

## AQUINAS - METAPHYSICAL PRINCIPLES

See "The Principles of Nature" in Kaufmann and Baird

As it was for Aristotle and his predecessors, the problem of change is of crucial importance for Aquinas. For Parmenides and Plato, change is incompatible with true Being. So, Parmenides denied the reality of change altogether and Plato allowed it only an inferior degree of reality. Aquinas, following Aristotle, says that what has true being is individual substances and, so, one must account for the capacity of any substance to be transformed directly or indirectly into any other. The matter of a substance is what accounts for the potentiality of a substance to undergo indefinitely many changes. This matter as such must be perfectly indefinite and without character, otherwise there would have to be something that accounts for its capacity to be changed into something else. This "First matter" must be pure potentiality as opposed to secondary materials like water, brass, wood or flesh. This opinion leads Aquinas to disagree with Augustine, who took the stoic view that matter contains "seminal reasons", indeterminate forms, like seeds, according to which different quantities of matter are induced to develop along specific lines, especially into living things.

This First matter never exists by itself. Anything capable of existing by itself has some definite characteristics, some form so that it constitutes an animal, plant or mineral. But it is also true that forms or essences never exist by themselves, only in combination with matter as aspects of individual substances. They exist only as individuated by some portion of matter, as concrete individuals.

How can there be a number of individuals of the same species? The form or essence, rational animality is exactly the same in each human being. It is one, not many. It is a universal thing. So, it cannot account for there being many individuals of the same species. Only matter can be the principle of individuation. But what about incorporeal creatures, angels?

These are not composites of matter and form. They are purely spiritual creatures. Indeed, it is not only by faith that one knows that there are purely spiritual creatures. Aquinas thought that their existence was a preamble, something capable of rational proof. We find a hierarchy discernible among the forms of things. At the bottom are the forms of inorganic substances. Next come forms of plant life, then animal life, then the form of the rational soul, humanity. At the top of the scale is God. Obviously there is a gap in the hierarchy unless there are forms between

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humans and God. Since there are forms inferior to that of humans, but superior to those of basic inorganic materials like air or water, it would be disorderly and illogical if there were no forms between that of humans and God. Since God's existence can be proven, there would be no gap in forms between himself and humanity. God is uncreated, incorporeal and incomposite. It stands to reason then, that there are beings which are like humanity in being created and composite but are also like God in being incorporeal. Such are angels. But if they are incorporeal, how can they be composite? In human beings, the form (rational soul) is united with a body, producing a composite whole. But angels have no material component. Aquinas thus has to find a distinction in creatures that is even more fundamental than the distinction between matter and form. This is the distinction between essence and existence. It is a distinction important not only to Aquinas' view of the angels but to his whole metaphysics.

See "On Being and Essence" in Kaufmann and Baird

A similar distinction had already been made by Al-Farabi and Avicenna. Aquinas adopted much of what they said about this distinction. The supporting argument goes like this.

Except for God, nothing exists necessarily. No finite substance is such that what it is (its essence) entails that it is (its existence). The essence of something consists in the characteristics that define or determine its nature, the sort of thing it would be if it existed. To consider the essence of something is not by itself to know whether any such thing actually exists. The essence of humanity represents the possibility or "potency" of the actual existence of human beings. Existence is the actualization of the essence, nature or form of humanity. "Existence is the act by which the form is".

In fact, the word "existence" (*existentia*) is hardly ever used by Aquinas. His preferred word is "esse", the infinitive of the Latin verb meaning "to be". But he also uses it as a noun. When he does that, it is usually translated as "existence".

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So, for Aquinas, any actually existing individual (*substantia*) is composed of two "elements" (1) essence or nature (*essentia, natura, quidditas*) and (2) *esse*. Essence and *esse* are really distinct aspects of an actually existing individual substance. They are not just logically distinct aspects like the distinction between the inner surface and the outer surface of a hollow sphere. We cannot think of a hollow sphere with an inner surface without thinking of it having an outer surface. Yet we can very well think of what a thing is without thinking that it actually exists. We can easily think of what constitutes the essence of purely fictional creatures like centaurs even though we know they do not exist. And we can easily know that something actually exists (e.g., whatever is banging on my front door) without knowing what it is, its essence.

Every finite substance, then, is constituted by two principles, an essence or form determining what it is and an act of existence determining that it is. So, even an incorporeal intelligence such as an angel is composed of these two principles. There is no composition of form and matter in an angel but there is a composition of form and existence.

This result also suggests an argument for the existence of God. Aquinas refers to it as his "third way" of proving God's existence. We have already examined this argument. But Aquinas also examines Anselm's argument that God's existence follows directly from the concept of God's supreme perfection. Aquinas agrees with Anselm that God, the being than which nothing greater can be thought must be thought of as existing necessarily. But he does not agree with Anselm that we may therefore directly conclude that God actually exists. God's non-existence outside our thoughts is compatible with the conception of him as existing necessarily. Indeed, our conception of God is not adequate by itself to enable us to even know that God may exist in reality, that God's existence is even possible.

God, if He existed, would exist necessarily. So, there would be no real distinction between God's essence and His existence. But can we really understand how God's existence could be the same as his essence? We could understand this

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and, so, be assured of its possibility only if God's essence were something into which we had some real insight and such insight is impossible to us at least in this life. Aquinas says

God cannot be seen in his essence by one who is merely man except he be separated from this mortal life. The reason is that the mode of knowledge follows from the nature of the knower. But our soul, as long as we live in this life, has its being in corporeal matter; hence, it knows naturally only what has a form in matter or what can be known by such a form. Now it is evident that the divine essence cannot be known through the nature of material things.

That God exists and exists necessarily can be proved according to Aquinas, but not sheerly on the basis of some conception we have formed of what He is. None of our ideas is adequate to represent his essence.

Human knowledge, in the present life, is built up from sense experience. We abstract from our experience of physical objects the forms or essences that determine their natures. These forms or essences in abstraction from the particularizing matter in which they are embodied are universals like Humanity. We employ these universals in judgements ("Socrates is human") whereby we achieve knowledge of the physical objects of our experience. Not that our knowledge is limited to physical objects. He argues that we may also know of the existence of incorporeal objects insofar as the existence of these is implied by certain features of corporeal objects. For example, God's existence is implied by the contingency characteristic of corporeal objects. Our notion of God in this life will always be imperfect because of our having to think of him in terms drawn from our experience of the world. God's essence is beyond our grasp. But, to the extent that the natural world manifests his existence we can know him indirectly and by analogy.