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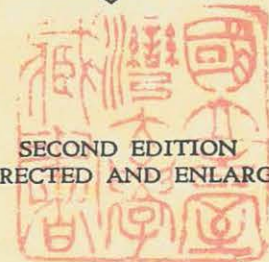
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Being and Some Philosophers

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order of intelligible reality. This is why all Platonisms sooner or later lead to mysticism, and sooner rather than later. Now, mysticism in itself is excellent, but not *in* philosophy, and especially not in a philosophy whose professed ambition is to achieve perfect intelligibility. It was not easy to guess what would happen to being if existence was left out of it. Plato cannot be blamed for having tried it, but history shows us to what consequences such an undertaking was bound to lead: once removed from being, existence can never be pushed back into it, and, once deprived of its existence, being is unable to give an intelligible account of itself.

But is it certain that what is lacking in Plato's being is existence? Being may be more complex than Plato's selfhood, without including existence. It might be, for instance, substance. Our problem cannot be solved correctly unless we first take the answer of Aristotle into consideration.

Chapter II

Being and Substance

AMONG all the objections directed by Plato himself against his own doctrine of being, there is an outstanding one, namely, that, if there are Ideas, we are no better off for knowing this, because we cannot know them and, anyhow, they have nothing to do with the world of sense in which we live. Slaves, Plato says, are not enslaved to mastership, but to concrete beings that are their masters. Likewise, masters do not have dominion over slaveness, but over their own slaves; thus, these real things around us can do nothing to those yonder realities, any more than those yonder realities can do anything to this world of ours. Whence it follows that, even if it were proven that there are Ideas, we could not possibly know them. Gods, perhaps, know them, but we don't, because we have not science in itself, which is the only possible knowledge of things in themselves. The world of Ideas remains unknowable to us, and, even though we did know it, such knowledge would not help us in understanding the world we live in, because it is different from and unrelated to it.¹

If there were such a science as a phenomenology of metaphysics, Platonism would no doubt appear as the normal philosophy of mathematicians and of physico-mathematicians. Living as they do in a world of abstract, intelligible relations, they naturally consider number as an adequate expression of reality. In this sense, modern science is a continually self-revising version of the *Timaeus*, and this is why, when they philosophize, modern scientists usually fall into some sort of loose Platonism. Plato's world precisely is the very world they live in, at least *qua* scientists. Not so with biologists and physicians, and, if we want to clear up the difference, all we have to do is to quote two names: Leibniz, Locke. Physicians seldom are metaphysicians, and, when they are, their metaphysics is very careful not to allow its *meta* to lose sight of its *physics*. Such men usually follow what Locke himself once called "a plain historical," that is, descriptive, "method." Aristotle

¹ Plato, *Parmenides*, 133 d-134 c.

was such a man. When a French physician said, "There are no sicknesses, but there are men who are sick," he was not aware of summing up, in a terse sentence, the whole Aristotelian doctrine of being. Yet he did. The metaphysics of Aristotle is the normal philosophy of all those whose natural trend of mind or social vocation is to deal, in a concrete way, with concrete reality.

Like his master, Plato, Aristotle is interested in *ὄντα*: that which is. Only, when he speaks of it, what he has in mind is something quite different from a Platonic Idea. To him, reality is what he sees and what he can touch: this man, this tree, this piece of wood. Whatever other name it may bear, reality always is for him a particular and actually existing thing, that is, a distinct ontological unit which is able to subsist in itself and can be defined in itself: not man in himself, but this individual man whom I can call Peter or John. Our problem then is to find out what there is, in any concretely existing thing, which makes it to be an *ὄντα*, a reality.

There is a first class of characteristics which, although we find them present in any given thing, do not deserve the title of reality. It comprises whatever always belongs to something, without being itself some thing. Aristotle describes such characteristics as "always given in a subject," which means that they always "belong to" some real being, but never themselves become "a being." Such are, for instance, the sensible qualities. A color always belongs to a colored thing, whence there follows this important metaphysical consequence, that such characteristics have no being of their own. What they have of being is the being of the subject to which they belong; their being is its being or, in other words, the only way for them to be is "to belong" and, as Aristotle says, "to be in." This is why such characteristics are fittingly called "accidents," because they themselves are not beings, but merely happen "to be in" some real beings. Clearly enough, accidents are not the *ὄντα* we are looking for, since their definition does not fulfill the requirements of what truly is.

Let us now turn toward another aspect of reality. To say that a certain being is "white" means that the quality of whiteness is present in this particular being. On the contrary, if we say that a certain being is "a man," we do not mean to say that "manness" is something which, like whiteness, for instance, happens to belong to, or to be in, this particular being. The proof of it is that it is possible to be a man without being white, whereas, to be a man without being man is impossible. Manness then is not a property that belongs *in* certain subjects; rather, it is a characteristic which

can be ascribed to those subjects. "Man" is what can be "said of" any actually given man. Let us call "predicability" this particular property. As in the case of accidents, it appears that such characteristics have no actual reality of their own. "Manness" and "stoneness" do not exist in themselves; they only represent what I can truly ascribe to real "men" or to real "stones;" so much so that to turn them into real beings would be to repeat Plato's mistake. It would be to substitute Ideas for actual realities.

This twofold elimination ultimately leaves us confronted with those distinct ontological units we spoke of in the first place. In point of fact, all we know about them is that they are neither abstract notions, such as "man" or "stone," nor mere accidents, such as the color of a man or the size of a stone. Yet, this twofold negation can be turned into a twofold affirmation. If real being is not a mere abstract notion or, as we say, a concept, it follows that what truly is, is individual in its own right. Moreover, to say that actual being is to be found only *in* a subject implies that actual being is a subject. Now, what is it to be a subject? It is to be that in which and by which accidents are. In other words, *ὄντα*, reality, is that which, having in itself all that is required in a thing so that it may be, can moreover grant being to those added determinations which we call its accidents. As such, every actual subject receives the title of "substance" (*sub-stans*), because it can be figuratively fancied as "standing under" accidents, that is, as supporting them.

The indirect character of this determination of being is obvious in Aristotle's own formulas: "Being (*ὄντα*), in the true, primitive and strict meaning of this term, is that which neither is predicable of a subject, nor is present in a subject; it is, for instance, a particular horse or a particular man."² But this seems to be little more than a restatement of the problem, for, if it tells us that Plato was right in refusing actual being to sensible qualities, while he was wrong in ascribing it to abstract notions, it still does not explain what makes reality to be real. We now know where to look for it, but we still do not know what it is.

It looks, then, as though the problem has to be approached in a different way. The question is to know what there is, in an individual subject, that makes it to be a being. In our sensible experience, which is the only one we have, the most striking indication we have that a certain substance is there is the operations it carries and the changes which it causes. Everywhere there is action, there is an acting thing, so that we first detect substances

² Aristotle, *Categories*, I, 5, 2 a 11.

by what they do. Let us call "nature" any substance conceived as the intrinsic principle of its own operations. All true substances are natures: they move, they change, they act. And this leads us to a second characteristic of substances. In order thus to act, each of them must first of all be a subsisting energy, that is, an act. If we follow Aristotle thus far, we are entering with him a world entirely different from that of Plato: a concretely real and wholly dynamic world, in which being no longer is selfhood, but energy and efficacy. Hence the twofold meaning of the word "act," which the mediaeval disciples of Aristotle will be careful to distinguish: first, the act which is the thing itself or which the thing itself is (*actus primus*); secondly, any particular action exercised by that thing (*actus secundus*). Now, if you take together all the secondary acts which a given thing performs, you will find that they constitute the very reality of the thing. A thing is all that it does to itself as well as to others. In such a philosophy, "to be" becomes an active word, which, before anything else, signifies the exercising of an act, whether it be the very act of "being," or that of "being-white," or any other one of the same sort. We said that "whiteness" is not, and rightly, but "a white man" is white, so that, through him, whiteness also is, as sharing in his own being. It still remains to be seen whether Aristotle is here talking about existence, but he certainly is talking about existing things; and, because, such as he describes it, reality is an actually real nucleus of energy, its very core lies beyond the grasp of any concept. Nothing is more important to remember in Aristotle's philosophy of being, and yet nothing is more commonly overlooked: in their innermost reality, substances are unknown. All we know about them is that, since they act, they are, and they are acts.

