

THE SCIENCE OF BEING AS BEING IN ARISTOTLE, AQUINAS, AND WIPPEL

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As my contribution to this series of lectures in honor of Msgr. John Wippel, I would like to discuss a topic that he explores in his own writings, the science of metaphysics, one of whose classical names is “the science of being as being.” The phrase itself originates in Aristotle, who begins book IV of his *Metaphysics* with the blunt statement, “There is a particular science (*estin epistēmē tis*) that theorizes being as being (*to on hēi on*) and that which belongs to it as such.”¹ Thomas Aquinas uses the same phrase to speak about the subject of metaphysics, and in Latin it is expressed “*ens inquantum est ens*.” Aquinas’s way of using the term is not just a repetition of Aristotle but reflects the influence of such thinkers as Augustine, Boethius, and Avicenna. Wippel in turn comments on the usage made by all these thinkers and he uses the term himself. Finally, the speakers in this lecture series have also used the phrase and in doing so they reflect Wippel’s commentary and usage.

This sequence of uses by different speakers is an example of what our colleague Thomas Prufer called recapitulation.² The words and thoughts of one person come to life in the speech and the minds of others, and each time they come to life they are not just repeated but recapitulated, ordered anew into capitula or chapters, into new headings or bullet points. They are re-syntaxed, we might say, and to re-syntax something is to rethink it. The rearrangement will inevitably reflect the thoughts and interests of the time in which it occurs, but it will not be governed by them unless the writer is a slave to his time, in which case he would not be a recapitulator but only a mouthpiece.³

There is nothing strange or exotic about the procedure of recapitulation; we do it all the time in regard to all sorts of things. None of us can start from scratch, neither in our philosophy nor in our other ways of thinking; Aristotle himself was recapitulating Plato and the PreSocratics. Whenever we think, we reprocess what others have thought, and we even recapitulate continually what we ourselves are thinking. When we compose something, we will almost always redraft what we have written earlier, and the right formulation will usually occur to us not when we are looking for it but on the next morning, after we have intellectually and imaginatively digested the document that we put together on the day before. Writing is like a conversation we have with ourselves over time, between our present and our past selves. All human thinking is rethinking – filling in details, rounding things out, and making adjustments, sometimes large but usually small.

Such rethinking, moreover, is not just a matter of reconfiguring signs and symbols in a hermetically closed system; it is a response to the way things are, but it is a response we make with the help of others, those we recapitulate and those with whom we converse. These other people help us to see *things* and to understand what they are; we do not just repeat what other people have said and we do not just live in meanings and in opinions.⁴ This is the spirit in which I would like to explore the science of being as being in what I say today. I don’t want to just tell you what Aristotle and others have said, but to express why it is interesting and important and possible for us to use

the phrase “being as being.” I would like to show that something valuable is going on and something significant is being disclosed when we try to become engaged in this science.

1. The Phrase “Being as Being”

What does it mean to think about and understand being as being? Let us turn first to Aristotle’s development of this topic. He introduces this science abruptly in book IV of the *Metaphysics*, at the start of the first chapter. He then immediately draws a distinction. He contrasts this science, the science of being as being, with other theoretic sciences that “cut off” a “part” of being and consider what belongs to that part. The Greek word for part is *meros*, and the word for cutting off is *apotemnō*, to sever, cut off, lop off, slice off. This is a graphic term, and it permits us to call the part a segment of being. As examples of such partial inquiries, Aristotle mentions the mathematical sciences. The science of being as being is thus distinguished from sciences that lop off a part of being and study that. The phrase “being as being” continues to be used throughout chapter 2. It occurs sometimes in variant forms, such as the plural “beings as beings” and “the one as one.”⁵

That is what Aristotle does in book IV. He presents another introduction and definition of this science two books later in the *Metaphysics*, in book VI chapter 1. There he says that we are seeking the principles and causes of beings as beings (in the plural), and he again contrasts such an inquiry with sciences that examine a kind – and here he calls the part a *genos* – of being. As an example of such a partial science he first mentions physics, which examines things that have within themselves their own principle of motion and rest. Such motion and rest imply that this kind of being involves matter. After discussing physics for a while, Aristotle briefly mentions mathematics as another example of a partial science. He then goes on to ask whether there is a kind of being that is separate – separate from matter and motion – and he says that if there is such a kind of being, a theological science will explore it.

Many questions arise in these two chapters of the *Metaphysics*, the initial chapters of books IV and VI, but I want to concentrate on just one issue. I want to concentrate on the contrast that Aristotle draws between sciences of a segment or a kind of being and the science of being as such. Aristotle does not just say flatly and simply that he is going to treat being as being. He doesn’t just say there is this unusual science and we are going to pursue it. Rather, as he sets out on this project, he distinguishes this venture from an inquiry into a part or kind of being. The contrast is important and it should not be overlooked. We don’t just have the science of being as being by itself; we have it in contrast with sciences of a part. What does this mean?

Consider what happens when we inquire into a kind of being, as we do in physics or mathematics, or, to broaden the contrast, when we engage in biology, which studies living things, or economics, which studies commodities and exchanges, or astronomy. In such partial sciences, we study being as mobile, being as quantitative, being as living, being as economic or as celestial. An intellectual motion – we could call it a confinement – takes place at the origin of such inquiry. Being is there as the background or the matrix, and we narrow our focus down to one of its kinds. We work with being as . . . quantified, or being as . . . living. We try, for example, to work out

mathematical relationships or the properties and principles of living things. As we do so, however, being itself always remains there behind us. Being stays at our back. Permit me to paraphrase Andrew Marvell. We focus on a given field, but “At our back we always hear/ Being’s winged chariot circling near.”⁶ Being, that from which this part has been cut, is always at our back, and moreover it is not just at our back and all around us, but also always at work in its own silent and surreptitious way in what we are focusing on. Being is in the part as well as in the whole. We overlook it and we take it for granted or as given, but it is there. A science of the part is, therefore, essentially a forgetful science. It forgets where it came from. It is oblivious of its own origins and principles and many of its ingredients. It is an ungrateful offspring, accepting its inheritance and spending it, but remaining unmindful of where it came from.

