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Aquinas on Being

Anthony Kenny

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ANTHONY KENNY

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PREFACE

THE subject of Being is one of the most important of all philosophical concerns. St Thomas Aquinas was one of the greatest of all philosophers. It will be the aim of this book to show that on this crucial topic this first-rank philosopher was thoroughly confused. The project may well seem a bizarre one, and to need explanation at the outset. The explanation will take an autobiographical form.

I first began to read St Thomas fifty years ago, being then a student at the Gregorian University in Rome, a Catholic ecclesiastical institution staffed by Jesuits. Between 1949 and 1952 I took a course in Thomistic philosophy—‘*ad mentem Sancti Thomae*’, as the papal instructions had it. The course involved very little actual study of Aquinas’ writings. We learnt our theory of being, our ontology, from a textbook on metaphysics written by Father (later Cardinal) Paolo Dezza, S.J. But the course did prescribe the reading of one text of St Thomas: the treatise *On Being and Essence* (*De Ente et Essentia*). I found it difficult and unrewarding, and completed my Roman philosophy course without any understanding or appreciation of the genius of St Thomas.

Later, as a graduate student in theology, I had the good fortune to be supervised by Father Bernard Lonergan S.J., who became well-known as a philosopher for his book *Insight*. He tried to make me see that St Thomas should not be judged by the dehydrated versions of his philosophy to be found in textbooks. It was necessary to come to grips with his original massive works—and Lonergan would describe to me his own decades of striving, as he put it, ‘to reach up to the mind of Aquinas’.

It was not, however, until I became a graduate student in Oxford at the end of the 1950s that I really began to learn this lesson. This was thanks partly to Herbert McCabe O.P. and his Dominican colleagues at Oxford, alongside whom I worked as a translator of sections of the *Summa Theologiae* for the new Blackfriars edition. But it was due above all to Peter Geach, whose 1955 lecture to the Aristotelian Society, 'Form and Existence', first made me see the relevance of Aquinas' metaphysical teaching to the concerns of analytic philosophers. The comparison in that paper between Frege's theory of functions and Aquinas' theory of forms has influenced my thinking on these topics ever since, and provides the background to much of the work in the present book.

Not only Aquinas' metaphysics, but his philosophy of mind now began to absorb me, and I belatedly came to appreciate the value of the work done in this area by one of my Roman teachers, Father Peter Hoenen S.J. My Oxford doctoral thesis, which was published in 1963 as *Action, Emotion and Will*, though overwhelmingly influenced by Wittgenstein, drew on Aquinas' philosophical psychology at a number of points.

One of the first books that I published after obtaining a full-time philosophy post was *The Five Ways* (1969), a study of the celebrated proofs for the existence of God offered by St Thomas in his *Summa Theologiae*. While I found it fascinating to examine these proofs in detail, I found that my inquiry led to a negative conclusion. None of the five proofs was a success, because on close examination their premisses depended far more on medieval scientific assumptions than appeared at first sight. The proof that was most free of the taint of medieval physics, and to that extent was most metaphysical, was the fourth way; but this, I discovered, was the most flawed of all the five. The notion of God to which it led was, I maintained, superficially profound but ultimately nonsensical.

From that time, I found that while my appreciation of Aquinas' philosophy of mind continued to grow, my admiration

of aspects of his metaphysics became ever more qualified. This dual judgement was expressed in the short book on Aquinas that I was invited to write in the Oxford series *Past Masters*, which appeared in 1969. The book contained three chapters, the first devoted to a summary of the Saint's life and works, the second to Being, and the third to Mind. The chapter on Mind argued that St Thomas's philosophical psychology was as well worth serious consideration as any theory of mind currently on the philosophical market. The chapter on Being, however, concluded as follows:

The theory of the real distinction between essence and existence, and the thesis that God is self-subsistent being, are often presented as the most profound and original contributions made by Aquinas to philosophy. If the arguments presented here have been correct, even the most sympathetic treatment of these doctrines cannot wholly succeed in acquitting them of the charge of sophistry and illusion. (Kenny 1980: 60)

Both the positive judgement on Aquinas' philosophy of mind and the negative judgement on aspects of his ontology provoked criticism from generally friendly reviewers. Given the brevity imposed by the *Past Masters* format, I had been able to present the case for both judgements only in the most cursory fashion. Accordingly, I decided that I must, at a later stage, produce a more argued and documented submission in each case. In 1993, therefore, I published a book with the title *Aquinas on Mind*, and now I offer this treatise on *Aquinas on Being*.

