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***“Participationes tripliciter considerari possunt”:
The Absolute Notion of *Esse* in Aquinas’s
Commentary on the *Divine Names****

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that, for Aquinas, *esse commune* is the absolute notion of *esse*. It is absolute, moreover, precisely in the Avicennian sense insofar as it is the consideration of *esse* as abstracted from intelligible and material modes of being. First, I clarify Dionysius’s distinction between the two senses of *per se* theonyms, focusing on the Procline provenance of adverbs like ἀπολύτως and ἀρχηγικῶς in the *Divine Names*. Second, I defend Aquinas’s interpretation and development of Dionysius’s distinction, highlighting his reliance on Avicenna’s threefold *consideratio* in his account of *per se* theonyms as absolute natures. I will conclude with suggestions for further research.

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Towards the end of the *Divine Names*, Dionysius addresses a question from Timothy, the work’s dedicatee. Timothy is puzzled by the Areopagite’s language. Sometimes, Dionysius identifies God with “Life Itself” (τὸν θεὸν ποτε μὲν αὐτοζωήν).¹ Sometimes, though, he calls God the substantifier, or cause, of Life Itself (αὐτοζωῆς ὑποστατής). Given this discrepancy, one can sympathize with the baffled tone with which Dionysius reports Timothy’s question. “Whatever, then, do [you, Dionysius,] mean [by] Being Itself, Life Itself, Wisdom Itself” (τί ποτε ἄρα [φῆς] τὸ αὐτοεῖναι, τὴν αὐτοζωήν, τὴν αὐτοσοφίαν)?²

Contemporary readers, even more puzzled than Timothy, can find some solace in Aquinas’s characterization of the Areopagite’s style. *Est autem considerandum quod*

¹ See Dionysius the Areopagite, *Corpus Dionysiacum* I. ed. B. R. Suchla (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1990), XI. 6, p. 221. (Hereafter, *De Divinis Nominibus*.) In this essay, I avoid the epithet *pseudo* for Dionysius. I do not dispute the scholarship regarding the authenticity of the treatises. Nonetheless, I think the epithet unduly prejudices the reception of the writings themselves and their philosophical significance. For more on this point, see Christian Schäfer, *The Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), pp. 11–22.

² Ibid., XI. 6, p. 221.

*beatus Dionysius in omnibus libris suis obscuro utitur stilo.*³ Considering that Thomas worked with the treatise in translation, this assessment is an understatement. Dionysian phrases like αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτὸ τὸ εἶναι fared even worse in Latin translation, as evidenced by the fact that Thomas received them under a variety of guises: *ipsum esse*, *ipsum per se esse*, and *ipsum secundum se esse*.⁴

Yet, despite this already cumbersome *copia verborum*, Thomas introduced a further term by identifying these *per se* terms with his own notion of *esse commune*.⁵ This addition did not prove entirely felicitous, as “a variety of theories has arisen regarding its specific meaning.”⁶ Some interpreters, the most preeminent among them Étienne Gilson, think that *esse commune* is an abstract universal in the mind.⁷ Others, like Klaus Kremer and Oleg Georgiev either identify it with God (Kremer)⁸ or posit it as a genus containing the divine *esse* (Georgiev).⁹ Still others, like Fabro, Wippel, and O'Rourke take *esse commune* as the general notion of *actus essendi*.¹⁰

In what follows, I would like to offer a modest precision to this *quaestio disputata*. Siding with the third group of interpreters, I argue that *esse commune* is the absolute notion of *esse*. It is absolute, moreover, precisely in the Avicennian sense

³ *In librum Beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio* (hereafter *In div. nom.*), ed. C. Pera, P. Caramello, C. Mazzantini (Rome: Marietti, 1950), prooemium, p. 1.

⁴ That all of these terms are equivalent is evident from Thomas's interchangeable usage in chapter five of his commentary. See *In div. nom.*, cap. V, lect. I, p. 236.

⁵ See Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), p. 140. “Instead of the simple *ipsum esse* (τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸ) which we find in Dionysius, Aquinas adopts the expression *ipsum esse commune*. Why does Aquinas introduce this adaptation? What is its significance?” I disagree with O'Rourke's characterization of locutions like αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτὸ τὸ εἶναι and τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸ as “simple,” but I grant his general point. It's far from clear why Aquinas felt the need to introduce *esse commune* in his commentary.

⁶ O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 141.

⁷ See Etienne Gilson, “Éléments d'une métaphysique thomiste de l'être” *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Age* 40 (1973), p. 19. “Comme tous les universaux, celui-là est un être de raison sans réalité autre que celle de l'intellect qui le conçoit.”

⁸ See Klaus Kremer, *Die Neuplatonische Seinsphilosophie und ihre Wirkung auf Thomas von Aquin* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), p. 309. “Was des Thomas' persönliche Vorstellung betrifft, so ist klar, daß für ihn Gott das *ipsum esse* oder, wie er gerne heißt, das *ipsum esse subsistens* ist.” “Während für Thomas das *ipsum esse* mit Gott zusammenfällt, ist dieses *ipsum esse* bei Dionysius nicht Gott, sondern dessen erstes Geschöpf im Sinne von erster Teilhabe (μετοχή).”

