

Formal Infinity, Perfection, and Determinacy in the Metaphysics of St. Thomas Aquinas¹

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DOI: [10.17421/2498-9746-02-08](https://doi.org/10.17421/2498-9746-02-08)

Abstract

The paper is an exploration in the field of Aquinas's metaphysics of form. The overall aim is to see how certain features that Thomas attributes to form, as form, fit together and present themselves at various levels and in various modes: substantial and accidental, material and immaterial, cognitive and physical, intentional and real, and created and divine. Particular attention is given to two essential properties of form, perfection and determinacy, and to how these relate to a characteristic that Thomas ascribes to forms considered absolutely or just in themselves; namely, their being, in one way or another, common to many and even somehow infinite. The paper concludes with a conjecture about the community of substantial form in a bodily substance.

CONTENTS

1	Two types of infinity	104
2	Universality and perfection	106
3	Other ways of being common to many: the cognitive species and cognitive power	108
4	Infinite in range, finite in nature	111
5	The priority, ranking, and determinacy, of natural forms	113
6	God as in a sense determinate, and some closing remarks about form	115
	Notes	118

This paper is an exploratory exercise. Rather than defend (or attack) any particular thesis, I propose simply to set side by side, and comment on, a number of text and ideas from Saint Thomas regarding what we could call the ontology of form. My main interest is in his notion of substantial form. But here I take a broader perspective, surveying various modes in which he thinks form is found. These include substantial and accidental, material and immaterial, cognitive and physical, intentional and real, and even created and divine. I shall especially want to focus on two features that Thomas seems to ascribe to form, just as form, and to see how they play out in the various modes. These features are perfection and determinacy.

1 TWO TYPES OF INFINITY

My first passage, which is from the *Summa theologiae*, is a very clear presentation of a distinction that Thomas draws between two types of infinity. We can call them material and formal. The text is most of the body of the first article of the *quaestio* on the infinity of God.

A thing is called infinite because it is not finite. Now, matter is in a way made finite by form, and form, by matter. Matter indeed is made finite by form, inasmuch as matter, before it receives a form, is in potency to many forms; but upon receiving one, it is terminated by that one. Again, form is made finite by matter, inasmuch as a form, considered in itself, is common to many; but by being received in matter, it becomes determinately the form of this thing. Now, matter is perfected by the form by which it is made finite; and therefore the infinite as attributed to matter has the nature of something imperfect; for it is as it were formless matter. On the other hand, form is not made perfect by matter, but rather is contracted by it; whence the infinite taken on the part of form not determined by matter has the nature of something perfect. Now being (*esse*) is what is maximally formal in all things, as appears from what is said above. Since, therefore, the divine being is not a being received in anything, but He is His own subsistent being, as was shown above, it is clear that God Himself is infinite and perfect.²

The reference in the passage's penultimate sentence is to *ST*, I, q. 4, a. 1, ad 3. There we are told that *esse* is most formal of all, because it is formal even with respect to forms themselves. Any form, as form, is act.³ But *esse* is the *actualitas*, as it were the very actness, of all things, even of the forms. This is why, although *esse* can be received in something, it never receives. The notions of act and actuality also help to explain why form as such brings perfection. As Thomas spells out in the body of *ST*, I, q. 4, a. 1, a thing is

perfect just insofar as it is in act. To be in act is to have being, somehow. And everything has being in and through some form.

The passage's other reference, in its final sentence, is to *ST*, I, q. 3, a. 4. There, having just argued that God is identical with His essence — *deitas*, deity — Thomas goes on to argue that He is identical with His very *esse*, His act of being the one God. This same thesis will serve, in *ST*, I, q. 4, a. 2, to show that God has all the perfection of being. The reason is that His being is not received in and contracted by anything. He can therefore be said to have, in a simple way and “uniformly,” absolutely all the perfections of things, including all forms.⁴

So our passage's main conclusion, which is that God is infinite and perfect, hardly comes as a surprise. Really the passage's primary aim seems to be to alert us to an ambiguity of the term *infinite*. As Thomas explains just before the lines quoted above, some of the presocratic philosophers did realize that the very first principle of reality must be infinite, since things flow from it without limit. But they regarded the principle as matter, and so they ascribed a material sort of infinity to it. They said that it was some sort of infinite body. We see in our passage that Thomas does not at all deny the existence of a material sort of infinity. What he denies is that it is the sort of infinity that God has. It cannot be, because it is quite opposed to perfection. It is sheer formlessness, and that means radical incompleteness — unfinishedness.

The ambiguity that Thomas is ascribing to the term *infinite* — and likewise to *finite* — may not be so clear in English. For us, I think, *infinite* and *finite* mean pretty much the same as *unlimited* and *limited*, with the latter suggesting restriction or reduction, and so imperfection. Do we usually even notice the kinship between *finite* and *finished*? But in this same passage, Thomas also exploits another term or group of terms (to which belongs the very term *term!*): *terminatur*, *determinate*, *determinatae*. I think his use of these fits well with our use of their English cognates. In one way, form terminates matter, making it a definite sort of thing, with a definite shape or look. Such terminating is a perfecting of something hitherto imperfect. In another way, matter determines form, contracting or restricting it so that it is the form of just this one thing and of nothing else. Such determining is not a perfecting, but a sort of limiting and confining. And for these reasons, the infinity of matter not terminated by form connotes something incomplete and imperfect, whereas the infinity of form without matter connotes something ample or extensive and perfect. It is the latter infinity that can be ascribed to God.