My reflection on Aquinas' ontology in recent years was greatly helped by discussion and correspondence with Norman Kretzmann, who in the last years of his life wrote two magisterial works on the Saint's natural theology: *The Metaphysics of Theism* and *The Metaphysics of Creation*. He taught me the importance of study of the *Summa contra Gentes* as well as of the *Summa Theologiae*.

Aquinas on Mind consisted largely of close readings, and philosophical analysis, of passages in the *Summa Theologiae* devoted to human intelligence and volition. In the present work I have adopted a rather different approach, treating Aquinas' major works in chronological order and inquiring what is to be learnt from each of them on the topic of being. There is, as will be seen, much similarity and continuity of doctrine between the earlier works and the later: but it is interesting to see the different forms that the teaching takes in the different contexts of monographs, disputed questions, and *Summas* of different kinds. The chronological approach was also necessary if justice was to be done to the claim of some admirers of Aquinas that he began with a naive notion of being in his early work, but acquired a coherent and defensible theory in his mature writings.

Close study of the texts of the different periods has not altered my opinion that Aquinas' teaching on being, though widely admired, is in fact one of the least admirable of his contributions to philosophy. Contemporary philosophers have long been accustomed to draw a distinction between the 'is' of existence, the 'is' of predication and the 'is' of identity. Aquinas most commonly introduces discussion of the verb 'to be' not with a trichotomy but with a dichotomy, which we will shortly have occasion to examine in detail.¹ But the problem is not that Aquinas fails to notice the distinctions that modern philosophers draw, and operates with too few senses of being: on the contrary there are many places in which he analyses the meaning of the Latin equivalent of the verb 'to be', and he draws many acute distinctions. However, the word as he uses it has many different meanings (and, as I shall argue, some non-meanings) that are never brought together into a coherent and systematic whole.

¹ See p. 2 below. A painstaking attempt to relate the 'Frege trichotomy' to Aquinas' dichotomy is to be found in the excellent article by Hermann Weidemann, 'The Logic of Being in Thomas Aquinas', in S. Knuuttila and J. Hintikka (eds.), *The Logic of Being* (Reidel, Dordrecht), pp. 181–200.

This means that ambiguity and equivocation infects many of his philosophical arguments and answers to objections.

This claim can obviously be justified only by a detailed examination of the texts, to which the main part of the book will be devoted. After that, I will be in a position to show that there are no fewer than twelve different ways in which being may be spoken of, or the verb 'to be' used, in the works of Aquinas and the authorities he discusses. Because Aquinas never systematically sorted out the contrasts, relationships, and overlaps between these different types of being, it is often difficult to be sure what exactly he is talking about in any context in which being is the topic. For the same reason, it is difficult to evaluate well-known systematic theses, such as the real distinction between essence and existence and the definition of God as self-subsistent being.

I have done my best to attribute appropriate senses to the passages I have discussed, but in many cases I have failed. For a historian of philosophy, it is a much more daunting task to criticize a philosopher than to defend him. In order to defend a text, it is sufficient to find one reading of it which makes it coherent and plausible; if one wishes to expose confusion, one has to explore many possible interpretations before concluding that none makes the text satisfactory. And at the end of it all, no doubt there are many places in which my failure to make sense of what Aquinas says reflects incomprehension on my part rather than confusion on his.

The history of philosophy can be pursued in various ways. The inquirer's interest may be primarily historical, aiming to bring out for our comprehension the intellectual system of a person or culture distant in time. Or it may be primarily philosophical, seeking to gain from the great writers of the past guidance about intellectual problems that are still living issues. My own historical writing has always been directed by the second motive, though I am well aware of the need to avoid anachronism in the study of long dead thinkers. It is only by appreciating

the differences between their and our approaches to philosophical problems that one can hope to gain new insight into the problems themselves. Otherwise the history of philosophy simply becomes contemporary philosophy in fancy dress.

One can gain philosophical insight not only when writing about a philosopher at his strongest (as I did in my *Aquinas on Mind*), but also when writing about a philosopher at his weakest, as I do in this present volume. All great philosophers have engendered great errors: we cannot, and should not, wholeheartedly accept Plato's theory of Ideas or the dualism of Descartes. It is no disrespect to the genius of Aquinas to try to dissolve some of the confusions on the nature of being to which he appears to have succumbed. We can gain rewarding insights by exploring even the false trails of a great mind.

