

AQUINAS THE NEOPLATONIST

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IF ONE DID NO MORE than read through some of the Neothomist manuals of the early to mid 20th century, one might come away with the impression that St Thomas Aquinas was a thorough-going anti-Platonic Aristotelian. This is most evident regarding the medieval “problem of universals”, viz., the debate over the ontological status of natures and properties. Regarding the question of universals, the way these manuals usually cover this topic is a bit of Plato bashing for a page or two, then comes the Aristotelian “solution” of common natures being “in the thing”, leaving the reader with a strict *in re* and *post rem* answer to the problem and then these authors move on to other topics.¹

But this “solution” won’t work for two reasons; the first and most important being that it is untenable. Real particularity cannot serve as the ontological foundation for commonality, and to pretend that it can opens one up to the attacks of the 14th century nominalists. With this understood, it should come as no surprise that nominalists such as Ockham can boast of recovering the “true Aristotle” by holding unwaveringly to the doctrine, “everything existing outside the soul is singular”. The linchpin of Ockham’s assault on universals outside the mind is that *the individual cannot be common*. It is wholly impossible, under pain of contradiction, that one particular thing be common, for that is to be particular and not-particular:

No thing outside the soul is universal, either through itself or through anything real or rational added on, no matter how it is considered or understood. Thus it is just as great an impossibility that some thing outside the soul be in any way universal... as it is an impossibility that a man be an ass through any consideration or according to any kind of being whatever.²

Ockham’s argument is a good one and is a problem for all those of the “moderate realist” persuasion.³ In fact, a similar argument making the same point came earlier from the neoplatonically influenced Albert the Great. Albert uses the same starting point as Ockham, (that singulars are discrete and incommunicable) as an argument to look *beyond* the singular to account for ontological commonality.⁴ Strictly speaking, a common

¹ For example see, RP Phillips, *Modern Thomistic Philosophy*, v. II (Westminster: Newman Press 1954) pp. 102-8

² *Ord. d.2. q. 7*, in Paul Vincent Spade’s, *Five Texts on the Medieval Problem of Universals* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994) p. 204

³ So as some scholars have pointed out, an Aristotelianism without some form of Platonism is nominalistic and unworkable for Aristotle’s apparent intentions of holding real commonality, “if one rigorously and honestly sought to remove these [Platonic] assumptions, the ‘Aristotelianism’ that would remain would be indefensible and incoherent. A comprehensive and scientifically grounded anti-Platonic Aristotelianism is, I suspect, a chimera.” (Lloyd Gerson *Aristotle and Other Platonists* (London: Cornell University Press, 2005) p. 290

⁴ “For this [universals existing apart from particulars] is proven thus, the existence of universals is a common existence adapted to coming into existence in many and communicable to many. Moreover this [universal] is not able to have existence from the singular: *because the singulars are discrete and*

nature, *qua* common, cannot be “in a thing”. If the nature is in a thing, it must be individual, and no individual can be common. Where then is this *common* nature? If commonality occurs only in the mind, then there is no *real* commonality and we are left, at best, with a nominalistic ontology where the only commonality is a being of reason, in other words, conceptualism.⁵

The second problem with the mere *in re* and *post rem* answer is that it simply misrepresents Aquinas. Aquinas is very explicit in areas that are at *best* questionable in Aristotle. In other words, we can say that a complete answer to this issue involves Aquinas adopting positions that are *Platonic, non-Aristotelian*, and to his mind, *true*.⁶ To understand what I mean by “non-Aristotelian”, there are three senses of which I will dub, a weak, moderate, and strong sense. So given any Platonic teaching X:

1. X is non-Aristotelian in the *weak* sense if it is simply the case that Aristotle does not mention X. It is not that Aristotle intended to deny X, but for whatever reason, he never got around to specifically mentioning it.
2. X is non-Aristotelian in the *moderate* sense when not only does Aristotle omit mentioning X, but there are at first glance, *explicitly stated obstacles* to X and thus *prima facie* difficulties to overcome before one can say Aristotle would have been open to holding X.
3. X is non-Aristotelian in the *strong* sense if and when the *prima facie* obstacles in the moderate sense cannot be harmonized with Platonic teaching and thus Aristotle’s stated position turns out in fact to be incompatible with X.

The position I defend here is that Aquinas, intentionally or unintentionally, holds fast to doctrines that are non-Aristotelian in the moderate sense. The key here to which type of “non-Aristotelianism” it turns out to be in the end hinges on the success or failure of harmonizing the obstacles raised in 2. It must be admitted from the outset that Aquinas himself glosses Aristotle in a way that harmonizes the positions, and this is almost

incommunicable. To communicate existence therefore is that which is the existence of universals, [which] the universal does not have from the singular.” St. Albert the Great, *Liber de praedicabilibus*, tr. II, ch. V

