

38. On Being and Essence

Introduction

A slight error in the beginning is large in the end, according to the Philosopher in *De caelo et mundo*, and being and essence are what is first conceived in the intellect, as Avicenna says in the *Metaphysics*. So, lest from ignorance of these, error should occur, one should first set out the difficulty regarding them by telling what is signified by the terms 'essence' and 'being,' how being and essence are found in various cases, and how they stand with respect to the logical intentions, i.e., genera, species, and differentia.

Moreover, as we ought to take knowledge of what is simple from what is complex, and come to what is prior from what is posterior, so learning is helped by beginning with what is easier. Hence we should proceed from the signification of being to the signification of essence.

Chapter I

One should be aware that, as the Philosopher remarks in the *Metaphysics*, being just as being has two senses. One is that which is divided through the ten categories; the other is that which signifies the truth of propositions. The difference between these is that in the second sense everything can be called being about which an affirmative proposition can be formed, even if it calls for nothing real; this is the sense in which privations and negations are called beings. For we say that affirmation is opposed to negation, and that blindness is in the eye. But in the first sense it cannot be said that anything is being unless it calls for something real; so that in the first sense, blindness and such as that are not beings. Thus the term 'essence' is not taken from

being in the second sense, for some are called beings in that sense which do not have an essence, as is obvious in the case of privations. But essence is taken from being in the first sense. Whence the Commentator, in the same place, says, "Being in the first sense is what signifies real substance."

And since, as was remarked, 'being' in this sense is divided through the ten categories, it is required that 'essence' signify something common to all natures through which various beings are organized into various species in various genera, as humanity is the essence of man, and so for other cases. And since that through which a thing is constituted into its own genus or species is what we signify through the definition indicating what a thing is, the term 'essence' has been changed by philosophers into the term 'quiddity' [whatness]. And this is what the Philosopher often calls "what it was to be," that is, that through which something is *what* it is. It is also called form, in the sense in which the certitude of any thing is signified through form, as Avicenna says in Book 2 of his *Metaphysics*. By another name it is also called nature, taking nature in the first of the four senses which Boethius gives in his *De duabis naturis*. According to this, nature is said to be all that the intellect can grasp in any way, for a thing is only intelligible through its definition and essence. And the Philosopher also says in Book 5 of the *Metaphysics* that every substance is nature. But the term 'nature' taken in this sense seems to signify the essence of a thing ordered to the proper operation of the thing, since no thing lacks its own operation. But the term 'quiddity' is taken from what is signified through the definition, and it is called essence since through it and in it a thing has being.

Chapter II

But since being is primarily and unqualifiedly said of substances, and secondarily in a qualified sense of accidents, essence is truly and properly found in substances, but only in a qualified way in accidents.

Translated for this volume by James J. Walsh from *S. Thomae Aquinatis opusculum De ente et essentia*, ed. C. Boyer (Rome: Gregorian University, 1933). Boyer utilized both the Baur and the Roland-Gosselin editions.

Of substances, some are simple and some composite, and there is essence in both; but in a truer and nobler way in simples. . . .

In composite substances, form and matter are characteristic, such as are soul and body in man. But it cannot be said that either of these alone is called essence. It is clear that matter alone is not essence, since a thing is knowable and ordered in species or genus through its essence. But matter is not the basis of knowledge, nor is anything determined to species or genus in accordance with it, but rather only in accordance with that by which it is in act. Nor can form alone be called the essence of composite substance, however much some try to maintain this. From what has been said, it is obvious that essence is what is signified through the definition of a thing, but the definition of natural substances does not contain form alone, but also matter. Otherwise, natural and mathematical definitions would not differ. Nor can it be said that matter is to be taken as a mere addition to essence in the definition of natural substance, as a being outside of its essence. For this manner of definition is more proper to accidents, which do not have perfect essence, and hence take substance or a subject outside of their genus in their definition. Thus it is obvious that essence includes matter and form. But it cannot be said that essence signifies a relation between matter and form or anything over and above them, since this would necessarily be an accident or extraneous to the thing, and the thing would not be known through it, all of which pertains to essence. For matter is brought into a being in act and a definite thing through form, which is the act of matter. So that which is added over and above does not give unqualified being in act to matter, but being in act in a certain way, as accidents do, as whiteness makes something white in act. When a form such as that is taken on, it is not said to be absolutely generated, but qualifiedly.

