

On What There Is in Aquinas

Robert Pasnau

Since Quine, it has become common to distinguish between ideology and ontology. The first concerns the conceptual framework in which a theory is articulated. The second concerns what entities the theory postulates. Suppose we apply this distinction to the familiar metaphysical framework of Thomas Aquinas, couched in terms of potentiality and actuality, matter and form, substance and accident. From this Quinean point of view, the Aquinian theory can be examined to discover how much is mere ideology, and how much is ontology. My suggestion will be that the theory is more ideological, and less ontological, than is ordinarily supposed. But this is not to say that it is mere ideology, because the ideology serves to map the modal structure of reality.

I.1 Cosmology

Before diving into the metaphysical details, it will be useful to locate ourselves within the cosmological worldview that Aquinas embraces. First and foremost, there is God, there has always been God, and there will always be God, necessarily. This, Aquinas famously thinks, can be proved in at least five different ways (I 2.3).

Might there *only* have been God? Well, before the world's creation there *was* only God. Indeed, to be precise, that was the situation for an eternity, though not of course for *all* of eternity, but only for that eternal part of the universe's history that predates God's initial creative act. One might then wonder: If God existed alone for an eternity, could God have chosen to exist alone for *all* of eternity? Scholars have disagreed on this question, but on the most straightforward reading of Aquinas's words, the answer is yes: God might have chosen not to create, in which case there never would have been anything other than God:

Since God's goodness is perfect, and he can exist without other things (since none of his perfection comes to him from others) it follows that

there is no absolute necessity that he will things other than himself (I 19.3c).

Given that God, considered alone, is perfectly and infinitely good, a world with only God in it would necessarily be as good as any world could be.¹

Nothing could be added to such a world to make it better. Still, nothing created by a perfectly good God could make the world any worse, else God would not be perfectly good. This suggests that God had a great deal of latitude in choosing to create this particular world rather than another: “Speaking in absolute terms, for everything made by God, God can make another that is better” (I 25.6c). There was, then, no decisive, sufficient reason why our world was chosen. Aquinas thus has an explanation for why it took so long – an eternity! – for God to get around to creating, and why God created only this one earth, with only so much space for creatures. God could have created more and larger earths, without limit, but more would not have been better, just as less would not have been worse.

Focusing on earth gets the cosmology right as far as the material world goes, but the material world is only part of creation. Indeed, it is both less numerous and less exalted than the immaterial part of creation, the angels, which “exceed in number, incomparably, material substances” (I 50.3c). The number of angels is “maximal, exceeding every material multitude” (ibid.), which seems to mean that the angels outnumber anything physical that one might care to count. How does he know this? His basis is the general principle that “to the extent things are more perfect, to that extent they are created by God in greater measure” (ibid.). Aquinas has no doubt that the immaterial angels are more perfect than we mere mortal animals, but still he has to admit that his conclusions about the angels are speculative, because “immaterial substances are of an entirely different nature from the quiddities of material things” (I 88.2c).

Details aside, it is the overall cosmic system that is the primary object of God’s attention: “God principally wills the good of the whole of his effects rather than any particular good” (SCG I.85 par. 3). So Aquinas supposes that, however the details are filled in, the universe is at any rate a well-ordered collection of things of different kinds, ranging from the simplest of corruptible bodies to the most elevated of immortal intellects. “If only one grade of goodness were found in things, the universe would

¹ For the case that God’s goodness requires creation, see Kretzmann, *The Metaphysics of Creation*, pp. 130–6. I have argued otherwise in Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*, pp. 394–404.

not be perfect” (I 47.2c). The angels contribute to this story not just in virtue of their lofty minds, but in virtue of Aquinas’s surprising view that each angel belongs to its own discrete species (I 50.4). Indeed, Aquinas is so focused on the contribution of species-level diversity to the goodness of the whole, that he feels it necessary to offer some explanation of why there are multiple individuals within a single species:

For things that are incorruptible, there is only one individual in each species, because the species is adequately preserved in that one. But for things that are generable and corruptible, there are many individuals in each species, so as to preserve the species (ibid.).

This focus on the species level has to be qualified when it comes to human beings, the only corruptible beings that are also rational. Our ability to love and understand God gives us special worth as individuals beyond the contribution we make to the well-ordered hierarchy of species. Thus, “rational creatures have as their end God, whom they can attain by their own operation, in knowing and loving him” (I 65.2c). Such considerations lead us into the domain of psychology and ultimately theology, and so lie beyond the scope of this chapter. For our purposes what warrants attention is the overarching design of the created world, which divides into material and immaterial domains, and then into further distinctions among species and individuals. These are the basic structural features that Aquinas’s metaphysics ought to be able to explain.

