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Published in:
Vetera novis augere

Publication date:
2023

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
te Velde, R. (2023). Thomas Aquinas and the Platonism of Pseudo-Dionysius and the Liber de causis. In S.-T. Bonino, & L. F. Tuninetti (Eds.), *Vetera novis augere: le risorse della tradizione tomista nel contesto attuale* (pp. 61-80). (Doctor communis. Pontificia Academia Sancti Thomae Aquinatis). Urbaniana University Press.

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Thomas Aquinas and the Platonism of Pseudo-Dionysius and de *Liber de causis*¹

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1. Introduction

The traditional reading of Aquinas in the school of neo-Thomism has always been strongly influenced by a certain scholastic construction of Aristotle's philosophy. Aquinas was predominantly read as an Aristotelian, at least with regard to the philosophical foundations (ontology and epistemology) of his theology. As a result, the tradition of neo-Thomism was for a long time more or less blind to the Platonic elements in Aquinas' thought, especially as present in his metaphysical doctrine of God and creation. In the middle of the twentieth century this dominant Aristotelian picture of Aquinas began to change. In 1954, the study *Saint Thomas and Platonism*, by Father Robert Henle, appeared, the first part of which contains a useful overview of all the texts in which Aquinas explicitly refers to the philosophical positions of Plato and the *Platonici*.² This study was clearly a sign of the growing awareness at the time of the substantial presence and influence of Platonic sources in the writings of Aquinas. More and more Thomistic scholars came to recognise that the traditional picture of Aquinas as an essentially Aristotelian thinker needed to be adjusted. Since the epoch-making studies of Fabro and Geiger in the forties and fifties of the last century, writing on the role of participation in Aquinas' metaphysics, the image of Aquinas as a faithful follower of Aristotle has lost much of its credibility.³ One began to read Aquinas

¹ In this article, in a shortened version presented at the 11th International Thomistic Congress, I freely expand on the themes of my earlier publication on Aquinas' reception of Platonism, "Aquinas's Aristotelian Science of Metaphysics," in *Nova et Vetera* 2015, vol.13, no.3.

² R.J. Henle, *Saint Thomas and Platonism. A Study of the Plato and Platonici Texts in the Writings of Saint Thomas*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1970 (reprint).

³ C. Fabro, *La nozione metafisica di partecipazione secondo S. Tommaso d'Aquino* (Milan, 1939; 2d revised edition: Turin, 1950); L.-B. Geiger, *La Participation dans la philosophie de s. Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris, 1942), reissued in 1950. See also Arthur Little, *The Platonic Heritage of Thomism*, Dublin, 1949. I want to mention my own book on participation, *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1995). See also

with new eyes, sensitive to the many Platonic elements and motifs that play a role in his metaphysical vision of reality.

However, the Aristotelian paradigm of Thomistic philosophy remains strong and influential to this day. In particular, those in the tradition of neo-Thomism who use to focus on the philosophical part of Aquinas' thought, or on what is construed as an independent philosophical doctrine distinct from the theological and dogmatic parts, tend to read Aquinas as a follower of Aristotle. Compare Ralph McInerny's judgement in his article in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: "As a philosopher, Thomas is emphatically Aristotelian."⁴ And in his book *Praeambula fidei* he argues for a return to the notion of Aristotelico-Thomism, i.e. a Thomistic philosophy being the organic development of Aristotle's thought.⁵ And he is not alone in this clear and unambiguous plea for the Aristotelian Aquinas.⁶

The debate about the alleged Aristotelianism of Thomas Aquinas versus the influence of Platonism on his thought is not yet closed. The question remains as to how his constructive use of Platonic sources, especially in the context of his metaphysics of creation, is to be assessed, and what hermeneutical considerations actually guided him in what is clearly a case of free creative appropriation. The thesis I want to defend in this article is that Aquinas' constructive adaptation of 'Platonism', especially the Platonism he found in the work of Pseudo-Dionysius (*On Divine Names*) and in the *Liber de causis*, was situated in the context of the science of metaphysics, which is a philosophical discipline in its own right, defined and treated in an exemplary manner in Aristotle's books of the same name. For Aquinas, Aristotle remained in many respects the exemplary philosopher, the *Philosophus*, whose science of metaphysics, however, required a supplement constructed on the basis of

John Wippel's magisterial study *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas. From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), especially Part One about the problem of the one and the many.

⁴ Ralph McInerny and John O'Callaghan, "Saint Thomas Aquinas," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2010), ed. Edward N. Zalta. By way of contrast one can mention Wayne Hankey who claims that Thomas was less of an Aristotelian than is commonly supposed; in his many publications, he has done much to show the influence of Neo-Platonism in Aquinas' thought. See his contribution to *The Oxford Handbook to Aquinas*, ed. Brian Davis and Eleonore Stump (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) under the title "Aquinas, Plato, and Neo-Platonism."

⁵ *Praeambula fidei. Thomism and the God of the Philosophers* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006); for an influential example of this version of Thomism, see Iosephus Gretd, *Elementa Philosophiae Aristotelico-Thomisticae*, 2 vols, Herder & Co., Friburgi Brisgoviae 1932.

