

The Ontological Difference for St. Thomas and Pseudo-Dionysius

John D. Jones

In one of his later essays, Heidegger offers an interpretation of metaphysics as ontotheologic. Briefly, metaphysics is logic both insofar as it responds to be-ing as a ground and experiences the difference between be-ing and beings as that between ground and what is grounded. For Heidegger, "What differs shows itself as the be-ing of beings in general, and the be-ing of beings in the highest."¹ The former is be-ing as the ground common to all beings and which is articulated by metaphysics as "onto-logic." The latter is be-ing as the highest being (God) which accounts for all beings and which, accordingly, is articulated by metaphysics as "theo-logic."

Heidegger's criticism of metaphysics is well known. That is, while metaphysics is ontological in thrust, since it asks about beings in respect of their be-ing, it nevertheless is fundamentally ontical in character. For by understanding be-ing as cause and ground, metaphysics persistently misunderstands be-ing as a being and, thus, misunderstands the ontological difference (that between be-ing and beings) in ontical terms (as the difference between beings).

In this paper I wish to consider the manner in which Pseudo-Dionysius and St. Thomas understand the ontological difference. The paper will be divided into three sections. First, I will briefly consider Aquinas' understanding of be-ing. This will exhibit the framework — at bottom essentialistic and ontical — within which he and the tradition, generally, interpret Pseudo-Dionysius. Second, I will briefly consider Pseudo-Dionysius' understanding of be-ing and, at the same time, show the inadequacies of traditional interpretations of him. For, while Pseudo-Dionysius understands be-ing as cause, he denies it to be a being. Thus he cannot be adequately understood within an essentialistic and ontical framework.

To suggest that Aquinas is an "essentialistic" thinker flaunts the

1. *Identity and Difference*, p. 70 (English edition). I use be-ing as a translation of *ὄν* and *Sein* to stress the dynamic character of that to which this word refers.

“existentialist” interpretation of his metaphysics. Thus, in the third section I will re-examine Aquinas’ metaphysics within the context of the existentialist interpretation advanced by such thinkers as Gilson, Carlo, and in particular Phelan. I will do this to show the limitations and fundamental essentialism of this interpretation. I will also show there emerges a fundamental identity between Aquinas and Pseudo-Dionysius, if these limitations and essentialism are removed. This identity is not to be understood in the traditional sense that Aquinas tames the excesses of Pseudo-Dionysius. Rather, I suggest that when freed from the essentialistic framework of his language, Aquinas approaches the non-ontical or non-entitative understanding of be-ing which was much earlier expressed by Pseudo-Dionysius.

I

As is well known, Aquinas’ most appropriate expression of the divine nature or essence is *ipsum esse per se subsistens*. This may be translated as *esse* itself subsisting in itself or *esse* itself subsisting in virtue of itself (provided that we do not understand *esse* as *causa sui*). The motivation for this expression is elegantly given in *S.T.I.3* which concerns God’s simplicity. Here the crucial articles consist in showing that God and God’s essence are the same (art.3) and that God’s *esse* and God’s essence are the same (art.4).

God is God’s essence since God is not composed of matter and form and, thus, as an individual being (*ens*), God must subsist as an individual essence. God, like the angels, is a subsisting essence; but why is the divine essence the same as its *esse*? Aquinas gives three reasons for this in article 4, the third of which is particularly revealing and parallels the *quarta via* for God’s existence.

Thirdly, just as anything which is on fire, but is not fire, is ignited through participation [in fire], similarly that which has *esse* and is not *esse*, is a being by participation. Now God is his essence as has been shown above. If therefore, he is not his *esse* he will be a being by participation and will not be his essence. Therefore, he will not be the first being which is absurd. Therefore, God is his *esse* and not only his essence.²

God is *esse* itself. But this must not be understood as the *esse* which is common to all beings (*esse commune*). For if God were *esse commune*, as unspecified *esse* or *esse* in general, God would “name a being in general (*ens commune*) and would name anything.”³ God is

2. *S.T. Ia.3.4.*

3. *S.T. Ia.3.4. obj. 1.*

not a universal (*esse* or *ens commune*). Yet God is an *ens*, a being. God is the being which is *esse* itself subsisting in virtue of its essence (*per essentiam*) and not by participation (*per participationem*). That is, God is *esse* itself subsisting in itself and, thus, apart from or independent of all other beings.⁴

