

Rudi A. TE VELDE, *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas*, edited by J.A. AERTSEN, *Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters* 46, E.J. Brill, Leiden-New York-Köln 1995, pp. XIV + 290.



This splendid book is about St Thomas's metaphysical account of creation. The title refers to its dominant theme, which is how the account succeeds in resolving apparent tensions between the notions of participation and substantiality as elements of fundamental ontology. A fascinating theme in itself, Dr. te Velde has also found the heuristic value of it. For all the progress that has been made over this century in recovering Thomas's metaphysics, his inquiry brings to light serious problems for prevalent interpretations of the doctrines of participation in being, creative causality, and the relation between being and essence. With a clarity of exposition that is simply extraordinary, in my judgment it also goes far toward resolving the issues.

What is meant by 'tensions' between participation and substantiality is nothing obscure. The terms themselves evoke the tensions between Platonism and Aristotelianism, and it is not hard to see how the Christian doctrine of creation adds further twists. Te Velde goes straight to the issues. For instance, the idea that creatures are 'beings by participation' seems to fit well with their status as totally dependent upon God. Can Thomas be consistent in also regarding the creature as a *substantial* being, something enjoying "ontological density", endowed with essence, existing in and through *itself*? On the other hand, the thesis that creatures merely participate in being implies an absolute substantial diversity, and so an extremely imperfect likeness, between them and God: the essence of created substance is *not* its being. Does this imply a somewhat negative factor in the "exceedingly good" work of creation? Again, how can one apply the notion of participation without *blurring* the distinction between the divine and the created, or attributing to the creature a component that, albeit finite, is one in substance with the infinite whole from which it emanates — literally a part of God? And so on.

We are reminded of the problem of Boethius's *De hebdomadibus*. How can substances be good insofar as they are, without being substantial goods? If they are only good by participation, it seems, then they will not be good insofar as they are. Te Velde's reading of Thomas begins by looking at how he treats the problem in his commentary on *De hebdomadibus*, where he analyzes the notion of participation at length, and also in *De veritate* q.21, with which the commentary is conjectured to be contemporaneous. These would be two fairly early works.

Boethius's own answer was that the goodness that a substance has, insofar as it is, is

neither the substance itself nor something participated, but a relation, that of conformity to the will of the First Good. In the *De veritate* Thomas explicitly departs from this answer and holds fast to goodness by participation. He does so by appeal to a notion he finds in *De hebdomadibus* itself, the very notion of participation in substantial being (*esse*). Created substances are not their being, but they have it insofar as they are, and it makes them good.

Already quite conscious of the Platonic background, Thomas is of course careful to steer the doctrine clear of Aristotle's criticisms of the Ideas and of 'participation' as a sufficient *explanatory* term. The resolution to a first and immaterial source does not apply to the species or genera of corporeal beings, but only to the so-called transcendentals; the participation cannot be univocal; and efficient causality must play a role. Te Velde brings out well the extent to which Thomas's procedure depends on Aristotle's own reduction from the categories of sensible being to immaterial or separate substance by way of the primacy of substance as form. He also draws an interesting connection between metaphysical *separatio* and Thomas's notion of the self-denomination of transcendental predicates. This means that they can be applied, by analogy, to their own abstract forms: goodness is good, truth is true, etc. One only wishes that this discussion had been capped with a closer look at analogy.

If the early works show Thomas heedful of Aristotle's quarrels with participation in general, it is only in later works, te Velde judges, that he displays a full appreciation of the difficulties for the special notion of participation in *being* that arise from the Aristotelian doctrine of the absolute universality of being and of its immediacy to every nature. Te Velde finds in these difficulties a strong motive for Thomas's well-known, ever more decisive rejection of the 'Avicennian' way of conceiving being as an accident of created essence. In this regard he duly stresses the importance, and the difficulty, of not confusing the composition of form and being with that of subject and accident or matter and form. A form is neither a substance in act prior to its being nor, like matter, a merely *indeterminate* potency whose determinate act is therefore separable from and in a way accidental to it. The distinction between a form and its being must not be interpreted to the detriment of the fact that each is referred to the other *per se*. The distinction is *in* their relation to one another, and the differences among forms are not independent of their relation to their being, but are differences in how being is apportioned through them.