⁶ Such an Aristotelian Thomism also fits better the analytical approach of Aquinas; see John J. Haldane, "A Thomist Metaphysics," in *The Blackwell Guide to Metaphysics*, ed. by Richard M. Gale, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 2002.

Platonic sources, as Aquinas was interested in a more complete and adequate account of the first principle and its causality of creation.

In what follows I will develop my thesis in three parts. First, I will argue that the Platonism of the *Liber de causis* and of Pseudo-Dionysius, as interpreted and adapted by Aquinas, is not so much opposed to Aristotelian philosophy as it can be integrated, in his view, into the model of the metaphysical science of being and its transcendent causes. Such a modified Platonism became an integral part of a metaphysics based on Aristotelian principles. Second, Aristotle's fundamental critique of Plato's doctrine of ideas was fully accepted by Aquinas with respect to the species of natural things, but not with respect to the *maxime communia*, the common notions such as being, good, and one. With regard to these transcendental notions, Aquinas recognises the relative validity of the Platonic type of abstraction. Finally, in the last part of this article, I will show that the Aristotelian thesis of the unity of substantial form guided Aquinas in his critical revision of the Platonic multiplicity of hypostatical forms. In his Commentary on the *Liber de causis*, he sees the author of the *Liber* as advocating the unity in the order of divine causality required by the (Aristotelian) thesis of the unity of substantial form in the order of created being. And this position of the unity of divine cause is closely linked with Aquinas' characteristic conception of being as universal perfection.

2. The Difference in Philosophical Method between Aristotle and the Platonists

First of all, we need to clarify a little how Aquinas himself saw the essential difference in philosophical method between Aristotle and the followers of Plato. What was the problem of Platonism for him? And, despite these problems, what did he see as its positive contribution to the philosophical challenges facing him as a Christian theologian?

An illuminating text in this regard is the third article of *De spiritualibus creaturis*, where Aquinas addresses the question of the unity of the human individual, composed of body and soul. Aristotle had argued for the substantial unity of the human individual, thereby criticising Plato's doctrine of ideas. The assumption of a plurality of distinct ideas would, according to Aristotle, lead to the loss of the intrinsic unity of sensible substances, including the human individual. Against this background, Aquinas discusses two views on the relationship between the body and the spiritual soul. According to one view, we must accept

a plurality of forms in the composite human being, corresponding to the series of essential predicates according to species and genus. In this view, each of the essential predicates said of this individual human being, such as 'man', 'animal', 'living', 'corporeal', stands for a distinct form in this individual. In this way, matter is the substrate of a series of subsequent forms, going from the more basic and common forms to the ultimate form which is the spiritual soul of man.

The other opinion, based on the principles of Aristotle's philosophy, says that there can be only one substantial form in a human individual, and that its single form, which is the human form, is the reason why this individual is a man, an animal, a living being and a corporeal being. Thus this view accepts no distinction between lower forms, responsible for the corporeal and sensory constitution of man, and a higher spiritual form which transcends the body.

Aquinas recognises the influence of a Platonic way of thinking behind the view of the plurality of forms, which was defended in particular by the more Augustinian theologians of his time. In order to clarify this Platonism, as opposed to Aristotle's philosophy, he reduces the difference between the two opinions to the fundamental difference between Aristotle's method in philosophy and that of the *Platonici*.

The diversity of these two opinions comes from the fact that when inquiring into the nature of things, some philosophers proceeded from the perspective of intelligible essences, and this was peculiar to the Platonists; and others from the perspective of sensible things, and this was peculiar to the philosophy of Aristotle, as Simplicius says in his *Commentary on the Categories* [Preface].⁷

In characterising the difference in method between the Platonists and Aristotle, Aquinas refers to the preface to Simplicius' *Commentary on the Categories*. The Platonists are said to

⁷ *De spir. Creat.* a.3: "Harum autem duarum opinionum diversitas ex hoc procedit, quod quidam ad inquirendam veritatem de natura rerum, processerunt ex rationibus intelligibilibus, et hoc fuit proprium Platoniorum; quidam vero ex rebus sensibilibus, et hoc fuit proprium philosophiae Aristotelis, ut dicit Simplicius in commento super praedicamenta." The reference is to Simplicius' *Commentary* at vol. 1, prologus, 8, l.70 – 9, l.85 (Simplicius, *Commentaire sur les Catégories d'Aristote, Traduction de Guillaume de Moerbeke*, ed. A. Pattin, 2 vols: vol. 1, Louvain, Paris 1971, vol. 2, Leiden 1975 (*Corpus commentariorum in Aristotelem Graecorum*, 1 and 2). See Michael Chase, "The Medieval Posterity of Simplicius' Commentary on the Categories: Thomas Aquinas and al-Fârâb," in Lloyd A. Newton, ed., *Medieval Commentaries on Aristotle's Categories* (Leiden: Brill, 2008) (Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition, vol. 10), 9-29. See also Wayne Hankey, "Thomas' Neoplatonic Histories: His Following of Simplicius," in *Dionysius* 20 (2002): 153-178.

proceed *ex rationibus intelligibilibus*, by way of 'abstract essences', whereas Aristotle proceeds *ex rebus sensibilibus*, on the basis of how reality manifests itself to us in sensory experience.

