

FIRST KNOWN BEING AND THE BIRTH OF METAPHYSICS

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I. INTRODUCTION¹

The organizers of the American Maritain Association annual meeting are to be congratulated for having planned this year's event to bear on metaphysics, its greatness and its humble condition. Were it only to mark the publication last year of Fr. Ashley's remarkable book, *The Way Towards Wisdom*, and to express our gratitude and admiration for all that Fr. Ashley has been doing now these many years, we would have reason enough and to spare.

However, this is a Maritain Association, and Fr. Ashley's approach to the question of the "way towards wisdom," while it agrees in spirit with Jacques Maritain, is notably different from the approach of Jacques. And so it is fitting that there be discussion, even argument, about such an issue. Indeed, it is one of the great benefits of an association such as this one, that we are all united in that "magis amica veritas"² principle

¹ Some abbreviations for works of St. Thomas Aquinas: "SCG" for *Summa Contra Gentiles*; "ST" for *Summa Theologiae*; "CM" for *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*; "BT" for *Commentary on Boethius' ON THE TRINITY*.

² Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.6 (1096a13-16): "Yet it would perhaps be thought to be better, indeed to be our duty, for the sake of maintaining the truth even to destroy what touches us closely, especially as we are philosophers or lovers of wisdom; for, while both are dear, piety requires us to honour truth above our friends [Oxford tr.; Sir David Ross]." Cf. St. Thomas, *In Ethic.*, 1.6 (paras. 4 and 5)(Pirota #77-78):

Quod autem oporteat veritatem praeferre amicis, ostendit hac ratione. Quia ei qui est magis amicus, magis est deferendum. Cum autem amicitiam habeamus ad ambo, scilicet ad veritatem et ad hominem, magis debemus veritatem amare quam hominem, quia hominem praecipue debemus amare propter veritatem et propter virtutem ut in VIII huius dicitur. Veritas autem est amicus superexcellens cui debetur reverentia honoris; est etiam veritas

which urges us to spell out our disagreements as well as our agreements, for the common good of all.

I do not mean to present myself as *altogether* in agreement with Maritain,³ but what I propose concerning the coming into being of metaphysics has more in common with his views than with those of Fr. Ashley.

When I speak of the coming into being of metaphysics I identify as metaphysics the science that considers things precisely as beings (and mean by “science” demonstrated conclusions and the ability to draw

quiddam divinum, in Deo enim primo et principaliter invenitur. Et ideo concludit, quod sanctum est praehonorare veritatem hominibus amicis.

Dicit enim Andronicus peripateticus, quod sanctitas est quae facit fideles et servantes ea quae ad Deum. Juxta hoc etiam est sententia Platonis, qui reprobans opinionem Socratis magistri sui dixit quod oportet de veritate magis curare quam de aliquo alio; et alibi dicit: amicus quidem Socrates sed magis amica veritas; et in alio loco: de Socrate quidem parum est curandum, de veritate autem multum.

[But that one ought to prefer truth to friends he shows by this argument: because to him who is the greater friend preference is to be given. Now, since we have friendship as regards both, viz. towards the truth and towards a human being, we ought to love the truth more than the human being, because we ought to love the human being especially because of truth and virtue, as is said in the 8th book of this work. But truth is a surpassing friend to which one owes the reverence of honour; truth is also something divine, for it is found primarily and principally in God. And so he concludes that it is a holy thing to honour by priority truth over human friends.

For Andronicus the Peripatetic says that holiness is that which makes [us] faithful and servants of those things relating to God. In this connection there is also the view of Plato who, criticizing the opinion of his master Socrates said that “one must care more for truth than for anything else” and in another place he says: “Socrates is a friend, but truth a greater friend.” And in still another place: “One should care little about Socrates, but much about truth.”]

³ I have expressed some disagreement with Maritain on this in my paper: “Jacques Maritain, St. Thomas, and the Birth of Metaphysics,” *Études Maritainiennes* \ *Maritain Studies* 13 (1997): 3-18.

them). And I see myself as asking a perennial question. Plato, in the *Republic*, for example, offers us an account. He asks: "What, then, Glaucon, would be the study that would draw the soul away from the world of becoming to the world of being [*epi to on*]?"⁴ He had already proposed the nature of the educational task: not to "put true knowledge into a soul that does not possess it, as if they were inserting vision into blind eyes..." but rather "an art of the speediest and most effective shifting or conversion of the soul, not an art of producing vision in it, but on the assumption that it possesses vision but does not rightly direct it and does not look where it should, an art of bringing this about."⁵

His general description of what draws the soul towards being is that "some reports of our perceptions do not provoke thought to reconsideration because the judgment of them by sensation seems adequate, while others always invite the intellect to reflection because the sensation yields nothing that can be trusted."⁶ He illustrates what he means by considering, let us say, the last three fingers of the hand, so that the middle of the three is seen as big relative to the smallest and as small relative to the biggest. Thus, the *same* finger is viewed as *both small and big*. And he asks: "And is it not in some such experience as this that the question first occurs to us, *what* in the world, then, is the great and the small?"⁷ Plato moves us through an entire curriculum of subjects, e.g. arithmetic, geometry, physics, etc., always from the viewpoint of their stimulating questions about *what is* and *entity*. In the end, he says:

But all the other arts [other, i.e., than "dialectic" or metaphysics] have for their object the opinions and desires of men or are wholly concerned with generation and composition or with

⁴ Plato, *Republic* 7.6 (521D), trans. Paul Shorey, The Loeb Classical Library (London/Cambridge: Heinemann/Harvard University Press, 1935). Allan Bloom (Plato, *Republic* [New York: Basic Books, 1968], Book 7, 521D) translates: "What, then, Glaucon, would be a study to draw the soul from becoming to being?"

⁵ Plato, *Republic* 7.4 (518B-D).

⁶ Plato, *Republic* 7.7 (523A-B).