Despite the apparently positive character of these expressions of the divine nature, they must all be understood in a negative manner. For we can only comprehend these expressions by reference to sensible and intelligible beings and the essences which determine them. Now essence (*essentia*), as the Latin understanding of Aristotle's *ousia*, properly does not apply to divine *esse*; for essence is what determines an *ens* within a species. Further, within Thomas' creationist metaphysics, such essence is potential with respect to *esse*. Yet divine *esse* is unspecified — not in the sense of *esse commune* — but as beyond all specification. Thus, God is beyond essence or being (if we translate οὐσία as being). That is, God is no finite subsisting essence such as an angel.

Yet there is an analogous sense in which essence can be said of God. For while essence properly determines a being within a species and, thus, perfects the being to be what it is, if we prescind from the notion of specification and think of determination solely as perfection, then *esse* itself is the essence of God. For *esse* itself is what God is and, since *esse* is the greatest perfection, God is the most perfect being (*ens perfectissimum*). God as *esse* itself is an "infinite ocean of being (or essence)."

God is beyond being or essence (ὑπερουσίος). But this is not to be understood in a privative or defective manner. Rather, it is to be understood by way of excess (*excessum* as a translation of ὑπερβολή). Divine *esse* and essence exceed the *esse* and essence of all other beings, for God is not a being which lacks *esse*, is potential of *esse*, has *esse* only by participation in it, or has it in a limited way. God is so excessively and superabundantly full of *esse* that God subsists as *esse* itself. God is *esse* subsisting in itself. God is the supreme *ens* (*supremum* or *maxime ens*) and supreme essence. God exists superessentially or supersubstantially (*superessentialiter* or *supersubstantialiter* as a translation of ὑπερουσίως) and supereminently (*supereminenter* or *superexcellenter* as a translation of ὑπεροχίως).

God is *esse* itself. For Aquinas *esse* is the act of all acts or the act of be-ing (*actus essendi*). This in part marks Aquinas' fundamental overcoming of Aristotelian metaphysics, for while Aristotle comprehends essence as actuality, he does not perceive the

4. S.T. Ia.3.4. ad. 1.

contingency of (finite) essences themselves. But, for Aquinas, since these essences are contingent — that is, since they need not be and, thus, do not have *esse* in virtue of themselves — they must stand in a potency relationship to *esse* and be actualized by *esse* in order to be. Indeed, for Aquinas there is a radical primacy of *esse* over all essences such that essence is ultimately reducible to *esse*.⁵ For Aquinas, the relation between *esse* and essence is not that between *existentia* and *essentia*, where *existentia* is the mere 'thatness' or 'givenness' of beings which requires the presence of essence in order to be anything at all. Rather *esse* itself is the fully complete actuality (perfection) of which various essences are limitations or modifications.

Decisive in the understanding of Aquinas which we have here presented is that *esse* is thought of as an *ens* or being. Thus the difference between be-ing itself (God) and beings is ultimately ontical in character. Now we called God "super-essential." This name can signify the ontological difference for Aquinas, although it signifies that difference in ontical terms. For through that term, *esse* itself is posited as an infinite essence existing in itself, apart from and beyond all finite essences. The term "superessential" is negative in character so far as it denies that God is a finite essence. But, at bottom, it is affirmative, or better, positional in character. For this term positions God as a being existing apart from other beings. That is, superessential (supersubstantial) does not mean beyond as completely without essence; rather, it means infinite essence beyond finite essence.

This understanding of be-ing as superessential forms a basis for Thomas' reading of Pseudo-Dionysius.

Dionysius says that God is indeed substance, but as supersubstantial, to prevent anyone from believing that God is in no manner to be called substance or mind or any other such kind of thing.⁶

This understanding of be-ing as superessential is also reflected in Aquinas' criticism of Pseudo-Dionysius' position that names of God are purely causal designations.

When a man speaks of the 'living God' he does not simply want to say that God is the cause of our life, or that He differs from a lifeless body. . . We shall suggest that such [non-negative and

5. See the excellent but unduly neglected book by William Carlo, *The Ultimate Reducibility of Essence to Existence in Existential Metaphysics*, (The Hague, 1966).