This is an important difference which lies at the basis of their respective method in philosophy. The basic principle of Aristotle's philosophy is that it is only through the senses that we come to understand the intelligible essence of things. In other words, the intellect can only understand by turning to the phantasm (*conversio ad phantasmata*). It is important to realise that the Aristotelian way of proceeding *ex rebus sensibilibus* concerns the question of the intelligibility of reality as we know it. For Aristotle, the senses are the permanent condition of our cognitive access to the intelligibility of reality. Reality is assumed to be intelligible in itself by virtue of its essence. The human intellect is not capable of grasping the truth of things directly by means of intellectual intuition, but arrives discursively at the knowledge of the truth of its object on the basis of the sensory appearance of that object. This is what seems essential to the Aristotelian approach within philosophy. And this is what Aquinas affirms again and again: in order to arrive at knowledge of the transcendent order of divine causes, we must proceed from the senses. The *ex sensibilibus* is the permanent condition of the metaphysical movement of thought towards transcendence; it also means that there is no metaphysics without physics, no knowledge of metaphysical objects such as God (or the separate substances) without transcending the perspective proper to the sense-bound knowledge of physics.⁸ Physical knowledge is the default mode of the human intellect; to attain knowledge of that which is beyond physics, it must become metaphysical by focusing on the intelligibility proper to a thing as being. It is only by grasping the common being of things, the *esse* found in each thing differentiated and determined according to a specific nature, that the intellect is led to the common cause of being, which is God.

The Aristotelian way of proceeding *ex rebus sensibilibus* appears to be fundamental to how Aquinas understands the transcending movement of metaphysics. He links this principle to Aristotle's view of the difference between 'what is better known to us' and 'what is better known in itself'. With regard to the knowledge of God, even if God is intelligible to the highest degree, the human mind is not able to grasp the intelligibility of the divine essence immediately in itself, but must proceed indirectly (and negatively) from what is

⁸ See for the typical reductive movement of metaphysics, my book *Metaphysics between Experience and Transcendence. Thomas Aquinas on Metaphysics as a Science* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2021).

better known to us - sensible reality - to what is better known in itself. The formal structure of the way of proceeding in the knowledge of God is indicated in the following text:

Our natural knowledge begins from the senses. Hence our natural knowledge can go as far as it can be led by sensible things. But our intellect cannot be led far enough by the sense to see the essence of God But because sensible things are his effects and depend on him as their cause, they can lead us far enough to know whether God exists, and to know what must necessarily belong to him as the first cause of all things, exceeding all things caused by him.⁹

Here we have a neat description of the dynamic ascent of metaphysical reason to God, starting from sensible reality, *ex rebus sensibilibus*, as opposed to the Platonic way of the *rationes intelligibiles*.

3. The Prooemium of the Commentary on *De divinis nominibus*

In the previous section we saw that Aquinas, following Aristotle, rejects the Platonic doctrine of ideal forms. The main reason for this is that a plurality of separate forms, according to the order of species and genus, would destroy the intrinsic unity of sensible substances. Sensible reality would lose its very substantiality. Instead of Plato's dialectical philosophy, which consists in the pure thinking of intelligible forms in their logical interconnections, Aquinas opts for Aristotle's first philosophy, which, in its search for the causes and principles of being, proceeds from reality as it is given to the senses.

If Aquinas is, in this sense, a genuine Aristotelian thinker, the question arises as to how he actually manages to reconcile his highly valued Platonic sources, especially Dionysius' *De divinis nominibus*, with the principles of true philosophy as taught by Aristotle. How can Dionysius be 'saved' from Aristotle's critique of the very foundations of Platonism? As a theologian, Aquinas is, as might be expected, most interested in the theological part of metaphysics, the doctrine of the First Cause and its universal causality with respect to all beings. And, as suggested above, Aristotle's theory of the first principle in book Lambda of his *Metaphysics* is not very developed. His work lacks a complete and satisfying account of the

⁹ ST I, q.12, a.12.

deity as the causal origin of all being. In this respect, Dionysius, rooted in the tradition of Neoplatonic thought, has more to offer. How, then, can Dionysius' thought about the divine principle be integrated in the philosophical science of metaphysics as conceived by Aquinas?

To find an answer to this question, we must turn to the introductory text of Aquinas' Commentary on *De divinis nominibus*. Dionysius - or rather the unknown Christian and Neoplatonic author living in the fifth century who hides behind the authoritative name of the Greek convert Dionysius, the disciple of St Paul himself - is held in high esteem by Aquinas.¹⁰ The *De divinis nominibus* is one of the main sources of his thought about God, in particular his view of how God, the simple and transcendent origin of the many and diverse perfections in the created world, can be named by names derived from these perfections, such as 'being', 'life', 'knowledge', and so on. Dionysius is a Christian author, a Catholic theologian of great reputation, and as such, for Aquinas, an authoritative source of what the faith teaches.

