

PHILOSOPHY, GOD, AND AQUINAS

John F. X. Knasas

University of St. Thomas, Department of Philosophy,
Center for Thomistic Studies
3800 Montrose, Houston, Texas, USA
Telephone (713) 525 3597
E-mail: jknasas@stthom.edu

Received on 25 September, 2012; accepted on 17 January, 2013

Abstract. *The article briefly surveys the Christian intellectual tradition as the tradition tries to come to grips with Pascal's complaint that human reasoning cannot reach the Biblical God. In his complaint that he wanted the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Blaise Pascal epitomized the perennial issue of Christian philosophy: Can human reason approach the God of belief? Because of the first of the Ten Commandments, any Christian must strive to integrate the first principle of his philosophy and the God of his belief. Building upon ideas from Etienne Gilson, I try to map out, for purposes of further study, the key responses to achieve this required integration. The thinkers mentioned are: Augustine, Bonaventure, Aquinas, the Moslem Mutakallim, Latin Averroists, Hume, and Kant. Particular attention is paid to Aquinas' metaphysics of actus essendi by which he claimed to reach the God who revealed his name to Moses as "Ego sum qui sum: I am who am." The article concludes that Aquinas' a posteriori approach to God from the esse of sensible things appears to be sufficiently unique to avoid problems in other approaches. Only further study can determine if this is so.*

Keywords: *Esse, existence as fact, causality, motion, First Commandment, sense realism, constitutive a priori, first principle and God.*

1. The God of the Philosophers and the God of Believers

In the 17th century there lived the French Christian apologist, Blaise Pascal. In his famous work, *Pensées*, Pascal remarked, “Give me the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and not the God of the Philosophers.”¹ As Pascal saw it, the Judeo-Christian God is one item and the God of philosophy is another item. Can Aquinas’ thinking elevate the philosopher’s mind to a first cause identifiable with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?

At the beginning of his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas argues that if the religious believer successfully conducts his human reason in a philosophical vein, then the believer can come to recognize the God of his religion in the believer’s first philosophical principle. As Aquinas dramatically said, “For, if we do not demonstrate that God exists, all consideration of divine things is necessarily suppressed.”² But sufficient philosophically reached information is available for the believer to come to this identification. The philosopher will not demonstrate everything that the believer holds true of God. But the philosopher will nevertheless determine something decisive for this identification. I would note that this way of making an identification is used in many other situations. For example, a customs official knows from my passport alone that I am Prof. Knasas. Yet the customs official is ignorant that I am married, who my wife is, that I have children, and who my children are. So too from the modest evidence attainable from human understanding, the Christian philosopher can recognize the God in whom this philosopher also believes.

2. Impact of the First Commandment and the Augustinian Response

In fact, philosophers in the Judeo-Christian tradition must strive to establish and to preserve an identity between their first philosophical principle and the God of their religious belief. The First Commandment establishes this requirement: “God said thou shalt have no gods before me.” The Church Fathers and the Medievals understood this to mean that God is the greatest conceivable being, a being with no superior even in thought. Therefore, God is also the first principle of reality.

In Greek philosophy no god made this claim. A Greek god was simply a personal being superior to man. Hence, many cases existed in which God was one thing and the first philosophical principle was something else. In the first chapter of his *God and Philosophy*, the famous French Thomist, Etienne Gilson, discusses these cases in Greek philosophy and some others.³ In the second chapter Gilson mentions the many

1 Pascal, B. *Pensées*, VIII, n. 555; trans. W. F. Trotter. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1940, p. 153–54.

2 Aquinas, Th. *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. by Anton C. Pegis. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975, I, 79.