⁷ Plato, *Republic* 7.7 (524C).

the service and tendance of things that grow and are put together, while the remnant which we said did in some sort lay hold on reality [*tou ontos*]-geometry and the studies that accompany it-are, as we see, *dreaming about being* [*peri to on*], but the clear waking vision of it is impossible for them as long as they leave the assumptions which they employ undisturbed and cannot give any account of them.⁸

As Socrates had already said in presenting the Divided Line, mathematics leaves its starting-points unexamined, while the power of dialectic explores all such “starting-points” and rests only in what can be seen to be absolute beginnings.⁹

Plato's point on the less than full awareness of being in the sciences lower than dialectic, i.e. lower than metaphysics, finds its continuation in Aristotle's view, in *Metaph.* 6.1 (1025b7-17). As Thomas says in explaining this passage:

All these particular sciences, which have just been mentioned, are about some one particular domain of being, for example, about number or magnitude, or something of that order. And each one treats circumscriptively about its own subject-domain, i.e. so [treats] of its own domain, that [it treats] of nothing else; for example, the science which treats of number does not treat of magnitude. For none of them treats of being unqualifiedly, that is, of being in its generality [*de ente in commune*], *nor even about any particular being inasmuch as it is a being*. For example, arithmetic does not determine about number inasmuch as it is a being, but inasmuch as it is number. For to consider *any being, inasmuch as it is a being*, is proper to metaphysics [*italics mine*].¹⁰

II. WHAT DOES METAPHYSICS LOOK LIKE? THOMAS' ANSWER

To judge the birth of something, one must have knowledge of the authentic appearance of that thing. Let us ask St. Thomas for a

⁸ Plato, *Republic* 7.13 (533B-C).

⁹ Plato, *Republic* 6.20-21 (510C-511D).

¹⁰ Cf. St. Thomas, *CM* 6.1 (1147), concerning Aristotle at 1025b7-10.

description of metaphysics. I will use for this, to begin with, CM 4.2. There, with Aristotle, Thomas is calling metaphysics simply “philosophy.” We read:

[563] Here [Aristotle] shows that the parts of philosophy are distinguished in keeping with the parts of “a being” and “one.” And he says that the parts of philosophy are as many as the parts of substance, about which the terms “a being” and “one” are principally said, the principal consideration and aim of this science being about [substance]. And because the parts of substance are ordered to one another in a certain order, since immaterial substance is naturally prior to sensible substance, therefore it is necessary that among the parts of philosophy there be some first. Nevertheless, that [part] which is *about sensible substance* is *first in the order of teaching*, because it is necessary to begin teaching from what are more known to us; and concerning that there is treatment in the seventh and eighth books of this work. However, that [part] which is *about immaterial substances* is prior in *dignity* and in the *aim* of this science; concerning which there is treatment in book twelve of this work. And nevertheless whatever are first must be continuous with the other parts, because *all the parts have for genus “one” and “a being.”* Hence, in the consideration of “one” and “a being” the diverse parts of this science are united, even though they are about *diverse parts of substance*: in such a way that it is *one science* inasmuch as the aforementioned parts are following on this, i.e. “one” and “a being,” *as what are common to substance*. And in this respect the philosopher is like the mathematician. For mathematics has diverse parts, one principal, viz. arithmetic, and one secondary, viz. geometry, and others following upon these, such as optics, astronomy, and music.¹¹

¹¹ Aquinas, CM 4.2 (563), commenting on Aristotle, *Metaph.* 4.2 (1004a2-9):

Et tot partes hic ostendit partes philosophiae distingui secundum partes entis et unius; et dicit, quod tot sunt partes philosophiae, quot sunt partes substantiae, de qua dicitur principaliter ens et unum et de qua principalis est huius scientiae consideratio et intentio. Et, quia partes substantiae sunt ordinatae adinvicem, nam substantia immaterialis est prior substantia sensibili naturaliter; ideo necesse est

Thus, while Thomas, as the teacher, presents the whole project, he also indicates the order of teaching, i.e. *the order according to which the human mind properly enters into metaphysics*. It aims for the heights, whatever they may be, from the start, but it takes its rise from the study of sensible substance, study of such substance from the viewpoint of being.¹²

inter partes philosophiae esse quamdam primam. Illa tamen, quae est de substantia sensibili, est prima ordine doctrinae, quia a notioribus nobis oportet incipere disciplinam: et de hac determinatur in septimo et octavo huius. Illa vero, quae est de substantia immateriali est prior dignitate et intentione huius scientiae, de qua traditur in duodecimo huius. Et tamen quaecumque sunt prima, necesse est quod sint continua aliis partibus, quia omnes partes habent pro genere unum et ens. Unde in consideratione unius et entis diversae partes huius scientiae uniuntur, quamvis sint de diversis partibus substantiae; ut sic sit una scientia in quantum partes praedictae sunt consequentes hoc, id est unum et ens, sicut communia substantiae. Et in hoc philosophus est similis mathematico. Nam mathematica habet diversas partes, et quamdam principaliter sicut arithmetica, et quamdam secundario sicut geometriam, et alia consequenter se habent his, sicut perspectiva, astrologia et musica.

¹² We might recall CM 7.11 (1525-6-7):

He [Aristotle] shows what remains besides to be determined concerning substances. And he posits that two [things] remain to be determined. The first of which is that, since it has been determined that the substance and quiddity of sensible and material things are the very parts of the species, it remains to determine *whether of such substances, i.e. material and sensible, there is any substance separate from matter [praeter materiam]*, such that it is necessary to seek some substance of these sensibles other than that which has been determined, as some people say numbers existing outside matter, or something like that, i.e. species or Ideas, are the substances of these sensible things. And concerning that *there must be inquiry later*.

For this inquiry is proper to this science. For in this science we try to determine concerning sensible substances for the sake of this, that is, because of immaterial substances, because *the theorizing concerning sensible and material substances in a way pertains to physics*, which is not first philosophy, but second, as was established in book 4. For *first philosophy is about the first substances, which are immaterial substances*,

Because many of our friends have said that metaphysics only comes into existence with the discovery of the existence of immaterial substance,¹³ a view that does not seem to me correct, I was led further to focus on what Aristotle says in *Metaphysics* 7, at the end of the second of the two introductory chapters. In that beginning of book 7, it is first established that the focus of the science is to be on being as found in *substance*. There is then a review of the opinions of some other people regarding substance. First, evident substance is reviewed, i.e. sensible substances; and the question is raised whether these are the only substances (as the ancient physicists thought), or whether there are other substances besides these, such as those proposed by the Platonists, or whether sensible substances are not substances at all, but only some non-sensible substances are such. Aristotle then reviews the opinions concerning non-evident substance, mentioning Pythagorean views and the Platonic doctrines of mathematical as distinct from the Ideas, etc.