⁹ Oleg Georgiev, “Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and Thomas Aquinas on the Nature of the Individually Subsistent,” *Archiv für mittelalterliche Philosophie* 6 (2000), pp. 65-66. In particular, Georgiev maintains that, for Aquinas, God “participates in being itself (*ipsum esse*).”

¹⁰ See John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), pp. 102-103. Wippel calls *esse commune* the “act of being in general.” See also Cornelio Fabro, *Participation et Causalité selon Thomas D'Aquin* (Louvain: Publications Universitaires de Louvain, 1961), 372. “Cet ‘*esse commune*’ n'est pas une formalité abstraite, ni un acte unique d'être commun à tous les êtres, mais c'est l'actualitas essendi que tout être reçoit par l'intermédiaire de l'esse propre participé de Dieu.” Finally, see O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 128. O'Rourke's refers to *esse commune* as the “fullness of perfections,” echoing Thomas's definition of *actus essendi* as the *actualitas omnium actium, et propter hoc est perfection omnium perfectionum*. See Thomas Aquinas, *Questiones disputatae de potentia*, ed. P. M. Pression (Rome: Marietti Edition, 1965), p. 192. Cited in Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought*, n. 34. Wippel himself later comments on Dionysius's influence on this definition.

insofar as it is the consideration of *esse* as abstracted from its intelligible and material modes of being.

My argument is divided into the following sections. First, I will clarify Dionysius's distinction between the two senses of the *per se* theonyms. In particular, I will focus on the Procline provenance of adverbs like ἀπολύτως and ἀρχηγικῶς in the *Divine Names*. Second, I will defend Aquinas's interpretation and development of Dionysius's distinction. I will highlight his reliance on Avicenna's threefold *consideratio* in his account of the *per se* theonyms as absolute natures. I will conclude with some suggestions for further research on the crucial role that *esse commune* plays in Aquinas's ontology.

1. The *Per Se* Theonyms Absolutely Considered

In §6 of chapter eleven, Dionysius distinguishes two senses of *per se* terms. On the one hand, they are said “primarily” (ἀρχικῶς), “divinely” (θεϊκῶς), and “causally” (αἰτιατικῶς) of God. On the other hand, they are said “participatedly” (μεθεκτῶς) of “the foreknown powers bestowed from the unparticipable God” (τὰς ἐκδιδόμενας ἐκ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀμεθέκτου προνοητικὰς δυνάμεις), which “finite beings participate in a manner appropriate to themselves” (ὧν τὰ ὄντα οἰκείως ἑαυτοῖς μετέχοντα).¹¹

Terms said in this second way, according to Dionysius, signify aspects of God's providential Will insofar as they are manifest in creatures' unique activities. They signify the totality of ways in which beings share in God's providential powers without thereby coming to share in the Divine Nature itself (ἐκ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀμεθέκτου). That is, creatures' actualizations of the Divine Will are their unique shares in “substantification itself, vivification itself, and divinization itself” (αὐτοουσίωσιν, αὐτοζώωσιν, αὐτοθέωσιν).¹² These participations themselves are πληρώματα, fullnesses of perfection divisible by creatures.¹³

Admittedly, this second sense is obscure, and it raises more questions than it solves. How do these πληρώματα exist? Are they concepts in the human mind? Do

¹¹ *De Divinis Nominibus*, XI. 6, pp. 222-223. Ἀλλ' αὐτοεῖναι καὶ αὐτοζωὴν καὶ αὐτοθεότητά φαμεν ἀρχικῶς μὲν καὶ θεϊκῶς καὶ αἰτιατικῶς τὴν μίαν πάντων ὑπεράρχιον καὶ ὑπερούσιον ἀρχὴν καὶ αἰτίαν, μεθεκτῶς δὲ τὰς ἐκδιδόμενας ἐκ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀμεθέκτου προνοητικὰς δυνάμεις τὴν αὐτοουσίωσιν, αὐτοζώωσιν, αὐτοθέωσιν, ὧν τὰ ὄντα οἰκείως ἑαυτοῖς μετέχοντα καὶ ὄντα καὶ ζῶντα καὶ ἐνθεα καὶ ἔστι καὶ λέγεται καὶ τὰ ἄλλα ὡσαύτως. Emphasis added.

¹² Interestingly, Dionysius chooses nouns derived from o-contract stems, which, in Greek, tend to have a factitive meaning. See Herbert Weir Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1956) §866. Perhaps, this diction is meant to emphasize the fact that these participations are dependent upon, yet still distinct from, the creative παραδείγματα that exist simply within the Divine Mind. For more on this point, see Gregory Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas as Exemplar Causes* (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 2008), pp. 83-155.