3 Gilson, E. *God and Philosophy*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1964.

ingenious and creative medieval attempts to employ Greek metaphysics in the service of Christianity. For example, the Augustinian school of Christian philosophy tried to deepen the Platonic understanding of human knowledge into an interior or subjective path to God. In my opinion, certain features of this Christian Platonism has remarkable similarities to the 18th century philosophy of Immanuel Kant and risks Kant's subjectivism with the denial of classical metaphysics. This worry is especially apropos of Augustine's most famous follower, Bonaventure. For Bonaventure the human mind has an *a priori* knowledge of God, the eternal and infinite good. The mind uses this knowledge constitutively to judge limited truth, perfection and happiness.⁴

3. Latin Averroism and Motion

Other medieval thinkers kept their philosophical focus upon real existents given in sensation. Some, like the Latin Averroists scrutinized the form and determination found in sensible things. This approach seemed to lead to a first cause that introduces form into things through movement. Similarly, a builder through his activity introduces design into some material. But is a first mover decisive evidence for the creative and infinite God of Christian belief? Many Christian philosophers thought that the answer is no. They said that a first mover might well be a being still inferior to God.

4. Thomas Aquinas and *Esse*

Instead of the formal aspect of sensible things, Aquinas focuses on the existential aspect, on the existence of things. But Aquinas understands the phrase "the existence of a thing" in a special way. Ordinarily, "the existence of a thing" means simply the fact of the thing. The phrase means that the thing is there rather than not there, that the thing is in the world rather than not in the world. Aquinas acknowledges this fact-sense of existence, but he insists that the fact-meaning of existence must be enriched. More profoundly, the existence of a thing means a special act of a thing. In virtue of this special act, the thing is a fact. A thing can have many acts. For example, the thing that is me can have the acts of running, speaking, seeing, deciding, playing the violin, etc. These acts are different from me. I am one thing, they are something else. The real difference is manifested by me being found without them. But this datum also means that I am really different from them as something more fundamental. For Aquinas my existence is also an act of me, but unlike my other acts, my act of existence lies prior to

4 "It remains, therefore, that the being which we are considering is the Divine Being. Strange, then, is the blindness of the intellect which does not consider that which it sees before all others and without which it can recognize nothing. . . . It comes first to the mind, and through it, all other things." Bonaventure, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, trans. and commentary by Philotheus Boehner (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, Saint Bonaventure University, 1956) ch. 5, 83. Also see Knasas, J. F. X. The Augustinian Approach to God and Kantian Epistemology. *Angelicum*. 2006, 83: 819–833.

me. In this one case, I am not fundamental to my act, but an act is fundamental to me. In Latin, Aquinas refers to a thing's act of existence as *esse* and as *actus essendi*.

Existential act characterizes Aquinas' metaphysical understanding of being as being, *ens inquantum ens*. Throughout his career Aquinas insisted that a substance was a being (*ens*), or an existent, because of its act of being (*esse* or *actus essendi*). For example, in the *Sentences* commentary (1252) at I, d. 19, q. 2, a. 2c: "Just as motion (*motus*) is the act of the mobile inasmuch as it is mobile; so too being (*esse*) is the act of the existing thing (*actus existentis*), inasmuch as it is a being (*ens*);" also in his *De Veritate* (1256) at I, 1, ad 3m, second set: "But the name of being (*ratio entis*) is taken from the act of existence (*ab actu essendi*);" then in his *Quodlibetales* (1258) at IX, 2, 3: "Being (*esse*) is called the act of a being inasmuch as it is a being (*actus entis in quantum est ens*), that is, by which something is named a being (*ens*) in act in the nature of things;" and in the *Metaphysics* commentary (1272) at XII, lectio 1: "For a being (*ens*) is called as if a possessor of being (*esse habens*)."

It is difficult to understand how Aquinas came to philosophically distinguish this special act sense of the phrase "the existence of the thing." I said that I distinguish my other acts by observing how I can be found without them. But this approach would not work here. I am never found in reality without my act of existing. Without it I am nothing. Actually Thomists themselves disagree on what the approach is. I will just mention that I am indebted to two famous French neo-Thomists, Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain who focus upon Aquinas' doctrine of the *duplex operatio intellectus*. In his *Sentences* commentary at I, d. 19, q. 5, a. 1, ad 7m, Aquinas is on record that the second operation ". . . respicit esse rei: looks upon the act of existence of the thing"⁵