Having reached this point, Aristotle had to stop, leaving his doctrine open to every possible interpretation and misinterpretation. He knew full well that to be is to be in act, that is to say, to be an act, but to say what an act is, was an altogether different proposition. The only thing he could do about it was to point to actuality as to something which we cannot fail to know, provided only we see it. Or else he would point out its contrary, that is, potentiality or possibility, but even this does not help much, since to understand act through potency is much more difficult than to understand potency through act. When worrying about the problem, Aristotle first reminds his reader that "we must not seek a definition of everything;" then he invites him to figure out for himself, by comparing a number of analogous cases, the mean-

ing of those two terms: "As that which is building is to that which is capable of building, so is the waking to the sleeping, and that which is seeing to that which has its eyes shut but has sight, and that which is shaped out of the matter to the matter, and that which has been wrought to the unwrought." Assuredly, a bare inspection of these examples clearly shows what Aristotle had in mind when he said: "Actuality means the existence of the thing;"² they help us, so to speak, in locating actual reality: we now know where to look for it, and that is all.

It is typical of Aristotle's realism that, though fully aware of the bare and ultimate "givenness" of act as such, he never thought of setting it aside as irrelevant to reality. There is something which is not above being, as was the Good of Plato, but which is *in* being or, rather, which is the very reality of being, yet escapes definition. Real things are precisely of that sort, and philosophy should take them such as they are. If there remains something mysterious in the nature of actuality, it is at least a mystery of nature, not a mystery created out of nothing by the minds of metaphysicians.

We must now proceed in our inquiry and ask Aristotle one more question which, I am afraid, will prove a puzzling one. This very being which reality is inasmuch as it is act, what sort of being is it? In other words, what do we mean exactly by saying of a being in act, that it *is*? The first answer which occurs to the mind is that, in this case at least, to be means to exist, and this, probably, was what it meant to Aristotle himself when, in everyday life, he forgot to philosophize. Nothing is more widespread among men than the certitude of the all-importance of existence: as the saying goes, a living dog is better than a dead king. But we also know that, what they know as men, philosophers are liable to forget as philosophers, and our problem is here to know if, when Aristotle speaks of actual being, what he has in mind is existence or something else.

To this question, we are fortunate in having Aristotle's own answer, and nothing in it authorizes us to think that actual existence was included in what he called being. Of course, to him, as to us, real things were actually existing things. Aristotle has never stopped to consider existence in itself and then deliberately proceeded to exclude it from being. There is no text in which Aristotle says that actual being is not such in virtue of its own "to be," but we have plenty of texts in which he tells us that to be is

² Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Θ, 6, 1048^a 38-1048^b 4, in *Aristotle Selections*, ed. by W. D. Ross (New York, Scribner, 1927), p. 82.

something else. In fact, everything goes as if, when he speaks of being, he never thought of existence. He does not reject it, he completely overlooks it. We should therefore look elsewhere for what he considers as actual reality.

"Among the many meanings of being," Aristotle says, "the first is the one where it means *that which is* and where it signifies the substance."⁴ In other words, the *is* of the thing is the *what* of the thing, not the fact that it exists, but that which the thing is and which makes it to be a substance. This by no means signifies that Aristotle is not interested in the existence or non-existence of what he is talking about. On the contrary, everybody knows that, in his philosophy, the first question to be asked about any possible subject of investigation is, does it exist? But the answer is a short and final one. Once evidenced by sense or concluded by rational argumentation, existence is tacitly dismissed. For, indeed, if the thing does not exist, there is nothing more to say; if, on the contrary, it exists, we should certainly say something about it, but solely about that which it is, not about its existence, which can now be taken for granted.

This is why existence, a mere prerequisite to being, plays no part in its structure. The true Aristotelian name for being is substance, which is itself identical with what a being is. We are not here reconstructing the doctrine of Aristotle nor deducing from his principles implications of which he was not aware. His own words are perfectly clear: "And indeed the question which was raised of old and is raised now and always, and is always the subject of doubt, namely, what being is, is just the question: what is substance? For it is this that some assert to be one, others more than one, and that some assert to be limited in number, others unlimited. And so we also must consider chiefly and primarily and almost exclusively what that is which is in this sense."⁵ All we have now to do is to equate these terms: what primarily *is*, the *substance* of that which is, *what* the thing is. In short, the "whatness" of a thing is its very being.

Such is the principle which accounts for the metaphysical structure of reality in the doctrine of Aristotle. Each actual being is, so to speak, made up of several metaphysical layers, all of which necessarily enter its constitution, but not on the same level nor with equal rights. On the strength of what has been said, it is clear that what is most real in substance is that whereby it is an act. Now, a corporeal substance is not what it is because

⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Z, 1, 1028 a 13.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1028b2-8, in *Selections*, ed. by Ross, n. 26, p. 64.

of its matter. To use a classical example, a statue is not what it is because it is made of wood, of stone or of bronze. On the contrary, the same statue can almost indifferently be made of any one of those matters, and we will say that it is the same statue, provided only its shape remains the same. This, of course, is but an image. Natural forms are less easily detected than artificially made ones, but the reason for it is that shapes are visible, whereas natural forms are the intelligible core of visible reality. Yet, there are such forms. Materially speaking, an animal is made up of inorganic matter, and nothing else. The chemical analysis of its tissues reveals nothing that could not as well enter the composition of entirely different beings. It is nevertheless an animal, and therefore a substance, because it has an inner principle which accounts for its organic character, all its accidents, and all the operations it performs. Such is the form. Obviously, if there is in a substance anything that is act, it is not the matter, it is the form. The form then is the very act whereby a substance is what it is, and, if a being is primarily or, as Aristotle himself says, almost exclusively *what* it is, each being is primarily and almost exclusively its form. This, which is true of the doctrine of Aristotle, will remain equally true of the doctrine of his disciples, otherwise they would not be his disciples. The distinctive character of a truly Aristotelian metaphysics of being—and one might feel tempted to call it its specific form—lies in the fact that it knows of no act superior to the form, not even existence. There is nothing above being; in being, there is nothing above the form, and this means that the form of a given being is an act of which there is no act. If anyone posits, above the form, an act of that act, he may well use the technical terminology of Aristotle, but on this point at least he is not an Aristotelian.

This fundamental fact entails many puzzling consequences, the first of which is that, when all is said, we are coming back to Plato. It has often been remarked, and rightly, that the forms of Aristotle are but the Ideas of Plato brought down from heaven to earth. We know a form through the being to which it gives rise, and we know that being through its definition. As knowable and known, the form is called "essence." Now, it is a fact that forms or essences remain identically the same in all these individuals that belong to a same species. If the main objection directed by Aristotle against Plato holds good, namely, that *man* in himself does not exist and that, if he exists, we are not interested in him, because what we need to know is not *man*, but men, the same reproach seems to apply to Aristotle. Like that of Plato, his own

doctrine has neither use nor room for individuals. The only difference is that Plato made open profession not to be interested in individuals, whereas Aristotle makes open profession to be interested in nothing else, and then goes on to prove that, since the form is the same throughout the whole species, the true being of the individual in no way differs from the true being of the species.

All this is very strange, yet it was unavoidable. On the one hand, Aristotle knows that *this* man alone, not *man*, is real; on the other hand, he decides that what is real in this man is *what* any man is; how could his *this* and his *what* ever be reconciled? True enough, Aristotle has an explanation for individuality. Individuals, he says, are such in virtue of their matter. Yes, but the matter of a being is not *what* that being is, it is what is lowest in it; so much so that, of itself, it has no being. However we look at it, there is something wrong in a doctrine in which the supremely real is such through that which exhibits an almost complete lack of reality. This is what is bound to happen to any realism which stops at the level of substance; not the individuals, but their species, then becomes the true being and the true reality.*

The radical ambiguity of the doctrine is best seen by its historical consequences. During the Middle Ages, thinkers and philosophical schools were divided between themselves on the famous problem of universals: how can the species be present in individuals, or how can the multiplicity of individuals share in the unity of the species? At first sight, this centuries-long controversy has the appearance of a purely dialectical game, but what really lies at the bottom of the whole business is the very notion of being. What *is*? Is it, as Ockham says, only individuals? Then the form of the species is absolutely nothing but the common name we give to individuals similar among themselves. This is nominalism. If, on the contrary, you say that the form of the species must needs be, since it is owing to it that individuals are, then you are a realist, in this sense, at least, that you ascribe to specific forms a reality of their own. But what kind of reality? Has the form a sort of self-subsisting reality? Then it is a Platonic Idea. Has it no other existence than that of a concept in our mind? Then in what sense can we still say that it is the very core of

* This is why so many disciples of Aristotle will stress the unity of the species. The famous Averroistic doctrine of the unity of the intellect for the whole human species has no other origin. The species alone is substance. At the very extremity of the development, and beyond Averroes, looms the metaphysics of the substance: Spinoza.

actual being? Now it is by no means unusual to see philosophers disagreeing among themselves; what is really puzzling here is that, should we believe them, they all agree with Aristotle. And I rather think they do. At any rate, I would not undertake to convince any one of them that he does not, because Aristotle himself had bungled the whole question.