¹³ See *De Divinis Nominibus*, IV. 5, p. 150. Dionysius uses the word πλήρωμα to refer to the primal ἀκτίς, or ray, of God, which represents the totality of His participable effects. See *De Divinis Nominibus*, I. 1, p. 109; I. 4, line. 2, p. 115; III. 1, line 1, p. 139.

they exist primarily in the Divine Mind? Are they self-subsisting entities *in rerum natura*, as the Platonists thought?

Here, we need to recall an earlier remark from §6. For Dionysius, signifying a perfection μεθεκτῶς is the same as signifying those things that exist “absolutely” (ἀπολύτως) and “principally” (ἀρχηγικῶς) and those things that “were constituted first from God” (ἐκ θεοῦ πρώτως ὑφεστηκέναι).¹⁴ Dionysius, therefore, associates the following adverbs while explaining the second sense of the theonyms: ἀπολύτως, ἀρχηγικῶς, and μεθεκτῶς.

These adverbs are rare in the *Corpus Areopagiticum*, ἀρχηγικῶς and μεθεκτῶς being *hapax legomena*.¹⁵ Nor does Dionysius elaborate on their meaning in this passage. Moreover, the few instances of ἀπολύτως (absolutely) in the *Divine Names* are unrelated to its sense above. For Dionysius uses this adverb elsewhere to refer to those names predicable of the entire Godhead (as opposed to those said of particular Persons in the Trinity).¹⁶ At other times, he uses it to signify God’s radically unbegotten nature.¹⁷ Neither of these senses deals with participable being.

However, two texts from Proclus are helpful for reconstructing Dionysius’s meaning. In his *Commentary on Plato’s Cratylus*, Proclus employs an adverbial pair (ἀρχικῶς τε καὶ ἀπολύτως) similar to the one used in the *Divine Names* (ἀπολύτως καὶ ἀρχηγικῶς). Proclus uses these adverbs to describe the activities of self-subsisting “fontal gods” (πηγαῖοι θεοί).¹⁸ These gods—here, Ocean and Tethys—are sources of

¹⁴ *De Divinis Nominibus*, XI. 6, p. 222. Τί δὲ ὅλως, φῆς, τὸ αὐτοεῖναι λέγομεν ἢ τὴν αὐτοζωὴν ἢ ὅσα ἀπολύτως καὶ ἀρχηγικῶς εἶναι καὶ ἐκ θεοῦ πρώτως ὑφεστηκέναι τιθέμεθα; Τοῦτο δέ, φαμέν, οὐκ ἔστιν ἀγκύλον, ἀλλ’ εὐθὺ καὶ ἀπλὴν τὴν διασάφησιν ἔχον. Οὐ γὰρ οὐσίαν τινὰ θεῖαν ἢ ἀγγελικὴν εἶναι φαμέν τὸ αὐτοεῖναι τοῦ εἶναι τὰ ὄντα πάντα αἰτίαν, μόνον γὰρ τοῦ εἶναι πάντα τὰ ὄντα καὶ αὐτὸ τὸ εἶναι τὸ ὑπερούσιον ἀρχὴ καὶ οὐσία καὶ αἴτιον, οὐδὲ ζωογόνον ἄλλην θεότητα παρὰ τὴν ὑπέρθεον πάντων, ὅσα ζῆ, καὶ τῆς αὐτοζωῆς αἰτίαν ζωὴν οὔτε, συνελόντα εἰπεῖν, ἀρχικῶς τῶν ὄντων καὶ δημιουργικῶς οὐσίας καὶ ὑποστάσεις, ἃς τινες καὶ θεοὺς τῶν ὄντων καὶ δημιουργοὺς αὐτοσχεδιάσαντες ἀπεστομάτισαν, οὓς, ἀληθῶς καὶ κυρίως εἰπεῖν, οὔτε αὐτοὶ «ἡδύσαν», ἅτε δὴ οὐκ ὄντας, οὔτε «οἱ πατέρες αὐτῶν». Emphasis added.

¹⁵ Schula notes the variant reading of ἀρχικῶς for ἀρχηγικῶς in the text above. However, I think she is correct to omit it in her reconstruction, as Dionysius reserves ἀρχικῶς for the Divine Nature Itself. See note 11.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, II. I, p. 122. Τοῦτο μὲν οὖν καὶ ἐν ἄλλοις ἐξετασθὲν ἡμῖν ἀποδέδεικται τὸ πάσας ἀεὶ τὰς θεοπρεπεῖς ἐπωνυμίας οὐ μερικῶς, ἀλλ’ ἐπὶ τῆς ὅλης καὶ παντελοῦς καὶ ὁλοκλήρου καὶ πλήρους θεότητος ὑπὸ τῶν λογίων ὑμνεῖσθαι καὶ πάσας αὐτὰς ἀμερῶς, ἀπολύτως, ἀπαρτηρήτως, ὁλικῶς ἀπάσῃ τῇ ὁλότητι τῆς ὁλοτελοῦς καὶ πάσης θεότητος ἀνατίθεσθαι. Emphasis added. See also, XII. 3, p. 225. Ταῦτα μὲν οὖν ἐπὶ τῆς πάντα ὑπερβαλλούσης αἰτίας ἀπολύτως ὑμνητέον καὶ προσρητέον αὐτὴν ὑπερέχουσιν ἀγιότητα καὶ κυριότητα καὶ βασιλείαν ὑπερκειμένην καὶ ἀπλουστάτην θεότητα. Emphasis added.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, X. 3, p. 216. Χρὴ δέ, ὡς οἶμαι, καὶ χρόνου καὶ αἰῶνος φύσιν ἐκ τῶν λογίων εἰδέναι. Καὶ γὰρ οὐ τὰ πάντα καὶ ἀπολύτως ἀγέννητα καὶ ὄντως αἰῶνια πανταχοῦ φησὶν αἰώνια, καὶ τὰ ἀφθάρτα δὲ καὶ ἀθάνατα καὶ ἀναλλοιώτα καὶ ὄντα ὡσαύτως, ὡς ὅταν λέγῃ τό· «Ἐπάρθητε, πύλαι αἰώνιοι», καὶ τὰ ὅμοια. Emphasis added.