Also, the act of existence cannot be completely dependent upon its subject. *Esse* involves a reference to something else. This something is ultimately a thing that does not have *esse* as its act. Rather, it is a thing that is its *esse*. In a famous instance of this causal reasoning in the early *De Ente et Essentia*, Aquinas calls the first cause of the act of existence, pure existence—*esse tantum*.⁶ Aquinas immediately recognizes it as *Deus*, the God of his belief. In the *Summa Contra Gentiles* I, at the end of Chapter 22, Aquinas indicates why this connection between his metaphysics and his faith is so easy for him. Aquinas understands God to have revealed "this sublime truth" to Moses when God told Moses at Exodus 3:13 that his name is, "I am who am; *ego sum qui sum*."⁷

5 For a philosophical commentary on this text and others like it, see Knasas, J. F. X. *Being and Some Twentieth-Century Thomists*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2003, p. 182–196.

6 "Whatever belongs to a thing is either caused by the principles of its nature . . . or comes to it from an extrinsic principle . . . Now being itself (*ipsum esse*) cannot be caused by the form or quiddity of a thing (by 'caused' I mean by an efficient cause), because that thing would then be its own cause and it would bring itself into being, which is impossible. . . . And because everything that exists through another is reduced to that which exists through itself as its first cause, there must be a reality that is the cause of being for all other things, because it is pure being." Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, trans. by Armand Maurer. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1968, ch. 4, 56–57.

7 "This sublime truth Moses was taught by our Lord. When Moses asked our Lord: 'If the children of Israel say to me: what is His name? What shall I say to them?' The Lord replied: '*I am who am* . . . Thou shalt say to the children of Israel: *He who is* hath sent me to you.'" Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* I, 22; Pegis trans., I, 121. Aquinas' metaphysical reading of this Exodus passage would be disputed by today's exegetes.

Aquinas' critique of Anselm's *Proslogion*-type reasoning in the *Contra Gentiles* I, 11, and the *Summa Theologiae* I, 2, 1, reveals that Aquinas intends his own arguments for God to be able to stand up to philosophical scrutiny. Also, other texts, like his commentary on Boethius' *De Trinitate*, show that Aquinas possesses a sophisticated understanding of philosophy and its divisions. Among these divisions, Aquinas assigns to metaphysics the human intellect's knowledge of God. The above sketched reasoning from *esse* appears to manifest Aquinas' idea of the metaphysical path to God. Hence, the metaphysical reasoning from *esse* should be a reader's hermeneutical framework for reflection on Aquinas' famous "Five Ways" to God and other God proofs. It is hard to believe that Aquinas would have set aside his metaphysics of *esse* when presenting what he understands as philosophically cogent proofs for God.

5. The *Mutakallim* and the World's Temporal Inception

To continue, let me note that still other theistic philosophers try to work from other meanings of "the existence of the thing." Some, like that orthodox Moslem theologians called the *Mutakallim*, stayed with the fact-view of the thing's existence. Usually within the context of a temporal beginning for the universe, they said that the fact of the world needed a cause.⁸ But such thinking runs into David Hume's 18th century criticisms of knowledge of causality. Hume argues that a thing's going from not being a fact to being so is no sure indication that the thing is caused. Our experience of the transition includes no acquaintance with causality.⁹ Also, it does no good to say that the transition must have a cause for otherwise the fact of the thing is caused by nothing. Hume incisively notes that this reason only *presupposes* the causality that one is trying to prove and then observes that the identity of the *presumed* cause cannot be nothing.¹⁰

6. Avicenna and Existence as an Attribute

Still other theists say that the existence of a thing means an act subsequent and posterior to the thing like my running or playing the violin. The Latin Avicenna seems to

In his *Does God Exist?* New York: Vintage Books, 1981, p. 621, Hans Küng says that exegetes admit the possibility of Aquinas' metaphysical interpretation, yet in all probability the Biblical author did not intend this sense. A contemporary Thomist could concede Küng's point and briefly delay the claim of "Deus" until the uniqueness and spirituality of the creative first cause of *esse* is established.

