

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 22 | Issue 1

Article 11

1-1-2005

Anthony Kenny, AQUINAS ON BEING

Brian Davies

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Davies, Brian (2005) "Anthony Kenny, AQUINAS ON BEING," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil200522143

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol22/iss1/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

Aquinas on Being, by Anthony Kenny. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002. Pp. x and 212. \$45.00.

BRIAN DAVIES, *Fordham University*

We say that certain things exist, or that they are beings as opposed to non-beings. We say, for example, that there are mountains in Switzerland, or that people are beings while chimeras are not. But we cannot plausibly maintain that "There are mountains in Switzerland," or "John is a being," are *descriptions* of anything. "___ exist(s)" and "___ is a being," do not tell us what something is (as some philosophers would say, they are not "first level" predicates or predicables). Aquinas, however, seems to hold that God is existence or being (*esse*) itself (*ipsum esse subsistens*), that *this* is what God is, which might seem to suggest that Aquinas is somewhat askew when it comes to the topic of being or existence in general. But is he? In *The Five Ways* (1969) and *Aquinas* (1980), Kenny argued that he is. In the present volume, and with reference to a large range of Aquinas's writings, he continues to maintain this verdict. In his discussions of being, says Kenny, Aquinas exhibits "extraordinary analytical ability as a philosopher" (p.189) and "draws many acute distinctions" (p.viii). And yet, so Kenny submits, it is not possible to extract "a consistent and coherent theory" of being from Aquinas's many writings. Aquinas's teaching on being is, says Kenny, "thoroughly confused" (p.v); though widely admired, it is, in fact, "one of the least admirable of his contributions to philosophy" (p.viii).

Kenny defends these judgments by offering and defending the following major conclusions: (1) Aquinas does not grasp the syntactic difference between the verb "to be," as expressed by the existential quantifier, and various other senses of the verb that he highlights; (2) Aquinas's statements about spiritual substances (e.g. angels) endorse an unacceptable Platonism at odds with Aquinas's usual (Aristotelian) account of form; (3) Aquinas is wrong to assert that God is *ipsum esse subsistens* since, as this teaching is articulated in *De Ente et Essentia* 4,6, and elsewhere, it incorporates (by implication) the ludicrous suggestion that the answer to the question "What is God?" is "There is one." Kenny also suggests (cf. pp.43 f. and 107 ff.) that Aquinas's claim that God's essence is existence (*esse*) (a) entails that the word "God" is equivalent to what would be expressed by the ill-formed formula "For some x, x ..." (a quantifier with a bound variable attached to no predicate), or (b) merely amounts to the assertion that the word "God" means "something which cannot cease to exist, and has not begun to exist" (cf. pp.44 and 85). Kenny adds that Aquinas's teaching that God's essence is *esse* can, from what he writes in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* (and elsewhere), be taken as supposing that "est," in "Deus est," is a genuine first level predicate, which it cannot be, says Kenny, given what we have learned from Frege (cf. pp.87 and 105 f.). In the context of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Kenny argues, (cf. pp.106 f.), the thesis that God's essence is to exist is to be read as asserting (unintelligibly) that God just *is* (period).

Kenny is wrong in his reading of *De Ente et Essentia* 4 and comparable passages in Aquinas. In Kenny's translation (p.34), *De Ente et Essentia* 4 says: "I can understand what a human being is, or what a phoenix is, and

yet be ignorant whether they have *esse* in the nature of things." As Kenny interprets Aquinas, this sentence *correctly* maintains that knowing what a noun means does not amount to knowing that there is anything in reality corresponding to it (p.35). But, Kenny continues (pp.35 f.), Aquinas *wrongly* proceeds to conclude that God, therefore, differs from creatures since knowing what the word 'God' means is the same as knowing that God exists (i.e. that the answer to 'What is God?' is, absurdly, 'There is one'). There is, however, no reason to suppose that Aquinas is arguing along the lines that Kenny suggests here either in *De Ente et Essentia* 4 or in other comparable passages in his writings. Kenny's reading of Aquinas relies heavily on *De Ente et Essentia*'s phoenix example. Given that there is no phoenix, Kenny reasons, we must presume Aquinas to be starting only from the meaning of certain words (p.35 ff.; cf. also p.62 and p.99). Yet we have no reason to suppose that, in *De Ente et Essentia*, Aquinas took "phoenix" to signify a purely imaginary object (many of his contemporaries certainly did not think of the phoenix in this way, and neither did some major early Christian authors — e.g. Tertullian, St Ambrose, and Clement of Rome). In the above quotation Aquinas links "phoenix" and "human being." In his Commentary on the *Sentences* (2,3,1,1) he links "phoenix" and "eclipse" (cf. Aristotle on "eclipse" in *Posterior Analytics* II,2). And, in his Commentary on Aristotle's *De Caelo* (3,8), he cites the phoenix as an example of something generated and perishable, even though it is alone in its species. *Pace* Kenny, therefore, Aquinas's *De Ente et Essentia* argument for there being a distinction of essence and existence in creatures, but not in God, is most plausibly read as starting with actually existing things (or things actually existing at some times) of which we can provide real definitions (not just nominal ones). Aquinas's argument then suggests that these definitions do not include "exists" as an element. In *De Ente et Essentia* 4, and in passages comparable to it, Aquinas's main point seems to be that we can understand the natures of (the essences of) various real things (all of them created by God) without simultaneously understanding that any particular one of them exists. Aquinas thinks that, for example, your understanding of the nature which in fact is had by me does not entail that there is any such person as me, which seems a plausible position to maintain (unless you want to claim that I cannot but exist given what I am by nature).

