

The One, the Many, and the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity: Variations on Simplicity in Essentialist and Existentialist Metaphysics

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Abstract : One of the tasks contemporary analytic philosophers have focused on (e.g., Wolterstorff, Alston, Plantinga, Hasker, and Crisp) is the analysis of certain medieval metaphysical frameworks. This growing body of scholarship has helped clarify and prevent distorted readings of medieval and ancient writers. However, as scholars like Dolezal, Duby, and Brower have pointed out, these analyses have been incomplete or inaccurate in some instances, e.g., with regard to analogical speech or the doctrine of divine simplicity (DDS). Additionally, contributors to this work frequently express opposing claims or fail to note substantial differences between ancient and medieval thinkers. This is the case regarding the comparison between Thomas Aquinas and others. Anton Pegis and Étienne Gilson have argued along this line that Thomas' metaphysical framework represents a fundamental shift. Gilson describes Thomas' metaphysics as a turn from a form of "essentialism" to "existentialism." One should argue that this shift distinguishes Thomas from many Analytic philosophers as well as from other classical defenders of the DDS. Moreover, many of the objections Analytic Philosophers make against Thomas presume the same metaphysical principles undergirding the above-mentioned form of essentialism. This weakens their force against Thomas' positions. In order to demonstrate these claims, it will be helpful to consider Thomas' metaphysical outlook alongside that of two other prominent figures: Augustine and Ockham. One area of their thinking which brings their differences to the surface has to do with how each relates to Platonic and Neo-Platonic thought. More specifically, it is illuminating to consider whether and how each distinguishes or conceives essence and existence. It is also useful to see how each approaches the Platonic conflicts between essence and individuality, unity and intelligibility. In both of these areas, Thomas stands out from Augustine and Ockham. Although Augustine and Ockham diverge in many ways, both ultimately identify being with particularity and pit particularity against both unity and intelligibility. Contrastingly, Thomas argues that being is distinct from and prior to essence. Being (i.e., Being in itself) rather than essence or form must therefore serve as the ground and ultimate principle for the existence of everything in which being and essence are distinct. Additionally, since change, movement, and addition improve and give definition to finite being, multitude and distinction are, therefore, principles of being rather than non-being. Consequently, each creature imitates and participates in God's perfect Being in its own way; the perfection of each genus exists pre-eminently in God without being at odds with God's simplicity, God has knowledge, power, and will, and these and the many other terms assigned to God refer truly to the being of God without being either meaningless or synonymous. The existentialist outlook at work in these claims distinguishes Thomas in a noteworthy way from his contemporaries and predecessors as much as it does from many of the analytic philosophers who have objected to his thought. This suggests that at least these kinds of objections do not apply to Thomas' thought.

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