What remains, therefore, is that the term 'essence' signifies in the case of composite substances that which is compounded from matter and form. . . . however much it is form alone that in its way is the cause of being of this type. We see the same in other instances which are constituted from several principles. These things are not named from one or another of those principles alone, but from what embraces both.

This is clear for flavors: sweetness is caused by the action of heat dissipating the humid, and however much heat is in this way the cause of sweetness, a body is not called sweet from the heat, but from the flavor which embraces heat and the humid. But since the principle of individuation is matter, it might seem to follow from this that the essence, which embraces form as well, is only of the particular and not the universal. From which it would follow that a universal would not have a definition, if essence is what is signified through definition. Hence it should be known that the matter which is the principle of individuation is not matter taken in any and every way, but only signate matter. And I call matter signate which is considered under definite dimensions. This matter is not called for in the definition of man just as man; but it would be called for in the definition of Socrates, if Socrates had a definition. In the definition of man, non-signate matter is called for, for it is not this bone and this flesh which is called for in the definition of man, but just bone and flesh, which are the non-signate matter for man.

Chapter III

. . . The essences of genus and of species also differ with respect to signate and non-signate, however much another manner of determination [*designatio*] might belong to each. For the determination of an individual with respect to a species is through matter determinate in its dimensions, but determination of a species with respect to genus is through a constitutive difference, which is taken from the form of the thing. But this determination or designation which is in the species with respect to the genus is not through anything existing in the essence of the species which is in no way in the essence of the genus. Indeed, whatever is in the species is also in the genus, although not as determinate. . . .

Hence the basis is apparent for the analogy between genus, species, and differentia on the one hand and matter, form, and the composite in nature on the other, even though the latter are not the same as the former. For genus is not matter, but is taken from matter as signifying the whole; nor is the differentia form,

but is taken from form as signifying the whole. Whence we say man is the rational animal, but not from animal and rational in the way we say he is from soul and body. He is said to be man from soul and body in the way that a third thing is constituted from two things, neither of which the third thing is. For man is not the soul nor is he the body. But if man is said to be in some way from animal and rational, it will not be as a third thing from two things, but as a third concept [*intellectus*] from two concepts. For the concept of animal lacks the determination of the species-form, and it expresses the nature of the thing through its status as matter with respect to the final perfection. But the concept of the differentia "rational" consists in the determination of the species-form. The concept of the species or definition is constituted from these two concepts. And so, just as a thing constituted from various things does not take the predication of those things from which it is constituted, so neither does a concept take the predication of those concepts from which it is constituted. For we do not say that a definition is the genus or the differentia. . . .

As has been said, the nature of the species is indeterminate with respect to the individual, just as the nature of the genus is with respect to the species. Hence just as the genus, as it is predicated of the species, implies in its signification, however indistinctly, all that is determinately in the species, so the species, as it is predicated of the individual, must signify, though indistinctly, all that is essentially in the individual. In this way the essence of the species is signified by the word 'man,' whence man is predicated of Socrates. But if the nature of the species is signified as set apart from the signate matter which is the principle of individuation, it will stand as a part, and the word 'humanity' signifies it in this way. For humanity signifies that whence man is man. But signate matter is not that whence man is man, and so in no way is it contained among those from which man has it that he is man. Since, therefore, the concept of humanity includes only those from which man has it that he is man, it is obvious that signate matter is excluded or set aside from its signification. And because a part is not predicated of the whole, so it is that humanity is predicated neither of man nor of Socrates. And so Avicenna says that the quiddity of a composite is not that very com-

posite, however much the quiddity itself is composite. Thus humanity, even though it is composite, still is not man; rather, it has to be received into signate matter.

But, as was said, the determination of a species with respect to the genus is through forms, and the determination of an individual with respect to the species is through matter. So the term signifying that from which the nature of the genus is taken, setting the determining form completing the species, has to signify that material part of the whole, just as body is the material part of man. But the term signifying that from which the nature of the species is taken, setting aside the signate matter, signifies the formal part, and so humanity is signified as a certain form. And it is called the form of the whole, but not as though it were added on to the essential parts, matter and form, as the form of a house is added to its integral parts. Rather, it is a form which is the whole, embracing both form and matter, while setting aside that through which matter is rendered determinate.

