

**Jacques Maritain**  
***Antimoderne***

**Chapter IV: Knowledge of Being<sup>1</sup>**

(Translation by Sylvie D. Rousseau)

*He who does not believe in God anymore  
does not believe in Being,  
and he who hates the Being  
hates his own existence.  
O Lord, I found you.*

Paul Claudel.

**I**  
**Of Being in General**

Philosophy is not constructed *a priori*, like a splendid palace built in the void, it must be founded on *facts*, on the most simple and evident facts.

Supporting his study on such facts and working at every step to draw from them all they can give to the intellect — all their intelligible contents, so to speak — the philosopher sets out to conquer the fundamental notions and first truths on which everything else depends.

But he will not act like Descartes: he will not imagine that he knows nothing and that bare reason is sufficient to find out all there is. Reason never approaches its object without using some previous human work, and this learned man lied in good faith, like all Naturalists — of which he is the metaphysical precursor, for in his domain he was the first to claim the rights of ingenuous vision against craft.

Why should I be prevented to use other philosophers' discipline to see my object better? I will not endeavor to enquire directly into things without the philosophers, nor against them, but with their help. And I will lean from the start on the virtue of the intellect, otherwise how could I open my mouth to speak?

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<sup>1</sup> *Antimoderne* (1922) is a collection of Maritain's early essays (1910 to 1922) never or not yet translated in English. This lecture may be regarded as an outline of the author's conferences of 1932-1933, "*Sept leçons sur l'être et les premiers principes de la raison speculative*" (*Seven lessons on being and the first principles of speculative reason*), translated in English six years later and published under the title: *Preface to Metaphysics* (1939). (Translator's Note.)

Thus I will choose as a support the most simple fact, the first which is perceived. I will not pretend it is all I know and that all the rest is still doubtful, but among all what I know I will use this fact to establish my reason on a firm foundation.

What is the most simple fact in the world that I see with my eyes and grasp with my intellect? In other words, what is the most commonplace — and the most certain — experimental proposition that I can formulate? *There are things that are*: nothing more common, more simple, more certain. This fact is implied in all my experience, in all experience.

What is implied in this statement of fact? A double affirmation:

1° All those things *are*. I find in all things a certain reality that is being and that I call *being*. Even if I know very well what is being, I will not be so naive as to try and explain what it is, to give a definition, for it is an absolutely primordial notion. But I see immediately that being includes two elements called for by each other: *what is*, or what a thing is, what I call, in the broadest meaning of the word, the *essence* of the thing; and *the act of being*, that I can call *existence* of the thing. Hence in all things we find being.

2° However, those things are different from each other, as I know and declare they are many, thus *diverse*. — I am aware that Parmenides claims the contrary. If things are, says he, they cannot be many. In all things there is being; thus being is all there is and multiplicity is an illusion. But I will not listen to Parmenides. I will follow my reason, that tells me I am not Monsieur Guignebert<sup>2</sup> and I will develop my idea of being.

From this twofold affirmation, I will draw a *first conclusion*: the notion of being is everywhere applicable; it is not reserved to a class of objects excluding all others, as the notions of “philosopher” or “artist” suit certain classes of men and not others, or as the notion of “man” applies to one kind of animal but excludes the others; the notion of being is immediately appropriate to all things. I say that the notion of being is *transcendental*, it exceeds or transcends any limit of class or category: *transcendence of being*.

*Second conclusion*: things are, and are different. How do they differ? They differ by their very being. If they would not differ by their being, they would differ by something else; but something other than being is non-being, it is nothing. Things really different cannot differ by nothing. Thus the idea of being means something essentially *various*, something that is found differently in different beings, something which is said of these beings “for various reasons”, or something that can be called being in a different way. This thing *is* in its way, as that one *is* in its way, as this third one *is* in its way, and their difference is in their very being. I will express this by saying that the notion of being is *one* only proportionally, or by saying it is an *analogical* object of thought. — *Analogy of being*.

*The notion of being is a transcendental and analogical notion.*

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Guignebert, professor of Christian History at the Sorbonne, who considered the story of Jesus a myth. (T.N.)

Now, if I reflect on the act of knowing, I see that this object of thought that I call being is the term towards which my intellect tends by nature. What my eyes look for in the world, what draws them, is color, my ears perceive sounds, my tongue flavors. But my intellect is drawn by what is; this is what it grasps and what it tells me. Knowing the cause of a thing, its purpose, its origin, its properties, its relations to other things, are means to know what the thing is, they are all views on its being. Being is there as soon as the intellect is in action. Being is presented to the mind in one way or another by every idea and the intellect resolves all its conceptions in being.<sup>3</sup> I will affirm that *being is the intellect's proper object*.

If we affirm that the intelligence can truly know — and is not lying — we are saying that the intellect can really know being, its object.