¹⁸ One passage shows several parallels to Dionysius’s text. In his *Commentary on Plato’s Cratylus*, Proclus writes, εἰσὶν οὖν ὁ τε Ωκεανὸς καὶ ἡ Τηθύς πηγαῖοι θεοὶ κατὰ τὰς πρωτίστας ἐαυτῶν ὑποστάσεις· διὸ καὶ ὁ Σωκράτης νῦν πατέρας τῶν ρευμάτων αὐτοὺς εἶρηκεν. προέρχονται δὲ καὶ εἰς τοὺς ἄλλους διακόσμους τῶν θεῶν, ἀρχικῶς τε καὶ ἀπολύτως καὶ οὐρανίως τὰς αὐτὰς ἐν ἐκάστοις ἐπιδεικνύμενοι

powers (δυνάμεις) participable by entities across the levels of Proclus's ontology. Existing ἀπολύτως, for Proclus, means to be a self-subsisting, transcendent god responsible for perfections at lower degrees of being.

A second text confirms this reading. In his *Commentary on the Timaeus*, Proclus employs the same adverbial contrast between ἀρχηγικῶς and οἰκειῶς that occurs in §6 of Dionysius's text. Proclus writes:¹⁹

The intellectual realm contains the sense-perceptibles in a unitary manner (ἐνοειδῶς), and the intelligibles secondarily, while the intelligible realm has embraced in advance both the intellectual and the sense-perceptible objects in a principal (ἀρχηγικῶς) and unified (ἡνωμένως) manner. But in each rank the universe [is disposed] in an appropriate manner (οἰκειῶς).

Through their simpler mode of being, intelligible realms adumbrate and pre-contain the perfections of sensible and intellectual orders. Existing principally (ἀρχηγικῶς) means to enjoy perfections in a simpler way than entities at lower levels of being, which, in turn, enjoy them in ways appropriate (οἰκειῶς) to themselves. For Proclus, therefore, ἀρχηγικῶς and ἀπολύτως signify *modes of being* proper to gods whose perfections are imitated and received in a limited way by others.

It is just these gods whose existence the Areopagite emphatically denies in the *Divine Names*.²⁰ Yet, Dionysius's rejection of Proclus's gods is nuanced insofar as the theonyms perform a similar role in his ontology. On the one hand, they are not self-subsistent. On the other, the divine names signify simple and participable sources of perfection. They signify simple perfections that adumbrate and pre-contain the various perfections of things at lower degrees of reality.

Needless to say, this conclusion only exacerbates the aforementioned difficulties. How can a *per se* theonym signify something as a source of perfection for others if it is not itself a substance? We are confronted by the "paradox that *esse*, which is the source of what is real, the very perfection of being, does not itself exist."²¹

As Aquinas's exposition will show, this aporia presupposes a limited notion of what it means to exist. In a word, it assumes that *esse* means either *esse universale* or *esse particulare*, either intelligible being in the mind or material being *in re*.

δυνάμεις. ὁ δὲ γε Τίμαιος καὶ τὰς ὑποσελήνους αὐτῶν ἀνύμνησεν τάξεις, πατέρας μὲν Κρόνου καὶ Ῥέας αὐτοὺς καλῶν, ἐγγόνους δ' Οὐρανοῦ καὶ Γῆς. This passage is striking for its mention of πατέρες, as well as for its use ἀρχικῶς and ἀπολύτως in the context of δυνάμεις. See *Procli Diadochi in Platonis Cratylum commentaria*, ed. G. Pasquali (Leipzig: Teubner, 1908), §142. See Proclus, *Commentary on the Timaeus* vol 1, trans. Harold Tarrant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 101.

¹⁹ See Proclus, *Commentary on the Timaeus* vol. 2, trans. David Runia and Michael Share (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 191. Greek provided in the translation.

²⁰ *De Divinis Nominibus*, XI. 6, p. 223. οὐς, ἀληθῶς καὶ κυρίως εἰπεῖν, οὔτε αὐτοὶ ᾗδεισαν οὐκ ὄντας οὔτε οἱ πατέρες αὐτῶν.

