

BEING AND ITS DIFFERENTIATION FROM ESSENCE IN AVICENNA AND THOMAS AQUINAS

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ABSTRACT

In this Article, existence and essence are studied. First, there is a detailed definition for existence or being. The views of Aristotle are dealt with, then the notions of plato on this topic are handled. Avicenna's conception is then discussed. Subsequently, it is argued that thomas Aquinas, as a commentator of Aristotle, has tried to clear up what the previous scholars have left obscure. The notions of St. Thomas are introduced later.

Averros' interpretation of metaphysics then is brought up. In another connection, it is argued that the first philosopher who has attempted to prove the distinction between essence and existence is Avicenna. According to him the first acquisition of mind is the concept of being. Naturally, we gain the impression of being through inner sensation from the things contained in our environment.

For Aristotle, metaphysics was that science whose proper subject was being qua being ($\tau\acute{o}\delta\upsilon\nu\theta\upsilon$). Now to know beings as such may mean three somewhat different things. First is the abstract notion of being, conceived both in itself and with its inherent properties, which would be what was called by later Aristotelian as the formal object of metaphysics. Second, metaphysics may deal with those beings which can truly be said to be because their being actually answers to the true definition of being. In this second sense, the science of being is divinity or theology. Third, metaphysics has to know its subject through its cause, and since the subject at hand, namely, being, is the first of all subjects, metaphysics has to know everything, is the first of all subjects, metaphysics has to know everything that is through its first cause.⁽¹⁾

Moreover, in Metaphysics, chapter 2, he inquires

into the meaning of the word "being" which does have several different meanings. These are related to one and the same fundamental reality which is $\acute{\omicron}\upsilon\varsigma\iota\alpha$. Certain things are called "beings" because they themselves are substances (or realities = $\acute{\omicron}\upsilon\varsigma\iota\alpha$). It therefore is a science of all that which deserves the title of "being" because all that which receives that name receives it because of its relation to reality ($\acute{\omicron}\upsilon\varsigma\iota\alpha$). Reality, along with $\acute{\omicron}\upsilon\varsigma\iota\alpha$, its principles and its causes, is the proper object of the science of being. Moreover, since it deals with being, that science must deal with all its aspects, especially with "oneness," for "to be" and to be "one" are one and the same thing. This leads us to the conclusion that $\acute{\omicron}\upsilon\varsigma\iota\alpha$ (reality or substance), being and one, are equivalent terms.⁽²⁾

One could find, perhaps, some reasons for the concrete distinction between essence and existence in

plato's works or especially in the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle. The question as to which of being and essence were the primary reality played a capital role in the history of philosophy. Most Aristotelian philosophers argue over being as if it was based on a presupposition that existence, being a common attribute of all beings, is a most general sense and, hence, has only the reality to which nothing in reality corresponds. Ibn Sina regards existence as a real attribute of essence. Far from saying that existence is a mere attribute, he declared existence to be the sole nature or reality of God, while in contingent beings, he regarded existence as deriving or borrowing from God and, hence, "additional to" their essence but not to particular things that exist.

As a commentator of Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas does little more than repeat Aristotle on this point, except that he clears up what was obscure in his text and puts some order into this complex problem. True enough, the very order which St. Thomas Aquinas puts into it is not without significance from the point of view of his own thought; yet, had we nothing else to rely upon besides his commentary on the *metaphysics* of Aristotle, we would be reduced to conjectures concerning his own position on the question.⁽³⁾

The most important distinctions between two notions of being and essence in western middle ages were brought up by St. Thomas in his famous book "*De Ente et Essentia*" (concerning being and essence).

In an introduction to this book, he says the reason for writing this book was:

Because a small error in the beginning is a great one in the end, according to the philosopher in the first book of the *De Caelo et Mundo*, and since being and essence are what are first conceived by the intellect, as Avicenna says in the first book of his *metaphysics*. Therefore, lest error befall from his *metaphysics*. Therefore, lest error befall from ignorance of them (being and essence) in order to reveal their difficulty it should be said what is signified by the names being and essence, and how they are found in diverse things and how they are disposed with respect to (se habent ad) logical intentions, namely, genus, species and difference.⁽⁴⁾

Although not explicitly but as a matter capable of being interpreted, there are some indications in *metaphysics* which implied that Aristotle, in his mind, had been aware of the problem. For Aristotle, "Aman," "being man" and "man" are the same thing. The reality of each thing is one and is not by accident. *Metaphysics* deals with "oneness" as it deals with "being" because oneness and being are simply two other names for reality, which both is and is one in its own right.