6. S.T.Ia. 13.2.

non-relational] terms do say what God is. They are predicated of Him in the category of substance but fail to adequately represent what He is.⁷

II

This understanding of be-ing (the divinity) will not do for Pseudo-Dionysius. He never refers to the divinity as a being. More importantly he never speaks of a divine essence or being (οὐσία). Moreover, he never refers to the divinity by the phrases "according to being" (κατὰ τὴν οὐσίαν which is translated in Latin as *per essentiam*) or "in itself" (καθ' αὐτό which is translated in Latin as *per se*). For Pseudo-Dionysius the divinity: be-ing ὑπερουσίως.⁸ The divinity: not somehow be-ing but simply and unlimitedly be-ing.

How are we to understand this adverb ὑπερουσίως? If as is customary, we translate it as "superessentially" then we have translated it as an adverb of manner which tells us in what manner or how the divinity exists. Specifically, to say that the divinity exists superessentially is to say that the divinity exists in a super-essential manner, a manner which transcends every finite essential manner of be-ing, and which is preeminently essential or substantial.

This will not do for Pseudo-Dionysius. I believe that ὑπερουσίως is to be translated as "beyond every manner of being" or, more literally, as "beyond-beingly." Now beings are unified multiplicities which are (exist) through having a share in or participating in the divinity. Hence "having" indicates multiplicity and marks all and only beings. Thus when Pseudo-Dionysius characterizes the divinity as ὑπερῆνωμένος, this term must be understood as "beyond unity" or "beyond what is unified" and not as "supremely unified." Similarly, the divinity: beyond-having (ὑπερέχον) and before-having (προέχον), not supremely-having and pre-having. In this way we understand "ὑπέρ" in an appropriately and radically negative fashion which does not end up affirming the divinity to be an infinite being beyond finite beings.

Thus, the divinity, be-ing ὑπερουσίως: be-ing beyond every manner of being. Far from marking the divinity as be-ing or

7. *Expositio De divinis nominibus*, I.1.28.

8. D.N.II.11.6498. Translations from the *Divine Names* (D.N.) are contained in my book, *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite: The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, (Marquette University Press, 1980). The brief exposition of Pseudo-Dionysius' teaching is drawn from the introduction to the book. See pp. 29-32, 41-46, and 61-65.

existing in the highest manner or way, *ὑπερουσίως* and the fore-mentioned adverbs all deny every manner of be-ing to the divinity. These adverbs indicate an absence from every essentiality, deny an infinite essence, and deny that the divinity is a being.

The term *ὑπερουσίως* names the ontological difference for Pseudo-Dionysius. It does not merely deny that be-ing is beyond all finite essences as an infinite essence. It denies that be-ing is any essence and, hence, any being. Hence it does not reduce the ontological difference to an ontical difference. Put another way, since *οὐσία* fundamentally expresses manners of be-ing, it is precisely beings which are beingly (*οὐσίως*). As be-ing itself is not a being; being itself: *ὑπερουσίως* (beyond beingly.)⁹

Two remarks may be made on this denial of a divine essence. First the 'modern' controversy as to whether God is more appropriately named as 'he', 'she' ('thou'), or 'it' is mistaken on two counts. First, insofar as the divinity (be-ing itself): the letting be of beings, and all divine names refer to this causality, then all of these names are equally appropriate to the divinity. More importantly, they are all equally and fundamentally inappropriate; for these names designate only beings and the divinity (be-ing) *is not a being*.

Second, traditional metaphysics maintains that we can only know that God is but not what God is. This is because the divine essence is inaccessible to finite knowledge. This distinction between whatness and thatness is never made by Pseudo-Dionysius. However, in light of our understanding of *ὑπερουσίως* I would suggest that neither we nor God know what God is for the simple reason that there is no divine essence or whatness to know. That is, since the distinction between whatness and thatness can only apply to beings, the distinction does not apply to God (be-ing). Put somewhat differently, if we are to take seriously the simplicity of be-ing, then these distinctions between whatness and thatness or between causality and essence can only be distinctions made by us in our attempt to think the divine. They are distinctions of thought. Yet if the divinity is not a being, we ought not make the distinctions with regard to God. If we insist that these are appropriate distinctions with regard to God, then we must give up understanding God as be-ing itself.

9. To formally avoid propositional discourse I write "The divinity: beyond beingly be-ing" rather than "the divinity is beyond beingly be-ing" and use adverbial expressions such as "simply and unlimitedly be-ing" rather than "simple and unlimited be-ing" to avoid the impression that we are talking about a being. Generally, what follows the colon ":" says what precedes it.