The task is all the more worth carrying out because many of the teachings of Aquinas that, if I am right, are most vulnerable to philosophical criticism are precisely those that are held up as models of metaphysical wisdom by many of his theological followers. I hope I have shown in my earlier writings that I have no wish to discourage admiration of Aquinas: by putting the present work beside them, I hope to refocus it where it has been misdirected.

I am much indebted to an anonymous reviewer for Oxford University Press whose careful criticisms of an earlier draft of this work led me to rewrite, and I hope improve, considerable sections of the text.

A.K.

Oxford, 2001

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I *ON BEING AND ESSENCE: I*

THE short treatise *On Being and Essence* (*De Ente et Essentia*) was written when St Thomas was a young man—while still a bachelor, according to his biographer. The exact date is not known, but it certainly was written during the early years of his first period in Paris before he proceeded to the mastership in 1256 at the age of 30. It quickly became popular as an introductory manual of metaphysics, and so provides us with a useful starting point for the study of Aquinas' theory of Being.¹

The treatise is heavily influenced by the eleventh-century Arabic philosopher Ibn Sina or Avicenna, whose *Metaphysics* is referred to in the very first lines of Aquinas' prologue.² 'Being and Essence', Avicenna is quoted as saying 'are the first things grasped by the intellect', and this is taken to show the importance of conceiving them correctly. The statement is puzzling: both concepts seem abstruse and sophisticated, and the words that express them are far from being the first words learnt by children in any language. Something else must clearly be meant.

The saying is most plausibly represented as based on an analogy between intellectual understanding and sense perception. If I see something out of the corner of my eye, I may

¹ References to *De Ente et Essentia* are given to vol. XLIII of the Leonine edn, chapter and line.

² Avicenna (980–1037) was one of the principal interpreters of Aristotle to the Islamic world. Portions of his philosophical encyclopaedia were translated into Latin in Toledo in the second half of the twelfth century, one bearing the title *Metaphysica*.

wonder for a moment whether it is an aeroplane, a bird, a paint-mark on the window, or a mote on my spectacles; but, it may be said, all the time I know it is *something*, a being of some kind or other. However, as St Thomas was often to emphasize, the analogy between the senses and the intellect is a treacherous one. Intellectual understanding proceeds sometimes from the more general to the more specific (I may learn what a tree is before being able to discriminate between an oak and an ash) and sometimes from the more specific to the more general (it is quite possible to be able to recognize a dog before mastering the more abstract notion of animal). It is not plausibly represented as taking its start from the most general and unspecific concept of all.³

The first chapter of the treatise begins with a dichotomy, extracted from Aristotle's glossary of philosophical terms in *Metaphysics*, Book Δ, which recurs frequently in Aquinas' writings in every period. Being, we are told, is spoken about in two ways: the kind of being spoken of in the first way comes in one or other of the ten categories; the kind spoken of in the other way signifies the truth of propositions.⁴

The categories of which Aquinas is speaking originate in a classification made by Aristotle of different kinds of predicate.⁵ The predicate of a sentence may tell you what kind of a thing something is, or how big it is, or where it is, or what is happening to it, and so on. We may say, for instance, of St Thomas Aquinas that he was a human being, and that he

³ A more sophisticated, but still unconvincing, defence of Avicenna's doctrine is presented by St Thomas later in *Summa Theologiae* (1a, 85, 3). See my *Aquinas on Mind* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 108–9.

⁴ *Ens per se dupliciter dicitur: uno modo quod dividitur per decem genera; alio modo, quod significat propositionum veritatem* (1.2–5). There is a problem of translation here, given that there are no quotation marks in Latin. Should we translate as '“being” is used in two ways' or as 'being is spoken of in two ways'? Of the subsequent clauses, the first suggests the former translation and the second the latter.

⁵ See below, p. 178.

was fat, clever, and holier than Abelard; that he lived in Paris, in the thirteenth century, that he sat when lecturing, wore the Dominican habit, wrote eight million words, and was eventually poisoned by Charles of Anjou. The predicates we use in saying these things belong, Aristotle would say, in different *categories*: they belong in the categories of, respectively, substance, quantity, quality, relation, place, time, posture, vesture, action, and passion.

When a predicate in a particular category is actually true of something, then, according to Aquinas, there exists in the world an entity corresponding to the predicate. The first nine of the predications above are, I believe, true: thus, among the items of the world's history we must include Aquinas' humanity, his size, his intelligence, and so on. The tenth of the predications is most probably false, even though Dante believed it to be true. So we cannot reckon, among the furniture of the universe, the poisoning of Aquinas by Charles of Anjou. But the entities corresponding to the predicates of true sentences make up what Aquinas here calls the being that comes in one or other of the ten categories.