So what do we do about this? How can we become more grateful and more reverent toward our origins? Following our teacher Aristotle, let us give our progenitors the respect that is due to them. We set out to engage in the science that discusses being as . . . being. This Aristotelian phrase is very dynamic but also very strange. We start off with being, just as we do in all the partial sciences, and we *start* to narrow it down. We take being *as* . . . (as what?) . . . as being! We start narrowing it down, but then – surprise! – we stop narrowing it, and we turn around and go back to our starting point. We recover our origins. We go back to the beginning. Moreover, we go back not just to any beginning but to the first one of all, to the underived beginning, behind which there is nothing to investigate or even to think of. This is the ultimate brick wall behind which there is nothing else. We do watch our back. We go back to *the* beginning from which all parts and kinds are sorted out.

We could not make this move without contrasting it against the partial sciences. If we tried to perform it just by itself, we would not be able to define it. We would not find any friction or any grip through which we could clarify what we are doing. We could not have made the strategic distinction that we need. There is a science of being as being only because there are partial sciences in which being is at work. We need these partial sciences, so that we can get behind them and achieve a science of being as being. We have first to become oblivious to being if we are going to remember it. The partial sciences whet our appetite for the theoretic life and put us on the road to first philosophy, but the road does not lead to yet one more partial science. It leads to this strange science of being as being.

Let’s look more closely at this maneuver of confinement. I want to introduce a metaphor to make it stand out more clearly. We start with the most general context “being,” and we initiate a restriction, we say “being as. . . .” But then, suddenly, like good open field runners, we “reverse field” and go back to what we started from. When we do this, we annul the “as” of confinement. Instead of concentrating on “being as mobile” or “being as numerable” or “being as alive,” we begin to focus on “being as . . . BEING!” We bounce back. We are thrown back on what we normally and always leave behind and presuppose. The “as” annihilates itself, but unless it did so, unless it led us to expect a confinement and then disappointed us, there would be no turn of our minds to this new subject. We go back to what everyone else leaves behind. Philosophy is here defined against the other sciences, which are not even aware of the confinement at work in their establishment.

I use the metaphor of “reversing field” to describe the move made into first philosophy. In football, this would mean that instead of running toward the opponent’s goal line, we turn around and start running toward our own. Most people watching the game would ask, “What’s going on? What on earth is he doing? He’s running toward his own end zone.” The other team wouldn’t even try to stop us. Even our cheerleaders would stop cheering us on. But that’s the way we are, and that’s philosophy. We want to get back to our beginnings, to the principles that are at work in everything. Philosophy is not for everybody, even though everybody draws on being in whatever they say, think, and do, and even though everybody attempts something like a study of being as being, if only in a confused way, whenever they venture an opinion about the whole of things.⁷

And although the partial scientist explicitly considers only his partial field, many of the dimensions of being “shine through” or are “at work” in his partial science. Being shows up, for example in his use of the word “is,” or in his assumption and use of the principle of noncontradiction, or in the very idea of definition or intelligibility or distinction, as well as in his syntax and predication, and in his use of “same” and “other” and “prior” and “posterior,” that is, the postpredicaments. These are all things that the science of being as being does deal with; they are all proper to being as such, but they are also ingredients in the partial sciences. Incidentally, one of the more curious things that Aristotle says the science treats is whether Socrates and Socrates seated are the same.⁸ The question may sound trivial, but it raises the issues of identity and accidental being. Only this science, furthermore, can come to terms with the nature of sophistry and dialectics.⁹ The science of being as being is also the science of truth; at the beginning of book II of the *Metaphysics* Aristotle refers to it as “the investigation concerning truth, *hē peri tēs alētheias theōria*,” and he later, in books V and VI, speaks about the true as one of the meanings of being.¹⁰ This science would, therefore, also deal with the distinction between our opinions of things and the way things really are. I would claim that this science would also examine the way things can exist in the mind, in pictures, and in words.

The partial scientist can’t handle these things in his partial science – as a biologist or botanist or physicist – but he can’t help using them. We cannot give a psychological or a biological explanation of the principle of noncontradiction, for example, or of the intelligibility of things; we can clarify such things only in the science of being as being.¹¹ For that matter, we cannot give a psychological clarification of psychology, or a biological explanation of biology, and it is philosophically amusing when such scientists try to do this. What would it mean to give a biological explanation of the science of biology? It would have to show that the science is a product of bodily, organic processes, and that it is carried on in order to sustain bodily life. All partial sciences are partial; they don’t watch their back. The things that come from behind us are what the first philosopher works on, the things that permeate the partial sciences but can’t be treated by them.

I should mention some other features of the science of being as being or philosophy. It is eminently realistic and concrete, because it deals with what is, with things or beings as such. Furthermore, it does not just speak about things over against us; it also speaks about ourselves as the ones to whom being appears, and in doing so it again does not carry out an enterprise in psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics, history, or biology. First philosophy clarifies what we are as agents of truth. We are a special kind of entity because being is an issue for

us, and because we are an issue for ourselves. The science of being as being is called in Latin the science of *ens qua ens*, but it is also the science of *mens qua mens*. It turns to “intellect as intellect” in contrast with intellect as psychological or sociological or biological. I would also suggest that Aristotle’s maneuver into first philosophy is similar to the transcendental reduction of Husserl, which also is a procedure leading away from unselfconscious partial science into first philosophy. By getting to “mind as mind” Husserl also gets to being as being. And while we have been concentrating on special sciences as the contrast for first philosophy, we might also have thought about areas outside of science, such as ethical conduct, politics, and poetics, as foils for the turn to being as being. These things also arise from the matrix of being, as partial domains within it.

2. Metaphysics and Judgment

So far we have been working under the aegis of Aristotle. We turn now to a theme from Thomas Aquinas, one that has been extensively developed by John Wippel, the judgment of separation as the establishment of the field for the science of being as being. As Wippel and others have argued, the most important place where Aquinas examines this issue is in his commentary on the *De Trinitate* of Boethius, where Thomas discusses the division and method of the sciences. Aquinas’s treatment of the topic is prompted by a claim made by Boethius about the division of sciences, but it can also be seen as a condensation and recapitulation of Aristotle’s discussion in *Metaphysics* books IV and VI. Aquinas introduces a number of new ideas in his analysis.

