

PAUL O'GRADY

EXISTENCE AND WISDOM

1. INTRODUCTION

Gaven Kerr's *Aquinas's Way to God* explores the argument for God's existence found in Aquinas's *De Ente et Essentia*, laying out the metaphysical background first, then outlining the argument. While he engages with mainstream Aquinas scholarship (e.g. Fabro, Geiger, Wippel), he also engages with philosophers whose account of existence differs from that of Aquinas, such as Frege, Russell, Quine, as well as David Lewis and Nathan Salmon. Even though Kerr is ultimately critical of analytical approaches to existence and hence of rapprochement between analytical philosophy and Aquinas, such engagement is welcome and indeed follows in the spirit of Aquinas, who engaged with the mainstream philosophical movements of his day.

However, developing, exploring and defending metaphysical arguments for God's existence, despite having a distinguished philosophical lineage, is definitely a minority pursuit nowadays. The attitude of Daniel Dennett is probably typical of a great deal of contemporary philosophers.

I decided some time ago that diminishing returns had set in on the arguments about God's existence, and I doubt that any breakthroughs are in the offing, from either side. (GUTTING 2017, 27).

There are many philosophers who would characterize themselves as religious, who also doubt the value of such proofs. At the more positive end is Alvin Plantinga who says

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I should make clear first that I don't think arguments are needed for rational belief in God. In this regard belief in God is like belief in other minds, or belief in the past. Belief in God is grounded in experience, or in the *sensus divinitatis*, John Calvin's term for an inborn inclination to form beliefs about God in a wide variety of circumstances. Nevertheless I think there are a large number – maybe a couple of dozen – of pretty good theistic arguments. None is conclusive, but each, or at any rate the whole bunch taken together, is about as strong as philosophical arguments ordinarily get. (GUTTING 2017, 10).

So Plantinga doesn't think traditional arguments are rationally necessary for theism, nor are they conclusive. Richard Swinburne, who does think he can make a good cumulative argument for God's existence, thinks arguments such as Aquinas's start from premises which are not generally accepted and hence are not convincing to contemporaries.

While Plantinga and Swinburne (arguably the leading living theistic philosophers of religion) accept the role of arguments despite having doubts about the kind deployed by Aquinas, there are others who reject outright the role of arguments in this way. Gary Gutting comments on leading Catholic philosopher of religion, John Caputo:

There is more to religions than theological concepts. As Caputo emphasizes, they are all historically rooted in distinctive historical traditions, which involve narratives (stories of how the tradition originated and developed), practices (private devotions and public rituals), institutions (schools and churches), and positions of authority (elders or priests). The fundamental concepts of a religion are used to formulate doctrines that provide the intellectual accounts needed to justify and explain the practices. As a result, the doctrines are primarily vehicles for sustaining the practices, institutions and, especially, the system of authority. (GUTTING 2017, 52).

Therefore the role of foundational argument is quite out of place and offers a mistaken view of religious belief. Jewish philosopher of religion, Howard Wettstein, in similar vein, remarks:

The medievals, blessed with a more-or-less stable first philosophy, lived philosophically charmed lives...the medieval conception [or cluster of them] of how religion and philosophy might join forces seems to many of us inapplicable nowadays. The crucial philosophic truth complement seems missing in action. It is not only that the traditional proofs of God's existence are in dispute. Nor is it merely the lack of a received view – or even a widely accepted consensus – in philosophy, substantively or methodologically. For many of us, philosophy simply cannot be brought to bear on religion the way that the medieval supposed. (WETTSTEIN 2012, 93–4).

So, the project executed in this book, defending a first-order argument from Aquinas as philosophically sound against various objections, is radically out of step with the views of many contemporary philosophers, both atheist and theist. I am sympathetic with the skeptical stances articulated by such a range of figures and yet I also find something fascinating and compelling in Aquinas's argument. So how to bridge the gap between such contemporary skeptical sensibility and the systematic intricacies of Aquinas's metaphysics?

I think there is much of value to be learned in conceptual analysis, distinction making, objection forming and reformulating positions, as is the norm in most philosophical traditions. However, there is also a relationship between such technical philosophy and the life of the philosopher, how the detailed analytic discussions engage with questions, values, traditions of inquiry and preferred dialogue partners of those developing the theories. To illustrate this I would like to focus on the debate about the nature of existence, discussed in chapter three, where the metaphysical view Aquinas is pitted against the deflationist account of Frege-Russell-Quine. There are technical issues in semantics and logic which need to be clarified, but there is also the issue of how the views defended relate to the forms of life of the protagonists. As I shall argue, the kind of self-reflection which links the technical dialectical concerns with deeper existential concerns has a good claim to be the virtue traditionally known as theoretical wisdom.