What of the other kind of being, being in the sense of the word in which, Aquinas says, it signifies the truth of propositions? In this sense, he tells us, anything about which an affirmative proposition can be formed may be called a being.⁶ Obviously, the first-class beings in the ten categories can be called beings in this sense too, since true affirmative propositions can be formed of them. But not everything that is a being in the second sense is also a being in the first sense, as Aquinas goes on to assert. There are second-class beings which 'posit nothing in reality', namely, negations and privations. To explain what he means, Aquinas says 'we say that affirmation is the opposite of negation, and that there is blindness in an

⁶ Secundo modo potest dici ens omne illud de quo affirmativa propositio formari potest (1.6-7).

eye'.⁷ It is fairly clear what is meant by saying that blindness 'posits nothing in reality'. It does not mean that blindness is something unreal or fictitious: rather, it means that it is not a positive reality, as the power of sight is, but an absence of such a power. The other limb of the explanation, however, is not so clear. Is Aquinas giving an alternative example, with affirmation being an example of a second-class being, or is he producing an argument, and if so what is its force? If we take this passage on its own, it is difficult to find an answer.

There is a further difficulty. Suppose the sentence 'there is blindness in this eye' is false. In that case, surely there is no such thing as the blindness of this eye: not even a second-class entity. Yet, on the face of it, we have formed an affirmative proposition about it. Even if that is not the kind of proposition that Aquinas had in mind, there is no difficulty in forming perfectly straightforward, but false, subject–predicate affirmative propositions about blindness, such as 'Aristotle was blind'. Perhaps what Aquinas really meant as the criterion for second-class beings was that *true* affirmative propositions could be formed about them.

In the present context, the use to which Aquinas puts his distinction between first-class and second-class beings is to make the point that only first-class beings have essences. There is no such thing as the essence of blindness: there are only essences of entities in the ten categories. 'Essence signifies something common to all the natures by which different beings are located in different genera and species: thus humanity is the essence of a human being, and so forth.'⁸

Here we are brought up short by a difficulty. The items in the ten categories, the first-class beings, corresponded to ten

⁷ Dicimus enim quod affirmatio est opposita negationi, et quod caecitas est in oculo (I.9–10).

⁸ oportet ut essentia significet aliquid commune omnibus naturis per quas diversa entia in diversis generibus et speciebus collocantur, sicut humanitas est essentia hominis (I.22–3).

types of predicate. I gave as an example of the first type of predicate 'is a human being' and said that the entity corresponding to it was an individual's humanity. Now that we are told that the items falling under the ten categories have essences, we would expect that humanity (unlike blindness) has an essence. But instead we are told that humanity *is* an essence—the essence of a human being.

The solution to the puzzle is found by tracing it back to an ambiguity in Aristotle's Greek. Aristotle named the first of his categories the category of *substance* (οὐσία): a predication in that category tells you, concerning the thing that the sentence is about, what kind of thing it is—a human being, a cat, a cabbage, a lump of salt. The word 'substance' in this usage marks off one type of predication, in contrast to predications in the other nine categories, which can be called predications that predicate *accidents*. But Aristotle also uses the word 'substance' to refer to the thing that the sentences containing the predicates are *about* (e.g. *Metaphysics*, 1028b, 33 ff.). Thus, Thomas Aquinas was himself a substance, about whom substantial and accidental predications could be made. Sometimes an express distinction is made between these two usages, with substance as subject being called 'first substance' and substance as predicate being called 'second substance'.

When, therefore, we are told that first-class beings are the beings in the ten categories, we should really understand this as including not just the entities corresponding to the ten types of predication, but also the entities of which the predications are made, namely, first substances. Substances, in fact, turn out to be much the most important types of first-class beings.

The lumping together of substances and substantial predicates may seem puzzling to a logical purist; but it is understandable because of the very close relationship between any substance and the predicate which tells you what kind of substance it is. There is an important difference between substantial

and accidental predication. When a substantial predicate ceases to be true of a substance, then that substance ceases to exist; when an accidental predicate ceases to be true, the substance merely changes. Thus, Aquinas could cease to be fat without ceasing to be Aquinas, but he could not cease to be a human being without ceasing to exist.