2 UNIVERSALITY AND PERFECTION

But let us look a little closer at what the passage says about form with and without matter. First, form perfects matter. That is clear enough. Form actualizes matter, gives it some type of unity and wholeness, and also — at least in the case of substantial form — some power for activity. Some forms — souls — even bring life and vital activity to matter. On the other hand, a form received in matter is made “determinately the form of this thing.” Here I suppose that what first comes to mind, at least for those familiar with Thomas’s thought, is the doctrine of matter as principle of individuation. A form that can be received in matter, if it is considered just in itself and not as received, has a definite nature, but it is still indeterminate in a way: in number. How many instances of dogness are there? Dogness itself does not say. Considered in itself, absolutely, it is compatible with there being none, or one, or any number you please. But once dogness is taken, not absolutely, but as received in matter, so that we have in view something concrete — a certain dog — what we are considering is no longer common dogness, but the particular dogness of that particular dog.⁵ Lassie’s dogness is not and can never be the dogness of any other dog. Considered as received in matter, a form is incommunicable.⁶

It should be stressed that these are only different ways of considering a form. There is not, for Thomas, any real process of taking common forms and privatizing them. It is not that Lassie’s dogness began as pure common dogness and then somehow became Lassie’s. Even less does Lassie have common dogness in herself, somehow underlying or presupposed to that which makes it precisely her dogness. Such a view would be closer to Scotus’s than to Thomas’s.⁷ For Thomas, Lassie’s dogness is wholly incommunicable, from the start. It has no common component or origin. Yet neither is it incommunicable just by virtue of itself.⁸ That is Ockham’s view.⁹ It is incommunicable by being in matter. And so when we consider it just in itself, by abstracting it from its matter, we grasp it simply as dogness, not as Lassie’s dogness. In other words, a form in matter is actually particular and incommunicable, and this is how it really exists. But it is potentially common, insofar as it is potentially intelligible. To make it actually intelligible, by abstracting it from matter, is to make it actually common. Still, this commonness belongs to it, not as it is in reality, but as it is grasped by the intellect.

In the passage on infinity, however, Thomas’s point is not merely that form in matter is incommunicable. For even forms outside matter may be incommunicable. Such are forms that are not receivable in matter, forms that

subsist in themselves, as deity does. Thomas's point is that, as compared to form outside matter, form in matter is diminished, contracted. Its extension is curtailed. A form in matter cannot be the form of other things; a form outside matter can be. Moreover, Thomas seems to assume that the greater extension of form outside matter constitutes a greater perfection. Does it? Clearly, form without matter is more perfect than matter without form. And matter with form is more perfect than matter without form. But is form outside matter more perfect than form in matter? In some cases, yes it is; deity is more perfect than any form in matter. But, for the moment, let me limit the question to forms receivable in matter. Are they more perfect outside matter — i.e., abstracted — than in matter? Is the universal, in the sense of what there can be many of, more perfect than the particular?

It seems to me that Thomas's own answer to this is, at best, only a qualified yes. We can say that to be universal, as such, is more perfect than to be particular, as such; but at the same time, a form's being universal entails the absence of a mode of perfection that particulars can have, namely, subsistence. Thus in his commentary on the *Posterior Analytics*, Thomas says:

With respect to what belongs to reason, that is, with respect to science and demonstration, the universal will not be less of a being than the particular, but more. For the incorruptible is more of a being than the corruptible, but a universal nature (*ratio*) is incorruptible, while particulars are corruptible. And corruption happens to them on account of their individual principles, not on account of the nature of the kind, which is common to all and is conserved through generation. Thus, therefore, with respect to what concerns reason, universals are more beings than particulars are. But with respect to natural subsistence, particulars, which are called primary and principal substances, are more beings.¹⁰

To be incorruptible, as such, is to be more of a being than to be corruptible is. Thomas makes this the basis for saying that the universal is more of a being than the particular. Of those kinds of things whose particular members are corruptible, the particulars must cease to be; but the kind itself need not cease. However, Thomas does not say unqualifiedly that the universal is more of being. He says that it is so with respect to what belongs to reason. What he means, I take it, is that a nature exists as universal, and hence as able not to corrupt, only in relation to reason. The nature that reason considers universally has real being only insofar as it is the nature of some individual or other; and a particular instance of the nature, such as the dogness of Lassie, ceases when the individual that it is the nature of ceases. And it is the individual, Lassie, not the individual's nature or essential form, that

subsists. The individual has its own being in the nature of things. It is not made a being through reason's operation, as universals are. An individual substance is a primary substance, a being in the most proper sense. Notice also that a kind such as dog is not absolutely incorruptible, simply unable to cease. Unlike the particulars, it may be conserved indefinitely; but its conservation depends on the unceasing generation of new particulars. If generation ceased, so would the kind.¹¹ Now, it is not that the individual's essential form plays no role in the individual's subsistence. On the contrary, Thomas makes subsistence depend much more on form than on matter.¹² But what is a principle of subsistence is only form in matter, not abstracted form.

So it seems to me that Thomas cannot be thinking that a form that is in matter and thereby "determinately of this thing" is in every respect less perfect than a form that is common to many through reason's abstracting it from matter.¹³ In a way it is less perfect, but in another way it is more. But it also seems to me that, in the passage on infinity, when Thomas says that a form, in itself, is common to many, the sort of commonness that is obtained through abstraction is not the only sort he has in mind. It hardly can be, since his aim in this passage is to show that the infinity of form belongs to God, and since he denies that the divine form, in itself, is indeterminate in number or universal, something there can be many of. In itself it is incommunicable.¹⁴ Yet neither is it strictly a "particular"; as a form naturally separate from matter, it is an individual that enjoys the extension of its whole kind.¹⁵ Such a form is not confined to a particular place and time, as forms in matter are. So now let me call attention to another way, or set of ways, in which forms not in matter can be said to be common to many.

3 OTHER WAYS OF BEING COMMON TO MANY: THE COGNITIVE SPECIES AND COGNITIVE POWER

Not many pages after the passage on God's infinity, Thomas takes up the topic of God's knowledge. His first article on the topic refers back to the passage on infinity.