We then move to a statement of what is to be done with regard to all this. Notice where Thomas, paraphrasing Aristotle, says that *it must be asked* whether the mathematical and the [Platonic] Forms are anything other than sensible things or not, and if not, whether there are any other separable substances, and why and how: "...or whether there is no substance other than the sensibles." And he goes on to say that *this will be determined in the 12th book and beyond*. The text reads:

about which it theorizes not merely inasmuch as they are substances, but inasmuch as they are such substances, i.e. inasmuch as they are immaterial. About sensible substance it does not theorize inasmuch as they are such substances, but inasmuch as they are substances, or even beings, or inasmuch as through them we are led to the knowledge of immaterial substances. But the physicist, conversely, determines about material substances, not inasmuch as they are substances, but inasmuch as they are material and [as] having in them a principle of movement.

¹³ Most recently we have Benedict Ashley, O.P., *The Way toward Wisdom: An Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Introduction to Metaphysics* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006); and also Ralph McInerny, *Praeambula Fidei: Thomism and the God of the Philosophers* (Washington, D.C.: the Catholic University of America Press, 2006).

Then when he says: "Therefore, concerning these things..." [Aristotle] shows what is to be said concerning the aforesaid: ... what about the aforesaid is said well or not well, and *which* are substances, and whether the aforementioned mathematical and forms are something apart from sensible things or not. And [as regards] those substances, if they are apart from sensibles, what sort of being they have. And if these are not apart from sensible substances, *whether there is any other substance that is separable, and why, and how, or whether there is no substance other than sensible [substances]*.

For this he will determine in this work, *in book 12 and beyond*. But nevertheless, *before he determines this*, it is *necessary* to propose and describe what substance is in these sensible things, in which substance is *manifestly* to be found. This he does in this seventh [book] and in the following eighth.¹⁴

We see, here, that the exclusive concern in this part of metaphysics will be substance as found in sensible things. The question as to whether there is any substance besides this, any "separable" substance, belongs to the second part of metaphysics.

This is the conception of both Aristotle and Thomas as to how the human mind enters into metaphysics.¹⁵

¹⁴ Aquinas, CM 7.1:

[1268] Deinde cum dicit: "De his igitur..." ostendit quid circa praedicta dicendum sit; dicens, quod dicendum est quid de praedictis dicitur bene aut non bene, et quae sunt substantiae, et utrum praedicta mathematica et species sint aliquid praeter res sensibiles, aut non. Et illae substantiae si sint praeter sensibiles, quem modum essendi habeant. Et si ista non sunt praeter sensibiles substantias, utrum sit aliqua alia substantia separabilis, et quare et quomodo; aut nulla est substantia praeter sensibiles.

[1269] Hoc enim determinabit in duodecimo huius et infra. Sed tamen antequam haec determinantur, oportet primo ponere et describere quid sit substantia in istis sensibilibus, in quibus substantia manifesta invenitur. Quod quidem facit in hoc septimo et in octavo sequenti.

¹⁵ The question, of course, is often raised as to whether Thomas, in his commentaries, is expressing his own views as well as what he takes to be

III. THE NATURE OF FIRST KNOWN BEING

St. Thomas has a description of our first knowledge of being that is at odds with what we find suggested by both Fr. Ashley and Ralph McNerny. The difference this makes as regards the coming into existence of metaphysics will become clear as we proceed.

In his book *Praeambula Fidei: Thomism and the God of the Philosophers*, McNerny in his first chapter on metaphysics leads off with a section on “establishing the possibility of a science of *ens inquantum ens*” [191]. We read:

On many occasions Thomas makes the point that until and unless there is proof of the existence of immaterial being, *to be and to be material will be synonymous*. It is *only* a proof of the existence of im-material being that opens the possibility of a science whose subject would be being as being [my stress].

Now, this is not true. Thomas never says or implies a situation (other than error) in which the human mind takes “to be” and “to be material” as *synonymous*. And we have already seen Thomas present the first part of metaphysics, the study of *being as being* in sensible substances, as existing even when it is not known whether there is any immaterial being. How can McNerny have read him the way he has?

At the beginning of the chapter he raised the question: how can there be need for a science of “being,” in the light of the doctrine that being is what we all first know. His section is called “*ens primum cognitum*.” In exposing the puzzle, he asks how there can be need for sciences *presupposed* to metaphysics (considered as science of being). McNerny distinguishes our knowledge of *ens primum cognitum*, i.e. first known being, from the consideration of *ens “inquantum ens”*, i.e. being as being.¹⁶ *He contends that “until and unless it is known that there is*

Aristotle’s; I believe that he is, particularly because he does indicate differences on occasion.

¹⁶ He mentions the distinction made by Cajetan in his *Commentary on De Ente et Essentia*, and also refers to a text of John of St. Thomas on our first knowledge. I am glad to note that I have seen no such distinction in Capreolus’s defense of St. Thomas against Scotus and Peter Aureol concerning the notion of “*ens*,” cf. my paper “Does Being Have a Nature? (Or: Metaphysics as a Science of the Real),” published in *Approaches to Metaphysics*,

immaterial being, the predicable range of 'being' will be material things" [190]. This, again, is not so. Of course, if "the predicable range" means merely the items of which we can here and now predicate "being," then it is true, but trivial. It means simply that we know of no immaterial beings. However, we are from the outset able to pose the question: "are all beings material beings?" and this question is only intelligible because "being" is not limited in its "predicable range" at all. Human intellection has the nature of intellection right from the start, and its object is "*ens universale, universal being.*"¹⁷ That is why intellection in its very nature is *infinite* [ST 1.54.2]. There is no doubt that, in the case of the human intellect, the object must first be encountered in material things: "*ens et verum consideratum in rebus materialibus*" ["a being" and "the true" considered in material things][ST 1.87.3.ad 1]. St. Thomas uses this expression when explaining that, while the human intellect can know its own operation, it can only do so by *reflection* back from an operation bearing upon a material being. Now, the very possibility of such *reflection* as resulting in knowledge is based on the essential *universality* of the object, "*ens*" ["*commune quoddam,*" *ibid.*].¹⁸

As Thomas teaches, the very universality of the object, "*ens,*" indicates that the rational creature that possesses such knowledge is in immediate relation with the universal cause of being [ST 2-2.2.3]. Indeed, the knowledge of the very terms of the absolutely first principle of understanding *known to all* pertains to *wisdom*, since it is a

ed. William Sweet (Dordrecht, Holland: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004), 23-59.