Thus, when Aquinas in *On Being and Essence* talks of the 'essence' of a horse or a cabbage, this is the same as what corresponds to a predication in the Aristotelian category of substance. The essence is what makes a thing the kind of thing it is: what makes a human being human, what makes a cabbage a cabbage and a vegetable, and so on. A predicate in the category of substance gives the answer to the question 'what kind of thing is this?' The Latin interrogative used in asking that question is 'quid?' and so, Aquinas says, philosophers use the word 'quiddity' as equivalent to 'essence'.⁹

Aquinas goes on to mention other terms that have been used by philosophers in the meaning which he wishes to give to 'essence': 'form', for instance, in Avicenna, and 'nature' in Boethius.¹⁰ In the course of his own writings he will use the three words with distinct meanings. For the moment, he contents himself with drawing attention to the different nuances conveyed by these terms if they are used as equivalent. 'Form' is here being used as a general term for the stable element in a

⁹ In this context Aristotle uses the almost untranslatable Greek expression τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι (Met. Z, 1028b34, etc.). This is literally 'the what-is-it to be' of a thing, i.e. the type of being that answers the question 'what is it?' Aquinas reports him thus: 'hoc est etiam quod Philosophus frequenter nominat quod quid erat esse, id est hoc per quod aliquid habet esse quid' (1.3 1-3). He seems to be understanding the Greek interrogative word (corresponding to 'what?') as if it were a pronoun or variable, corresponding to 'something'. His Latin translates roughly as 'this is what the Philosopher often calls that-which-something-was-to-be, i.e. that to which something owes it that it is what it is'. A paraphrase more intelligible to modern ears might be: 'the quiddity is that which makes something F, where F is a predicate in the category of substance'.

¹⁰ Manlius Severinus Boethius, a 6th-century Roman senator, author of *The Consolation of Philosophy* and a number of works on logic.

thing;¹¹ ‘nature’ stresses the link between the essence and the characteristic operations or activities of a thing; ‘quiddity’ indicates that the essence is what is expressed by a thing’s definition. ‘Essence’ itself, he says, is so called because ‘by it and in it a thing has *esse*’.

‘*Esse*’ is the infinitive form of the Latin verb for ‘to be’. In this work it will often be left untranslated when it occurs because, as we shall see, it has multiple meanings in Aquinas’ writing. I shall try in the course of the work to disambiguate these meanings by giving them different English paraphrases, but it is misleading and tendentious to use any one English word (e.g. ‘existence’) to correspond to the Latin ‘*esse*’. The Latin words that give the treatise the title *De Ente et Essentia* are related to the same Latin verb, since ‘*ens*’ is the present participle of the verb, and ‘*essentia*’ is an abstract noun formed from it. They do not, however, present the same systematic ambiguity as ‘*esse*’ does, and so I have retained in general the traditional translations ‘being’ and ‘essence’.¹²

The first-class beings that Aquinas has identified by reference to Aristotle’s categories may, as we have seen, be divided into two kinds: substances and accidents. Accidents are the entities corresponding to the last nine categories: substances are the entities that are assigned to natural kinds by predicates of the first category. It is substances, Aquinas says, that strictly and truly have essences; accidents do so only after a manner of speaking and in a limited sense.¹³

¹¹ Dicitur etiam forma, secundum quod per formam significatur certitudo uniuscujusque rei (I.34–5).

¹² ‘*ens*’ is not without translation problems of its own. Because Latin has no articles, the word can mean either ‘Being’, i.e. all that is; or ‘a being’, an entity, an individual thing that is. One must rely on context to disambiguate. The English word ‘being’ can correspond not only to the Latin participle, but also to the Latin infinitive, in which case it is equivalent to ‘to be’. This use will be generally avoided in this book, since the infinitive ‘*esse*’ is being left untranslated.

¹³ *Essentia proprie et vere est in substantiis, sed in accidentibus est quodammodo et secundum quid* (I.55–7).

In the class of substances, as we shall see, Aquinas included some mysterious entities which are very different from the everyday material objects—such as people, animals, stocks, and stones—that philosophers use to introduce the notion at the outset. Wisely, however, he begins with a discussion of familiar mundane substances as being easier to comprehend, and the first thing he tells us about them is that they are all composite. They are all made up of form and matter.

