

## Virtus Essendi: Intensive Being in Pseudo-Dionysius and Aquinas\*

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Although the term *esse intensivum* does not appear in the works of St. Thomas, it expresses with admirable accuracy his notion of being as the exhaustive and comprehensive plenitude of the existential perfection of things. It has been coined by Cornelio Fabro after Aquinas' phrase *albedo intensive infinita*, which is used to illustrate the presence of a perfection in a cause which constitutes the essence and fullness of that perfection, in contrast to its limited participation by an effect.<sup>1</sup> It indicates the infinite intensity and simple fullness which precedes dispersion and division throughout any multiplicity. This is a pervasive background motif in both Dionysius and Aquinas: the cause possesses the perfection more eminently than that which has it as received. The effect is present *virtually*, i.e. according to a greater power; its perfection is contained *more intensely* in the source. Following from this is the pre-eminent presence of all perfections within the comprehensive plenitude of being and, more originally and profoundly, their unlimited presence in absolute, infinite divine Being. Cornelio Fabro is the exponent of St. Thomas whose work has contributed most to an appreciation of this aspect of Aquinas' original vision of being. Such an understanding of the profound significance of these texts, inspired in great measure by Dionysius, was closed to Durantel — who, in 1919, merely remarked: 'L'antériorité de l'être doit s'entendre naturellement d'une antériorité logique et non chronologique.'<sup>2</sup>

That the notion of the eminence or intensity of perfection as virtually present within the cause is derived from Dionysius is clear from the following sample passage:

Predication according to essence is always more primary than predication by participation. For what is in an effect cannot

\*I wish to dedicate this article in grateful appreciation to my first teacher of Philosophy, Rev. Edwin Rabbitte OFM, Professor Emeritus, University College Galway.

1. *De Veritate* 29, 3: Si enim intelligatur corpus album infinitum non propter hoc albedo *intensive* infinita erit, sed solum *extensive*, et per accidens. This distinction between *intensive* and *extensive* corresponds to that between *virtualis* and *dimensiva*, which we will consider in detail in the following pages. See Cornelio Fabro, *Participation et Causalité selon S. Thomas d'Aquin* (Louvain, 1961), p. 253, n. 18.

2. *Saint Thomas et le Pseudo-Denis* (Paris, 1919), p. 180.

be in the cause in the same manner but more eminently; and Dionysius explains this as follows: 'If anyone should say that life itself lives or that light itself is enlightened, he would not in my view speak correctly, unless this is expressed differently: since what are in effects pre-exist abundantly and substantially in their causes.' He calls life or light the cause, and what is living or enlightened the effect.<sup>3</sup>

As is well known, Aquinas praises Dionysius for rejecting the separate order of independent universal causes and for restoring all creative causality to the unique and universal cause. The Platonist motif, however, illustrates the fundamental principle that what is caused as an effect participates in its cause and that its perfection is preserved in it virtually according to a superior mode. A perfection which is received into a subject does not accrue or belong essentially to it of its own power. The key to Plato's affirmation of transcendent perfection is the recognition of the limited nature of the objects within our experience. A limited or incomplete measure of any perfection is unable to explain itself, to render reason for its existence. It is intelligible only through the indwelling presence of that fullness upon which, of its nature as finite, it places a limitation. A perfection embodied within an individual is measured to the capacity of that being. But such a limited measure is ultimately meaningful only in the light of a plenitude which, free from all restriction, is sufficient to itself and which is the source of its limited participations.

#### *Virtual Quantity: The Language of Esse Intensivum*

Aquinas adopts from Neoplatonism and in particular from Dionysius the doctrine of the intensity and plenitude of perfec-

3. *In I Sent.*, 22, 1, expositio textus (ed. Mandonnet, p. 544-5): Semper autem principalior praedicatio est quae est per essentiam, quam quae est per participationem . . . Non enim quid est in causato, oportet esse in causa eodem modo, sed eminentiori; et sic exponit Dionysius sic dicens: 'Vivere si quis dicat vitam, aut illuminare lumen, non recte secundum meam rationem dicit; sed secundum alium modum ista dicuntur: quia abundanter et substantialiter ea quae sunt causatorum, prius insunt causis'; dicit causam vitam vel lumen, causatum, vivens vel illuminatum. Dionysius' text: περισσῶς καὶ οὐσιωδῶς προένεστι τὰ τῶν αἰτιατῶν τοῖς αἰτίοις (*Divine Names* 2, 8, 58). References to Dionysius' *Divine Names* (DN) and to Aquinas' *In Librum Beati Dionysii De Divinis Nominibus* (*In DN*) are according to C. Pera's edition (Turin, Marietti: 1950); they are distinguished by using Arabic numerals for chapter and paragraph of Dionysius' work, and Roman numerals for chapter and *lectio* in Aquinas' Commentary. The third number (Arabic) refers to the paragraph in this edition. For a detailed examination of the influence of the Pseudo-Dionysius on St. Thomas, see Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Leiden, 1992).

tion; he recognises it as verified in a special way at the most intimate and ultimate level of *esse*. It is Dionysius' view of participation and pre-eminent presence which leads Aquinas to conceive of *esse* as the emergent fullness shared by all entitative characters. Aquinas' notion of intensive and emergent *esse* becomes in turn the core and foundation for his existential metaphysics of participation, as Fabro repeatedly emphasises.<sup>4</sup> Dionysius understands being, above all, as the focus of participation by all things in divine Goodness. All things are preserved in the created fullness of Being.

Aquinas indeed himself exploits the idea of virtual intensity to convey the inward nature of things and the varying degrees of their perfection, especially that of being. It will be revealing to take a closer look at the language employed. Especially noteworthy is the manner in which Aquinas draws upon elements from Aristotle's concepts of power and virtue in the moral and physical spheres. These he takes far beyond their setting in Aristotle, to the deeper level of ontological fullness and divine subsistence propounded by Dionysius.

The nature of intensity is most frequently elaborated upon in the context of theological discussions: the equality and relations of the divine persons, the divine gifts of grace, the nature of angels, the virtue of charity, or the ability of human and angelic knowledge to comprehend divine nature. Intensity expresses the manner of quantity characteristic of metaphysical or spiritual actions, powers and realities: a mode which must differ from the kind of quantity proper to corporeal reality. A passage which appropriately illustrates our theme is found in *De Veritate*, where Aquinas responds to the question whether or not the grace of Christ is infinite.<sup>5</sup> He begins by noting that 'finite' and 'infinite' refer to quantity, and that quantity is of two kinds: 'dimensional' (*dimensioniva*),

4. *Participation et Causalité*, p. 195: 'Cette "notion intensive" de l'*esse* . . . est le véritable fondement de la métaphysique thomiste de la participation.'

5. *De Veritate* 29, 3: Est autem duplex quantitas: scilicet dimensioniva, quae secundum extensionem consideratur; et virtualis, quae attenditur secundum intensionem: virtus enim rei est ipsius perfectio, secundum illud Philosophi in VII Physic: Unumquodque perfectum est quando attingit propriae virtuti. Et sic quantitas virtualis uniuscuiusque formae attenditur secundum modum suae perfectionis. Utraque autem quantitas per multa diversificatur: nam sub quantitate dimensioniva continetur longitudo, latitudo, et profundum, et numerus in potentia. Quantitas autem virtualis in tot distinguitur, quot sunt naturae vel formae; quarum perfectionis modus totam mensuram quantitatis facit. Contingit autem id quod est secundum unam quantitatem finitum, esse secundum aliam infinitum. Potest enim intelligi aliqua superficies finita secundum latitudinem, et infinita secundum longitudinem. Patet enim hoc, si accipiat una quantitas

which indicates extension, and 'virtual' (*virtualis*) which signifies an intensity or degree of perfection (*secundum intensionem*): 'the excellence or power — *virtus* — of a thing is its perfection' (*virtus enim rei est ipsius perfectio*), since, as Aristotle teaches, 'anything is perfect when it attains its proper excellence (*virtus*)'.<sup>6</sup> Thus the virtual quantity of each form is determined by the measure of its perfection. While dimensional quantity comprises length, width, depth and number, 'virtual quantity' (*quantitas virtualis*) is distinguished into as many classes as there are natures and forms; it is their degree of perfection which determines their quantitative measure. Thus a white body, for example, has the virtual quantity of whiteness in so far as it embodies, or approximates to, the full perfection of whiteness; the virtual quantity of a sentient being is considered in respect of the perfection of sensation and so on. Thus, considered as a being, the virtual quantity of any thing is determined by its perfection of existing: *sicut ex hoc quod dicitur ens, consideratur in eo quantitas virtualis quantum ad perfectionem essendi*.<sup>7</sup> In one and the same object, distinct modes or measures of virtual quantity can be affirmed according to the different natures predicated of it. We can indeed conceive of a white body which is infinite in dimension, but its whiteness will not thereby be infinite

dimensional, et alia virtualis. Si enim intelligatur corpus album infinitum, non propter hoc albedo intensive infinita erit, sed solum extensive, et per accidens; poterit enim aliquid albius inveniri. Patet nihilominus idem, si utraque quantitas sit virtualis. Nam in uno et eodem diversa quantitas virtualis attendi potest secundum diversas rationes eorum quae de ipso praedicantur; sicut ex hoc quod dicitur ens, consideratur in eo quantitas virtualis quantum ad perfectionem essendi; et ex hoc quod dicitur sensibilis, consideratur in eo quantitas virtualis ex perfectione sentiendi; et sic de aliis. Cf. *In I Sent.*, 17, 2, 1: Quantitas autem dicitur dupliciter: quaedam virtualis, quaedam dimensionalis.

6. *Physics*, VII, 3, 246a 13-15: ἡ μὲν ἀρετὴ τελειώσις τις — ὅταν γὰρ λάβῃ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ ἀρετὴν, τότε λέγεται τέλειον ἕκαστον. Moerbeke translates: 'Virtus enim quaedam perfectio est: unumquodque enim tunc maxime perfectum est, cum attingit propriae virtuti.' See Aquinas, *In Physic.*, VII, vi, 920. The reference given in *De Veritate* 29, 3 of the Marietti edition to C. VIII is incorrect. This is reprinted in the Frohmann Holzboog *Opera Omnia*. See *In Metaph.*, V, xviii, 1037f for an interesting explanation of the perfection of a natural being in terms of its proper measure of magnitude (*magnitudo naturalis*) — both of its continuous dimensions and of its natural ability or power. From Aquinas' example of a horse, it seems that with the first sense he has in mind some ideal physical range, admitting of variation, and determined no doubt by the form of the species. We can thus best understand Aquinas' statement that both forms of perfection (*quantitas dimensiona sibi naturaliter determinata* and *quantitas virtutis sibi debita secundum naturam*) belong to the interior perfection of a being.

7. *De Veritate* 29, 3.

in intensity, but only in extension and accidentally.<sup>8</sup> That which is infinite in dimensive quantity has nevertheless of itself a finite act of existence.<sup>9</sup> Even if we were to conceive of a sensitive soul, which has the full perfection of sensation, it would still be finite in essence, because its act of being (*esse*), even though infinite in its sentient power, is limited to a certain perfection of being, namely sensibility, which is exceeded by the perfection of intelligence.<sup>10</sup> We may note that while virtual quantity is present in all things, dimensive quantity resides only in bodies; in God and angels virtual quantity alone is present.<sup>11</sup>

Now, with regard to the meaning or nature of being (*ratio essendi*), Aquinas affirms:

Only what includes all the perfection of being (*omnis essendi perfectio*) can be infinite, since it is a perfection which may be diversified in an infinite number of different modes. And in this manner only God is infinite in his essence; because his essence is not limited to any determined perfection but embraces every mode of perfection to which the nature of being can extend; he is, therefore, essentially infinite.<sup>12</sup>

8. See also *De Veritate* 2, 9: Si aliquod corpus infinitum ponamus esse album, quantitas albedinis extensiva, secundum quam dicitur quanta per accidens, erit finita; quantitas autem per se, scilicet intensiva, nihilominus esset finita.

9. *De Veritate* 2, 9, ad 9: Illud quod est infinitum quantitate, habet esse finitum.

10. *De Veritate* 29, 3: Si ergo intelligatur aliqua anima sensibilis quae habeat in se quidquid potest concurrere ad perfectionem sentiendi qualitercumque, illa quidem anima erit finita secundum essentiam, quia esse suum est limitatum ad aliquam perfectionem essendi, scilicet sensibilem, quam excedit perfectio intelligibilis; esset tamen infinita secundum rationem sensibilitatis, quia eius sensibilitas ad nullum determinatum modum essendi limitaretur. The English version (*Truth*, Vol. 3, trans. Robert W. Schmidt, SJ, Chicago, 1954, p. 413) mistranslates the last phrase as 'any definite mode of sensing'.

11. *In I Sent.*, 19, 3, 1: In Deo non potest esse quantitas nisi virtutis. Cf. *Ibid.*, ad 3. *ST*, I, 8, 2 ad 1: Incorporalia non sunt in loco per contactum quantitatis dimensionis, sicut corpora: sed per contactum virtutis. *ST*, I, 52, 1: (Dimensiona quantitas) . . . in angelis non est; sed est in eis quantitas virtualis. Cf. *Quodlib.* 1, 3, 1. In the *Summa*, Aquinas makes a related distinction between quantitative and virtual totality or 'whole' (I, 76, 8; I, 8, 2 ad 3).

12. *De Veritate* 29, 3: Quantum igitur ad rationem essendi, infinitum esse non potest nisi illud in quo omnis essendi perfectio includitur, quae in diversis infinitis modis variari potest. Et hoc modo solus Deus infinitus est secundum essentiam; quia eius essentia non limitatur ad aliquam determinatam perfectionem, sed in se includit omnem modum perfectionis, ad quem ratio entitatis se extendere potest, et ideo ipse est infinitus secundum essentiam.

God alone has infinite intensity (*intensio infinita*).<sup>13</sup> The important notion of *quantitas virtualis* and the virtual perfection of being is thus given its maximum significance in referring to divine Being. (We will return to the notion of virtual fullness and intensity of divine being.) And while Aquinas begins this passage of *De Veritate* with a phrase from Aristotle, his vision of God as the infinite perfection or comprehensive intensity of Being is unmistakably Dionysian, even in formulation. Almost continuous in both text and context are some brief lines from *De Malo* which resumes Dionysius' corrected view of the Neoplatonist theme of separated perfections. The separated form which is pure act, namely God, is not limited to any one species or genus but possesses the total power of being boundlessly inasmuch as he is his own being. This is clear, states Aquinas, from Chapter 5 of *Divine Names*:

The separate form which is pure act, namely God, is not determined to any species or genus, but has uncircumscribed the full power of being (*totam virtutem essendi*) since it exists as its own act of being, as is clear from Dionysius in Chapter 5 of *Divine Names*.<sup>14</sup>

From Dionysius, Aquinas attains the notion of the infinite and virtual intensity of perfection in God; being is the universal and fundamental power or perfection which comes to presence in individuals according to varied degrees. We encounter here a striking manner in which being is grasped as power or perfection, virtue or strength, which rather than possessing richness by way of extension or dominion beyond itself, is one of inner attainment, of self-actuality according to differing degrees of pitch or intensity.

The vocabulary and application of *virtus* is indeed rich and extensive in itself. Most frequently it refers to the moral quality of human powers or faculties in their capacity to act. But it is clear that for Aquinas it is much broader. Following on Aristotle, the word *virtus* expresses for him the perfection of any power in relation to its final goal.<sup>15</sup> The following passage, although delivered in a discussion on human habits and dispositions, has a profound

13. *De Veritate* 2, 9: The validity of referring this term to God may be extrapolated from the context.

14. *De Malo* 16, 9 ad 6: Forma separata, quae est purus actus, scilicet Deus, non determinatur ad aliquam speciem vel genus aliquod; sed incircumscribitur habet totam virtutem essendi, utpote ipsum suum esse existens, sicut patet per Dionysium cap. V De divinis nominibus. In *de Caus.*, IX, 2, 232: Eius virtus excedit omnem virtutem et Eius esse omne esse. See *Ibid.*, IV, 109.