The primary mistake of Aristotle, as well as of his followers, was to use the verb "to be" in a single meaning, whereas it actually has two. If it means that a thing is, then individuals alone are, and forms are not; if it means *what* a thing is, then forms alone are and individuals are not. The controversy on the being of universals has no other origin than the failure of Aristotle himself to make this fundamental distinction. In his philosophy, as much as in that of Plato, *what* is does not exist, and that which exists, is not.

Had Plato lived long enough to read, in the First Book of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, the criticism of his own doctrine of ideas, he might have written one more dialogue, the *Aristoteles*, in which it would have been child's play for Socrates to get Aristotle entangled in hopeless difficulties:

"I should like to know, Aristotle, whether you really mean that there are certain forms of which individual beings partake, and from which they derive their names: that men, for instance, are men because they partake of the form and essence of man."

"Yes, Socrates, that is what I mean."

"Then each individual partakes of the whole of the essence or else of part of the essence. Can there be any other mode of participation?"

"There cannot be."

"Then do you think that the whole essence is one, and yet, being one, is in each one of the things?"

"Why not, Socrates?"

"Because, one and the same thing will then at one and the same time exist as a whole in many separate individuals, and will therefore be in a state of separation from itself!"

"Nay, Socrates, it is not so. Essences are not Ideas; they do not subsist in themselves but only in particular things, and this is why, although we conceive them as one, they can be predicated of many."

"I like your way, Aristotle, of locating *one* in many places at once; but did you not say that essence is that whereby individual beings are?"

"Yes, Socrates, I did."

"Then, my lad, I wish you could tell me how it may be that beings are through sharing in an essence, which itself is not!"

The history of the problem of universals has precisely been such a dialogue, and it could have no conclusion. If essences exist, they cannot be shared in without losing their unity and consequently their being. If individuals *are*, then each of them should be a distinct species and there could not be, as in point of fact there are, species that include in their unity a multiplicity of individuals. What is true is that essences are and that individuals exist, so that each essence exists in and through some individual, just as in and through its essence every individual truly is. But, to be in a position to say so, one must first have distinguished between individuation and individuality, that is, one must have realized that, no less necessarily and perhaps more deeply than essence, existence enters the structure of actual being.

Thus, the world of Aristotle is made up of existents without existence. They all exist, otherwise they would not be beings; but, since their actual existence has nothing to do with what they are, we can safely describe them as if they did not exist. Hence the twofold aspect of his own work. He himself is a *Janus Bifrons*. There is a first Aristotle, who wrote the *Historia Animalium*. He was a keen observer of actually existing beings, deeply concerned in observing the development of the chick in the egg, the mode of reproduction of sharks and rays, or the structure and the habits of bees. But there is a second Aristotle, much nearer to Plato than the first one, and what this second Aristotle says is: "The individuals comprised within a species, such as Socrates and Coriscos, are the real beings; but inasmuch as these individuals possess one common specific form, it will suffice to state the universal attributes of the species, that is, the attributes common to all its individuals, once for all"⁷ This "once for all," is indeed dreadful. It is responsible for the immediate death of those positive sciences of observation which Aristotle himself had so happily fostered. For centuries and centuries men will know everything about water, because they will know its essence, that which water is; so also with fire, with air, with earth, with man. Why indeed should we look at things in order to know them? Within each species, they are all alike; if you know one of them, you know them all. What a poverty-stricken world such a world is! And how much deeper the words of the poet sound to our ears: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are

⁷ Aristotle, *De partibus animalium*, A, 4, 644^a 23-27, in *Selections*, ed. by Ross, n. 54, pp. 173-174.

dreamed of in your philosophy." Yes, indeed, but this was the same poet who knew that what matters is "to be or not to be," and it should matter in philosophy if it does in reality.

For those who fancy that philosophy is bound to follow the march of time, and that what was held as true a hundred years ago can no longer be held to be such, it is an instructive experiment to glance at the commentaries of Averroes on Aristotle, especially in those passages in which he himself comments on the nature of being. What happened to Averroes was simply this: In the twelfth century after Christ, Averroes, himself an Arab established in Spain, happened to read the works of Aristotle, and he thought that, on the whole and almost in every detail, Aristotle was right. He then set about writing commentary after commentary in order to clear up the obscure text of Aristotle and thereby to show that what that text said was true. He could not well do the one without doing the other. To him, Aristotle was *the* Philosopher: to restate his doctrine and to state truth itself were one and the same thing.

What makes the case of Averroes an eminently instructive one, especially for the discussion of our own problem, is the new turn which, between the time of Aristotle and that of his commentator, religion had given to the problem of being. Inasmuch as it is an abstractly objective interpretation of reality, philosophy is not interested in actual existence; on the contrary, inasmuch as it is primarily concerned with human individuals and the concrete problems of their personal salvation, religion cannot afford to ignore existence. This is why, in Plato's philosophy, the gods are always there to account for existential events. Ideas alone cannot account for any existence, because they themselves are, but do not exist, whereas the gods, whatever they may be, do at least exist. In the *Timaeus*, not an Idea, but a god, makes the world, and, though Ideas account for the intelligibility of what the god makes, they themselves do not make it. It takes something that *is* to cause an existential happening.

In the twelfth century after Christ, two religions, both stemming from the Old Testament, agreed in teaching that there is a supreme God, Who truly is and Who is the Maker of the world. "To make" means here "to create." First, there was God, but there was no world. Next, there still was God, but there also was a world, because God had made it to be, and for God to make it to be is what we call creation. Now, if we believe that the world has been created, what is the very first thing that happened to it at the very time when it was created, if not *to be*? The sovereign importance of existence and its factual primacy cannot possibly

be overlooked by men who believe that things have been created out of nothing. Existence, and existence alone, accounts for the fact that any given thing is not nothing. This is why, even before the time of Averroes, another Arabian philosopher, whose own position we shall later examine, had taught that, since to exist is something that happens to beings, existence itself is an "accident."

When he read this statement of Avicenna, Averroes felt not only surprised, but scornfully indignant. And no wonder. Having learned from Aristotle that being and substance are one,⁸ he 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. In Aristotle's own words: "A man, an existent man, and man, are just the same."⁹ How indeed could it be otherwise in a philosophy in which the very being of a being is to be "that which it is?" Now, it is very remarkable that, when confronted with the doctrine of Avicenna, Averroes made no mistake about its origin. That was a religious origin, and Averroes immediately said so: "Avicenna is quite wrong in thinking that unity and being point to determinations superadded to the essence of a thing, and one may well wonder how such a man has made such a mistake; but he has listened to the theologians of our religion and mixed up their sayings with his own science of divinity,"¹⁰ that is, with his own metaphysics. Now, this is precisely what Averroes himself has always refused to do. Religion has its own work, which is to educate people who are too dull to understand philosophy, or too untutored to be amenable to its teaching. This is why religion is necessary, for what it preaches is fundamentally the same as what philosophy teaches, and, unless common men believed what it preaches, they would behave like beasts. But theologians should preach, not teach, just as philosophers should teach, not preach. Theologians should not attempt to demonstrate, because they cannot do it, and philosophers must be careful not to get belief mixed up with what they prove, because then they can no longer prove anything. Now, to preach creation is just a handy way to make people feel that God is their Master, which is true even though, as is well known by those who truly philosophize, nothing of the sort ever happened. The fundamental mistake which accounts for the distinction be-

⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Z, 1, 1028^b4.

⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Γ, 2, 1003^b.