No! says Kant, it is impossible to know what is out of my mind and independent from it, because what I know is necessarily in my thought, not outside of it, and because the act of knowing, as any action, modifies what it acts upon. But in affirming such impossibility, is he not affirming being? So he does the opposite of what he says, and his intellect, like any other, follows its law despite himself. I will pass by someone who deals with knowledge without suspecting at all that he is manhandling a unique order of things without understanding that the essence of the mind is precisely to make exist *within the mind* that which exists *in itself* outside of the mind, and that knowledge is not an action like any other material action, that produces something, but an immaterial action consisting in becoming immaterially, and I will just continue on my way.

Science progresses by extending gradually to the indefinite multitude of objects of knowledge the light or evidence that intelligence finds in the intuition of being.

This capital doctrine of the resolution of all objects of thoughts in being supposes the following:

1° Being imbibes every object of intellectual knowledge, and every idea presents the being in some way to the mind; some ideas present the being itself under one *aspect* or another — *transcendental* concepts; the object presented by other ideas is a determined being or a being “contracted” by differences which are themselves part of being — concepts contained in a *genus*.

2° It follows that the idea of being, embracing in its reach an indefinite plurality of objects is a multiple idea, and is one only proportionally (*secundum quid*). Thus all things can be resolved in being without losing their differences. Each thing can be considered according to its being, so is encompassed in the laws of being.

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<sup>3</sup> *Illud quod primo intellectus concipit ut notissimum est ens, et in hoc omnes conceptiones resolvit.* (Saint Thomas, *de Verit.*, 1, 1)

Let us call “intelligible” that which can be object of intellection. I see immediately that all that *is* is intelligible; for if an unintelligible being existed, a being that could not be object of intellection, intelligence would not have being as its proper object. And I see that, for the same reason, every thing is intelligible in the same measure that it is.

*Being is the proper object of intelligence and every being is intelligible in the measure that it is.*

Every being is intelligible in the measure that it is — I say, intelligible in itself, not intelligible for me. Indeed, if my human intelligence is disproportionate to a being that is beyond it because purely spiritual, this being, despite being more intelligible in itself, will be less intelligible for me.

## II First Axioms

This idea of being I just examined, my intelligence extracts it from the objects perceived by my senses. However, once this idea is formed, my intellect, contemplating being in one or another thing of the sensible world, but contemplating it as being, grasps immediately, not as a finding of experience, but as a pure requirement of the intelligible object, that *every thing is what it is*, and that *being cannot be non-being*. A truth very poor in actual content, of course, but a truth that commands in heaven and on earth and elevates me on a plane superior to the entire order of animal perception; the first self-evident truth and first principle of all my knowledge and all my discourse, for I cannot use my tongue to speak, nor my intelligence to know, without affirming or denying, without professing by the very fact that being is, and that non-being is not.

The *principle of identity*: every thing is what it is, and the *principle of non-contradiction*:<sup>4</sup> to be is not not to be, is a self-evident truth, the first that imposes itself to my intelligence.

No! says Hegel. Being and non-being are identical, because being is pure indetermination and pure indetermination is nothing, and because becoming is precisely to be and not to be. But Hegel is unreasonable, for becoming is to pass from non-being to being, or from being to non-being, it is in no way to be and not to be at the same time; and far from being pure indetermination, the being’s indetermination is all degrees of indetermination enveloped and undistinguished in one analogous concept.

Beings not only are, they *act*. This is another fundamental fact, and a new idea, the idea of action, that I formed from the awakening of my mind immediately after the idea of being. To define action properly is impossible, as it is a first notion like the notion of

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<sup>4</sup> The principle of non-contradiction is the logical form of the principle of identity (*cf. Preface to Metaphysics*, Fifth Lecture, part I, *An Attempt to Reflect upon the Intuitive Character of First Principles*). (T.N.)

being. All I could say is that the action that my senses brought to my knowledge,<sup>5</sup> the action of bodies on one another, is like a communication in being from a thing to another.

How do we call a being acting upon another? It is a *cause* (an “efficient” cause, or an “*agent*”). From the experience I have of the activity of bodies surrounding me and of my own activity, my intelligence has derived this notion of cause a long time ago. Now that I examine it under the light of the notions of being and action on which I directed my attention, I discover that I can define an efficient cause: that which by its action accounts for or gives *sufficient reason* for something else to be.

*The notion of cause thus implies two elements: the notion of action and the notion of sufficient reason.*

What does that mean for the being of an object to have sufficient reason? It is that in which the intellect considering a being finds its rest (like it rests when considering the motion of a watch’s hands while knowing the operation of the moving parts behind; or when considering a square the double of another knowing that the one is built on the diagonal of the other). — Being is indeed intelligible. And the intellect, which is made for being in as much as it is intelligible, must possess the being complete and fully determined. It is not satisfied with regarding the being of an object as a simple fact, it will find rest and satisfaction only in what completes and determines the being as intelligible. Since, however, intelligibility goes hand in hand with being, that which determines an object in respect of intelligibility is that which grounds its being, in other words that in virtue of which it is. We have thus brought out the notion of *sufficient reason*. I was saying before: that in which the intellect considering a being finds its rest. Now I say: that by virtue of which a thing is, or that which is such that, when it is posited in being, the thing is also posited in being.