Cognizers are distinguished from non-cognizers in this, that non-cognizers have nothing but their own form alone. But a cognizer is naturally apt to have also the form of some other thing. For the species of what is cognized is in the cognizer. Whence it is evident that the nature of a non-cognizing thing is more contracted and limited, while the nature of cognizing things has a greater amplitude and extension. For this reason the Philosopher

says in *De anima* III that the soul is in a way all things. The contraction of a form, however, is by matter. Whence we said above [ST, I, q. 7, a. 1] that forms, according as they are more immaterial, approach more to a certain infinity. It is therefore clear that a thing's immateriality is the reason for its being cognitive; and according to the mode of immateriality is the mode of cognition. Whence in *De anima* II it is said that plants do not cognize, on account of their materiality. But sense is cognitive, because it is receptive of species without matter, and intellect is still more cognitive, because it is more separate and from matter and unmixed, as is said in *De anima* III. Whence, given that, as is clear from things said above, God is at the summit of immateriality, it follows that He is at the summit of cognition.¹⁶

Here we clearly have a type of form, or even two closely related types, that can be said to be common to many, and this on account of their immateriality. The first is what Thomas here calls a "species." He is not using the word in the sense of a kind, that is, a group of things whose natures have the same definition. He means the form of something, existing in such a way as to constitute cognition of the thing. For instance, when you see something green, say grass, you have the species of green in your eye, and it is in virtue of that species that you are seeing the grass as green.¹⁷ The species is a likeness of the green in the grass.

Clearly it is an unusual sort of likeness, since your eye does not thereby look green. It still has whatever color it had before. This is just what Thomas is saying here: while having its own form, e.g., its own color, a cognizer can also take on the form, the species, of some other thing. The species is in the cognizer; yet it is also of some other thing. Moreover, it is not a universal. It is not indeterminate in number. The species of green in your eye is an individual form existing at an individual time. Nevertheless there is a clear sense in which it is common to many and not (to use the expression of ST, I, q. 7, a. 1) "determinately the form of this thing." For this same individual form is both your (eye's) form, functioning as that by which you see the green thing; and it is a form of the grass, functioning as that by which the grass is seen as green. It is only in you, but it is not your form alone; it is the grass's form too.

This doctrine is familiar to Aristotelians. To others it may sound strange. Aristotle helps make it plausible by observing that this is not the only case in which what is in one thing is both that thing's and another's.¹⁸ Motions are like that. One and the same motion, undergone by one and the same thing, is both of the thing that undergoes it, as the thing's passion, and of the agent that gives rise to it, as the agent's action. For instance, a process of heating up that is taking place in the coffee over a fire, is both the coffee's

act of being heated, and the fire's act of heating. It is in the coffee, but it is not the coffee's alone. And indeed sensation (on Aristotle's account of it) resembles this, inasmuch as the species is produced in the sense by the thing sensed. The species of green in the eye is an act — not a process like heating, but an act in the sense of a form — that is both produced by the grass and received by the eye.

However, the seeing also differs from the heating in important ways. One is the very fact that the seeing is not a process. The heating is a process tending toward a likeness, in the coffee, of the heat in the fire; but the seeing is not a process toward a likeness of the green in the grass; rather, it coincides with a likeness already received. Another difference is that, in seeing, the eye is not just passive, receptive of the species of green. Rather, by means of the species received, the eye produces an act of seeing. Eyesight is precisely a power to produce such an act by means of such a species. The agent of this act is not the grass seen, but the eye. To be sure, this act also remains in the eye. It is not an action by the eye on the grass; action such as that would take place in the grass. The grass seen, however, is the object of the act of seeing. The eye's act of seeing the grass is the very same activity as the grass's being seen.

These differences can be traced to an important difference between the species that is the formal principle of the eye's action and the heat in the coffee. The heat in the coffee is like the heat in the fire, and it is even an effect of the heat in the fire, but it is not the fire's heat. It is only the coffee's. It is "determinately the heat of this thing." But, as we have noted, Thomas's claim is that the species in the eye is not just a likeness of the green in the grass, and not just an effect of it; it is itself also a species *of* the grass. Why must it be? Because by it, the eye is in a way united to the grass. The eye is acting about the grass — seeing it. The heat in the coffee may make the coffee like the fire, but it does not at all unite the coffee to the fire, constitute anything in the coffee that bears upon or is about the fire. "Knowledge in act is the same as its object."¹⁹ Even setting aside the grass's influence on the eye, its producing the species, the species is of the grass inasmuch as the grass is seen by it. The eye's actually being a seer of the grass and the grass's actually being seen by the eye are the very same actual being. This point is especially significant in relation to intellectual cognition, because the intelligible species, unlike the sensible, constitutes universal cognition; indefinitely many things are known through it (albeit not distinctly, but only in a confused way²⁰). They do not all produce it, and yet it is of them all, as that by which they are known.

Moreover, the one species is of the seeing subject, not only as that by

which the subject sees the external thing, but also as that by which the subject too is perceived — by itself. One perceives oneself seeing. The act of seeing is perceptible to its subject, as an act of the subject, and it is so chiefly in virtue of its own formal principle, which is the species of what is seen.

Now, if the cognitive species is a form that is in a way common to many, insofar as it is common to cognizer and cognized, it is connected with another form that is also common to both cognizer and cognized, in a slightly different way. This form is the cognizer's own natural form, insofar as it brings with it the very power to cognize. Thus, in this same text, Thomas is saying that the cognizer's nature has a certain amplitude and extension, enabling its subject to take in forms of other things. The amplitude, I take it, refers to the capacity to take in the forms; the extension refers to their still being forms of other things, so that by them the cognizer in a way is one with those things. And this is why Aristotle says "the soul is in a way all things."²¹ Why the qualification "in a way"? There seem to be two reasons. One is that the soul is the things, not according to their natural being, but according to their being cognized. The other is that it is so only potentially. It is by nature capable of having forms of other things, but its actually having them requires the things' actions on the senses. Nevertheless, there is a genuine sense in which the cognitive potential in it is not only its own potential, for knowing, but also a potential of other things, even all things, for being known.