15. *De Caelo* I, 11, 281a, 10-19: δέον ὀρίζεσθαι πρὸς τὸ τέλος καὶ τὴν ὑπεροχὴν τὴν δύναμιν . . . 'Ἡ δὲ δύναμις τῆς ὑπεροχῆς ἐστίν' . . . διωρίσθω γὰρ κατὰ τῆς ὑπεροχῆς τὸ τέλος λεγόμενον τὸ κυρίως δυνατόν.

metaphysical meaning: 'Virtue denotes a determinate perfection of a power. The perfection of anything, however, is considered especially in relation to its end. Yet the end of a power is its act. A power is said to be perfect, therefore, in so far as it is determined to its act.'<sup>16</sup> Thus in its unqualified sense, *virtus* is the *ultimum potentiae* — the utmost to which a power can attain.<sup>17</sup> *Virtus*, however, also admits of degrees in relation to such an ultimate. Such quantity of virtue (*quantitas virtutum*) is most aptly exemplified in the domain of human habits and Aquinas again employs the vocabulary of participation and intensity. Greatness of virtue may be taken to refer to the intensity or slackness according to which it is shared by the subject.<sup>18</sup> Aquinas explains that the magnitude of *virtus* may be deemed greater or less (*major et minor*) in two ways: in itself, with respect to the things to which it extends, or on the part of the subject by which it is participated. It will be participated variously by different persons or by the same person at different times.<sup>19</sup> This is intensive greatness, the magnitude which is proper and unique to *virtus*: the inner measure and density of its presence embraced and embodied concretely in the individual. As examples Aquinas mentions knowledge and health, which are received in greater measure by one subject than by another, according to its nature and aptitude. Such habits and dispositions vary in intensive greatness, he explains since, as Aristotle has pointed out, they are judged in relation to a subject which possesses them (*secundum ordinem ad aliquid*).<sup>20</sup> Aristotle's analogy of health springs easily to mind here and while its parallel with being

16. *ST*, I-II, 55, 1: Dicendum quod virtus nominat quamdam potentiae perfectionem. Uniuscuiusque autem perfectio praecipue consideratur in ordine ad suum finem. Finis autem potentiae actus est. Unde potentia dicitur esse perfecta, secundum quod determinatur ad suum actum. *ST*, I-II, 55, 3: Virtus importat perfectionem potentiae. In *I Sent.*, 29, 3, 1: Virtus autem, secundum Philosophum, est ultimum in re de potentia.

17. *ST*, I-II 55, 1 ad 1: Unde quando dicitur quod virtus est ultimum potentiae, sumitur virtus pro objecto virtutis. Id enim in quod ultimo potentia potest est id quod dicitur virtus rei.

18. *ST*, I-II, 66, 2: Quantitas virtutum . . . potest attendi secundum participationem subjecti, prout scilicet intenditur vel remittitur in subjecto. For similar terminology, see *ST*, I-II, 52, 1, which treats 'de intensionibus habituum' (66, 1): intensio et remissio, magis et minus, plus vel minus, intensior et remissior.

19. *ST*, I-II, 66, 1: Si vero consideretur virtus ex parte subjecti participantis, sic contingit virtutem esse maiorem vel minorem, sive secundum diversa tempora in eodem, sive in diversis hominibus.

20. *ST*, I-II, 52, 1: Sic igitur patet quod, cum habitus et dispositiones dicantur secundum ordinem ad aliquid ut dicitur in VII *Physic.*, dupliciter potest intensio et remissio in habitibus et dispositionibus considerari. Uno modo, secundum se: prout dicitur major vel minor sanitas; vel major vel minor scientia quae ad plura vel pauciora se extendit. Alio modo, secun-

is far from the present context, it is exactly what we are concerned with.

In a significant passage of the *Summa*,<sup>21</sup> Aquinas grounds the virtual quantity of a being's perfection in its form. Here he points out that the quantity proper to material beings is *dimensive* in nature. This may be either continuous (extension in the literal sense, characteristic of time or space)<sup>22</sup> or discrete, which constitutes the nature of number. We may also speak, however, of the 'quantity of power' (*quantitas virtutis*) or excellence of a being, its *virtual quantity* — its perfection in respect of any aspect or determination. (The analogy used by Aquinas here is that of heat: hot things are said to be 'more' or 'less', according as they are more or less perfect.) According to Aquinas, the virtual quantity of any being is first rooted in its nature or form; form confers upon it what Aquinas strikingly calls its 'spiritual greatness' (*magnitudo spiritualis*), endowing, on the analogy of heat, its intensity and perfection (*suam intensionem et perfectionem*).

Moreover, form further determines, as an effect, the virtual quantity of any being in two respects: inwardly, so to speak, it mediates or measures its act of being (*forma dat esse*), and outwardly

dum participationem subjecti: prout scilicet aequalis scientia vel sanitas magis recipitur in uno quam in alio, secundum diversam aptitudinem vel ex natura vel ex consuetudine. Cf. Aristotle *Physics*, VII, 3, 246b 3-4: "Ἐν δὲ καὶ φαμεν ἀπάσας εἶναι τὰς ἀρετὰς ἐν τῷ πρὸς τί πως ἔχειν. Note that *virtus* translates both δύναμις and ἀρετή.

21. *ST*, I, 42, 1 ad 1: Ad primum ergo dicendum quod duplex est quantitas. Una scilicet quae dicitur quantitas molis vel quantitas dimensiva, quae in solis rebus corporalibus est; unde in divinis personis locum non habet. Sed alia est quantitas virtutis, quae attenditur secundum perfectionem alicuius naturae vel formae. Quae quidem quantitas designatur secundum quod dicitur aliquid magis vel minus calidum inquantum est perfectius vel minus perfectum in tali caliditate. Huiusmodi autem quantitas virtualis attenditur primo quidem in radice, idest in ipsa perfectione formae vel naturae, et sic dicitur magnitudo spiritualis, sicut dicitur magnus calor propter suam intensionem et perfectionem. Et ideo dicit Augustinus, quod in his quae non mole magna sunt, hoc est maius esse quod est melius esse, nam melius dicitur quod perfectius est. Secundo autem attenditur quantitas virtualis in effectibus formae. Primus autem effectus formae est esse, nam omnis res habet esse secundum suam formam. Secundus autem effectus est operatio, nam omne agens agit per suam formam. Attenditur igitur quantitas virtualis et secundum esse et secundum operationem; secundum esse quidem inquantum ea quae sunt perfectioris naturae sunt maioris durationis; secundum operationem vero inquantum ea quae sunt perfectioris naturae sunt magis potentia ad agendum.

22. See *ST*, I, 42, 1, obj. 1: In divinis autem personis non invenitur neque quantitas continua intrinseca, quae dicitur magnitudo; neque quantitas continua extrinseca, quae dicitur locus et tempus; neque secundum quantitatem discretam invenitur in eis aequalitas, quia duae personae sunt plures quam una.

it is the origin of the virtual quantity of a being's activities or operations, since in its action every agent acts in virtue of its form (*omne agens agit per suam formam*). In this passage Aquinas thus outlines summarily the three aspects under which we may speak of the 'virtual quantity' of beings: *esse* or the act of being, its form or nature, and its operations or activity. Form plays, moreover, a central role as in a sense the instrumental origin or source of the virtual perfection of the other two.<sup>23</sup> Aquinas states explicitly in *De Potentia* that the *virtus essendi* of each thing is proportionate to the measure and intimacy of its form.<sup>24</sup>

A similar threefold distinction is offered in *In I Sent.*, 19, 3, 1,<sup>25</sup> where Aquinas, faced with the question whether greatness can be

23. In this regard see also *Contra Gentiles* 2, 55, 1299: *Esse autem per se consequitur ad formam . . . unumquodque autem habet esse secundum quod habet formam.* (References are to paragraphs of the Marietti edition.) *De Veritate* 29, 3 ad 4: *Forma est principium actus. Secundum autem quod habet esse in actu, non est possibile quod a forma cuius est essentia finita, procedat actio infinita secundum intensionem.* On the role of form, see Klaus Riesenhuber, *Die Transzendenz der Freiheit zum Guten* (München, 1971), Chapter 9: 'Die Form als Ursprung des Seins'; also Cornelio Fabro, *Participation et Causalité*, pp. 343-62.

24. *De Potentia* 5, 4 ad 1: *Nam quantum unicuique inest de forma, tantum inest ei de virtute essendi.* See the texts cited in footnotes 55-7 below. Tomás Melendo Granados, *Ontología de los opuestos* (Pamplona, 1982), p. 186: ' . . . hay que admitir un *magis et minus* en las formas sustanciales. *Magis et minus* que se origina, no por la intensificación o remisión de una misma forma, sino por la diversidad jerárquica entre las formas sustanciales, que provoca una mayor o menor intensidad en la posesión del acto de ser.' See *In I de Gen. et Corrupt.*, 8, 62.

25. Respondeo dicendum, quod in Deo non potest esse quantitas nisi virtutis; et cum aequalitas attendatur secundum aliquam speciem quantitatis, aequalitas non erit nisi secundum virtutem. Virtus autem, secundum Philosophum, VI *Ethic.*, c. II, est ultimum in re de potentia. Unde etiam dicitur in VII *Physic.*, text. 18, quod virtus est perfectio quaedam, et tunc unumquodque perfectum est quando attingit propriam virtutem. Omnibus igitur illis modis quibus contingit pertinere ad ultimum est considerare virtutem rei. Hoc autem contingit tripliciter: primo in operationibus in quibus contingit gradus perfectionis inveniri. Unde dicitur habere virtutem ad operandum quod attingit completam operationem, prout dicitur II *Ethic.*, cap. v, quod virtutis est quae bonum facit habentem, et opus eius bonum reddit. Secundo respectu ipsius esse rei, secundum quod etiam Philosophus dicit, I *Caeli et mundi*, text. 103, quod aliquid habet virtutem ut semper sit. Item secundum plenitudinem perfectionis respectu ipsius entis, secundum quod attingit ultimum naturae suae . . . Si igitur virtus divina consideretur secundum perfectionem ad opus, erit virtus potentiae operativae. Si autem consideretur perfectio quantum ad ipsum esse divinum, virtus eius erit aeternitas. Si autem consideretur quantum ad complementum perfectionis ipsius naturae divinae, erit magnitudo. Quod patet ex hoc quod ipse probat aequalitatem in magnitudine ex hoc quod tota plenitudo naturae Patris est in Filio; secundum quem etiam modum Augustinus dicit, VI *De Trinitate*, cap. viii,

applied to God, responds that in God there can only be quantity of power: *quantitas virtutis*. He follows Aristotle in saying that *virtus* is the ultimate achievement of a being, i.e. the attainment of its utmost potentiality. *Virtus* is synonymous with perfection: a thing is perfect when it attains its proper power or virtue. The virtue of a thing may be considered, therefore, with regard to every aspect in which it is open to attain fulfilment. This occurs in three ways: firstly, in those operations in which it is possible to find different degrees of perfection. Thus that which exercises a complete activity has the (full) virtue of action (*virtus ad operandum*). The virtue or power of a thing is also found 'with respect to the very existence of a thing' (*respectu ipsius esse rei*). Thus, in Aristotle's example, a thing may have the power to always exist.<sup>26</sup> Finally there is that virtue which is measured according to the plenitude of perfection with respect to the being itself (*respectu ipsius entis*), in so far as it attains the ultimate within its own nature — in other words, according to its form. The power of God is clearly supreme in all three respects: manifestly, God has the operative power to act; eternity is itself the very power of his existence; and the fullness of the perfection itself of divine nature is his greatness, a magnitude, which Aquinas stresses, is not one of dimension but of virtue alone.<sup>27</sup>

Aquinas refers to Augustine's view in Chapter 6 of *De Trinitate*, that in beings whose greatness is not one of bulk, *to be more*, or greater, is *to be better*: *In his enim quae non mole magna sunt hoc est maius esse quod est melius esse*. Augustine dealt with the distinction of material and bodily magnitude at some length in *De Quantitate Animae*. As with Aquinas, the greatness of being of spiritual realities resides, according to Augustine, in their *virtus*: 'When we hear and speak of a great and strong soul, we ought not to think of its size, but of its power (*quantum possit*).'<sup>28</sup> Aquinas recognises the distinction in Aristotle's evaluation of the intellect which, 'though small in bulk, surpasses by far all else in power and value.'<sup>29</sup> In his

quod in his quae non mole magna sunt, idem est maius esse quod melius, secundum quod etiam dicimus aliquem hominem esse magnum, qui est perfectus in scientia et virtute.

26. Aquinas frequently uses the phrase *virtus essendi* to express the power of some beings (heavenly bodies) to endure eternally in existence (*Contra Gentiles* 2, 33, 1098, *De Caelo et Mundo* I, vi, 62). Though related, this is not the full, intensive, meaning of *esse* as a virtual perfection. For the texts of Aristotle, *De Caelo*, see note 54 below.

27. *In I Sent.*, 19, 3, 1 ad 3.

28. *De Quantitate Animae* 17: Non igitur magnum vel ingentem animum cum audimus aut dicimus, quantum loci occupet, sed quantum possit, cogitandum est.

29. *Nic. Eth.*, X, vii, 8, 1178a: εἰ γὰρ καὶ τῷ ὄγκῳ μικρόν ἐστι, δυνάμει

commentary on this passage from the *Ethics*, he simply notes that the magnitude of the intellect is one of virtual quantity, but does not elaborate.<sup>30</sup> In none of the passages where he outlines the distinction between virtual and dimensive quantity does Aquinas attribute the doctrine to any specific source.

The connection between the virtual quantity of beings and the intensive nature of perfection is brought out clearly by Aquinas when considering the intensity of action. Responding in *De Potentia* to the question whether the power of God is infinite,<sup>31</sup> Aquinas speaks of a certain intensity which belongs to the efficiency of action (*intensio secundum efficaciam agendi*), according to the manner whereby a being exercises its active powers.<sup>32</sup> A certain infinity may, he suggests, be ascribed to active power in a manner similar to that of quantity, both continuous and discrete. The 'quantity' of power is discrete when measured according to the number of its objects — whether they are many or few. This is called 'extensive quantity' (*quantitas extensiva*, which is of course synonymous with 'dimensive quantity'). The quantity of power is continuous when measured with respect to the slackness or intensity of its action. This is its 'intensive quantity' (*quantitas intensiva*). Extensive quantity refers to the *objects* of power, intensive quantity to its *action*; active power is the principle of both. The former determines

καὶ τιμότητι πολὺ μᾶλλον πάντων ὑπερέχει. In the translation of William of Moerbeke: Si enim et mole parvum est, potentia et pretiositate multum magis omnibus superexcellit.

30. *In Ethic.*, X, xi, 2107: Quamvis enim hoc optimum sit parvum mole, quia est incorporeum et simplicissimum, et per consequens caret magnitudine molis, tamen quantitate virtutis et pretiositatis multum excedit omnia quae in homine sunt.

31. *De Potentia* 1, 2: In actione etiam invenitur quaedam intensio secundum efficaciam agendi, et sic potest potentiae activae attribui quaedam infinitas secundum conformitatem ad infinitatem quantitatis et continuae et discretas. Discretas quidem secundum quod quantitas potentiae attenditur secundum multa vel pauca obiecta; et haec vocatur quantitas extensiva: continuae vero, secundum quod quantitas potentiae attenditur in hoc quod remisse vel intense agit; et haec vocatur quantitas intensiva. Prima autem quantitas convenit potentiae respectu obiectorum, secunda vero respectu actionis. Istorum enim duorum activa potentia est principium. The reference given to *De Potentia* 1, 3 in Fabro, *Participation et Causalité*, p. 253, is incorrect.

32. Aristotle compares the magnitude of powers in a somewhat similar manner, measuring them in terms of time: 'The greater power is always that which produces an equal effect in less time, whether it be heating, sweetening, throwing or, in general, effecting any kind of change.' *Phys.*, VIII, 10, 266a29-31: ἔστω γὰρ αἰεὶ ἡ πλείων δύναμις ἡ τὸ ἴσον ἐν ἐλάττω χρόνῳ ποιοῦσα, οἷον θερμαίνουσα ἢ γλυκαίνουσα ἢ ῥίπτουσα καὶ ὁλως κινουσα.

its extent (the number of its objects), the latter the measure of its presence, efficacy, and intimacy within them.

The powers and activities of the spirit, such as intellectual knowing and loving are thus measured in degrees of virtual, rather than dimensive quantity: they admit of greater or lesser levels of efficacy; they vary in the measure of their intensity. Intellectual comprehension, for example, admits only indirectly of dimensive quantity — inasmuch as it relies upon sensation for its object. Considered in itself, in its grasp of the intelligible, it varies in virtual quantity, according as it comprehends its object more or less perfectly and intimately.<sup>33</sup> Extensive quantity, Aquinas declares, is accidental to knowledge, whereas intensive quantity is essential to it.<sup>34</sup> (Note the identity of *quantitas virtualis* and *quantitas intensiva*.) Similarly, love is marked only extrinsically by extensive or dimensive quantity, i.e. as it attains to fewer or more numerous objects; intrinsically it is measured only by the intensity of its act (*secundum intensionem actus*), as it loves something to a greater or lesser degree. This is its virtual quantity and as such it varies *quantum ad intensionem actus*.<sup>35</sup> Now, divine power is infinite in both

33. *De Veritate* 8, 2: Per se autem non comparatur ad intellectum intelligibile secundum quantitatem dimensivam, cum intellectus sit virtus non utens organo corporali; sed per se comparatur ad ipsum, solum secundum quantitatem virtualem. Et ideo in his quae per se intelliguntur sine coniunctione ad sensum, non impeditur comprehensio intellectus nisi propter excessum quantitatis virtualis; quando scilicet quod intelligitur, habet modum intelligendi perfectiorem quam sit modus quo intellectus intelligit.