A non-entitative and non-essentialistic understanding similar to the above is hinted at by Plotinus and John Scotus Eriugena. Thus, Plotinus denies essence (whatness) to the one.

But this non-subsisting, what is it? We must withdraw silent, hopeless, and search no further. . . We must remember that all questioning deals with the what-it-is of a thing, its quality, its cause, or its *being* (εἶναι). . . The question as to what it is shows only that we must ask nothing about it but that we must grasp with the mind, as far as possible, and understand that it is permissible to connect nothing with it.¹⁰

Similarly, in the following remarkable passage, John Scotus Eriugena, who was heavily influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius, denies that God knows what God is.

How, therefore, can the divine nature understand of itself what it is, seeing that it is nothing? For it surpasses everything that is, since it is not even *esse* itself but all *esse* derives from it, and by virtue of its excellence it is supereminent or beyond every essence and every substance. For how can the infinite be defined by itself in anything or be understood in anything when it knows itself ('to be') beyond finitude and infinity. So God does not know of himself what he is because he is not a what, being in everything incomprehensible to himself and every intellect.¹¹

Let me continue with a brief summary of Pseudo-Dionysius' understanding of the relation between be-ing and beings. For him the divinity brings forth all beings and lets them be. Thus the divinity is the cause of all that is. Pseudo-Dionysius understands this causality in terms of the threefold structure of abiding, procession, and reversion. This, of course, is the typical Neoplatonic understanding of causality. Abiding, the divinity: apart from beings. The abiding divinity: be-ing beyond every way of being. This does not mean that the divinity subsists beforehand or pre-exists — exists apart from beings — or has all beings in itself before causing them. Rather, the abiding divinity: before be-ing (πρῶν) before-subsisting (προυφιστημένον), and before-having (προέχον). Abiding, the divinity is not a being which subsists independently of or apart from beings, for the divinity is not a being. (The) beyond beingly be-ing — be-ing simply and unlimitedly: not supremely full but beyond fullness (ὑπερπλήρης). For since it is only what can attain to its limits that can be full, it is

10. Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI.8.11

11. Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, II. 589B.

only beings that are full. In the same way, the divinity is not an excess of being and be-ing but thrust beyond be-ing. Thus the phrase which characterizes God for most of medieval thought ("infinite ocean of substance") is, I believe, ultimately inimical to Pseudo-Dionysius' thought.

The divinity abides, processes, and reverts. In procession and reversion, beings come forth from out of the divinity and subsist as beings. More correctly, the procession and reversion of beings out of the divinity is the procession and reversion of the divinity out of itself in which it differentiates and shows itself in and as all beings. This differentiation which is the divinity is the *ecstasis* of the divinity out of itself which is the letting-be of beings. This letting-be is not grounded in a supreme being but "is" the divinity; the divinity: the letting-be (be-ing) of beings.¹²

III

Recent scholars, such as Gilson, insist that Aquinas goes beyond the essentialistic metaphysics of his time, which derives from Aristotle, by stressing the primacy of *esse*. It is commonly asserted that all philosophers previous to Aquinas remained within the grip of an essentialistic metaphysics which inadequately tried to think *esse* as an extrinsic determination of essence. Put another way, medieval philosophy as it leads up to Aquinas can be viewed as the increased consciousness of *esse* in light of the opposition between *esse* and essence. But in making essence primary, the philosophers preceding Aquinas could only articulate *esse* as a foreign and extrinsic, and therefore inferior determination of essence.¹³ This judgment is incorrect with respect to Pseudo-Dionysius. For given the correctness of my interpretation it is Pseudo-Dionysius and not Aquinas who radically goes beyond an essentialistic way of thinking be-ing. For in my view a radical overcoming of essentialistic metaphysics requires not only that essence be subordinated to *esse* as the structures by which *esse* limits itself in beings; such an overcoming requires that *esse* not be thought as a being or as subsisting in itself.