4 INFINITE IN RANGE, FINITE IN NATURE

Not just any soul, of course, is in a way all things. Aristotle is talking about the human, intellectual soul. It is in a way all the sensibles and all the intelligibles. The souls of beasts, merely sensitive souls, extend only to the sensibles. So the being common to many admits of more and less. (Of course this is also true of universals; for instance, genera are common to more things than are the species under them.) This is important, because it is connected with another gradation, which we may find harder to understand: gradation in immateriality. Our passage says that things have cognition insofar as they are immaterial, and are more cognitive the more immaterial they are. Thomas is talking about their forms — their substantial forms — and the greater or lesser extent to which these forms are conditioned and contracted by matter. This is not the place to lay out Thomas's understanding of the correlation between cognition and immateriality.²² What interest us are the correlations that he seems to see between the immateriality of a form,

its commonness, and its perfection. But we should at least be clear that cognitive potency for forms is different from material potency. Cognitive reception of a form does not “terminate” the potency in the way a form in matter terminates the matter. Forms in matter are contrary to others of the genus, e.g., other colors. Having one excludes the others; getting any other entails losing this one. But forms in cognition are not contrary to each other. The cognizer remains open to others. Seeing green, you can also be seeing red.

Now, there being gradation in a form’s commonness is interesting, since it indicates that the multitude of things to which a form is common may or may not be infinite. Universals are common to potentially infinite multitudes of particulars. But cognitive forms may be common only to a certain number of things. A sensible species is common to the individual sensing animal and the individual sensed thing, and nothing else. As for the power of sensing, Thomas does ascribe a qualified sort of infinity to it, on account of its extending to all the sensible things relative to it, as sight extends to all visibles; but intellect is the only power that extends to absolutely all things, so that only its range is absolutely infinite.²³ And as we saw, Thomas tells us that this infinity of intellect is owing to its not being seated in matter at all, at least not directly. Human intellect, for instance, is seated in the human soul. However, the human soul itself is the form of a body, and this fact conditions the human intellect’s range. Although it extends to all things, its primary objects are the natures of bodily things. It grasps incorporeals only insofar as they can be known through and in terms of corporeals.²⁴

Remarkably, however, not even total separation from matter coincides with unqualified infinity. Angels are pure subsistent forms, wholly immaterial, with intellects that understand universals and that have an infinite range. Perhaps angels can also be said to be infinite with respect to how they instantiate their kinds. This is because an angel’s specifying form (which just is the angel) is not received in or participated by matter; again, such a form is not strictly a “particular,” with only a partial share in the extension of its kind. It fills the whole grade of being that the kind constitutes. Nevertheless, Thomas denies that angels are unqualifiedly infinite entities.²⁵ His reason is that an angel is not identical with his being (*esse*). Rather, angelic being is received in a form that is distinct from it and that is related to it as potency to act. This potency is not matter. But, qua potency, it is analogous to matter; and by it, angelic being is “contracted to a determinate nature,” the nature of the angel’s kind, which is a kind in a certain genus of beings.²⁶ Notice the word “determinate” again. Only God’s being is not contracted at all. In the passage on His knowledge, Thomas says that He is “at the summit

of immateriality.” He has no potential or receptive factor. And so only He is absolutely infinite.

For completeness’ sake, we can note that the infinite potential of matter for forms is also only qualified, since as it is not for absolutely all forms, but only all physical forms.²⁷ Notice too that even our intellect’s potential for the forms of all things is not quite a potential for all forms. It is only for all intelligible forms. Intellect cannot receive physical forms, that is, forms that are in matter, as such. God has the active power to produce absolutely all forms, physical and intelligible, but no one receptive potency has the capacity for all of them.²⁸

5 THE PRIORITY, RANKING, AND DETERMINACY, OF NATURAL FORMS

Now we can consider the perfection of these forms that are common to many, not as universals, but as individuals with a common or sometimes even infinite extension: cognitive species and cognitive powers. On Thomas’s account, the species that a cognizer receives from things have what he calls “intentional” being. This is taken as opposed to “natural” or “real” being. In this context, natural or real being is found not only in physical or material things, but also in separate or immaterial things; that is, in subsistent forms, such as angels. Moreover, intentional being may also be found in material things. The difference between intentional and natural or real is not that the one is immaterial and the other material; nor is it that the one is cognitive and the other is not. The essential difference is that intentional being is weaker than natural being.²⁹ Even though the species in cognition, having at least some measure of immateriality, enjoy greater extension than forms wholly immersed in matter, a form in matter that gives natural being is, as such, stronger than a cognitive species that has only intentional being. It is stronger precisely in the sense that it makes something to be, unqualifiedly, in accordance with it. The form of green in grass makes the grass be green. The species of green in the eye does not make the eye be green. It only makes the eye see green, and this only together with the eye’s power of sight. (That same species also exists in the visible medium, but it does not succeed in making the medium see.) So the species, as compared with the natural form, is in somewhat the same situation as the universal; in a way it is more perfect, being more common, but in another way it is less, being weaker.

As for the cognitive power itself, it is a form that has real or natural being, not intentional. For it makes the eye be, without qualification, some-

thing that sees. That is, it makes the eye be an eye. Nevertheless its natural being is not the very strongest sort. For it is only a quality, an accident. So is intellect. Even angel intellect is only an accident.³⁰ Creaturely cognitive powers are accidental forms serving to complete the creature's natural potential for cognitive activity. They are added to, but also flow from, the creatures' substantial forms.³¹ Their very infinity is proof that they are not substantial; again, created substance is always "contracted to a determinate nature," a kind in a genus.³² So, as compared with substantial forms, cognitive powers too gain their greater extension only at the cost of a somewhat lesser perfection.³³ Substantial forms give substantial being, which is being in the strongest mode.³⁴

At the same time, not all substantial forms are equal. And those of cognizers are more perfect than those of non-cognizers. They are more perfect as *natures*. In part, this means they are more perfect principles of activity. They bring a more perfect mode of inclination. Cognizers can aim at their good as existing in whatever ways they can cognize it. Their appetite is much less contracted or restricted than the merely physical tendencies of non-cognizers. But moreover, in the place where Thomas explains that point, he also shows how the substantial forms of cognizers are more perfect even as principles of being. He is picking up again the point made in the text on God's knowledge, but from a slightly different angle.