²¹ O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 151. See *De Potentia*, q. 1, a. 1, co. esse significat aliquid completum et simplex sed non subsistens.

Appropriating Avicenna, Aquinas will argue that there is a third way a nature can 'be,' namely insofar as it is considered absolutely, as abstracted from particular and universal modes of being.

2. Aquinas on *Ipsium Esse Commune*

A hasty reading of Aquinas's exposition of this distinction in Dionysius might lead one to reject it as anachronistic and overly Aristotelian. Although Aquinas knew that Dionysius wrote in the language and style of the Platonists,²² he did not know that Dionysius borrowed concepts, arguments, and even entire passages from Proclus. This context, as we saw in the previous section, is crucial for understanding Dionysius's use of ἀπολύτως. Without it, one might wonder whether Aquinas could have accurately understood the Areopagite's meaning.

This worry seems plausible given Aquinas's gloss on ἀπολύτως in his commentary. He writes:²³

[Dionysius] proposes first [to] the person of Timothy what is signified by *per se esse* or *per se vita* or any other things of this kind. He clearly says that [they signify] "**absolutely**" (*absolute*), that is **abstractly** (*abstracte*), and "principally" (*principaliter*), that is as the principles of other things.

In this interpretation, *absolute* and *abstracte* are synonyms. This identification, however, is problematic if *abstracte*, for Aquinas, means signifying something as an *abstraction* in the mind. For abstractions are *entia rationis*, or beings with the lowest degree of *esse* according to Aquinas.²⁴ One can restate the worry thus; on the one hand, Aquinas seems to think the theonyms signify *abstracte*, i.e. insofar as something is an *ens rationis* and at a lower degree of *esse*, whereas Dionysius thinks they signify simple sources of perfection existing without a substrate.

This reading of Aquinas, as I indicated above, is incorrect. It misinterprets Aquinas's identification of *abstracte* and *absolute* as if the former referred to a way of signifying something with merely conceptual existence. *Abstracte*, however, must be

²² *In div. nom.*, prooemium, p. 1. plerumque utitur stilo et modo loquendi quo utebantur platoniei, qui apud modemos est inconsuetus.

²³ *In div. nom.*, cap. XI, lect. 4, p. 346. Proponit ergo primo, ex persona Timothei, quid significetur cum dicitur per se esse aut per se vita et quaecumque alia huiusmodi et dicit signanter: absolute, idest abstracte, et principaliter, idest sicut principia aliorum. Emphasis mine.

²⁴ *In div. nom.*, cap. V, lect. 2, p. 244. Dicit ergo primo quod ex universali causa omnium quae Deus est, sunt substantiae Angelorum, Deo similium quae sunt intelligibiles, inquantum sunt immateriales et sunt intellectuales, inquantum habent virtutem intelligendi se et alia, et iste est primus gradus substantiarum, quae nec corpora sunt, nec corporibus unita. Secundus gradus est substantiarum quae non sunt corpora, sed corporibus unita sunt; et quantum ad hoc dicit: et animarum. Tertius gradus est substantiarum corporalium; et quantum ad hoc dicit: et omnis mundi naturae. In quarto gradu entium, sunt accidentia quae sunt in novem generibus. Quintus gradus est eorum quae non sunt in rerum natura, sed in sola cogitatione, quae dicuntur entia rationis, ut genus, species, opinio et huiusmodi.

read in light of what Aquinas says later in the *lectio*. When done so, it is clear that Aquinas's interpretation of the text is both accurate and philosophically cogent.

Aquinas distinguishes between two kinds of abstraction in this part of the commentary. On the one hand, there is the sense of *in abstracto* used by the Platonists. As Aquinas says:²⁵

It must be known that the Platonists, positing that the ideas of things were separate, held that all things said to be abstract in this way (*omnia quae sic in abstracto dicuntur*) subsisted in abstraction [as] causes according to a certain order (*in abstracto subsistere causas secundum ordinem quemdam*).

Dionysius and the Platonists recognized that certain terms can signify abstractly. The Platonists, however, inferred from this *ordo significandi* that the things signified by these terms had an abstract, or immaterial, mode of being.

Dionysius, on the other hand, resisted this inference and thereby grasped the true meaning of what it is to exist *abstracte* and *absolute*.²⁶ According to Aquinas, Dionysius's use of ἀπολύτως is just what Avicenna meant by his *consideratio absoluta* of a nature. That is, Dionysius, like Avicenna, intended to highlight a way of signifying finite perfections apart from their mode of being in particulars or in the intellect.