⁵ Arthur Little states the problem well, “The metaphysical problem, however, that still remains [with Aristotle] is that of the unity of the universal. From what source does it derive its unity? If it derives it from a real source this can apparently be no other than the singulars in all of which it is univocally verified. But unity cannot be found in plurality or disunity. The universal idea cannot be one *because* it is verified in many. It is not enough to say that it is one because it is verified in many in so far as *they* are one, namely under the respect of their one common nature. For their nature is only common because it can be conceived in one idea referable to each and all; this is what it is to *be* common... If on the other hand, the universal derives its unity only from the mind then it will be impossible for a plurality to have any characteristics in common. For the unity of the universal signifies the common character of the notes signified. If that unity is a pure fiction of the mind ungrounded in reality so too will be the common character signified by it. No idea can without change be verified in each of several individuals; there are no true universals. Conceptualism is inevitable therefore unless we can answer the question: from what source does the universal derive its unity? Arthur Little, *The Platonic Heritage of Thomism* (Dublin: Golden Eagle Books, 1950), p. 47

⁶ This phraseology I borrow from Little, although my use of it differs.

entirely based on his interpretation of one passage in the *Metaphysics*.⁷ However as we will see, the interpretation of this passage is questionable and even if accurate, still does not resolve other apparently conflicting statements. Whether or not all of the texts of both Aquinas and Aristotle are reconcilable, I cannot answer here. For now, it seems evident that an important facet of Aquinas' positions on universals is difficult to reconcile with other texts of Aristotle and this is all I desire to show here.

The Thomistic doctrine on the table here regards the truth of *ante rem* realism, viz., that some type of Platonic Form, Idea, or universal *must*, in some sense, exist prior to and apart from individual things. While Aquinas unquestionably agrees with Aristotle's individualist doctrine that everything outside the soul is individual, Aquinas' view is more nuanced and robust. As we will see, although this *ante rem* universal is prior to and *the ground of* individual instantiation and human cognition, Aquinas does not think it can exist separately like a Platonic substance. Thomas also differs from Plato and Augustine in that the universals in the human mind are not *ante rem* but are abstracted from individual things. Yet for Aquinas, it is the universal *ante rem* in the mind of God that provides the prerequisite conditions for such abstraction. In this way, Aquinas' *ante rem* realism serves two roles. First there is the ontological requirement. Unity cannot be grounded in a plurality. Nothing can give what it does not have and unity can only come from something that has it. Secondly, there is their service as truth-makers. A necessary truth is that which cannot be otherwise, but there is nothing necessary in contingent singulars. So for Aquinas, *ante rem* universals account for both the ontological unity of things with the same nature, and hence for any necessary truth made about that nature. We now look at texts for each of these facets.

***Ante Rem* Universals as the Ground for Ontological Commonality**

Aquinas maintains that sameness in difference needs an explanation, and this is expressed by participation. Everything imperfect is a participation of what is perfect,⁸ and to participate is nothing other than to receive partially from another.⁹ Aquinas attributes this participation principle to the Platonists:

Now according to the positions of the Platonists, anything that is found in many things must be reduced to something first, which is such through its essence, from which the others are said to be such through participation.¹⁰

Aquinas uses this same principle in the *De Potentia*, and again attributes the reasoning to Plato. It is necessary that whatever is held in common by multiple things must be reduced

⁷ "Now we do not know a truth without its cause; and a thing has a quality in a higher degree than other things if in virtue of it the similar quality belongs to the other things as well (e.g. fire is the hottest of things; for it is the cause of the heat of all other things); so that that causes derivative truths to be true is most true. Hence the principles of eternal things must be always most true (for they are not merely sometimes true, nor is there any cause of their being, but they themselves are the cause of the being of other things), so that as each thing is in respect of being, so is it in respect of truth." (Meta. II 993b24-31)

⁸ ST I.93.2

⁹ *In De Caelo*, lib. 2 l. 18 n. 6

¹⁰ *Super Librum De Causis Expositio*, translation from St Thomas Aquinas: *Commentary on the Book of Causes*, tr. Vincent Guagliardo, Charles Hess, and Richard Taylor (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996) prop 16, pp. 105-6

to one source because these sharers are diverse and so in themselves cannot account for that commonality:

For it is necessary, if some one thing is discovered commonly in many, that it be caused in them from some one cause; for it cannot be that this common attribute belongs to each one as derived from its own self, since each one, according to that it is itself, is distinct from the other; and a diversity of causes produces a diversity of effects. Therefore, since existence is found common to all things, which according to that which they are, are distinct from each other, it must be that of necessity with them the act of existence be attributed not from their own selves, but from some one cause. And this seems to be the reason of Plato, who maintained, that before every multitude some unity would exist not only with regard to number, but even in real things.¹¹

Aquinas' reasoning is straightforward. That something can be multiplied or individuated *presupposes* that it exists in some way and that it is one, otherwise what is "it" that is being multiplied? This source of unity must be separate from individuals since "enmattered forms" are individuated by that matter and a material individual cannot be the source for ontological commonality:

for it is of the very notion of an individual that it cannot be in several [...] because a form, be it substantial or accidental, is naturally in someone indeed, not in several, as this whiteness, which is in this body.... matter is the principle of individuation of all inherent forms, because, since these forms, considered in themselves, are naturally in something as in a subject, from the very fact that one of them is received in matter, which is not in another, it follows that neither can the form itself thus existing be in another.¹²