34. *De Veritate* 20, 4 ad 14: Quantitas extensionis est scientiae accidentalis; quantitas autem intensiva est ei essentialis.

35. *ST*, II-II, 24, 4 ad 1: Dicendum quod caritati non convenit quantitas dimensiva, sed solum quantitas virtualis. Quae non solum attenditur secundum numerum obiectorum, ut scilicet plura vel pauciora diligantur: sed etiam secundum intensionem actus, ut magis vel minus aliquid diligatur. Et hoc modo virtualis quantitas caritatis augeatur. See also *In I Sent.*, 17, 2, 1, *Solutio* and ad 2: Quantitas autem dicitur dupliciter: quaedam virtualis, quaedam dimensiva. Virtualis quantitas non est ex genere suo quantitas, quia non dividitur divisione essentiae suae; sed magnitudo eius attenditur ad aliquid divisibile extra, vel multiplicabile, quod est obiectum vel actus virtutis . . . Quantitas virtutis attenditur dupliciter: vel quantum ad numerum obiectorum, et hoc est per modum quantitatis discretarum; vel quantum ad intensionem actus super idem obiectum, et hoc est sicut quantitas continua; et ita excrescit virtus charitatis. Similarly, the spiritual gifts of love, knowledge, charity and grace are measured in terms of their virtual or intensive quantity — secundum maiorem et minorem perfectionem virtutis (*In I Sent.*, 17, 2, 1 ad 3). Cf. *De Veritate* 29, 3 ad 4: Forma est principium actus. Secundum autem quod habet esse in actu, non est possibile quod a forma cuius est essentia finita, procedat actio infinita secundum intensionem. Unde et meritum Christi non fuit infinitum secundum intensionem actus: finite enim diligebat et cognosce-

respects, since it never produces so many effects that it cannot produce more, nor does it ever act with such intensity that it cannot act even more intensely. Aquinas clarifies: 'The intensity of God's action is not measured according as it is in itself — because thus it is always infinite, since God's action is his essence — but according as it attains its effect; thus some things are moved by God more efficaciously, some less.'<sup>36</sup> God is equally present to all things, but not present to all in equal measure.

Since *esse* is what is more efficacious within each thing, grounding and actualising its every perfection, it is, in the light of this passage, most appropriate to speak of the intensity of the act of being at the inner heart of the individual, and of the comprehensive infinity of its existential intensity within *Ipsium Esse Subsistens*. From the many texts and varied contexts in which Aquinas elaborates the notions of virtual quantity, denoting the intensity of action and existential and formal perfection, we can conclude that it is both valid and enlightening to speak of the virtual intensity of being, and of *virtus essendi* as the intensive power or perfection of being. Cornelio Fabro does not seem to have exploited the wide wealth of texts by Aquinas on virtual quantity and the connection between *virtus* and intensity.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps this is not all too surprising, since it is indeed only *en passant* that Aquinas himself makes explicit the identity between 'virtual' and 'intensive' quantity (*Et similiter patet in quantitate virtuali vel intensiva*).<sup>38</sup> He

bat; sed habuit quamdam infinitatem ex circumstantia personae, quae erat dignitatis infinitae.

36. *De Potentia* 1, 2: Utroque autem modo divina potentia est infinita. Nam nunquam tot effectus facit quin plures facere possit, nec unquam ita intense operatur quin intensius operari possit. Intensio autem in operatione divina non est attendenda secundum quod operatio est in operante, quia sic semper est infinita, cum operatio sit divina essentia; sed attendenda est secundum quod attingit effectum; sic enim a Deo moventur quaedam efficacius, quaedam minus efficaciter.

37. Citing *De Veritate* 29, 3, he writes: 'En conclusion: de la quantité dimensive l'analogué métaphysique est passé à la *quantitas virtualis* qui est la perfection d'être, et il s'est placé au sommet dans l'Acte d'être comme plénitude de perfection.' (*Participation et Causalité*, p. 259). See note 150 below.

38. *De Veritate* 29, 3 ad 5: Quod enim finitum aliquid per continuum augmentum possit attingere ad quantumcumque finitum, veritatem habet, si accipiatur eadem ratio quantitatis in utroque finito; sicut si comparemus lineam ad lineam, vel albedinem ad albedinem; non tamen si accipiatur alia et alia ratio quantitatis. Et hoc patet in quantitate dimensiva: quantumcumque enim linea augeatur in longum, nunquam perveniet ad latitudinem superficiei. Et similiter patet in quantitate virtuali vel intensiva: quantumcumque enim cognitio cognoscentis Deum per similitudinem proficiat, nunquam potest adaequari cognitioni comprehensoris, qui videt Deum per essentiam.



does not dwell at any length on their fruitful association. These notions are present below the surface of his discourse; their profound kinship, their original and ultimate identity with respect to being, however, should be clear.

The text of *De Veritate* 29, 3 understands the notion of intensity in the Platonist sense of presence and plenitude of perfection; *De Potentia* I, 2 adopts it as a model for deepening the Aristotelian notion of operation and actuality. In the *Summa*, Aquinas attributes virtual quantity to the mediation of form.

### *Virtual Intensity of Being*

These passages, particularly revealing of Aquinas' concept of Being as intensive *virtus*, power and excellence which is present in graded measures, as an inner quantity — one is tempted to speak of a 'qualitative quantity' — seem to have been overlooked by writers on thomistic being.<sup>39</sup> In an isolated remark Etienne Gilson draws attention to the Dionysian origin of the term *virtus essendi*.<sup>40</sup> In an article entitled precisely 'Virtus Essendi', he identifies *virtus essendi* with the *actus essendi* which each thing receives through its form, but denies that it can be present in diverse degrees of inten-

39. An exception is James F. Anderson, who mentions it briefly in *The Bond of Being* (New York, 1969), pp. 295-6. By the same author, see *The Cause of Being*, (St. Louis, 1952,) pp., 122-3, for an outline of Aquinas' distinction between quantitative, essential and virtual totality. The present article is a partial response to the suggestion of L.-B. Geiger: 'Aristote s'était contenté, nous l'avons dit, de poser au-dessus des êtres mobiles, des substances immobiles et éternelles. Saint Thomas approfondit cette manière de voir en mettant en évidence une sorte d'intensité croissante ou de perfection en quelque sorte qualitative de l'*actus essendi*. Une étude de son vocabulaire, à cet égard, serait des plus révélatrices. L'*esse* comporte une *virtus*, une *perfectio* qui va croissant, à mesure qu'on s'élève dans l'échelle des êtres (idée qui eût sans doute paru inintelligible à Aristote). Et cette croissance n'est rien d'autre que la réalisation de moins en moins imparfaite, de plus en plus purement actuelle, de l'*actus essendi* lui-même, selon toute sa plénitude intensive, *secundum totum suum posse*. (*Philosophie et Spiritualité* I (Paris, 1963), pp. 149-50). See *La participation dans la philosophie de Saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris, 1953), p. 198, n. 2, where Geiger, with a reference to Dionysius, speaks of *virtus essendi*, 'sorte de plénitude intensive de l'*esse*'. See p. 373, n. 2: 'Cette notion de: *nature de l'être* (*entitas, natura entis, virtus essendi*), demanderait à être précisée. Elle suppose une vue de l'être, où de prime abord celui-ci apparaît comme doué d'une densité qualitative, qui permet de lui appliquer les données générales valables pour les formes ou les essences.' Geiger quotes *In DN*, V, i, 629 as an example of this understanding of being.

40. *Le Thomisme* (Paris, 1972), p. 194, n. 8: 'La notion de *virtus essendi*, d'origine dionysienne, signifie l'aptitude intrinsèque de la forme à l'existence.'

sity. This is because of his failure to advert to Aquinas' distinction between 'dimensive' and 'virtual' quantity. He writes as follows:

L'on ferait fausse route en cherchant dans saint Thomas une doctrine de l'être qui reconnaîtrait à l'*esse* une intensité intrinsèque variable à laquelle correspondraient, dans la nature, les degrés différents de perfection qui distinguent les êtres. Le mouvement comporte des degrés de quantité qui permettent de le dire plus ou moins grand, l'être n'en a pas . . . Pour l'imagination, une *virtus*, une *dynamis* est une force, et si on en parle comme de quelque chose qui peut être donné dans sa totalité, ou ne se rencontrer que sous forme de participation limitée, il est inévitable que nous l'imaginions comme une quantité variable. Le plus simple est de lui attribuer divers degrés d'intensité. C'est justement là que l'erreur d'interprétation guette le lecteur. Il convient de ne transposer les attributs du physique dans l'ordre du métaphysique. Au delà de la nature il n'y a plus de matière, ni d'étendue, ni de quantité, ni de plus ou moins. L'*esse* échappe à toutes ces déterminations, mais comme malgré tout il y a des différences d'être nous nous représentons des degrés de pureté et d'actualité formelle sous l'aspect de degrés d'intensité quantitative qui ne conviennent aucunement à l'être.<sup>41</sup>

41. 'Virtus Essendi', *Mediaeval Studies* 26 (1964), pp. 8-9. Much of what I am attempting to convey here is brought out much more admirably by Gilson himself in *The Elements of Christian Philosophy*, (New York, 1963) pp. 210-12, where the influence of Dionysius on Aquinas' appreciation of being is highlighted. Gilson comes closest to affirming existence as a variable, virtual and intensive value when he speaks of quality and quantity as inseparable in reality: there is thus a 'quality of quantity'. However, only 'if we agree to *imagine* [his emphasis] essences as various quantities of actual being (will) the ontological density of each essence . . . determine a qualitative specification proper to it.' Gilson interprets Aristotle's view that 'a definition is a sort of number' to suggest that 'The Philosopher seems to have conceived (or imagined) each specific essence (stone, plant, animal, etc.) as a certain quantity of being. . . . Translated into the language of Thomas Aquinas, this would mean that each essence represents the quantity of actual being (*esse*) participated in by a specifically defined substance. . . . There is less being in a material form, limited to be itself only because of its matter, than in an intellectual substance capable of becoming any other given being.' My only disagreement with Gilson is that rather than a concession to imagination, such a view of being as a virtual quantity exhibiting varying degrees of intensity is conceptually compelling and is, moreover, textually based in the works of Aquinas. Indeed Joseph Owens considers that Aquinas' advance beyond Aristotle (whose philosophy of being is marked by 'the absence of any treatment of *existence*') may be expressed in Gilson's words from *Le Thomisme*, (1944, pp. 54-5): 'Chaque essence est posée par un acte d'exister qu'elle n'est pas et qui l'inclut comme son autodétermination . . . c'est donc la hiérarchie des actes d'exister qui fonde et règle celle



I cite this passage at length to show how far from the mark Gilson's remarks are. He takes his cue from the pronouncement *esse autem non habet aliquam extensionem quantitatis* in *Contra Gentiles*.<sup>42</sup> Being has no quantitative extension; Gilson, however, seems unfamiliar with Aquinas' phrase: *ex hoc quod dicitur ens, consideratur in eo quantitas virtualis quantum ad perfectionem essendi*.<sup>43</sup> The distinction which Aquinas makes is between *extensio quantitatis* and *quantitas virtualis*. This is precisely the meaning of the paragraph which Gilson only quotes in part. Aquinas illustrates the contrast in the continuation of the passage: *non oportet quod virtus essendi sit infinita in corpore finito, licet in infinitum duret*.<sup>44</sup> The inner power or virtue of being belongs to a dimension of beings other than that of quantitative measurement (spatial or temporal). This is what Aquinas means when he declares that the being of anything, considered in itself, is not a quantity (*non est quantum*); it has no parts, but is at once complete.<sup>45</sup> In this sense it is invariable; a thing either is or it is not. Moreover, each being is one; existence and unity are convertible. Quantity belongs to the being of a thing only accidentally — in so far as it is subject to time and change, or if the thing itself has a determined quantity. Thus Aquinas completes the paragraph of *Contra Gentiles* I, 20: 'There is no difference whether something endures through that power [*virtus essendi*] for an instant or for an infinite time, since its changeless being is not touched by time except by accident.'<sup>46</sup> (In this sense we can understand Aquinas' profound statement: *Esse autem est aliquid fixum et quietum in ente*).<sup>47</sup>

Even if it were extended without limit, what is of its nature finite could never attain to infinity.<sup>48</sup> Extended endlessly in space, a

des essences, chacune d'elles n'exprimant que l'intensité propre d'un certain acte d'exister.' (Joseph Owens, *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics*, Toronto, 1963, p. 466, n. 41). See A. Solignac, 'La doctrine de l'esse chez saint Thomas est-elle d'origine néoplatonicienne?', *Archives de Philosophie* 30 (1967), pp. 449-50: 'La densité d'être, si l'on peut dire, la densité de valeur de chaque acte d'esse, est variable selon chaque être; c'est pourquoi il y a une *scala entis*, une échelle des degrés d'être.'

42. *Contra Gentiles* 1, 20, 175.

43. *De Veritate* 29, 3.

44. *Contra Gentiles* 1, 20, 175.

45. *De Caelo et Mundo* I, vi, 62: *Ipsium autem esse alicuius rei secundum se consideratum non est quantum: non enim habet partes, sed totum est simul.*

46. *Contra Gentiles* 1, 20, 175.

47. *Contra Gentiles* 1, 20, 179.

48. For an interesting discussion on Aristotle's principle that an infinite power cannot reside in a finite magnitude (*Phys.*, VIII, 10, 266a27-8: οὐκ ἐνδέχεται ἐν πεπερασμένῳ μεγέθει ἀπειρον εἶναι δύναμιν) see Carlos Steel, 'Omnis corporis potentia est finita. L'interprétation d'un principe

bodily being would still remain finite in nature; and what is temporal, even were it to endure without beginning or end, would likewise remain limited in its being. What is finite, were it to exist eternally, would be eternally finite. Infinity is not attained by multiplying finitude *ad infinitum*, nor eternity simply by endlessly extending time. The *virtual* quantity of being is the vertical source in which the perfection of each thing is intensified and grounded, whereas *dimensive* quantity is the level at which the perfection of material being is dispersed along the axes of space and time. Intensified to infinity, the former constitutes the unique subsistence of simple and absolute Being; extended beyond limitation the latter would be formless and ever-finite matter, of itself powerless and inert.<sup>49</sup> (Later in *Contra Gentiles*,<sup>50</sup> Aquinas contrasts the 'dimensive quantity' of material things with the *virtus* of immaterial beings. A body possessed of infinite dimensive quantity would spatially be everywhere; an immaterial being having infinite power would be everywhere present. Through the immensity of his power — *immensitate suae virtutis* — God touches all things, as the universal cause of all things.)<sup>51</sup> It is because Aquinas uses the language of measure and quantity, proper in

aristotélien: de Proclus à S. Thomas', *Philosophie im Mittelalter*, Ed. Jan. P. Beckmann et al., (Hamburg, 1987), 213-24.

49. See *De Potentia* 1, 2: *Dicendum quod infinitum dicitur dupliciter. Uno modo privative; et sic dicitur infinitum quod natum est habere finem et non habet: tale autem infinitum non invenitur nisi in quantitibus. Alio modo dicitur infinitum negative, id est quod non habet finem. Infinitum primo modo acceptum Deo convenire non potest, tum quia Deus est absque quantitate, tum quia omnis privatio imperfectionem designat, quae longe a Deo est. Cf. De Potentia 1, 2 ad 5.*

50. *Contra Gentiles* 3, 68, 2424: *Res enim corporea est in aliquo sicut in loco secundum contactum quantitatis dimensionis; res autem incorporea in aliquo esse dicitur secundum contactum virtutis, cum careat dimensionis quantitate. Sic igitur se habet res incorporea ad hoc quod sit in aliquo per virtutem suam, sicut se habet res corporea ad hoc quod sit in aliquo per quantitatem dimensionis. Si autem esset aliquod corpus habens quantitatem dimensionis infinitam, oporteret illud esse ubique. Ergo, si sit aliqua res incorporea habens virtutem infinitam, oportet quod sit ubique.*

51. *Contra Gentiles* 3, 68, 2430. On the nature of divine immensity, M. Curtin writes: 'God is not only beyond continuous quantity but also, by reason of his fullness of being, he is beyond the possibility of measurement; he is immeasurable, immense. What measure or independent standard could really be applied to him? His immensity, an absolute attribute, must be distinguished from his omnipresence which is a relative attribute; if God had not created the world, he would still be immense; but he would not be omnipresent because there would be no world for him to be present in.' 'God's Presence in the World. The Metaphysics of Aquinas and some Recent Thinkers', *At the Heart of the Real. Philosophical Essays in Honour of the Most Reverend Desmond Connell, Archbishop of Dublin*, ed. Fran O'Rourke, (Dublin, 1992), p. 129.

our initial experience to dimensive extension but here adapted to a more profound and inner metaphysical dimension, that he can make the following assertion, which, moreover, provides the rule and founding principle for the inner and intensive measure and density of creatures: *Unumquodque tantum habet de esse, quantum [Deo] appropinquat*.<sup>52</sup> This is the language of quantity and distance, borrowed to express the participation of existence.