This concept, being more general than the concept of cause, logically comes before it, as cause supposes sufficient reason.

The concept of cause adds to the concept of sufficient reason the idea of action, the cause is sufficient reason because of its action, — consequently cause is a being different from the thing caused, for that which does an action cannot at the same time and in the same respect receive the action. On the contrary, a triangle, for example, is sufficient reason for its properties not because of its action but by itself, by its essence. To be a Euclidean triangle is the same thing as to have the sum of the angles equal to two right angles. To be a man and to require (I do not say ‘to have’, but ‘to require’) the faculty of laughter are not different things but only one. They are different aspects of the same thing expressed in two different concepts, one supposing the other because it cannot be presented to the mind without the other — included in it — springing before the mind at the same time. It follows that we can distinguish *two kinds of sufficient reason*: a thing can be sufficient reason for another thing by its very being, or by what it is, — and then

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<sup>5</sup> Here I am speaking only of predicamental, or transitive, action which is the first to be known because it is perceived by the senses.

it is actually indistinguishable from the thing (in itself or only in its roots) of which it is sufficient reason; or a thing can be sufficient reason for another by its action, or by what it is doing, then it is properly a cause, and actually distinct from its effect. Whatever the derivation in actual existence, deriving from a sufficient reason is above all to derive from it in intelligibility.

Thus the concept of sufficient reason comes before the concept of cause. Now, if I direct my attention to this concept, it reveals a new principle; I see immediately the convenience of this object of thought: that which has grounds, or sufficient reason, for being, with this other object of thought: that which is. “Without that by which it is (without sufficient reason), that which is would not be”, “all that is has sufficient reason for being”, the principle of sufficient reason spreads absolutely universally to all that is.

*The principle of sufficient reason:* all what is has sufficient reason for being, is a self-evident truth.

No! declare Schopenhauer and the Pessimists of the Will. The depths of being are irrational, for it is a deception to pretend that intelligence can completely penetrate nature in itself, like a system of clear ideas or an hypostasized logic, and evil at least is inexplicable. But the error of such bitter people is to let themselves be scandalized with the absolute intellectualism of the Optimists of the Reason, Leibniz or Hegel, however rightful is their irritation against them. In order to escape the ones and the others, it is enough to understand that all beings which are not God must be partly unintelligible inasmuch as there is non-being in them, and that explains their deficiencies. Consider the infirmity without limits of matter and “potentiality” below, with respect to the infinite liberty of the transcendent Goodness above: they are all what is needed to reveal to angels the ultimate reason of evil.

A thing that cannot not exist is called *necessary*; a thing that could not be is *contingent*. If there is a being which is in itself, or in its essence, the sufficient reason of its existence, I say it exists “of itself” or *a se*; such being, if it exists, is obviously necessary, absolutely and by itself.

As soon as these notions are brought out, a third principle of speculative reason springs to mind in the light of being. Indeed, if I think of an object not existing of itself, a being which is not necessary, I grasp immediately the actual identity of this term: that which does not contain in itself the grounds of its being, that which could not be, and this other term: that which has a cause, that which depends from the action of a sufficient reason actually distinct from it.

*The principle of causality:* every being which is not *of itself* has a cause, or (restricted formula) every being having a contingent existence has a cause, or (restricted formula) that which has a beginning has a cause, — is a self-evident truth.

No! says Kant, the principle of causality is not a self-evident truth, it is a synthetic *a priori* judgment, or a necessary form of our mind joining two heterogeneous terms, that we

superimpose on a phenomenon; for if I think: that which begins, I think of what begins and not of what is caused; this does not come from that, I put it in myself. — But Kant, deceived by the logic of Leibniz, failing to discern that all our concepts find their resolution in being, believes that the analysis consists in ascribing a preconceived identity to two notions taken as such and saying that A is A. On the contrary: if I actually think and do not confine myself to consider thought signs and formulas, if I know what means “that which has a beginning” (thus “that which could not be”, and “that which does not contain in itself the grounds of its being”, for on the contrary a being which has its grounds in itself must always be, and has no beginning), and if I know what means “to be caused”, I actually have in my mind two different notions but, by the vital act of judging, I identify them, I declare they are identical *in re*, for I see in the term “caused” that *that which has the property of being caused has not in itself the grounds for its being*, exactly like knowing what “number”, and “even or odd” mean, I see that that which has the property of being “even or odd” is a “number”.<sup>6</sup> If ever I affirmed of a subject a predicate that I would have put in myself without it being actually there, I would not make a “synthetic *a priori* judgment” but a lie. Of course, the myth of synthetic *a priori* judgments is only a theatre Fafner,<sup>7</sup> it only pretended and could never really threaten the principle of causality.