In the *prooemium* of his Commentary, he sets out to introduce his readers to the writings of Dionysius and to clarify his philosophical allegiances. One of the difficulties that the modern reader of Dionysius will encounter, Aquinas explains, is that he often uses a Platonic style and way of speaking that is no longer common in our time (*apud modernos*).¹¹ Dionysius' philosophical language is Platonic in character, whereas we - Aquinas and his contemporaries - are used to the style and language of Aristotle.¹² But Dionysius' Platonic style does not make him, Aquinas thinks, a truly Platonic thinker who subscribes to the problematic - tenets of Platonic philosophy. Thus, despite the anti-Platonic implications of Aristotelian philosophy as it became known in the thirteenth century, the theology of Dionysius deserves to be fully recognised and appreciated.

In a subtle way, Aquinas argues that Dionysius distances himself in his work from those aspects of Platonism, especially the doctrine of ideal forms, that are contrary to

¹⁰ See Acts 17: 34; for the influence of Dionysius on the thought of Aquinas, see Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1992).

¹¹ In *De div. nom.*, prooemium (ed. C. Pera, Marietti, 1950): "...quia plerumque utitur stilo et modo loquendi quo utebantur platonici, qui apud modernos est inconsuetus." Cf. W.J. Hanky, "Dionysian Hierarchy in St. Thomas: Tradition and Transformation," *Denys l'Areopagite et sa postérité en Orient et en Occident, Actus du Colloque international Paris, 21-24 septembre 1994*, ed. Ysabel de Andia (Paris: Institut d'études augustiniennes, 1997) (Collection des Études Augustiniennes, Série Antiquité, 151), 405-438.

¹² One may doubt whether the contrast between the Platonic style of thinking and the Aristotelian way of philosophy was so sharp in the thirteenth century as suggested here by Aquinas. It was most of all Aquinas himself who has endeavoured to promote the new philosophy of Aristotle. But one should not forget that he used to read the *Liber de causis* against the background of the Aristotelian metaphysics.

Christian faith and rational truth. The Platonism of Dionysius, so is the message he wants to convey to the reader, is a revised Platonism that does not fall under the critique of Aristotle; a revised Platonism that not only agrees with the Christian faith, but can even be accepted as a welcome contribution to that part of metaphysics that studies the divine causality of creation.

In the preface to his Commentary, Aquinas gives a brief explanation of the basic principles of Platonic thought. Platonists, he says, hold that the species of things exist in themselves and separately. Thus, for example, they say that this particular human being is not essentially a human being, but is a human being through participation in the “separated man”. Since the species of things can be thought of separately from their individualising and material conditions, they must also exist separately. For the Platonists, there is no difference between the logical order of pure thought, with its *rationes intelligibiles*, and the order of being. The dialectical effort of pure thought gives access to being, that is, to the intelligible essences of things. Now, this method of hypostasizing intelligible essences is applied not only to the species of things, says Aquinas, but also to the most common predicates such as 'good', 'one', and 'being' - in other words, to the transcendental properties of being.¹³ It is by means of this distinction between categorical forms (species and genus) and transcendental forms (being, good, one) that Aquinas is able to concede a relative truth to the position of the Platonists:

The Platonists not only considered abstraction of this kind regarding the ultimate species of natural things, but also concerning the most common features, which are 'good', 'one', and 'being'....

The reasoning of the Platonists concords neither with faith nor with the truth in so far as it concerns the separateness of natural species, but regarding what they say concerning the first principle of things, their opinion is most true and consonant with the Christian faith.¹⁴

In this instructive passage, Aquinas distinguishes between the species of natural things (the categorical domain), which fall under the consideration of the science of physics, and the

¹³ See for the medieval doctrine of transcendentals, Jan Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals: The Case of Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

¹⁴ *In De div. nom.*, prooemium: “Nec solum huiusmodi abstractione Platonici considerabant circa ultimas species rerum naturalium, sed etiam circa maxime communia, quae sunt bonum, unum et ens.... Haec igitur Platoniorum ratio fidei non consonant nec veritati, quantum ad hoc quod continet de speciebus naturalibus separatis, sed quantum ad id quod dicebant de primo rerum principio, verissima est eorum opinio et fidei Christiana consona.”

maxime communia, the transcendentals, which define the proper object domain of metaphysics. The *maxime communia* are not separate principles in the Platonic sense; they are common to all things, since they are essential aspects of the being common to all that exists. But these *communia* can be said to enjoy, in Platonic terms, a hypostatical reality in the first principle, which is the One and the Good. What all things have in common must be reduced to a separate principle which is the cause of these common features. Here we see the kind of integration that Aquinas has in mind between the Platonic hypostatical way of thinking and the Aristotelian perspective of metaphysics, the study of common being together with its transcendental properties.