And so it is apparent that the term 'man' and the term 'humanity' each signify the essence of man, but in different ways, as has been said. For the term 'man' signifies it as a whole, in that it does not explicitly involve the determination of matter, but contains that implicitly and indistinctly, just as the genus was said to contain the differentia. Hence the term 'man' is predicated of individuals. But the term 'humanity' signifies the essence as a part, since it only contains in its signification what belongs to man as man, with all determination of matter set aside. As a result it is not predicated of individual men. On account of this, sometimes the term 'essence' is found predicated of a thing (for Socrates is said to be a certain essence) and sometimes it is denied, as when we say the essence of Socrates is not Socrates.

Chapter IV

Having seen what is signified by the term 'essence' in composite substances, one should see how it stands with respect to the nature of genus, species, and differentia. Since that to which the characteristic [*ratio*] of genus, species, or differentia pertains is predicated of this designated singular, it is impossible for the

characteristic of a universal, namely, genus or species, to pertain to essence signified as a part, as by the term 'humanity' or 'animality.' Hence Avicenna says that rationality is not the differentia, but the basis for the differentia; for the same reason, humanity is not the species nor is animality the genus. Likewise, it cannot be said that the characteristic of genus or species pertains to essence as a certain thing existing outside of singulars, as the Platonists maintained. For in that way, genus and species would not be predicated of this individual; it cannot be said that Socrates is what is separate from him, nor does what is separate conduce to the knowledge of this singular. What is left, then, is that the characteristic of genus or species pertains to essence as it is signified in the manner of a whole, as by the terms 'man' or 'animal' implicitly and indistinctly containing all that is in the individual.

Nature or essence taken thus can be regarded in two ways. One way is according to its own nature, and this is the absolute consideration of it. In this way, nothing is true to say of it except what pertains to it in just such a way; anything else is falsely attributed to it. For example, to man just as man there pertain rational and animal and whatever else falls into his definition. But white or black or any such not belonging to the nature of humanity does not pertain to man as man. Hence if it is asked whether this very nature can be called one or many, neither should be conceded. For either is outside of the concept of humanity, and either can accrue to it. For if plurality were of its very nature, it could never be one; yet it is one as it is in Socrates. Likewise, if unity belonged to its concept and nature, then there would be one and the same nature of Socrates and Plato, and it could not be pluralized among several instances.

Considered in the other way, essence has being in this one or that, and thus something is predicated as an accident of it by reason of that in which it is. In this way it is said that man is white, since Socrates is white, however much that does not pertain to man as man. But this nature has two-fold being, one in singulars, the other in the soul; and accidents follow upon the said nature in each. Thus in singulars it has multiple being according to the diversity of singulars. Yet for the nature itself, according to its proper, that is, absolute consideration, none of these has to be. For it is false to

say that the nature of man, taken thus, has to be in this singular. For if to be in a singular pertained to man just as man, it would not ever be outside this singular. Likewise, if it pertained to man just as man not to be in this singular, it would never be in it. But it is true to say that being in this singular or that or in the soul does not belong to man just as man. It is obvious, then, that the nature of man absolutely considered abstracts from any being whatever, in a way that does not set aside any of them, and this nature so considered is what is predicated of all individuals. Yet it cannot be said that universality pertains to a nature taken thus, since unity and community belong to universality. But neither of those pertains to human nature according to its absolute consideration; for if community belonged to the concept of man, then wherever humanity were found, community would be found, and this is false. For in Socrates there is not found any community; whatever is in him is individuated. Likewise it cannot be said that the status of genus or species attaches to human nature according to the being which it has in individuals, since human nature is not found in individuals according to the unity pertaining to all, which is what the nature of universality requires.

What remains, then, is that the status of a species attaches to human nature according to the being it has in the intellect. For human nature has being in the intellect abstracted from everything individuating. It has a uniform character with regard to all individuals which are outside the soul, as it is equally the image of all and conducive to the knowledge of all insofar as they are men. And from its having such a relation to all individuals, the intellect devises and attributes to it the character of a species. Whence the Commentator says in Book 1 of the *De anima* that it is the intellect which makes universality in things. Avicenna also says this in his *Metaphysics*. And however much this nature as known has the character of a universal as compared to the things which are outside the soul, since it is one likeness for all, still, according to the being it has in this or that intellect, it is a certain particular appearance [*species . . . intellecta*!]. Hence the mistake of the Commentator in the *De anima* is obvious. He wished to argue the unity of the intellect from the universality of the form as known. But the universality of that form is not according to the being which it has in

the intellect, but according to the way it is referred to things as their likeness, just as if there were a corporeal statue representing many men, surely the image or appearance [*species*] of the statue would have its own singular being in the way it would be in this particular matter; but it would have the character of community as commonly representative of several. . . .