Aquinas, following Aristotle, distinguishes two kinds of intellectual operations: the first act of the intellect, simple apprehension, in which we express an intelligibility and come to know what a thing is; and the second act, the act of judging, the act of composing and dividing, which looks to (*respicit*) the existence of the thing in question. Thus, by the first act we understand *what* ostriches or unicorns are, but through the second act, the judgment, we deal with whether ostriches or unicorns really are and how they are. As Wippel writes, “Thomas’s point is this: if it is through the intellect’s first operation that we discover quiddities or understand what things are, it is only through its second operation that we discover their existence (*esse*).”¹²

Judgments in turn can be of two kinds. First, there are judgments of existence, such as “there are ostriches” or “the ostrich lives” or, negatively, “there are no unicorns, the unicorn is not.” Second, there are judgments of attribution, such as “The ostrich runs around” or “The ostrich does not fly.” Both kinds of judgments deal with the existence of what they refer to, whether the simple existence or the qualified or attributed mode of existing. It is real ostriches that run around, and real ostriches that do not fly.

But the initial discovery of the existence of something, such as ostriches or, more exotically, electrons or neutrons, is not yet by far the entrance into the study of being as being. Judgment gives us a direct, naive awareness of the reality of things, of particular kinds of things. It does involve reason; it is more than the elementary awareness of reality that we have in sensory experience, where we could be said to encounter the resistance of things but not yet their being. When we judge we move into reason – I would say we move into syntax – and we register the actuality

of things, their being. We have an initial contact with being. We have not yet, however, turned toward being as being.

Let's stay with this initial sense of being for a moment and try to concretize it by offering two more examples. Suppose we are out for a walk and it starts to rain and we say, "It is starting to rain and we are far from home." We register not only *raining*, but that it *is* raining. The thing is presented to us as really being. The hard fact is given to us, and it can be presented through either a judgment of existence or a judgment of attribution. We bump into the reality of this particular being, and we do so through the act of judgment. But now let's take a more dramatic example. Consider the kind of awareness that Joseph Stalin had when he finally realized or judged that Hitler was indeed invading the Soviet Union. Stalin had been in denial about the threat and he refused to believe warnings that people sent him. He took no precautions, and he was shocked and awed when Operation Barbarossa actually began to be – when it came into existence – on June 22, 1941. Stalin might well have judged, for himself and for others, "This *is* an invasion; it's really happening; this is not a drill." Thus, as Wippel writes "Here, . . . owing to its cooperation with the common sense, the intellect will be in a position to judge that the object one is perceiving (and which is acting on the external senses) actually exists. . . . One will now make an initial judgment of existence regarding the particular thing one is perceiving."¹³

The actuality in question, of course, is that of a particular kind of thing. We are dealing not with sheer existence but with the existence of something definite. In this example it is an invasion, in the other example a rainstorm. It is true that Stalin did not directly perceive the invasion, but he did perceive its effects – for example, we might suppose, in the reports he received and the somewhat jittery behavior of his subordinates. So here we have an awareness of the reality or existence of things, registered and presented to us by the act of judging.

But as rational human beings we need not stay with a particular judgment regarding a particular occurrence. We can go beyond any such particular judgments and get a comprehensive idea of "reality" or "that which is." We might express this by a more generalized aphorism, such as "Those are the facts" or "Things are what they are" or, in the memorable words of Walter Cronkite, "That's the way it is." We have reached a sense of the world as real. But even this more global sense of being is not yet the entrance into first philosophy. It is still not the metaphysical understanding of being as being. This generalized notion is what Wippel calls the primitive or premetaphysical notion of being.¹⁴ It is a generalized sense of what is. To allude to what we said earlier in this paper, we could say that at this point we have not yet reversed field; we are still moving forward in our cognition, even if we are doing so in a more global way. We have a sense of "being," but not being as such or being as being.

What happens next, and what establishes the science of being as being, is that another judgment comes into play, one different from the judgments of existence and attribution that give us the reality of things. The new judgment is specifically a negative judgment, a judgment of separation. In what we have described so far, the being we have encountered has been material and mobile. Thus, the rain that is falling, or the tanks crossing the Russian border and the Stukas bombing the railroad stations, are all material and mobile, and so far as we know this kind of thing is all that there is; reality, as we have experienced and conceived it so far, involves matter and motion, and if

we were to stop at this point to analyze what we have before us, we would be involved in physics as the highest and most comprehensive science, and its principles and causes would be the highest we could seek. We would be studying being as material and mobile.

But as we reflect further and think more carefully about what we have encountered, we come to see that being need not be constricted to matter and motion. In our experiencing and in our physics we have developed and used such notions as substance, actuality and potentiality, identity and difference, and even being and truth. We couldn't have had a physics or any thoughtful experience without the involvement of these forms. But we realize that although these dimensions of things occur in the material and mobile being we experience, they could also occur outside of matter and motion. They don't need to be constricted to material and mobile being. We come to see that they enjoy what Wippel calls negative or neutral immateriality.¹⁵ They *are* found in material and mobile beings, but they also can go beyond them and can be found in beings that are separate from matter and motion. We express this transcendence in the judgment of separation, in which we assert that being and all that belongs to it as such need not be material and mobile, although it obviously can be material and mobile and in some instances actually is so. We can, therefore, think about the things we experience not just as material but also simply as being.

And we can go still further and see that being need not be limited to any particular kind of being. As Wippel puts it, "That by reason of which something is recognized as being need not be identified with or restricted to that by which it is recognized as being of a given kind."¹⁶ Being taken as being includes material things, but it can also encompass immaterial things, and it cannot be limited to any particular kind of being. In this way, we attain being as being, which Thomas also calls *ens commune* or being in general. This is the subject of metaphysics, and we set out to determine its principles and causes.