1.2 Dependence and Distinctness

When Aquinas turns his attention in the first part of the *Summa Theologiae* from God to creatures, the very first conclusion he reaches is that “it is necessary to say that everything that exists in any sort of way exists from God” (I 44.1c). God is the limiting case of this principle, because God has already been *identified* with existence (I 3.4). Since Aquinas has proved already that there can be only one being like that (I 11.3), everything else must merely *have* existence or, as Aquinas puts it here, must “participate in existence” (I 44.1c). The language of participation signals that we have come to one of the most Platonic moments in the *Summa Theologiae*, where the critical argument turns on the familiarly Platonic principle that where many things have F in common, this commonality must be explained by some one thing that is F intrinsically. This is made most explicit in a later parallel discussion of whether corporeal creatures come from God, in which Aquinas reasons as follows:

If distinct things are unified in something, it is necessary for there to be some cause of this union, since distinct things are not unified in virtue of themselves. And so it is the case that, whenever in distinct things some one thing is found, those distinct things must receive that one thing from some one cause, just as distinct hot bodies have their heat from fire. But *existence* is found to be common to all things, no matter how distinct. Therefore it is necessary that there be one principle of existing from which whatever exists in any sort of way has existence – whether it be invisible and spiritual or visible and corporeal (I 65.1c).²

Let us refer to this, as Aquinas himself does (DP 3.5c), as “Plato’s argument,” the *ratio Platonis*. The trouble with Plato’s argument is that it threatens to yield an absurd inventory of primary Fs – i.e., the “some one cause” in virtue of which other things are Fs. Not even Plato believed that there is a Form for every way in which things are. As *Parmenides* 130c puts it, “What about things that might seem absurd, like hair and mud and dirt, or anything else totally undignified and worthless? ... Surely it is too outlandish to think there is a form for them.” But how then does one decide where Plato’s argument does and does not apply? And if this *ratio Platonis* is indeed sound, how can one avoid applying it to *every* case where “distinct things are unified in something”?

For Aquinas, an answer to these questions requires noticing that the argument does not require that distinct Fs must be made F by some sort of common *proximate* cause that is itself intrinsically F. This *is* something like how the story goes for the example he offers, where everything that is hot is so in virtue of the elemental quality of Fire, which is essentially hot and is a constituent of everything that is hot. But in most cases the explanation of F-ness will not be so straightforward. Although many things are *rough*, for instance, there is no quality of roughness that all the rough things share. The argument, however, does not require this; it requires only that, at some level of explanation, there be some common cause. And for Aquinas there turns out to be only one cause, God, that is truly common to all things. Hence he offers this *ratio Platonis* only in the context of establishing that God is the cause of all things, because here it so happens that the deeper explanatory structure neatly tracks the surface appearances. All things have existence because they participate in the one thing, God, who just is existence. Because the argument is sound, it can be

² Aquinas offers more extended versions of arguments along these lines at DP 3.5 and SCG II.15. For a careful analysis of the latter version, see Shields and Pasnau, *The Philosophy of Aquinas*, Section 5.1.

generalized to other cases, but in most other cases the story is too messy to be very illuminating. To trace roughness back to its ultimate cause, for instance, would be an extremely convoluted and unrewarding project.

Even in the paradigm case of heat, the *ratio Platonis* does not work in quite the way one might suppose. For although everything that is hot can be explained in terms of the elemental quality of Fire, there is no *single* thing (other than God) that accounts for the heat of each individual. Rather, this flame has its elemental qualities and that flame has its elemental qualities. Aquinas makes it very clear that he thinks there are no universal properties *in re*. For instance, he writes that “no commonness is found in Socrates; rather, whatever is in him has been individuated” (*De Ente* 3.80–2).³ Aquinas also does not countenance any sort of separate entity that would intrinsically be hot, analogously to the way that God is existence itself. He does imagine the possibility of such Platonic entities, remarking for instance that “if whiteness were subsistent, it would have to be one thing, since whitenesses are multiplied in virtue of their receptacles” (I 44.1c). But he sees no need to postulate this higher domain of entities. As far as the *ratio Platonis* is concerned, God alone does all the necessary explanatory work.

So the problem of the one and the many, for Aquinas, ultimately reduces to the problem of God and creatures. From a cosmological perspective, as we have seen, there are many creatures because God wills there to be a universe like that, richly diverse in kinds. From a metaphysical perspective, there are many kinds of beings because all beings other than God merely participate in existence. Whereas God’s nature *just is* existence, creatures *have* existence as something additional to their own nature. Hence God’s existence is infinite, whereas in creatures “their existence is received and contracted to a determinate nature” (I 7.2c). Thus there are many ways of participating in the divine being, so as to exist in this way or that way.

Within a given kind (whiteness, say, or humanity) there are many particulars insofar as such natures are instantiated within different receptacles or subjects. There are many whitenesses, for example, because there are many white bodies, and each body has its own distinct sensible qualities. Similarly, there are many human souls, because each is individuated by the body in which it is received. In general, “the natures of created things are individuated through the matter that is subjected to that specific nature” (I 39.1 ad 3). Without such matter, there can be no individuation, meaning that there can be no diversity beyond the diversity of kinds. And so it is, as noted earlier, that Aquinas thinks each angel must be a species

³ See Leftow, “Aquinas on Attributes,” and Brower, “Aquinas on the Problem of Universals.”

unto itself. Because angels lack bodies, the only way they can be individuated is by having an existence that is delimited by a distinct nature.