2. EXISTENCE

Kerr outlines Aquinas's account of existence (*esse*) in chapter three and contrasts it with other accounts. Aquinas holds that *esse* is a metaphysical principle of being, is related to essence as act to potency and is the most fundamental principle of actuality. Aquinas combines Aristotelian views on composition and Platonic views on participation into his own distinctive position. Kerr then contrasts this view with a number of other accounts of existence, the first of which is what he calls the Frege-Russell-Quine view.

Frege discusses the topic of existence in the context of a discussion of the philosophy of arithmetic. He surveys efforts to clarify the concept of number and this involves him in looking at the nature of concepts, their properties and related notion such as 'one' and 'unit'. He discusses the differences between concepts and objects. There are properties of things which fall un-

der a concept. These are the genuine, descriptive properties of the thing (red, cool, smooth as applied to a billiard ball). A property of a concept on the other hand is different. In Frege's example,

... 'rectangular' is not a property of the concept 'rectangular triangle'; but the proposition that there exists no rectangular equilateral rectilinear triangle does state a property of the concept 'rectangular equilateral rectilinear triangle'; it assigns to it the number nought. (FREGE 1959, 65e).

Frege articulates a clear distinction between properties of things (or objects) and properties of concepts. So 'number' applies to concepts, not to things. Frege then argues that 'existence' is analogous to number, it applies to concepts and not things. The affirmation of existence is just the denial of the number nought to the concept. On this Fregean view, existence is not a property of objects but a property of a concept. And for Frege this is why the ontological argument fails, since it takes existence as a property of an object rather than as a property of a concept.

Hermann Weidemann (following Geach) notes that for Aquinas, the fundamental distinction about the verb 'to be' is between what has been called the 'actuality sense and the 'there is' sense (WEIDEMANN 1986, 181). The former is a full-blooded metaphysical sense, connected to the discussion of the ten categories which analyses different ways in which something can be. The latter sense is a way of using the verb 'to be' in relation to things which strictly speaking don't exist, for example privations such as blindness. To say that blindness exists is to say that it is true to say that someone is blind. The actuality sense is more fundamental and is the cause of the 'there is' sense, but the 'there is' sense is more comprehensive (and includes things which don't exist, like privations). This distinction is stated clearly at the start of *De Ente et Essentia*.

For Aquinas, the basic distinction in predication is between substantial and accidental predication. Predicates in the first category pick out the essence of what is being discussed (what is said of a subject) whereas the other nine discuss quality, quantity, relation and so on (what is in a subject). The existential uses of 'to be' connects to this distinction. The 'actuality sense' is connected to substantial predication (since it is through essence that existence comes to an entity) while the 'there is' sense relates to accidental predication.

So for Aquinas, while he observes the distinction between existential, predicative and identity senses of 'is,' there is also a connection between these. Predication is based on a kind of identity (what the subject refers to

and what is said of the predicate are in some way identical in a true statement). Identity involves predication (of the same form). The ‘there is’ sense of existence clearly connects to the Fregean approach. Existence is explicated here through affirmation, the instantiation of predicates. But for Aquinas this is a derivative sense, ultimately being causally dependent on the ‘actuality sense’. The truths of cognition and language rest on the way the world is.

This second way in which being is used is related to the first as an effect is to a cause. For from the fact that something is in reality it follows that there is truth and falsity in a proposition, and the intellect signifies this by the term ‘is’ taken as a verb copula. (AQUINAS 1995, #896).

Aquinas also makes a triple distinction between being as true, being as what a thing is and being as actually existent “Being is said in three ways. In one way it is the nature of the thing, in another being actually existent, in the third way being is said to be what signifies the truth in the composition of propositions” (*In I Sent*, dist 33, q. 1, a. 1, ad 1). Frege seems to allow for a notion of existence as actuality, but crucially doesn’t make a systematic connection between this notion and that captured in the quantificational account. For Frege, the denial of the number nought to a concept, is not connected to any account of actuality. For Aquinas there is a systematic connection. The concept gets its reality through the actualization of its being and that fact that one can make a true statement about the concept is dependent on the prior actualization of the reality which the subject term picks out and which is true of the predicate.