Part Two examines participation and the causality of creation. The general concern seems to be how the composition of essence and participated being in the creature squares with the notion of creation as a production having no presupposed subject. Te Velde disputes Geiger's postulation of a double participation, viz. essence as a self-limited formal participation of the divine essence by similitude, and being as a real or actual participation limited by the essence. A double participation is implausible in itself, and granting an independent participation to essence risks presenting being as a mere mode of it. Thus Fabro criticizes Geiger for weakening the real distinction between essence and being as potency and act. But te Velde finds Fabro still making the essence a too absolute 'other', first limited 'in itself' and then conferring its limitation on its being, which 'in itself' would be unlimited.

Fabro is in fact led to posit a *distinct creation* of essence and being. Yet what Thomas says is that to create essence is nothing other than to attribute being to it. It is as though for Fabro limitation by a quiddity were something *alien* to being, in any instance — as though, for a horse, to be in act were anything other than to be a *horse* in act. He even speaks of creation as an "ontological fall", meaning the *total dissimilitude*, the ontologi-

cal difference of *opposition* between effect and cause» (my emphasis). Is a creature like God, and so good, *despite* its nature, not because of it? Te Velde interprets participation as a more organic and positive connection between the creature's composite structure and its precise status as an *effect*, which *as such* is conformed with *and* inferior to the cause. Essence and being function *together* in establishing *both* the likeness of creature to Creator and the inequality of the likeness. «Any distinction on the part of the creature insofar as it is created must be understood, not by reducing the distinct elements in the effect to a distinction in the cause..., but formally as the way the effect represents the cause as distinguished from itself» (p. 116). Further on, in an exceptionally lucid way, he articulates a similarly organic relation between God's agency and created agency in the causation of natural effects and even of *esse* itself.

The last chapter in Part Two examines what *esse commune* means and how being, as being, is differentiated. This discussion has the welcome result of countering the impression, often left by the 'existential' Thomists in their striving against rationalism, of a sort of gap between the intelligible and the real (the "inconceivability" of being). Concerning *esse commune*, te Velde takes his stand against the view that it reaches all the way to the first cause of being. This would make it a mere logical notion, the truth of propositions (which extends even to non-being). It is the common actuality of all things *in rerum natura*; and, precisely as common — belonging to a multitude in an intelligible co-ordination — it falls short of the very cause of the order. As said of the cause, being must mean something *proper* to it. At the same time, being as actuality is something formal, or what we might call the term at which a thing is first brought to stand in a certain order. And in each thing being is what is simplest and *most* formal, the thing's engagement in the most universal, all-encompassing of orders. Hence it is what *first* ranges a thing under the scope of that most universal of all powers, intellect.

So *esse* is that by which things are first intelligible; but *what* the intellect first grasps is *ens*. This Thomas will often interpret as what has *essence*, and primarily as a subject subsisting in its essence. *Esse* itself has no meaning except as referred to a subject and as related to a constitutive *act* of the subject, a form, as its actuality. (Te Velde even suggests reading '*actualitas omnium actuum*' to mean the very act-ness, so to speak, of every act and form.) In sensible *ens*, which is what we know first, these are really distinct components; the *ens* is their result. Hence '*ens*' has a concrete or composite mode of signifying. Yet *what* is signified by '*ens*' is something whole, and in that sense something primary, not a result. The only explanation for this situation is that sensible *ens* is not primary *ens*. Thus it is '*ens*' itself that urges the mind through the step-by-step resolution to the one utterly simple, wholly self-explanatory being. Te Velde notes Thomas's care to save the full meaning of *ens* in God: not only being in act, but also subsistence and essence. Thinking again of existential Thomism, here he might also have dwelt on Thomas's conception of God as essentially *form* (*Summa theologiae* I q.3 a.2).