Thus it is clear how essence or nature stands regarding the character of species. This character does not come from those features which pertain to it in its absolute consideration, nor from the accidents such as whiteness or blackness which accrue to it according to the being it has outside the soul; but it comes from the accidents which accrue to it according to the being it has in the intellect. It is also in this way that the character of genus or differentia pertains to it.

Chapter V

Now it remains to see how essence is in separate substances, namely, the soul, the intelligences and the First Cause. However much all philosophers concede the simplicity of the First Cause, still some try to maintain the composition of matter and form in the intelligences and in souls. The author of this position is said to have been Avicenna in the book *Fons Vitae*. But this is contrary to what is usually said by philosophers, since they describe those substances as separate from matter and they argue them to be without matter. The strongest argument is from the power for knowing which is in them. For we only see forms to be actually known as separated from matter and its conditions; and they are made to be actually known only through the power of a knowing substance, as achieved by it and received in it. Whence it is necessary that in any knowing substance whatever, there be every type of immunity from matter; so that it does not have a material component, nor is it even as a form impressed in matter, as are materialized forms.

Nor can anyone claim that it is not every kind of matter that impedes the capacity to be known, but only corporeal matter. For if this were by reason of corporeal matter only, then to impede knowability would require that the matter have a corporeal form, since matter is only called corporeal because it stands under

a corporeal form. And this cannot be, since that very corporeal form is actually knowable, as are other forms which are abstracted from matter. So in no way is there composition from matter and form in an intellective soul or an intelligence, with matter taken as it is in corporeal substances. But there is a composition of form and being. Thus in the comment on the ninth proposition of the *Liber de causis* it is said that an intelligence is one having form and being, and form is taken there as the quiddity itself or the simple nature. And how this is, is plain to see. For whatever things are so disposed that one is the cause for the other to be, the one that has the character of the cause can be without the other, but not the reverse. But such a disposition is found in form and matter that form gives being to matter. So it is impossible for there to be any matter without form, but it is not impossible for there to be some form without matter. For form just as form does not have dependence on matter. If some forms are found which can only be in matter, this happens in that they are distant from the First Principle, which is the first act and pure act. And so those forms which are closest to the First Principle are forms inherently subsisting without matter, for form does not require matter throughout the genus, as was said. Forms of this kind are intelligences, and so it is not required that the essences or quiddities of these substances be other than form itself.

The essences of composite and simple substances differ, then, in that the essence of composite substances embraces not only form, but form and matter; but the essence of simple substances is form alone. And this makes for two other differences. One is that the essence of composite substance can be signified as a whole or a part, which happens because of the determination of matter, as was said. Hence the essence of a composite thing cannot be predicated in just any way of that composite thing, for it cannot be said that man is his quiddity. But the essence of a simple thing, which is its form, can only be signified as a whole, since there is nothing there except form as receiving the form. And so the essence of a simple substance is predicated of it in whichever way it is taken. So Avicenna says that the quiddity of a simple substance is itself simple, since there is not anything to receive it.

The second difference is that from the fact that the essences of composite things received in determinate matter are multiplied according to its division, it happens that some are the same in species but diverse in number. But since the essence of simples is not received in matter, no such multiplication can obtain in that case. Hence it is not required that many individuals of the same species be found for those substances; but there are as many species as there are individuals, as Avicenna explicitly states. However much such substances are forms without matter, it is not simplicity of every type which is in them, such as are pure acts, but they are mixed with potentiality, in this way: whatever does not belong to the concept of essence or quiddity comes from outside it and makes up a composition with essence, since no essence can be known without the parts of essence. But every essence or quiddity can be known without anything being known concerning its being. For I can know what man is, or a phoenix, and still not know whether or not it has being in reality [*rerum natura*]. Therefore it is obvious that being is other than essence or quiddity, unless perchance there is some thing whose quiddity is its being. There can only be one such being, the First. For it is impossible that there should be pluralization of anything except through the addition of some differentia, the way the nature of a genus is multiplied in species, or through a form being received in diverse matter, the way the nature of a species is multiplied in diverse individuals, or through one being abstracted and another received in something, in the way that if there were some separated heat, from the separation itself it would be other than an unseparated heat. But if there were given some thing which is only being, such that the very being is subsistent, this being would not take the addition of a differentia. For then it would not be being alone, but being and some form outside of that. And much less would it take the addition of matter, since then it would not be a subsisting being but a material one. So what is left is that there can only be one such thing which is its own being, when it is necessary that in any other thing outside of that, its being is other than its quiddity or nature or form. Thus it is necessary that in intelligences, being is outside of form; hence it was said that an intelligence is form and being.