How do we make sense of this difference in approach? Is there a knock-down formal argument which pushes one towards Frege’s deflationist account or Aquinas’s metaphysical account? Kenny thinks there is and accuses Aquinas of having conceptual confusion about existence. If existence is thought of as the existence of a kind or a form (specific existence), then the claim that in God essence and existence are identical amounts to the claim that there is an analytic relationship between essence and existence in anything of this kind — but leaves it open whether anything of this kind actually exists. On the other hand if existence is thought of as individual existence, the claim that God exists is an ill-formed formula — $(Ex) x$. A range of response to this objection exists and I shall not enter that debate here. Suffice to note that it does not seem a knock-down argument.

An eminent scholar of the history of analytic philosophy, tracing the rise of analytic philosophy from British Idealism, notes of his own project:

one of the things that I wish to convey, indeed, is that issues at the most fundamental level of philosophy are not decided by conclusive argument. For every argument that Moore or Russell could mount against Idealism, there is an idealist reply which points out a distinction that is being neglected, or one that is drawn erroneously; an assumption smuggled in, or the sense of a term distorted. (HYLTON 1990, 105).

So how might one think of the stand-off between deflationist analytic approaches to existence and Aquinas's full-blooded account?

3. METAPHILOSOPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Gaven Kerr's own explanation of the difference is that analytic philosophy fails to rise to the true level of metaphysics. Frege and his followers are interested in issues about meaning and discussions of existence then follows. This is problematic because "this mode of thinking signifies a failure to think metaphysically. What really matters in metaphysics is not whether there are beings that match up with our concepts, but being itself and coming to terms with that." (KERR 2014, 75). The problem with this is that it puts constraints on what counts as metaphysics that many other metaphysicians would challenge, it seems unduly stipulative. Many contemporary metaphysicians seem happy to pursue investigations into e.g. change, identity, categories, universals, causation, time etc without using the idiom of 'being'. This seems another example of the kind of issue Hylton referred to above. Here is a dispute about fundamental matters of topic, method, approach and what count as 'genuine'. One may well clarify and articulate one's own position, but it will have little traction for those who do not share it. The stand-off of competing entrenched positions is familiar, indeed normal in the history of philosophy. However, attempts to think beyond the impasse, to construe the debate as not simply one about technical issues in consistency and conceptualization, but about the place of philosophical argumentation in the larger project of living a good life are gaining traction. And such a conception is arguably compatible with Aquinas's own position. Gyula Klima presents Aquinas's views on philosophy of language, discussing the role of the copula, semantic relations, predication, the associated ontology, but then notes "Aquinas does have all these mundane interests to a certain extent. However, he always has them subordinated to his primary interest in truth, indeed not just any mundane truth, but the First Truth." (KLIMA 2012, 386).

4. REFLECTION ON METHOD

The approach that one takes in philosophy is usually shaped by a multiplicity of factors. There's the education one has received, the charisma of one's teachers, one's own personal interests, values and goals, the broader intellectual culture of the period, various social and political factors. One way of thinking about this is to separate philosophy from the contingent and multifarious conditions of its production and think of it as being above these. Such causal factors might be of interest to historians, sociologists or biographers, but has no bearing on the truth or validity of the position advanced. An opposed way of thinking seeks to reduce the value of philosophy to these factors, it is nothing other than an expression of such contingencies and is mistaken in its pretensions to objectivity.

In the context of deep philosophical disagreement, rehearsing the arguments of one's own favoured position will have little traction in fostering dialogue or understanding. It will bolster one's allies, offer solace to oneself, perhaps, but does little to advance mutual comprehension or grasping the significance of such deep differences. When one group values religious belief over science, or vice versa, another group values truth while others are suspicious of universal claims to truth, another thinks that philosophy can achieve knowledge, while other think of it as a resistance against intellectual power grabs, tub-thumping one's own position within its own parameters is certainly possible, but to what end? If the very goals, methods and values of the approach is up for grabs, virtuoso performances will have limited purchase.

So, some kind of reflection on what one achieves while doing philosophy the way one does it can be fruitful. *Given* a set of goals, assumptions and values, a framework of questions, authors and heroes, then it begins to make sense why someone works the way they do. Thomas's belief in metaphysical inquiry, focused on the question of being and developed by him to the new discussion of existence as a co-principle of being at the level of actuality is comprehensible in the framework of the debates between Aristotle and Neoplatonism, the task of reconciling reason and Biblical religious belief, the state of natural science and mathematics, the form of life of a friar preacher, the historical context of feudal society and the personality of the man. Russell's rejection of Idealism, his post-Kantian realism, his deep involvement in mathematics, the impact of Einsteinian physics, his liberalism and skepticism, his aristocratic upbringing and bohemian Bloomsbury lifestyle illuminate his rejection of biblical religion and his social iconoclasm. How does this relate to the technical debate about the correct construal of existence?