Yet let us consider in more detail the "existentialistic metaphysics" of Aquinas as insisted upon by such interpreters as Gilson, Carlo, and Phelan. I want in particular to consider Phelan's interpretation, which is contained in his article "Being and Creatures"; for this is one of the most thoroughgoing interpreta-

12. Cf., *D.N.* IV.13.712A.

13. See Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas*, pp. 36-40, 48-54.

tions of Aquinas in the "existentialist" vein. It exhibits both the limitations of this interpretation and, yet, also contains elements which point in the direction of completeness for which I would argue and which, to that extent, point toward a fundamental identity between Aquinas and Pseudo-Dionysius on the matters we have been discussing.

Let us consider certain aspects of Phelan's interpretation which point in this direction of completeness. In regard to the essentialistic aura in which Aquinas' writings are developed and which is due to Aristotle, Phelan writes:

However scrupulous one may be to exercise that essentialism by due distinctions and refinements, the impression still remains in spite of all protests to the contrary that something called *esse* is given by a Being called Creator to a being called creature; something called *esse* is shared by God and creatures; something else called essence is distinct from *esse* in creatures, but not in the Creator. In other words, the very words we use, being grammatically nouns or substantives, it is difficult to avoid thinking that what they designate are things or substances with a nature of their own.¹⁴

Later in the article, and inspired by Gilson's phrase "There is no being (*esse*) save the divine being (*esse*) in which all creatures participate,"¹⁵ Phelan writes:

If one must talk the language of participation, I would say, also: "There is no being (*esse*) save the divine being (*Esse*), and all beings participate it." This sounds pantheistic only to the ears of those who think of *esse* as something."¹⁶

These passages certainly seem to point to a non-ontical understanding of be-ing. We may note further, how Phelan is sensitive to the adverbial character of Aquinas' discourse about *esse*, in contrast to the specifying (adjectival) language of Aristotle. Thus beings exercise their be-ing "*aliquo modo*," and "*diversemode*," while divine be-ing "is exercised" "*omnimode*" or, better, "*sine modo aliquo*."¹⁷ This certainly seems to allude to the distinction between οὐσίως and ὑπερουσίως which I made in connection with Pseudo-Dionysius' understanding of be-ing and beings.

And yet:

14. Citations refer to the article as printed in G. Phelan, *Selected Papers*, (Toronto, 1967), p. 87.

15. Gilson, *op. cit.*, p., 360.

16. Phelan, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

17. Phelan, *ibid.*, pp. 88-9.

(1) The distinction between divine be-ing and the be-ing of creatures is that between *Esse* and *esse*, *Ens* and *ens*. Now Aquinas never makes this contrast between “big E” and “little e”. Phelan’s use of it, especially in English, inevitably suggests an unnecessary reification of divine be-ing as a being (*maxime ens*). The very capitalizing of ‘E’ in ‘Ens’ when referring to divine be-ing, suggests that *ens* is not understood as participle (gerund) but as noun.

(2) And, indeed, Phelan wants to recognize that God is an *ens*.¹⁸ Yet this requires an essentialistic interpretation of *esse* and *ens*. That is, as Phelan rightly notes, *ens* has two meanings for Aquinas: *habens esse* and *id quod est*. Now *habens esse* is the ‘existential’ understanding of *ens* which subordinates essence to *esse*. Yet on this basis *esse* is not an *ens* for *esse* does not have *esse*, not even preeminently. Thus *esse* can be understood as an *ens* only so long as *ens* is understood as *id quod est*.¹⁹ But this is a thoroughly essentialistic understanding of *ens*; for *ens*, as *id quod est*, is and is what it is — and on an essentialistic interpretation, is thoroughly accounted for — only in virtue of its *quod quid erat esse* (what was to be). This, of course, is the equivalent of Aristotle’s τὸ τὶ ἦν εἶναι, which is the primary expression of οὐσία. Thus, so far as Phelan insists that *esse* is an *ens*, he offers an interpretation of *esse* which is, at bottom, essentialistic.

We note, of course, that if one gives up the understanding of *ens* as *id quod est* in favor of understanding it as *habens esse*, one must also give up understanding *esse* as *per se subsistens*. For the *per se* (in itself) is fundamentally coordinated to οὐσία; it is precisely οὐσία that ought preeminently as τὸ τὶ ἦν εἶναι that is in itself.