¹⁷ Cf. SCG 3.25 (Pera #2066 [para. 12]); ST 1.78.1; 1.79.2c and ad 3; 1.105.4; 1-2.9.1; 1-2.10.1.ad 3.

¹⁸ This object is also spoken of in the body of the same article as "*natura materialis rei.*" Obviously, "*natura*" here is the same as "*essentia*" and "*quidditas,*" and all such items, *understood*, have an infinite reference, a reference to being as such. (That is why the essence of the angel is not a principle of *understanding* even the angel's very own self, save as seen under the aspect of "*ens et verum*" [1.54.2.ad 2].) Cf. also SCG 2.83 (paras. 28 and 29; Pera ed. #1677 and #1678) on the powerful generative role of our natural knowledge of "*ens*" [a being].

knowledge of the proper effect of the highest cause, that effect being *ens commune*.¹⁹

It is quite true that at first we do not know whether there is any immaterial being. Thus, the proper answer to the question (already a truly metaphysical question): "is there immaterial being?" is "I do not know." At that stage already the statement: "to be is to be material" is simply false. It is a metaphysical error.

This²⁰ is a point made clearly by Thomas in his *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*. There we read that metaphysics is most certain, i.e. more certain than any other science, inasmuch as it attains to the

¹⁹ On this, see "St. Thomas, Physics, and the Principle of Metaphysics," ch. 4 in my book: *Form and Being* (Washington, D.C.: the Catholic University of America Press, 2006), at 57-60. The climax is in *ST* 1-2.66.5.ad 4:

Ad quartum dicendum quod veritas et cognitio principiorum indemonstrabilium dependet ex ratione terminorum, cognito enim quid est totum et quid pars, statim cognoscitur quod omne totum est maius sua parte. *Cognoscere autem rationem entis et non entis*, et totius et partis, et aliorum quae consequuntur ad ens, ex quibus sicut ex terminis constituuntur principia indemonstrabilia, pertinet ad *sapientiam*, quia *ens commune* est proprius effectus causae altissimae, scilicet Dei. Et ideo sapientia non solum utitur principiis indemonstrabilibus, quorum est intellectus, concludendo ex eis, sicut aliae scientiae; sed etiam iudicando de eis, et disputando contra negantes. Unde sequitur quod sapientia sit maior virtus quam intellectus. [The truth and knowledge of the indemonstrable principles depends on the notion of the terms [*ex ratione terminorum*]; for, it being known what a whole is and what a part is, at once it is known that every whole is greater than its own part. But to know the notion of "a being" and "not a being" [*entis et non entis*], and of "whole" and "part," and of the other [items] that follow upon "a being," out of which as out of terms the indemonstrable principles are constituted, *pertains to wisdom*; because "a being, universally" [*ens commune*] is the proper effect of the highest cause, viz. God. And so wisdom does not merely make use of the indemonstrable principles, on which [the virtue of] understanding [bears], concluding from them, as do the other sciences; but also [it treats of them] as judging about them and as disputing against those who deny them. Hence, it follows that wisdom is a greater virtue than understanding.]

²⁰ This paragraph is taken from the just-mentioned book *Form and Being*, 55-56.

primary principles of beings. Though some of these principles are *less* known to us than other things (thus placing in doubt metaphysics' claim to being "most certain"), nevertheless this claim is well founded, inasmuch as the most universal principles, pertaining to being as being, are *both best known in themselves and best known to us*. And these pertain to metaphysics.²¹ Obviously, if the first principles, as first known, were *at first limited to corporeal being as corporeal*, they would not be known as they pertain properly to metaphysics. Thomas sees the principles, precisely as known first of all and to all, as having the properly metaphysical character. This does not make the beginner a finished metaphysician, but it does mean that the principles of metaphysics are precisely those very first known principles, not some newly constructed conception of being resulting from the study of physics. If we did not start with metaphysical principles, no particular science would ever provide them. Nor can we *improve on what is best known to us and in itself*.²²

Now McInerney goes on, very properly, to say: "let us have the texts before us." The text he selects from Thomas bears on the ancient

²¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia libri ETHICORUM Aristotelis* 6.5, Leonine edition (Rome: Ad Sanctae Sabinae, 1969), tome 47-2, lines 102-06 (concerning Aristotle at 1141a12-17), Pirotta edition, #1181:

...existimamus quosdam esse sapientes totaliter, idest respectu totius generis entium...illa quae est sapientia simpliciter est certissima inter omnes scientias, in quantum scilicet attingit ad prima principia entium, quae secundum se sunt notissima, quamvis aliqua illarum, scilicet immaterialia, sunt minus nota quoad nos. Universalissima autem principia sunt *etiam quoad nos magis nota, sicut ea quae pertinent ad ens in quantum est ens*: quorum cognitio pertinet ad sapientiam sic dictam, ut patet in quarto *Metaphysicae* [my italics]. [We judge that some people are universally wise, i.e. with respect to the entire field of beings... that which is wisdom unqualifiedly is the most certain among all the sciences, inasmuch as it attains to the first principles of beings, which in themselves are most known, though some of them, i.e. the immaterial things, are less known to us. However, the most universal principles are *more known even to us, such as those which pertain to being as being*: whose knowledge pertains to the "wisdom" so said, as is clear in *Metaph.* 4.]

²² Cf. *ST* 1-2.51.2 (979b31-35 and 46-48).

philosophers who thought that all being is material, and who accordingly thought that it belonged to natural science to treat of the first principle, the principle of contradiction. They were wrong because there is immaterial being, and so their science was not the most universal, having being as being as its subject. In order to confirm this point, Thomas notes that in *Physics* 8 it is proven that immobile being exists.²³

Quite so. However, this does not mean that until such proof is forthcoming, “to be and to be material will be *synonymous*.” It rather means that, since people spontaneously think metaphysically,²⁴ until one proves the existence of immobile being or immaterial being, *one stands in danger of making the erroneous metaphysical judgment*: “All being is mobile and material.” One further stands in danger of confusing the science of mobile being with the science of being as being. It is significant that Thomas, in speaking of the ancients here concerned, says: “...the ancients did not opine [*non opinabantur*] that any substance other than mobile corporeal substance existed....” That is, they *opined* that no such substance exists. The word “opine” is a *propos*. They were making a metaphysical error.