But te Velde has his own way of presenting Thomas's notion of form as "something divine" in things. Form is the main target of the final Part, "Degrees of Participation and the Question of Substantial Unity". From the earlier chapters it is clear that «as related to the act of being the nature is related, not to something else, but to its own actuality, and likewise being, as related to the nature in which it is received, is related to something of itself, its own determination» (p. 200). Now he spells out the *per se* connection between form and being. It means a *causal* role of form with respect to being. And it is not just an indirect and occasional role, that of limiting being in some cases. It is tied to what being itself is. Being needs form.

It is especially here that the interpretations of Fabro and Gilson are seen to limp. They restrict the effect of form to *esse formale* or “formal actuality”, as opposed to *actus essendi* or “existential” act. Gilson speaks as though a formal cause and an efficient cause cannot have one and the same effect. Fabro, while granting form the name of ‘act’ insofar as it completes an essence, all but withdraws it again by reading it as a “positivity of nothingness”. The only unqualified act is the act of being. Form’s job is to give it a recipient that limits and so negates it.

The texts just do not bear them out. Thomas could hardly be clearer about holding that form gives *esse in actu*, *esse actuale*, *esse et speciem*. He even says that although by creation God causes *esse* without the mediation of any other agent, still it is always “by means of some formal cause”. True, as a *result* of mediation, *esse* takes on a limited mode; but limiting *esse* is not the *chief* role of the form. Its role is to fix the positive *proportion* to God according to which the creature participates *esse* from Him. «Hence form is not in one respect potency and in another respect act» (p. 226). The expression ‘form is act’ does indeed mean that it completes an essence; but what *this* means is precisely that being follows immediately. Form is not only the determination *of* a thing’s being but also the thing’s determination *to* its being. It is only if a form is a mere principle of, hence distinct from, its being — its being only *follows* immediately — that it is not pure or self-sufficient act, but only a perfect vehicle for appropriating the influence of a nobler act (a nobler *form*), relative to which it is a finite and receptive potency.

I now come to my one reservation about te Velde’s presentation. It is rather marginal, and I hope I am not forcing the issue. It concerns something that he himself seems somewhat uncomfortable about: the occasional adoption of a ‘Hegelian’ way of speaking. Take this passage. «As [a being other than God] must be distinct from the first being, the only way for it to be a determinate being is *by negating in itself* the identity [of essence and *esse*] which defines the first being» (p. 154; my emphasis). Now, if we took this strictly, what would it mean? Would it not mean that the distinction of the thing’s essence from its *esse* is the thing’s own effect? The distinction would be traced back to something *in* its essence, as though the essence *excluded* its *esse* from itself. But a thing’s essence is signified by its definition; and if ‘*esse*’ is not included in anything’s definition, neither does the definition *assert* its exclusion. The essence is simply a potency for *esse*. A thing does not fall short of God by positively *removing* itself from God.

I very much doubt that te Velde means the above formulation to be taken strictly. But my question is, is the language of negativity really necessary here, or even merely neutral? It favors interpreting being in terms of movement and rest, especially the movement and rest of human thought. Is that really suited to Thomas’s *meta-physics*? And its spell is powerful.

In Chapter X.5, on the meaning of creation ‘*ex nihilo*’, te Velde lays a curious stress on the possibility of thinking of creation as a “dynamism”, a “transition” from non-being to being. He notes that Thomas assigns two senses to ‘*ex nihilo*’: not just the negative ‘*non ex aliquo*’, but also the affirmative, temporal ‘*post nihil*’. Of course Thomas denies that creation is a movement in the strict sense, and te Velde is very clear about that. But he is somehow drawn to give ‘*ex nihilo*’ an affirmative sense that would evidently apply even if God had made things *without* a temporal beginning (as Thomas says He could have). «By His infinite power God determines, one might say, each thing from pure non-being to a determinate and finite being.... That a being is created out of nothing means that the determinateness of its being (=essence) is the result of a determinate negation with respect to God’s infinite and simple being itself» (p. 159).

