Aquinas on Ideas

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Abstract

Thomas Aquinas' thought is generally considered, with justification, to be an application of the philosophy of Aristotle to a Christian intellectual context. Aristotle was not the only intellectual source for Aquinas, however, and this article considers the application of Plato's Ideas, a notion rejected by Aristotle, to the treatment of the relationship between God, seen as Being Itself (*ipsum esse*) and determinate created beings. It is suggested that in adapting the Ideas to the Christian context Plato transforms their nature in a radical manner.

In I a, 15 of his *Summa Theologiae* Thomas Aquinas considers the existence of Ideas, a concept more associated with the thought of Plato than with the Aristotelian approach at the center of Aquinas' thought. Although the complex topic of this aspect of Aquinas' thought cannot be fully considered here, a partial determination of (a) the necessity for a theory of Ideas in Aquinas' system and (b) the nature of Ideas in that system. The focus of this article will be on the passage at 1,15 of the *Summa.*

I

In the *Summa* Aquinas accepts Aristotle's critique of Platonic Ideas insofar as that critique is directed against the Ideas as they are conceived to exist "in themselves, and not in the intellect." (I.15.1) In his system Aristotle replaces the Platonic Ideas by forms that are necessarily embodied in a concrete primary substance which provides an ultimate ontological ground. While Aquinas accepts the autonomy of a concrete object on one level, for theological reasons he must locate the *ultimate* ground not within the object itself but within *ipsum esse*, the first cause which is identifiable with divine being. One consequence of this modification of Aristotelian thinking is the doctrine expressed in this passage that holds that "It is necessary to posit Ideas within the divine mind."

The necessity for postulating forms existing apart from the things themselves can be understood by examining their function in Aquinas' system as (i) exemplars of objects and (ii) principles of knowledge.

(i) *Exemplars of Objects*

The relationship between created objects and *ipsum esse* is often stated by Aquinas in a Platonic vocabulary of participation, resemblance, and imitation. What is primarily communicated to the object in this relationship is not a determinate Form but being itself. An object relates to *ipsum esse*

insofar as it *exists*.

. . .precisely as things possessing existence they resemble the primary and universal sources of all existence. (I.4.3)

In opposition to both Plato and Aristotle, Aquinas finds that it is the act of being and not Form which is the highest actuality.

A created object, however, cannot be pure being. If it were so it would be a necessary, self-subsistent being and could therefore not have been created. Because God could not create an uncreated being it follows that every created being must have its being determined, limited, by a specific Form.

The determination of objects constitutes the order of the world and Aquinas must account for the source of that determination as well as an object's being. Aquinas maintains that the order of the world could not have arisen from chance and rejects the possibility of a demiurgic secondary agent for the world. The Forms cannot be independent of being, of course, and thus Aquinas must maintain that they somehow originate from *ipsum esse*.

He considers two possible explanations of this origin. In the first, the determination would arise from a similar determination of the agent, as when an animal reproductively generates a member of its own species. This is immediately rejected because *ipsum esse* has no determinate form. The second explanation is based on an analogy with an intelligent agent whose causal productions are not limited by its own nature. Such an agent can produce an object in imitation of a concept, a mental exemplar, as when an architect realizes an idea for a house in the world. God, as *ipsum esse*, is the supreme intellectual agent and thus Aquinas can maintain that determinate forms can originate through 'likenesses' that inhere within the divine mind and thus the divine essence. These likenesses are the Ideas. That the Ideas function as explanations for the determinations of objects, that is for forms, is clearly stated in the *Summa*:

God is the first exemplary cause of all things. In proof whereof we must consider that if for the production of anything an exemplar is necessary, it is in order that the effect may receive a determinate form by reason of the exemplar before him. . . Now it is manifest that things made by nature receive determinate forms. This determination must be reduced to divine wisdom as the first principle, for divine wisdom devised the order of the universe residing in the distinction of things. And therefore we must say that in the divine wisdom are the models of all things, which we have called *ideas*—i.e. exemplary forms existing in the divine mind. (I.14.3)

(ii) *Principles of Knowledge*

In Ia,.15.1 Aquinas also states, but does not explicitly argue, that Ideas act as principles of knowledge. This is most clearly stated in his contention that both God and the blessed can have knowledge of objects through access to the exemplars of the objects within the divine intellect. Thus the Ideas must *in some sense* be inherent within *ipsum esse*. In its embodied state, however, the intellect cannot directly intuit the Ideas and thus in that state the exemplars are principles of knowledge in a secondary sense in which the human intellect derives its capacity to know from its likeness to the di-

vine intellect. A somewhat different sort of resemblance is involved here. The human intellect does not resemble a likeness within the divine intellect but, rather, it is analogous to the divine intellect itself; it is an "image," a likeness in kind and not merely a "trace" (*vestigium*). One might also maintain that the ideas are principles of earthly knowledge in that they determine those embodied forms which are the objects of that knowledge.