What will this science do? What sort of explanations will it provide? As I have indicated earlier, it will develop such themes as the principle of noncontradiction and other metaphysical and logical principles, as well as the notions of substance, form and *esse*, essence and existence, the potential and the actual, truth and falsity, predication and syntax, and identity and difference.¹⁷ It would explore how things are in the world, how they are in the mind, and how they can exist in speech and in images. Such themes cannot be handled in biology or chemistry or physics, and not even in psychology or sociology, even though they occur in all such sciences. Furthermore, one of the things this science will do is to show that its subject, *ens commune*, cannot account for its own being, and that it needs a cause of its existence. The science reasons to God as the uncaused, universal cause of the being of things, and it explores how we can speak about the God who is so much beyond anything we can directly experience. God is not included within the subject matter of metaphysics; he is considered in this science not as part of its subject but as the cause or principle of its subject, which is *ens commune*. Such knowledge of God as the cause of beings is the goal or the end of first philosophy.

3. A Question

Wippel's treatment of this topic is comprehensive and subtle, but in reading it I find a problem, which you may have discerned in my exposition of this topic. My question is, what does the judgment of separation separate our target from? Does it separate the notion of being from matter and motion, or does it separate it from any limited kind of being at all? These two strands are found in his argument and it seems to me that it would be desirable to distinguish them more explicitly than he does in some passages.

Perhaps I could make my question more obvious and more vivid by saying that it deals with the status of separate or immaterial substances, which Aquinas in his commentary on Boethius calls the separate intelligences and which he elsewhere calls angels. Such beings are positively immaterial, but they are finite and created. My question is, do such separate intelligences fall under *ens commune*, the subject of metaphysics, or not? Are angels part of the subject of metaphysics, or are they among the principles and causes of the subject of metaphysics?

Let me summarize the problem I wish to raise. I find the following two lines of argument interwoven in Wippel's treatment of this topic.

1. In some passages he says that the judgment of separation moves us beyond material and hence mobile things. The judgment of separation shows that notions like being, substance, and truth need not be limited to material things but can be applied to immaterial and divine things. These positively immaterial beings will come into metaphysics as the causes and principles of its subject, *ens commune*. They will not be included in the subject of metaphysics. Thus, Wippel says "Being as being is the subject of metaphysics; things separate from matter and motion in the positive sense – divine things – are studied by metaphysics only as principles of its subject."¹⁸ He also writes "Divine things, such as God and separate substances, are . . . regarded as causes of being in general (*ens commune*)."¹⁹ In this approach, it seems to me, angels would not fall within *ens commune* but would be among its causes and principles. In this formulation, *ens commune* encompasses just material and mobile being. I would see this as an Aristotelian way of approaching first philosophy.
2. But at other times Wippel says that the judgment of separation moves us beyond limited beings of any kind (and not just beyond material and mobile beings). It moves us beyond any *kind* of being, including spiritual beings, and in this approach angels *would* fall under *ens commune*. For example, he writes that the judgment of separation is "a negative judgment in that it denies that that by reason of which something is described as being is to be identified with that by reason of which it is a being of a given kind, for instance, material and changing being, or quantified being, or, for that matter, spiritual being."²⁰ Metaphysics, he says "treat[s] of being in general . . . or without restriction, precisely insofar as it is being rather than insofar as it is being of a given kind."²¹ In this viewpoint, *ens commune*, the subject of metaphysics, would encompass both material being and separate substances – in one passage Wippel refers to "being in general

and that which falls thereunder, that is, created being”²² – and only God would remain outside it, not created separate substances. God would be considered in metaphysics as the cause and principle of *ens commune*. I would see this as a Thomistic way of describing first philosophy.

There seem to be two lines of argument here: the one that leads us to transcend material being, and the one that leads us to transcend finite being of any kind, and some passages of Wippel’s writings seem to oscillate between the two. The two lines of argument are, of course, related. The second reinforces the first. If in our judgment of separation we have gone beyond the limitations inherent to any kind of being, we will obviously have also gone beyond the limitations of material being, which is a kind of being. However, if we only establish the first transcendence, if we only show the possible immateriality of being as being, we have not yet determined that being can transcend all finite kinds of being. We haven’t yet determined that it can transcend angelic beings or separate forms.

I think, however, that the two lines of argument can be reconciled. Going beyond material and mobile being can be seen as a step toward the fuller transcending of finite being. Trying to go beyond being in matter and motion would prompt us to go one step further and ask whether being as such can transcend all finite kinds as well. Material and mobile beings are obviously divided into multiple kinds of things, multiple species whose individual instances come and go. This highly perceptible sense of kinds could be a step toward kinds as such, even to the kinds that are found within immaterial being, where, according to Aquinas, every individual is a kind unto itself and therefore able to exhaust the perfections of what it is.

4. Proposal for a Response

Let us explore the elements found in these two approaches.²³ This section of my paper will not be *about* the science of being as being; it will be an exercise in the science itself, an attempt to clarify the way of being of forms, both material and separate, as well as the meaning of the act of *esse*.

a. Material Forms

Consider first the forms of material things. Consider something like being patriotic or patriotism. Only human beings in their embodiment can be patriotic, because the attribute involves belonging to some native community and having a patrimony, something inherited through the sharing of life. We can talk in different ways in regard to this attribute. We can say, “Johnson is patriotic,” and we can also say, “Johnson is a patriot.” In both cases, we refer to the individual human beings who embody the form. But we can also shift our focus and talk about patriotism as such, and when we do so we disregard, we positively abstract from, any particular instances of this form (we don’t just leave them indeterminate). We can distill the form of patriotism and we can talk about the form itself. We can say a lot of things about it, for example, that patriotism involves a native community.

Such an isolated form can never exist by itself. Patriotism can exist in a real way only as instantiated in Johnson, Smith, and Jones, but it can be talked about by itself and what we say about it is true of the form itself and of all the things that instantiate the form. What we say is not true simply about our concept of the form or our idea of the form. We are talking about a kind of being or a way of being, and not just about an idea. We would do well to avoid talking about the *concept* of patriotism; it is much better to talk about “being patriotic” and about “what it is to be patriotic,” or about patriotism itself.

The form of patriotism does not subsist. It does not stand on its own. It is embodied and individualized in people and it really exists only in that way. But the form of patriotism cannot be exhausted by its instances, not even by all of them. Each patriot has his own patriotism, and each has it in a limited manner. No human being can embody all the potentials of the form of patriotism. Some people embody it more than others; we could say that Alexander Hamilton was more patriotic than Aaron Burr, and a character in a movie might be a purified paradigm of patriotism, such as the man played by Mel Gibson in the film *The Patriot*. This is what a work of art does, it sublimates the form of things, but not even the fictional, artistic paradigm can be sheer patriotism, the very form. The form exists as distributed and confined, but in itself, considered absolutely, it contains everything that patriotism can be, and not even all the patriots together can exhaust it. These features are true of all the forms that are essentially material, that is, all the forms that need to determine material beings to be actual.