Aquinas clarifies the two senses of *per se* theonyms distinguished by Dionysius. Thomas's exposition is nuanced and worth quoting in full. He writes:²⁷

It is possible, therefore, that God, who is the principle of these powers, remain in Himself unparticipable and consequentially is not participated, while His gifts (*dona Ipsius*) are divided in creatures and partially received [by them]. Whence, [the gifts] are said to be participated by creatures. And inasmuch as they are participated according to the peculiarity (*secundum proprietatem*) of each one of the participants, the participants both are and are called existents by nature, insofar as they participate *esse* (*secundum hoc participantia et sunt et dicuntur ex natura existentia, inquantum participant esse*)... And since the principle is unparticipated, it is the cause of both participations and

²⁵ *In div. nom.*, cap. XI, lect. 4, p. 346. Excludit erroneum intellectum. Ad cuius evidentiam sciendum est quod Platonici, ponentes ideas rerum separatas, omnia quae sic in abstracto dicuntur, posuerunt in abstracto subsistere causas secundum ordinem quemdam.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 346. excluso errore, solvit secundum veritatem.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, cap. XI, lect. 4. Licet enim Deus, qui est harum virtutum principium, in se imparticipabilis maneat et per consequens non participetur, tamen dona ipsius dividuntur in creaturis et partialiter recipiuntur, unde et participari dicuntur a creaturis; et secundum quod participantur secundum proprietatem uniuscuiusque participantium, secundum hoc participantia et sunt et dicuntur ex natura existentia, inquantum participant esse; et viventia, inquantum participant vita; et divina inquantum participant deitate; et simile est de aliis. Et quia principium imparticipatum, causa est et participationum et participantium, ideo Deus et participationum et participantium substantificator est.

participants. For this reason, God is the substantifier of participations and participations (*Deus et participationum et participantium substantificator est*).

From this passage, we can see that Thomas has correctly interpreted Dionysius's distinction. On the one hand, a *per se* theonym can signify a perfection as it exists in the unparticipable Godhead. On the other hand, it can signify a participation, perfection, or power given to creatures by God. These participations, in turn, are divided by creatures according to the peculiarities of their various natures.

Thomas then introduces a threefold consideration of a *participatio*, a consideration that he attributes to Dionysius.²⁸ Before introducing this text, a small caveat is needed. By *participatio*, Thomas is not talking about a receiver's active relation to an entity more perfect than itself, i.e. *participare* or μετέχειν. Rather, he is talking about the nature or perfection insofar as it is *received* by another, i.e. a *participatio* or μετοχή. Gregory Doolan makes this distinction nicely:²⁹

The term "participation" in English is commonly employed in an active sense to refer to the structure whereby a participant is actively related to and dependent upon some higher causal source. By contrast, Thomas's frequent (but not exclusive) usage of the Latin term *participatio* is according to a passive sense, referring not to the activity of participating but rather to the effect of that activity: the participated perfection.

With this caveat in place, we can turn to Thomas's threefold consideration of a *participatio*. Aquinas writes:³⁰

Participations themselves, though, can be considered in three ways (*tripliciter considerari possunt*). First, in themselves (*secundum se*), as they abstract from both universality and particularity (*prout abstrahunt et ab universalitate et a particularitate*), as is signified when *per se vita* is said. In another way, they are considered universally, as when *vita totalis vel universalis* is said. In a third way, they are considered particularly, as when life is said of this or that thing.

A *participatio*, like life, can be considered either as the life of a particular living thing, as the universal nature of life (*vita universalis*) in the intellect, or as having been

²⁸ See note 33 below.

²⁹ See Gregory Doolan, "Esse Subsistens and the Third Mode of Participation," *The Thomist* 82 (2018), 621. Elsewhere, in his commentary on Boethius's *De Hebdomadibus*, Thomas develops a threefold division of *participare*. For this text and its interpretation, see Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought*, p. 97.

³⁰ *In div. nom.*, cap. XI, lect. 4, p. 347. Participationes autem ipsae tripliciter considerari possunt: uno modo secundum se, prout abstrahunt et ab universalitate et a particularitate, sicut signatur cum dicitur: per se vita; alio modo considerantur in universali, sicut dicitur vita totalis vel universalis; tertio modo in particulari, secundum quod vita dicitur huius vel illius rei.

abstracted from universal and particular modes of existence (*prout abstrahunt et ab universalitate et a particularitate*).

This third sense, according to Aquinas, is what Dionysius meant by ἀπολύτως. Abstract (or absolute) existence does not mean the kind of being possessed by a Platonic Form. Nor, *pace* Gilson, does it signify the universal mode of being that an Aristotelian concept enjoys in the mind. Nor, *pace* Kremer and Georgiev, is it equal to or higher than *esse divinum*. Rather, a Dionysian term like *ipsum per se esse*, what Aquinas calls *ipsum esse commune*,³¹ signifies a finite participation insofar as it is considered apart from its particular and universal modes of being.

In the above passage, Thomas employs Avicenna's threefold consideration of a nature. According to Avicenna, one can consider any given nature particularly, universally, or absolutely. Thomas describes Avicenna's distinction in *Quodlibet* VIII. He says:³²

Following Avicenna in his *Metaphysics*, it must be said that there is a threefold distinction of a nature (*triplex est alicuius naturae consideratio*): (a) the first, as it is considered according to the *esse* it has in singulars (*in singularibus*), as the nature of stone in this stone; (b) another consideration of a nature is according to its intellectual *esse* (*esse intelligibile*), as the nature of a stone is considered according to how it is in the intellect; (c) a third, however, is the absolute consideration (*absoluta consideratio*) of a nature, insofar as it is abstracted from either kind of *esse* (*prout abstrahit ab utroque esse*). According to [this] consideration, the nature of a stone, or the nature of anything whatsoever, is considered insofar as it relates to those things which agree (*competunt*) with such a nature *per se*.