This is a quite remarkable admission when we consider not only is it the point made above by Albert the Great (who in that context was writing *against* Aristotle) but it is also a future anticipation of Ockham's argument. The individual cannot be common, and "it is clear that common nature becomes distinct and multiplied by reason of the individuating principles which come from the matter."¹³ Because of this individuation, no material individual can be in more than one place at the same time.¹⁴ So Aquinas' view has two tenets; 1) that multiplicity of any kind can only be grounded in a unity, and 2) that ground of unity is nowhere to be found in the individuals themselves. Plato and Socrates both have a human nature, individuated from the common human nature, yet that common human nature as common is *not* in either Socrates or Plato. It is at this point that Ockham will reject the common nature as something existing outside the mind, and why not? If all things outside the mind are individual, and no individuals can possibly contain a common nature, then shouldn't Aquinas follow Ockham on this and also reject the reality of an extramental common nature?

No, Aquinas will not do this because that would amount to a denial of our common experience that diverse things have the same nature and so the truth of that first Platonic

¹¹ *De potentia*, q. 3 a. 5. Aquinas goes on to make a second similar argument from the *Meta. II* text already mentioned. This interpretation however will be discussed below.

¹² ST III.77.2

¹³ *Ibid*, ad 3

¹⁴ Which in modern analytic parlance has been called the "axiom of localization". This was held by both Aquinas ("Because to be in several places at once is incompatible with the individual, by reason of its having being undivided in itself, for it would follow that it is divided as to place." ST Supp. 83.3) and Ockham, (*Ord. d.2 q. 4*; Spade 128).

tenet, “it is *necessary* that in whatever things in which one nature is found, must be reduced to one principle of that nature”.¹⁵ Individual human beings really do have the same nature, it is just individuated and multiplied in many, but “individuated” or “multiplied” nature presupposes a prior undivided nature. But if one asks where is this source of unity or common nature, Aquinas responds that the existence of a nature is *threefold*. One, according to the existence it has in singulars, another as it is in the intellect, and thirdly, the nature absolutely considered as abstracted from whichever existence. In the real order, the nature absolutely considered is prior to any individual instantiation. Citing Pseudo-Dionysius, Aquinas attributes this sense of the nature to the divine idea or exemplar and it is on account of this that the nature may be subsequently instantiated:

In this therefore that which is prior, is always the reason of the posterior; and the posterior having been removed the prior remains, but not the converse; and from that it is because this which applies to the nature absolutely considered, is the reason why it may apply to some nature according to the existence which it has in the singular, but not the converse. *Therefore for instance Socrates is rational, because man is rational, and not the converse; whence having granted that Socrates and Plato may not exist; still rationality would apply to human nature.* Similarly yet again, *the divine intellect is the reason for the nature absolutely considered, and in singulars; and the nature itself absolutely considered and in singulars is the reason of the human intellect, and in a certain way the measure of itself.*¹⁶

The idea of “man” in the divine mind is prior to instantiation in an individual and the common nature accounts for why all things that participate in that nature have the properties that they do. It is because rationality applies to human nature as such that Socrates and Plato can be subsequently rational, and not vice versa. This of course is true for other forms as well. As pure existence, the divine nature is communicable and diverse forms arise from diverse imitations of the divine essence:

The exemplar is the same as the idea. But ideas, according to Augustine, are “the master forms, which are contained in the divine intelligence.”... God is the first exemplar cause of all things.... Now it is manifest that things made by nature receive determinate forms. This determination of forms must be reduced to the divine wisdom as its first principle, for divine wisdom devised the order of the universe, which order consists in the variety of things. And therefore we must say that in the divine wisdom are the types of all things, which types we have called ideas - i.e. exemplar forms existing in the divine mind. And these ideas, though multiplied by their relations to things, in reality are not apart from the divine essence, according as the likeness to that essence can be shared diversely by different things. In this manner therefore God Himself is the first exemplar of all things.¹⁷

Participation in existence is necessary for anything whose essence is not existence.¹⁸ Yet this participation in the First Being is always according to a particular mode. Therefore it is necessary for the existence of any being to have a form that is a participation in the First Being – in other words, participating in a form is *ontologically necessary on the part of the individuated nature*. Simply positing individuated natures is not sufficient for they

¹⁵ *De veritate*, q. 2 a. 14

¹⁶ *Quodlibet* VIII, q. 1 a. 1 emphasis added

¹⁷ ST I.44.3 cf. SCG I.50.9

¹⁸ “But because subsistent “to be” can only be one, as was pointed out above, then necessarily all other things under it must be as participating in “to be”, *Tractatus De Substantiis Separatis*, IX

cannot exist without participating in the One. So the natures of things depend upon a participation in a mode of being or form which is universal and eternal and this form remains even when the individual does not:

But it must be observed that the beings which share existence from the First Being, do not share in it according to a universal mode of being as it is found in the First Principle; they participate in it in a particular way, according to a certain determinate mode of being which belongs to this given genus or this given species. Now each thing is adapted to one determinate mode of being according to the mode of its substance. But the mode of every substance composed of matter and form is according to the form through which it belongs to a determinate species. Thus, a thing composed of matter and form is made through its form to receive a share in existence itself from God according to a mode proper to it.¹⁹

Later in this treatise, Aquinas says the forms of things have a two-fold cause, that of the generating entity as the cause for this being and the exemplar as the absolute cause of a certain nature. The generating entity alone is not sufficient for a new instance of a nature. If we take for example, the generation of a horse:

The necessity of this distinction is apparent to anyone considering the causes of things which are generated. For when a horse is generated, the generating horse is indeed the reason why the nature of horse begins to exist in this being, but it is not the essential cause of equinity. For that which is essentially the cause of a certain specific nature must be the cause of that nature of all the beings that have that species. Since, then, the generating horse has the same nature, it would have to be its own cause, which is impossible. *It remains, therefore, that above all those participating in equinity, there must be some universal cause of the whole species.*²⁰

This priority of the *ante rem* universal of course would go for any sort of thing.²¹ Combining this *ante rem* universal with both the enmattered form and as abstracted by the intellect, we have a threefold understanding of the universal. Interestingly, this *triplex* quality also allows Aquinas to answer a certain objection that says the angels cannot have knowledge of universals, since Aristotle in the *De Anima* says, “the universal animal is either nothing or it is posterior.” Given that the universal is not posterior except when abstracted from things, and since the intellects of Angels do not abstract the forms from things, it seems the angels do not have universal concepts.²² Aquinas responds that God can infuse the angel with his ideas because:

It must be said that the universal is threefold. Certainly that which is in the thing, one may know this nature, which is in particulars, as much as in these it is not according to the aspect of universality in act. Still, it is certainly a universal which is received through abstraction from the thing, and this is posterior to the thing; and in this mode the forms of angels are not universals. *Still, a certain one is universal to a thing, because it is before*

¹⁹ *Tractatus De Substantiis Separatis*, VIII

²⁰ *Tractatus De Substantiis Separatis*, IX

²¹ For instance Aquinas uses the same argument with regard to humans, “For an individual man cannot be the cause of human nature absolutely, because he would then be the cause of himself; but he is the cause of human nature being in the man begotten; and thus he presupposes in his action a determinate matter whereby he is an individual man. But as an individual man participates human nature, so every created being participates, so to speak, the nature of being; for God alone is His own being, as we have said above” (ST I.45.5 ad.1)

²² *Super Sent.*, lib. 2 d. 3 q. 3 a. 2 arg. 1

the thing itself, as the form of a house in the mind of a builder; and through this mode universals are forms of things existing in the angelic mind.²³

So for Aquinas, like St Albert, the ontological unity of material things is grounded in the fact that individuals of a certain species equally participate in the nature of the species.²⁴ In fact, with Albert the divine ideas of forms are likened to rays radiating from God and multiplied in matter,²⁵ and interestingly enough, Aquinas also makes use of this “ray of light” analogy:

Although the first cause infuses all things with one infusion, its infusion is nevertheless received differently in different things. A clear example of this is in light, which proceeds from a luminous body in one way, but according to the way that different rays pass through variously colored glass, the rays produce a different appearance.²⁶

So it seems Aquinas and Albert the Great agree on the necessary prerequisites for ontological commonality. Of course we should also note that these forms of things do not merely have their *origin* in the divine ideas, but according to Aquinas, individuals depend on these ideas *each and every moment of their existence* and without this ontological participation, individuals would cease to be.²⁷

But what about Aristotle’s vicious criticism of Plato’s forms? Aquinas says Aristotle’s arguments only do away with them as separate exemplars posited by Plato,²⁸ but they do not militate against exemplars as divine ideas. In fact, Aquinas openly admits his view is in semi-Platonic insofar as the plurality of exemplars in the divine intellect serves as the ontological basis for individuated natures:

²³ *Super Sent.*, lib. 2 d. 3 q. 3 a. 2 ad 1 emphasis added

²⁴ “In those things, however, that differ materially, nothing prevents many being found equal to one another, for in substances the individuals of one species equally participate the nature of the species. Likewise in accidents it is possible for diverse subjects to participate whiteness equally.” *Super Librum De Causis Expositio* prop. 4 op. cit., p. 34

²⁵ “And if it may be asked why it [the universal] is one, because it must be said it may make itself exist in these three, it is good that a similarity has been introduced about light and color. And it must be said because that which makes it to be one in three itself, is the power of the first intelligence, which is the universal cause of existence in all things: even whose simple nature itself (which because it is a universal is this or that) is a producing ray. And because the contracting is such it is multiple according to the diverse natures to which it pertains, therefore there are many universals, reducible yet by some mode to one, because it has been caused by the first cause.” St. Albert the Great, *Liber de Praedicabilibus* Tr. II ch. VI