¹⁰ Averroes, *In IV Metaph.*, c. 3, in *Aristotelis Stagiritae . . . opera omnia* (Venetiis, apud Juntas, 1552), Vol. IX, p. 43^v.

tween being and its existence is Avicenna's illusion that a religious belief can assume a philosophical meaning.¹¹

What makes the case of Averroes a highly instructive one is that, in so far as Averroes was Aristotle, Aristotle found himself inescapably confronted with the metaphysical problem of existence so that he could no longer ignore it. If there was room for existence in a world in which being is identical with "what it is," now was for the new Aristotle the time to tell us where it fits; if, on the contrary, existence was just a word which added nothing to what we already know about being, the new Aristotle was bound to tell us that it was so, and why. This last is exactly what Averroes has done, so that his metaphysics constitutes a crucial experiment, in so far at least as the relation of pure substantialism to existence is concerned.

Who, Averroes asks, says that real beings "exist?" In a way, everybody does, but how do they say it? Arguing from the root of the verb which means "to be" in Arabic, Averroes remarks that, in common language, when people want to say that a thing 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." We ourselves would now say that, to Averroes' compatriots, as to some German philosophers, *to be is to be there: sein is da sein*. This is nothing more than a crude and popular way of talking, but if any philosopher takes it seriously, he will have no other choice than to make existence an accidental determination of being. The thing must then be imagined as a reality, let us say an essence, which is in itself distinct from and prior to the bare fact that it happens to be or not to be there. Such is, according to Averroes, the mistake made by Avicenna when he said that existence is an accident that happens to the essence: "*Quod esse sit accidens eveniens quidditati.*"

Several errors necessarily follow from this first one. If the very fact that a certain being *is*, is distinct from *what* that being is, each and every real being will have to be conceived as a compound of its essence and its existence. If we so conceive it, the essence will have to be further conceived, not as a being, but only as that which becomes a being when it happens to exist. Now, since essence no longer deserves the title of being, except in so far as it receives existence, or *esse*, the distinction of essence and existence becomes a distinction between two constituents of being, one of which is conditioned by and subjected to the other.

¹¹ Averroes, *Destructio destructionum*, disp. VIII, ed. cit., Vol. IX, f. 43^v; and disp. I, f. 9^v.

In other words, essence then deserves the title of being only inasmuch as it has already received its existence. Consequently, apart from its existence, essence in itself is a bare possible, not a being, but a possible being. A world made up of such essences is a world in which no being contains in itself the reason for its existence, for its necessity, for its intrinsic intelligibility.

Such a world was exactly what Avicenna wanted, in order to placate theologians. When all is said, there is one necessary being, and only one. He is "the First," eternally subsisting in virtue of His own necessity and eternally drawing possibles from potency to act. Now, to actualize a possible is to give it actual existence, so that an existing being is a possible which happens to be actualized. It now is because, in the eternal flow of changing things, it was its turn to be. Let us now single out one of these existing beings and look at its structure. Out of itself, it was but a possible, but it now is in virtue of the power and fecundity of the First and, while it is, it cannot not be. It is therefore necessary, and it is so on two accounts: first, while it lasts, it cannot not be; next when actual existence happens to it, it cannot not happen to it, because every being is only in virtue of the necessity of the First. What flows from the First flows from Him according to His own internal intelligible law. Every existing being then exhibits two opposite faces, according as we look at it as it is in itself or as it is in its relation to the First. In itself, it is but possible; in its relation to the First, it is necessary. As Avicenna himself says, it is a *possibile a se necessarium ex alio*, that is, as it were a single word, a "possible-by-itself-necessary-by-another." In short, this is among the sort of beings which can be produced by a first cause, since their own existence is entirely deprived of necessity. To say that existence is an accident which happens to essences is but a shorter way of saying the same thing.

Such a doctrine is perfectly consistent, yet Averroes rejects it as a whole because there is something wrong in its very principle, namely, its notion of existence. What is existence, Averroes asks, and how are we supposed to conceive it? Avicenna says that it is an accident, but we know how many kinds of accidents there are, we know which they are, and existence is not among them. Of the ten categories of Aristotle, the first is substance, while the nine following ones designate all possible accidents, such as quantity, quality, place, relation, and so on. We don't find existence there. Now, since it is supposed to happen to a substance, it cannot be substance, and since it is not one of the known accidents, it cannot be an accident; hence it is nothing, because all that is,

is either substance or accident. A very remarkable argument indeed, at least if we look at it in the proper way. To Averroes, as to Aristotle himself, the ten categories cover the whole domain of what can be known and said about things. If existence answers none of the only questions concerning reality which make sense, then existence does not make sense, it is unthinkable, it is nothing.

To this conclusion, the obvious objection is that Aristotle himself might well have overlooked a category. After all, nothing proves that his list was complete, and, were we to say that there are ten accidents instead of nine, there would be no harm in it. Perhaps, but let us try. Existence then is an accident, but, as soon as we look at it that way, our new accident exhibits most disturbing properties. At least its properties seem entirely different from those of any other accident. When I add quantity to a substance, I give it size, or bulk, whereby I alter its appearance; if I add quality to it, I make it look white or black, and I still alter its appearance, and so on with all the other accidents of place, relation and so on, each of which contributes a specific determination of the substance, in itself distinct from all the other types of determination. In other words, quantity gives to a substance what quality cannot give; quantity is not quality, but they are two irreducibly distinct categories of accident. Not so with existence. If to be were a category, it would indiscriminately apply to all the other categories, and to all of them in the same way. When I say that a certain substance has both quality and quantity, I do not mean that quantity is the same thing as quality, nor that both quantity and quality are the same thing as substance. Three distinct notions are here present to my mind, but, if I say that a substance is, that its quantity is, or that its quality is, what am I doing? The very accident which I am supposed to add to any one of those three terms blends itself, so to speak, with them and vanishes from sight as being identical with them. "This substance is black" is a meaningful proposition, because blackness is not the substance of which it is predicated. "This substance is," if it means anything, means that this is a substance, and to maintain the contrary would be to maintain that a real substance is distinct from its own being. The same reasoning likewise applies to all the nine accidents. If existence were an accident, then quantity, for instance, could not be, because, were it existence, it could no more be quantity than it can be quality, and so on with the rest. The proposition, "quantity is," either means that quantity is quantity or it means nothing. In short, one cannot consider as an accident that which can be said of any substance and of any

accident without adding anything to its notion. The very idea of a category common to all the other categories is absurd. All that business, Averroes says, is censurable and wrong: *hoc totum est falsum et vituperabile*. There is no place, in metaphysics, for an existence conceived as distinct from that which is.

Mistakes, however, have to be overcome, and what precedes would leave us with a divided mind, unless we were to account for the very confusion which is responsible for so many misunderstandings. Such propositions as "x is" do indeed make sense, and what they say may be true or false as the case may be. But what do they mean? When a judgment is true, it is so because it says "that which is." Any true judgment then asserts the reality of something which is indeed a reality. To say that "a man is" merely means that "there is a man," and, if this proposition happens to be true, it is so because what is there is indeed a man. But let us generalize the proposition. When I say that "something is," whatever that may be, the proposition merely means that a certain being is there. What matters here is the intrinsic reality of the being at stake, and precisely the verb "is" expresses nothing else than that very reality. Avicenna wants us to imagine that "is" adds something to the notion of being. But this does not make sense, since, as a word, "being" signifies nothing else than "is." "Being" is the noun derived from the verb "is," so that its meaning can be nothing else than "that which is." We might as well maintain that "humanity," which is derived from "man," signifies something else than "what man is," or that "individuality," which is derived from "individual," signifies something more than "what an individual is." What has Avicenna done? He has simply imagined that the "is" of our judgments, which is the bare statement of the actual reality of a certain essence, signifies something which, when added to essences, turns them into so many realities, whereas, to say that a certain being is merely means that it is a being.¹²

The world of Averroes thus appears as made up of truly Aristotelian substances, each of which is naturally endowed with the unity and the being that belong to all beings. No distinction whatsoever should then be made between the substance, its unity and its being. In a fearfully concise statement, Averroes tells us: "The substance of any one being, by which it is one, is

¹² Averroes, *Epitome in librum Metaphysicæ Aristotelis*, tract. I, ed. cit., Vol. VIII, f. 1692; *Destructio destructionum*, disp. V; ed. cit., Vol. IX, f. 34^v. Cf. A. Forest, *La Structure métaphysique du concret selon saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris, J. Vrin, 1931), p. 143, n. 2.

its to be, whereby it is a being: *Substantia cujuslibet unius, per quam est unum, est suum esse, per quod est ens.*¹³ The equation of substance, one, to be and being is here absolutely complete, and, since substance comes first, it is the whole of reality.