For another example, consider the form of being musical. We can say that Elvis is musical and that Elvis is a musician, but we can also talk about the form of musicality or about music as such. In this case also, no musician, not even Elvis or Mozart, can exhaust the virtualities of music, even though musicality as such does not subsist or stand itself by itself, even though it needs Elvis and Mozart to be actualized. Material forms exist only in their embodiments but they are not exhausted by any of them, nor by all of them.

I have one more point to make about material forms. They can really exist, as I have said, only in their embodiments, but in addition they can exist in the mind or the intellect. They can take on a cognitive existence correlated with their real existence. Patriotism can exist in the minds of those who think about it, but in a different manner from the way it exists in those who embody it. In this regard, the phenomenon of a picture or a dramatization of the form is especially interesting, because it expresses not only real patriotism but the patriotism as it is conceived by those who depict it. The being of the depicted or dramatized patriotism is intermediate between the real and the cognitive existence. And still more interesting is the way the form of patriotism exists in the name that signifies it, in the word *patriotism*. The form exists in the word as its sense or meaning. The word is different from a picture, because it captures the form of patriotism in its intellectualized purity (whereas an image captures patriotism in only one version), but the name still signifies real patriotism and, indirectly at least, real patriots. The exploration of the way of being of material forms – in things, in the mind, in images, and in words – is part of the task of the science of being as being.

b. Separate Forms

So much for material forms. Let's move now to separate, immaterial form. Suppose there is an angel whose form is something like loyalty, "The Loyalty Angel." His loyalty would not be like ours, because his form could not be embodied in us, but let's say it is something like what we call loyalty. He is loyal in the way that only an angel can be, and he does not need to perform loyal acts in order to become loyal, the way we must do in order to appropriate our loyalty, nor does he grow or mature or ripen in regard to what he is. That angel would be the separate and perfected form of that characteristic, as Raphael is the archangel of healing, Michael the warrior archangel, and Gabriel the announcer. The Loyalty Angel would not be the form in which the patriots Johnson, Smith, and Jones participate in. He would be the pure angel of celestial loyalty: he would be fully actual in his substance from the beginning, and he would exhaust the perfection of his kind of loyalty. Or let's consider "The Musical Angel," the intensified and unified form of the muses, the pure form of Polyhymnia or Euterpe. The Loyalty Angel and The Musical Angel, the separate form of loyalty and the separate form of harmony, do not participate in a form, they each *are* a form. Notice, also, that nothing else participates in them. They are not like the forms of patriotism or human music. They are not that in which patriots and musicians participate. They are subsistent beings; they do stand on their own. Each of them, furthermore, exhausts the potentialities of what he is. Each is fully charged and fully activated. An angel might on occasion come down and "touch" a human patriot or musician; he might affect the imagination of a human being and help him acquire an intelligible species; but he would not share his own angelic form with the human being.²⁴ Angels exist in another way, and let us also remember that there are myriads of angels, each with its own specific excellence fully achieved.

So now we have encountered embodied forms (like patriotism) and separate forms (like angels). I would say that the Aristotelian strain in the judgment of separation stops at this point. It transcends material and mobile being and leads to separate form, even to a first separate form, but it does not go any further. This is the outer rim of Aristotle's world. It is true that Aristotle talks about being as well as about form, but his understanding of being comes to its completion in the separate form that is the capstone of the cosmos. As Thomas Pruffer writes, for Aristotle, "Minded soul contemplating form which is form of . . . and form in . . . frees that form toward the more primary way of being: being form only, being form alone."²⁵ The Prime Mover of Aristotle is like a super angel for Aquinas. It is the highest and best thing that can be.

c. *Esse commune*

We now turn to the Thomistic line of argument in regard to the judgment of separation. This approach introduces a new dimension and focuses on the question of being even more sharply than Aristotle's approach does. If Thomas were to discuss The Loyalty Angel and The Musical Angel, for example, he would admit that such beings exhaust the potential of *what* they are, they exhaust their own form, they *are* all that they could be, but he would also point out that they still are not altogether simple. They might be "necessary angels" (to use the elegant term of Wallace Stevens), but they still depend on something beyond themselves for what they are and for the fact that they

are.²⁶ Why are they not purely simple and radically necessary? *Because it does not follow from what they are that they have to be.* They do not exist simply on their own, and they could be conceived not to be. They are necessary and sempiternal beings, but there is a sense in which they still need to be explained. They depend on something different from them for their being. They are necessary, but still *ab alio*.²⁷

Because of this dependence, both angels and material beings have something in common existentially despite their great difference in kind. They can both be grouped together and included under one notion, the notion of being. They all *are* and they can be called beings, and the Thomistic name for all of them, for them and whatever else there is, is *ens commune*, being in general, or being as being. Just as Johnson and Smith are patriots, and Elvis and Mozart are musicians, so all of them, Johnson, Smith, Elvis, Mozart, as well as The Loyalty Angel and The Musical Angel and everything else besides, are beings. They are all included within *ens commune*, and *ens commune* is the subject of metaphysics, the science of being as being.

But what makes them to be *beings*? Is there another form that makes them to be beings, as there is a form of patriotism that lets Johnson be patriotic? Is there a form for actual existence? Do angels have one form that makes them what they are and another form that makes them to actually be? Do *we* have a form that makes us human and another form that makes us to be? No, we don't want to say that, neither for angels nor for ourselves, because here we are stretching beyond form: we are no longer dealing with a kind of being. The act of being is not a kind of being. Rather than speak of a form of actuality, we should talk about *esse* or the act of *esse*. As patriotism is to Johnson the patriot, so *esse* is to The Loyalty Angel, The Musical Angel, and to Johnson, Smith, and Jones, both in themselves and in their ways of being patriotic, as well as Elvis and Mozart and their ways of being musical.