One cannot agree with M.-D. Philippe who, in his criticism of Gilson, states that by *virtus essendi* Aquinas means nothing more than *la capacité d'exister*.<sup>53</sup> Clearly, Aquinas does not simply attribute to God the 'capacity to exist', i.e. a possible existence. Aquinas does indeed speak of *potentia ad esse*, but this denotes something quite distinct. Referring to Aristotle's statement that some things have the power (*δύναμιν*) to exist always,<sup>54</sup> — and recalling that *virtus* denotes *quamdam perfectionem potentiae* — Aquinas notes that *potentia* can be understood either with respect to *esse* or to *agere*. *Potentia ad esse*, and the corresponding *virtus ad esse* belong to matter; *potentia ad agere* and *virtus ad agere* reside in form, which is the *principium agendi*. *Virtus ad esse* thus stands in counterpoint to *virtus essendi*; it signifies the *ens in potentia* of matter, whereas *virtus essendi* is the actualising perfection of *ens in actu*, the integral and complete individual being.<sup>55</sup> In *Contra Gentiles* 1, 20, (the passage from which Gilson draws the disputed phrase referred to), Aquinas contrasts the 'passive potency for being' (*potentia quasi passiva ad esse*), which is the potency of matter, with what is a kind of active potency (*potentia quasi activa*) which is the power of being — *virtus essendi*.<sup>56</sup> This belongs primarily, he as-

52. *ST*, I, 3, 5 ad 2.

53. Marie-Dominique Philippe, 'Analyse de l'être chez Saint Thomas', *Tommaso d'Aquino nel suo settimo centenario*, Vol. 6 (Naples, 1977), p. 28, n. 88.

54. *De Caelo* I, 12, 281b 25-32: "Ἀπαν ἄρα τὸ αἰεὶ ὄν ἀπλῶς ἀφθαρτον . . . δυνατόν τὸ αἰεὶ ὄν . . . δύναται εἶναι . . . δύνασθαι εἶναι."

55. *ST*, I-II, 55, 2: Dicendum quod virtus ex ipsa ratione nominis importat quamdam perfectionem potentiae. Unde cum duplex sit potentia, scilicet potentia ad esse, et potentia ad agere, utriusque potentiae perfectio virtus vocatur. Sed potentia ad esse se tenet ex parte materiae, quae est ens in potentia; potentia autem ad agere se tenet ex parte formae, quae est principium agendi, eo quod unumquodque agit, in quantum est actu.

56. *Contra Gentiles* 1, 20, 174: Etsi detur quod in corpore caelesti non sit potentia quasi passiva ad esse, quae est potentia materiae, est tamen in eo potentia quasi activa, quae est virtus essendi: cum expresse Aristoteles dicat, in I Caeli et Mundi, quod caelum habet virtutem ut sit semper. See also *De Potentia* 5, 4 ad 1: Potentia ad esse non solum accipitur secundum modum potentiae passivae, quae est ex parte materiae, sed etiam secundum modum potentiae activae, quae est ex parte formae, quae in rebus incorruptibilibus deesse non potest. Nam quantum unicuique in-

serts, to the potency or power of form, since each thing is through its form.<sup>57</sup>

Another term which Aquinas uses synonymously with *virtus* and which he invests with the same positive, 'quantitative', ontological significance is *posse*. It provides further confirmation of the qualitative measures which being may embody. 'Those things which merely exist are not imperfect because of any imperfection in absolute being. For they do not possess being according to its whole power (*secundum suum totum posse*); but rather they participate in it through a certain particular and most imperfect mode.'<sup>58</sup> Aquinas thus distinguishes between the *esse* of things which are devoid of any perfection beyond simple existence and those which have a higher ontological density. Expressing the power and virtue of being, *posse* acquires its fullest and most proper significance as referring to God who is the full power of Being.

Aquinas indeed finds the phrase 'the power of being' in Aristotle's theory of the celestial bodies: these have the power always to be.<sup>59</sup> What Aristotle's concept expresses is the vehemence of reality, its basic undeniable presence or force. All things, in so far as they exist, have an irrefutable character; most, however, are subject to generation and corruption and their power of being is transitory. Heavenly bodies endure eternally in existence. Aquinas' notion of virtual, intensive being, which admits of varying degrees of inner perfection, however, goes beyond this fundamental rigour of being. In this step he is inspired by Dionysius. Aquinas finds the vocabulary of *virtus essendi* in Dionysius: αὐτοῦ τοῦ εἶναι

est de forma, tantum inest ei de virtute essendi; unde et in I Caeli et Mundi Philosophus vult quod quaedam habeant virtutem et potentiam ut semper sint.

57. *De Caelo et Mundo* I, vi, 62: (Averroes) fuit autem deceptus per hoc quod existimavit virtutem essendi pertinere solum ad potentiam passivam, quae est potentia materiae; cum magis pertineat ad potentiam formae, quia unumquodque est per suam formam. Unde tantum et tamdiu habet unaquaeque res de esse, quanta est virtus formae eius. Et sic non solum in corporibus caelestibus, sed etiam in substantiis separatis est virtus essendi semper.

58. *Contra Gentiles* 1, 28, 262: Illa vero quae tantum sunt, non sunt imperfecta propter imperfectionem ipsius esse absoluti: non enim ipsa habent esse secundum suum totum posse, sed participant esse per quendam particularem modum et imperfectissimum.

59. *Contra Gentiles* 1, 20, 174. See note 54 above. On the infinite power of being to endure infinitely in Proclus and the *Liber de Causis*, see *In de Causis* IV: Omne enim immobiliter ens infinitum est secundum potentiam essendi; si enim quod potest magis durare in esse est maioris potentiae, quod potest in infinitum durare in esse est quantum ad hoc infinitae potentiae. Ibid. XVI: Ea quae plus durare possunt, habent maiorem virtutem essendi; unde illa quae in infinitum durare possunt, habent quantum ad hoc infinitam potentiam.

δύναμιν (*ipsius quod est esse virtutem*),<sup>60</sup> τὸ εἶναι δύναμιν εἰς τὸ εἶναι (*ipsum etiam esse virtutem ad hoc quod sit*).<sup>61</sup> But it is not so much this phraseology which inspires his appreciation of being as intensive, virtual perfection, (he does not give any special consideration to the passage in his Commentary), as the teaching of Dionysius on the central role of being which suggests to Aquinas the nature of being as perfective, dynamic actuality and intensive plenitude: the power of being which is the comprehensive, energising principle of all perfection.

### *Intensity of Being in Pseudo-Dionysius*

The most explicit statement by Dionysius on the nature and status of being is to be found in Chapter 5 of the *Divine Names*, where he treats of the name 'Being' as applied to God. While for Dionysius, in accordance with the Neoplatonist tradition, Goodness is the proper name of God, Being is primary among created perfections and is therefore the most excellent of names drawn from creation which may be pronounced in praise of God. For Aquinas, on the other hand, Being is not only the primary perfection of finite reality but also the very essence and proper name of God. In Dionysius' view, 'Good' is the universal and transcendent name which alone expresses God's nature; 'Being' expresses what is globally and primarily the first gift of creation. Of inestimable interest, however, is the significance which Dionysius gives to the value of being in itself as constitutive of the perfection of finite beings. This is found in his exposition of being as God's primary effect and first participation. We shall examine Dionysius' view in the context of Aquinas' Commentary, since there is here a close unity of meaning regarding this central and fundamental doctrine. (Indeed, as Van Steenberghen remarks, we find here, 'dans le commentaire de S. Thomas comme dans le texte de Denys, l'aspect le plus original de la doctrine de la participation à l'être.')

<sup>62</sup>

As Aquinas notes, Dionysius gives two reasons why the name 'Being' or '*Qui est*' is applied most fittingly to God. These are in fact two aspects of the one relation of causality. Firstly, God is to

60. 8, 3, 332.

61. 8, 3, 334. The phrase τοῦ εἶναι δύναμιν occurs three times in Proclus' *Commentary on the Timaeus* (Ed. Diehl, I, 267, 15; I, 268, 3; II, 131, 1-2: ἄπειρον τοῦ εἶναι δύναμιν). Is it possible that this is the source of Dionysius' phrase?

62. Fernand Van Steenberghen, 'Prolégomènes à la quarta via', *Rivista di filosofia neo-scholastica* 70 (1978), p. 104.

be named according to his primary effect, i.e. from the most sublime perfection which he produces. (Dionysius must thus prove the paramount excellence of being within creation, in order to attribute Being to God before all other names.) Secondly, the argument is raised to the level of participation through an intensification of the value of being which has been disclosed in the first step of the argument: 'He says that God himself has prior and pre-eminent being in a prior and eminent way',<sup>63</sup> i.e. he possesses in the unity and abundance of his Being the unlimited measure of every perfection. This conclusion rests upon the first justification of the primacy of being.

We find in Dionysius a rational justification of the primacy of being, albeit in a less radical and profound form than in Aquinas. Dionysius establishes summarily the excellence of being and, once this position is attained, defends the priority of being on the ground of its divine origin and its immediacy as the causal presence of God within beings. He begins thus with a natural appreciation of the radical value of being and argues that for something to be wise or living, it must first of all be.

Being is laid down (προβέβληται, *propositum*) or created before the other participations in God, and Being itself (αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτὸ τὸ εἶναι) is anterior to life itself, wisdom or divine likeness; and all the other principles in which beings participate, first participate themselves in Being. Moreover, all of the subsistent principles in which beings participate, themselves participate in subsisting Being; and there is no being whose essence and eternity are not Being Itself.<sup>64</sup>

Although the primacy of Being is attained by Dionysius through a natural insight and justified by reasoned reflection, this justification occurs within the context of creation. Being is the first perfection to be created and that which first participates in God.

Being is taken by Dionysius from the outset as the principal, most ancient and venerable of God's gifts. The priority of existence among all the participations of the Good stems from its privileged position as radix of all specific perfections, in which they must first participate in order to be and to effect their presence within beings. Not only is Being the plenitude of perfection from which all individual beings derive, but it is the source of all the perfections

63. V, i, 636: Hoc ergo est quod dicit quod ipse Deus praeesse et superesse prae habet et super habet. See DN 5, 5, 267: καὶ γὰρ τὸ προεῖναι καὶ ὑπερεῖναι προέχων καὶ ὑπερέχων.

64. 5, 5, 266: καὶ πρὸ τῶν ἄλλων αὐτοῦ μετοχῶν τὸ εἶναι προβέβληται καὶ ἔστιν αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτὸ τὸ εἶναι πρεσβύτερον τοῦ αὐτοζωῆν εἶναι καὶ αὐτοσοφίαν εἶναι καὶ αὐτομοιότητα θείαν εἶναι καὶ τὰ ἄλλα ὅσων τὰ ὄντα μετέχοντα.

which they share. In Dionysius we re-encounter the Platonist concept of universal causes, i.e. transcendent principles of perfection in which finite beings participate according to the various qualities which they enjoy. For the Pseudo-Areopagite, however, it serves as a model of reflection in order to conceive of the causality of distinct perfections and their exemplary presence in the Creator. The so-called transcendent principles are not distinct from Being, separate and apart from it, as it were, but are themselves participations in Being itself. 'For, indeed, all the principles of beings through their participation in Being both are and are principles; they first of all are and are then principles.'<sup>65</sup>

Thus, according to Dionysius if we suppose, for example, that Life itself (αὐτοζωή) is the principle of living things, and Similarity itself the principle of all things which bear resemblance, and Unity and Order the principles of all things which are unified and ordered; and likewise if we call 'Participations *per se*' (αὐτομετοχάς) all the other principles in which beings participate, we will find that these participations first participate in Being; through Being they first of all subsist themselves and are subsequently principles of this or that. By participation in Being, therefore, they both subsist in themselves and permit things to participate in them. And if these principles exist through their participation in Being, much more so do those beings which in turn partake of them.<sup>66</sup> Through Being all things both are, and receive their determination as the kind of being which they are.<sup>67</sup>

This intensive unity of the qualities and perfections of a being in its very Being or its *to be*, and the superiority of Being is illustrated by the reply to a hypothetical but interesting objection. If Being transcends life and life exceeds wisdom, why, it is asked, are living and intelligent beings superior to things which merely exist, i.e. beings whose highest perfection is their simple existence; and why do intellectual and spiritual natures surpass all others and come closer to God, rather than those which have the simple richness of being. Should not those which participate exclusively and solely in the most sublime gift of God, namely existence, be superior and therefore transcend the rest?<sup>68</sup> But as Dionysius points out in his response, the objection assumes that intellectual beings do not also share in life and existence, whereas it is precisely as

65. 5, 5, 267: Καὶ γοῦν αἱ ἀρχαὶ τῶν ὄντων πᾶσαι τοῦ εἶναι μετέχουσιν καὶ εἰσι καὶ ἀρχαὶ εἰσι καὶ πρῶτον εἰσι ἔπειτα ἀρχαὶ εἰσι.

66. 5, 5, 267: εἶναι πρῶτον αὐτὰς μετεχούσας καὶ τῷ εἶναι πρῶτον μὲν οὐσας, ἔπειτα τοῦδε ἢ τοῦδε ἀρχὰς οὐσας καὶ τῷ μετέχειν τοῦ εἶναι καὶ οὐσας καὶ μετεχομένας.

67. 5, 7, 274: τὰ ἄλλα ὅσα τῷ εἶναι ὄντα, τὰ ὄντα πάντα χαρακτηρίζει.

68. 5, 3, 259.

beings that they are living and intelligent.<sup>69</sup> The perfections are not separate but spring from Being itself, are concentrated and rooted within it. Just as life includes virtually within itself as one of its possible determinations the perfection of wisdom, so does Being embrace life, although it extends beyond living things so as to contain also inanimate beings. Its extension is more universal, thus its perfection is more fundamental and creative. This text of Dionysius clearly illustrates the nature of virtual and intensive presence of all perfection in Being and is frequently invoked by Aquinas to explain both the intimate and intensive presence of *esse* throughout all things and the unified presence of all finite reality in God as the source of Being.<sup>70</sup> In a startling sentence, expressing what has recently been termed the 'ontological difference', Dionysius emphasises the distinction and primacy of Being with respect to beings, and the priority of Being itself in the divine causation of that which is: 'He is the Being of beings; and not only beings, but the Being itself of beings is from the Being before the ages.'<sup>71</sup>

In his Commentary, Aquinas points out that beings which are endowed with life and intellect do not lack, but 'possess being more excellently.'<sup>72</sup> In the words of Dionysius, not only do they desire God's beauty and goodness more but, actually partaking of these perfections, 'are closer to the Good, participating in it more abundantly and receiving from it more abundant and greater gifts.'<sup>73</sup> In the same manner, rational beings surpass those which have mere perception, while the latter are superior to mere living beings, and these in turn to inanimate reality.

It is noteworthy that, in commenting upon these lines of Dionysius, St. Thomas introduces the concept of *act* to explain the distinction between the desire for the Good in beings and their actual and effective possession of it, which, ultimately, is the necessary keynote of existence: *et non solum magis desiderant, quasi perfectius ordinatae in ipsum, sed eo magis participant, perfectiorem bonitatem actu habentes*.<sup>74</sup> (For Dionysius, even non-being, i.e. matter with-

69. 5, 3, 260: 'Ἄλλ' εἰ μὲν ἀνούσια καὶ ἄζωα τις ὑπετίθετο τὰ νοερά, καλῶς ἂν εἶχεν ὁ λόγος.

70. E.g. ST, I, 4, 2, ad 3.

71. 5, 4, 264: ἄλλ' αὐτός ἐστι τὸ εἶναι τοῖς οὐσι καὶ οὐ τὰ ὄντα μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτὸ τὸ εἶναι τῶν ὄντων ἐκ τοῦ προαιωνίως ὄντος.

72. V, i, 615: Sed divinae mentes Angelorum non carent esse, quinimmo habent excellentius super alia existentia creata. Living things are clearly 'more noble' than non-living bodies (ST, I, 3, 1).