Form in those things that share in cognition is found in a higher mode than in those that lack cognition. For in those that lack cognition is found only form determining each to one proper being, which indeed is the natural being of each.... But in those things that have cognition, each is determined to its own natural being by its natural form, in such a way that it is nonetheless receptive of species of other things; as sense receives species of all sensibles, and intellect, of all intelligibles, such that the human soul is in a way all things by sense and intellect; in which respect things having cognition approach a likeness to God, in Whom all things pre-exist, as Dionysius says.³⁵

What is of special interest here for us is the use of the words *determining* and *determined*. Earlier we saw that form in matter "terminates" matter, whereas form received in a cognitive power does not terminate the power. Here Thomas speaks of "natural" form. He is talking about substantial form. This is sometimes, but not always, form in matter; think of angels. But whether or not it is in matter, substantial form "determines to" natural being. One thing — one substance — never has more than one natural being, which is the being of its own identity, i.e., of its substantial unity.³⁶ But a substance

may be determined by its substantial form to its one natural being in such a way that it can have forms of other things as well; not, obviously, in such a way that they determine its natural being, but in some other way — a way that also constitutes some sort of “being,” and indeed a further perfection of the subject’s natural being. For in the act of cognizing, the cognizer comes to *be itself* more perfectly.³⁷ It does so precisely inasmuch as it also, in a way, comes to be other things. Its determination to be itself is all the stronger, for its having the capacity to be others too, while still being itself. This point calls to mind Thomas’s argument that a substantial form which is one in essence but multiple in the powers and bodily dispositions of which it is the principle, is for that very reason more perfect than a substantial form that yields fewer powers and dispositions.³⁸ The point is also reminiscent of Thomas’s claim that God’s unity is all the more perfect for our needing a multiplicity of concepts in order to consider Him as best we can.³⁹

Nevertheless it remains true that the way in which a created cognizer “is” other things is less perfect than the way in which the things are in themselves. It is only intentional being, not natural being, let alone substantial being. The passage just quoted, however, also says that knowers approach a likeness of God, in whom all things “pre-exist.” This remark is an echo of a text that I mentioned in passing early on, according to which God contains all the perfections of all things, simply and in a “uniform” way — that is, in a single, simple form.⁴⁰ In God, things exist even more perfectly, not less, than they exist in themselves.⁴¹ But now let me present a text on the suitability of applying to God Himself the notion of *determinacy*.

6 GOD AS IN A SENSE DETERMINATE, AND SOME CLOSING REMARKS ABOUT FORM

In the very first article of what was apparently his very first quodlibetal disputation, held probably in 1256, Thomas addressed the question of whether a created intellect can see the divine essence immediately, that is, in itself and not through some created likeness (which can never represent it adequately). Of course his answer is affirmative. The article’s first objection, however, is very pertinent to our present topic, both because it reminds us that even intelligibility, notwithstanding the infinity that it involves, also involves some sort of determinacy; and because it presents us with a remarkable case in which determinacy, perfection, and commonness are all found together, and each to the highest possible degree. Here are the opening sentence of the article, the first objection, and then after the ellipsis, Thomas’s reply.

It seems that no created intellect can see the divine essence immediately. <1> For since a created intellect bears indifferently on all intelligibles, it cannot know something determinately unless it be determined by its object. But the divine essence is not an object that can determine the intellect, because it is supreme among beings, and of maximum generality, and in no way determinate. Therefore a created intellect cannot see it.

...

To the first objection it must be said that something is called determinate in two ways. First, by reason of limitation; in the other way, by reason of distinction. Now the divine essence is not something determinate in the first way, but in the second way. For a form is not limited except by the fact that it is received in another, to whose mode it is commensurated. But in the divine essence there is not something received in another, because its being (*esse*) is the divine nature itself, subsisting; which is the case in no other thing. For any other thing whatsoever has a received, and so limited, being; and hence it is that the divine essence is distinguished from all by not being received in another. Thus, if there were some whiteness existing not in a subject, it would be distinguished by that very fact from any whiteness existing in a subject; and this even though as far as whiteness goes it would not be received, and so not limited. Therefore it is plain that the divine essence is not something general in being, since it is distinct from all others, but only in causing; because that which is per se, is cause of those things that are not per se. Whence a per se subsisting being (*esse*) is cause of all being received in another. And thus the divine essence is an intelligible that can determine the intellect.⁴²

The objection makes a connection between supremacy and generality. Thomas's reply does not simply reject such a connection. But the objection centers on the wrong sort of generality. Thomas calls it generality in being. Evidently he means in predicability. The most general predicate will also be the most indeterminate. If the divine essence, being supreme, is also most general in this sense, then He will have no determinacy at all. Even the intelligible form signified by the term *being* has some determinacy, after all, since it is distinct from what is signified by *non-being*; but nothing determinate can be more general than being, since every determination is itself a being. So if the divine essence is even more general than being — common, we might say, both to being and to non-being — then it must be utterly without determination. And if so, it will be altogether unintelligible, at least to us. It will have nothing by which we can distinguish it from other possible objects of understanding.