The act of being is the capstone here, and all entities share in it. Each entity enjoys its own act of existing. But we can broaden the range of our speech and move beyond particular acts of being; we can also speak in a more general manner about the act of existing. When the act of *esse* is considered in a universal and abstract way, it is called *esse commune* by Aquinas. *Esse commune* is, as Wippel says, the act of being when it is "viewed in general."²⁸ We can intellectually distill *esse commune* from particular existents (the procedure is somewhat analogous to the distillation of patriotism from patriots).

Esse commune is far richer than the share of existence found in any particular entity. According to Wippel, Aquinas implies "that any finite substance simply has or participates in *esse commune* without exhausting it."²⁹ Each entity has its own principle of being, its own act of existence, and hence it limits *esse commune* to itself, to its kind and its individuality, but no entity or entities, not even the material world and everything in it, nor an angel and all the angels combined, nor even the material and angelic world together, could empty out the virtualities of *esse*, the potential of existence, even of finite existence. The world around us is a marvelous place and a source of wonder. It's a wonderful world, as Louis Armstrong assures us. Think of our privileged planet and the multitudes of kinds that it allows to proliferate, not only in biological forms but in the characters and actions of men: so many essences and so much diversity of being right here at home, and in addition there are the galaxies and black holes of the cosmos, the fields and particles, and the various energies of things. But even with all this diversity, *esse commune*

could give rise to still more kinds and particulars than the world we marvel at. There might have been unlimited other things and their stories, perhaps even other universes. Everything that is only *participates* in *esse commune*, it does not exhaust it.

I would like to make one more point about *esse commune*. It does not subsist or stand on its own. It exists in only two ways: as participated by various things, and as conceived by us. In this respect it is more like material forms, more like patriotism, than like separate forms or angels, because material forms also exist only in their instances and in our minds (and their existence in our depictions and our words reflects their existence in our minds). Because *esse commune* does exist as conceived by us, it ought to be grateful to us, and especially to people like Louis Armstrong, who sings about it, and Thomas Aquinas, who theorizes it. It owes something to us. We are the custodians of being or, as Heidegger says, the shepherds of being. We furnish it, with all its virtuality, with something of a home in our minds and our words.³⁰ We are special in the cosmos, because within it we alone, it would seem, can marvel at *esse commune* and let it exist intellectually.

5. *Esse subsistens*: Beyond Being and *Esse commune*

So now we have come to *ens commune* (which includes embodied forms and separate forms) and the *esse commune* in which entities participate. All this takes us pretty far. How far does it take us? Can there be anything beyond this, or have we here come up against the ultimate brick wall? Do *ens commune* and *esse commune* provide the widest and ultimate context, that beyond which nothing can be thought? No, not yet, not in Thomistic metaphysics. Why not? Because in each of its instances *ens commune* still involves a distinction between *what* it is and *that* it is, and between its essence and its *esse*. *Ens commune* cannot account for its own actuality; it only participates in *esse*. It does not and cannot depend on itself. What it is does not explain why it is. As rich and varied as *ens commune* is, it still receives its being from elsewhere, from something beyond *ens commune*, and this reception could depend on one source only, on the being whose essence entails existence. This source could be nothing but *esse* subsisting in itself and of itself, which of course is God as Creator.³¹

There could be only one such subsistent existence, only one that could stand on its own in this way. It is individuated not through being any *kind* of being, not even by fulfilling any specific form, as angels do, nor by being made concrete by this particular mass of matter, as embodied forms are individuated. *Esse subsistens* is individuated simply by being sheer, undifferentiated *esse*. All beings that share in existence depend specifically on this “being” or principle that exists in the most independent way. It “stands on its own” – it subsists – in a way that is more radical than the way in which pure forms (like angels) can stand alone. *Esse subsistens* is infinitely different from any *forma subsistens*.³²

The totality of things, *ens commune*, might not have been; its essences do not entail existence, not even as a whole. *Esse subsistens*, in stark contrast, could be all that there is. It has, however, chosen not to be alone. It or he has chosen to create beings that participate in its existence. The Scottish philosopher David Braine writes that this being, the divine existence, is “transcendent in nature; yet not distant, but immediate to each thing, . . . [with] an

intimacy to each thing which none can share.”³³ Neither Polyhymnia nor Euterpe, neither The Loyalty Angel nor The Musical Angel, could be so intimate to the things that are in this world, because God is subsistent *esse* and not simply subsistent form, and all things, created and preserved, are continually given their being by him. The Musical Angel touching Mozart is as nothing compared with God letting something, anything be.

St. Augustine, toward the end of the *Confessions*, expresses this sheer *esse* of God (its being beyond any kind of being), as well as the dependence of every kind of being on it. Through the Holy Spirit, he says, we see that “whatever is in any particular manner is good; *bonum est, quidquid aliquo modo est.*” Why is it good? “Because it is from him who is not in any particular manner, but [just] is – is; *ab illo enim est, qui non aliquo modo est, sed est est.*”³⁴ By repeating the word *est* in this striking way, Augustine says that God *is* simply; he exists not in any particular mode nor as any particular kind. The *est* of God is not like that of any other; it is reduplicated: *est*, and nothing else. The second *est* prevents us from adding any thing or any mode to the first.³⁵ Augustine makes this assertion not in a metaphysical treatise but in the *Confessions*, which is a prayer addressing God. It is true that these phrases themselves are grammatically in the third person; they comprise an incipient metaphysical discourse, which perhaps needs to be stated in the third person. But to speak about God as sheer *esse* is not incompatible with Christian prayer; to the contrary, it clarifies the setting for prayer. The repetition of the verb – *sed est est* – is still in ordinary language and it is a rhetorical trope, but it is on the verge of metaphysics. One *est*, an ordinary one, would not have been sufficient.

To return to the vocabulary of Thomas Aquinas, the actuality of God as sheer *esse* is different from *esse commune*, the virtuality of finite existence, which does not stand alone and which needs to be modified in order to be real. *Esse commune* needs things in order to be realized, but God could be all that there is, with no lessening of goodness and perfection. God is not a separate form nor is he the ground of being in the sense of *esse commune*. He is *esse subsistens*, and he could be without the world. The being of all other things, moreover, depends not on an inevitable emanation from God, but on his deliberate choice to create.