73. DN 5, 3, 260.

74. V. i. 615. Pierre Faucon writes: 'Invité par Denys à concevoir l'être comme le fondement ou la source originelle de toutes les perfections, Thomas d'Aquin exploite le vocabulaire d'Aristote: l'être est l'acte actuel et fondamental d'où jaillissent les perfections à mesure qu'elles sont

out form, is 'ordained' towards goodness; beings come into existence and possess Being precisely through love of Goodness.) Here, Aquinas ingeniously attributes the multiplicity of perfections within a being to the unique excellence of its own act of *esse*. The excellence of being enjoyed by any reality is relative to its possession in act of a greater measure of goodness. *Esse habent excellentius* is equivalent to *perfectiorem bonitatem actu habentes*. Aquinas is thus able to draw advantage from Dionysius' limitation of being to the possession in act of goodness to illustrate the primacy of the act of being: what matters ultimately is the actuality of perfection.

As noted earlier, the central meaning of being in Dionysius cannot be fully discovered simply from a reflection on finite beings alone. We must refer to its divine origin and its privileged role in creation. Its primacy as a perfection among creatures stems from its immediacy as the creative medium by which God is present in and to all creatures. This is noted by Aquinas who comments that, for Dionysius, *nomen vero entis designat processum essendi a Deo in omnia entia*.<sup>75</sup> Being, *ipsum esse* (αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτὸ τὸ εἶναι), is for Dionysius the most dignified and privileged of creatures because it is the first participation in God. All perfections are perfections of Being and Being itself is the first perfection created. Thus it is in and through Being that all things participate in God.<sup>76</sup> As its first gift the absolute and self-subsisting Good brings forth Being itself.<sup>77</sup>

As Aquinas notes, the reason for Dionysius' view of the primacy of Being is its position as the principal and most worthy of God's effects and its role as mediatory focus of all subsequent effects. St. Thomas gives an interesting interpretation of Dionysius' phrase *πρὸ τῶν ἄλλων αὐτοῦ μετοχῶν τὸ εἶναι προβέβληται*. He writes:

Being itself is offered to creatures to be participated in before all the other participations of God. Whatever perfection a creature may have, it receives through a participation in God, who is, as it were, offered to all beings that they may participate in

éduites de la potentialité. Cette explication de la pensée dionysienne en termes aristotéliens manifeste l'originalité de l'exégèse thomiste: recueillant les doctrines de ses devanciers, Saint Thomas procède au moyen de confrontations doctrinales qui mettent en relief les complémentarités. La preuve est ainsi faite qu'au moment où il rédige son commentaire, Saint Thomas n'hésite pas à se servir de la philosophie d'Aristote pour soutenir son option en faveur du platonisme dionysien.' Pierre Faucon, *Aspects néoplatoniciens de la doctrine de saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Lille, 1975), p. 235.

75. V, i, 610.

76. 5, 266: *πρὸ τῶν ἄλλων αὐτοῦ μετοχῶν τὸ εἶναι προβέβληται*.

77. 5, 6, 267: *Πρώτην οὖν τὴν τοῦ αὐτοῦ εἶναι δωρεὰν ἢ αὐτοῦ πεπραγαθότης προβαλλομένη*.

him; but he is first participated in with regard to Being itself (*ipsum esse*) prior to any other perfection: thus Being itself *per se* is more ancient, that is, more primary and noble than Life itself.<sup>78</sup>

Aquinas claims to discern two arguments in Dionysius in favour of the primacy and superior dignity of Being as such over Life, Wisdom and other such exemplary perfections. Firstly, whatever shares in other participations must partake first of Being. To this Aquinas adds the simple logical consideration that something is known as a being before it is conceived as 'one', 'living' or 'wise'. What Aquinas calls the second argument for the primacy of being is a metaphysical explication of the first: Being is the first value participated in not only by individual beings, but is more immediately and profoundly the source of those perfections and principles of which, in the language of Neoplatonist metaphysics, each individual specifically partakes. Life and wisdom are certain ways of being; Being is, therefore, prior to and more simple than life and wisdom, and is related to them, according to St. Thomas, both *sicut participatum ad participans* and *ut actus eorum*.<sup>79</sup> Being is thus the principle of all principles participated in by beings. Dionysius concludes: 'No being exists whose substance and eternity is not Being itself (τὸ αὐτὸ εἶναι)'<sup>80</sup> or, as Aquinas puts it, Being is the 'form' participated in by all things with respect to their subsistence and duration.<sup>81</sup>

Here we have an example both of a major inspiration exercised by Dionysius and a masterly commentary by St. Thomas. Dionysius uses neither the word 'act' nor 'perfection', but his sense

78. V, i, 633: *Hoc est ergo quod dicit, quod ipsum esse propositum est creaturis ad participandum ante alias Dei participationes. Quamcumque enim perfectionem creatura habeat, fit per hoc in Dei participatione, qui quasi proponitur et offertur omnibus ad participandum; sed per prius participatur quantum ad ipsum esse, quam quamcumque aliam perfectionem: et ipsum per se esse est senius, idest primum et dignius eo quod est per se vitam esse.*

79. V, i, 635: *Quod autem per se esse sit primum et dignius quam per se vita et per se sapientia, ostendit dupliciter: primo quidem, per hoc quod quaecumque participant aliis participationibus, primo participant ipso esse: prius enim intelligitur aliquod ens quam unum, vivens, vel sapiens. Secundo, quod ipsum esse comparatur ad vitam, et alia huiusmodi sicut participatum ad participans: nam etiam ipsa vita est ens quoddam et sic esse, prius et simplicius est quam vita et alia huiusmodi et comparatur ad ea ut actus eorum. Referring to this passage from the Commentary on Dionysius, Fabro writes: 'Saint Thomas, et lui seul, proclame l'émergence absolue de l'esse comme acte de tous les actes et de toutes les formes. Formes et actes "retombent" dans la condition de puissance ou de "capacité" receptive de l'acte d'être.' Ibid.*

80. 5, 5, 266.

81. V, i, 635.

is clear. The phrases *πρὸ τῶν ἄλλων αὐτοῦ μετοχῶν τὸ εἶναι προβέβληται καὶ ἔστιν αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτὸ τὸ εἶναι πρεσβύτερον* and *τὰ ἄλλα ὧν τὰ ὄντα μετέχοντα, πρὸ πάντων αὐτῶν τοῦ εἶναι μετέχει*<sup>82</sup> could only have been interpreted by Aquinas in terms of participation in *esse* as the first perfection<sup>83</sup> and act of all beings.<sup>84</sup> Aquinas weaves together the causal principles of both Platonist and Aristotelian metaphysics, placing them under the primacy of being as their primary act which enriches, and the first perfection to be participated. Whether the form which determines a being is conceived as an immanent act or as a transcendent perfection which is participated, it must first be actualised by and participate in being. In perceiving the central value of Being, the supreme form and primary act, Aquinas discerns the focus and fulcrum uniting Platonist and Aristotelian metaphysics; Dionysius plays a significant role in this discovery.

For Dionysius, Being is the focal point, the radical and radial centre of God's action within beings. This is the ultimate source of its primacy. The power of creation touches most radically the central act of being and from here diffuses its presence and penetrates throughout all creation. This is the ontological primacy proper to the act of being. It is, as it were, the immediate and intimate medium through which God acts upon each being, actualising its essence and all its features. As Dionysius writes: 'Being itself is never withdrawn from any being',<sup>85</sup> and Aquinas adds: 'since nothing can be said to exist unless it possesses *esse*.'<sup>86</sup> St. Thomas summarises the role of *esse* in creation: *Deus per ipsum esse omnia causat*.<sup>87</sup>

### Virtual Plenitude of Divine Being

In light of this primacy of being as the fullness of finite perfection and its central role in the causality of creation, it is understandable why the phrase 'power of being' attains its fullest significance for both Dionysius and Aquinas when referring to the infinite pre-eminence of divine being. The motifs of intensive being and of *virtus essendi* attain their full significance in divine being. Existence is at its highest intensity, and *virtus essendi* is

82. 5, 1, 266.

83. V, i, 633.

84. V, i, 635.

85. 5, 8, 278: τὸ δὲ εἶναι αὐτὸ τῶν ὄντων πάντων οὐδέποτε ἀπολείπεται.

86. V, ii, 659: Nihil potest dici existens nisi habeat esse.

87. V, i, 639.

complete in the being of God: *Dei magnitudo est esse eius*.<sup>88</sup> (This could be affirmed of all beings; the greatness of each thing is its being. What Aquinas intends here is that God's greatness is unlimited, because his being is boundless.) God is infinite in power, possessing in advance and by excess (*προέχων καὶ ὑπερέχων*) all strength and energy, causing both individually and universally the power of being itself. While Being is for Dionysius the very energy, dynamism and power of all things, it is itself empowered by the divine supraontological power. The relation is thus expressed: 'Being itself, if it is proper to say so, has the power to be (*δύναμιν εἰς τὸ εἶναι*) from the power which is beyond being (*παρὰ τῆς ὑπερουσίους δυνάμεως*).'<sup>89</sup> God is infinite in power because he is transcendent being. This is the understanding, moreover, which Dionysius brings to *Exodus* 3, 4: 'By a power beyond being, "He who is" (*ὁ ὢν*) is substantial cause of all being (*εἶναι*) and creator of that which is.'<sup>90</sup> Commenting on another important Neoplatonic text, the *Liber de Causis*, Aquinas declares: 'If anything had the infinite power of being (*infinitam virtutem essendi*), such that it did not participate in being from another, then it alone would be infinite, and this is God.'<sup>91</sup>

God is affirmed as essentially good because he embraces within his existence in an infinite and unlimited power all the perfections manifest in finite beings. In creatures the perfection of being is limited and diverse, in God it is absolute and simple. The principles of intensity, participation and pre-eminent presence, here determine the thought of both Dionysius and Aquinas. Aquinas emphasises the determination of perfection as act, grounded universally in the actuality of existence. God is known to be all-perfect because he is affirmed as cause of all things in their existence. It will be fruitful in this regard to have a closer look at these notions of causality and exemplarity in Aquinas' Commentary on *The Divine Names* and in other passages inspired by Dionysius.

Especially revealing of Dionysius' inspiration is Question 4 of *Summa Theologiae* I, where Aquinas considers the perfection of God; particularly article 2, where he reasons that God is universally perfect since in him are present the perfections of all things. Dionysius' influence is clear, firstly, from the appeal made to his authority in response to the objections which Aquinas advances

88. IX, i, 808.

89. 8, 3, 334.

90. 5, 4, 262: ὁ ὢν ὅλου τοῦ εἶναι κατὰ δύναμιν ὑπερουσίος ἐστὶ ὑποστάτις αἰτία καὶ δημιουργὸς ὄντος.

91. *In de Causis* IV, 109: Si autem aliquid sic haberet infinitam virtutem essendi quod non participaret esse ab alio, tunc esset solum infinitum et tale est Deus.



against his own view. And considering in turn each of these objections, he again refers to Dionysius. God is perfect because, in Dionysius' words, he embraces all existing things in a primordial unity: *Deus in uno existentia omnia prae-habet*.<sup>92</sup> Aquinas, in the corpus of the article summarily repeats that the perfections of all things exist in God; he is said, therefore, to be totally or universally perfect, since he lacks none of the nobility of any nature.

St. Thomas puts forward two lines of reflection to establish this view, suggesting that Dionysius has followed similar lines in his thought. The first argument recalls a principle which is commonplace in Dionysius, echoed throughout Aquinas' metaphysics and repeated with frequency in the Commentary on *The Divine Names*: 'Whatever perfection there is in an effect must be found in its efficient cause.'<sup>93</sup> As Aquinas explains, this can occur in two ways: firstly an effect may be potentially present in its cause in a manner identical with its own nature: as when one man, for example, generates another. The cause is in this case 'univocal' with its effect; it anticipates the effect by its own natural form. An effect may also be pre-contained in an eminent or more perfect manner when the cause is of a different and superior nature (*agens aequivocum*), as when the sun's power produces objects bearing a certain derived likeness to the sun. It is evident, Aquinas states, that such an effect pre-exists virtually, i.e. potentially or within the power of its efficient cause and is present, moreover, in a pre-eminent and more perfect manner (*eminentiori modo*). He distinguishes between the superior, virtual presence of an effect in an agent cause and potential presence in a material cause which is inferior. This entire article is pervaded by the notion of *virtus*: intensive, virtual or preeminent presence.<sup>94</sup> (In the following article Aquinas, in continuation of a passage from Dionysius, explains the deficiency of an effect in relation to its cause in terms of intensity or slackness — *secundum intensionem et remissionem* — and illustrates their difference with the example of things which are more or less white.<sup>95</sup>

92. ST, I, 4, 2. See DN 5, 10, 284: 'Εν ἐνὶ γὰρ τὰ ὄντα πάντα καὶ προέχει καὶ ὑπέστηκε. Sarracenus translates: 'In uno enim . . . existentia omnia et prae-habet et subsistere facit'. The Marietti and Blackfriars editors give 5, 9 as the source of Aquinas' quotation. Durantel (p. 183) also cites 5, 10.

93. ST, I, 4, 2: Quidquid perfectionis est in effectu oportet inveniri in causa effectiva. IV, iv, 331: Causa superior prae-habet in se quod in effectibus inferioribus invenitur; V, i, 631: Causa praeeminet effectibus . . . sicut effectus virtute praeexistunt in causa; IX, iv, 846: Omnes enim effectus praeexistunt virtualiter in sua causa. See note 3 above.

94. ST, I, 4, 2: Manifestum est enim quod effectus praeexistit virtute in causa agente: praeexistere autem in virtute causae agentis, non est praeexistere imperfectiori modo, sed perfectiori.

95. ST, I, 4, 3 ad 1.

We find thus the juxtaposition of both *virtus* and *intensio* and the Neoplatonist theme of *albedo separata*).

Besides the example of the sun, which Dionysius had already adduced to illustrate the preeminent presence of effects within a superior cause, Aquinas cites in his Commentary the artistic causality of the architect or craftsman in whom the effect is anticipated and unified intentionally. Here, however, the cause bears only an extrinsic relation of similarity to its effect. Now the most perfect and profound presence is that of all beings within the fullness of their creative cause. However, Aquinas notes that there is a certain analogy not only between each cause and effect, but between the relation of different causes to their respective effects. There is a parallel between the relation which a particular cause has to its individual effect and the relation of the supreme cause towards its universal effects.<sup>96</sup> By this he means that each effect is imbued with greater or lesser perfection according to the existential wealth and resources of its cause. The more perfect and supreme a cause, the more universal will be its causative power and efficacy; the more intimate its immanence in its effects and the presence of its effects within itself. 'The more elevated a nature, the more intimate is that which proceeds from it.' Since existence or being is what is more universal and profound in all things, their common and primary source can be only Being Itself: *Ipsium esse per se subsistens*. As universal and supreme cause, God is most intimately and powerfully present within creatures. (Such presence must be correctly understood: Aquinas remarks that 'beings are more properly in God than God in things.'<sup>97</sup>) And concluding his first argument for God's infinite perfection in ST, I, 4, 2, Aquinas states: 'Since God is the first efficient cause of things, the perfections of all things must pre-exist in God in a pre-eminent manner.'<sup>98</sup> And St. Thomas believes that this is the significance of Dionysius' statement: 'He is not this and not that, but he is all as cause of all.'<sup>99</sup>

The causality of beings derives in its totality through existence itself from the infinite plenitude of God's Being. All the goodness within beings thus flows from the singular perfection of their divine origin. Because he produces the perfection of all things,

96. V, iii, 662: Eadem autem est proportio causae particularis ad suos particulares effectus et causae universalis ad suos.

97. ST, I, 8, 3.

98. Cum ergo Deus sit prima causa effectiva rerum oportet omnium rerum perfectiones praeexistere in Deo secundum eminentiorem modum. Et hanc rationem tangit Dionysius dicens de Deo quod non hoc quidem est hoc autem non est, sed omnia est ut omnium causa.

99. 5, 8, 280: οὐ τότε μὲν ἐστὶ τότε δὲ οὐκ ἐστὶν . . . ἀλλὰ πάντα ἐστὶν ὡς πάντων αἴτιος.



all perfection must pre-exist in God's own Being.<sup>100</sup> And not only must he possess perfection, but that he may originally cause perfection in the radical manner of creation, God must himself *be* the endless and subsistent perfection from which all created goodness flows. God is 'complete' (in his Being and Goodness) because he embraces universally all things within himself.<sup>101</sup> He is 'all in all' since he *is* causally the perfection of all things.<sup>102</sup>

The first argument proposed by Aquinas in *ST*, I, 4, 2 to illustrate God's universal perfection proceeds from the diversity of perfections throughout beings to their unique and pre-eminent presence in the creative cause. God is the fontal abundance from which all things receive their individual wealth of existence. The second way outlined by Aquinas reflects upon the nature of God whose existence has been established, whose essence is affirmed as self-subsisting Being, *Ipsium Esse Subsistens*. God does not *have* being or share in it according to any measure of its richness; he *is* Being Itself and embraces within his simple existence all the plenitude of the richness of Being: *Deus est ipsum esse per se subsistens: ex quo oportet quod totam perfectionem essendi in se contineat*.<sup>103</sup> God is infinitely perfect in himself and not merely as the cause of all finite perfection. He is not only the *Summum Bonum* of all things but is exhaustively and absolutely all-perfect in himself. He is infinitely and independently perfect. Existence is the perfection of all perfections and there is nothing more perfect than subsistent Being itself. God is indeed that than which no greater is possible or may be conceived.