Averroes' interpretation of *metaphysics*, about the distinction between existence and essence and

preferability of existence or essence, is based on full loyalty to Aristotelian views. It is one which is a doctrine of identity of being and substance. Existence is not the essence of reality. Perhaps one concludes that being and essence are both the principles of what is real. Reality through different determinations and notions is displayed in essence or existence of the same thing.

Certainly the first philosopher who seriously attempts to prove the distinction between essence and existence is Avicenna. In his view, the first acquisition of mind is the concept of being. We have knowledge of the being, more as through a bare conception. Even if one can suppose himself to be in a state where completely unconscious of his sensations and imaginations, he is still knowing that he exists. Naturally, we gain the impression of being through inner sensation and outer sensation from the things contained in our environment. The concept of being cannot be brought up under essential categories as genus or species. Every understanding and therefore knowledge of a thing or a subject or an object is reducible to two different and separate understandings as far as related to essence or existence. Then one can say there are two kinds of questions; an essential question and an existential question. According to Avicenna, "there is the reality of a thing which is the truth that is in it. And there is its essence which is that by which it is what it is." And there is its actual existence. What is meant by a thing is usually associated with the notion of existence, though in fact they are entirely separate. The idea of an existent being accompanies a thing because it either exists in the concrete or in the imagination and the mind. Otherwise, it would not be a thing. Could a thing be absolutely non-existent? If by that is meant existing in the concrete, then it may be allowed. A thing could be conceived by the mind and yet not exist among external things. But there cannot be a thing that the mind or the imagination cannot conceive. Information is always of what can be realized mentally; and of what is absolutely non-existent, no information can be given, either in the form of an assertion or in the form of a negation. Should we suppose that there is some information, then the non-existent would have an attribute, and if there is an attribute, there must be that to which it is attributed? And that would mean that the non-existent exists, which is absurd.⁽⁵⁾

Having learned from Aristotle that being and substance are one. Averroes was bound to conceive substance as identical with its actual reality. Now, to say that something is actually real, and to say that it is, is to say one and the same thing. How indeed could it be otherwise in a philosophy in which the very being of

a being is to be “that which it is”?⁽⁶⁾ Averros criticizes Avicenna for his mistake that existence is an accident that happens to the essence, while he himself has neglected that there are two different kinds of accidents through the subjectivity and objectivity of things in Avicennian metaphysics. Avicenna explains that an attribute may be an accidental concomitant non-constitution or a non-concomitant identity. The first is applied here.⁽⁷⁾

The fact that a certain being is, is distinct from what that being is. Essence is not a being as far as it does not happen to exist. Essence accepts the title of being only in as much as it has already received its existence. Essence, in Avicenna’s view, does not deserve in itself the title of being. A world made up of such essences is a world in which no being contains the reason for its existence and necessity in itself.⁽⁸⁾

Averros, in his metaphysics, tries to constitute a crucial experiment insofar, at least, as the relation of pure substantialism to existence is concerned. Arguing from the root of the verb which means “to be,” he says that in common language, when people want to say that something exists, they say that it is “to be found” just as, in order to convey that a certain thing does not exist, they say that it is “not to be found.” Jilson says to Averros’ compatriots, as to some German philosophers such as Heidegger, that to be is to be there: “sein is dasein.” The thing must then be imagined as a reality, let us say as an essence, which is in itself distinct from and prior to the bare fact that it happens to be or not to be there.⁽⁹⁾

What is being, according to Thomas Aquinas, is what Aristotle had said it was, namely, substance. Aristotle has left something out while describing being, but what he has seen there, is there. The presence, in Thomism, of an Aristotelian level on which being is conceived as identical to οὐσία, is beyond doubt, and there is always a temptation for his readers to reduce him to Aristotle. However, for those whose identity calls being with what is commonly called substance, there can be no distinction between essence and existence, since being and οὐσία are one and the same thing. Each time St. Thomas himself looks at being as at a substance, as Aristotle, he makes no distinction between essence and existence.

Thomistic metaphysics is based on the acceptance of the analytical elements of being as real. Hence, if Aquinas describes the elements of this analysis as “terms,” the expression can in no way be thought to imply logical analysis. The very act of the conception of essence as apart from thin existence is proof of the reality of the distinction. This is the radical realism of which Aquinas is perhaps the outstanding exponent. It is this characteristic of Aquinas’ thought which has led

Mandonnet to remark that never in his own mind has Aquinas raised the question concerning the real metaphysical character of the distinction.⁽¹⁰⁾

As in his logic, Avicenna devotes a section of his metaphysics in both Shiffa and Alesharrat to the principles and method of definition and its relation to that which is being defined. He finds a special significance in definition and gives it an application much wider than the purely formal one. He is essentially a metaphysician, although he is named by most philosophers (follower or component) after him as the head of logicians. But logic does not occupy him excessively; he is constantly using logical distinctions and all the resources of what was for him only an instrument and a tool in establishing the basis of his arguments and in constructing the vital points of his metaphysics. He is interested in forms and terms, in theses, antitheses and syntheses. Carra de Vauz drew attention to this and tried to show its similarity to the kantian method of thought.⁽¹¹⁾ Absolutely, historical compromising of Aristotelian realism as observed by Avicenna, Averros and St. Thomas and kantian transcendental idealism from the other side, leads us to accept that the problem of being is yet more able to be interpreted and to be understood.