Esse subsistens, in its sheer simplicity and perfection, is beyond our experience and understanding. Our minds and our words are proportioned to material things and the forms that make them what they are. We are at home with enmattered intelligibilities. We can, nevertheless, devise a name for *esse subsistens* (we have just done so), and we formulate this name by using the word *to be* and contrasting *esse subsistens* against both separate forms and *esse commune*. We define the name by making a judgment of separation. We give a meaning to the name by making distinctions; we need these distinctions to be able to signify what the name refers to.³⁶ The world we experience and bring to speech points toward a primary mover and ultimately toward a cause of existence (which is the truth of the primary mover), but our minds, words, and images cannot capture the intelligibility of what is so indicated. As Thomas Pruffer writes, “The world implies God, but it does not manifest him as he is in himself.”³⁷ Our words need God’s own Word if we are to do more than gesture toward such undifferentiated perfection of being; and yet, we do use our own words to indicate it as being beyond our knowing.

Concluding remarks: Metaphysics and Religion

Let us recall the various forms and excellences that we have distinguished. First, there are embodied forms, such as ostriches and patriotism. They need individual bodily substances to exist, but they can also exist in our minds and in dramas, pictures, and words. Such forms are never fully exhausted, not even by splendid instances or by poetic creations. They are only participated. Second, there are separate forms or angels. Each of them exists as a limited kind of being, but it exists as fully actualized in its form. Other things do not participate in it. Third, there is *esse commune*, which is not a form but the virtuality of finite existing. It is participated by all finite things, whether embodied or separate. It could have given rise to many other beings that would have been different from those that actually exist. Fourth, there is *esse per se subsistens*, the divine and creative cause of all things. It does exist or subsist, and it is unique in its absolute and simple perfection of being. It alone could have been all that there is. Its essence entails existence. To the extent that things exist and share in existence, they participate in this perfect, simple, and unlimited *esse*.

Thomistic philosophical exploration comes to its final context when it reaches the pure existence of God as the first and final cause of the being of things. At this point Thomistic metaphysics has moved from its subject, being as being, and has come to rest in its goal or end, the cause of its subject. Before concluding my discussion, however, I wish to make a slight digression, from metaphysics to religious worship. In our philosophy of being, we have distinguished three different kinds of ultimate and transcendent principles: separate forms, as examined by Aristotle; *esse commune*, as the virtuality of being for things in general; and *esse subsistens*, the being of God the Creator. But things that are ultimate are more than an object of philosophical curiosity. Each of these ultimates is also an object of human reverence or religious worship. We reach them in our metaphysics, but we also depend on them in a definitive way. We recognize and perhaps even sense that dependency, and we express it in religious veneration. Thus, the separate forms can be seen as the gods, good or bad, that are worshiped in pagan religion. John Henry Newman, for example, says, “Jupiter and Neptune, as represented in classical mythology, are evil spirits, and nothing can make them otherwise.”³⁸ *Esse commune*, with its virtuality of being, can be the object of philosophical and poetic piety, such as that expressed by Heidegger, who speaks about being as eventful and as sending us our destiny at different moments in history. *Esse commune* could be considered as the “Es” in Heidegger’s phrase, “Es gibt. . . .”³⁹ And of course *esse subsistens* is what Christians worship as Creator and Redeemer. To be devoted to God as creative *esse*, in his transcendence and yet his metaphysical proximity to all creatures, is a very different thing from honoring and fearing separate forms (the powers that be), and different also from finding poetic and philosophical satisfaction in things. Once we see that God can be like this, and once we believe that he is this way, we find that we are “no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,/ with an alien people clutching their gods.”⁴⁰ This religious aspect of metaphysics should not be overlooked. We do not just cognize what is ultimate; we also revere it. In fact we usually conceive it first in worship and only later in philosophy.

By reaching the ultimate actuality of subsistent *esse*, we gain a new perspective on all the other dimensions of beings. For example, we can distinguish, with Aquinas, between the *esse subsistens* of God and the *esse commune*

of created things, and we can compare their respective potentialities and activities. We can also look back on the forms of things, and speak about form from the perspective of *esse*, *esse commune*, and *esse subsistens*. The ancient doctrine of *eidōs* can be viewed in a new light. We get a new and more intense appreciation of what it means to be “first” in the order of being. We can draw parallels and analogies where they are appropriate and think more carefully about the nature of things, about what it is for things to be, and what it is for us to understand them. Even accidental being takes on a new dimension. Both *esse* and form become validated through the metaphysics we have inherited. The Thomistic perspective brings out features that may not be as sharply delineated in Aristotle’s science of being as being.

As we explore the themes of being and form, however, we enter into contemporary controversy. Form and being deserve special attention in our modern and postmodern world, since the rejection of form is one of the founding principles of modernity and one of the self-evident premises of postmodernity. In the premodern understanding, which Aristotle and Thomas share and which we should try to recover and recapitulate, material things were defined by their formal cause, and separate forms, whether called intelligences or angels, were a reinforcement and completion of embodied forms. Things were definable and intelligible because they were determined by form, and they had their being through their form. But one of the major resolutions of modern philosophy was to eliminate form, both the embodied and the separate. Modern philosophy resolved to remove forms – from the face of the earth, from the vault of the sky, and also from the human intellect, that part of the soul that Aristotle was willing to call the place of forms, the *topos eidōn*. By removing form, modernity has also extinguished the question of being as being, and it has reduced human thinking to the brain and the body, the product of evolution and natural process. It has diluted both being and intellect. The work of John Wipple and other Thomist metaphysicians, therefore, is not just historical. It also serves to revive the question of being and to make room for the human difference. It helps restore us to our proper place in the order of things.

ENDNOTES

1. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IV 1, 1003a21-22.
2. Thomas Prufer, *Recapitulations: Essays in Philosophy* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1993).
3. For examples of successful pictorial recapitulations of Christian mysteries, consider the works of the early Flemish painters, such as Jan van Eyck, Dirk Bouts, and Hans Memling. Their images use contemporary landscapes, cityscapes, clothing, furniture, and utensils, as well as contemporary faces and gestures, but they do not dissolve the mystery into the world of the artists. To the contrary, they enable the mystery to appear in a pictorial syntax appropriate to that world.
4. Of course, if we are unwilling or unable to let things truly appear, then we may indeed be simply reshuffling words, images, and opinions.
5. On the plural see 1003b15-16 and on the “one as one” see 1004b5.