Now to be sure, Aquinas does not always use the *per se subsistens* formula when referring to divine *esse*. Perhaps it is not essential to his understanding of *esse*. If so, then Aquinas and Pseudo-Dionysius seem to be in fundamental agreement that be-ing is not a being. But can we do away with the *per se subsistens* formula in Aquinas without doing fundamental violence to his writings? One should note that Pseudo-Dionysius is aware of “essentialistic language,” uses it with respect to beings, but never applies it to the divinity. Unless one reads him from an essentialistic perspective, one sees that he takes pains to deny such language with regard to the divinity. Aquinas, on the other hand, uses the essentialistic language and constantly makes crucial distinctions based on such language. Thus while one needs to depart considerably from traditional interpretations of Pseudo-Dionysius to comprehend his understanding of be-ing, it seems that one must engage in a

18. Phelan, *ibid.*, pp. 85, 89, etc.

19. Phelan, *ibid.*, p. 90.

Heideggerian retrieve of monumental proportions to get Aquinas to say that *esse* is not an *ens* and is not to be thought as *per se subsistens*.

Why does Phelan (and, perhaps, Aquinas) cling to this fundamentally essentialistic understanding of *esse*? I would suggest two reasons, although there are undoubtedly others.

(1) The first concerns the demands of theism and, specifically, Christian theism which posits God as a supreme personal Being Who is the Cause and Creator of all other beings. This is typical of ordinary religious and philosophical discourse and seems necessary to satisfy the religious desire for a transcendent Someone (Thou) to Whom we can pray and worship as our loving Creator and Redeemer. Such a view also seems necessary to satisfy the philosophical, metaphysical demand for an ultimate cause of beings. For, it seems that unless we are to fall into atheism and un-grounded thought by saying that God is nothing, we must affirm that God is Something and Someone.

And yet it is here that the connection between ontology and theology becomes most tenuous and problematic. It is never clear to me why, from the standpoint of thought, be-ing should be named 'God.' The only answer one gets is "Well, what else would you call it, especially so far as you have viewed it as cause?" Hence, on this line and given both the virtually unquestioned assumption that God is a being and the essentialistic/ontical tendencies of our ordinary and philosophical discourse, which is fundamentally directed towards beings, be-ing ends up getting understood as a being.

It seems to me that we have the following dilemma. If one insists on naming be-ing (itself "God" and one denies, as I believe that one must, that be-ing is a being, then theism is no longer tenable for it posits God as a being. This, of course, does not entail a lapse into either pantheism or atheism for these are ontical positions just as is theism. As Phelan notes in the passage earlier quoted (and with allowances for the essentialism which remains in it) "There is no being, *esse*, save divine being, *Esse*; and all beings participate in it. This sounds pantheistic only to the ears of those who still think of *esse* as a something."

On the other hand, if one insists that God is a being (whether an 'it' or 'thou' or 'super-thou' makes no difference) and denies that be-ing is a being, then theology is not ontology. Theology becomes a purely ontical inquiry which seeks to talk about the divine being and its causal relation to other beings. This inquiry is strictly subordinated to ontology for every ontical inquiry presupposes but can never of itself ask the question about be-ing.

(2) The second reason that Phelan holds onto an essentialism is that he wants to do metaphysics as a rational, propositional discourse about be-ing and beings. Phelan wants to say that God (be-ing) is, that beings are, and to rationally understand so far as possible, the connection between beings and be-ing.²⁰ But ultimately, one can say that be-ing is (exists) — that is, engage in propositional discourse about be-ing — only if one regards be-ing as a being. For all propositional discourse, which is grounded on the existential judgment “it is” and which must distinguish between the “it” and the “is,” is always directed toward beings. To deny that be-ing is a being is to deny both the adequacy of propositional discourse about be-ing and the “relation between” be-ing and beings.

For Phelan such a view leads to a “Pseudo-mysticism of a Platonic or Plotinian stripe”²¹ (and, I might add, a Pseudo-Dionysian stripe): that one engages in (propositional) discourse to see the ultimate impossibility of (propositional) discourse. This seems to be thoroughly unacceptable to Phelan. We might note that within our century the denial of rationalistic, propositional discourse for dealing with the question of be-ing leads to Heidegger’s attempt at a non-metaphysical thinking and saying of be-ing. This attempt, of course, leads him away from the traditional identity of thought and reason to the belonging together of thought and poetry. It is, of course, not clear that Phelan would be in sympathy with such an attempt.