Aquinas employs the term “real” to characterize the distinction between essence and existence only three times in his writings. Though in the “De Ente et Essencia” he did not use this expression, but the whole meaning of this book is as an affirmation of the mentioned distinction. Roland-Gosselin explains the different cases of the distinction in St. Thomas. First, the real distinction between essence and existence, which is equal with the Avicennian notion of one, would have been modified by Aquinas if he had found it excessive or had thought that Avicenna had transferred a pure logical distinction to the metaphysical plane. At the same time, Aquinas anticipates possible criticism from the point of view of Averros by insisting that he is speaking of concrete things and not logical entities.⁽¹²⁾ But what is very important from an Avicennian view of being is the transcendental monopantheism attribution of being which Aquinas avoids in his philosophical terms. The distinction between essence and existence in separated substances affords a principle for the solution of the problem of pantheism in Thomas Aquinas. The existence, which is of God’s very essence, is received by separated substances. That is, God is distinguished from his creatures in that the latter have two elements, essence and existence, whereas he is absolutely simple.⁽¹³⁾ For more explanation of the distinction between essence and existence as is brought up in “De Ente,” we must say despite the conception that essence

implies the real distinction between essence and existence, there might be a substance whose quiddity is its very existence. In such a case, the division which is present in ordinary substances would disappear. This thing (*hec res*) can have being, consequently, as one and primal.

Another reason for the distinction between essence and existence is grounded on the very nature of created beings themselves. The character of substance is either a result of its own nature or is caused by some other thing. Whatever pertains to thing is either caused by a principle of its nature or comes to it from some extrinsic principle. But if very form or quiddity causes the existence of a thing, it would first have to exist. This is absurd. Hence, its existence must be caused by something already in existence. And since everything that has being from another is reduced to that which has being by its own nature, to the first cause, there is necessarily something which is the cause or the existence of all things by the very fact that it is existence only.⁽¹⁴⁾ There is some default with the consequence of this deduction which we do not deal with at present.

Now, after this illumination, the question of being still remains open. What is being? How can we answer this question? One cannot define being a priori or a posteriori because it is subject to reason (*verstand*) rather than a category of understanding. Therefore, it is not definable. One can define its manifestations, its appearances, its phenomenal individuation, but not being itself. One may ask why being should be necessary. The reply is merely tautological, unless it were necessary, it would not be. Why it is so cannot be explained. One cannot think of being without being, that is to say, without movement from and towards being. If there were only being without being, being would have to be self caused and continuous, or be merely a brief and spontaneous emergence from on-being to which it would be condemned to return in a state of eternal nothingness.⁽¹⁵⁾

With Avicennian thinking about being, we have to reject that nothing in reality corresponds to existence. On the contrary, nothing is real except existence. There is a fundamental difference between the general notion of being or existence and those of essence. Since essences do not exist *per se*, but only arise in the mind from particular forms and modes of existence and hence are mental entities, they can, in principle, be fully known by the mind. But the general notion of existence that arises in the mind cannot know or capture the nature of existence, since existence is the objective reality and its transformation into an abstract mental concept necessarily falsifies it. Essence is by itself a general notion and does not exist *per se*, and hence, can

be known by the mind. Existence is not an abstract notion, empty concept or secondary intelligible to which nothing strictly corresponds in reality. Mulla Sadra, the most famous follower of Avicenna and the founder of a new school in Islamic philosophy, has said: "All notions which arise from [our experience of] the external world and are fully grasped by the mind, their essences are preserved [in the mind] even though the mode of their existence changes. But since the very nature of existence is that it is outside the mind, it can never possibly come into the mind, or else its nature will be completely transformed. Hence, existence can never be [conceptually] known by any mind."⁽¹⁶⁾ If existence were to be treated only as an abstract notion, then it must be regarded as some sort of an essence. Real existence has no names (i.e., properties and descriptions), while essences have names.⁽¹⁷⁾

Now, we have to explore which is of it, truth does have meaning: existence of essence. Essence signifies something common to all natures by which diverse beings are disposed in different genera and species, as for instance, the horse is the essence of horse and so on for others. By means of essence, the things constituted in its proper genus or species are not those which are signified by the definition indicating what the thing is. Hence, it is that the name essence has been changed by philosophers into the name quiddity or "*quod quid erat esse*" which does mean by virtue of it, a thing has to be what it is. The certitude of any single thing is signified by means of form, and hence, essence have been called form. The name quiddity is taken from that which signifies the definition. We call it essence according to the virtue of it and in it being has existence (*esse*).