To illustrate the infinite and universal perfection of God as subsistent being, Aquinas makes use of the Neoplatonic motif of separated perfection. He considers the hypothesis of subsistent heat: a warm body does not possess the full perfection of heat because it does not partake of heat according to its full nature. But if there existed a heat which subsisted in itself, it would lack nothing of the power or perfection proper to heat as such. Transferring the analogy to being, St. Thomas states that since God is subsistent being itself, nothing of the perfection of being can be lacking in him. 'Now the perfections of all things belong to the perfection of being,' he continues, 'since beings are perfect according to the manner in which they have existence. It follows, therefore, that

100. V, ii, 662: Sic enim omnia praeexistunt in Deo, sicut Ipse omnium est productivus.

101. II, i, 113: Ipsa Deitas . . . dicatur tota, quasi prae habens in se universa.

102. I, iii, 99: 'Omnia in omnibus', in quantum omnis perfectio est ipse Deus causaliter.

103. *ST*, I, 4, 2.

God does not lack any perfection.' And Aquinas again credits Dionysius with this reasoning when he writes in Chapter 5 of *The Divine Names*, that God 'does not exist in a particular manner, but embraces primordially all being within himself simply and without limit', adding that 'he is the being of all that subsists'.<sup>104</sup> Elaborating upon this same passage<sup>105</sup> in his Commentary on *The Divine Names*, Aquinas likewise traces the absolute goodness and complete perfection of God to the subsistent identity of his Being. Here he illustrates it with the hypothesis not of heat but of subsistent whiteness. A perfection which has its own self-subsistent presence is infinite and unique; received into another it is multiplied and limited. Participation is thus the root of finitude. Aquinas writes:

Dionysius shows that all things are in some manner unified in God. This is evident when we consider that every form when received into anything is limited and measured according to the capacity of the recipient; thus an individual white body does not possess the complete whiteness proper to the full power of whiteness. But were there to exist a separate whiteness, it would lack in nothing which belongs to the power of whiteness. Now, all other things have being (*esse*) as received or participated and do not, therefore, have being according to the full power of being; God alone, who is subsisting being itself, has being according to the full power of being (*secundum totam virtutem essendi, esse habet*).<sup>106</sup>

104. *ST*, I, 4, 2: Manifestum est enim quod, si aliquod calidum non habeat totam perfectionem calidi, hoc ideo est, quia calor non participatur secundum perfectam rationem: sed si calor esset per se subsistens, non posset ei aliquid deesse de virtute caloris. Unde, cum Deus sit ipsum esse subsistens, nihil de perfectione essendi potest ei deesse. Omnium autem perfectiones pertinent ad perfectionem essendi: secundum hoc enim aliqua perfecta sunt, quod aliquo modo esse habent. Unde sequitur quod nullius rei perfectio Dei desit. Et hanc etiam rationem tangit Dionysius, cap. 5 de Div. Nom., dicens quod Deus non quodammodo est existens, sed simpliciter et incircumscripse totum in seipso uniformiter esse praeacipit: et postea subdit quod ipse est esse subsistentibus.

105. 5, 4, 263-4: Καὶ γὰρ ὁ θεὸς οὐ πῶς ἐστὶν ὢν ἄλλ' ἀπλῶς καὶ ἀπεριορίστως ὅλον ἐν ἑαυτῷ τὸ εἶναι συνειληφῶς καὶ προειληφῶς διὸ καὶ βασιλεὺς λέγεται τῶν αἰώνων ὡς ἐν αὐτῷ καὶ περὶ αὐτὸν παντὸς τοῦ εἶναι καὶ ὄντος καὶ ὑφεστηκότος καὶ οὔτε ἦν οὔτε ἔσται οὔτε ἐγένετο οὔτε γίνεται οὔτε γενήσεται, μᾶλλον δὲ οὔτε ἐστίν, ἀλλ' αὐτὸς ἐστὶ τὸ εἶναι τοῖς οὐσί· καὶ οὐ τὰ ὄντα μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτὸ τὸ εἶναι τῶν ὄντων ἐκ τοῦ προαιωνίως ὄντος.

106. V, i, 629: Ostendit quod omnia conveniunt Deo, quodammodo. Ad cuius evidentiam considerandum est quod omnis forma, recepta in aliquo, limitatur et finitur secundum capacitatem recipientis; unde, hoc corpus album non habet totam albedinem secundum totum posse albedinis. Sed si esset albedo separata, nihil deesset ei quod ad virtutem albedinis per-

This, states Aquinas, is what Dionysius means when he says that God can be the cause of being to all things, since he 'does not exist in a particular way (οὐ πῶς ἐστὶ, *non est existens quodam modo*)', that is, according to some limited and finite mode, but embraces the fullness of existence, anticipating Being universally and infinitely within himself, since it pre-exists in him as cause and proceeds from him to others.<sup>107</sup> The ultimate ground of divine unity, perfection and creativity, therefore, is the self-subsistence of God's Being, his identity in his own act of *esse*. As Aquinas points out, God can be cause of existence for all beings only because he is himself the inexhaustible plenitude of existence, lacking in none of the perfection of Being. God exists, not according to one particular manner or mode but simply is, absolutely and infinitely, without condition or measure.<sup>108</sup> And he is unique through the self-subsistence of his Being: subsistent being can be one only; existence is limited when diffracted through a multiplicity of beings, as whiteness is likewise limited and multiplied when diversified amongst a variety of bodies. But if whiteness were subsistent and autonomous in itself, with an independent and separate existence apart from all white objects, it would also of necessity be one.<sup>109</sup>

The intensive participation and pre-eminent presence both of all perfections at the finite level within the perfection of being and, universally, of the perfections of all beings within divine subsistent being is brought out clearly by Aquinas in his reply to one of the objections in *ST*, I, 4, 2. The objection is that which Dionysius had already raised, hypothetically, to illustrate his own view of being as fundamental and all-embracing perfection. The objection states that a living thing is more perfect than one which simply exists, and a wise being more perfect than one which is merely alive, since to live is more perfect than merely to exist and to be wise more perfect than to live. But, Aquinas develops the argument, if God's essence is existence itself, he does not have such perfections as life and wisdom. In reply Aquinas refers to Chapter 5 of *Divine Names* where Dionysius states that even though being itself is more perfect than life, and life as such is more perfect than

tineret. Omnia autem alia, sicut superius dictum est, habent esse receptum et participatum et ideo non habent esse secundum totam virtutem essendi, sed solus Deus, qui est ipsum esse subsistens, secundum totam virtutem essendi, esse habet.

107. *V*, i, 629.

108. *ST*, I, 7, 1: Cum igitur esse divinum non sit esse receptum in aliquo, sed ipse sit suum esse subsistens; manifestum est quod ipse Deus est infinitus et perfectus.

109. *ST*, I, 44, 1: Deus est ipsum esse per se subsistens . . . esse subsistens non potest esse nisi unum: sicut si albedo esset subsistens, non potest esse nisi una, cum albedines multiplicuntur secundum recipientia.

wisdom — when these are considered abstractly in themselves as distinguished by reason — nevertheless a living being, which both exists and is alive, is more perfect than one which simply exists; similarly, a wise being both exists and is alive.

So, although to be existing does not include within it to be alive or to be wise (since it is not necessary that what participates in being should partake of it according to every mode of being), nevertheless the very being of God (*ipsum esse Dei*) embraces life and wisdom; since none of the perfections of being can be absent from him who is subsisting being itself.<sup>110</sup>

Aquinas, in reliance upon Dionysius, here understands being in the intensive sense of primary and universal value: both the finite act of *esse* of the individual existent in which all particular perfections are rooted and in which they partake, and the infinite subsistent Being itself in which the perfection of universal being is pre-eminent present in a unique superplenitude and intensity. As the essential plenitude of Being, divine being includes all life and wisdom since these are themselves participant modes of being. There is an analogy between the participation of all finite value in the primary perfection of created existence and the universal embrace at the heart of divine Being of all created goodness. This kinship rests upon the principle that the perfection of an effect is present virtually and to an eminent degree in its cause; *esse* is the principle at the interior of each individual which actualises all its resources, as in the universal sphere God is the creative cause of all.<sup>111</sup>

The objection and the reply of Dionysius and Aquinas focus in fact upon two distinct aspects of the concept of being: on the one hand existence as intensive universal value embracing all other perfections such as life and wisdom which are but degrees of excellence within reality (thus one might say that to be wise is to be more, i.e. to exist in a more perfect manner) and on the other, the most general concept of being which abstracts universally from all perfections. The concept of being is thus at once the most abstract and impoverished, yet the richest and most significant. Explicitly

110. *ST*, I, 4, 2 ad 3: Ad tertium dicendum quod, sicut in eodem capite idem Dionysius dicit, licet ipsum esse sit perfectius quam vita, et ipsa vita quam ipsa sapientia, si considerentur secundum quod distinguuntur ratione: tamen vivens est perfectius quam ens tantum, quia vivens est etiam ens; et sapiens est ens et vivens. Licet igitur ens non includat in se vivens et sapiens, quia non oportet quod illud quod participat esse, participet ipsum secundum omnem modum essendi: tamen ipsum esse Dei includit in se vitam et sapientiam; quia nulla de perfectionibus essendi potest deesse ei quod est ipsum esse subsistens.

111. Cf. Cornelio Fabro, *Participation et Causalité*, pp. 428-9.

it expresses the minimum possible regarding any being, merely that it exists; latently, however, it embraces notionally in an absolute way the universal perfection of all that exists. It is this latter intelligibility, transposed to the transcendent level and intensified towards infinity, which provides the best conception within human grasp for the reality and goodness of God. The self-subsistent plenitude of the absolute Good may be expressed in a plurality of ways; although on first encounter the least expressive name is that of Being, it is ultimately the most significant denomination, allowing God to be understood as the pre-eminence and plenitude of perfection present in reality.

The subsistent identity of God in his Being is again affirmed as the source of God's universal perfection in a remarkable passage of *Contra Gentiles*, 1, 28, where Aquinas yet once more invokes *Divine Names* 5, 4. He writes: 'God who is not other than his being, is a universally perfect being. And I call "universally perfect" that which is not lacking in the nobility of any genus.'<sup>112</sup> Aquinas declares that the nobility of anything accrues to it by virtue of its being. A man does not have any nobility from his wisdom, for example, unless, through it he really is wise, i.e. unless his wisdom actually exists. The measure of nobility of anything is in accordance with its mode of being, for each thing is said to have a greater or lesser degree of excellence in so far as its act of existence is proportioned to some special nobility, of a greater or lesser degree. In other words, the excellence or nobility of each thing depends upon the measure in which it possesses the perfection of being; the perfection of every being is bestowed and determined in measure by its act of existence. If there is something, therefore, to which the whole power of being belongs (*tota virtus essendi*), it can lack none of the excellence of any being. Now anything which is its own act of being (*esse*) possesses being according to the total power of existence (*secundum totam essendi potestatem*). God, who is his own existence, has being, therefore, according to the complete power of being itself. Thus he cannot be lacking in any of the nobility which belongs to any thing. Aquinas again employs the model of subsistent whiteness, which, were it to exist in separation from all objects and unlimited in its reception by the defect of any particular thing, would possess the full power of whiteness.<sup>113</sup>

112. *Contra Gentiles* 1, 28, 259: Deus tamen qui non est aliud quam suum esse, est universaliter perfectum. Et dico universaliter perfectum, cui non deest alicuius generis nobilitas.

113. *Contra Gentiles* 1, 28, 260: Omnis enim nobilitas cuiuscumque rei est sibi secundum suum esse: nulla enim nobilitas esset homini ex sua sapientia nisi per eam sapiens esset, et sic de aliis. Sic ergo secundum modum quo res habet esse, est suus modus in nobilitate: nam res secundum quod

And once more he immediately aligns this manner of conceiving the infinite excellence of God as the subsistent identity and plenitude of Being with Dionysius' avowal: 'God does not exist in a certain way; he possesses and embraces primordially all being within himself absolutely and without limit.'<sup>114</sup>

In sum, Aquinas affirms under the inspiration of Dionysius the intensity of presence and perfection within the intimacy both of finite and infinite being. Such presence occurs at the finite level in the concentration of the entire perfection of each being within the primary actuality and fullness of its act of being; and universally, in the exemplary and causal presence of all existing things in absolute subsistent Being. At the finite level, all secondary aspects of things partake of the primary perfection of being; within the universal horizon, the ensemble of realities is in turn embraced in a pre-eminent and exemplary manner in divine Being.

Everything is real through the actuality of *esse*: *Necesse est participare ipsum esse. Esse* is the primary and ultimate act, the *actus ultimus, qui participabilis est ab omnibus; ipsum autem nihil participat*.<sup>115</sup> It can itself partake of none, since it is the universal act and plenary form of all. There is nothing more original in which it may share. Within creation, therefore, *esse* is the similitude par excellence of God. It is infinite in relation to the things which exist, their endless plenitude which can be shared in an infinity of ways. The paradox, however, is that it does not subsist in itself, but abides only in existing things. It is in turn itself contained in subsistent divine Being. 'The first act [God] is the universal principle of all acts, since it is infinite, pre-containing all things within itself, as Dionysius says.'<sup>116</sup>

suum esse contrahitur ad aliquem specialem modum nobilitatis maiorem vel minorem, dicitur esse secundum hoc nobilior vel minus nobilis. Igitur si aliquid est cui competit tota virtus essendi, ei nulla nobilitatum deesse potest quae alicui rei conveniat. Sed rei quae est suum esse, competit esse secundum totam essendi potestatem: sicut si esset aliqua albedo separata, nihil ei de virtute albedinis deesse potest . . . Deus igitur, qui est suum esse, habet esse secundum totam virtutem ipsius esse. Non potest ergo carere aliqua nobilitate quae alicui rei conveniat. See also 1, 28, 261-2.

114. *Contra Gentiles* 1, 28, 267: Dionysius etiam, in V cap. de Div. Nom. dicit: Deus non quodam modo est existens, sed simpliciter et incircumscriptive totum esse in seipso accepit et praeaccepit. Cf. *In I Sent.*, 8, 2, 3: Divinum esse, ut dicit Dionysius, De Divinis nominibus, V, 4, praeaccepit sicut causa in se omne quantum ad id quod est perfectionis in omnibus.

115. *De Anima*, 6 ad 2. Cf. *In Hebd.* 2, 24: Ipsum esse est communissimum . . . unde relinquitur quod id quod est, aliquid possit participare; ipsum autem esse non possit aliquid participare.

116. *ST*, I, 75, 5, ad 1: Primus actus est universale principium omnium actuum quia est infinitum, virtualiter in se omnia prae habens, ut dicit Dionysius.

Dionysius' inspiration for both aspects of the universally similar and analogous intensive presence of existence is evident from Aquinas' Commentary:

All existing things are contained under common *esse* itself, but not God; rather is *esse commune* contained under his power, since divine power extends farther than created being itself; and this is what he says, that *esse commune* is in God himself as that which is contained in that which contains, not that God himself is in that which is *esse*.<sup>117</sup>

All things are stored up in the fullness of *esse commune* and *esse commune* abides within the fullness of subsistent divine Being.

#### *Esse Intensivum: Primary Act and Perfection*

In his unique and original vision of being, Aquinas brings together the Aristotelian primacy of actuality — carrying this doctrine to a profound level not glimpsed by Aristotle — and the Platonist principle of perfect plenitude. For St. Thomas, *esse* is the actualising and emergent plenitude of perfection to which all entitative determinations stand as potency towards act, as participant to perfect and pre-eminent fullness. Being is both primary actuality and universal formal perfection. Participation must be understood not as an act whereby a being 'has' something as its possession, i.e. as a having, but as a manner of existing or of being. In its metaphysical context, to participate is precisely to *be*. To participate in existence is to exercise the act of being even though this act has been received. Things abide *in se*, but not *per se*. As a value which is participated, being is the very act of being. Aquinas penetrates more profoundly, therefore, to the significance of both actuality and participation, discovering their profound meaning precisely in their unique identity as *esse*, the primary act and fullness of perfection in every thing.