Aquinas's language in this *Quodlibet* is similar to that used in his commentary in at least three respects. First, both texts introduce a *consideratio* that is threefold (*tripliciter* and *triplex*). Second, both distinguish two modes of being for a nature: in singulars (*in particulari* and *in singularibus*) and universally in the mind (*in universali* and *esse suum intelligibile in intellectu*). Third, both emphasize a third mode that abstracts from these

³¹ *In div. nom.*, cap. V, lect. 11, p. 245. "Deinde, cum dicit Et ipsum... ostendit quomodo esse se habeat ad Deum; et dicit quod ipsum esse commune est ex primo Ente, quod est Deus, et ex hoc sequitur quod esse commune aliter se habeat ad Deum quam alia existentia.

³² See *Quodlibet*, VIII, q. 1, a. 1. *Sancti Thomae de Aquino opera omnia*, vol. 25/1 (Rome: Leonine Edition, 1996), 51-53. Cited in Doolan, "Third Mode," 624; n. 44. "Dicendum, quod, secundum Avicennam in sua metaphysica, triplex est alicuius naturae consideratio. Una, prout consideratur secundum esse quod habet in singularibus; sicut natura lapidis in hoc lapide et in illo lapide. Alia vero est consideratio alicuius naturae secundum esse suum intelligibile; sicut natura lapidis consideratur prout est in intellectu. Tertia vero est consideratio naturae absoluta, prout abstrahit ab utroque esse; secundum quam considerationem consideratur natura lapidis, vel cuiuscumque alterius, quantum ad ea tantum quae per se competunt tali naturae." Emphasis and additions mine.

two (*prout abstrahunt et ab universalitate et a particularitate* and *prout abstrahit ab utroque esse*).

Even if Avicenna is not mentioned explicitly in Aquinas's commentary on the *Divine Names*, his *triplex consideratio* is clearly invoked at a crucial moment in Thomas's exposition. In effect, Thomas argues that Dionysius's *per se* theonyms signify finite perfections the way Avicenna says one can signify a nature absolutely. Thomas thus weaves together Dionysius's use of ἀπολύτως, i.e. *absolute*, with Avicenna's *consideratio absoluta*. He connects these two authors through his interpretation of *abstracte*, which receives a meaning different than what one might expect from a thinker famous for his doctrine of intellectual abstraction.

Consequently, identifying universal *esse* with *ipsum esse* would be to conflate two ways of signifying a nature. Universal *esse* exists immaterially in the mind. By contrast, *ipsum esse* signifies ἀπολύτως or *absolute*—absolutely rather than universally. If this distinction were not already clear, Thomas makes it explicit, writing:³³

And God is the cause of all of these [participations and participants]. And this is what [Dionysius] says, that the Good, i.e. God, (1') is primarily said to be the Substantifier of those things, namely of *per se vita*, *per se esse* and so forth, insofar as [they are] considered *per se* and absolutely (*prout per se et absolute consideratur*); (2') next, of the whole of them, namely of universal *esse* and the like (*idem universalis esse et similiū*); (3') next of the particulars themselves, as of a particular *esse* or of a particular life (*ut particularis esse vel particularis vitae*); (a') next of the totality of the participants themselves, of the universal living thing and the universal existent (*existentis universalis*) (b') next particularly of the participants themselves, as of this or of that being (*ut huius vel illius entis aut viventis*).

Aquinas nicely recapitulates the distinctions he has made in his *lectio*. He makes a general distinction between participations (1'-3') and participants (a'-b'). Under participations he lists three kinds: (1') a perfection considered absolutely and *per se*, such as *per se vita* and *per se esse*, (2') a perfection considered universally, such as *esse universalis*, and (3') a perfection existing in a particular, like the *esse* of this or that thing. Under participants, he lists two species: (a') participants considered universally like

³³ Ibid., cap. XI, lect. 4. "Et horum omnium Deus causa est; et hoc est quod dicit quod bonus, idest Deus primo quidem dicitur esse substantificator ipsorum, scilicet per se vitae et per se esse et huiusmodi, prout per se et absolute consideratur; postea, totorum ipsorum, idem universalis esse et similiū; postea particularium ipsorum, ut particularis esse vel particularis vitae; postea totaliter participantium ipsis, viventis universalis et existentis universalis; postea particulariter ipsis participantium, ut huius vel illius entis." The labeling of the distinctions is Doolan's. However, the translation, emphases, and additions are my own. See in Doolan, "Third Mode" p. 625.

existens universalis or *vivens universalis*, and (b') individual participants like this or that being.