But, as Epicurus would tell me, it is not true that all what begins has a cause. We are free in our actions, so there are declensions without cause in the motion of certain atoms, something like what the good Monsieur Renouvier calls absolute beginnings. — I answer that, on the contrary, the free act comes from a cause (the will of an intelligent nature) which is so very much a cause that it is master over the very determination to its effect, for it always acts from a motive but determines itself the efficiency.

Now, let us consider a being in action, an efficient cause producing its effect. These are two different things: the being and its action. To be a Euclidean triangle is the same thing as to have the sum of the angles equal to two right angles. But to be a man who thinks is not the same thing as the action of thinking. Why does the cause act? Why does it act this way, and entail this effect and not another?

There must be a sufficient reason for this: I will state that *the efficient cause is determined before* the action is performed to produce this particular effect rather than any other. Otherwise, it would not act in this particular way; it would not act at all. Therefore, the arrow is determined to its target by the archer, while the bird is determined to fly, and the fire is determined to burn because of their nature. In the case of natural agents it is enough to posit the object I term fire for the action of burning to follow of itself, under the requisite conditions. But the action of burning being different from the fire, we must say that the fire is — by itself or by its essence — determined to perform this particular action.

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<sup>6</sup> In each case we have what the Ancients called a *per se secundo modo* where the predicate is not implicit in the notion of the subject as belonging to its definition. On the contrary, it is the subject which is implied by the predicate, not as part of its definition but as being *the distinctive subject* of that predicate. Similarly, in the notion of “caused” I see that “that which exists not of itself” is necessarily “caused”.

<sup>7</sup> A giant in Wagner's *Das Rheingold*. (T.N.)

Now, if I reflect on this notion: to be determined to a term, I see it presupposes an ordination, a relation to that term. In the case of a cause determined to an effect, this ordination, being the ground of the agent's action, must exist between the agent and the term of the action *before* the agent acts and produces its effect. In the case of the arrow, the determination is accidental; in the case of natural agents, it is of the essence of the agent: to be fire is to be ordained by that very fact to the action of burning.

How can there be a relation, an ordination between two things which do not exist in any fashion, or between a thing which exists and a thing which does not? For a relation or ordination to exist between two terms both terms must exist. Therefore an effect or an action must somehow exist if the agent is to be determined, ordained or inclined towards it. Hence the action or effect must exist before it is produced or realized. How is it possible?

This is possible only if the action or effect exists *as present in thought*, with the existence of knowledge. Only in this way can it exist — in thought, in knowledge — before existing actually. The reference to the goal possessed by the arrow is in the thought of the archer before being imparted to the arrow.

We have seen that, in the case of natural agents, the determination to the effect or the action is the agent's essence. Now we are compelled to admit that, *before being posited in their natural existence*, the agent's action and therefore his essence alike exist with an existence superior to their merely natural existence, an existence of knowledge or thought. The agent's essence and its action must be present in a thought on which that essence depends and which conceives it as an ordination or determination to that action, We see, then, that at the original formation of things, there is something analogous to what we call intellect. Hence it is enough to posit the object I term fire for the action of burning to follow of itself, under the requisite conditions. But to posit this thing I term fire is precisely to posit a reference, preordination or radical determination to the action of burning, an action conceived by a thought as to what this particular object is to produce and perform.

We see, therefore, that *the sufficient reason of an agent's action*, that which determines it to a particular action or effect rather than any other, *is the effect itself* — not as produced and accomplished, but as that which is to be produced, accomplished and therefore as preconceived by a thought, so as to preordain the agent to that action (the agent's thought in the case of intelligent agents, like man, or the mover's thought, in the case of the arrow, or the thought which is the foundation of the agent's essence, in the case of natural agents). Hence the archer's goal is the reason of the impulse imparted to the arrow. Hence the action of flying (known in a thought prior to the bird and supreme cause of the bird's existence) is the ground of the bird's nature; the bird has wings for flying. Hence the burning (known in a thought prior to, and supreme cause, of the fire's existence) is the reason of the fire's being; fire is fire in order to burn.



Then emerges the notion of the reason why, the intention in which a thing is, or is made, in other words the *notion of finality* (final cause) implicitly contained in the notion of effect, as soon as the effect is conceived as the term to which the cause is determined. I have formed this notion of finality a long time ago, working from my experience, but now I see it does not apply only to man's actions (man works to find happiness, takes a medicine to heal, learns to know, and so on), it applies to any agent. And I see the true significance of this principle enunciated above: an efficient cause acts only because it is determined to an effect. This principle means: the end (known by a thought) is the reason for the action of any agent, any efficient cause (be it determined to the action in reason of its own intelligence, of a received impulse, or of its nature). If an agent was not ordained to an end, it would not act in one way rather than another, it would not act at all.