Thus far, Averroes seems quite successful in his effort to rid philosophy of existence, but it still remains for him to solve a problem, namely, the very one which Avicenna himself had tried to solve: the relation of possible beings to their actual existence. After all, there are such things as actualized possibilities, and their being cannot be the same, as actual, as it was as a mere possible. Under this definite form, at least, the problem of existence cannot be eliminated. Averroes is clearly conscious of it, but he thinks that, even then, it remains a pseudo-problem; so much so that a philosophy worthy of the name can and must establish its futility. In the mind of Avicenna, the whole difficulty is tied up with his notion of what he calls the "possible out of itself." Of course, if there are such beings which, out of themselves, are merely possible, the problem arises to know what must be added to them in order to give them actual reality. But is the pure possible of Avicenna an intelligible philosophical notion? We can understand what Avicenna means by the First, Who is the only necessary being, and Who subsists in virtue of His own necessity. We also can understand that all that which is, outside the First, is necessary in virtue of the necessity of the First. Had he said this, and nothing more, Avicenna would have said nothing but the truth and the whole truth; for, indeed, all that which is, is necessary either by itself or by its cause, and the proposition can be proven.

Let us consider the case of any one of those beings which Avicenna holds to be "necessary in virtue of another." Since it is, and since it is necessary that it be, in what sense can we still say that it remains "possible?" Avicenna's answer is that such a being remains possible in itself. But what is its "itself," apart from what it is? Avicenna says: it is its essence. Which is true. But, if we take a certain essence prior to its actualization, it is indeed a pure possible, precisely because it does not yet exist and has no necessity whatsoever; if, on the contrary, we take it as already actualized, it does then exist, but it has become necessary and there is no trace in it of any possibility. When it was possible, it was not, and, now that it is, it no longer is possible. To imagine it as being both at one and the same time, one has to suppose that it actually is, and that, while it is, it still remains in itself as if

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¹³ Averroes, *In IV Metaph.*, c. 3, ed. cit., Vol. IX, f. 43^v.

it were not. The unrealized possibility seems here to survive its actual realization and, so to speak, to receive from its very negation some sort of vague reality. But this is absurd. "If the thing is necessary, however it may have been posited, possibility is wholly absent from it. Nothing can be found in the world of such a nature that it be possible in a certain way, yet necessary in another way. For, it has already been shown that what is necessary is in no way possible, since possible and necessary contradict each other. Where there is possibility in a certain being, it is that such a being contains, over and above what is necessary from the point of view of its own nature, something that is merely possible from the point of view of another nature. Such is the case of the heavenly bodies, or of what there is above them (namely, the *primum mobile*) for, such things are necessary as regards their being, but they are possible with respect to their motion in space. What has led Avicenna to that distinction was his opinion that the heavenly bodies are necessary by another, and yet possible out of themselves."¹⁴

To complete his criticism, Averroes had only to identify the cause required by Avicenna in order to account for the existence of the "possible out of itself," with the cause of existence required by religions in order to account for the creation of the world. And he did it. "You must know" [Averroes says] "that the newness ascribed by religious law to this world is of the same nature as the newness of things as it is understood in this doctrine."¹⁵ Let us pause a moment to pay homage to the remarkable philosophical insight of Avicenna's great adversary. What he clearly sees in the doctrine of his predecessor is a kind of philosophical substitute for the religious notion of creation. The God of Avicenna is a God Who *is*, so much so that, rather than say that His essence is identical with His existence, we had better say that He has no essence at all. Yet, Avicenna does not consider his God as having created the world by an act of will. As has been said, the world flows from God's intrinsic necessity, according to the laws of intelligible necessity. There is no true creation in Avicenna's doctrine, but to the keen eyes of Averroes there still is too much of it, or, at least, there still is something which looks too much like it. The world of Avicenna remains a world of happenings. Assuredly, they all are necessary happenings, but still they do happen. Possibles that were mere possibles become actual beings, then pass away and make room for the actualization of other

¹⁴ Averroes, *Destructio destructionum*, disp. VIII, ed. cit., Vol. IX, f. 43^v.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, disp. I, Vol. IX, f. 9^v.

possibles. There remains in such a philosophy at least some faint trace of what any true philosophy of the concept hates above everything else, novelty.

A universe in which nothing new ever happens—such is the universe of Averroes himself. To the question: "How do you account for the fact that motions begin and then come to an end?" his answer is that motions may seem to begin and to end, but that motion itself never has either beginning or end. It cannot either begin or end, because to move essentially entails both a before and an after, so that, wherever you look for motion there always is a "before" whence it comes, as surely as there is an "after" whither it goes. The modern principle of the conservation of energy in the world would have been welcomed by Averroes. All the motions of the heavenly bodies and all the motions which are caused by them on earth, that is to say, all the motions there are, constitute for him a single motion, indefinitely perpetuated, whose sum total remains indefinitely the same: "And this is why, when theologians have asked philosophers if the movements anterior to the present ones have ceased, the philosophers have answered that those movements have not ceased, because, as philosophers see it, just as those movements have had no beginning, so they have no end."¹⁶ And let us not forget that what is true of motion holds good for any event in general. All that happens is a motion of some sort, so that all that is, is always there, identically the same, in spite of its apparent mutability.

One could hardly wish for a world better made to suit the taste of abstract conceptual thinking. Existence is no more to be feared here than it will be in the philosophy of Spinoza. No provision is made for it in this eternally self-identical world, not even the smallest corner where that unpredictable element may threaten to play the most harmless of its tricks. Perfectly proof against newness, it remains eternally such as it is. Since generations and corruptions are but particular kinds of motion, individual beings can come and go without disturbing the peace of the world. Some beings, such as the heavenly bodies and the pure intelligences which move them, are naturally eternal and incorruptible; taken all together, they make up the divine world, which is free from change in its own right. As to the other beings, which, like ourselves, are born, and whose life is so short, it is true to say that they themselves are subject to change, but they do not count, for their only function is to ensure the perpetuity of their own species, which itself always is owing to them and never changes. Individuals

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

pass away, the species never pass away. They do not pass away because, just as a motion never ends except in giving rise to another motion, so that motion is always there, so also "man" never ends, owing to the perpetual substitution of those who are born for those who die. The world has always been just what it is; humanity has always been just what it is; human knowledge has always been just what it is, for the totality of intelligible forms is being permanently radiated and, so to speak, broadcast by the subsisting Intelligence Who thinks for us and in us from above, the intellectual differences between human souls having no other cause than the individual abilities of their respective bodies to catch the divine message, that is, to receive those intelligible forms. Intellectual intelligibility, then, may happen to be received by one man better than by another, in which case we say that he is more intelligent, or even that he has genius, but, when a philosopher dies, philosophy itself remains. It may now exist in the West, now in the East, but philosophy always remains because there always are philosophers, and, if true philosophy seems at times to perish, it is but an illusion. Total knowledge is always present in the Intelligence which is the unique intellect of the human species, and, though you can't take it with you when you die, because you have no individual intellect to take it in, nothing of it is lost. True enough, the divine message may be blurred for a while, but not forever. Once caught by Aristotle in Greece, it is now being heard by Averroes in Spain, and we need not fear that it will ever be completely lost. In short, individual men are mortal, and wholly so, but all the true, all the good and all the beautiful of which they partake for a little while is immortal in its own right. If the future of such things is what makes men uneasy when they die, they can die in peace, for truth, goodness and beauty always come to them from above and they abide there. They are eternally safe and bright in that Intelligence which perpetually enlightens mankind; they are still more so in each one of the higher intelligences, and they are eminently so in the first and supreme Thought, Who eternally thinks Himself in the solitude of His own perfection and is the Supreme Being because He is the Supreme Intelligibility. All that is here, is eternally there, and it is there much more really than it is here. In spite of all appearances, the world of being is one solid block of intelligible necessity. Such is the ultimate reason why being always is and cannot be conceived apart from its being. A perfect instance, indeed, of a mental universe in which, for any conceivable being, to be and to be that which it is are one and the same thing.