And such people did act confusedly, making metaphysical judgments on insufficient evidence. Thus, they really did treat what they studied from the viewpoint of being, treating of being as being. That is why *Aristotle* singles out those same naturalists as his *predecessors* when he is introducing the idea of a science of being as being. The early cosmologists had the ambition to seek the highest causes, and they sought the causes of being as being!²⁵

Notice that it is never said in the text of Thomas offered to us that until one proves the existence of the immobile or immaterial, “being” and “being material” are *synonymous*. One could say that *some early*

²³ The text is *CM* 4.5 (593).

²⁴ Consider *ST* 1-2.94.2 (ed. Ottawa 1226a3-8), teaching that the human being has a natural inclination to know the truth about God. Cf. also *SCG* 3.25 (Pera #2066 [para. 12]).

²⁵ Aristotle, *Metaph.* 4.1 1003a26-32, and Thomas, *CM* 4.1 (533).

thinkers thought so. They said, as reported by Plato in the *Sophist*: “To be is to be a body.”²⁶ They were already in error.

Thomas uses the establishment in *Physics* 8 of immobile and incorporeal being as *making evident* the greater universality of “being” as contrasted with “mobile being” and thus the distinction of the two sciences.²⁷ However, this is not the same as saying that until such a proof is made, no one is asking truly metaphysical questions, or reaching truly metaphysical conclusions. We have seen Thomas himself present the first part of metaphysics as treating of being in sensible, material substance and still not knowing whether there is any immaterial substance. (If one took our opponents’ point of view, one would have to say that Thomas thought he was doing metaphysics when in fact he was in physics!)

McInerney refers also to *CM* 6.1 (1170), to 11.7 (2267), and to 3.6 (398). This last in part reads: “Just as, if there were no other substances prior to mobile corporeal substances, natural science would be prime philosophy, as is said below in book 6.”²⁸ This encapsulates exactly what all these texts say, namely that if there were no substances ontologically prior to mobile corporeal substance, natural science would be *first philosophy*.

²⁶ Plato, *Sophist* 246a-b. In the translation of H.N. Fowler [Loeb Classics, *Plato*, vol. VII (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press/Heinemann, 1921)], the passage runs: “... for they ... maintain stoutly that that alone exists which can be touched and handled; for they define existence and body, or matter, as identical, and if anyone says that anything else, which has no body, exists, they despise him utterly, and will not listen to any other theory than their own.”

²⁷ We should note that Fr. Ashley’s book (cf. p. 19) is meant to develop a “dialogue” in a mode of “reconciliation” as the approach to metaphysics most appropriate for our place and time in culture. It is thus “dialectical” in the Aristotelian sense. Thomas, too, sees the proving of the existence of separate entity as overcoming a confused situation. Indeed, no one doubts the importance for metaphysics and so for humanity of a proof of the existence of immaterial reality.

²⁸ Aquinas, *CM* 3.6 (398): “Sicut si non essent aliae substantiae priores substantiis mobilibus corporalibus, scientia naturalis esset philosophia prima, ut dicitur infra in sexto.”

McInerny claims, in concluding, that all these texts show that “metaphysics as a science of being as being, where being has more reach than sensible being, depends upon knowing that there are immaterial beings.” [193] Again, “reach” is ambiguous, as was “predicable range.” If it means: “is actually predicated of,” then it is trivial: all admit that people who are ignorant of the existence of immaterial being cannot be talking about it. Still, such a person can say: “I do not know whether there are immaterial beings.” “Being,” for them (as for everyone), “reaches beyond” the material. Thus, what McInerny contends is simply not so. The texts he refers to only say and show that if there were no separate entity, physics would be primary philosophy (obviously, such “first philosophy,” such “science of being as being,” would not be suitably named “meta-*physics*.”). They say nothing about a need to know that such entity exists *in order to bring into existence* metaphysical science.²⁹

It is certainly true that if, *per impossibile*, there were no immaterial entity, no immobile, incorporeal substance, then the science that treats of material substance would be altogether universal and first. However, there does exist separate entity, and that means that our intellects are different from any intellect that would exist, *per impossibile*, in that hypothetical world. Real intellect is something which we have by participation from immaterial substance (*ST* 1.79.2 and 4). Its first notion, of *ens universale*, is a sapiential seed: 1-2.66.5.*ad* 4 and 2-2.2.3 (ed. Ottawa, 1416a6-17).

This does not mean that we are full-fledged metaphysicians from the start, but it does mean that from the start we are equipped to ask the question: “Is to be to be a body?” This is a question which would

²⁹ This also applies to what he says in n. 12, p. 194. There he refers to *CM* 1.12 (181): this merely asserts the insufficiency of the doctrine of causes in the earliest philosophers, since they made no provision for incorporeal realities, and such reality exists, as is seen in the book *De anima*. There is no doubt of the importance of such doctrines for metaphysics, but that does not mean that the thinker who is still in ignorance of such being cannot, while still in such a condition of ignorance, be a metaphysician. He is considering being as being when he asks the question as to whether there is separate entity, and he need not give the wrong answer; he may confess ignorance and keep working on an answer.

have no sense if “being” simply meant “body,” i.e. if they were *synonyms*. And we are equipped from the start to refrain from the wrong answer. The early philosophers really were guilty of *metaphysical error*.³⁰

McInerny’s scenario does not capture the true situation of the early philosophers, viz. that they were actually *confusing two different sciences*, unbeknownst to themselves. That is why Aristotle can *both* criticize them and *take them as models*: “they were seeking the causes of being as being, and so I should do so.”³¹ Thus, we see that things are not so easily presented as McInerny thinks.