Matter's status as the principle of individuation raises various perplexing questions, such as *What individuates the matter?* This is not a question to which Aquinas has a clear answer. In other respects, however, the theory is well suited to his needs. Because he thinks of individuation as a one-time event, taking place at the moment a nature first comes to exist in matter, he need not suppose that a nature's ongoing existence depends on material sameness. Matter individuates the form that it receives, and that form then goes on to individuate the enduring entity: "Distinct individuals have distinct forms made distinct by their matter" (I 85.7 ad 3). This two-step explanation helps account for identity through the perfectly ordinary sorts of material change that plague other descriptions of sameness over time. Aquinas also has room to account for some of the theological oddities that the Christian faith requires. Whiteness can be separated from the bread, for instance, in the sacrament of the Eucharist, without losing its individual identity. Similarly, the human soul, at death, can be separated from the body. These are unnatural occurrences, but they are not metaphysically impossible.⁴

We thus have at least a sketch of how a multitude of distinct things arises from, and depends upon, a single God. But the sketch presupposes various bits of ideology: the idea of natures, and the idea that these natures at least sometimes exist in material subjects. So now we need to extend this story to account for these notions. To do this, we need the idea of actuality.

1.3 Actuality and Composition

Aquinas's youthful primer on what there is, *On the Principles of Nature*, begins like this:

One should know that some things can be, although they are not, and some things are. That which can be is said to be in potentiality; that which is now is said to be in actuality (1.1–2).

⁴ On the separated human soul, see Pasnau, *Aquinas on Human Nature*, Chapter 12. On the Eucharist, see Adams, *Some Later Medieval Theories of the Eucharist*. As Aquinas conceives of accidental being (see Section 1.4 below), an accident can exist apart from its subject only if it changes its mode of being, i.e., the way in which it exists, so as to go from a way in which a substance exists to being a subsistent entity in its own right (see Pasnau, *Metaphysical Themes*, Section 10.3). To some this may seem metaphysically impossible, and indeed it did seem impossible to many later scholastics. I regard it as a virtue of my account that it explains why Aquinas's account of the Eucharist was so widely regarded as untenable.

What there is, is actual. God, as usual, manifests this principle *in excelsis*, being purely and perfectly actual (I 4.1) without even the constraints that come from having a determinate nature that participates in existence (I 3.4). Everything else is actual in a more limited way, having received its actuality – its existence of one sort or another – from God: “everything created is in actuality, but not in pure actuality” (I 44.2 ad 3).

Creatures are never purely actual, because they are always composite in one way or another, and “in every composition there must be potentiality and actuality” (I 3.7c). An angelic nature has the potential to exist – it can exist – but it does exist only when actualized by the existence it receives from God. A certain sort of body – an embryo – has the potential to become a human being, but the human being comes into existence only when the embryo’s matter is actualized by a human soul, giving rise to a soul–body composite. To mark such composition, Aquinas relies on the Aristotelian terminology of matter and form: “Just as everything that is in potentiality can be called *matter*, so everything from which something has existence ... can be called *form*” (*Principles of Nature* I.36–9). When these terms are used as broadly as this, even the angels can be said to have matter, simply inasmuch as they are a composite of potentiality and actuality.

This broad usage is not standard for Aquinas, since he ordinarily prefers to say that the angels are wholly immaterial (I 50.1–2), but the broad usage is helpful in highlighting several important features of the theory. First, the concepts of *potentiality* and *actuality* are the bedrock of Aquinas’s metaphysics and are to be understood in modal terms, as ways in which things are possible or actual. God is actual in all respects, and at all times and places. Some finite natures are merely possible, whereas some natures are actual, which is to say that they have been actualized by participating in existence. Second, although Aquinas accepts the familiar distinction between material and immaterial entities, and draws the line roughly where one might expect – with bodies on one side and minds on the other – his metaphysics is not fundamentally dualistic. Fundamentally, the created world is all of one kind, finitely actual, and as a result Aquinas faces fewer of the notorious difficulties over mind–body causation and mind–body union that confront more categorical forms of dualism. Minds, for Aquinas, are just a certain kind of actuality, and are just as well suited to act on bodies, and be joined with bodies, as are any other sorts of actualities.