²⁶ *Super Librum De Causis Expositio*, prop 20, p. 123

²⁷ “He [God] also gives created agents their forms and preserves them in being. Therefore He is the cause of action not only by giving the form which is the principle of action, as the generator is said to be the cause of movement in things heavy and light; but also as preserving the forms and powers of things; just as the sun is said to be the cause of the manifestation of colors, inasmuch as it gives and preserves the light by which colors are made manifest. And since the form of a thing is within the thing, and all the more, as it approaches nearer to the First and Universal Cause; and because in all things God Himself is properly the cause of universal being which is innermost in all things; it follows that in all things God works intimately” ST I.105.5

²⁸ “However, it should be noted that, even though this argument does away with separate exemplars posited by Plato, it still does not do away with the fact that God’s knowledge is the exemplar of all things.” *Comm. On Meta. I 1. 15* (translation from *Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics* (South Bend: Dumb Ox Books, 1995) pp. 89-90

We must observe in the divine intellect a certain distinction and plurality of understood exemplars, according as that which is in the divine intellect is the proper exemplar of diverse things. Hence, since this obtains according as God understands the proper relation of resemblance that each creature has to Him, it remains that the exemplars of things in the divine intellect are many or distinct only according as God knows that things can be made to resemble Him by many and diverse modes. In accord with this, Augustine says that God made man and a horse by distinct exemplars. He also says that the exemplars of things are a plurality in the divine mind. *This conclusion likewise saves to some extent the opinion of Plato and his doctrine of Ideas, according to which would be formed everything that is found among material things.*²⁹

***Ante Rem* Universals as the Ground for Necessary Truth**

A necessary truth is simply a proposition that cannot be false. But what is the ground of necessity for the truth of such propositions? Notice this is not to seek merely a sufficient *scientific* foundation for necessary truths, but rather a sufficient *ontological* foundation. Aquinas is not an illuminationist, sensible things are sufficient for knowing necessary truth, but following Augustine, Aquinas, does not think that any observed individual form can ground necessary truths. So if we talk about the nature of a circle, or the truth of “two plus three equals five”, Aquinas thinks there needs to be some necessary eternal existence to ground these truths if they are always true. As truth follows the existence of things, Aquinas’ metaphysics of *ante rem* realism is already in place to fulfill this role. This grounding of eternal truths in the divine ideas is first evident in his commentary on the Sentences. There is only one existence that is eternal and thus since the existence of everything else is mutable and contingent, any truths regarding any of these latter things is also then mutable and contingent since, “it is clear that nothing is necessarily true in creatures”.³⁰ As was said in the *Quodlibet* passage above, Aquinas says that the nature must be prior to the individual; that is, Socrates is rational, because man is rational, and not the converse. It is because “human nature” exists as divine exemplar prior to things that, “having removed all individual men still rationality would be attributed to human nature.”³¹ It is only the eternal *ante rem* Ideas in the divine mind that have the ontological wherewithal to serve as the foundation of necessary truth. Since, “Things are called true from the truth of the intellect. Hence, if no intellect were eternal, no truth would be eternal.”³²

In the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas argues against the notion that knowledge of necessary truths proves that the human soul is eternal, what it does show however is “*that those understood truths are founded upon something which is eternal.*”³³ And not surprisingly, this is so for mathematical truths as well, as “the nature of a circle, and the fact that two and three make five, have eternity in the mind of God.”³⁴ But this position on the truths of mathematics is quite interesting; for mathematical platonism has been defined simply as holding that mathematical entities are “abstract – outside of physical space, eternal and unchanging – and as existing necessarily – regardless of the details of

²⁹ SCG I ch. 54, 5 emphasis added

³⁰ “Unde patet quod nulla veritas est necessaria in creaturis” *Super Sent.*, lib. 1 d. 19 q. 5 a. 3. In the objections Aquinas often grounds these truths in the divine ideas.

³¹ *Quodlibet* VIII, q. 1 a. 1 ad.1

³² ST I.16.7

³³ SCG II. 84

³⁴ ST I.16.7 ad.1

the contingent make-up of the physical world.”³⁵ Such a definition makes Aquinas a mathematical platonist.

Why “Moderately” Non-Aristotelian?

We must turn now to those difficult passages in Aristotle which I have said are *prima facie* obstacles to harmonization with Aquinas’ platonic views. Listing these impediments briefly, they are:

1. Aristotle seems to deny any need for a ground of ontological commonality over and above singulars and so denies any need for exemplar forms
2. Aristotle seems to limit the causality of the Prime Mover to only final causality - but imparting a form from a mind to a being involves efficient causality. Moreover, Aristotle suggests that there are many prime movers, thus *ipso facto* denying that multiplicity need be grounded in unity
3. Aristotle seems to say that necessary truths, such as in mathematics, can be grounded in contingent things

All of the above are apparent denials of positions that Aquinas explicitly holds. The remaining task is to highlight these Aristotelian texts that seem to contradict Aquinas’ position.