*The principle of finality:* every agent acts in view of an end, is a self-evident truth.

No! says Auguste Comte. The principle of finality is a remnant of the metaphysical stage, we must replace it by the positive principle of existential conditions. The bird flies because it has wings; it does not have wings in order to fly; IF this condition of possessing wings did not exist, birds would not fly; there is no other explanation. But Auguste Comte argues beside the question, which is to know if the action of flying, being different from the bird's essence, would not require, in order to follow from that essence, to be incorporated in it as an end, meaning that to be a bird is precisely to be made for flying. We can of course say that fire burns because it is fire, that birds fly because they have wings, but in the absolute, if fire is fire, it is to burn, if birds are birds, it is to fly. It is far from the truth to say that the agent's nature is the final reason for its action, when a nature is what it is only because it is ordered to its action, as an end known by an intelligence, which is the reason for the agent's nature and for its (actual) action. Comte's principle of existential conditions is probably a shameful disguise of the principle of finality itself, if it is not merely a deception and a triviality. If there were no planes, man would not fly: this conditional explains that Romans of old did not fly, but it fails to explain the existence of planes.

### III Being, Action, Motion

Before dealing with the idea of cause, I noted above the idea of action. (The action I thought about at first was the action of bodies on one another, termed external action.) I have to return to this idea of action, — but this time I will take it in all its extension: internal action, like the acts of loving or knowing, as well as external action, — to compare it to the primordial idea, the idea of being.

To act is not simply to be however it is to be in a certain way, but above all it is to *superabund in being*; action implies a certain plenitude, a blossoming, more exactly an emanation where the being perfects itself (overflowing in external action, or keeping to itself in inwardly action). Man is (*is* purely and simply) from the moment he lives, but if he speaks, fights, works, he is more, and if he acts inwardly, directing his intellect to the

truth and his will to the good, he is still more. If I were to call the pure and simple being of a thing its primary being, I could call this thing's action its secondary being, or the superabundance of its being.

In any case, what I see clearly is that things must be before they can act. *Being precedes action, at least with a priority of nature.*

No, says Fichte, action, which is life, comes before being, which is death. But this is only because Fichte imagines life as a punch, and being as ash. In speaking so, either he continues to put stock in the idea of being like if it was not deceiving, but then, when he says that action comes before being, he is saying that what is not can act, which is absurd; or he rejects the idea of being and pretends that instead of thinking 'being', we must think 'action', thus he rejects with the idea of being the principle of identity which is tied to it, and he supposes that intelligence, which cannot work without using this principle, is by nature deceiving, which is also absurd.

Being, then, comes before action. This implies that a being acts following what it is and in the measure in which it is. (Does not the moral life of man consist precisely in acting as he truly is?) In other words, action is the manifestation of being; as we recognize a tree to its fruits, we know the being of things by their action, or operation – and we humans can only know beings in this way.

*Action follows and manifests being.*

When a being acts upon another, the latter changes, or becomes what it was not. The notion of *change* or *motion* is also a primary notion, thus not subject to be really defined. But to put more clearly what this notion means, I will say that where change occurs there is a thing which passes to a new state or becomes a different being.

Consequently, there is no change without a being which is changed, thus *being precedes motion.*

No! says Heraclitus, echoed by Mr. Bergson, to last is to change, motion precedes the immutable being. These philosophers refuse to admit sensible *accident*, which is purely an object of intellection. In speaking so, either they continue to put stock in the idea of being, but then, when they say that change precedes being, they are saying that what is not can change, which is absurd. Or they reject the idea of being and pretend that instead of thinking 'being', we must think 'change' or 'motion', thus they reject as untrue the principle of identity which is tied to being, and suppose that thought is by nature deceiving, which is also absurd.

*Being precedes becoming and there is no change without a being that is changed.*

I now see that when a thing changes — even living things that move by themselves — the thing cannot be alone the cause of its change, for what it becomes, which it was not

before, does not have its grounds entirely in what the thing is, otherwise it would always be so, and would not become so, thus its becoming depends on a cause other than itself.

*Everything that moves is moved by something else.*

#### IV Degrees of Being

All things that are in the world differ from one another by their very being; if one thing is different from another by something which it has that the other has not, the first has more in respect to being, it is more than the second, for this or that which it possesses is being. Therefore I must say that things are more or less, or that there are *degrees of being*.

When I say more or less, my imagination represents spontaneously things with measurable extension. But at this point there is no question of quantity, there is solely question of being. I am only saying that a thing is more than another if, in order to distinguish them, it is sufficient to think of some intelligible determination that one lacks which the other has. The notion of more or less so defined is pure, in itself and for my intellect, of any consideration of space or quantity.