- 8 For a presentation and discussion of their reasoning, see Craig, W. L. *The Cosmological Argument from Plato to Leibniz*. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1980, ch. 3, "Arabic Theologians and Philosophers." Interestingly, though Bonaventure agreed with the *Mutakallim* that philosophy could demonstrate the world's temporal inception, Bonaventure never used this point to demonstrate God. As noted, Bonaventure stayed within Augustine's "interior" way to God.
- 9 See Hume, D. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, sect. 4, pts. 1 and 2; as edited by T. H. Green and T. H. Grose, *David Hume: The Philosophical Works*. Darmstadt: Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1964, IV, 36 and 129.
- 10 Hume, D. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, sect. 4, pt. 3; Green and Grose ed., *Hume: The Philosophical Works*, I, 383, For comments on this text and those of supra n. 9, see Knasas, J. F. X., *supra* note 5, p. 219–221.

espouse this view.¹¹ Also, the view appears in the ontological arguments of the modern rationalists - Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz. This approach runs into Kant's claim that there is no difference between 100 possible dollars and 100 actual ones.¹² What Kant means is that usually an addition to a thing makes a difference to the thing. When a coat of paint is added to the house, the house is different than it was before; when the running is added to the man, the man is different. But when existence is added to the possible, we simply seem to have the possible itself actualized. The 100 actual dollars do not have anything different than the 100 possible dollars. Kant's reflections on the meaning of existence are a powerful reason for the existence-as-fact view. But they have no application to Aquinas' view that the thing's existence is an addition in the manner of a *prior* and *fundamental* act. As such, *esse* is the act of all determination in the substance without itself being a determination. So, Kant's observation about the actual adding nothing to the possible is correct if by "addition" one means more determination. But Aquinas' principle of *esse* adds to the possible not by bringing in further determination but by bringing in the act in virtue of which all formal determination is realized.¹³

Conclusion

To conclude, the metaphysical basis for Aquinas' philosophy of God appears to be sufficiently unique to avoid problems in other approaches. As such, it promises to avoid Pascal's complaint. Only further study can determine if this is so.

References

-
- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>Aquinas, Th. <i>On Being and Essence</i>, trans. by Armand Maurer. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1968.</p> <p>Aquinas, Th. <i>Summa Contra Gentiles</i>, trans. by Anton C. Pegis. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975.</p> <p>Bonaventure, <i>Itinerarium Mentis in Deum</i>, trans. and commentary by Philotheus Boehner. St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, Saint Bonaventure University, 1956.</p> | <p>Craig, W. L. <i>The Cosmological Argument from Plato to Leibniz</i>. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1980.</p> <p>Gilson, E. <i>God and Philosophy</i>. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1964.</p> <p>Hume, D. <i>A Treatise of Human Nature</i>, sect. 4, pt. 3; Green and Grose ed., <i>Hume: The Philosophical Works</i>, I, 383.</p> <p>Hume, D. <i>An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding</i>, sect. 4, pts. 1 and 2; as</p> |
|--|--|

-
- 11 See Aquinas' commentary on the *Metaphysics*, Bk. 4, lect. 2.
- 12 Kant, I. *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 599/B 627; Norman Kemp Smith trans. New York: St Martin's Press, 1965, p. 505.
- 13 For further comparison of Aquinas' principle of *esse* with current analytic discussion on "exists" as a predicate, see John F. X. Knasas, "Haldane's Analytic Thomism and Aquinas's *Actus Essendi*," ed. by Craig Paterson and Matthew S. Pugh in *Analytical Thomism: Traditions in Dialogue*. Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006, p. 233–252.

- edited by T. H. Green and T. H. Grose. *David Hume: The Philosophical Works*. Darmstadt: Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1964.
- Kant, I. *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 599/B 627; Norman Kemp Smith trans. New York: St Martin's Press, 1965.
- Knasas, J. F. X. *Being and Some Twentieth-Century Thomists*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2003.
- Knasas, J. F. X. *Haldane's Analytic Thomism and Aquinas's Actus Essendi*, ed. by Craig Paterson and Matthew S. Pugh in *Analytical Thomism: Traditions in Dialogue*. Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006.
- Knasas, J. F. X. The Augustinian Approach to God and Kantian Epistemology. *Angelicum*. 2006, 83: 819–833.
- Pascal, B. *Pensées*, VIII, n. 555; trans. W. F. Trotter. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1940.

