

The problem of the One and the Many has been a topic of debate amongst metaphysicians of all philosophical schools of thought. As always, there are schools which lean to two extremes: either that all being is one (*Monism*), or that existing things are only diverse (*Pluralism*). The Thomistic school, following the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, seeks to demonstrate that we cannot coherently reject that existing things are both unified, yet distinct from one another. But how can the Thomist account for both the unity and multiplicity of being? In order to make these concepts intelligible, Aquinas makes the distinction between *essence* and *existence*. It is through this distinction that we can come to see that all created beings share similarity in existence, and dissimilarity in essence.¹ The principle of similarity and dissimilarity applies to all existing things. This paper will demonstrate how it is that all existing things are constituted by this composition, and by moving from effect to cause, we can then discover that the *cause* of all existing things is altogether simple *without* a composition of essence and existence.

Let us first define what Aquinas means by existence. When he speaks about existing things, he uses the term *being*. The term “being” can be said to signify *that which is*, or something that is real.² Aquinas also uses the term *act* as a way to show that a thing exists actually, as opposed to a potential existence. When speaking of things in existence, Aquinas does not think of beings as static, but rather, as intrinsically dynamic insofar as it is in act. All existents whether animate or inanimate, are in action by its intrinsic unity (*unum per se*).³ In other words, it is clear that there is an actively present unity by which various parts, all the way

¹ W. Norris Clarke, *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2014), 82.

² Clarke, *The One and the Many*, 25.

³ Clarke, *The One and the Many*, 65.

down to the atomic level, are acting as a distinctive whole. If something was not a distinctive whole, it would not have existence. Whether we are speaking of a rock or a human person, the very fact that these two things *are*, means they have existence.

We can now turn to the definition of essence. Aquinas offers a few terms in reference to essence: quiddity or a thing's whatness, its form, or its nature.⁴ It is referred to as these things because it is that which makes a thing to be what it is, and what signifies the determination of a thing.⁵ It could be said that essence is a potentiality to being. For instance, we can conceive of the nature of something that does not have existence, yet there is no contradiction in the possibility of that thing existing. Let us use Bigfoot as an example: while there are people in North America who claim to have seen Bigfoot, its existence has never been confirmed. Even without confirming the existence of Bigfoot, we can still know something about it – namely, that it is a hairy ape-like creature who walks upright through the wilderness. It is precisely the *whatness* or the *nature* of Bigfoot that we can speak of as its essence.

Understanding the basic idea behind essence and existence, we can examine how they relate to each other in the real world. Based on the descriptions above, it should become clear that something which has existence must have an essence, but something with an essence does not necessarily imply existence (as in the case of Bigfoot). It cannot be said then, that existence participates in essence, since an essence is only *real* when it has existence. Thus, existence is the maximum basis that essences participate in.⁶ When we look at a rock, a tree, a dog, or a human, we know that they exist, but they all exist in a different way. The rock exists as a rock, the tree

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, trans. Armand Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies), 31.

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, 30.

⁶ Clarke, *The One and the Many*, 83.

exists as a tree, the dog as a dog, and so on. All of these things are similar in the sense that they all exist, but they are dissimilar in the sense that they are not the same things. It is for this reason, that we would say that the principle of similarity is existence, and the principle of dissimilarity is essence.

If we consider that a tree and a rock share existence in a different way, we can then see that each is limited to a specific mode of existence. So, not only does essence allow for a multiplicity of being, but it also imposes a limitation upon beings to exist in this or that way. It follows then, that beings come to have essence by a limited existence, and they come to have existence by a participation in existence itself.⁷ That is to say, any contingent being composed of essence and existence must have its existence caused by something extrinsic to it since nothing caused can be the cause of itself.⁸ The chain of causes of a thing's existence must ultimately lead back to the efficient cause of *all* things, which is subsistent existence itself (*ipsum esse subsistens*) – and this we call God.

According to Aquinas, God is altogether simple. In other words, he is not composed of parts. This understanding necessitates that God does not have a body, is not composed of matter and form, and cannot have a distinction of essence and existence, or any distinctions whatsoever. For the purposes of this paper, I am focusing strictly on the essence/existence distinction. With God, there can be no distinction of essence and existence because his essence or nature *is* his existence. This can be demonstrated by taking into consideration the difference between essence and existence in created beings which are contingent, and uncreated being which is necessary. Recall when we discussed Bigfoot to comprehend the idea that essence does not directly

⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 44, a. 1.

⁸ *ST I*, q. 3, a. 4.

necessitate existence. This is the case for anything contingent because knowing the nature of something does not tell us it *must* exist. However, for a being that is necessary, its essence *would* necessitate its existence by virtue of its absolute necessity.

What do I mean by necessary being? I base this concept from the Aquinas' third proof for the existence of God. In the Third Way, Aquinas says that all things are either possible or necessary. We can know that things are possible by the very fact that they are generated and corruptible, and therefore possible *not* to be – it does not have to exist.⁹ But there must be something that is necessary insofar as it is impossible for it *not* to exist. As mentioned previously, there must be some first efficient cause of all things. Without a first cause, there would have been no effect to begin with. Thus, it is necessary for a first cause, and this first cause would be necessary for the existence of anything at all.

Based on the necessity of the first cause, we can know that it must be of itself *uncaused* since if it was caused, it would not be the first cause, but rather some intermediate cause.¹⁰ If God is not caused by anything, then he must be necessary. Being the first cause of all existing things, one cannot claim that God participates in existence since participating in existence would indicate some potency in God to have his existence actualized by another, and this is in large part why Aquinas refers to God as existence itself, and that which is Pure Act (*Actus Purus*).¹¹ This is also why we would say that God does not *have* existence like contingent beings do, but that he *is* existence by which all contingent beings participate in some limited fashion.

So, if we see that God's very nature is that which is necessary, then his essence cannot be distinguished from his existence because speaking of his essence immediately implies existence.

⁹ *ST I*, q. 2, a. 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *ST I*, q. 12, a. 1.

While speaking of Bigfoot's essence, we know that it is very *possible* that he does not exist. But with God, *what* he is necessitates *that* he is. Thus, there can be no real distinctions in God, but only distinctions within our minds. It can now be said that essence and existence are the *same* in God who is the uncaused, necessary, first efficient cause of all being.

The problem of the One and the Many is not really a problem at all in light of the Thomistic doctrine of Divine Simplicity since existence itself (God) is what the neo-Platonic tradition calls the *One*. The *many* can be understood as those contingent beings who share in existence which flows from the *One*, and by this participation in existence, the multiplicity of being is distinguished from God based on its limited existence. This limited existence is understood through the essence of a being which limits it to a specific kind of existence as *this* or *that* thing. But God, as opposed to creation, is unlimited. His essence cannot be some limited existence, for he is existence itself. For this reason, it seems that the only coherent position we can hold to is that God is simple and without a real distinction of essence and existence.

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