The transcendental notion of being, from the standpoint of affirming that a being is more when it is not deprived of this or that, or that a being has the plenitude of being or is achieved, this notion is one and the same as the notion of perfect, “perfect” being, “that which does not lack anything,” either in a given order (relative perfection), or purely and simply (absolute perfection). To speak about degrees of being is therefore to speak about *degrees of perfection*.

Where is *diversity* (I am referring to another diversity than the simple position in space), everywhere is *inequality*.

Finally, I see that being, which is, as we know, analogous and where all our concepts are resolved in the end, in a way embraces in its amplitude all possible perfections: *being and perfection are therefore linked together*. Consequently, if an existing thing possesses the plenitude of being, if it is the very Being, this thing possesses necessarily infinite perfection.

I will insist upon this truth. I know that being comprehends two distinct elements that connote one another, *essence* (what a thing is, that which it is) and *existence* (the very act of being). The idea of existence means purely and simply the action or perfection by which something is posited “outside of nothingness,” *extra nihil*, and “outside of its causes,” *extra causas* — of course I do not pretend to define the notion of existence, which is a primary notion, I only wish to clarify what I mean, and what everybody means, with this primary notion. Nevertheless, this very perfection, when I consider it closely, appears to me the perfection *par excellence*, for it is through it that all what a thing is, all its perfections, are posited in reality. A living dog is better than a dead lion. So, this

perfection above all others, which is existence, is received more or less fully following the degree of perfection imparted to the essence; but let us suppose a thing which is *the very Being*, that is, a being whose *essence* is precisely *to exist*, in that case this greatest of perfections which consists in existing, nothing else will measure it, and the essence of such a being, by the very fact that it will not measure or limit the perfection of existing, will contain in itself the infinity of perfection.

But does such a thing exist? Before the inquiry, I will consider the notion of degrees of being, or perfection, that I just outlined and I will try to bring out its intelligible fruit, in other words I will search some axioms directly linked to this notion.

If, at the onset, I compare this notion to the principles of sufficient reason and causality, I realize that the sufficient reason cannot be less (possess a lesser degree of perfection) than that of which it is the reason; I also notice that the cause must in some way have in itself the effect's being and perfection — it can give only that which it has — and even it must be more (possess a higher degree of perfection) than the effect, for it not only exists, it acts, it produces the effect.

I. The more cannot come from the less; that which is less and has less perfection cannot be the cause or ground for something that is more and has more perfection.<sup>8</sup>

II. The cause is more and is more perfect than that of which it is reason.<sup>9</sup>

These principles are self-evident and appear immediately to the intellect. Why then do we speak of small causes producing great effects? And don't the father who is a man like his son is of the same degree of being and not of a higher degree?

This is so because the axiom in question is about the total cause: small causes that produce great effects can only be partial causes. Parents as well are not the total cause of their child, there are prior causes that cause them to exist and to act, hence Aristotle's saying, *homo et sol generat hominem*; besides, the father is a complete man (adult) whereas the child is a man in becoming.

But I take occasion of this difficulty to remark that metaphysical axioms impose themselves by their intellectual evidence and the primordial requirements of the notion of being; they are not simply a generalization from a few cases of experience. Proof is that experience would seem to contradict them at first, if we do not take the time to analyze and disentangle its complexity. But I know very well that axioms apply to every case of experience. Thus their strength do not come only from experience. The examples

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<sup>8</sup> *Propter quod unumquodque et illud magis, aut saltem non minus* — that in virtue of which anything is must be greater or at least not less than it.

<sup>9</sup> *Id propter quod aliquid est, oportet melius esse* — that in virtue of which anything is must be better than it. From whence follows: *omne imperfectum a perfecto trahit originem* — all imperfect reality is derived from the perfect reality which is its origin.

we find are merely illustrations to help our imagination, they might even be the occasion for our intellect to really conceive them but they are in no way their foundations.

Now let us consider a being which possesses a perfection by itself, or by its essence (*per se, per suam essentiam*), when it possesses this perfection in virtue of its own nature (without being necessarily the sole and supreme ground for this perfection). So, every man is a living being, or a rational being, *per suam essentiam* (without being himself the supreme reason for life and rationality); a burning body emits light by itself (without being the total and final reason of light). On the contrary, a mirror is not a body that emits light, it only reflects the sun, a piece of iron is not incandescent by itself, but only when it is placed in a fire. Hence the truth of a new axiom appears (which is only a determination of the principle of sufficient reason):

III. That which is not by itself (*per se, per suam essentiam*) supposes prior to itself (at least by a priority of nature) that which is by itself.<sup>10</sup>

There cannot be infinite regress in the chain of things that possess a perfection but do not possess it by themselves, and we must at one point stop at their ultimate ground for being, a thing that has this perfection in virtue of its own essence. Moreover, that which has a perfection *per se* has necessarily more of it than that which does not possess this perfection *per se* (axioms I and II).