To me this is more confusing than clarifying. To be sure, it is much more nuanced than Fabro's extravagant notion that '*nulla*' is something *real*, functioning after creation to secure the distinction between creatures and God. But still, does not the expression "the *result* of a determinate negation" treat the distinction as depending on a kind of *removal*? God is pure *esse*, and if pure non-*esse* is not real, are we not still being coaxed into envisioning it as, so to speak, the limit of a function, His 'ideal' contrary? The partial ("determinate") approach to it would be what yields the creature's distinction from Him. But can pure *esse* even be *conceived* to have a contrary? Would that not be to put it in a genus, at least a logical one (*S.Th.* I q.3 a.5)? Is it not a sort of very abstract materialism to think of pure non-being as a contrary?

Te Velde clearly wants not to posit any sort of contrary of God. A creature is not «different from God by a positive difference»; analogy means «the aspect of difference cannot be isolated from the sameness of *being*» (p. 281). But then should we even see the difference as the *effect* of a negation, giving negation itself the positive status of a cause? Once more: «He determines His effect to a finite being according to the decision of his will and the conception of his wisdom» (p. 159). Certainly He decides wisely *among* His possible effects; but must He determine the effect *to* finitude, go out of His way to apply a negation to it? To be His effect *entails* finitude. (Compare te Velde's citation, *De potentia* q.1 a.2 ad 13, with *S.Th.* I q.25 a.2 ad 2.)

So I would ask: is not the very relation of cause and effect between God and creature enough to establish the opposition, the real distinction, and the inequality between them? They are *relative* opposites. No *absolute* opposition, no original *removal*, is needed (see *De potentia* q.7 a.8 ad 4). To put it another way: for God to know a creature properly, must He *contrast* it with Himself? Could He not simply grasp it in its positive analogy, i.e. *proportion* to Himself?

Now, Thomas says that the proportion of creature to God is one of effect to cause, and of *potency to act* (*S.Th.* I q.12 a.1 ad 4). Recall again te Velde's superb prescription. «Any distinction on the part of the creature insofar as it is created must be understood, not by reducing the distinct elements in the effect to a distinction in the cause..., but formally as the way the effect represents the cause as distinguished from itself». He is concerned about how Thomas understands the "identity of the difference" between essence and being in creatures (p. 88). Could not the language of negativity be set aside, and the logic of analogy be brought forth instead, especially as applied to the relation of potency and act? When this is properly understood, there is no more question of 'what makes the difference'. A potency is not distinct from its act by virtue of a differentia, or any note of contrariety or removal. The distinction is in the very proportion of one to the other. That is why their union is immediate (see *Metaphysics* VIII.6, 1045b17-19). (As an aside, I would also suggest that a closer study of potency and act, in their application to essence and being, could help to further the work of distinguishing this composition from that of matter and form and bringing out the special 'positivity' of form. For potency and act are not generic terms that apply equally to the two pairs or that express the very same proportion between them. It would be a study of Thomas's teaching that 'potency' is *equivocal* as said now of matter with respect to form, now of form with respect to being.)