For Aquinas, it is clear that the species of natural things do not admit of a separate and ideal existence. He fully endorses Aristotle's critique that the separateness of species and genera would lead to the loss of the essential unity of sensible substances. Socrates would not be essentially human if the species were distinct and separate from the concrete individual reality of Socrates. The case is different with the common predicates *bonum*, *unum* and *ens*. Here the hypostasizing type of abstraction of Platonism has an acceptable and legitimate sense. The Platonists postulate something primary, which is the 'essence of goodness', the 'essence of unity' and the 'essence of being', and this we call God. It follows that all things are said to be good, or one, or beings, by way of derivation (participation!) from this primary principle.¹⁵ This, in a nutshell, is the Platonic doctrine of the First Principle and its participatory causality, as present in the speculative theology of Dionysius, and as judged by Aquinas to be most true (*verissima*) and consistent with the Christian faith.

Aquinas' favourable attitude to the variety of Platonism he finds in Dionysius calls for two comments. He explicitly mentions Platonic phrases such as 'the essence of goodness' and 'the essence of unity', which characterise the way in which Dionysius conceives of God. But whereas a Platonist would regard 'the essence of goodness' as a hypostatical reality, even as the primary hypostasis from which all things proceed, Aquinas certainly does not consider the essence of goodness as a reality in itself. What is described as the 'essence of goodness' and the 'essence of unity' is explicitly identified with being; and although this being is quasi-hypostatically circumscribed as the 'essence of being', a phrase that does not really fit into Aquinas' metaphysical vocabulary, what is implicitly intended is clearly the

¹⁵ *In De div. nom.*, prooemium: "Ponebant, enim, unum primum quod est ipsa essentia bonitatis et unitatis et esse, quod dicimus Deum, et quod omnia alia dicuntur bona vel una vel entia per derivationem ab illo primo."

ipsum esse of God, the first being (*primum ens*) that is identical with its being (*esse*). And since God is the first being, being by his essence (*ens per essentiam*), he must also be good *per essentiam*.¹⁶ Being is for Aquinas the primary name of the first cause, especially insofar as it is the first efficient cause of all things, the divine agent of creation. The Dionysian primacy of the good is changed into the primacy of being. Thus, although the good and the one are formulated as hypostatical principles - 'the essence of goodness', 'the essence of unity' - they are, for Aquinas, transcendental properties which follow upon being. For Aquinas, Plato's supreme good, as first principle of reality, cannot be without being, since being as the name of God, I would suggest, accounts in particular for God's efficient causality. Only as identical with being, as its implicate, can the supreme good be conceived as an Aristotelian agent, a real principle with an effective power.¹⁷

Second, the Platonic model that Aquinas recognises in Dionysius' conception of the first principle and its participative causality is only acceptable to him insofar as it can be integrated within the Aristotelian framework of metaphysics. Metaphysics is the study of being as common to all things (*ens commune*) and of the separate causes of being. It is the science of metaphysics which tells us that, given the plurality of beings in the world, there must be a First, which is essentially being, and thus also essentially good, and that all things that derive their being, together with their goodness, from this principle. For Aquinas, this is even an acknowledged part of Aristotle's philosophy, see for example his frequent reference to the second book of *Metaphysics*: there must be something primary which is *maxime ens* and as such the cause of all subsequent beings.¹⁸

It should be noted that for Aquinas the alleged agreement between Plato and Aristotle regarding the primary being is not so much a historical fact as a hermeneutical claim and construction. Aquinas wants to show that Plato, especially the version of

¹⁶ In *Summa theologiae* I, q.6, a.3, God is said to be '*bonum per essentiam*', essentially good. The reason which is given is that God has every kind of perfection in virtue of his essence. 'Essence' is here used in an Aristotelian sense of the primary principle of a thing's being. The essence of God is the sufficient reason of his complete goodness. This is not the same as the Platonic expression 'the essence of goodness', which is nothing else than the pure reality of goodness.

¹⁷ See *ST I*, q.6, a.4 for the same reduction of the good and the one to being: "Et quia bonum convertitur cum ente, sicut et unum, ipsum per se bonum dicebat esse Deum, a quo omnia dicuntur bona per modum participationis."

¹⁸ See Aristotle's *Metaphysics* II, 993b30; this passage lies at the basis of the fourth argument for the existence of God, often considered as a more Platonic argument; see *ST I*, q.2, a.3: "Est igitur aliquid quod est verissimum, et optimum, et nobilissimum, et per consequens maxime ens: nam quae sunt maxime vera, sunt maxime entia, ut dicatur II *Metaph.* (...) Ergo est aliquid quod omnibus entibus est causa esse, et bonitatis, et cuiuslibet perfectionis: et hoc dicimus Deum."

Platonism he finds in Dionysius, has important things to contribute to the metaphysical doctrine of the first principle and its causality; and that these valuable aspects of Platonism can be understood as an integral part, even as a further development, of the Aristotelian project of the metaphysical science of being and its transcendent causes.