In favor of explaining "essence," Aristotle says in *Metaphysics* that being, by itself (*ens per se*), is said to be taken in two modes: in the one mode, it is divided into ten genera; in the other, it signifies the truth of propositions. The difference between these is that in the second mode, everything can be called being concerning which an affirmative proposition can be formed, even if it posits nothing in the thing (*in re*). But in the first mode, only what posits something in the thing can be called being. The name "essence," therefore, is not taken from being in the second mode, for in this mode some things are said to have essence which have not being, as is evident in privations. In the fourth book of *Metaphysics*, Aristotle says that every substance is a nature which signifies the essence of a thing in as much as it has a disposition toward an operation proper to the thing, since no thing is lacking in its proper operation.⁽¹⁸⁾

Ibn Sina accuses some logicians who did not distinguish between the essential and that which is

stated as the answer to the question "what is it?" If Some of them desire to distinguish (between the two), what he says boils down to the following: That which is stated as the answer to the question "what is it?" is that which, in spite of its essentiality, is more general in the group of essentials. But then they get confused if they are shown the case of essentials that are more general, without being genera, such as the things which are called "generic differences."

But he who inquires into what it is, is only inquiring into the quiddity which you have already known and which is realized only through the totality of the constitutive. Thus, the answer to the question "what is it?" must be given by the quiddity.⁽¹⁹⁾

The genus that Avicenna refuses to accept as the answer to the question "what is it?" is that which is a part of the quiddity, as "animal" is a part of "human being." But the genus that he considers fit to answer this question is that which is the quiddity itself, as "animal" is the quiddity of various species falling under it. In other words, it is the genus which is the common quiddity and not that which is a part of the specific quiddity that can tell us what a thing is.⁽²⁰⁾

There is a difference between that which is stated as the answer to the question "what is it?". That which enters the answer to the question "what is it?" or that which is stated on the way to the question "what is it?". For the answer itself is other than that which enters the answer or that which falls on the way to it.

The question of he who asks "what is it?", in accordance with the requirements of every language, corresponds to "what is its essence?" or "what is the comprehension of its name?"

A thing is what it is only by virtue of the union of what it has in common with other things and what is proper to it, such that its essence, which is sought in this question, is realized. As for the more general [essential], it is neither the identity of a thing nor the comprehension of its corresponding name.⁽²¹⁾

Instead of answering by quiddity, one can answer by the definition since it is a phrase signifying the quiddity of a thing and since it differentiates the species from all others under the same genus, it is said to give "absolute particularity" in the sense that the defined is more specific than the genus. Sometimes Avicenna also says that one can answer the question "what is it?" by the name. That is because the name, too, corresponds to the quiddity and is, hence, said to signify it. The name human being signifies "human being" which is the quiddity. But the difference between the name and the definition is that while the former is a single expression, the latter is a composite.⁽²²⁾

As last it should be noted that as St. Thomas pointed out, natures exist as modes of accidents in corporeal

substances, whereas essences exist as the modes of accidents in the intellect. Essence is continuously conditioned by the nature so that the essence, as abstracted, is what the thing is in its proper and necessary mode apart from all contingent increments. The thing is that which is understood by means of the essence. Essences, being entia rationis or beings of reason, are that by virtue of which the intellect understands natures in as much as they are natures, namely, as such a necessary being freed from all improper accidents. Sensitive knowledge is the material cause of intellectual knowledge and leads to the quiddity of the thing. That is, the formal equivalent of the thing is according to that kind of thing and not another.⁽²³⁾

References:

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3. *Ibid.*, P. 155.
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15. *The necessity of being*. Joseph Chiari. new York: Gardian press. 1973. Also, for a more comparative analysis, refer to: *Avicenna*, P. 213-214.
16. *The philosophy of Mula Sadra*, P. 28.
17. *Ibid.*, P. 29.
18. *Aristotle. Metaphysics*, 1017 a 22-25 and *Metaphysics*, 614 635.
19. *Ibn Sina. Remarks on Admonitions*. [B751.162.ES 1984]. Part One. Logic, P. 59.
20. *Ibn Sinna differentiates between answer to the question: "Al-dakill fi jawab ma huwa" and the question: "Al-maqul fi tariq ma huwa."*
21. *Ibid.*, P. 60.
22. *Ibid.*, P. 61 and *al-ashrat*. Avicenna, P. 225, P. 233.
23. *Concerning being and essence*. Thomas Aquinas. Preface.