Kenny might reply that Aquinas still ends up ridiculously asserting or implying that "There is one" is the proper answer to "What is God?". But there is nothing in Aquinas's writings to support this interpretation of him (unless we adopt what I take to be Kenny's misreading of *De Ente et Essentia* 4). In general, Aquinas shows himself perfectly well able to distinguish between "Is there ...?" and "What is ...?" questions, and between the sorts of answers appropriate to each, together with their implications. Of course, Aquinas *does* think that God's essence (*essentia*) is to exist (*esse*). But he never expounds this doctrine by saying that what God is can be adequately, or even intelligibly, expressed by "There is one." He usually says (cf. *Summa Theologiae* Ia, 3,4) that "God's essence is to exist" means that there is no *compositio* (mixture) in God of *essentia* and *esse*, which, in turn, means that God cannot owe his existence to anything distinct from himself

(i.e. cannot be something created). As Aquinas often stresses, (cf. *Summa Contra Gentiles* I,14, III,39, and the Introduction to *Summa Theologiae* Ia,3), his claim that God's essence is existence is chiefly to be construed as a piece of *negative* theology — as part of an account of what God *cannot* be, given that “we cannot know what God is but only what he is not” (*De deo scire non possumus quid sit sed quid non sit*). Kenny pays no attention to this aspect of Aquinas's thinking, which ought to lead his readers to be dubious when it comes to his claims that “God,” for Aquinas, amounts to “For some x , $x \dots$,” or that Aquinas's “God's essence is existence” can be construed as teaching that the word “God” only signifies something (maybe unreal) which cannot cease to exist and which never began to exist. For Aquinas, “God” is the word we can use to refer to what makes the “difference” between there being something rather than *nothing*. On Aquinas's account, and on the supposition that God has created the universe, “God exists” (*Deus est*) is equivalent (among other things) to the claim that “___ creates,” “___ is not created,” “___ in no sense owes its existence to anything distinct from it” (all, surely, perfectly respectable first level predicates, by the way) are truly affirmable of something. And Aquinas's teaching that God's essence is existence most certainly does not ever amount only to the claim that “God” is a word to be understood as meaning “Something which cannot cease to exist and never began to exist.”

Of course Aquinas thought that God, by nature, lacks beginning and end. But he thought so because he believed that whatever accounts for there being something rather than nothing cannot come into being or perish. And, *pace* Kenny, he does not take this belief to mean that “God's essence is to exist” is equivalent to “God just *Is*,” where “___ is” is to be understood as a first level predicate signifying what something is by nature. According to Aquinas, we cannot describe something by saying that it simply exists. “Every mode of existence,” he explains, “is determined by some form” (*quodlibet esse est secundum formam*) (cf. *Summa Theologiae* Ia, 5,5 ad.3; cf. Ia, 29,2 ad.5; Ia, 50,5, Ia, 75,6; *De Principium Naturae* 1). Like Aristotle, Aquinas believed that there is no such class of things as things which just are. For the most part, Aquinas's “*Deus est*” means that what it takes to be divine is truly predicable of something. He never explicitly asserts that “*est*,” in “*Deus est*,” tells us *what* God is. On the contrary, he often says that we can know that “*Deus est*” is true without knowing what God is. For Aquinas, God is not an item in the universe. He is not part of what we are concerned with if we ask, as Aquinas thinks we should, ‘How come something rather than nothing?’. As he puts it in his Commentary on Aristotle's *Peri Hermeneias* (to which Kenny makes no reference), God is *extra ordinem entium existens, velut causa quaedam profundens totum ens et omnes eius differentias* (“outside the realm of existents, as a cause from which pours forth everything that exists in all its variant forms”). Aquinas, of course, is not here saying that God does not exist. His point is that God cannot be thought of as created, that God is not potentially non-existent. And that is what he is basically saying in the many texts in which he contrasts God and creatures by insisting that, while it does not belong to creatures to exist by nature, it does so belong to God. Kenny, however, while sometimes hovering around it, seems to ignore this aspect

of Aquinas's thinking. He never appears seriously to engage with what Aquinas chiefly took to be the difference between God and creatures (a difference which, among other things, leads Aquinas to say that there is a distinction of essence and existence in creatures but not in God).