Still, there is a principled distinction here between immaterial substances (the angels) and material substances. We had a glimpse of this

already, in the way that angels are not individuated within a species. They are not individuated, because they do not actualize bodies. Aquinas holds that “everything existing in act has some form” (I 7.2c). In this sense, the angels are forms, but they are not forms that actualize matter, now speaking of matter in the strict sense. But what is this strict sense? The question is complex, because there are various kinds of matter in play here. For starters, there is one kind of matter that serves as the prior materials for something new (like the ingredients in a recipe), and another kind that serves as the subject that individuates the forms it receives. (The surface of a wall, for instance, is potentially white, and becomes actually white by taking on *this* whiteness.) Angels have no matter of the first kind, but in a way they do have matter of the second kind, inasmuch as an angel’s mind serves as the potential subject for virtue, knowledge, and other mental qualities (I 55.1). This, however, does not preclude the angels from being strictly immaterial, because there is yet another kind of matter that they lack: matter as the stuff that is potentially a body of some kind. The angels are simply minds, without bodies, and so they lack the sort of matter that characterizes our earthly domain.

To get a clearer sense of this domain, we need to distinguish between two kinds of forms. One kind makes a thing be a substance of a certain kind, and so is known as *substantial form*. Another kind makes a substance be a certain way, and is known as *accidental form*. Aquinas writes:

Matter is contracted through form to a determinate species, just as a substance of some species is contracted through an accident inhering in it to a determinate mode of being, as a human being is contracted through white (I 44.2c).

So here we have two levels of matter (or potentiality), and two levels of form (or actuality): a first matter that takes on a substantial form, and then a second matter – a substance – that takes on various accidental forms. When that first matter – what we call *prime matter* – takes on a substantial form, the result is a body of a certain kind. To say that it is a *body* is to say that it is spread out with part outside of part, in three dimensions (I 18.2c). To say that it is a body *of a certain kind* is to say that it has a *nature*, or an *essence* or *quiddity*. The angels, then, are actualized natures but they are not bodies, because they do not inform prime matter.

The two levels of hylomorphic (i.e., matter–form) composition just described raise a great many puzzling questions, first and foremost questions about how such composites are unified. That there must be unity is

taken for granted by Aquinas, because he takes for granted that a thing exists only insofar as it is a unity:

One (unum) does not add to being (ens) any thing (res), but only the denial of division. For one signifies nothing other than undivided being. From this it is plain that one converts with being. For every being is either simple or composite. Something simple is undivided both actually and potentially. Something composite, in contrast, has existence not while its parts are divided, but only once they constitute and compose that composite thing. Hence it is clear that the existence of any thing consists in undividedness. And so it is that any given thing, as it maintains its existence, so it maintains its oneness (unitatem) (I 11.1c).

To say here that “one converts with being” is to assert a biconditional: A thing exists if, and only if, it is one thing. As this passage makes clear, to say that a thing is one is not to say that it is simple: Only God is wholly simple, and so there is composition throughout the created world. Still, there are different kinds of composition, and Aquinas thinks that the things that exist in the primary sense have a special sort of unqualified unity: They are one thing *simpliciter*.

Of the two sorts of hylomorphic composition described above, only the first level yields unqualified unity. At the second level, Aquinas is unconcerned with securing unity in this strong sense. Here “matter, as it is under one substantial form, remains in potentiality to many accidental forms” (I 7.2c), and Aquinas is happy to allow that such unions are merely accidental: “From an accident and its subject results not something one per se, but one per accidens” (*On Being and Essence* 5.43–4). The implication of this doctrine, when conjoined with his views about the convertibility of *one* and *being*, is that a substance joined with its accidents is not, strictly speaking, a being at all. Of course we talk about the pale man, and the speckled hen, just as we talk about a stack of wood or an army of soldiers. We can speak of these as *things* if we like, since they all have, after all, one or another *kind* of unity. But in each case their unity is accidental, and so none of them is a *being* in the proper sense of the term.

The true hylomorphic unities, then, are unities of substantial form and prime matter. Among material creatures, these are the substances, the things that Aristotle (*Categories*, Chapter 5) had marked as the primary beings on which all else depends. Composites that have such substances as ingredients do not have the same kind of unity, because in these cases the ingredients are liable to preexist and outlast the composite. The textbook definition of an accident, after all, is that “accidents are items that

come and go without the destruction of their subjects.”⁵ So the conjunction of a substance with an accident, or the conjunction of two substances, cannot be a unity in the unqualified sense. And because of the tight connection between unity and existence – “something is a being in just the way that it is one” (I 76.1c) – Aquinas is committed to concluding that such conjunctions do not have unqualified existence.

This commitment to the primacy of substance becomes particularly vivid when Aquinas considers what it is, strictly speaking, that God creates. His answer is that God creates the substances:

Creating is a kind of making, as was said, and making is directed at a thing’s existing. Hence making and creating are properly suited to the things to which existence is suited, and existence is properly suited to subsistent things, whether they are simple, like the separate substances [viz., the angels], or composite, like material substances (I 45.4c).

Existence is properly suited to subsistent things, Aquinas says here, because such substances are the things that are true unities and so truly exist. In a broad sense, as we saw in Section 1.2, God creates *everything* that there is, and that includes things like armies and woodpiles, speckled hens and pale men. But these things come for free with creation, as it were, because in creating substances God creates all of the rest. God can create the substances and then take a day off, because the substances exhaust the things that truly exist.