4. The Monotheism of the *Liber de causis* and the Doctrine of the Unity of Form

One of the most important and appreciated of the Neoplatonic sources of Aquinas is the *Liber de causis*.¹⁹ The identity of the author of the *Liber* is still a matter of debate among scholars. When the work began to circulate in the Latin universities in the thirteenth century, under the title *Liber de Expositione Bonitatis Purae* (Book of the Exposition of Pure Goodness), it was attributed to Aristotle himself and was generally regarded as the completion of Aristotle's metaphysics.²⁰ In the eyes of medieval thinkers, it filled in Aristotle's otherwise deficient account of the ultimate causes of the universe as presented in *Metaphysics* XII. Even Aquinas long considered Aristotle to be its author, at least until he came across Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, translated by his fellow Dominican William of Moerbeke. Then, as he explains in the preface to his Commentary, he realised that the *Liber de causis* was in fact the work of an unknown Arabic author who had freely used Proclus' *Elements of Theology*.²¹ Aquinas no longer thought that the work was written by Aristotle. Nevertheless, he must have continued to regard the *Liber de causis* as a supplement to the science of metaphysics as developed by Aristotle in his books of metaphysics. To put it more precisely, the *Liber de causis*, together with the work of Dionysius, was the main source from which Aquinas borrowed the necessary elements for constructing a metaphysical account of

¹⁹ For Aquinas' Commentary on the *Liber de causis*, see: *Sancti Thomae de Aquino Super librum de causis expositio*, ed. H.D. Saffrey (Fribourg: Société philosophique, 1954). Translated into English by V. Guagliardo, C. Hess, and R. Taylor, *St. Thomas Aquinas: Commentary on the Book of Causes* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996).

²⁰ Cf. the telling remark of Saffrey in the introduction of his edition of Aquinas' Commentary on the *Liber de causis*: "On voit que dès cette époque, dans l'université, le *Liber* est rattaché à la *Métaphysique* d'Aristote." (p. xix).

²¹ *Commentary on the Book of Causes*, preface: "And in Greek we find a book handed down by the Platonist Proclus, which contains 211 propositions and is entitled *The Elements of Theology*. And in Arabic we find the present book which is called *On causis* among Latin readers, known to have been translated from Arabic and not known to be extant at all in Greek. Thus, it seems that one of the Arab philosophers excerpted it from this book by Proclus, especially since everything in it is contained much more fully and more diffusely in that of Proclus."

the First Cause (God), free from the problematic aspects of Neoplatonism, especially its polytheistic implications, and compatible with the project of metaphysics as defined by Aristotle. As Wayne Hankey wrote: "Thomas found that the doctrine of the *De divinis nominibus* was a monotheistically modified Platonism like that of the *Liber de causis*".²² And this "monotheistically modified Platonism" was, I would argue, perfectly acceptable in Aquinas' eyes as a theological complement to the science of metaphysics.²³

In this section I want to discuss some illuminating passages of Aquinas' Commentary on the *Liber de causis*. I will confine myself to the exposition of the third proposition. Here Aquinas first offers an account of the Neoplatonic hierarchy of divine forms as present in the philosophy of Proclus; then he goes on to explain that both Dionysius and the author of the *Liber* correct this pagan Platonism of Proclus with regard to the thesis of the plurality of divine forms.

In describing the outlines of Proclus' system of metaphysics, Aquinas first reminds the reader of the basics of Platonism. Plato, he says, had postulated universal forms that were separate and subsistent in themselves. Because such universal forms exercise a certain causality over particular things that participate in them, he - that is, Proclus - called such forms 'gods'. Furthermore, he assumed a certain order among these forms, according to the principle that the more universal a form is, the more simple and prior a cause it is, for the first form is participated in by the later forms. In the order of ideal forms, the first is the separate One and Good itself, which is called the Supreme God and the First Cause of all things. It should be noted that in Proclus these divine forms are called 'henads', derived instances of the first One, prior to the lower hypostatical orders of minds, souls and bodies.

Now, Aquinas continues, Dionysius has corrected this position of the plurality of ideal forms. There are not many forms, so that one would be 'per se goodness', another 'per se being', another 'per se life', and so on in relation to the others. As Dionysius said, they are all one and identical with the First Cause of all things.²⁴ In the divine realm there is only one

²² W. Hankey, "Aquinas and the Platonists," in *The Platonic Tradition in the Middle Ages; A Doxographic Approach*, ed. by Stephen Gersch and Maarten Hoenen, (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002), 311.

²³ See the following remark of Aquinas in his Commentary on the *Liber de causis*: "quia vero secundum sententiam Aristotelis quae in hoc magis catholicae doctrinae concordat, non ponimus multas formas Sed unam solam quae est causa prima." (*In LC*, prop. 13, ed. Saffrey, 83, l.8).

²⁴ In his Commentary on Dionysius' *De divinis nominibus*, Aquinas describes in a similar way how Dionysius distances himself from the polytheistic implications of Platonism; see especially the following passage: "The Platonists, whom Dionysius imitates much in this book (...) posited separated realities 'per se'. (...) Indeed, they laid down these separated principles as mutually distinct in respect to the First Principle which they called the

cause, and that cause is the source of the life of all living things, the source of the being of all being things, and so on. This Dionysian monotheistic 'modification' of Platonism leads to something close to Aquinas' own conception of God: God is characterised as being itself, *ipsum esse subsistens*, and as such he is the very essence of goodness, and so whatever belongs to the perfection of goodness and of being belongs essentially to him, so that he is the essence of life, of wisdom, of power, and of the rest.²⁵ God contains in himself all perfections in simple unity, and on this condition he can be said to possess the universality of causality in relation to lower reality. Aquinas' understanding of being as universal perfection makes it possible to conceive of God as the one and only cause of all things, containing in himself the fullness of perfection.