The phrase *per se* pertains to the subject possessing a perfection and to the way in which it is with regard to this perfection. But could we consider the perfection itself (the predicate or attribute) and the way in which it exists in the subject?

For example, if I say that Peter is a man, or Peter is white, or is good, I say that certain perfections exist in him. I can consider these perfections in themselves, abstracting them from the subject in which they are: I may speak about them like things existing separately in my mind (without knowing at this point if they can also exist separately outside the mind). I will call them Humanity (that in in virtue of which Peter is a man), Whiteness (that in in virtue of which he is white), Goodness (that in in virtue of which he is good).

Besides, to every perfection thus considered in itself befits a certain plenitude of being. If they actually existed in a pure state they would necessarily have this fullness of being, for they would be real beings lacking nothing they could possess, as a pure state of being entails no possibility of diminution.

But do the subjects in which these perfections really exist have the plenitude of being? Is Socrates man in plenitude? He would then have all that humanity calls for, the wisdom of Aristotle, the art of Phidias, the science of Archimedes, and so on to infinity; he would have all the perfections spread in the multitude of men. If the whiteness of a lily could be the plenitude of whiteness, this lily would have all what whiteness implies, and nothing

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<sup>10</sup> *Quod est per se (per suam essentiam) prius est eo quod non est per se* — that which is by itself (by its essence) is prior to that which is not by itself.

could be more white, or of a different white. If a fruit could be said good in plenitude, it would have all what goodness can imply and nothing would be better or different.

Comparatively to the *plenitude* or richness of being that a perfection is capable of and that it would necessarily possess if it actually existed in its pure state, the being this perfection has in these subjects is thus diminished, or fallen, so to speak. The subjects do not possess this perfection in all the fullness it calls for. Indeed, either the perfection actually resides in a multitude of individuals who have it in the same degree (first example: nobody can be more or less *man*) but share between themselves in every degree all the contingent *variety* of being suitable to this perfection, or (like in the two other examples) it resides actually in subjects which possess it in different *degrees*, for if whiteness or goodness in themselves cannot admit of more or less, the things in which I see them are more or less white, or more or less good, so that the qualities of whiteness or goodness in these things have a greater or lesser intensity or perfection. There are beautiful faces and others more or less so, but none can extinguish the fullness of beauty.

How to call this diminutive way in which a perfection exists in certain subjects comparatively to the plenitude it calls for and that it would necessarily have if it existed in pure state? This perfection is not in these subjects in all its possible fullness, but only in part. Let us say that these subjects share this perfection rather than extinguish it, or they *participate* in this perfection. Here is then a new concept outlined before my eyes. By contrast, a perfection existing in a subject in all the plenitude of being it calls for and so is extinguished by the subject, I would say it exists in this subject *by essence (per essentiam)*.

When I think of a subject possessing a perfection in this way, I see immediately that such a subject is at the highest degree of this perfection since he — hypothetically — possesses this perfection in all the plenitude it calls for, so that no other being can have it in a higher degree.

More importantly, this being must not only possess this perfection but he has to be the perfection itself; for the perfection must be in him in its plenitude, thus exist in him in its pure state and, consequently, when attributed to him, remain in pure state so that we not only say this being is good but that he is goodness itself. He is so good that he extinguishes all the possible plenitude of goodness, he is so good that goodness itself is his nature. Hence the hyperbole of common language about those who display eminently an art or a virtue: this man is generosity itself, or he is poetry in person. Likewise, if an existing thing was white by essence, it would be whiteness itself. If there existed a being that was man by essence, he would be humanity itself.

Finally, *a subject having a perfection by essence is necessarily infinite in the order of this perfection*. For any limit is a negation. Then what is good by essence, being goodness itself, cannot have in itself anything that could limit its goodness. Likewise, if whiteness itself or humanity itself existed, this thing would have absolutely no limit to its whiteness or humanity.

It becomes then evident that *what has a perfection by participation possesses or receives this perfection from another*, for it has this perfection without being this perfection, thus cannot acquire it from itself. (If this being had this perfection from itself, the perfection could not then be received, which would imply a diminution; then the being must *be* this perfection, at least eminently, which is excluded by hypothesis.) If a being that has a perfection by participation receives it from another being that must possess it in a greater degree to be able to give it (axiom II), and if this second being also possesses this perfection by participation, having acquired it from a third, we must, under pain of infinite regress, stop at the being which has this perfection to the highest possible degree, that is, at the being having this perfection by essence (*per essentiam*).