Aquinas must introduce external causes for embodied forms because he does not accept primary substance as the ultimate ground of reality or explanation. In addition to the internal demands of his system this doctrine, as Henle (p.358) notes, seems designed to at least superficially harmonize Aquinas' thought with the neo-Platonists and it certainly can be argued that his vocabulary is "strained" here. If the order of the world was not to be treated as arbitrary, however, an equivalent of this doctrine, however expressed, would have to be introduced.

II

In Ia.15.2 Aquinas considers a possible conflict between the absolute simplicity of *ipsum esse* and the apparent multiplicity of Ideas that seem to inhere within it. The most general of the Platonic Ideas – Being, Goodness, Unity, and the rest of the transcendentals – were not a problem because they were equivalent to *ipsum esse* and thus to the divine essence. Indeed, Aquinas these Platonic Ideas as prefiguring of his own Christian concept of a monotheistic God. The transcendentals are not, however, mentioned in the treatment of Ideas and, precisely because they are identical with *ipsum esse*, they are not considered as Ideas in the Thomistic sense. Ideas in Thomas are introduced to explain the determinations, the limitations of the being of created objects, not the essential aspects of being itself that are represented by the transcendentals. The essence of God seen in itself cannot be an Idea and, in fact, is not known through a likeness by God or by the blessed.

A more difficult problem arises from the consideration of Ideas that represent less general concepts and singular things. Goodness may be convertible with *ipsum esse*, but a horse is clearly not an instance of being itself but of a particular kind of being. The distinct ideas needed to explain the multiplicity of determinate forms in the world – and, in fact, all possible forms – would seem to abolish the simplicity of the essence that contains them. That the intellect can know many things yet retain its unified simplicity constitutes no problem for Aquinas but that there is a plurality of objects of knowledge is unacceptable given the simplicity of *ipsum esse*:

> Now it is not repugnant to the simplicity of the divine mind that it understands many things; though it would be repugnant to its simplicity were God's understanding to be informed by a plurality of likenesses. (I.15.2)

This implies that the Ideas can be known in many ways because "the knowledge of God is the cause of things" (I.14a.8), they determine many diverse objects while in reality constituting a simple unity.

Each Idea is in fact identical to the di-

vine essence, to *ipsum esse*.

God is the likeness of all things according to his essence; therefore an idea in God is nothing other than his essence" (I.15.2)

The multiplicity of Ideas, on the other hand, derived from the fact that the divine essence can be viewed from a multiplicity of perspectives; that is, as a likeness with or determining cause of each particular form:

Inasmuch as God knows His essence perfectly, He knows it according to every mode in which it can be known. Now it can be known not only as it is in itself, but as it can be participated in by creatures according to some kind of likeness. But every creature has its own proper species, according to which it participates in some way in the likeness of the divine essence. Therefore, as God knows His essence as so imitable by such a creature, He knows it as the particular model and idea of that creature; and in the like manner as regards other creatures. (I.15.2)

The Ideas are multiple because God knows and causes the specific determinations of created objects and all possible objects.

Thus, determined objects in some sense are like undetermined pure actuality. This likeness can only consist of the fact that objects participate in *esse* insofar as they are. Thus, the process of an object's realizing a determinate form does not consist in anything over and above its primary participation in *esse*; it merely indicates that the causal relationship that stands between *ipsum esse* the effect must be less actual than the cause. Because the object cannot be pure being it must take on the determinate character of a 'this' or a 'that'. Its actuality, that is, must be limited by potentiality. The resemblance that is the basis of that participation, and thus of the particular object's being, does not consist of a Platonic likeness to an Ideal Form is indicated by Aquinas' description of the likeness of natural objects in terms of their retention of mere traces of being. For Plato, the determinate form of an object, its nature, took the form of an approximate likeness to a determinate Form; in Aquinas the only likeness between a determinate object and *ipsum esse* is the being of the object. But being itself has no form, is not this or that but rather God Himself so as actualized object an object does not have a determinate form.

What makes an object what it specifically thus consists, in a manner unlike the Platonic Forms, in an absence or gap between the object and that which gives it being. To be *this object* is precisely to not be any other kind of object and thus it is to lack the properties of other types of objects. To not have such a lack would be to be God Himself, to be pure being, *ipsum esse*, which of course would be impossible for a created object. Because the Ideas are the source of these determinations they are principles of limitation of being rather than the principles of being they are in Platonic philosophy. To imitate an idea for Aquinas was to participate in *esse* in a certain imperfect manner, that provided the limits that was needed for determinate created existence distinct from *ipsum esse*. The exact nature of this limitation in a particular case, that is the form of the object, is determined by the divine will and intellect in a way not entirely conceivable to the human intellect.

In Aquinas' treatment of the Ideas he makes use of a notion derived from Plato and explicitly rejected in Aristotle's alterna-

tive theory of immanent form. Because Aquinas adapts Aristotelian ideas to a world created by the Christian God he must relate the immanent forms of objects to their source in God and Plato's theory of Ideas provides an appropriate means of accommodating this need. In making this accommodation, however, Aquinas radically transforms the Ideas from positive principles of Being to principles of limitation, of potentiality, that serve to differentiate determinate objects from being itself, from God.

References

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