FILOSOFIJA, DIEVAS IR TOMAS AKVINIETIS

John F. X. Knasas

St. Thomas universitetas, Jungtinės Amerikos Valstijos

Santrauka. Straipsnyje parodoma, jog Tomo Akviniečio filosofinis mąstymas pateikia nuoseklų biblinio Dievo aiškinimą. Tokie mąstytojai kaip Augustinas ar Bonaventura, aiškindami Dievą žmogaus viduje ir taikydami platoniskąjį metodą, teigia Dievą esant konstitutyviniu žmogaus proto a priori. Jų požiūris lemia Kanto metafizikos kritiką. Kiti krikščionybės filosofai tenkinasi a posteriori epistemologija. Arsitotelininkai ir lotyniškieji averoistai susitelkia ties realių juslinių daiktų judėjimu. Bet pirmojo judesio realizavimas visada gali likti žymiai menkesnis už begalinį ir kūrybingą krikščioniško tikėjimo Dievą. Užuoat apmąstę juslinių daiktų savybes, kiti ėmėsi tirti pačią juslinių daiktų egzistenciją. Tarp pastarųjų, dar iki Kanto, buvo aiškinančių daikto egzistenciją kaip daikto faktą. Jie teigė, kad Dievą įrodo tai, jog daiktų faktiškumas turi pradžią laike ir todėl turi tikslą. Šį pirminį egzistencinį aiškinimą kritikuoja David Hume kalbėdamas apie priežastingumo hipotezę – tai, kas atsitinka, turi priežastį. Kiti, pavyzdžiui, lotyniskasis Avicena ir modernieji racionalistai aiškino daikto egzistenciją kaip unikalų vyksmą, arba kaip požymį, kylantį iš daikto, ir posteriori, šio daikto priežastimi yra Dievas. Kantas ir jiems davė tinkamą atkirtį įtikinamai parodęs, kad aktualumas prie galimybės nieko neprieda. Straipsnio pabaigoje aprašomas Tomo Akviniečio požiūris į juslinio daikto egzistenciją. Kaip ir Avicena, Tomas Akvinielis aiškina daikto egzistenciją kaip vyksmą, bet šis vyksmas yra fundamentalus ir pirmesnis nei jo subjektas. Tomas Akvinielis egzistenciją aiškina žodžiais „esse” ir „actus essendi.” Turintis, fundamentalią prasmę savo subjektui, esse yra bet kokio formalaus determinavimo veiksmas, bet pats nėra jokia formali determinacija. Tuo Tomas Akvinielis pritaria Kanto pastebėjimui, kad tarp galimybės ir fakto nėra determinacijos skirtumo, tačiau Tomas Akvinielis tvirtina, kad faktas yra daugiau nei galimybė. Be to, Akviniečio esse samprata leidžia jam išvengti Hume'o priežastingumo kritikos kalbant apie egzistencijos fakto prasmę. Galiausiai, dėl savo fundamentalios reikšmės, juslinių daiktų esse, priešingai negu jų judėjimas, leidžia Tomui Akviniečiui aptikti pirmąjį principą – tai yra kūrėją. Straipsnyje daroma išvada, kad Akviniečio Dievo

a posteriori aiškinimas per protingų daiktų *esse* yra labai išskirtinis ir leidžia išvengti kitose interpretacijose kylančių problemų. Ar taip yra iš tiesų – parodytų kiti tyrimai.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *Esse*, egzistencija kaip faktas, priežastingumas, judėjimas, Pirmas Dievo įsakymas, juslinis realizmas, konstitutyvinis *a priori*, pirmasis principas ir Dievas.

John F. X. Knasas, St. Thomas universiteto Filosofijos katedros Tomistinių studijų centro profesorius. Mokslinių tyrimų kryptys: egzistencinis tomizmas, neo-tomizmas.

John F. X. Knasas, University of St. Thomas, Department of Philosophy, Center for Thomistic Studies. Research interests: Existential Thomism, Neo-Thomism.