Obviously, nothing could be more unpalatable than such a doctrine to theologians of any persuasion. That Averroes himself had his troubles with Moslem divines not only is a fact, but should cause us no surprise. Later on, Spinoza, whose doctrine largely is a revised version of Averroism rewritten in the language of Descartes, will also have his trouble with the Synagogue, and for the same fundamental reason: in any religious world there is novelty, because there is existence. But, if there is a religious world in which newness reigns supreme, it is the Christian world, in which at least two extraordinary things once happened—its creation by God and its re-creation through the Incarnation of the Divine Word. One of the most paradoxical episodes in the history of Western thought has been the rise, in the thirteenth century, of a philosophical school whose members imagined that they could think as Averroists while believing as Christians. If there is a crucial experiment on the compossibility of existence with being in a metaphysics in which being is identified with substance, here is one, and there is good reason to hope that its study will throw some light on the true nature of their relation.

One of the most famous Averroists of the thirteenth century, Siger of Brabant is exactly the man we need to help us with our problem. Not only was he a Christian—and I personally do not know of any reason to doubt the perfect sincerity of his faith—but he also was, around 1270, a Master of Arts in the University of Paris. A Master of Arts was then a professor in charge of teaching philosophy to students who, for the most part, were later to study theology. As such, the Parisian Master of Arts had nothing to do with theology itself; his only business was to introduce his students to the philosophy of Aristotle, from his logic to his metaphysics, ethics and politics. On the other hand, it must be borne in mind that 1270 is a rather late date in the history of mediaeval philosophy. When Siger of Brabant had to deal with any philosophical problem, he could not avoid taking into account what some of his predecessors had already said on the question. The Commentaries of Averroes were at his disposal and, to him, what they said was the adequate expression of Aristotle's own thought, which itself was one with philosophical truth. But he had read many other philosophers, such as Avicenna among the Arabs, Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas among the Christians.

This, I think, should account for the remarkable decision made by Siger of Brabant when, having to raise questions about Book IV of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, he found himself confronted with

the definition of this supreme science: a science whose object is being *qua* being. The problem was not for him to find something to say about it; in fact, he had only too much to choose from, but he made an unusual choice. The very first question asked by Siger on this occasion was: "Whether, in created things, being (*ens*) or to be (*esse*) belongs to the essence of creatures, or is something added to their essence."¹⁷ Obviously, we are now reaching a time when the problem of the distinction of essence and existence has already been openly raised and widely discussed. For Siger to have asked it in the very first place, the question must have already become, if not, as it now is, a perennial question, at least a question of the day. Between Siger and his own favorite master, Averroes, there stands Thomas Aquinas. For him, that is the trouble, but for us, that is what makes his case extremely interesting. If, as he naturally will do, Siger wants to identify essence and existence, it won't be enough for him to play Averroes against Avicenna, whom Averroes had both known and already refuted; he will have to play Averroes against Thomas Aquinas, whom Averroes could not refute, because he could not foresee his coming.

The whole discussion of the problem is somewhat obscured by a certain ambiguity, for which Siger himself is not responsible, because its source lies in the very position of the question. Averroes was right at least in this, that the origin of the notion of existence, as distinct from the notion of essence, is religious and tied up with the notion of creation. No one can read the Old Testament and try to formulate what it teaches about the origin of the world, without reaching the conclusion that, if there has been a creation, then the world is something that both is new and exists. As compared with its eternal idea in God, existence happens to it as a novelty.

When Christian theologians want to express this relation of the created world to its Creator, they all say that creatures do not exist out of themselves, but owe their existence to God. This is a point on which they all agree, and, although their agreement is here unavoidable, it has been, for many of them as well as for more than one of their historians, the source of a dangerous confusion.

The only way to express such a relation is to say that, since creatures do not exist by themselves, they receive their existence

¹⁷ M. Grabmann, *Neuaufgefundene "Questionen" Sigers von Brabant zu den Werken des Aristoteles* (Clm. 9559), in *Miscellanea Francesco Ehrle*, (Roma, Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana, 1926), Vol. I, pp. 103-147. The above-quoted text is to be found on p. 133

from God. Their own being is not something that belongs to them *per se*; it is given to them from above, and, precisely because their being is a received being, they are distinct from the only *per se* Being there is, namely, God, their Creator. It can therefore be said that in all Christian theologies no creature *is* in its own right. Now, if creatures do not owe their own existence to themselves, there must needs be in each of them some sort of composition of what they are with the very fact that they are. In short, the distinction between creatures and their Creator entails, in creatures themselves, a distinction between their existence and the essence of their being.

If this were true, all theologians and philosophers of the Middle Ages should have taught the distinction of essence and existence, for, indeed, all of them have realized the distinction there is between the self-existent Being, Who is God, and the being of His creatures, who have it only because they receive it. But it is not so. The problem of the distinction of essence and existence is an altogether different problem. It is a purely philosophical problem, which consists in determining whether or not, within a created being, after it has been created and during the very time when it is, there is any reason to ascribe to it a distinct act in virtue of which it *is*. Now, if all theologians agree on the fact that creatures owe their being to God, it is not true to say that they all agree on the second point. They do not; far from it. Many mediaeval theologians, to whom the distinction of essence and existence has been wrongly ascribed, have in fact never thought of it. What is true is that, if a mediaeval theologian professes, as a philosopher, the distinction of essence and existence, he will find in it, as a theologian, the sufficient and ultimate reason we have for distinguishing the self-existent Being of God from the received being of creatures. But those who hold different metaphysics of being will find at their disposal many other ways of distinguishing God from His creatures, which proves at least this, that, when a theologian teaches the distinction of essence and existence, it is not because Christian theology necessarily requires it, but because he thinks that, as a philosophical doctrine, it is true. The very fact that great Christian theologies, such as those of Duns Scotus and of Suarez, manage perfectly well without this distinction, is a sufficient proof that it is not a dictate of revelation, but a purely rational view of the nature of being.

Siger of Brabant was too near the very origin of the doctrine not to fall victim to this confusion. Observing that, in those doctrines in which essence is distinct from existence, theologians

resort to it in order to justify the distinction of beings from the Supreme Being, he jumped to the conclusion that this very use they made of their thesis was, in their eyes, both its origin and its justification. This mistake is apparent in the initial remark of Siger's own answer to the question: "There are several different opinions on this point. Some say that a thing *is* in virtue of a disposition added to its essence, so that, according to them, "thing" and "being" have not the same meaning. Thus, "to be" is something added to the essence. This is the opinion of Albert in his Commentary. His reason is that of the *Liber de Causis*, namely, that things have their being from their first principle."¹⁸ Now, whether or not Albertus Magnus has taught the distinction of essence and existence in creatures, I am not prepared to say, but, if he did, it cannot have been for that reason. True enough, if a certain being is a creature, we can easily imagine that it *might* not exist, as indeed would be the case if God had not created it. Consequently, practically all theologians admit that there is, between any given creature and its being, what they call a distinction of reason. The actual thing *is*, but, after all, it does not contain in itself the sufficient reason for its own existence, so that we can abstractedly conceive it as a non-existing thing. Such a statement does not necessarily imply that the thing in question is itself composed of its own essence and of its own existence; it merely expresses the relation of effect to cause which obtains between any creature and its Creator. And this indeed is what the *Liber de Causis* means when it says that the first principle is, to all things, their own being.

The same mistake occurs under another form towards the end of his question, when Siger of Brabant remarks: "Every thing that subsists by itself, below the First, is composite. This last reason has been the main one for Brother Thomas."¹⁹ No, it has not. After admitting that nothing below God is simple, and that created things include both essence and existence, Brother Thomas has naturally concluded that the first and fundamental lack of simplicity in things was due to their composition of essence and existence, but he did not need such a composition in order to account for their lack of simplicity. Even without resorting to the composition of matter and form which some theologians, like Augustine and Bonaventura, for instance, admitted in all created beings, Brother Thomas could have resorted to the distinction of act and potency, which occurs in all creatures, but not

¹⁸ Siger of Brabant, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

in the cause of their being, the Pure Act Whom we call God. And this is what Siger himself very clearly shows by proving that, without resorting to the distinction of essence and existence, it still remains possible to account for the lack of simplicity in creatures, as opposed to the perfect simplicity of God. If this be true, as I think it is, the fact that, below the First Cause, everything is composite cannot have been for Brother Thomas the main reason for positing the distinction of essence and existence in created things.