Thomas rejects this sort of generality, however, in favor of a very different sort. He calls it generality in causing. The divine essence is the most universal of causes, extending to absolutely all things. Nor is it only the

universal agent; it is also the universal exemplar and the universal end. The deity is the common good of all things. And it enjoys all of these causalities because contains in itself, in an eminent way, all the perfections of things, and everything that can be understood in any way.⁴³ In comparison with the divine form, even the nature of being is limited.⁴⁴ In this way the divine form is the most “common to many” of all. It is also absolutely infinite and absolutely perfect, since it involves no sort of composition of receiver and received, whether it be that of matter and form, or any other sort of composition of potency and act, such as even angels have. There is no material or contracting principle in God. And so, if by *determinate* we mean limited or contracted, the divine essence is not determinate. But the term can also mean something else. It can mean *distinct*. In this sense the divine essence is determinate.⁴⁵ It is distinct in its very purity or separateness. Indeed there is nothing more distinct. The deity is utterly incommunicable. It is more so than the essence of any creature, bodily or spiritual. The essence of a bodily creature’s species is entirely communicable, and even that of an angel is partly so, as to its genus. But the divine species is in no genus.⁴⁶ While being most common, as a cause, God is also most individual, being utterly undivided in Himself — that is, utterly simple — and utterly divided from every other thing.⁴⁷ Being most distinct, most *formal*, He is also exquisitely intelligible.

My main interest here is not to defend the possibility of calling God “determinate.” In fact, despite the passage just examined, I do think we find Thomas rather avoiding that way of speaking, and instead tending to deny that God is determinate in the sense of limited or confined. But he always teaches that God is distinct, and that God is essentially a form. And my main interest is in the nature of form generally. In the light of the foregoing, it seems to me that more work needs to be done to put together the various functions that we see Thomas assigning to form: principle of being, principle of cognition, principle of efficient causality. In particular, there seems to be a certain tension — though by no means a sheer opposition — between the function of form in matter, which is to give determinate natural being to a single thing, and the intrinsic aptitude of form, as form, to be “common to many.” In part, I suppose, the tension is mitigated by the consideration that even form in matter is a principle of agency and of “like generating like”; indeed it seems to be in the power to effect one’s like that Thomas locates the primitive notion of “perfection.”⁴⁸ But what about the even more basic level of formal causality, form giving being to the very matter that it is in? This after all is where we first get the very notion of form, where we first see form functioning just as form.

My suggestion would be to continue along the line indicated in the discussion of the determinacy of the divine essence: the line of *unity*. Form gives being (*esse*) to matter, I am inclined to say, inasmuch as it reduces matter to the sort of unity that *esse* presupposes, the unity of a single essence.⁴⁹ But we should not think of this merely in logical terms, as the unity of the parts of a definition. It is also the unity of matter itself, the unity of a single natural body. What is especially suggestive here, I think, is the doctrine that a substantial form is in every part of the body that it informs, indeed the *whole* form — its whole essence — is in every part.⁵⁰ All the parts share in the essence of the one form, and in the one act of being to which the form determines the thing. Forms are simple items. They do not per se have quantitative parts.⁵¹ But we should definitely not think of them as points; a single point can hardly be found in all the parts of a body. We can perhaps say then that even form in matter, especially substantial form, is “common to many”: not to many distinct substances, but to the many parts of the one substance that it informs. We might say that form is something intrinsically expansive (of course it is only a metaphor). One is reminded of the connection that Aristotle sees between the Greek term for *nature* and the term for *growth*.⁵²

None of this should be seen as undermining the absolute metaphysical primacy of *esse*. To be is the “perfection of all perfections and the actuality of all acts.” But surely part of its primacy consists in its being that which is “maximally formal of all.”

NOTES

1. Revised version of a Philosophy department seminar at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, 20 October 2015.
2. *Infinitem dicitur aliquid ex eo quod non est finitum. Finitur autem quodammodo et materia per formam, et forma per materiam. Materia quidem per formam, in quantum materia, antequam recipiat formam, est in potentia ad multas formas, sed cum recipit unam, terminatur per illam. Forma vero finitur per materiam, in quantum forma, in se considerata, communis est ad multa, sed per hoc quod recipitur in materia, fit forma determinate huius rei. Materia autem perficitur per formam per quam finitur, et ideo infinitum secundum quod attribuitur materiae, habet rationem imperfecti; est enim quasi materia non habens formam. Forma autem non perficitur per materiam, sed magis per eam eius amplitudo contrahitur, unde infinitum secundum quod se tenet ex parte formae non determinatae per materiam, habet rationem perfecti. Illud autem quod est maxime formale omnium, est ipsum esse, ut ex superioribus patet. Cum igitur esse divinum non sit esse receptum in aliquo, sed ipse sit suum esse subsistens, ut supra ostensum*

- est; manifestum est quod ipse Deus sit infinitus et perfectus:* Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (ST), I, q. 7, a. 1.
3. See ST, I, q. 75, a. 5. On nothing's being more formal than *esse*, see also *Summa contra gentiles*, I.23, §214 (Marietti).
 4. See also ST, I, q. 14, a. 6. Thomas takes the term *uniformly* from ps.-Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus*, ch. 5.
 5. See Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio Libri Posteriorum*, Lib. II, lect. 20, §592 [11] (Marietti).
 6. Sometimes, I think, this is taken to mean that the matter is already incommunicable in itself and that the form in it, as well as the whole composite, somehow shares in the matter's incommunicability. One then wonders how something that is nothing but potency — Thomas frequently calls (prime) matter *ens in potentia tantum* — could play such a role. Already in a very youthful work, however, Thomas wrote: “prime matter is said to be numerically one in all things. But *numerically one* is said in two ways; namely [first], to mean what has numerically one determinate form, such as Socrates; and in this way prime matter is not said to be numerically one, since in itself it has no form. [Second], something is also called numerically one because it is without the dispositions that make for numerical difference; and in this way prime matter is one in number, because it is understood without all the dispositions from which numerical difference arises”: *De principiis naturae*, cap. 3. Prime matter, by itself, is only potentially an individual. What is unqualifiedly an individual is a subsistent whole, such as Socrates. (On this see Lawrence Dewan, O.P., *The Individual as a Mode of Being according to Thomas Aquinas*, in L. Dewan, *Form and Being: Studies in Thomistic Metaphysics*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington 2006, pp. 229-47.) And the immediate principle of its subsistence and wholeness is its form. So it is not that the form and the composite share in the individuality or incommunicability of the matter. That to which individuality is properly attributed is the composite. The form is the immediate or proper principle of its individuality. But this function of the form presupposes its inherence in matter (just as does its function of giving being to the composite). Only in this sense is the matter the “principle” of individuation.
 7. See Bl. John Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, II, d. iii, part 1, qq. 1-6; *Quaestiones super Libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis*, lib. VII, q. 18.
 8. See Gabriele Galluzzo, *Two Senses of 'Common': Avicenna's Doctrine of Essence and Aquinas's View on Individuation*, in D. N. Hasse and A. Bertolacci (eds.), *The Arabic, Hebrew and Latin Reception of Avicenna's Metaphysics*, De Gruyter, Berlin / Boston 2012, pp. 309-337. Galluzzo puts it aptly: for Thomas, the essence of a material individual is itself individual; but it is so, not “primatively,” but rather “derivatively,” owing to its inherence in matter. I am not quite sure, however, about another distinction that Galluzzo draws there, between the essence as “actually common” and as “modally common.” The actually common essence would be the universal, which Galluzzo simply identifies with the concept, this being universal in its “representational content” but in itself an individual entity; to me that sounds more like Ockham, and I am more