IV. Whatsoever possesses anything by participation is reducible to that which possesses it by essence as its principle and cause.<sup>11</sup>

It is clear, on the other hand, that which has the being or a perfection without being it or having it by ITS essence (*per se*) does not have the being or the perfection BY ESSENCE (*per essentiam*). But the reciprocal proposition is not necessary: Peter is man by participation, and at the same time Peter is man by his essence.<sup>12</sup>

If a subject has being or a perfection by its essence, and there are several individuals that also have it, so that the perfection is in each individual in the same degree, but they share in different degrees the fullness of being that befits it, or else if this perfection is in several beings in different degrees, then it resides *per essentiam* in none of the subjects. Peter is man *by his essence*, but I see that Paul, John, Jack also are men, and they share in different degrees wisdom, science, virtue, strength of mind and body, intuition, and so on, that can befit man, I understand that every one is at an infinite distance from being man by essence. A plant has life by its essence (since it is its nature to be a living body). If I consider different living things, say a lichen, rosebush, sea urchin, dog, man, each possesses life in a different degree, thus in a more or less perfect or limited manner, I see that none of these things has life by essence; otherwise they would all have the fullness of life, without any limitation; they would be life itself. Then would the principle I stated a moment ago (axiom IV) apply here? Whether it is question of perfections that the subject does not possess by its essence — goodness, for example<sup>13</sup> — or of perfections the subject has by its essence, like humanity, or life, I must admit that what is by participation supposes before it what is by essence. Let us boldly affirm that, before these things we call men, or living, or good, or white, there is something that has humanity, life, goodness or whiteness by essence and not by participation.

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<sup>11</sup> *Omne quod habet aliquid per participationem reducitur ad id quod habet illud per essentiam sicut in principium et causam.*

<sup>12</sup> Cajetan expounded this important distinction between *per suam essentiam* and *per essentiam* (*in Sum. Theol...*) along with the right notion of participation. This is how Thomism saved the essential of Plato's thought.

<sup>13</sup> Nothing in this world is good *per se*, since a thing is said to be good, purely and simply, when its being is achieved as befits its nature, and a thing that is not the Being itself does not have its achievement by its essence alone.

How is it possible? Should I Platonize and believe that in a supra-sensible world exist eternal separate forms, such as humanity in itself, to which things here below would “participate” I don’t know how? But I clearly see that there is no humanity in itself, nor whiteness in itself, for humanity cannot exist apart from real flesh and blood individuals, and whiteness cannot be seen except in things with surface and dimensions; therefore they cannot exist in pure state.

What then should we say? An obvious principle weighs on us and assures us that all the perfections that exist in our world in different subjects by participation must exist somewhere else by essence.

We must distinguish two categories among the perfections we can consider in the world: those that pertain to being, such as goodness, beauty, intelligence, are *analogous* like the being; their concept does not essentially imply limitation and they can exist and retain their intelligible value (their “formality”) and their name in another mode than the one in which we can know them in things. The others, such as whiteness and humanity, pertain to determinate *genera* in being, thus their concept essentially implies limitation and they cannot exist while retaining their intelligible value and their name in another mode than the finite mode in which we know them in things. Nothing precludes that the first kind of perfections exist in the pure state. But in this case, since each of them embraces being in its concept, each one is the being in pure state, the pure act of being, the very Being subsistent, and therefore they cannot remain distinct from one another. Would Goodness in itself be infinitely good if it was not also infinitely beautiful? And Beauty in the pure state must be infinitely good also. And Intelligence in the pure state must be infinitely beautiful and infinitely good as well.

Now *reason requires that all these perfections should have a primary sufficient reason* even as they exist in this world. Thus there is a being infinitely separate in nature of everything else, a being of an unimaginable simplicity, beyond all our concepts, which is at the same time beauty, goodness, intelligence, life and all transcendent perfections. I do not think anymore of this being as an ideal object, I know he exists, because the multiple mixed perfections I discover in the world have invincibly led me to affirm his existence: beings would not be if the Being were not. As he *possesses being and all perfections* by essence, he possesses them not only in virtue of himself or of his essence, but *in virtue of his essence as an absolutely total and supreme principle*; he has them, as the scholastics say, not only *per se*, but *a se*.

As for the other kind of perfections, such as humanity or whiteness, they also are by essence in this same infinite Being analogously known, but, since they cannot exist in the pure state without exploding their concept, so to speak, they lose their intelligible value and their own formality in a higher perfection, hence there is no name to designate them anymore.

Then, because of all the perfections that exist by participation in things, *the natural movement of my meditation on being has finally led me straight to God*, into the



incomprehensible being where the perfections of all things shine prominently, either “formally” in the case of beauty, goodness, intelligence, truth, life and above all the being itself, or “virtually”, such as in the essence of man, angel, lion, or in the whiteness, the light, the color of the sky and meadows, the freshness of whitewater, the flavors and fragrances and all the passing delights of the world, even what is true in false goods, and in all the adornment of created joy which he promised to repay hundredfold to those who would renounce it for him.

Plato intuited these things, may he be blessed. And if he sometimes seemed a little out of his mind, mythmaker Pygmalion in awe before eternal Ideas as he was, let us not forget that when those Ideas are restored in their proper place, in the divine intelligence, Platonism becomes true.

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