So we have now made some progress in distinguishing between Aquinas’s expansive ideology and his much more minimalist ontology. But these results yield a puzzle. It is easy to see the appeal in supposing that God creates only the basic building blocks and gets the rest for free. But, as we have seen, humans and hens and trees are not themselves entirely simple; they are composites of prime matter and substantial form. So why not suppose that when God created, what he created, strictly speaking, was the matter and its forms, and then he got the substances for free out of those ingredients? What gives the substances priority? Moreover, what about the man’s paleness? What about those speckles on the hen? If they are among the things that exist, then do they not need to be created too? To answer these questions, we need to take up Aquinas’s doctrine that things have different ways of being.

⁵ Porphyry, Introduction [*Isagoge*], Section 5.

1.4 Ways of Being

Where I have been urging a distinction between ideology and ontology, Aquinas talks only of ways of being. We have seen this repeatedly already in how he characterizes creation – for instance when he concludes “it is necessary to say that *everything that exists in any sort of way* exists from God” (I 44.1c), or “it is necessary that there be one principle of existing from which *whatever exists in any sort of way* has existence” (I 65.1c). Such expressions hearken back to Aristotle’s dictum that “being is said in many ways.”⁶ But when one looks to see how exactly Aquinas understands this dark saying, it turns out that he does not mean that there are different manners of existence, as if existence were a determinable property like a color that comes in various determinate shades. Instead, his point is that when we speak of the various elements of his metaphysics – the various kinds of form and matter under discussion – we inevitably describe them as things or beings or entities. We can hardly help but talk that way, since these are indeed ineliminable features of the metaphysics. But we should not thereby conclude that the theory is ontologically committed to such things. Beyond the theory’s ideological expansiveness lies a surprisingly parsimonious ontology.

Since this is an unorthodox way to understand Aquinas, it requires strong textual support. Let me return, first, to his discussion of what it is that God creates (I 45.4c). We saw at the end of the previous section that what God creates, strictly speaking, is substance. The immediate lesson drawn from this was that various sorts of higher-level composites – speckled hens and woodpiles – are not, strictly speaking, created. They are not the things created because they are not the things to which “existence is properly suited” (as above). That led to a question about the metaphysical ingredients of substances, and how they fit into this story. And in fact Aquinas immediately goes on to address this question:

Forms and accidents, and other things of this sort, are called beings (*entia*) not because they themselves are, but because through them something is. Whiteness, for instance, is said to be a being because through it a subject is white. Hence, according to the Philosopher [*Met.* VII.1, 1028a18–20], an accident is more properly said to be *of a being* rather than *a being*. Therefore, just as accidents and forms and such things that do not subsist are more properly *coexistent* rather than *existent* (*entia*), so they ought to be called *concreated* rather than *created*. The properly created things, then, are subsistent things (I 45.4c).

⁶ See e.g., *Met.* IV.2, 1003b5 and VIII.2, 1042b25, and the discussion in Shields, *Order in Multiplicity*, Chapter 9.

The word “concreated” nicely captures the idea that, in creating the substances, God gets forms and accidents for free. These are not additional entities that need to be created on top of the substances, as it were, because they do not themselves have any proper existence. For them to exist just is for the substance to exist in a certain way.

This boldly sweeping claim is one that Aquinas regularly repeats, and not just in the context of creation but also when discussing the natural generation of forms. Here there was often felt to be a special problem for the Aristotelian about how a form (e.g., the soul of a dog) could come into existence anew, as if *ex nihilo*, something that is supposedly forbidden in natural processes.⁷ Aquinas simply denies that we should think of substantial and accidental forms as entities that come and go in the world. Instead, the sense in which forms are beings is not univocal with the sense in which substances are beings:

A natural form is not said to exist univocally with the thing (*re*) that is generated. For a natural generated thing is said to exist per se and properly, as if having existence and subsisting in its existence. A form, in contrast, is not said to exist in this way, since it does not subsist, nor does it have existence per se. Rather, it is said to exist or be a being because by it something is. In this way, accidents are called beings because a substance, by them, is either qualified or quantified – not that, by them, the substance unconditionally *is*, as it is through a substantial form. Hence accidents are more properly said to be *of a being* rather than *beings* (DP 3.8c).

So “being” is said in many ways inasmuch as the term is non-univocal, although the term is not wholly equivocal either, since Aquinas thinks the different usages are analogical along the lines just described. Thus far, one might hesitate over the ontological implications of this doctrine, but the passage continues so as to leave no doubt:

Any sort of thing that is made is said to be made in the way in which it is said to exist. For existence is the endpoint of the making. Hence that which is properly made, per se, is the composite. The form, in contrast, is not properly made, but is that by which something is made – that is, that through whose acquisition something is said to be made. Therefore, from the fact that, through nature, nothing is said to be made from nothing, there is no obstacle to our saying that substantial forms exist by the operation of nature. For that which is made is not the form but the composite, which is made from the matter and not from nothing (*ibid.*).