But how does Siger himself account for the difference in simplicity which there must needs be between God and His creatures? True to the spirit which prevails in the metaphysics of both Averroes and Aristotle, he does not feel impressed by the fact that created beings *might* not be. Let us rather say that, to him, this is far from being a fact. If they were not necessary, be it only through their cause, they would not be at all. What makes them different from the first principle cannot lie in the very fact that they are, but in their peculiar way of being, that is, in *what* they are. Because He is Pure Act, the First is one and simple. On the contrary, below Him, all the rest is mere participation in the pure actuality of the First. Now, a participation always is a certain degree of participation. Some created beings even participate more or less in the actuality of their cause, and this is why they have different essences, according as they approach more or less the simplicity of the First. Just as numbers differ from one another in species because of their various relations to unity, which is the principle of number, so beings differ from one another in essence because of their various relations to the pure act of being. Now, what a certain creature lacks in act is exactly measured by its potency. There is then a lack of simplicity in all creatures, because what makes them to be creatures is the amount of potency which specifies the essence of their own act. But we do not even need to assert this in order to avoid the difficulty. Let us take a creature that is not made up of form and matter, that is, a purely spiritual substance. Like the First, it is bound to be a self-subsisting act of thought, yet it still will lack the simplicity of the First. For, indeed, the First is a self-thinking thought; He does not need to receive from any source His own intelligibility, whereas, below the First, all knowing substances know their objects only through intelligible species. "*Omne aliud a Primo intelligit per speciem quae est aliud ab ipso*: Every being other than the First knows through some species that is something else than that very

being."²⁰ In other words, the Aristotelian notion of substance is so foreign to existence that existence plays no part in this description of created being.

The whole argumentation of Siger obviously entails that the actuality of substance as such be the whole of the actuality of being as such. In such a world, to be is to be substance, that is, either a pure form, if the substance at stake be an incorporeal one, or a substantial unit of form and matter, if the substance at stake be a corporeal one. In both cases, substances *are* in virtue of their form, which is act by definition, and, since there is nothing above act, the whole reality of any given being is completely accounted for by the actuality of its very form.

We are now in a position to see what must have been, from the point of view of Siger of Brabant, the main mistake made by both Brother Albert and Brother Thomas. Albert was right in saying that, God alone excepted, each and every creature is *per aliud* in the order of efficient causality; but this does not prevent each created thing from being a being *per se*. For, if it is at all, then it is a substance, and every substance is as such both *a se*, *ex se* and even *per se*, since it is by itself, out of itself and through itself that it is the very being it is. To which Albert will no doubt rejoin that, anyhow, it is not the cause of its own being. Of course it isn't! Unless it were created, it would not be at all, but, now that it has been created, it is a *per se* because it is a substance. When the old English poet exclaims: "O London, thou art of townes a *per se*!"²¹ he does not mean to say that London is without having been made, but, rather, that London is such a city as stands alone among all the others and, for this reason, eminently *is*. London eminently is for being the very city it is. In other words, a created thing is *per aliud* in the order of efficient causality, yet it is *per se* in the order of formal causality, which, in the realm of substance, reigns supreme. Albert has therefore intermingled the two orders of the efficient cause and of the formal cause; hence his curious illusion that an existing thing still needs existence in order to exist. A perfectly valid argument indeed for anyone who, taking existence for granted, cannot see in what sense an actually given substance may still need to have it.

But, if the case of Master Albert is bad, that of Brother Thomas is worse. For, instead of merely saying that substances owe their being to something else, he has attempted to find, in substances

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

²¹ Ascribed to William Dunbar. *The Poems of William Dunbar*, edited by W. Mackay Mackenzie (Edinburgh, Porpoise Press, 1932), poem no. 88, l. 1, p. 177. Cf. Appendix C. pp. 240-241.

themselves, some definite room for the very existence they are supposed to receive. And he cannot do it because the thing simply cannot be done. Thomas does not want existence to be substance itself, because he wants it to be the existence of the substance, that is, the very principle which, present *in* the substance, makes it to be. As if anything were still wanting in that which is, in order to make it to be! On the other hand, Thomas fully realizes that Avicenna was wrong in making existence an accident. As an accident, existence would fit nowhere in philosophy; which means that it has to be something else. But, if it is neither a substance nor an accident, *what* is it?

No more pertinent question could be asked by a philosopher to whom to be is necessarily to be a *what*. And the reason for Siger's attitude is clear: where there is no "whatness," there is no conceptual intelligibility. If we cannot say "what" the thing at stake is, then no thing is really at stake, and we are merely talking about nothing. Plato may have been mistaken in putting the One and the Good above being, but he had been right in saying that, if reality is only "what" it is, there must be some higher principle above even reality. Here, on the contrary, the very notion of a "higher-than-whatness" principle completely vanishes, because the summit of reality is itself, though an act, yet a *what*. The Aristotelian God is a being of which we can say what He is, namely, the pure act of an eternally self-thinking Thought. There is no trace of any invitation to rise above substance in such a metaphysics, no inducement therefore to wonder if, after all, whatness is truly the whole of reality. Of course, Siger *might* have asked himself the question, but our whole point is precisely to show that, however deep and keen a mind he has, no philosopher can see what lies beyond his own position of the question.

This is precisely what is happening to Siger, and not to understand what one is talking about is such an advantage in any kind of discussion that one is bound to score along the whole line. For, what he does is to ask Brother Thomas: "*What* is existence?" and, of course, Brother Thomas cannot answer. Unfortunately, unable as he was to say what existence is, he had at least tried to point it out, that is, to call our attention to it, so that we might at least realize *that* it is. In order to do so, he could not help using words, each of which means something whose "whatness," if so desired, we could define. While so doing, Brother Thomas obviously gives the impression of trying to define existence, although as a matter of fact, he is merely pointing to it. For an onlooker who sees it as a would-be definition, each and every such attempt

can result only in failure. With diabolical cleverness Siger has singled out, among the innumerable formulas of Thomas Aquinas, the one which, were it a definition, would certainly be the worst of his failures. Quoting verbatim, Siger says that, according to Brother Thomas: "To be (*esse*) is something superadded to the essence of the thing, that does not belong to the essence of the thing, yet which is not an accident, but is something superadded as if it were, so to speak, constituted by the essence, or out of the principles of the essence."²² As regards obscurity, this is a masterpiece. Everything in it is wrong, and it is so according to Thomas Aquinas himself: To be is not something (*aliquid*), because it is not a thing (*quid*); moreover, it is not even true to say that *esse* does not belong to the essence (*non pertinens ad essentiam rei*), because, though it be not the essence, it certainly is *its* to be; last, but not least, if it does not belong to the essence, how can it, at the same time, arise from its constitutive principles? Are we to suppose that existence originates in the constitutive principles of an essence which, apart from its existence, is not? With such an opportunity, Siger could not help but score. Let us admit, he says, that existence is constituted, or, rather, as it pleases Brother Thomas to say it, *quasi* constituted by the principles of reality. Now, what are those principles? There are but three: matter, form (whose union constitutes the substance), accident. If it be anything at all, existence has to be either matter, or form, or accident. Now, Thomas himself says, and rightly, that it is not an accident; on the other hand, he does not say that existence is matter, because matter is potency, whereas, to be is an act; nor does he say that existence is form, because, if he said so, existence would not have to be added to essence: *qua* form, essence would exist in its own right. Siger's victory is here complete. To say, with Brother Thomas, that existence is superadded to form, to matter and to accident is nothing less, Siger scornfully remarks, than *ponere quartam naturam in entibus*, that is, to add a fourth one to the three known constituent principles of reality.

To us, this does not have the appearance of a high crime. If three principles are not enough, why not a fourth one? But the irony of Siger is quite excusable if we remember that he was a disciple of Aristotle through the commentator *par excellence*, Averroes. Now, here is a man, Brother Thomas, who calls Aristotle *Philosophus*, the Philosopher; who speaks Aristotle's own philosophical language: matter, form, essence, substance, accidents, and who nevertheless attempts to say something for which such

²² Siger of Brabant, *op. cit.*, pp. 135-136.

a language has no words. Here again Siger of Brabant *might* have guessed that Thomas Aquinas' philosophy was *not*, after all, the philosophy of Aristotle, but all the appearances were against it, and it is no wonder that he mistook the new position of his adversary for a mere perversion of an old one.