This discussion of Aquinas’ metaphysics seems to suggest that Aristotle is the “villain” who prevents Aquinas from fully or explicitly articulating what he wants to say. Indeed, the existentialist understanding of *ens* as *habens esse*, which is based on the model of participation, suggests that at bottom Aquinas is a Platonist. But even this implies that Aquinas remains within an ontical understanding of be-ing. For the comprehension of *esse* itself as *per se subsistens* entails that *esse* is an *eidos*. Aquinas himself seems to accept this eidetic understanding of *esse*. Thus Aquinas, noting that the Platonists call the species of sensible things, say man itself, by names such as man in itself, beyond man, humanity of all sensible men and other such names, asserts that:

The Platonists do not only consider such abstractions about the ultimate species of sensible things, but also about the transcendentals, which are good, unity and be-ing. For they posit a one-first which is itself the essence of goodness, unity,

20. Phelan, *ibid.*, p. 85.

21. Phelan, *ibid.*, p. 86.

and be-ing, and which we call God. Thus, they have called that first, good itself, or good in itself or principally good or super-good or even the goodness of all that is good.

This definition of the Platonists is not consonant with faith or truth insofar as the separate species of natural things is concerned. However, so far as they speak about the first principles of things, their opinion is most true and consonant with Christian faith.²²

This passage forms the basis for Aquinas' reading of Pseudo-Dionysius. As my remarks on Pseudo-Dionysius have suggested, I believe it to be fundamentally inadequate. That is, I do not believe that Pseudo-Dionysius intends to understand beyond-beingly be-ing (be-ing itself) as an *eidōs*. Indeed, it seems to me that the radical thrust of the Neoplatonic understanding of the one (Plotinus), beyond beingly be-ing (Pseudo-Dionysius), and the godhead (Eckhart) is to move away from such eidetic comprehension. How Plato understands the good of the *Republic* is not clear, but those who, in the Neoplatonic tradition, express the good as the one of the *Parmenides* (Hypothesis I) move considerably away from traditional metaphysics. Those who, on the contrary, understand the good-one along the line of Aristotle's *nous*-unmoved mover, move within the ambit of traditional, essential, eidetic, and ontic categories.

These divergent manners of understanding the one-good are intertwined from the days of the Academy and the Lyceum.²³ The Aristotelian interpretation continues right down to the present days, as is witnessed in Heidegger.

Since Plato, thinking about the be-ing of beings becomes — philosophy because it is the gazing up to the ideas. . . The ideas are the super sensuous, sighted in the nonsensuous glance. They are the being of all beings which cannot be grasped with the tools of the body. And in the realm of the supersensuous the highest is permanence and appearing of all beings. Because this "idea" is in such a way the first cause for everything, it is also "the idea" which is called "the Good." This highest and primary first cause is called the divine by that idea which as the idea of all ideas remains the first cause for Plato, corresponding to Aristotle's τὸ θεῖον. Since the exposition of Being as idea, thinking about the being of beings has become metaphysical,

22. *Expositio De divinis nominibus*, "Prooemium"

23. See Philip Merlan, "Greek Philosophy from Plato to Plotinus," in *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (ed. A. Armstrong), pp. 14-132.

and metaphysics has become theological. Theology means here the exposition of the "first cause" of beings as God and the misplacing of being into this first cause which contains being in itself and discharges it from itself because it is the most being of all beings.²⁴

However adequate this interpretation may be of Plato and most Western metaphysics it does violence to the fundamental thrust of the ever persistent fragile, and constantly misunderstood Neoplatonic 'metaphysics.' Of course, by way of closing, one must admit that the failure to radically break with Plato's language, especially insofar as this language is subsequently formed by Aristotelian categories, always tends to compromise a non-eidetic thinking and, indeed, forms the basis of the persistent misunderstanding of this thinking. Indeed even apart from Aristotelian influence, the Platonic language of participation threatens an adequate understanding of the difference between be-ing and beings. For when the language of participation prevails, beings are understood as *habens esse* in such a way that the difference between be-ing (divinity) and beings is that between be-ing and having be-ing. Yet the language of participation and of having arises with Plato to articulate the relation between an individual and the form or *eidos* which determines it to what it is. But if be-ing is not an *eidos* how are we justified in using the language of participation to articulate the relation of be-ing and beings? Does not such an articulation threaten to remain bound to an eidetic understanding which, once again, misunderstands the ontological difference in ontical terms?

*Marquette University,
Milwaukee*

24. *Plato's Doctrine of Truth*, p. 268 (English edition).