- inclined to say that the universal is the essence as *object* of the concept, not as the concept itself. Also, by “modally common” Galluzzo means a modal property that the extra-mental essence would have if, *per impossibile*, it existed by itself apart from matter. I do not find Thomas thinking of it in this way; I think he considers the extra-mental essence to be common in the same way that it is intelligible, namely potentially (which after all is what one would expect to find opposed to “actually”).
9. See William of Ockham, *Ordinatio*, I, d. 2, qq. 4-8; *Summa logicae*, part I, ch. 17.
 10. *Universale quantum ad id quod rationis est, idest quantum ad scientiam et demonstrationem, non erit minus ens quam particulare sed magis: quia incorruptibile est magis ens quam corruptibile; ratio autem universalis est incorruptibilis; particularia autem sunt corruptibilia, quibus accidit corruptio secundum principia individualia, non secundum rationem speciei, quae communis est omnibus et conservatur per generationem. Sic igitur quantum ad id quod rationis est, universalia magis sunt entia quam particularia. Quantum vero ad naturalem subsistentiam, particularia magis sunt entia, quae dicuntur primae et principales substantiae: Thomas Aquinas Expositio Libri Posteriorum, Lib. I, lect. 37, §330 [8] (ed. Marietti).*
 11. Regarding the possibility of a kind’s ceasing, see *Summa contra gentiles*, I.66, §545 (Marietti); also Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia super librum De caelo et mundo*, L. III, lect. 8, §598 [§4].
 12. See *ST*, I, q. 29, a. 2, ad 5.
 13. We might also consider the doctrine that genus is to differentia as the indeterminate to a determination of it, in a way analogous to the relation of matter and form — a relation of potency and act. Thomas is very clear that the differentia is nobler than genus; see *ST*, I, q. 50, a. 4, ad 1. And yet of course the genus is more common. This is all the more interesting since he does regard the genus as more noble than the species (not to be confused with the differentia), inasmuch as it is “more absolute and less contracted”: *ST*, I-II, q. 18, a. 7, ad 3. On the whole, determinacy (in the sense of definiteness, not contractedness) seems to have a certain priority over commonness.
 14. See *ST*, I, q. 3, a. 2, ad 3; a. 3. I say “in itself” because to us it can seem communicable: *ST*, I, q. 13, a. 9.
 15. See *ST*, I, q. 13, a. 9, ad 2; q. 14, a. 1, obj. 3 & ad 3; q. 30, a. 4, obj. 3; q. 39, a. 6, ad 2; q. 40, a. 3; q. 50, a. 4.
 16. *Cognoscentia a non cognoscentibus in hoc distinguuntur, quia non cognoscentia nihil habent nisi formam suam tantum; sed cognoscens natum est habere formam etiam rei alterius, nam species cogniti est in cognoscente. Unde manifestum est quod natura rei non cognoscentis est magis coarctata et limitata, natura autem rerum cognoscentium habet maiorem amplitudinem et extensionem. Propter quod dicit Philosophus, III De anima, quod anima est quodammodo omnia. Coarctatio autem formae est per materiam. Unde et supra diximus quod formae, secundum quod sunt magis immateriales, secundum hoc magis accedunt ad quandam infinitatem. Patet igitur quod immaterialitas alicuius rei est ratio quod sit cognoscitiva; et secundum modum immaterialitatis est modus cognitionis. Unde in II De anima*