The all-too-real embarrassment of Brother Thomas invited him to do so. What is it Thomas says of existence? "*Quasi constituitur per principia essentiae.*" What does this *quasi* mean? If it means that existence is not really constituted by the principles of essence, he has said nothing; but, if it means that the principles of essence really constitute existence, then, since what matter and form actually constitute is substance, existence is bound to be its accident. And there is no way out, which means that, however long we turn it over and over or wander through it in all directions, there is no room for existence in the metaphysical universe of Aristotle, which is a world, not of existents, but of things. And this, at least, is what Siger has clearly seen. Granting to Brother Thomas that the constitutive principles of reality make up the whole cause of its existence, it necessarily follows that existence is a meaningless word. For, indeed, what is actually constituted by the principles of any conceivable thing is that very thing: "*Constitutum per principia essentiae est ipsa res,*"²³ and, once the thing is there, fully constituted by its principles, why should we bother further about its existence? If the thing is there, then it is; the existence of reality is identical with reality.

In such a metaphysics, essence, substance, thing and being are just so many points of view on reality itself. *Ens*, or being, designates what actually is. *Res*, or thing, designates the habitual possession of being: a thing is that which is. In this sense, Avicenna was right in saying that "being" and "thing" are not synonymous, but the fact that their significations are not the same implies by no means that they do not signify one and the same thing. It is the thing which is being, just as any being is a thing. Technically speaking, the mistake of all those who, with Avicenna, attempt to distinguish between beings and their being is to ascribe a distinct essence to what is but a mode of signification.²⁴ In fact, we should never forget that essence (*essentia*) primarily means the possession of being or the reality which belongs to being inasmuch as it actually is. What else could existence be, in Siger's doctrine, if

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

²⁴ *Ibid.* This argument is borrowed from Averroes, *In IV Metaph.*, c. III, ed. cit., f. 32^r: "*Et iste homo ratiocinatur ad suam opinionem . . .*" which, for Averroes, it was a crime to do.

not essence itself in its supreme degree of actuality? "*Esse significat essentiam per modum actus maximi*," that is to say, any fully constituted essence exists in its own right.²⁵

Siger's metaphysics of being thus remains, on the whole, the same as that of Aristotle, and this is why, even after the decisive intervention of Thomas Aquinas, his philosophy rejects it as a mere verbal illusion. Yet, like those of Averroes and Aristotle, his metaphysics deals with actually real and concrete being. The point is noteworthy because, were it not so, a very large section of history would not make sense. I am here alluding to the fact that so many Christian theologies, during the Middle Ages and after, have expressed both themselves and their philosophies in the language of Aristotle. This is eminently true of the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas, so much so that, deceived by what is an irresistibly misleading appearance, too many of his historians have mistaken him for an Aristotelian. Radically speaking, he was not, but it is true that he has, so to speak, absorbed Aristotelianism, then digested it and finally assimilated its substance within his own personal thought.

What allowed him to do so, and what accounts for the fact that between the Averroists and himself conversation and discussion were at least possible, is precisely that they were all concerned with the same concrete reality. What Aristotle had said about it was not the whole truth, yet it was true, and it always was Thomas' conviction that no already acquired truth should be allowed to perish. His attitude on this point can best be understood by referring to the problem of creation. The world of Aristotle and of Averroes is what it is as it has always been and always will be. Wholly innocent of existence, no question can arise about its beginning or its end, or even about the question of knowing how it is that such a world actually is. It is, and there is nothing more to be said. Obviously, it would be a foolish thing to speak of creation on the occasion of such a world, and, to the best of my knowledge, Thomas Aquinas has never spoken of the Aristotelian cosmos as of a created world; on the other hand, Averroes and his disciples have always maintained that, in the doctrine of Aristotle, God is not merely the Prime Mover of the world, but that he also is its Prime Maker.

Nothing could have been better calculated than this subtle distinction between Mover, Maker and Creator, to help us in ascertaining the true nature of Aristotelian being. If the God of Aristotle were nothing more than the Prime Mover of the

²⁵ Siger of Brabant, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

world, He would, in no sense of the word "being," be the cause of its being. A merely physical cause, such as God, would not be a metaphysical cause. If, as Averroes, Thomas Aquinas and many Averroists have said,²⁶ the God of Aristotle is the Maker of the world, the reason for it is that He actually is, for all beings, the cause of their very being. They owe Him, not only to move if they move, to live if they live and to know if they know, but to be. If men really were what Aristotle thought them to be, they would be very far from feeling free never to think of God. True enough, they would have very little, if anything, to expect from Him, since He Himself would not even be aware of their existence: species, at the utmost, not individuals, are worth being included in His own self-contemplation. Nevertheless, mediaeval texts are there to prove that there is such a thing as Averroistic piety.²⁷ To pray to the God of Aristotle would be pointless, in so far, at least, as prayer includes asking, but there would be very good ground to praise and to worship Him in Whom all men should recognize the Supreme Cause by which they act, they live and they are.

Still this is not yet a created universe. There still remains, in its beings, something which the God of Aristotle could not give them, because He Himself did not possess it. As a World-Maker, the God of Aristotle can insure the permanence of substances, but nothing else, because He Himself is an eternally subsisting substance, that is, a substantial act, but nothing else. His actuality is a self-contained one. He is an act to Himself alone, and this is why what happens outside Himself is not due to the fact that He loves, for He loves Himself only, but to the fact that He is loved. He has only to be what He is, in order to foster in other Pure Acts, inferior to Him yet no less eternal than He is, a permanent love for His own perfection and a permanent desire to be united with Him. Such are the divine Intelligences, and, as their desire of the First eternally reaches matter, a matter no less eternal than is the First Himself, everything eternally falls into place and eternally moves in virtue of that love which, in the words of the

²⁶ "*Ad questionem jam motam breviter, dico quod profundi philosophi, et majores eorum et maxime Averrois in tractatu De substantia orbis et in libro Destructio destructionum respondent quod Primum abstractum non tantum dat motum corpori caelesti, sed dat sibi esse et permanentiam aeternam in sua substantia.*" Helias Hebraeus, *Utrum mundus sit effectus*, in Joannes de Janduno, *De physico auditu* (Bergamo, 1501), f. 131^v. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In VI Metaph.*, lect. 1, ed. Cathala, n. 1164.

²⁷ M. Grabmann, *Die Opuscula de Summo Bono . . . und de Sompnii des Boetius von Dacien*, in *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge* (Paris, J. Vrin, 1931), pp. 306-307.

altissimo poeta, "moves the sun and the other stars." Where there is motion, there is life. Divine intelligences and heavenly bodies immutably subsist by themselves; like the First, they are gods and the life they live is divine. Below them, in immediate contact with this sublunary world and even engaged in it, are those intelligible realities which, too weak to subsist and endure by themselves, stand, so to speak, in need of some material support. They are the species. Intelligible forms, and therefore no less eternal than the gods, they nevertheless are not by themselves, but they run, so to speak, through an infinite number of individuals, which eternally succeed and replace one another in order to maintain the species to which they owe their forms. This is why individuals do not matter in themselves; their species uses them in order to endure, so that, for each of them, not the individual, but the species is the true reality. In such a world, everything is indebted to the First for all that it is. From the heavenly beings, whose very substance it is to be pure acts of contemplation and love of the First down to the humblest corporeal being whose very substance it is to share, while it lasts, in the intelligible form of its species, nothing can be found which is not indebted to the First for all that which it is, inasmuch as it is. The world of Aristotle owes its divine maker everything, except its existence. And this is why it has no history, not even in history. Hermetically sealed against any kind of novelty, the existenceless world of Aristotle has crossed century after century, wholly unaware of the fact that the world of philosophy and of science was constantly changing around it. Whether you look at it in the thirteenth, fourteenth, fifteenth or sixteenth century, the world of Averroes remains substantially the same, and the Averroists could do little more than eternally repeat themselves, because the world of Aristotle was an eternally self-repeating world. It has opposed Christian theologians when they taught that God could have made another world than the one He has made. It has resisted Christian theologians when they maintained that, in this God-made world, there take place such events as are the work of freedom and escape necessity. Because theology was, before anything else, a history full of unpredictable events, it has branded theology as a myth, and science itself has felt the weight of its hostility. Itself scientifically sterile, there is not a single scientific discovery against which, so long as it lasted, it did not raise an indignant protest. And no wonder, for, since the world of Aristotle has no history, it never changes and it is no one's business to change it. No newness, no development, no history, what a dead lump

of being the world of substance is! Yet, there certainly seems to be some newness, some development, some history in the actual world in which we live. It is now beginning to look as though we made some mistake in carelessly discounting existence. But we have not yet exhausted the list of its metaphysical substitutes. Indeed, one of them, namely, "essence," has played such a part in shaping the history of modern philosophy that, before turning to existence, we must single it out for detailed consideration.