This is made explicit by Aquinas in another context, where he gives it its radical foundation in infinite act: unlimited self-subsistent Being, the pure and perfect fullness in which all things (causally) participate:

Everything which is participated is related to the participant as its act. Now whatever is proposed as a created form subsisting

117. V, ii, 660: Omnia existentia continentur sub ipso esse communi, non autem Deus, sed magis esse commune continetur sub eius virtute, quia virtus divina plus extenditur quam ipsum esse creatum; et hoc est quod dicit, quod esse commune est in ipso Deo sicut contentum in continente et non e converso ipse Deus est in eo quod est esse.

*per se* must participate in being; even life itself, or whatever is called thus, participates in being itself (*participat ipsum esse*), as Dionysius says in Chapter 5 of *Divine Names*. But participated being is limited to the capacity of the participant. Thus God alone, who is his own existence, is pure and infinite act.<sup>118</sup>

Being as participated in is the act of the participant. This is expressed elsewhere as follows: 'Everything which participates is related to what is participated as potency to act; thus the substance of any created thing is related to its existence as potency to act.'<sup>119</sup>

The intimacy of being throughout its ontic determinations may be understood by considering that in living things their being is very life itself. In the animal, life is not a principle distinct from its *esse*, but rather an increased and enriched manner of existing, a power or virtue of being more noble than the simple fact of existence or manner of being of the inanimate. It is by the same principle of actuality that I exist and by virtue of which I am alive. To be alive is the 'to be' of what is living. Here Aquinas rejoins Aristotle: *Vivere enim viventibus est esse, Vivere enim viventis est ipsum esse ipsius*.<sup>120</sup> There is no separation or cleft between the life of the animal and its existence. To be, for the living thing, is to be alive; to live is precisely to be, but according to a more intense mode of being.

Aquinas remarks: 'It is clear that a living body is more noble than a nonliving body.'<sup>121</sup> This is the evidence of immediate observation and not yet the fruit of reflection and metaphysical insight. The difference between the phenomenological and the metaphysical viewpoints may be expressed in an apparent paradox: even though the living being is more perfect and noble than the nonliving, i.e. a body which simply is, being is more noble a perfection than life. Being is more intimate within the living body than life itself. In Aquinas' striking phrase: 'being inheres more vehemently than life' (*Esse vehementius inhaeret quam vivere*).<sup>122</sup>

118. ST, I, 75, 5 ad 4: Omne participatum comparatur ad participans ut actus eius. Quaecumque autem forma creata per se subsistens ponatur, oportet quod participet esse: quia etiam ipsa vita, vel quidquid sic dicetur, participat ipsum esse, ut dicit Dionysius, 5 cap. de Div. Nom. Esse autem participatum finitur ad capacitatem participantis. Unde solus Deus, qui est ipsum suum esse, est actus purus et infinitus.

119. *Quodl.* 3, 8, 1: Omne autem participans se habet ad participatum, sicut potentia ad actum; unde substantia cuiuslibet rei creatae se habet ad suum esse, sicut potentia ad actum.

120. *In de Causis* XII, 278.

121. ST, I, 3, 1: Corpus vivum manifestum est quod est nobilius corpore non vivo.

122. *In III Sent.*, 30, 2.

Life does not add a restriction to being but draws rather all the more deeply from its inexhaustible wealth. It is thus that we must interpret the assertion: *Vita nihil addat supra esse nisi determinatum modum essendi seu determinatam naturam entis*.<sup>123</sup> Life is thus understood as a higher nobility of being: *Ea quae sunt et vivunt perfectiora (sunt) quam ea quae tantum sunt*.<sup>124</sup> This is but a realistic evaluation of an objective hierarchy in the order of things. There are indeed distinct degrees of value and perfection within the universe. Whereas matter is regarded as *esse debile*,<sup>125</sup> life and wisdom are praised by Aquinas as *nobilitates*. Already central to Dionysius' vision was the fundamental appraisal of the pattern whereby some things are more perfect in their existence than others according to their proximity and likeness to the Good. This is wholly espoused by Aquinas who attributes their excellence to the fecundity and abundance of *esse* which is their embodied similitude to God. *Esse* is the plenitude of perfection; susceptible of variant measures of strength or intensity it is for Aquinas the ultimate foundation of metaphysical participation: 'Whether a thing has a vigorous or a feeble share in the act of being, it has this from God alone; and because each thing participates in an act of existence given by God, the likeness of each is found in him.'<sup>126</sup> The participation of *esse* either *forte sive debile* is but confirmation of the intensive proportioning of existence.

Crucial in the formation of Aquinas' notion of *intensive esse* is Dionysius' manner of attributing all perfections to the simplicity and superiority of Being. All qualities and modes of reality are contained within the superabundance of existence (*prae habens et super habens*). In particular, Dionysius' understanding of rational, living, intelligent things as a pre-excellence of being was of singular importance in shaping Aquinas' appreciation of being as fullness. Thus, it is through Being that the perfection of life is actualised; it first participates in being and draws upon the perfection of life which is stored within the thesaurus of existence. Only then does the virtue of life imbue the inanimate. *Esse* first pervades that-which-is, raising it from the utter absence which is nothingness; life then infuses it with an increased perfection, a more intense

123. *In de Causis* XII, 281.

124. *Contra Gentiles* 1, 28, 259.

125. *De Veritate* 2, 5, obj. 12: *Materia prima habet minimum de esse. Corpus: Materia autem, propter debilitatem sui esse, quia est ens in potentia tantum, non potest esse principium agendi. Ad 12: Illa quae habent deficient esse.*

126. *De Veritate* 2, 5: *Res autem, sive forte sive debile esse participet, hoc non habet nisi a Deo; et secundum hoc similitudo omnis rei in Deo existit quod res illa a Deo esse participat.* Translation, Robert W. Mulligan, SJ. *Truth*, Vol. I (Chicago, 1952), p. 88.

degree of being. We may say, therefore, that living things exist more intensely; they have a higher pitch of being: they *are more*. The flower growing unobserved and hidden in a crevice upon the highest mountain has a greater interiority and intensity of being; it is *more* than the mountain, greater in its inner perfection than the giant and majestic beauty of the physical universe: it *is more*. In this light we may read Aquinas' remark: *nobilitas cuiusque rei est secundum suum esse*.<sup>127</sup>

All the perfections of a being are perfections of *esse*; this must not be understood as a tautology, but as expressing the depth of being as the intensity and fullness, the source and well-spring, of all that is present as positive in reality. *Esse* is the first and final perfection of things. Being penetrates with its presence to the intimate core of each thing and fills out its every aspect. It is *esse* which originally grants reality, which makes things present to themselves and inserts them into the universal order. This is the ontological difference between being as primary actuality and that which is in potency towards its participated actuality.

Intelligent beings, likewise, have a greater excellence of being; they are yet more elevated on the *scala entis* and are closer to infinite goodness, since they embody a greater measure of the power or efficacy of being; they have a greater *virtus essendi*. They harbour a more profound and inner depth of existential wealth. The same complete identity cannot, however, be affirmed between the rational character of man and his act of existence because he is not exclusively or exhaustively rational but embraces many non-rational activities. (Moreover, to identify the activity of knowing with the very act of being would be to identify the substance with its accident and would entail the identity of the knowing subject with its object). We can affirm nevertheless the inherence of cognition within existence as a richness which is born out of the heart of being as the actuality of the knower. To know is a more excellent mode of existing (*modus existendi*) but is included in being and proceeds from *esse*.<sup>128</sup> In the simplicity and perfect unity of God, there is sheer identity between the endless perfections of Being, Life and Intelligence: *Ipsium intelligere primi Intelligentis est vita eius et esse ipsius*.<sup>129</sup> (Remarkable is the ease with which Aquinas, in referring this doctrine to Aristotle, perceives the harmony of the two approaches.)

What we are here calling to mind is that in all beings, *esse* is not a dimension alongside all other aspects of things but is their full-

127. *Contra Gentiles* 1, 28, 260.

128. *In de Causis* XII, 281: *Haec duo (vivere et intelligere), prout sunt in ipso esse non sunt aliud quam esse.*

129. *In de Causis* XII, 278

ness and foundation. It is identical with them in so far as they are perfections — it is their very perfection — and transcends them in so far as they pose a limit to its infinity. Essence is thus a *modus essendi*, determining the nature of that which is. *Esse*, however, is not identical with its determinations, although it subsists alone in and through them. Being is the originative perfection which emerges to adopt the particular forms and determinations which constitute the individual. *Esse* infuses into all finite forms of the real a presence which actualises them from within at their most profound and intimate depth, fulfilling them but surpassing also their grasp so that it is never consumed or exhausted even by their ensemble. It resembles the source which feeds the stream and impels its flow, but which as distinct is never exhausted in its outpouring. *Esse* is as the very illumination through which things first emerge and become manifest that they may appear and stand out in their own dimension and relief but which remains itself concealed; the universal and ubiquitous light which illumines all beings but cannot itself be seen. It is the silent and unceasing energy which nourishes and maintains the endless ferment of the universe. *Esse* is the quiet leaven (*aliquid fixum et quietum*) within the world of beings which, unobserved, perfects and harmonises each and every one within the ensemble and which lies at the origin of the whole. It is the unseen interior of things which reaches outward towards their utmost bounds, but is never enveloped by them.

Being is not simply one other among the endless forms or perfections of the created universe but is the most fundamental of all, embracing all others as secondary and implicit. In its generality it forms the foundation of the pyramid, comprehending all things universally within its power. In its simplicity it is the apex, containing all in a virtual manner according to a higher, pre-eminent presence. Being, however, is not merely the sum of all perfections and forms, but is their total simplicity and plenitude. All other qualities which the earlier Platonists would have established as independent, individual forms in themselves, Dionysius united in the simplicity of the single and universal form of Being. In characterising *esse* as intensive we view all perfections as contained eminently within the primary and plenary perfection of being. These are active only as emerging from the actuality and ontological fullness of being. In turn *esse* emerges and shines through the medium of beings. *Esse* is the pre-eminence of all wealth; it constitutes in anticipation all the qualities which are diffracted and dispersed according to its manifold wealth throughout the entitative dimensions of each thing. *Esse* is the *thesaurus* of all riches and resources, of whatever order, found within any

being.<sup>130</sup> In an analogous but superior manner, St. Thomas discovers the unity of wealth of all finite being which is diffused and dispersed throughout the multiplicity and hierarchy of creation as present and anticipated in Infinite Subsisting Being.

In the individual existent, *esse* is genetically, so to speak, the abundance of existential perfection from which all subsequent characters and determinations emerge, from which they blossom and spring forth. They are its manifestations or modes of presence. The act of being is not an empty, functional or efficient energy which in an instrumental manner simply effects into existence the modes of essence and accident of an individual, but is the wellspring which continually nurtures what-is in all its diverse activity. It is not merely *initium* but also *fons et origo*, and more importantly it is their *plenitudo essendi*. This is the significance of the distinction made between existence as the mere fact of being, and *esse* as the fullness of perfection and enduring source which constantly renews within each being the ever-present creative power of God who is Absolute Being. To assert being as existential plenitude is to recognise that the perfections within beings over and above their simple existence are themselves perfections of being itself and that in origin being constitutes their excellence and their abundance. The principle of intensity allows us to conceive the existential richness and diversity of all things, individually and universally, as preserved virtually and causally, according to a higher mode of presence within the primary perfection of *esse*.

Essence and accidents participate in *esse* and draw from it their constant energy. *Esse* is thus the plenitude both of actuality and form, the *actus actuum* and the *forma formarum*. As primary act and plenary perfection, Being is the treasure store of value, a reservoir of richness and energy. *Esse* is thus at once both intensive and emergent act; it constitutes within an anterior simplicity and unity all the actuality and perfection of a being and diffuses it throughout its each and every aspect. *Esse* is the profound and inner pulsation which confers upon each thing its radical irruption and insurge, letting it stand out of and over against the void of nothingness. It is what is most intimate and fundamental within each thing,<sup>131</sup> what is most formal, since it includes every other determination. *Esse* is the exhaustive actuality, the inexhaustible source and fullness of the entire wealth which conjoins to establish and constitute each entity as a unique being and inserts it according to its due rank within the hierarchic order of the universe. Being is in each thing its first and final goodness, primary

130. See Albert Keller, *Sein oder Existenz? Die Auslegung des Seins bei Thomas von Aquin* (München, 1968), p. 246.

131. In *Ev. Johannis* I, 5, 183: Cum ergo esse sit intimum cuilibet rei.



and supreme, fundamental and comprehensive, embracing all its entitative wealth and resources.

The Neoplatonic triad of Being, Life and Intelligence, taken from Proclus; Dionysius and the author of the *Liber de Causis*, is the frequent focus of Aquinas' reflection on the universal distribution and hierarchy of perfections. This is prominent in his Commentary on the *Liber de Causis*: *Considerandum est quod omnes gradus rerum ad tria videtur reducere, quae sunt: esse, vivere et intelligere*.<sup>132</sup> Aquinas' exposition of this is indeed ingenious. Each thing may be considered, he says, in three ways: firstly, in itself, in which respect *esse* is proper to it; secondly, in so far as it tends towards another: this is characteristic of life; and thirdly, in so far as it has within itself what is other. Now, to possess something according to its form, immaterially, is the most noble mode of possession and this is the characteristic of knowledge. To be the origin of one's own movement is the most noble of motions and this is the nature of life. Common to all of these, however, and primary among perfections is being: *esse igitur, quod est primum, commune est omnibus*. Not all things have the perfection of self-movement or of knowledge, but only the more perfect among beings (*perfectiora in entibus*). Aquinas summarises the order of priority: *Intelligere praesupponit vivere et vivere praesupponit esse, esse autem non praesupponit aliquid aliud*. Being, therefore, is given through creation alone.

#### *Dionysius, Source of Aquinas' Notion of Being*

Aquinas' close reliance upon Dionysius and the inspiration of DN V, 1 is especially evident in the celebrated passage of *De Potentia*, 7, 2, ad 9.<sup>133</sup> This is not always recognised, however. Albert

132. *In de Causis* XVIII, 338-339. See *In III Sent.*, Prol.

133. Hoc quod dico esse est inter omnia perfectissimum: quod ex hoc patet quia actus est semper perfectior potentia. Quaelibet autem forma signata non intelligitur in actu nisi per hoc quod esse ponitur. Nam humanitas vel igneitas potest considerari ut in potentia materiae existens, vel ut in virtute agentis, aut etiam ut in intellectu: sed hoc quod habet esse, efficitur actu existens. Unde patet quod hoc quod dico esse est actualitas omnium actuum, et propter hoc est perfectio omnium perfectionum. Nec intelligendum est, quod ei quod dico esse, aliquid addatur quod sit eo formalius, ipsum determinans, sicut actus potentiam: esse enim quod huiusmodi est, est aliud secundum essentiam ab eo cui additur determinandum. Nihil autem potest addi ad esse quod sit extraneum ab ipso, cum ab eo nihil sit extraneum nisi non-ens, quod non potest esse nec forma nec materia. Unde non sic determinatur esse per aliud sicut potentia per actum, sed magis sicut actus per potentiam. Nam et in definitione

Keller, for example, concluding his excellent study of the relation between the terms *esse* and *existentia*, makes no mention of Dionysius as the source of the final phrase of this passage, which he then proceeds to interpret as the primary enunciation of *esse* as plenitude.<sup>134</sup> More perceptive is the explicit statement of A. Solignac:

Une analyse philologique rigoureuse démontrerait sûrement que la source de la doctrine thomassienne de l'*esse* n'est autre que le De Divinis Nominibus ch. V, 1-7, c'est-à-dire le chapitre qui traite de l'être comme nom divin par excellence. Le texte célèbre et fondamental sur l'*esse* — nous voulons parler de De Pot. VII. 2 ad 9um — suffit d'ailleurs à mettre sur la voie un lecteur attentif. Si saint Thomas désigne Dieu comme l'*Ipsum esse per se subsistens* — et c'est de l'idée de Dieu que dérive toute la doctrine de l'*esse* — c'est parce qu'il avait lu dans le Pseudo-Denys que l'*esse* est la participation première, fondement de toutes les autres.<sup>135</sup>

The passage begins with the declaration by Aquinas: *Hoc quod dico esse est inter omnia perfectissimum: quod ex hoc patet quia actus est semper perfectior potentia*.<sup>136</sup> It is *esse* which first and alone makes the forms of perfection to be actually real. These may abide latently

formarum ponuntur propriae materiae loco differentiae, sicut cum dicitur quod anima est actus corporis physici organici. Et per hunc modum, hoc esse ab illo esse distinguitur, in quantum est talis vel talis naturae. Et per hunc modum hoc esse ab illo esse distinguitur, in quantum est talis vel talis naturae. Et per hoc dicit Dionysius quod licet viventia sint nobiliora quam existentia, tamen esse est nobilius quam vivere: viventia enim non tantum habent vitam, sed cum vita simul habent et esse.