Aquinas assumes that his readers are familiar with this pair of technical terms, but it is worth pausing to offer a brief explanation of them. ‘Form’ and ‘matter’ have their primary role in the Aristotelian analysis of the changes undergone by individual substances. If a child plays with a piece of plasticine and moulds it first into a boat and then into a giraffe, it is natural to say that the same bit of stuff is taking on different shapes. The Latin words ‘*materia*’ and ‘*forma*’, and still more Aristotle’s Greek words of which they are translations, can have this everyday meaning of ‘stuff’ and ‘shape’. But the moulding of a lump of plasticine, though it is the kind of thing that Aquinas, following Aristotle, often uses as an illustration to introduce the notions of matter and form, is not strictly a case of substantial change. That takes place when a substance of one kind turns into a substance of another kind. A better example to illustrate the Aristotelian notion would be a bottle containing a pint of cream which, after shaking, is found to contain not cream but butter. The stuff that comes out of the bottle is the same stuff as the stuff that went into the bottle, in the sense that nothing has been added to it and nothing has been taken from it. But the kind of stuff that comes out is different from the kind of stuff that went in. The stuff that remains the same parcel of stuff throughout is called by Aristotle *matter*. The matter takes first one *form* and then another: first it has the form of cream, and then it has the form of butter.

Most substantial changes are rather more complicated than this simple example suggests. One of Aquinas’ favourite exam-

ples of such a change is the death of an animal. But when a dog dies and its body rots, we do not have a case of a single substance of one kind turning into a single substance of another, but a case of a single substance turning into many different substances into which the body decomposes. On the other hand, when I eat a varied meal, matter of many different kinds takes on my substantial form, the form of humanity. Most substantial changes are, in the manner illustrated, either one-many changes or many-one changes.

Whenever there is substantial change, there must be an episode that begins with one or more substances $A, A', A'' \dots$ and ends with one or more different substances, $B, B', B'' \dots$. That is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for substantial change to occur. If this is to be a change rather than a substitution, it is necessary that there should be something in common between the substance(s) present at the beginning of the change and the substance(s) present at the end of the change. One way of explaining the concept of *matter* is to say that matter is what is common to the two termini of a substantial change.

Aquinas' purpose in introducing the notions of matter and form at this point is to relate each of them to the notion of essence, his main concern. The essence of a thing is not its matter alone: matter of itself is indeterminate, restricted to no one kind, whereas the essence of a thing is what makes it belong to a particular species and genus. The essence is not pure form, either: the essence of a thing is what is expressed by its definition, and the definition of a natural substance mentions its matter as well as its form. In mathematics, no doubt, we can define a triangle without asking what it is made of; but no similar account could express the essence of a tree or a metal. We have to say that an essence is neither matter nor form, but includes both.

The essence is not some third thing, over and above matter and form—some relationship between them, perhaps. For

matter and form are not two separate entities, existing independently of each other, which can then be joined together by some additional entity. Matter can exist only under some form or other: it is form that actualises matter and makes it into a being, an individual being of a particular kind.¹⁴

In compound substances, Aquinas concludes, the word 'essence' means the compound of matter and form¹⁵—a definition, he remarks, which accords with those of Boethius and of Averroes.¹⁶ There is something puzzling about this. The only instance of an essence we have so far been given is that humanity is the essence of a human being. Surely it is the human being—not his humanity—that is the compound of matter and form. The human being, we might say, is something concrete, and his essence is something abstract. If we speak in this way, the definition we are given seems to confuse concrete and abstract in a disconcerting way. The confusion thickens when Aquinas goes on to cite, in support of his definition, a dictum of Avicenna to the effect that 'the quiddity of composite substances is the composition of form and matter'. We already know that quiddity = essence; but now it is being identified with something abstract ('composition') rather than with something concrete ('the compound').

There is no real confusion here, only a superficial one that is due to Aquinas' desire to enrol in his support a variety of authors using different terminologies in different languages. Despite appearances, he did not mean to identify the essence (e.g. humanity) with the substance ('human being'): when he spoke of 'the composite' he did not mean 'a composite substance' but only 'a composite item'. What he really means is

¹⁴ Per formam enim, quae est actus materiae, materia efficitur ens actu et hoc aliquid (2.31–2). The form in question is substantial form: accidental forms, like whiteness, can be added to an already existent essence.

¹⁵ Relinquitur ergo quod nomen essentiae in substantiis compositis significat id quod ex materia et forma compositum est (2.38–40).

¹⁶ Averroes, or Ibn Rushd (1126–98), a native of Cordoba in Muslim Spain, was the author of a series of influential commentaries on Aristotle's works.