The author of the *Liber* follows Dionysius in his monotheistic correction of pagan Platonism. He does not speak, like Proclus, of a multitude of gods, but establishes unity in the divine realm (*unitatem in Deo constituit*).²⁶ There is only one principle, being itself, which is the cause of the being of things and of all their distinctive perfections. And Aristotle agrees with this opinion (*Metaph.* II; for the reference, see note 18). Thus, with regard to the universal causality of the first principle, Dionysius, the *Liber de causis* and Aristotle are all in agreement with one another, and with the doctrine of the Catholic faith.

With regard to the thesis of the unicity of the Creator, however, the text of the *Liber* confronts Aquinas with a problem arising from its Neoplatonic background. Its author uses a phrase that suggests a mediated process of creation: "the first cause created the being of the soul through the mediation of an intelligence" (*causa prima creavit esse animae mediante intelligentia*).²⁷ Such a process of mediation, in which different hypostatical principles cooperate in the constitution of lower reality, is unacceptable to Aquinas. It cannot be the case, says Aquinas, that the soul receives its essential being from the first

per se Good, and the per se One. Dionysius agrees with them in one way, and disagrees in another. He agrees in that the two posits life existing separately per se, and likewise wisdom, and being, and other things of this kind. He dissents from them, however, in this: he does not say that these separated principles are diverse entities, but that they are in fact one principle, which is God." (*In De divinis nominibus* cap.5, lect.1, 634).

²⁵ *In LC*, prop. 3 (ed. Saffrey, 20, l.16): "cum Deus sit ipsum esse et ipsa essentia bonitatis, quidquid pertinent ad perfectionem bonitatis et esse, totum ei essentialiter convenit, ut scilicet ipsa sit essentia vitae et sapientiae et virtutis et ceterorum." The formulation is very similar to the one used in ST I, q.4, a.2, only in the latter text the expression 'essence of goodness' is not mentioned; cf. ad 3: "...ipsum esse Dei includit in se vitam et sapientiam: quia nulla de perfectionibus essendi potest deesse ei quod est ipsum esse subsistens."

²⁶ *In LC*, prop. 3 (ed. Saffrey, 20, l.21): "Et hoc sequitur Auctor huius libri. Non enim invenitur inducere aliquam multitudinem deitatis, sed unitatem in Deo constituit."

²⁷ *In LC*, prop. 3 (ed. Saffrey, 21, l.23): "...per hoc quod anima est creata a causa prima mediante intelligentia; unde anima est a Deo sicut a causa prima, ab intelligentia autem sicut a causa secunda."

cause, which is 'being itself', while it subsequently receives other perfections, such as life and intelligence, from other principles, called 'the first life' and 'the first intelligence'. Although the idea of a mediated creation, as an implication of a plurality of hypostatical principles, is certainly a possible way of interpreting the text, Aquinas argues that this position must be rejected because it is contrary to "both the truth and the opinion of Aristotle".²⁸

The affirmation of the unity of God against Neoplatonic polytheism is not only motivated by Christian monotheism, it is also an implication of Aristotle's philosophy, in particular the thesis of the unity of substantial form. Here we have the typical alliance Aquinas saw between the principles of Aristotelian philosophy, especially its defence of the intrinsic unity of sensible reality, and the truth of Christian faith with its doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. Being itself, *Ipsum esse*, which is the principal name of the first cause, is the origin not only of the being common to all things, but also of the differentiating perfections contained in the substantial form of each individual substance. To suppose a plurality in the order of the divine causes would be to lose the substantial unity of the things constituted by those causes. "If the soul had a being from one cause and an intellectual nature from another, it would follow that it would not be absolutely one. Therefore it must be said that the soul has not only essence but also intellectuality from the first cause. This is in accordance with the opinion of Dionysius."²⁹ Things have their being and their specific mode of being from one and the same principle, which is being itself and as such the fullness of being.

In the previous section we noticed a subtle change in the position of 'being' in the transcendent realm of the divine. For Aquinas, 'being' is first in rank prior to the good and the one; it is because the good is convertible with being that the essential good itself can be called 'God'.³⁰ This goes against the typical Platonic preference for the good as the name of the first principle. For Aquinas, God is in the first place 'being itself', which contains in itself

²⁸ *In LC*, prop. 3 (ed. Saffrey, 23, l.21): "Sed etiam haec positio, si non sane intelligatur, repugnat veritati et sententiae Aristotelis qui arguit in III Metaphysicae contra Platonicos ponentes huiusmodi ordinem causarum separatarum secundum ea quae de individuis praedicantur." Aquinas recognizes in the passage from the *Liber* a Platonic way of reasoning according to which the series of more or less common predicates, said of the concrete individual thing, must be reduced to different separated forms, corresponding with these predicates.