⁷ On the general consensus that generation *ex nihilo* is impossible, see Aristotle, *Phys.* I.4, 187a27–9. On the debate over the generation of forms within late scholasticism, see Pasnau, *Metaphysical Themes*, p. 664.

Aquinas's conclusion here must have ontological import; otherwise it will have no force against his opponent. If substantial and accidental forms are among the things that are, then they need to be generated, and then Aquinas faces the problem of where they come from, if not from nothing. Of course, one might try to evade this problem in various ways, but Aquinas's way is to insist that, among material things, only composite substances exist. If this is not really what he means here, and if substantial and accidental forms are themselves beings in any proper sense, then he fails to have a response to the objection.⁸

For still another text, consider this general discussion of existence:

Existence (*esse*) is attributed to a thing in two ways. In one way, as to that which properly and truly has existence or is, and in this way it is attributed only to a substance that subsists through itself. Thus *Physics* I [186b4–8] says that a substance is what truly is. All those things, on the other hand, that do not subsist through themselves, but are in another and with another – whether they are accidents or substantial forms or any parts whatsoever – do not have existence in such a way that they truly are, but existence is attributed to them in another way – that is, as that by which something is – just as whiteness is said to be not because it subsists in itself, but because by it something has existence-as-white (*esse album*). Therefore existence properly and truly is attributed only to a thing that subsists on its own (*Quodlibet* 9.2.2c).

Substances, again, are the only things that properly and truly exist. There is no indication here that Aquinas has in mind some sort of diminished manner of existence that might be ascribed to their metaphysical parts. Rather, substantial forms and accidents – and indeed “any parts whatsoever”⁹ – are said here to exist only inasmuch as they are things “by which something is.” Whiteness, for instance, does not exist, but yet in virtue of it a substance exists-as-white.

On the surface, all these passages look like as explicit a denial as one could want that such forms have any sort of ontological standing on their own. But there may seem to be an obvious problem here. For Aquinas seems to be saying, at once, both that substantial forms and accidents do not exist, and yet that it is in virtue of these forms that the substances

⁸ On the analogy of being in Aquinas, see the recent skeptical discussion in Hughes, *Aquinas on Being, Goodness, and God*, pp. 7–20, and the more enthusiastic treatments in Klima, “Thomistic ‘Monism’ vs. Cartesian ‘Dualism’” and Brower, *Aquinas's Ontology of the Material World*, Section 2.4.

⁹ For the status of the integral parts of material substances – that is, bodily parts such as hands and arms – see my discussion in Pasnau, *Metaphysical Themes*, Chapter 26.

are a certain way. But if the forms do not exist, how can they play the role they are alleged to play? Consider, first, the case of substantial form. We have seen how the substantial form of a material substance actualizes prime matter and thus makes a substance with a nature of a particular kind (dog, stone, etc.). If such forms make substances, are they not obviously real? Aquinas sheds light on this question in the following passage:

For something to be the substantial form of another, two things are required. The first is that the form be the principle of existing substantially for that of which it is the form. But by “principle” I mean not the efficient (*factivum*) principle, but the formal principle by which something exists and is called a *being*. And from this follows the second thing required, namely that form and matter come together in one existence, which does not arise from an efficient principle together with that to which it gives existence. And this is the existence in which subsists a composite substance, comprised of matter and form (SCG II.68 par. 2).

Substantial forms would have their own existence if we were to think of them as extrinsic causes, making the material cause be a certain kind of thing in the way a mason makes bricks into a wall. It is very hard, in fact, to avoid this picture of the process. Even when Aquinas tries to warn us against it here, by saying that “form and matter come together in one existence” (*forma et materia convenient in uno esse*), his language works against him, because talk of “coming together” suggests a picture of two independently subsisting things that merge into one thing. But this is precisely the sort of accidental unity Aquinas wants to avoid. The unqualified unity of form and matter is such that there is really and truly only one being there. Talk of substantial form’s *doing something* to the composite does not entail that this form is an entity with its own causal agency.¹⁰

What about accidental forms? The painter Bridget Riley begins an essay on color with an insightful remark: “For all of us, colour is experienced as something – that is to say, we always see it in the guise of a substance which can be called by a variety of names.”¹¹ Aquinas seeks

¹⁰ The passage immediately goes on to make an exception for the human substantial form – the rational soul – which *is* subsistent and *does* exercise its own independent efficient causality. This creates an enormous problem for the unity of a human being, as Aquinas is well aware, because now he needs to explain how we can be one thing *simpliciter* and yet have an ingredient, the rational soul, which is a true entity in its own right. I take it to be a virtue of my account that it explains why Aquinas faces such difficulties here. His solution turns on the way in which, even though a human being consists of distinct substances, it still consists in just one substantial existence. A pale human being, in contrast, is not a true unity, and so not a true thing, because it is a composite of substantial existence and accidental existence.