Consider the following passage from Thomas, where he is speaking again of the first principles known to all human beings. It is of the *terms* of these very principles that he says:

But of some propositions the *terms* are such that they are in the knowledge of all, such as “a being”, “[something] one”, and the others which pertain to a being precisely as a being [*entis, in quantum ens*]: for “a being” is the first conception of the intellect. Hence, it is necessary that such propositions not only in themselves, but even relative to *everyone*, stand as known by virtue of themselves: for example that “it does not happen that the same thing be and not be,” and that “a whole is greater than its own part,” and the like. Hence, such principles all sciences receive from metaphysics, to which it belongs to consider being, just in itself [*ens simpliciter*], and those things which belong to being.³²

³⁰ One can, of course, contend that their error was understandable.

³¹ I dramatize the text of Aristotle, *Metaph.* 4.1 (1003a26-32).

³² Aquinas, *Expositio libri POSTERIORUM* 1.5 (Leonine lines 120-130; ed. Spiazzi, #50):

Sed quarundam propositionum termini sunt tales, quod sunt in notitia omnium, sicut ens, et unum, et alia quae sunt entis, in quantum ens: nam ens est prima conceptio intellectus. Unde oportet quod tales propositiones non solum in se, sed etiam quoad omnes, quasi per se notae habeantur. Sicut quod, non contingit idem esse et non esse; et quod, totum sit maius sua parte: et similia. Unde et huiusmodi principia

It is these terms, *as known by everyone*, that pertain to the metaphysician. This is hardly a scenario in which "being" first has a narrow meaning, limited to the physical, and then is widened by physics proving the existence of the incorporeal. What characterizes the group Thomas is speaking of in the text quoted above is that they are known from the start to all. These belong to metaphysics.

As regards the scientist in a particular discipline such as physics, St. Thomas views the mind of the physicist as using what is *known to all*, but using it *in a narrower* way. He says (speaking of the principles used by all the sciences):

Now, the reason why all the sciences use them [Aristotle] assigns thusly, that *each* subject genus of a particular science receives the predication of "a being." However, the particular sciences use the aforementioned principles not according to *their own community*, inasmuch as they extend to *all beings*, but rather as much as suffices for themselves; and this is according to the limit of the genus that has the role of subject in the science, concerning which the science provides demonstrations. For example, natural philosophy uses them inasmuch as they extend to mobile beings and no farther.³³

The doctrine is not that we have first a narrow notion and then it gets broadened by proof of separate entity; it is rather that *we have a notion from the start that is maximally universal* ("their own community"), but that the physical scientist "uses" only part of its range. The first notions are

omnes scientiae accipiunt a metaphysica, cuius est considerare ens simpliciter et ea, quae sunt entis.

³³ Aquinas, *CM* 4.5 (591):

Rationem autem, quare omnes scientiae eis utuntur, sic assignat; quia unumquodque genus subiectum alicuius scientiae recipit praedicationem entis. Utuntur autem principiis praedictis scientiae particulares non secundum suam communitatem, prout se extendunt ad omnia entia, sed quantum sufficit eis: et hoc secundum continentiam generis, quod in scientia subiicitur, de quo ipsa scientia demonstrationes affert. Sicut ipsa philosophia naturalis utitur eis secundum quod se extendunt ad entia mobilia, et non ulterius.

known from the start to all human beings and known in their *universality*.³⁴

I am pleased to note that Jacques Maritain taught that our first notions are such as to reveal their wider applicability. Speaking of the transcendentals he says:

Such objects are trans-sensible, because while having reality in the sensible where we grasp them first of all, they present themselves to the mind as transcending every genus and every category, and as able to have reality in subjects of a quite other essential nature than those subjects wherein they are apprehended. It is most remarkable that the first object attained by our mind in things, i.e. being—which cannot deceive us because, being the first, it cannot involve the mind’s own construction and thus possibility of false composition—bears within it the sign

³⁴ Ashley [*The Way*, 148] says:

I have argued in chapter 4 that such first principles as that of non-contradiction and of causality are shown *in via inventionis* to be directly evident principles only as principles of natural science restricted in its scope as a science of the sensible. Only when natural science has proved that immaterial being exists can these principles be extended analogically to become universal principles common to all the sciences. Thus, if taken in this universal sense, they are first principles of all the sciences and are proved by Metascience *in via resolutionis*.

I say that the physicist uses the first principles in a limited way (and so does Thomas: e.g. *CM* 4.5 [591], just seen). That does not affect the question of their *intrinsic power* right from the start. It affects their *scientific use*. Indeed, for Thomas, in the pedagogical order, their first scientific use is in *mathematics* (or even logic), not physics or metaphysics. Cf. e.g. Thomas Aquinas, *Super Librum de causis expositio*, ed. H. D. Saffrey, O.P. (Fribourg\ Louvain: Société philosophique Nauwelaerts, 1954), 2, lines 14-24; English translation: St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Book of Causes*, trans. Vincent A. Guagliardo, O.P., Charles R. Hess, O.P., and Richard C. Taylor (Washington, D.C.: the Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 3-4. I note, though, that the reason given for placing metaphysics last in this text relates properly only to *the second part of metaphysics*: i.e. it is that it “treats of the highest causes.”

that beings of another order than the sensible are thinkable and possible.³⁵

This is certainly not McInerny's conception of a notion of "being" which is *synonymous* with "corporeal being." It corresponds well with what I have pointed out in St. Thomas's texts about the first notion.

IV. THE NATURE OF FIRST KNOWN BEING (PART 2)

It could be that a source of confusion is the presentation of "*separatio*" in St. Thomas's *Commentary on Boethius' De Trinitate*.³⁶ If one uses as the *only possible statement* of the nature of the metaphysical object the Avicennian statement,³⁷ i.e. that metaphysics bears upon "what is separate from matter," in the sense that "[the objects] do not necessarily have being in matter, as do the mathematical," it may seem to follow that metaphysics can be known to be possible only when some being apart from matter is proved to exist.

³⁵ Cf. Jacques Maritain, *Les degrés du savoir*, 5th ed. (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1946), 423-24 [the translation is mine, but I find it is essentially the same as that made from the 4th ed. under Fr. G.B. Phelan's direction, viz. *The Degrees of Knowledge* (New York: Scribners, 1959), 214]:

De tels objets sont trans-sensibles, puisque réalisés dans le sensible où nous les saisissons d'abord, ils s'offrent à l'esprit comme transcendant tout genre et toute catégorie, et pouvant être réalisés dans des sujets d'une toute autre essence que ceux où ils sont appréhendés. Il est extrêmement remarquable que [424] le premier objet atteint par notre esprit dans les choses, l'être, - qui ne peut pas nous tromper parce qu'étant le premier il ne saurait envelopper de construction effectuée par l'esprit, donc de possibilité de composition fautive - porte en lui le signe que des êtres d'un autre ordre que l'ordre sensible sont pensables et possibles.