6. Andrew Marvell, *To His Coy Mistress*: “But at my back I always hear/ Time's winged chariot hurrying near.”
7. When people inquire into metaphysics, they expect at first to be informed about new and astonishing things, but in fact what they learn will be very old and very familiar, even if hitherto unnoticed.
8. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IV 2, 1004b1-2. This chapter gives a long list of the features of being that the science examines.
9. *Ibid.*, 1004b17-26.
10. *Metaphysics* II 1, 993a30; V 7, 1017a31-35; VI 2, 1026a34-35.
11. Trying to handle the issue of being as a psychological question would be what is known as psychologism.
12. John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite to Uncreated Being* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 3.
13. *Ibid.*, 38. My examples are of individual entities, but we could also deal with the existence of “kinds” of things. A person might ask, for example, whether there really is such a thing as benevolent friendship (or is everything ultimately a matter of surreptitious self-interest?), or whether there really is such a thing as malice (or is everything ultimately a matter of misunderstanding and fear?).
14. *Ibid.*, 39.
15. *Ibid.*, 60.
16. John F. Wippel, *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1984), 103.
17. Thomists emphasize the role of judgment in the discovery of being, but I would like to expand the domain of judgment to cover all of syntax. The paradigmatic form of judgment is predication and the judgment of existence, but other forms of syntax serve as appendages to judgment. They amplify it, but they also share in its articulative and assertive force. All syntactic articulation is implicitly assertion. On the role of syntax in truth and being, see Robert Sokolowski, *Phenomenology of the Human Person* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 31-96.
18. *Ibid.*, 31.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, 79.
21. *Ibid.*, 79n.
22. *Ibid.*, 31. See also pp. 81 and 103. On pp. 103-4 mobile being is shifted into changing being (and hence possibly immaterial). See also *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 44, 48-49, 53-54, 60-61. On p. 49 Wippel writes, “One judges that being, in order to be realized as such, need not be material, or changing, or quantified, or living, or for that matter, spiritual.”
23. I have found the following article by John Tomarchio helpful for the material in this section: “Aquinas’s Concept of Infinity,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 40 (2002): 163-87.

24. Aquinas says that higher angels can endow lower angels with intelligible species, but angels cannot instill intelligible species into a human intellect, because our minds take in such species only through phantasms. See *Summa theologiae* I, q. 111, a. 1-3, and q. 106, a. 1.
25. Thomas Pruffer, "Aristotelian Themes," in *Recapitulations*, 7. The ellipses are in the original text.
26. Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965). Also, *Angel Surrounded by Paysans*: "Yet I am the necessary angel of earth,/ Since, in my sight, you see the earth again,/ Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set,/ And, in my hearing, you hear its tragic drone." See *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 2008), 496-97.
27. Wippel's comments on the *De Ente et Essentia* of Aquinas show that separate forms play a strategic role in the discovery of the distinction between essence and existence, and hence in the transition to *esse subsistens*. See his essay, "Essence and Existence in the *De Ente*, Chapter 4," in *Metaphysical Themes*, 107-32.
28. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 120.
29. *Ibid.*, 121. See also p. 123, where Wippel says that *esse commune* "signifies this act principle considered universally and in its fullness of perfection rather than as received in any given participant."
30. There can be depictions of patriotism, in dramas, movies, and paintings, but could there be an image of *esse commune*? Probably not (why not?), but we do signify it with words.
31. On the difference between *esse commune* and *esse subsistens*, see Wippel, "Platonism and Aristotelianism in Aquinas," in his *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas II* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 285-86: "Thomas speaks of participating in *esse commune*, i.e., in the act of being viewed universally rather than as realized in any one particular being. Speaking this way carries with it a certain risk, since some might conclude that Thomas is therefore identifying *esse commune* and *esse subsistens*. Thomas explicitly rejects any such identification. . . . *Esse commune* is not something that exists apart from actually existing entities except in the order of thought. If God were to be identified with *esse commune*, God would exist only in the intellect."
32. Aquinas uses the term *forma subsistens* to signify angels in *Summa theologiae* I, q. 50 a. 2 ad 3, and q. 50 a. 5 c.
33. David Braine, *The Reality of Time and the Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 1.
34. St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XIII chapter 31. I am grateful to Kevin White for this reference and for other assistance in this paper.
35. One can read the text as simply repeating the word *est*, or one can read the second *est* as a predicate, as saying "he is 'he is'." This is the interpretation given by James J. O'Donnell in his *Augustine: Confessions* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), *ad loc.* (The commentary is available electronically at <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/conf/>.) O'Donnell says that Augustine's phrase is related to the *ego sum qui sum* of Exodus 3.14, where it is in the first person singular.
36. Wippel alludes to the need for such contrasts when he writes, "In the order of discovery one may move from one's discovery of individual beings as participating in *esse commune* to the caused character of such beings, and then on to the existence of their unparticipated source (*esse subsistens*)." *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 117. See also pp. 121 and 131.
37. Thomas Pruffer, "A Protreptic: What Is Philosophy?," in John K. Ryan, ed., *Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy*, volume 2 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1963), 3-4.

38. John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 326. What shall we say about religions in which animals or celestial bodies are worshiped? Do they really worship such bodily things, or do they not rather confuse the embodied and the separate forms?

39. See Martin Heidegger, "Zeit und Sein," in *Zur Sache des Denkens*, Gesamtausgabe, Abteilung I, Band 14 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2007), 5-30. Heidegger says he wishes to bring "das Es und sein Geben" into view (p. 9), and that "Sein gehört als die Gabe dieses Es gibt in das Geben" (p. 10). He says that the "Es" needs to be thought "aus der Art des Gebens her . . . , das zu ihm gehört" (p. 24). These phrases are not ordinary predications but indicators of a unique source and manifestation. Predication takes place within the logical space opened by the "Es" and its "Geben."

40. T. S. Eliot, "Journey of the Magi." *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, 1952), 69.