- dicitur quod plantae non cognoscunt, propter suam materialitatem. Sensus autem cognoscitivus est, quia receptivus est specierum sine materia, et intellectus adhuc magis cognoscitivus, quia magis separatus est a materia et immixtus, ut dicitur in III De anima. Unde, cum Deus sit in summo immaterialitatis, ut ex superioribus patet, sequitur quod ipse sit in summo cognitionis: ST, I, q. 14, a. 1.*
17. You are not seeing the species itself. You are seeing the color by means of it. See *ST*, I, q. 85, a. 2.
 18. *De anima*, III.2, 425b25-426a11; cf. *Physics*, III.3, 202a13-b29.
 19. *De anima*, III.5, 430a19-20; III.7, 431a1-2.
 20. See *ST*, I, q. 86, a. 2.
 21. *De anima*, III.8, 431b21. A few lines later he calls intellect the form of forms, and sense the form of sensibles.
 22. I discuss it at some length in Stephen L. Brock, *The Philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas. A Sketch*, Cascade Books, Eugene 2015, pp. 69-77.
 23. *ST*, I, q. 54, a. 2.
 24. *ST*, I, q. 84, a. 7.
 25. See *ST*, I, q. 7, a. 2, c. & ad 2.
 26. *ST*, I, q. 7, a. 2; cf. I, q. 50, a. 2, ad 4; I, q. 54, a. 2.
 27. *ST*, I, q. 7, a. 2, ad 3.
 28. *ST*, I, q. 75, a. 5, ad 1.
 29. I go into these distinctions in some detail in Stephen L. Brock, *Intentional Being, Natural Being, and the First-Person Perspective in Thomas Aquinas*, «The Thomist», 77/1 (2013), pp. 103-133.
 30. See *ST*, I, q. 54, a. 3.
 31. See *ST*, I, q. 77, aa. 1, 5, 6.
 32. See *ST*, I, q. 54, aa. 2-3; also I, q. 59, a. 2.
 33. For a surprising situation of this sort, see *ST*, I-II, q. 110, a. 2, ad 2.
 34. See Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia super Metaphysicam*, Lib. IV, lect. 1, §543 (Marietti).
 35. *Forma autem in his quae cognitionem participant, altiori modo invenitur quam in his quae cognitione carent. In his enim quae cognitione carent, invenitur tantummodo forma ad unum esse proprium determinans unumquodque, quod etiam naturale uniuscuiusque est . . . In habentibus autem cognitionem, sic determinatur unumquodque ad proprium esse naturale per formam naturalem, quod tamen est receptivum specierum aliarum rerum, sicut sensus recipit species omnium sensibilium, et intellectus omnium intelligibilium, ut sic anima hominis sit omnia quodammodo secundum sensum et intellectum, in quo quodammodo cognitionem habentia ad Dei similitudinem appropinquant, in quo omnia praeexistunt, sicut Dionysius dicit: ST, I, q. 80, a. 1.*
 36. On identity or sameness as substantial unity, see *Sententia super Metaphysicam*, Lib. V, lect. 11, §907; Lib. X, lect. 4, §1999, §2002,
 37. See *De anima*, II.5, 417b2-16.
 38. *ST*, I, q. 76, a. 5, ad 3.
 39. *ST*, I, q. 13, a. 4, ad 3.

40. *ST*, I, q. 4, a. 2; see above, in the text leading up to footnote 3. That the discussion in *ST*, I, q. 4, a. 2, has in view the divine essence understood precisely as a form comes out rather clearly at the beginning of a nearly contemporary, nearly parallel passage. *Forma separata quae est purus actus, scilicet Deus, non determinatur ad aliquam speciem vel genus aliquod; sed incircumscripse habet totam virtutem essendi, utpote ipsum suum esse existens, sicut patet per Dionysium, cap. V De divinis nominibus: De malo, q. 16, a. 9, ad 5.*
41. *ST*, I, q. 4, a. 2; see I, q. 18, a. 4.
42. *Videtur quod nullus intellectus creatus possit divinam essentiam immediate videre. <1> Intellectus enim creatus, cum indifferenter se habeat ad omnia intelligibilia, cognoscere non potest aliquid determinate nisi per obiectum suum determinetur. Sed divina essentia non est obiectum quod possit intellectum determinare, quia est summum in entibus, et maximae generalitatis nullo modo determinatum. Ergo intellectus creatus ipsam videre non potest.*
- ...
- Ad primum dicendum quod aliquid dicitur determinatum dupliciter: primo ratione limitationis, alio modo ratione distinctionis. Essentia autem divina non est quid determinatum primo modo, sed secundo, quia forma non limitatur nisi ex hoc quod in alio recipitur, cuius modo commensuratur. In essentia autem divina non est aliquid in alio receptum, eo quod esse eius est ipsa divina natura subsistens; quod in nulla re alia contingit: nam quaelibet res alia habet esse receptum, et sic limitatum; et inde est quod essentia divina ab omnibus distinguitur per hoc quod est in alio non recipi: sicut si esset aliqua albedo existens non in subiecto, ex hoc ipso distingueretur a qualibet albedine in subiecto existente; quamvis in ratione albedinis non esset recepta, et sic nec limitata. Patet ergo, quod essentia divina non est quid generale in essendo, cum sit ab omnibus aliis distincta, sed solum in causando; quia id quod est per se, est causa eorum quae per se non sunt. Unde esse per se subsistens est causa omnis esse in alio recepti. Et ita essentia divina est intelligibile quod potest determinare intellectum: Thomas Aquinas, *Quodlibet VII*, q. 1, a. 1, obj. 1 & ad 1. The dating of this *Quodlibet* is taken from Sancti Thomae de Aquino, *Questiones de Quolibet*, in *Opera omnia, Iussu Leonis XIII P.M. Edita*, vol. 1, cura et studio Fratrum Praedicatorum, Commissio Leonina / Éditions du Cerf, Roma / Paris 1996, p. ix*.*
43. On its containing all intelligibles, so that no single created species can represent it as it is, see *ST*, I, q. 12, a. 2.
44. See Thomas Aquinas, *Super librum Dionysii De divinis nominibus*, cap. XIII, lect. 3, §989 (Marietti).
45. The point is made very briefly in the very article on God's infinity in the *Summa* (*ST*, I, q. 7, a. 1). The third objection against God's being infinite says that "God is this and is not another," and that therefore He is finite. The reply is that the very reason for calling Him infinite, which is that His *esse* is not received in anything, shows Him to be distinct and separate from everything else.
46. *ST*, I, q. 3, a. 5.
47. See *ST*, I, q. 3, a. 2, ad 3, and q. 3, a. 3, together with I, q. 11, a. 4.
48. See *ST*, I, q. 5, a. 4.

49. On *esse* as presupposing the unity of an essence, see *ST*, I, q. 6, a. 3, ad 1.
50. See *ST*, I, q. 76, a. 8.
51. They may have quantity per accidens; see *ibid.*
52. *Metaphysics*, V.4, 1014b16-26.
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