³⁶ Aquinas, *Commentary on Boethius' ON THE TRINITY*, 5.3: cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio super librum Boethii De trinitate*, ed. Bruno Decker (Leiden: Brill, 1959); English translation in: Thomas Aquinas, *The Division and Methods of the Sciences: Questions v and vi of his Commentary on the De Trinitate of Boethius*, translated by Armand Maurer, 4th revised edition (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1986). This work is hereafter abbreviated as *BT*.

³⁷ It is so called, as we shall see, in e.g. *CM* 6.1 (1165).

It is certainly true that if, as in the time of Aristotle, there is confusion of physics and metaphysics, proving the existence of separate entity makes it clear that they are two distinct sciences (one might just as well say that it is thus that physics is revealed as a science distinct from metaphysics, as the converse). Aristotle thus made the point that if there is separate entity, then there is a science distinct from physics and prior to it in intelligibility. This step, historically, has even led many readers to hold that Aristotelian metaphysics is *solely about separate entity*.³⁸

Thus, we see St. Thomas, at the very moment when Aristotle makes this case for first philosophy as considering separate entity, insist in his commentary quite simply that *metaphysics is also about material substance*. So serious is the possibility of misreading here that Thomas, after following out Aristotle's presentation, sees the need to comment:

*It is to be noted, however [Advertendum est autem], that though to the consideration of first philosophy pertain those things that are separate as to being and notion from matter and motion, nevertheless not just those things, but rather the philosopher studies sensible things as well, inasmuch as they are beings.*³⁹

Only after making this point clear does he recall the Avicennian description:

Unless perhaps we say [Nisi forte dicamus], as Avicenna says, that the sort of common items that this science studies are called "separate as to being" not because they are always without

³⁸ For a review of the variety of readings of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* in this regard, cf. Joseph Owens, *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian METAPHYSICS*, second edition (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1963), 35-68 (summary at 66-68).

³⁹ Aquinas, *CM* 6.1 [1165]: "*Advertendum est autem, quod licet ad considerationem primae philosophiae pertineant ea quae sunt separata secundum esse et rationem a materia et motu, non tamen solum ea; sed etiam de sensibilibus, in quantum sunt entia, philosophus perscrutatur (my bold letters).*" I was glad to see that John Wippel, in his book: *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: the Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 54-55, treats the "Advertendum est autem..." passage as seemingly expressive of Thomas's own view.

matter, but because they do not necessarily have being in matter as do the mathematical.⁴⁰

The Avicennian presentation is an *option*, not the necessary presentation of the doctrine of the nature of metaphysics. There is no objection to this formulation, but Thomas's own first statement is to be noted, as a protection against being misled by Aristotle's procedure.

One could say, with Avicenna, that metaphysics is about "what is without matter and motion" because being can *sometimes* be found without these. The Avicennian formulation, *so taken, is made in the context of already knowing that there is separate entity*. Thomas's own first statement, i.e. "metaphysics is also about material substance," expresses his position, as we have seen him spell it out, that one can be in the science of metaphysics ("the first part of metaphysics"), and not yet know whether there exists any immaterial substance.

This is indeed, I would say, how one should read *ST* 1.85.1.ad 2, on the three levels of abstract objects. Notice that one is in a discussion of human intellectual knowledge of *corporeal things*. This is the topic of qq. 84-86.⁴¹ Q. 85 presents the mode and order of knowing such things. A. 1 of q. 85 bears on the understanding of corporeal and material things through abstraction from the images in the imagination, as the introductory paragraph makes explicit: "Thus we proceed to the first [article]. It seems that our intellect does not understand corporeal and material things through abstraction from the phantasms."⁴² The second objection reads:

Besides, material things are natural things, in whose definition matter is included. Now, nothing can be understood without that which is included in its definition. Therefore, material

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*: "*Nisi forte dicamus, ut Avicenna dicit, quod huiusmodi communia de quibus haec scientia perscrutatur, dicuntur separata secundum esse, non quia semper sint sine materia; sed quia non de necessitate habent esse in materia, sicut mathematica (my italics).*"

⁴¹ Cf. *ST* 1.84.1.prologue (ed. Ottawa, 511a23-27).

⁴² Aquinas, *ST* 1.85.1: "Ad primum sic proceditur. Videtur quod intellectus noster non intelligat res corporeas et materiales per abstractionem a phantasmatis."

things cannot be understood without matter. But matter is the principle of individuation. Therefore material things cannot be understood through abstraction of the universal from the particular, which is to abstract the intelligible likenesses from the phantasms.⁴³

Consider, now, the reply to the objection itself. Thomas begins by pointing out that some people have held that the species of the material thing is the form alone; however, Thomas himself holds that the definition of the material thing includes matter. He accordingly distinguishes between individual matter and common matter. This allows him to resolve the problem as regards the objects of natural science. However, he does not stop there. In keeping with Aristotle himself in *Metaphysics* 7 (to which Thomas refers here), who also spoke of a matter within mathematical objects,⁴⁴ Thomas continues with the distinction between sensible matter and intelligible matter. This allows him to distinguish not only between the natural and the mathematical, but also between the intellectual objects of mathematics and the objects of mathematical imagination. One can abstract from individual intelligible matter, but not from common intelligible matter.

In this same line of discussion we are introduced to the objects that Thomas elsewhere calls “metaphysical.”⁴⁵ We read: “But there are some [objects of intellectual consideration] which can be abstracted even from common intelligible matter, such as ‘a being,’ ‘something one,’ ‘potency’ and ‘act,’ and other such items, which also can exist without any matter, as is clear in the case of immaterial substances.”⁴⁶ Now, I

⁴³ Aquinas, *ST* 1.85.1.obj. 2: “Praeterea, res materiales sunt res naturales, in quarum definitione cadit materia. Sed nihil potest intelligi sine eo quod cadit in definitione eius. Ergo res materiales non possunt intelligi sine materia. Sed materia est individuationis principium. Ergo res materiales non possunt intelligi per abstractionem universalis a particulari, quod est abstrahere species intelligibiles a phantasmatis.”