134. Albert Keller, *Sein oder Existenz*, p. 246.

135. A. Solignac, 'La doctrine de l'*esse* chez saint Thomas est-elle d'origine néo-platonicienne?', *Archives de Philosophie* 30 (1967), p. 448. See Pierre Faucon, *Aspects néoplatoniciens de la doctrine de Saint Thomas d'Aquin*, p. 448. Cornelio Fabro concludes his analysis of Chapter 5 of Aquinas' Commentary on *De Divinis Nominibus* with the following verdict: 'La source principale de la notion thomiste d'*esse* intensif est donc avant tout le mystérieux Auteur des *Areopagica*' (*Participation et Causalité*, p. 229), thus confirming his earlier view: 'L'Angelico ama riferire all' Areopagita alcuni degli aspetti più profondi del suo sistema quali la nozione "intensiva" dell' *esse*' (*La nozione metafisica di partecipazione*, 2nd ed; Torino, 1957; pp. 89-90). Fabro estimates that this notion, which Aquinas received from Dionysius came to constitute more and more profoundly the central axis of thomist metaphysics (*Participation et Causalité*, p. 220). Again: 'Toute la métaphysique thomiste de la participation est basée sur cette notion simple et inépuisable de l'*esse*; l'*esse* est l'acte premier intensif qui embrasse et contient tout' (*Participation et Causalité*, p. 508).

136. The Marietti edition incorrectly reads *perfectio*.



within the potency of matter, virtually within the power of their efficient cause or intentionally within the intellect. But it is only by having *esse* that they actually exist in reality (*sed hoc quod habet esse, efficitur actu existens*). 'Wherefore it is clear that what I call *esse* is the actuality of all acts and therefore the perfection of all perfections.' Not only does *esse* actualise all things, constituting in its universal extension the actuality of all acts, but it comprehends also intensively within its own fullness the many-graded perfections of all. This is, as Aquinas goes on to explain, because nothing can be added to *esse* as more formal, determining it as act determines potency. Being (*esse*) is essentially (*secundum essentiam*) different from that to which it is added and whereby it is determined. *Esse* belongs to an utterly different order from that of essence; there is an intransgressible distance between the orders of *esse* and *essentia*. Nothing can be added to *esse* as extraneous to it, since outside it lies only non-being, which can be neither form or matter. Hence being (*esse*) is not determined by something distinct, as potency by act, but rather as act by potency, in the same way as form is determined by the matter proper to itself, and soul is defined as the act of an organic physical body.

Here Aquinas touches on two aspects which are significant for the relation of being to those perfections signified as form (*forma signata*). Being is, firstly, wholly and radically distinct from all its determinations. It constitutes an order unto itself. It may not be identified with matter, form, essence, substance or accident. As universal actuality, *esse* is determined, however, within every individual, and participated according to the capacity or potency of the principles of each. Moreover, the determinations of being, (i.e. the additions to the meaning of being whereby a thing is defined as a particular kind of being) emerge from the plenitude of being itself as concrete individual ways in which the universal actuality of being comes to presence. These determinations such as substance, genus, species, etc., through which beings are distinguished, are but so many *modi essendi*. The following passage from *De Veritate* is relevant:

All the other conceptions of the intellect are had by additions to being. But nothing can be added to being as though it were something not included in being — in the way that a difference is added to a genus or an accident to a subject — for every reality is essentially a being. . . . There are different modes of being according to which we speak when we speak of different levels of existence, and according to these grades different things are classified. Consequently, substance does not add a difference to being by signifying some reality added to it, but substance simply expresses a special manner of existing,

namely, as a being in itself. The same is true of the other classes.<sup>137</sup>

Being is distinct from all of its determinations, it transcends them, is nevertheless their source. It is their plenitude and actuality anterior to being received in a unique mode within an individual which it thereby raises, not merely out of utter nothingness into existence but enthrones in its unique status of individual privilege and perfection according to the kind of being which it is determined to be. This is what Aquinas means when he states in the text of *De Potentia* which we are considering: 'Accordingly, this act of being (*esse*) is distinct from that *esse* inasmuch as it is the *esse* of this or that nature.' Here he is suggesting that there are degrees of perfection among the concrete acts of being which endow different individuals with perfection and actuality. Whereas prime matter is for Aquinas *esse debile*, living reality is more noble than what merely exists. And it is precisely to Dionysius that he here refers in favour of *esse* as the source and plenitude of perfection: *Et per hoc dicit Dionysius quod licet viventia sunt nobiliora quam existentia, tamen esse est nobilius quam vivere: viventia enim non tantum habent vitam, sed cum vita simul habent et esse*. Being is more excellent than life since life is itself a mode of being; life is precisely the mode of being within a living thing. Whatever has life has also as such within its virtue the perfection of existence. Being, however, is of wider extension than life; there are, therefore, beings which partake of existence but not of life. As Keller puts it, *esse* is more perfect than *vivere*, but *ens* does not excel *vivens*.<sup>138</sup> Another author explains it: 'The transition from *vivens perfectius ente* to *esse praeeminet vitae* is the transition from a principally logical to a strictly metaphysical understanding of being.'<sup>139</sup>

This doctrine of the intensive and comprehensive value of being Aquinas appropriates completely as his own, as is evident from the originality and invention with which he finds it verified in the most unlikely contexts. To the question, for example, whether hu-

137. *De Veritate* 1, 1: Omnes aliae conceptiones intellectus accipiuntur ex additione ad ens. Sed enti non potest addi aliquid quasi extranea natura, per modum quo differentia additur generi, vel accidens subiecto, quia quaelibet natura essentialiter est ens; . . . Sunt enim diversi gradus entitatis, secundum quos accipiuntur diversi modi essendi, et iuxta hos modos accipiuntur diversa rerum genera. Substantia enim non addit supra ens aliquam differentiam, quae significet aliquam naturam superadditam enti, sed nomine substantiae exprimitur quidam specialis modus essendi, scilicet per se ens; et ita est in aliis generibus.

138. *Sein oder Existenz?*, p. 246. See Fabro, *La nozione metafisica di partecipazione*, p. 202.

139. Bernard Kelly, *The Metaphysical Background of Analogy*, Blackfriars, 1958, (Aquinas Paper 29), p. 5.

man happiness consists in bodily goodness,<sup>140</sup> Aquinas proposes as a hypothetical objection the view of Dionysius referred to, that to be (*esse*) is better than to be alive, and that life is better than the other things which are consequent upon it. But to the being and life of man, and therefore to his beatitude, concludes the objection, belongs most of all the health of the body. To this Aquinas brings the following distinction in the meaning of *esse*. Considered simply or absolutely in itself, as including all the perfection of existing, *esse* surpasses life and all subsequent perfections; in this sense being contains in itself all such secondary perfections which it transcends while embracing them.<sup>141</sup> This, says Aquinas, is the meaning intended by Dionysius. The objection posed presumes the alternative understanding of being, namely *esse* as participated in this or that thing which does not receive the full perfection of being, but which has *esse* in an imperfect manner, as is the minimum measure of being in any creature; in this case it is clear that being itself (*ipsum esse*) together with an additional perfection is more excellent. Because of this Dionysius can also say that living things are better than existing things and intelligent beings than living things.<sup>142</sup> Being, understood *secundum quod includit in se omnem perfectionem essendi*, is none other than the rich meaning of *esse* which Aquinas made the foundation and crowning of his metaphysics and natural theology. Dionysius and Aquinas here disclose a significant ambivalence in the notions 'living', 'wise' and 'being'. If 'wise' is taken as abstracting from the perfections of life and being, then it is less perfect than that which really is and lives. Referring to what is really wise, living and existent, the wise being is more perfect than the merely living or the simply existent. To be wise, however, is but a more perfect way of being. In both senses, therefore, being is more radical and fundamental.

Another interesting verification of the primacy of *esse* is found in his *Commentary on the Sentences*,<sup>143</sup> where Aquinas responds to the objection that charity (*caritas*) cannot be an accidental character of the soul, since it is through charity itself that the soul is perfect,

140. ST, I-II, 2, 5.

141. ST, I-II, 2, 5 ad 2: *Esse simpliciter acceptum, secundum quod includit in se omnem perfectionem essendi, praeeminet vitae et omnibus subsequentibus: sic enim ipsum esse prae-habet in se omnia subsequenta.*

142. ST, I-II, 2, 5 ad 2: *Sed si consideretur ipsum esse prout participatur in hac re vel in illa, quae non capiunt totam perfectionem essendi, sed habent esse imperfectum, sicut est esse cuiuslibet creaturae; sic manifestum est quod ipsum esse cum perfectione superaddita est eminentius. Unde et Dionysius ibidem dicit quod viventia sunt meliora existentibus, et intelligentia viventibus.*

143. In I Sent., 17, 1, 2, ad 3. The reference given by Durantel (*Saint Thomas et le Pseudo-Denis*, p. 179) is incorrect.

and an accident cannot be more noble than its subject. Here too the radical significance of being is brought into clear focus, as well as the Dionysian provenance of this doctrine. Absolutely speaking, says Aquinas, the soul is more perfect than charity as any subject is superior to its accident; but *secundum quid* the reverse is the case. The reason for this is that *esse*, as Dionysius states, is more noble than everything else which follows upon *esse*; thus *esse* absolutely speaking is more noble, for example, than understanding (*intelligere*) if it is possible to understand *intelligere* without *esse*. That which excels in *esse*, therefore, is more noble absolutely than all those which excel in any of the perfections which follow upon *esse*, although it may be less noble in another respect. And because the soul and every substance has a more noble existence (*nobilius esse*) than its accident, it is more noble absolutely. But regarding a specific *esse*, or in a certain respect, an accident may be more noble since it is related to substance as act to potency; this secondary goodness substance receives from accidents, but not the primary goodness of being, the *bonitas prima essendi*.<sup>144</sup> Being is the primary goodness of each thing, the substantial act of being, even though it may be further perfected in certain respects by its accidents to which it is related as potency in respect of these determinations. But these aspects of being are also themselves perfections of being. The priority and excellence of *esse* is thus reflected in the order of the principles which constitute being. All perfections 'follow upon' (*consequuntur*) *esse*; they are consequent to *esse* because they are implicit within it; they are stored up in advance within the treasury of being which is the universal fecundity of all.<sup>145</sup> Being is the fundamental power which each individual

144. In I Sent., 17, 1, 2, ad 3: *Esse secundum Dionysium, V cap. De div. nominibus, est nobilius omnibus aliis quae consequuntur esse: unde esse simpliciter est nobilius quam intelligere, si posset intelligi intelligere sine esse. Unde illud quod excedit in esse, simpliciter nobilius est omni eo quod excedit in aliquo de consequentibus esse; quamvis secundum aliud possit esse minus nobile. Et quia anima et quaelibet substantia habet nobilius esse quam accidens, ideo simpliciter nobilior est. Sed quantum ad aliquod esse, secundum aliquod, accidens potest esse nobilius, quia se habet ad substantiam sicut actus ad potentiam; et hanc bonitatem consequentem habet substantia ab accidentibus, sed non bonitatem primam essendi.*

145. In the following *Quaestio* (In I Sent., 17, 2, 2, *Contra*) we find yet a further affirmation by Aquinas of the primacy of being which is inspired by Dionysius: *Secundum Dionysium, V cap. De div. Nom., tantum distat inter ipsas Dei participationes et participantes, quod participatio quanto simplicior est tanto nobilior, participans vero quanto maiorem habet compositionem donorum participatorum, tanto nobilior est; sicut esse est nobilius quam vivere, et vivere quam intelligere, si unum sine altero intelligatur: omnibus enim esse praeeligeretur.*

exercises according to its own unique and proper intensity, *forte sive debile*.

### Conclusion

The conclusion to the present article may be briefly stated: It is illuminating and legitimate to employ the language of intensity to express the varying grades of the inner richness of things; for Aquinas, moreover, the 'intensity of being' is identical with *virtus essendi*. In the development of both themes — fundamentally one — Dionysius exerted profound influence and inspiration upon St. Thomas. The 'principle of intensity' and the pre-eminence of *virtus* are operative at the heart of finite being, where existence is seen as primary and comprehensive perfection and, more originally, at the source of all reality in the plenitude of divine power which anticipates within its simplicity the existential wealth of all creatures.

*Virtus essendi* may be understood in a fundamental sense, literally as the basic force, strength or power 'exerted' by anything which exists: its *vehementia essendi*,<sup>146</sup> the resolute and irresistible manner with which something imposes itself within the order of reality. If something exists, it imposes itself with an absolute character. Try as we may, we cannot refute or flee from that which is. Each thing shares in the absolute character of existence; it exerts a sovereign and inescapable *puissance*.<sup>147</sup> This is the sense of *virtus essendi* which Aquinas finds in Aristotle; from Dionysius he acquires the enriching motif of intensity. It is indeed the same word *virtus* which is used by Moerbeke to translate ἀρετή in Aristotle and by Sarracenus to render δύναμις in Dionysius' text. This is most significant as revealing the richness in meaning of the concept of *virtus essendi* which Aquinas derived from his historical sources. *Esse* is nobility and excellence, power and dynamic actuality. It is the virtue of being which determines the intensity or degree of

146. The term used by the Latin translator of Avicenna to denote a necessary being, which exists of itself. See Timothy McDermott, *Existence and Nature of God*, Volume 2, *Summa Theologiae* (London, 1964), p. 202. On p. 65 above (footnote reference 122) I have noted how Aquinas, on at least one occasion, uses this term to express the intensive sense of being. 147. With a reference to Aquinas' Commentary on *De Divinis Nominibus*, De Raeymaeker writes: 'In al wat is, in elk zijnde, hoe broos het anderzijds ook weze, schuilt bijgevolg een onwrikbaar taaie kracht, een onoverwinbaar weerstandsvermogen, kortom een kracht die tegen alles is opgewassen, de absoluutsterke zijnskracht, *virtus essendi*', 'Zijn en Absoluutheid', *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 20 (1958), p. 199.

perfection endowed upon an individual within the universal scale of beings. *Esse* determines, as it were, the ontological density of each individual along the great chain of Being. Rising in the universal scale, beings are filled more and more with the richness and nobility of the universal perfection of existence: *gradus in ipso esse inveniuntur*.<sup>148</sup> Different genera have different modes of being; a more noble substance has a more noble being: *nobilioris substantiae nobilius esse*.<sup>149</sup>

The meaning of intensity is borne out moreover in everyday usage. We commonly speak of intense heat or cold; we use the language of intensity to convey depths and degrees of light or colour. (It is of course possible to measure such degrees of intensity instrumentally, but such quantification is not required or presumed in such transferred usage of the term.) It is not by chance that the examples chosen by Aquinas to clarify the Neoplatonic motif of separate perfections are precisely those of *albedo separata* and *calor separata*. We speak of the intensity of pain; it also makes sense conversely to speak of pleasure as more or less intense. Inner states, spiritual or emotional, while not susceptible to numerical quantification, lend themselves to such description: job, love, amazement, sadness, grief, despair — such feelings vary in intensity according to their ardour or lassitude. Running through such usage is the connotation of an increase or decrease in quantity, distinct from the dimensive aspect of a physical kind. The language of intensity here signifies an escalation of inner attainment, as distinct from that of outward extension or expansion. It indicates a heightening or gathering of concentration rather than a loss of external dissipation or dispersion. An individual increases in respect of a particular perfection or determination not by extending outwards but through an increase of inner achievement; not by expanding its power to more or other objects, but through an enrichment of its own actuality: it is more.<sup>150</sup>

Such everyday use of the notion of intensity, in particular as referring to spiritual qualities or realities, suggests the aptness and

148. *ST*, I, 48, 2.

149. *Contra Gentiles* 2, 68, 1451.

150. See Cornelio Fabro, *Participation et Causalité*, p. 260: 'On pourrait presque dire, en termes hégéliens, que tandis que la *quantitas extensiva* se manifeste comme "rapport à l'autre", la *quantitas virtualis* s'actualise comme "rapport à soi" en un complet retour sur soi comme le nouvel infini positif.' Fabro remarks: 'Pour Hegel aussi, comme pour saint Thomas, cet infini est simplement l'*esse*', and cites the following passage with Hegel's emphasis: '... Die einfache Beziehung auf sich, welche Sein ist. Aber es ist nun auch erfülltes Sein, der sich begreifende Begriff, das Sein als die konkrete, ebenso schlechthin intensive Totalität.' (*Wissenschaft der Logik* ed. Lasson, II, p. 504).

legitimacy of referring to existence as an actuality, perfection or power embodying varying measures of intensity. Being is a value; all value is grounded in and springs from existence. Being is the original power and perfection; conversely the value and power of being may be understood as a variable intensity enjoyed in its own measure by each individual.

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