Gaven Kerr utilises William Vallicella's challenge to the Fregean view. In a number of works, Vallicella has a detailed (he refers to it as 'painful') analysis and rejection of the Fregean view of existence (VALLICELLA 2014, 70, note 60, referring to VALLICELLA 2002, ch. 4). He carefully distinguishes existence from instantiation and then goes on to show how various versions of the view that existence is best explained by instantiation are either circular, change the topic or patently mistaken. It is a virtuoso display of analytic precision, distinction drawing and careful argument. Is it conclusive? No and this reaches to the heart of the matter. How one judges a point, what weight one puts on an argument is not merely a matter of judging validity, it is not algorithmic. A key argument for Vallicella is that if 'exists' is understood as instantiation, then existence is not properly applied to individuals, such usages are meaningless. He then cites the example of the Cartesian cogito ('I exist') as a paradigm instance of a meaningful philosophical utterance. Any theory which rejects the meaningfulness of this must be rejected. However, eliminativists (in whatever area) would not be impressed by such an argument. They put weight on the strength of their theory (its epistemological power, theoretical benefits, explanatory abilities) and argue that common sense, tradition and everyday locutions do not trump theory. This stand-off is a meta-level debate about the relative weight of common-sense to theory, the purpose and role of theory.

One might think of this using the Gestalt metaphor of figure and ground. In Gestalt psychology what one perceives is a function of how one sees connections and makes associations. In the famous duck-rabbit image, the same image is construed in two different ways. The figure is what is foregrounded and present, the ground is the background framework from which this emerges. Philosophical arguments exhibit the same structure. There's the foregrounded debate (say about whether the *cogito* is meaningful) and the background set of commitments which feed into which way one judges the debate. In the absence of a universally agreed set of such background commitments, the peculiar inconclusiveness of philosophical disagreement continues.

How might one respond to this? The search for a foundation or method to resolve this has not issued in any widely accepted result. In general philosophers tend to work away in their own preferred tradition and approach (naturalists naturalize, Thomist's ontologize, postmodernists problematize etc etc) and take pot-shots at competitors. That is, they take the ground for granted and engage with figural debates from that stance. If one begins to reflect on this notion of ground and comes to think that there is no neutral, non-ques-

tion begging space from which to argue, is skepticism or radical relativism the upshot?

I think argument is possible about the different grounds and about how they relate to the figural debates. The debate about a narrow deflationist account of existence and a thick, metaphysically rich account is grounded in different sets of interests and values about the significance and role of e.g. logic and mathematics, of philosophical theology, of the relative roles of science and religion. This detailed cluster of commitments is not easily surveyed, but nevertheless forms a coherent system of beliefs for the person holding them and explains why that person weighs some considerations more strongly than others. How do we decide between competing systems?

5. WISDOM

This is where the relation of philosophy to biography comes into play. The cluster of theoretical commitments and values arise from lived experience, from values, aims, projects, goals, an environment and a context. If one thinks of philosophy as an activity engaged in by a person (rather than as a repository of information in a library, or an abstract realm of timeless ideas), then evaluating that activity includes evaluating the person and what the interplay of theory and action has amounted to. One can think of knowledge as, perhaps, a repository of information and understanding as deeper insight into connections in the system of knowledge. Reflection on fundamental structures of reality was traditionally called “wisdom.”

But wisdom, in its canonical Aristotelian articulation, had a peculiar bifurcation. Practical wisdom was concerned with living well, with the contingencies of human life, whereas theoretical wisdom had to do with the search for deep truth and universal necessary features of existence. This is not a wholly happy dichotomy. One can think of metaphysicians who purportedly limn the deep nature of reality, but who are bereft of practical wisdom, or indeed who are obnoxious or evil. It is difficult to see why such knowledge or understanding might be called wisdom, since a basic, widely-shared intuition about wisdom is that it supports one in being good, or that it cannot be associated with evil. So, a reflective justification of one’s choice of methodology in the context of widespread philosophical diversity, might well include showing how it supports one’s wellbeing, how it coheres with one’s values, aims and goals. Aristotle’s own account of the good life is structured using

principles and concepts deriving from his systematic metaphysical views (e.g. a virtue is ultimately describable under the category of a quality possessed by a certain kind of substance) illustrating the interaction of theoretical and practical. Such a characterization of theoretical wisdom does not eradicate disagreement, but it nevertheless offers a means of engaging with differences through reflection on the life of the philosopher and certainly offers a better way of thinking through disagreement than talking past each other or name-calling.