But all that pertains to something is either caused from the principles of its own nature, as is the capacity to laugh in man, or comes to it from some extrinsic principle, as the light in the air from the influence of the sun. But being itself cannot be caused by the form or quiddity of a thing, speaking of the efficient cause, because then a thing would be the cause of itself and would bring itself into being, which is impossible. Therefore it is necessary that every such thing whose being is other than its nature should have its being from another. And since everything which is through something else is reduced to a first cause which is through itself, it is necessary that there be some thing which is the cause of being for all things, in that it is being alone. Otherwise there would be an infinity in causes, since everything which is not being alone has a cause for its being, as has been said. Thus it is apparent that an intelligence is form and being, and that it has its being from a first being which is being alone, and this is the First Cause, which is God.

But everything which receives something from another is in potentiality with respect to that, and what is received in it is its act. Therefore it is necessary that the form or quiddity which is an intelligence be in potentiality with respect to the being which it receives from God, and that the being is received as act. It is in this way that act and potency are found in intelligences, yet not form and matter, except equivocally. And so to undergo, to receive, to be a subject and all such which seem to pertain to things by reason of matter, pertain equivocally to intellectual and to corporeal substances, as the Commentator says in Book 3 of the *De anima*. . . .

Distinction among these [separated] substances is thus according to the grade of potentiality and act, so that a superior intelligence which is closer to the First, has more of act and less of potentiality, and so for the others. This is ended in the human soul, which occupies the lowest rung among intellectual substances. Whence the possible intellect is disposed to knowable forms in the way that prime matter, which occupies the lowest rung in sensible being, is to sensible forms, as the Commentator says in Book 3 of the *De anima*. So the Philosopher compares it to a blank slate on which nothing is written. And because it has more of

potentiality than other substances capable of knowledge, it performs in such proximity to material things that a material thing is drawn to participate in its being. So from soul and body there results one being in one composite, however much that being, as belonging to the soul, is not dependent on the body. And after this form which is the soul, other forms are found

having more of potentiality and closer to matter, so much so that they do not have being without matter. In these also is found order and grade, on down to the primary forms of the elements, which are closest to matter, so that they do not have any operation except according to the demands of active and passive qualities and others which dispose matter to form. . . .

39. *Summa Theologiae* First Part Selections from the “Treatise on God”

Question 1 Concerning Sacred Teaching: What Is Its Character and What Is Its Range?

Article 1. The necessity of sacred teaching.

It seems that it is not necessary to have any other teaching beyond the philosophical disciplines:

1. Humans should not strive for what is beyond reason, as it is said in Ecclesiasticus 3:5: “Seek not after what is higher than you.” But what falls under reason is adequately treated in the philosophical disciplines. Accordingly, it seems superfluous to have any other teaching beyond the philosophical disciplines.

2. There can be teaching only about what is, for nothing is known except what is true, which coincides with being. But everything that is is studied by the philosophical disciplines, including God; hence there is a part of philosophy that is called theology or divine science, as the Philosopher makes clear in *Metaphysics* 6 [1026a19]. Accordingly, it was not necessary

to have any other teaching beyond the philosophical disciplines.

On the contrary. It is said in 2 Timothy 3:16: “All scripture inspired by God is useful to teach, reprove, correct, and instruct in justice.” But scripture inspired by God does not belong to the philosophical disciplines, which are discovered by human reason. Accordingly, it is beneficial that, beyond the philosophical disciplines, there be another science, inspired by God.

Reply. It was necessary for the sake of human salvation that there be a teaching in accord with divine revelation, beyond the philosophical disciplines investigated by human reason. First, because human beings are ordered to God as to an end that surpasses the grasp of reason; as Isaiah 64:4 says: “The eye has not seen, without you, O God, what you have prepared for those who love you.” But the end must be known in advance to humans, who should order their intentions and actions towards their end. Hence it was necessary for the sake of human salvation that certain truths which surpass human reason be made known to us through divine revelation. Moreover, it was necessary for God to instruct us by divine revelation even regarding the truths about God that can be investigated

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