My last quibble along these lines concerns more than the language, and it is the only one I pose as a real objection. The final chapter studies how, building on pseudo-Dionysius, Thomas works to reduce all perfections in things to a single divine principle, rejecting the Neoplatonic tenet that only being, the most common perfection, derives from the highest god, while lower divinities must account for the more special or proper

perfections. Here too there is much to praise. Te Velde shows how the key move is to interpret all other perfections as forms *of* being, to understand being as what constitutes all perfections *as* perfections. He sharpens the point by asking how the basic grades beyond common *ens*, namely life and intelligence, can be understood in terms of degrees of being, as pertaining to what being itself is. The answer turns on the fact that the being of each thing is what is most its *own*, the ‘interiority’ giving it stability in its own identity. A being is something that is ‘in itself’. Life and intelligence are precisely higher and higher ways of existing ‘in’ oneself, ways of remaining at home with oneself even in one’s engagement with others. Finally te Velde considers how these are to be understood to belong to God in His utter simplicity of being. God has interiority to the very highest degree, so much so that His life is entirely that of the perfect immanence of intelligence, and His intelligence is in perfect act about all things through itself alone, self-sufficiently, just in being itself.

But then te Velde goes on to ask: does calling God pure *esse*, or “infinite sea of being”, adequately convey His perfection of life and intelligence? Te Velde says no. His reason is that these involve a perfect relation not only to Himself but also to all other things. God’s universal perfection «must include somehow a principle of articulation or of differentiation, as God in knowing himself knows all things with a proper knowledge, according to how they are distinguished from each other» (p. 273). And so he feels he must call attention to how Thomas presents the inner procession of God the Son in terms of the operations of life and intelligence. Te Velde’s thought is that only this procession can *account* for God’s having His full perfection of intelligence. It would be *in virtue* of generating a distinct Word that God knows things properly. «One may say that the indistinct and simple power of the divine essence becomes articulated by God’s inner word according to the many diverse things that are indifferently contained in this (creative) power. In this sense, the inner distinction in God is the necessary condition for possessing distinct and proper knowledge of the things that proceed from God» (p. 278).

I think there is some confusion here as to how Thomas understands the role of the mental ‘word’ in the intellect’s operation. By a word, the intellect represents something it knows and uses its knowledge; but the word is not that by which the intellect first knows the thing that the word represents. In any case, te Velde is not very explicit about how the ‘distinction’ of the Word is supposed to help explain God’s proper knowledge of things. He seems almost to think that while God’s essence provides the exemplar of things insofar as they are like Him, it does not suffice, *qua* essence, as a basis for knowing ‘otherness’ and applying it to them; there must be, as it were, an uncreated, exemplary distinction in Him. But does this fit with te Velde’s own principle that distinctions in the creature are not explained by simply being traced back to distinctions in the creator?

Thomas sees no need at all to appeal to the procession of the Word in explaining God’s proper knowledge of things (see *S.Th.* I q.14 a.6). He clearly does not think that the things in the power of God’s essence are contained by it “indifferently”, if this means that His essence is not, *as* the essence it is, a perfect exemplar and intelligible *ratio* of what is proper to each thing. No work needs to be done to “articulate” it. The distinctions among creatures are according to their proper modes of participating in the divine perfection, and to understand these is nothing other than to understand the divine perfection itself in its full participability. And this pertains to it *as* perfection. Thomas gives a nice example: if you understand the six-fold, by that very fact you have a proper understanding of the three-fold. After showing so clearly how the more proper perfections of life and intelligence are folded back into being, why does te Velde think that anything more

than God's total perfection of being must be adduced in order to explain His knowledge of the *propria* of things? Is it after all the specter of *omnis determinatio est negatio*?

I do not mean to gainsay a very important point made by te Velde here (p. 278): God's identity should not be thought of solely in terms of 'first act', substantial being, which is something absolute, to the *exclusion* of second act or operation, which involves relation to others. But to avoid doing that, need we look beyond what pertains to His essence *as* essence? Is the point not secured just by saying that His essence is pure *esse*? For this means that He is outside all the genera of being, even that of substance, and embraces them all as principle of the whole of being (*S.Th.* I q.3 a.5). In Him, operation and even relation have the *nobility* of essence.

A very great deal can be learned from this book. Here I have been making disproportionately much ado about 'nothing'. But I have some excuse. The rest is said better there.

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