⁴⁴ Cf. Aristotle, *Metaph.* 7.10 (1036a10).

⁴⁵ Cf. *ST* 1.11.3.ad 2: “quoddam metaphysicum.”

⁴⁶ Aquinas, *ST* 1.85.1.ad 2 (525b32-37): “Quaedam vero sunt quae possunt abstrahi etiam a materia intelligibili communi, sicut ens, unum, potentia et actus, et alia huiusmodi, quae etiam esse possunt absque omni materia, ut patet in substantiis immaterialibus.”

would say that we should read as essential here the text up to the words: “other such items.” This presents the mode of abstraction we are to consider, taking “abstraction” as pertaining to *absolute intellectual consideration*. “*Ens*” and its associates abstract, i.e. by leaving it out of consideration, from *all* matter, individual and common, sensible and intelligible. The idea is that we mine *sensible things* for three modes of intelligible object, the third of which abstracts completely from matter.

Thomas then continues with the point that *these* objects *also* pertain to the discussion of the sort of “abstraction” that occurs in the intellect’s compositions and divisions. One can see that this is so because of the case of immaterial substances.

Thomas, in the reply to the previous objection, had distinguished the abstraction pertaining to our intellect’s acts of simple and absolute consideration from the abstraction pertaining to its acts of composition and division.⁴⁷ In the present reply to obj. 2, “*ens*” is presented as the product of an abstraction according to absolute consideration: it leaves out all matter. However, if one has knowledge of the existence of immaterial substances (which knowledge the body of the article noted as possible, starting from knowledge of material things), then it is clear [*patet*] that an “*ens*” can be something abstract in the second way as well.

The general doctrine of the abstractness of “*ens*” simply leaves out matter. It neither includes nor excludes being composed with or divided from matter.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ This latter “*abstractio*,” of course, is the same as the “*separatio*” spoken of in *BT*; Thomas never returned to that *BT* vocabulary. This is so even though, according to the vocabulary of the text of Aristotle in the *sed contra* argument of 1.85.1, *all* abstraction is being called “separation.” We read: “*Sicut res sunt separabiles a materia, sic circa intellectum sunt*” [as things are separable from matter, so are they in the intellect].

⁴⁸ There is no concept of “a being” which includes matter in the *precise target of signification (save through error)*, though all our concepts have a *mode of signifying* which derives from the materiality of the things we primarily know. See *ST* 1.13.3.ad 1 and 1.13.1.ad 2.

V. TO CONCLUDE

Metaphysics does not exist as a *science* until the first conclusion is demonstrated.⁴⁹ Because of the need for habituation in the domain of “particular reason,” i.e. the *vis cogitativa*, memorative, and imaginative powers, the drawing of that conclusion quite likely will follow the existence of physics. Thus we read:

In the apprehensive powers one must consider that the passive factor is twofold: one being the possible intellect [*intellectus possibilis*], the other being the intellect [*intellectus*] which Aristotle calls “passive” [*passivus*], which is particular reason, i.e. the thinking power [*vis cogitativa*] along with the memorative and imaginative [powers]. As regards the first passive factor, there can be an active factor which by one act totally convinces the corresponding passive power: for example, one proposition known by virtue of itself can convince the intellect to assent firmly to the conclusion. A probable proposition does not do this. Accordingly, many acts of reason are required to cause a habit of opinion, even as regards the possible intellect; whereas it is possible for a scientific habit to be caused by one act of reason, as regards the possible intellect. Still, as regards the lower apprehensive powers, it is necessary that the same acts be repeated often so as to impress something firmly in the memory. Hence, the Phil-

⁴⁹ Cf. ST 1-2.54.4.ad 3:

...he who in some science acquires by demonstration the science of one conclusion has the habit, but imperfectly. Then when he acquires through another demonstration the science of another conclusion, there is not generated in that person another habit; rather, the habit that was already present is rendered *more perfect*, as extending to more [truths]; in that the conclusions and demonstrations of one science are ordered, and one derives from another...[...ille qui in aliqua scientia acquirit per demonstrationem scientiam conclusionis unius, habet quidem habitum, sed imperfecte. Cum vero acquirit per aliquam demonstrationem scientiam conclusionis alterius, non aggeneratur in eo alius habitus; sed habitus qui prius inerat fit perfectior, utpote ad plura se extendens; eo quod conclusiones et demonstrationes unius scientiae ordinatae sunt, et una derivatur ex alia.]

osopher says in the book *On Memory and Reminiscence* that meditation confirms memory.⁵⁰

Nor is metaphysics *unqualifiedly perfect* until it has provided *all* the conclusions possible with respect to the highest cause, about which it treats in its second part.⁵¹ However, there are no grounds for holding that it cannot exist until one knows of the existence of immaterial substance.

⁵⁰ Cf. *ST* 1-2.51.3 [my stress]:

In apprehensivis autem potentiis considerandum est quod duplex est passivum, unum quidem ipse intellectus possibilis; aliud autem intellectus quem vocat Aristoteles passivum, qui est ratio particularis, idest vis cogitativa cum memorativa et imaginativa. Respectu igitur primi passivi, potest esse aliquod activum quod uno actu totaliter vincit potentiam sui passivi, sicut una propositio per se nota convincit intellectum ad assentiendum firmiter conclusioni; quod quidem non facit propositio probabilis. Unde ex multis actibus rationis oportet causari habitum opinativum, etiam ex parte intellectus possibilis, habitum autem scientiae possibile est causari ex uno rationis actu, quantum ad intellectum possibilem. Sed quantum ad inferiores vires apprehensivas, necessarium est eosdem actus pluries reiterari, ut aliquid firmiter memoriae imprimatur. Unde Philosophus, in libro De memoria et reminiscencia, dicit quod meditatio confirmat memoriam.

⁵¹ Cf. the text in n. 49. We should note that when one speaks of metaphysical wisdom, to which our knowledge of God belongs, it cannot in this present life be "perfect" in the sense of being the human being's *possession*; but the little knowledge one can have concerning God is preferable to all other knowledge. Cf. *ST* 1-2.66.5.ad 3.