In light of this text, we can draw the following four conclusions. First, Dionysius's *ipsum esse* and Thomas's *esse commune* are distinct from *esse universale*. The latter has only universal or intelligible existence. Most likely, it is the concept of *esse* in the mind, though this point is not explicit in the text. Second, *esse commune* is not the same as a particular thing's *actus essendi*. The former is the fullness or πλήρωμα of any given finite perfection, whereas the latter has already been determined by a particular thing's essence.

Third, though Thomas does not draw this point above, since Dionysius's text only lists five kinds of being,³⁴ it seems clear that *esse commune* also differs from *ens commune*.³⁵ *Ens* is *id quod habet esse*, not *esse* itself. *Ens commune* is the absolute consideration of the being of the participant, i.e. *ens per se*, rather than that of the participation, i.e. *esse per se*. Given Aquinas's famous distinction between *ens* and *esse*, between essence and existence, it seems that the latter (*esse per se*) stands to the former (*ens per se*) as act stands to potency. This is consistent with what Thomas says elsewhere in the commentary, namely that God makes all things (*omnia existentia*) subsist, i.e. exist and be substances, through *ipsum secundum se esse*.³⁶

Fourth, in light of the above distinctions, it seems that *ipsum esse* (i.e. *esse commune*) is the highest, created principle in Aquinas's metaphysics. Indeed, it is higher and more actual than the formal object of metaphysics itself (*ens commune*). It is, to repeat, the nature of *esse* considered absolutely, as separated from its mode of being both in particulars and in the mind.

In this way, it can be said to 'exist' as a simple source of perfection in a way that does not require a substrate. Aquinas thus employs Avicenna in order to resolve the aporia caused by Dionysius's appropriation of Proclus's fontal gods. The great Persian philosopher showed that a nature can 'exist' in a simple or absolute way such that it does not need to be 'in' either a material substrate or a mind. For one can consider a nature *per se*, or as prior to both modes of being.

³⁴ De Divinis Nominibus, XI, 6, line 20, p. 221. Διὸ καὶ (1') πρῶτον αὐτῶν ὁ ἀγαθὸς ὑποστάτης λέγεται εἶναι, (2') εἶτα τῶν ὅλων αὐτῶν, (3') εἶτα τῶν μερικῶν αὐτῶν, (a') εἶτα τῶν ὅλως αὐτῶν μετεχόντων, (b') εἶτα τῶν μερικῶς αὐτῶν μετεχόντων. Additions mine.

³⁵ See O'Rourke, p. 149. "Even *ens commune*, the logical concept of the entity of things, which provides the formal object of ontology, stands at the threshold of metaphysical reflection and does not penetrate to the inner principle sought by a deeper reflection upon reality."

³⁶ In div. nom., cap. V, lect. 1, p. 236. "Per quamdam similitudinem inter alios effectus prius fecit esse quod est, idest ipsum secundum se esse, et per ipsum esse fecit subsistere omnia quaecumque sunt: per hoc enim unumquodque est causatum a Deo, per suum esse ex Deo et non solum alia existentia causata participant esse, sed etiam ipsa principia existentium participant esse, inquantum sunt et principia sunt."

3. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that *ipsum esse*, or *esse commune*, is the absolute notion of *esse*. It is neither a concept in the mind nor the sum total of particular *actus essendi* at any given moment in time. It is prior to universal *esse* and a particular thing's own *actus essendi*. It is *esse* as considered apart from these two modes of being. It is what Avicenna would have called the absolute nature of *esse*.

In section one, I argued that Dionysius inherited the absolute and principal signification of *ipsum per se esse* from Proclus. For the latter, signifying a thing absolutely meant signifying a self-subsisting, transcendent god whose pre-contained and unified perfections were variously participated at lower levels of being. For the former, these signified πληρώματα of finite perfections existing without a substrate.

In section two, I showed how Aquinas was able to make good philosophical sense of this admittedly paradoxical notion. Moreover, I argued that Aquinas did so by employing Avicenna's threefold consideration of a nature. It is a mark of Thomas's great skill as a commentator that he was able to take such seemingly disparate insights and harmonize them in his exposition. Ironically, Avicenna emerges as the philosophical defender of Dionysius's Christian monotheism against Procline polytheism.

In what remains, I would like to suggest two future lines of research. First, I think much more needs to be said about *esse commune*'s analogical character in Aquinas's commentary. How does Aquinas use this notion to explain the hierarchical character of being into its five grades?³⁷ What does the analogical character of *esse commune* entail for its participants? Second, if *esse commune* is, as I have presented it, the highest finite principle in Aquinas's ontology (higher even than *ens commune*), what does this entail for our overall interpretation of Aquinas's metaphysics, which is the study of *ens inquantum ens*? How does *esse commune* relate to the other *per se* senses of being that Aquinas inherits from Aristotle? All of these questions can be rethought if we take seriously Aquinas's taxonomy of participations and participants from his commentary on the *Divine Names*.

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<https://dionysiuscircle.org/>

³⁷ See note 24.