6. BACK TO EXISTENCE

How does this help with the disagreement about existence? How might it help in deciding between a thin and thick account? Kerr and Vallicella both make serious dialectical points against the thin conception. Instantiation either begs the question, or eliminates the explanandum, or relies on the very things it seeks to eradicate. However, a wide church of analytic philosophers will not easily abandon the thin conception because of these arguments. They will respond in dialectical kind. The thick conception will be described as mysterious and defying comprehension, even by its own lights. There are no 'merkmal' characteristics of it, so there is nothing to lay hold of, no conceptual content, it is empty. Hence the idea of individual existence, while apparently sensible, evaporates under scrutiny. The instantiation account can't presuppose it, since there is nothing there! And on this view, Descartes is indeed wrong. Thinking that the cogito is actually meaningful is like talk of the 'ether' in physics. What was widely accepted in one era has become meaningless in another. True, one can try to give a framework in which ether-talk is meaningful, but it is no longer a framework acceptable to folk. It becomes clear that weighing and judging the force of an argument relies on a range of issues in the 'ground'. To move from one to another is a kind of conversion experience where whole sets of relations, values and ways of seeing are changed. The thin conception gets traction in a worldview which privileges a scientific approach, rejects traditional metaphysical discourse and which values progress, technical skill and clear procedures. The thick conception makes sense to those who value the traditional questions and ways of answering them, who connect philosophy to the humanities and who think spiritual questions are meaningful, valuable and indeed most important.

Crucially this doesn't lead to relativism. Seeing the debate in this way doesn't imply that everyone is right in their own way. One can be committed to a particular stance, believe one's opponents are genuinely mistaken, but nevertheless have a deeper understanding of why they hold the views they do. I, in fact, think that the arguments in favour of a thick conception are persuasive. But in the past, when I was immersed in Quinean philosophy, I would have been persuaded by the thin conception. And that had a lot to do with espousing the Quinean taste for desert landscape, impatience with tradition and suspicion of what I viewed as mystificatory tendencies. As my attitudes to eliminativism, the role of tradition and the significance of mystery changed, the cogency of these arguments and the weight I put on them, also changed.

Implicit in this foregoing discussion is an assumption about the nature of philosophy. On one conception philosophy is a disinterested, rational web of arguments and forms, perhaps existing as an abstract realm which we mortals dip into. The relevance of the biographies and circumstances of those mortals are of little relevance to the value of this web. On a different conception, philosophy is an activity carried out by mortals, whose meaning and value is constituted by the reasons, desires and goals of those mortals. This is something Aquinas would have accepted, believing that philosophy is subsumed in a wider religious and moral framework, which doesn't eradicate it or makes it redundant, but which certainly impacts on how one views it and the role it plays in one's life. It is also something which I think Gaven Kerr would agree with. His book has as a goal the effort to show that Aquinas is not *solely* a religious thinker (KERR 2014, xiii) and it succeeds well in this, showing the robust rationalism in his work. It is also clear that Gaven has deep commitments to the same religious vision as Aquinas and the value of his book lies in the relationship between the cool philosophical scholarship and the passionate religious life underpinning it.

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EXISTENCE AND WISDOM

Summary

In this paper, I examine the debate about existence between deflationist analytic accounts and the 'thicker' conception used by Aquinas when speaking of *esse*. I argue that the way one evaluates the debate will depend on background philosophical assumptions and that reflection on those assumptions could constitute an account of theoretical wisdom

ISTNIENIE I MĄDROŚĆ

Streszczenie

W niniejszym artykule analizuję dyskusję dotyczącą istnienia, która toczy się między deflacyjnym podejściem oraz „gęstsza” koncepcją używaną przez Akwinatę, kiedy mówi o *esse*. Twierdę, że sposób, w jaki wartościuje się debatę, będzie zależał od założeń filozoficznych i że refleksja nad tymi założeniami mogłaby stanowić opis mądrości teoretycznej.

Przełożył Jan Kłos

Key words: existence; philosophical diversity; method; wisdom.

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