As for Kenny's criticism of Aquinas concerning spiritual substances, all I can say is that it is puzzling. Kenny's idea seems to be that, for Aquinas in general (as for Aristotle), a form is what is captured by the predicate in a sentence like "Felix is a cat." He writes: "Forms are forms of the entity which is the subject of predication: Socrates' wisdom is what corresponds to the predicate in the sentence 'Socrates is wise,' and Plato's humanity is what corresponds to the predicate in the sentence 'Plato is human.' In the same way, a pure form would be something that corresponded to a predicate in a sentence that had no subject; but this seems close to an absurdity. What, we wonder, is the difference between the angelic pure forms that Aquinas accepts and the Platonic Ideas or Forms that he rejects?" (p.30). The difference for Aquinas is, presumably, that angels are subsisting things with knowledge and the capacity to act, while Plato's forms are nothing like this. It is obvious from so much that he writes that Aquinas would give this answer to Kenny. It is equally obvious that Aquinas would say that if there is something which subsists immaterially, then it can only be thought of as nothing but form. Aquinas, indeed, generally takes "form" to be what is flagged by "___ is wise" or "___ is human" in sentences like "Socrates is wise" or "Plato is human." And, in doing so, he frequently takes "form" to be a word to use when referring to what makes something material to be what it is (whether substantially, as in "Plato is human," or accidentally, as in "Plato is sleeping"). But what shall we say if asked to talk about (while presuming the existence of) non-material subsisting subjects such as angels, given that we are seeking to express ourselves with reference to the Aristotelian notion of form (as Aquinas, of course, was, and as Kenny notes that he was)? We might be forgiven for suggesting that such subjects (like God) cannot be material individuals sharing the same form, but must, instead, be pure forms: forms existing, though not materially.

One does not, *qua* Aristotelian, have to believe in angels in order to be persuaded that Aquinas is not talking nonsense in what he says about them as reported by Kenny. One does not even have to disagree with Kenny's suggestion that Aquinas's talk about angels is "arcane" (p.32). All one has to do (and Kenny makes precious little effort to do so) is to ask what an intelligent Aristotelian might feel obliged to say about angels (a) given the general intelligibility of Aristotelian talk about form, and (b) given that angels actually exist. Such an Aristotelian would, indeed, be trying to go beyond what Aristotle (no believer in angels) actually said about anything (including being). But why should fans of Aristotle (or anyone else, for that matter) be banned from trying to use words with which they are familiar in unfamiliar ways (as Aquinas, with a debt to Aristotle, was clearly trying to do in his discussions of angels, not to mention his discussions of God, in which he was also trying to make Aristotelians take their thinking further)?

Aquinas on Being is an important book since it comes from one of the

most gifted philosophers writing today, an expert on the history of philosophy, and someone who has been thinking and writing about Aquinas for many years. So all serious students of Aquinas should read it and seek to engage with its details (on many of which I have not been able to touch in this review). My overall impression, however, is that, interesting though its discussions of texts of Aquinas are, it has somehow managed to miss the forest for the trees, and not to have caught what Aquinas is generally driving at in what he has to say about God, being, and existence. Perhaps Kenny's basic mistake is to assume that talk about God is easily assimilated to talk about creatures. It has been suggested that, in trying to speak of God and creatures (which is what, in effect, Aquinas is always trying to do), Aquinas was working on the assumption that we can use words, not only to say what they mean, but also to point beyond what we understand them to mean (cf. Herbert McCabe, "The Logic of Mysticism," Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement 31, Cambridge, 1992). And, though Kenny does not engage with it, there is something to be said for that thesis, hard though it may be to do so given the complexities of medieval theories of reference (of which Kenny says little) and given corresponding complexities in modern theories of reference (of which Kenny says something).

Christian Moral Realism: Natural Law, Narrative, Virtue, and the Gospel, by Rufus Black. Oxford University Press, 2000. Pp. 368. \$90.00 (Cloth).

DANIEL N. ROBINSON, *Oxford University*

The perennial issue of moral realism is made all the more elusive by the protean nature of both the adjective and the noun. As early as Plato's dialogues one finds compelling arguments to the effect that all allegedly moral discourse is but a veiled reference to personal desires and merely conventional values and interests. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, moral science was but a part of a general psychology of human nature, with special attention to sentiment and the passions. Much of the influential writing on the subject was in defense of rationalist or emotivist or utilitarian conceptions of morality.

Within these inspired debates it is seldom easy to extract an ontologically precise version of the "realism" being affirmed or denied. Too often the controversy is framed in terms of "objectivity" and "subjectivity," the contestants seemingly and comparably confident that the status of realism must hang in the balance. It is as if, from the fact that the honeybee's visual sensitivity is greatest in the ultraviolet region of the spectrum, and that ours reaches its peak in the region of 5,500 Angstroms, roses can't be real after all! It should go without saying, of course, that ontological questions regarding the reality of an entity are distinct from epistemological questions regarding the adequacy or accuracy with which such an entity is apprehended. Thus, there may well be real moral properties, but they may be beyond our epistemic resources. Or, there may well be real moral properties, but they may elude all powers of comprehension except those