First we have seen that Aquinas accepts the Platonic principle that anything that is found in many things must be reduced to something first which is such through its essence and in which all the others participate. Yet Aristotle denies a need for anything over and above particulars. Letting letters represent elements:

All these difficulties follow naturally, when they make the Ideas out of elements and claim that there are separate unities apart from the substances which have the same form. But if, e.g., in the case of the elements of speech, the *a*’s and the *b*’s may quite well be many *and there need be no ideal a and ideal b besides the many*, there may be, as far as this goes, an infinite number of similar syllables.³⁶

Given a multiplicity of the same kind of element, Aristotle thinks nothing need be posited over and above these particulars to account for their unity. Singulars are sufficient explanations of common identity. Along this same line of reasoning, although we have seen Aquinas stress the necessity of exemplar causality prior to individuation, Aristotle on the other hand, seems to say such exemplar causality is superfluous:

It is evident, then, that the cause in which consists of the Forms, in the sense in which some are accustomed to speak of them, i.e., supposing that they do exist apart from singular things, is *useless* so far as processes of generation and substances are concerned. Nor will the forms be, for this reason, substances existing by themselves ...*Hence there is evidently no need to furnish a Form as an exemplar*; for men would have searched for Forms especially in sensible things, since these are substances in the highest degree. *But the thing which generates is adequate for producing the thing and for causing the form in the matter.*³⁷

³⁵ Penelope Maddy, *Realism in Mathematics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) p. 21 Maddy calls this view of mathematics “traditional Platonism”.

³⁶ *Meta.* XIII 10 1087a2-10 emphasis added

³⁷ *Met.* 1033b26- 1034a6 emphasis added

It may be objected that Aristotle is only talking here about forms as separate entities, and this is true, yet the charge itself of exemplars being superfluous seems to be unqualified. However we can get further insight from other passages where we would at least expect a mention of divine exemplarity if Aristotle really held to such a notion. For example, while we saw Aquinas say the forms of things are eternal in *spite of* their individual instances, Aristotle says that forms are eternal *only because of* the successive generation of individuals. A certain species can partake of the divine “in the only way possible to it”,³⁸ to wit, by successive generation of the same kind and “success is possible in varying degrees”³⁹ insofar as the species remains eternal through reproduction. Again, in the *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle says it is impossible that the natures of things be eternal in any way other than generation:

These, then, are the reasons of the generation of animals. *For since it is impossible that such a class of things [the nature of such a kind] as animals should be of an eternal nature, therefore that which comes into being is eternal in the only way possible.* Now it is impossible for it to be eternal as an individual (though of course the real essence of things is in the individual)- were it such it would be eternal- *but it is possible for it as a species. This is why there is always a class of men and animals and plants.*⁴⁰

These are two places where we would expect a mention of exemplarity in the divine mind, but yet there is none. Instead, we are told “the only way possible” these natures are eternal is by successive generation, on other words, always existing in particulars. But lest one object that these are only inferences from silence, one should be aware of another text where Aristotle comes right out and explicitly denies a need for exemplarity, while taking a swing at participation in the process:

But further all other things cannot come from the Forms in any of the ways that are usually suggested. *And to say that they are patterns and the other things share in them is to use empty words and poetical metaphors.* For what is it that works looking to the Ideas? *And any thing can both be and come into being without being copied from something else,* so that, whether Socrates exists or not, a man like Socrates might come to be.⁴¹

Additionally, while we saw Aquinas say that the universal is triplex with the primary instance being the *ante rem* idea in the divine mind, Aristotle conversely says the universal is either *posterior to the thing or nothing at all*:

Now ‘animal’ as a universal is nothing real, or is secondary; and we must say the same of any other general predicate.⁴²

To this it could be said that Aristotle has only been denying participation in separately existing exemplars not divine ideas, yet these texts do not make that qualification. Moreover, if we connect these; 1) that the species is only eternal by the successive generation of singulars (implying not in a divine mind), 2) that there is no need on the

³⁸ *De Anima* II, 415a26 - 415b7

³⁹ *Ibid*

⁴⁰ *GA* Book II, 731b24-732a1 emphasis added

⁴¹ *Met.* XIII, 1079b24 – 30 emphasis added

⁴² *De Anima* I 402b 7-8

part of individuals to participate in exemplarity, and 3) that the universal is either posterior to a thing or nothing, we have an cumulative unqualified denial of any exemplar forms whatsoever, separate existence or not.

Putting these problems aside, let us turn now to the question of the prime mover. We saw that Aquinas' God causes existence through efficient causality with an exemplar in the divine mind. Yet Aristotle says that the Prime Mover only moves by way of appetition and intelligibility, viz., final causality, "Now the first mover causes motion as something intelligible and something appetible; *for these alone* cause motion without being moved"⁴³ and even with his final causality, the *only motion* the Prime Mover causes is circular motion.⁴⁴ So both final causality, as distinguished from the other types of causes, and circular motion, as distinct from other types of motion, is the activity properly attributable to the divine. So even if we allow the prime mover to have exemplar forms in the divine mind, its difficult to see how forms can be imparted to things through anything other than efficient causality. If God is not an agent cause, there is no connection between the exemplar and the thing.