²⁹ *In LC*, prop. 3 (ed. Saffrey, 24, l.1): "...si ab alio haberet [anima] esse et ab alio naturam intellectivam sequeretur quod non esset unum simpliciter; oportet ergo dicere quod a prima causa a qua habet essentiam, habet etiam intellectualitatem. Et hoc concordat sententiae Dionysii..."

³⁰ See note 17.

all perfections. We must now consider how and to what extent this idea of ontological fullness departs from the basic view of Platonism.

In commenting on his Platonic sources, Aquinas sometimes uses expressions such as 'the essence of being' or 'essential being', terms which seem to be more or less equivalent to what in his own metaphysical vocabulary is called 'subsistent being itself'. The addition of subsistence is intended to distinguish the *ipsum esse* of God from the *ipsum esse* common to all things. The common being considered in itself is an abstraction; it does not subsist in itself. The *ipsum esse* of God, in contrast, subsists in itself. The question now is whether this '*ipsum esse*' of God can be regarded as a hypostatical principle in the Platonic sense of the word, something like the 'idea of being'. For Aquinas, 'being itself' is the preferred name of the cause of the being of all things. This seems to correspond in some sense to what Plato says (in *Phaedo* 110c): beauty itself is the cause of the presence of beauty in all beautiful things. Is 'being itself' then a hypostatical principle, the ideal form of being? But what if it is an ideal form? Is it then not necessarily distinct from other hypostatical forms?

In my view, the way Aquinas uses the expression 'being itself' for God fits into the Aristotelian model of metaphysics (although Aristotle would probably not have used such an expression). The metaphysical consideration of the whole of reality in the light of being leads to the affirmation of a primary being, which is God. This primary being (*primum ens*) is such, Aquinas argues, that it must be identical with its being (*esse*); in other words, it is its being itself. Thus the essence in God is not a limiting principle; its formal determination consists in nothing other than being, from which it follows that it has the *plenitudo essendi*. In other words, the essence in God does not stand for a limited perfection (being this); in so far as it is identical with being, it must include all perfections, which as such are perfections of being. This is the crucial point: for Aquinas, being means the formal ground of all perfection. Each thing is perfect in so far as it has being.³¹ Where being is present without limitation, as it is in God, it follows that there must be the infinite fullness of perfection. It seems to me that this is not really a Platonic way of reasoning, or at least it is not found in his Platonic sources. Aquinas seems to be assuming some kind of substrate in the real order: If being (*esse*), that is, just being, is present in God as a formal *ratio* without any limitation, that is, in such a way

³¹ See *ST I*, q.4, a.2: "Omnium autem perfectiones pertinent ad perfectionem essendi: secundum hoc enim aliqua perfecta sunt, quod aliquo modo esse habent."

that it is not the being of this or that, but being itself that completely fills the essence (the principle of determination) in God, then God must have the fullness of being in himself.

Is the formula '*ipsum esse subsistens*' a Platonic expression, result of a hypostatical abstraction? I am inclined to deny this. Characteristic of Aquinas' revision of Platonism is the new way of conceiving the identity of 'being' and 'good' in God. Within this identity, being has priority. Why is this so? I think the main reason is, for Aquinas, that Plato's supreme good, in order to be identified with God, must be more than an ideal principle, it must be an Aristotelian agent, a real principle with an effective power to create. And God can only be an effective agent by virtue of his being. 'Being' in God is not an intelligible form taken in itself; it subsists in itself as a real entity and is as such a real efficient cause.

The prominent place given to the term being in the transcendent realm is an important modification of the traditional Platonic primacy of the good. For Aquinas, the good is coextensive with being, and thus the 'absolute good' is identical with absolute being, and because of its identity with being, the absolute good can be called 'God'. This is a significant change in the relationship between being and good. The assumption is that the name God stands for a real (efficient) principle. Thus, only as identical with being can the absolute good be identified with God, who is an effective principle that gives being to creatures. The good itself of Platonism is not unconditionally qualified as the Creator God. In God, the attribute of the good is relocated and associated with final causality, the motivating cause of God's creative action. God creates because he wants to communicate his goodness to others as much as possible, according to the Platonic principle *bonum est diffusivum sui*. But he *can* create, that is, producing a being from nothing, by virtue of the infinite power of being that he embodies.

What can we conclude so far? Undoubtedly, there is a lot of Platonism in Aquinas, especially with regard to the doctrine of the first principle and its participative causality. The Platonism of Dionysius and of the *Liber de causis* helped Aquinas a lot in working out the theological part of metaphysics. However, this Platonism is modified, even corrected, in its method and basic assumptions, so that it fits into the Aristotelian framework of metaphysics, which is a science of the intelligibility of the being common to all things, and as such reducible to a first principle, which is being in identity with itself, *ipsum esse*. To speak of '*ipsum esse*' may sound Platonic; but for Aquinas it is not an ideal form, as such different

from other forms. It is the name of a real and effective power, a cause of being, which must contain in itself the fullness of perfection.