¹¹ Riley, “Colour for the Painter,” p. 31.

to escape this sort of naïve conception of color and other such forms: “Many err regarding form because they judge it as if they were judging substance. This seems to happen because forms are signified as substances are, in the abstract, as whiteness or virtue, and so on” (DVC 11C). This passage too goes on to make the same point as the earlier passages: “a form is said to be a being not because it exists – if we are to speak properly – but because something exists by it” (ibid.). Aquinas thus wants to allow that there is *being* associated with the color of the hen. This being is not the same as the being of the hen itself, because the one sort of being is accidental and the other substantial. But there is only one entity here, the hen, and it exists both as a substance and also in various accidental ways.¹² If we imagine God creating a hen, then we had better imagine God creating a hen of a certain size, shape and color, since there can be no indeterminate hens. But there is only one thing here that God creates: a hen, existing like *that*. These various determinate features are not things in their own right but mere modes of the hen (to use a later idiom),¹³ such that in creating a hen, these features come along for free.

1.5 Mere Ideology?

My conclusion is that what there is in Aquinas is only substance. The rest is ideology, not ontology. If this conclusion still seems doubtful, consider for a moment how else one might read the passages discussed in the previous section. One option is to treat *being* as a genuinely determinable concept, so that substances have one kind of existence whereas other sorts of beings have a different kind of existence. The difficulties with this way of proceeding, however, are considerable. In addition to the intrinsic obscurity of the notion of modes of being,¹⁴ there is the further problem that Aquinas never offers the slightest help with characterizing any sort of lesser, sub-substantial existence. Even worse, as I have been stressing, he seems to make it pretty clear that he wants to understand modes-of-being talk differently: not that it is a lesser way in which forms exist, but that

¹² For comprehensive discussions of accidental being, as distinct from substantial being, see Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought*, pp. 253–65 and Brown, *Accidental Being*.

¹³ As a first approximation, it is useful to think of Aquinas’s theory of accidental forms as akin to the later theory of modes, as articulated by Suárez and then deployed by Descartes, Spinoza, and others. Aquinas’s theory is quite unlike the standard scholastic theory of accidents, as developed first by John Duns Scotus, which is much more ontologically committing, and is the origin of the notorious doctrine of real accidents. See Pasnau, *Metaphysical Themes*, Chapter 13.

¹⁴ For a recent attempt to clarify the notion, see McDaniel, “Ways of Being.”

it is a way in which substances exist. So this line of thought ends up supporting the conclusion that what there is *only* substance.

Another option would be to treat all of Aquinas's ideology as fully ontologically committing, so that all of it – substantial form, prime matter, accidents, accidental unities – exist in a perfectly ordinary sense of “exist.”¹⁵ One would then need to read the passages from the previous section as making the point that, while many things exist in a perfectly ordinary sense, substances have existence (*esse*) in some sort of special sense. But this just shifts the mystery, because now we need a story about what this special sense of substantial existence is. And although there are various familiar ways in which substances are special – their unity, their independence, their persistence – these do not seem to give rise to any difference in manner of *existence*. Moreover, even if some such alternative story could be developed, it would seem inconsistent with the passages examined in the previous section, which critically depend on Aquinas getting the result that substances, “properly and truly,” are the only things that come into and go out of existence.

So I say that the famous apparatus of Aquinas's metaphysics – its forms and matter – is ideology rather than ontology. But this is not to say that it is *mere* ideology. For even if the hylomorphic framework is not *ontologically* committing, it had better serve some purpose beyond the merely decorative. And there is a quick argument to show that form and matter have to make some sort of difference to what there is, which is that Aquinas holds that only God is simple, and that all created substances are complex in various ways (I 50.2 ad 3). Given what I have said, I cannot allow that this complexity is ontological. But what other sort of complexity is there? The answer is that there can be a complexity of modal characteristics. Whereas God's simplicity is a consequence of his pure actuality, the complexity of creatures stems from their various admixtures of potentiality. Thus he says, as quoted already, that “in every composition there must be potentiality and actuality” (I 3.7c). I am the potential subject of whiteness, because I am potentially pale, which is to say that I *can be* pale (in a way that my chickens cannot). After a long, cold winter spent reading old books, I *am* pale, which is to say – using the familiar ideology – that the accidental form of whiteness inheres in me. But it is not as if there really is such a *thing*, a form of whiteness, that has sprung into existence within me. It's still just me and my books here (and my

¹⁵ See Brower, *Aquinas's Ontology of the Material World*, who ascribes to Aquinas an extraordinarily rich ontology of prime matter, substantial forms, accidents, and even accidental unities.

chickens).¹⁶ To be sure, I have taken on a different way of existing, and one might now want an explanation of what it is for a substance like me to take on a certain color. But this is a question for the natural philosopher, not for the metaphysician.