But there is another difficulty - how many Prime Movers does Aristotle think there are? The *Metaphysics* is indecisive on the matter, and so it seems even if we ignore the textual problems above and grant divine ideas and divine efficient causality, these divine ideas might be the ideas of anywhere between forty-seven to fifty-five immaterial "pure acts".⁴⁵ This vexed even Theophrastus, who thought it threatened the harmony of the universe since the source of movement was more than one. Plotinus also develops a similar line of critique against Aristotle, saying that if there is supposed to be a relation to one prime mover it is obscure and even if there were, any primacy would be cancelled by supposing it to have self-intellection. Plotinus says to correct this means going back to the cosmology of Plato. If however there is not a relation to one prime mover, then the harmony of the universe is not explained by one mind and the individuality of the different Prime Movers is impossible since Aristotle thinks matter is the principle of individuation.⁴⁶ What makes matters worse for harmonization is Aristotle's contention that the answer to this question lies beyond metaphysics and is better left to the astronomers!⁴⁷

⁴³ Meta. XII 1072a 26-27 emphasis added

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 1072b 8-9 emphasis added

⁴⁵ *Met.* 1074a10 – 17

⁴⁶ *Enneads* V, I. 9. Plotinus also noticed that an Aristotelian universal and the individual nature from which it is derived is not the whole story, for a coherent *in re* and *post rem* realism presupposes some form of *ante rem* realism, "Besides, the more general is by nature prior; hence, the Form-Idea is prior to the individual: but what is prior by nature is prior unconditionally. How then can the Form take a lower rank? The individual, it is true, is prior in the sense of being more readily accessible to our cognizance; this fact, however, entails no objective difference." (*Enneads* VI 3, 9).

⁴⁷ *Met.* 1073b3. This is a problem where Jaeger, following Simplicius, says that Aristotle gets bogged down in physics and astronomy rather than theology and thus the philosophical investigation, "loses itself in subsidiary matters, and shows far more interest in ascertaining the exact number of spheres than it does understanding of the fact that this grotesque multiplication of the prime mover, this army of 47 or 55 movers, inevitably damages the divine position of the prime mover and makes the whole theology a matter of mere celestial mechanics." (Werner Jaeger, *Aristotle: Fundamentals of the History of His Development* (London: Oxford 1962) p.347

Aquinas however does not surrender the exactitude of metaphysics to a physical science, nor does he need the astronomers to tell him how many gods there are. Multiplicity cannot account for unity. So a multiplicity of ideas, even in the minds of prime movers, cannot be the ground for unity. So *even if it is granted* that Aristotle held the prime mover to have ideas of things accounting for their natures, and *even if it is granted* that the prime mover does not move only by final causality, still, the Aristotelian allowance of multiple Prime Movers seems exceptionally difficult to reconcile with Aquinas' Platonic principle of unity as the source for all commonality.

Needless to say, all of this puts any agreement over the basis for necessary truths on the ropes, so on this I will be rather brief and simply discuss necessary truth in mathematics, and a good place to look for Aristotle's view on this is *Meta. XIII* (1077b18-1078a31). There we see that mathematical propositions are not about separate objects nor are they about perceptible objects *qua* perceptible. The mathematician simply separates what is not separate and considers a man as one indivisible, and studies what pertains to the man *qua* indivisible. The point here is that for Aristotle, mathematical sciences can be true without anything over and above individual objects. The truths of mathematics are grounded in individual things abstractly considered. Jonathan Lear's comments are quite instructive:

For, in an Aristotelian spirit, one can allow that "2 + 2 = 4" is true without having to admit that there exist numbers in a Platonic realm outside of space and time... mathematics must reproduce (to a certain degree of accuracy) certain structural features of the physical world. It is in virtue of this accurate structural representation of the physical world that applicable mathematics can fairly said to be true... For Aristotle, mathematics is true not in virtue of the existence of separated mathematical objects to which its terms refer, but because it accurately describes the structural properties and relations which actual physical objects do have.⁴⁸

In fact, Lear (correctly to my mind) categorizes those who ground mathematical truths in abstract ideas outside space and time and those who do not:

Let us use the word "Platonist" to describe the position in the philosophy of mathematics held by Plato and his followers in the Academy. Let us use "platonist" to describe anyone who believes that mathematical statements are true in virtue of the existence of abstract objects which exist outside space and time. (Kurt Gödel is an example of a platonist.) Finally let us say that a "mathematical realist" is someone who believes that mathematical statements are determinately true or false independently of our knowledge of them. Then one can say that Aristotle defends a form of mathematical realism while denying both Platonism and platonism.⁴⁹

Since Aquinas ultimately grounds mathematical truths in divine ideas, according to Lear's distinctions here, Aquinas is a platonist and Aristotle is not.

What then can we say about Aquinas frequent attribution of ontological participation to Aristotle in *Met. II* (993b24-31)? If we disregard questions of authenticity and development within Aristotle, we have to remember that this text comes at the end of

⁴⁸ Jonathan Lear, "Aristotle's Philosophy of Mathematics" (*The Philosophical Review* XCI, 2 1982) p. 191

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, n. on p. 188

Aristotle critiquing Plato's forms - participation is "empty talk"⁵⁰ and forms do not contribute anything to their being because they are not present in them.⁵¹ Thus we should be initially skeptical if this passage is intended to mean Aristotle really does accept ontological participation after all. Not surprisingly, Aquinas' interpretation on this matter has been criticized.⁵² No further critique needs to be presented here, all that needs to be said is that even if Aquinas' interpretation is right, then Aristotle is ostensibly at odds with himself regarding the other passages cited, and Aquinas' view is still moderately non-Aristotelian regarding those. Notables such as St. Albert the Great,⁵³ St. Bonaventure,⁵⁴ and Ockham all held the interpretation of Aristotle that denied all *ante rem* forms. Why does Aquinas differ? This is anyone's guess, but it's not unreasonable to think Aquinas' favorably loose interpretation was influenced by a desire to aid Aristotle's struggling reputation. Aquinas rightly saw a lot of truth in Aristotle, yet Augustinian Neoplatonism was the established norm in the Church and Aristotle was seen to hold doctrines contrary to the faith *via* his Arabic interpreters. Aristotle needed vindication from Averroes and yet still be valuable in a way independent of Plato. Whatever the motivation was, given that the very backbone of Thomistic metaphysics is that all creation is a participation in God's subsistent existence, I cannot help but think that Gerson is quite correct when he hints, "ironically, Aquinas employs Aristotelianism as he understands it in the service of what is in fact a Christianized version of Platonism."⁵⁵

Conclusion

Finally although "Neoplatonism" is a term from relatively recent scholarship to delineate the later development of Plato's thought, one of these developments was to explicitly place the forms as ideas in the divine intellect. Taken this way, we can say that when it comes to the issue of universals, Aquinas adopts a position that is *Neoplatonic, non-Aristotelian* and, *true*. Although it was the Aristotelian facet of Thomas' thought that first came to the fore in the Thomistic revival instituted by Leo XIII's *Aeterni Patris*, as some have pointed out further study has shown the strong influence of neoplatonic principles

⁵⁰ Met. 991a20-22

⁵¹ Met. I, 991a13

⁵² See for example Little op., cit. 27-30

⁵³ Albert writes in preparation for defending a Platonic view against Aristotle, "For Aristotle seems to posit that the universal does not have existence outside the particular: so he seems to say later, that the universal is not unless in this, by this it is, singular. He also says speaking against Plato, if the demonstration will be that the universal to be something one beside the many, it is not necessary: nevertheless to exist one from the many, it is true to say. And whether he may say, that to this demonstration it may be knowledge, it is not necessary to say, that the universal (from that which is knowledge) is separate from singulars: because it is sufficient, that the universal is one in many and from the many. Also thus far Aristotle said that it is not necessary to have supposed, that the universal is more than this." (St. Albert the Great, *Liber de Praedicabilibus* tr. II c. V)

⁵⁴ "For this reason, that while all recognized a first cause, the principle and end of all things, they disagreed about the in-between. For some denied that the exemplars of all things were in God, the chief being Aristotle, who, at the beginning and the end of his *Metaphysics* and in many other places, rejects the Ideas of Plato. Hence, he says that God knows only himself and has no need of knowledge of other things and moves as what is desired and loved. From which it follows that he knows nothing of particular things. Aristotle execrates the Ideas in his *Ethics* as well, denying that the highest good can be an Idea. But his arguments are worthless and are disproved by the Commentator." (St. Bonaventure, *In Hexaemeron*, VI, 2-3)

⁵⁵ Gerson, *Aristotle and Other Platonists*, p. 45.

in Aquinas' philosophical system.⁵⁶ This seems certainly true of Aquinas' *ante rem* realism and in light of this, one can justifiably brand Aquinas a Neoplatonist.

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⁵⁶ "It soon became apparent, however, as independent historical study of both Aristotle and St. Thomas progressed, that the originality of the latter and his independence of Aristotle were considerably greater than had been suspected. The fundamental point of difference was accurately analyzed as lying at the very heart of the metaphysics of being, namely, in the radical shift of equilibrium operated by St Thomas from form and essence to the act of existence or esse as the metaphysical core of every being and the basic unifying perfection of the universe... [if the Neoplatonic interpretations of his doctrine of participation are correct] it would appear that the peculiar genius and historical significance of the Thomistic system lie not in that it was an option for Aristotle as against Platonism but rather in that it was a deliberately wrought and highly original synthesis between both of these great main streams of Western thought." Norris Clarke, "The Meaning of Participation in St Thomas" in *Explorations in Metaphysics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1994), p. 90