Modal complexity, on this story, does not rest on some further story about ontological complexity. Instead, for Aquinas, the different ways of being potential and actual lie at the ground-level of the theory. Nothing could be more familiar than to say that, for Aquinas, matter is potentiality and form is actuality. But we should resist reading these familiar formulations as ontologically committing. A substance does not have a certain potentiality or actuality *because* a certain thing (a form) inheres in a certain other thing (the matter); rather, Aquinas's talk of form and matter is just his way of talking about a thing's basic modal characteristics. As we have seen, such talk comes in various kinds. There is the sort of potentiality that the ingredients have to be something new, and there is the potentiality of prime matter, and there is the potentiality of a substance to take on accidents. Then there is the actuality of substantial form, by which a substance *is*, and the actuality of an accidental form, by which a substance is F. Actualities themselves carry further potentialities or powers, and such higher-order potentialities are actualized not by existence (since the substance already exists) but by operation. So Aquinas writes: "Just as existing itself is a kind of actuality of an essence, so operating is the actuality of an operative potential or power. Accordingly, each of these is in actuality: the essence in terms of existing, the potential in terms of operating" (*DSC* 111c). Consider, for instance, the soul of an animal. According to Aristotle, it is the actuality of a body potentially having life (*De An.* II.1). In addition, a soul carries with it various potentialities: nutritive, sensory, or rational. These are not parts of the soul in any literal, ontologically committing sense, but merely its modal features:

It is true that the soul has various parts and powers, and that it thinks through one and senses through another. For the soul is a kind of whole potentiality and in this connection "part" is interpreted as a potentiality relative to the whole potentiality (*De An.* Commentary I.14.65–9).

¹⁶ Strictly speaking, the books may not count either, because artifacts in general are not substances. Aquinas has little to say explicitly, however, about what sorts of things do and do not count as substances. For an effort to sort this out, see Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*, Section 3.2.

If we want to know what a soul is, then, we should think not of some sort of mysterious entity that joins itself to matter, but rather as a set of potentialities and actualities that defines a thing as a living substance of one kind or another. What looks on its face like an ontologically promiscuous metaphysics is instead a theory that privileges, as fundamental, the modal features of reality.

The theory of prime matter makes for an interesting test of this approach. Until now, this discussion has not put much weight on that element of the theory, just because it is all too easy to make the case that prime matter lacks ontological standing. It is, after all, a purely potential element of a theory that treats existence as actuality, which is why God cannot make prime matter exist by itself (3.1.1). Still, it is an important part of Aquinas's ideology, and the *Summa Theologiae* even insists that prime matter is among the things created by God (even if, as we have seen, it is not properly created in the way composite substances are). Why concede that prime matter has been created at all? Aquinas's discussion runs quickly through some historical background, beginning with theories that postulated only bodies of one sort or another, then the introduction of substantial forms and accidental forms, and finally coming to prime matter. All he tells us at this point is that if God is "the cause of things inasmuch as they are beings" then he must be their cause "with reference to *all* that pertains to their existence in any sort of way" (I 44.2c). But this serves only to sharpen the real question: How does prime matter pertain to the existence of material substances? Elsewhere he is slightly more forthcoming: "Prime matter *is* in some way, since it *is* being in potentiality. God, however, is the cause of all things that are, as was shown above. Therefore God is the cause of prime matter" (SCG II.16 par. 12). This draws the needed connection to modality. To say that a substance contains prime matter is not to say that it has an ontological constituent, but rather to say something about its potential – about what the substance could become. It is to say, in short, that a material substance can become any sort of body whatsoever: "prime matter is that which is related to *all* forms and privations in just the way that bronze is related to *statue* and *unshaped*" (*Principles of Nature* 2.83–4). Just as I can become pale, so the bronze can become a statue. Aquinas's ideology of form and matter tracks modal features such as these. The point of talking about prime matter, then, is to highlight a distinguishing feature of material substances: that, through

substantial change, they can, eventually, become any sort of body whatsoever.¹⁷

By decoupling Aquinas's ideology from his ontology, we can take at face value the plain sense of what he says there is in the world. The result is an innovative metaphysics that treats actuality and potentiality as basic modal facts rather than as the product of further entities from which substances are composed. Having thus escaped the ontological extravagance to which his ideology might seem to give rise, we can in turn save the unqualified unity of substance, and so explain why only substances truly exist. This is not how Aquinas's views are generally understood, but it fits remarkably well with what he actually says there is.¹⁸

¹⁷ In Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*, pp. 131–40, I argued against the “independent ontological status” (p. 131) of prime matter in Aquinas. That discussion still strikes me as generally correct, as far as it goes, but as less than wholly persuasive, because it fails to explain the purpose of the ideology. The present discussion seeks to supplement that earlier treatment by explaining why the theory needs prime matter. I would also no longer speak of the account as “reductive in the direction of form” (p. 133). If it is reductive at all, it is so in the direction of substance.

¹⁸ Thanks to Jeffrey Brower, Jeffrey Hause, and an anonymous referee for their very helpful suggestions.