

## EXORCISING THE GHOST OF PARMENIDES

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It is well known that, in the Western World, metaphysics began with Parmenides' poem extolling being, or the "what is, is."<sup>1</sup> And his praise of being as a total unity, indestructible, immovable, without beginning or end, necessary and undifferentiated, is equally well-known. What is not so often noticed, however, is that Parmenides recognized the source for this view of being as residing in our thought patterns, which he called the way of truth, rather than in our sensory experience, which he designated as the way of appearances, opinion, and falsehood. For, "the same thing can be thought as can be" he says in fragment 5, and again in fragment 8, "thinking and the thing for the sake of which we think are the same."<sup>2</sup>

Yet this paper is not an attempt to offer a scholarly analysis of Parmenides' own metaphysics; rather, it is a chronology and analysis of the subsequent history of some metaphysicians in dealing with this legacy bequeathed to them by Parmenides. This legacy, which I am calling the "ghost of Parmenides," is the confusion of our *concept* of "absolute being" ("abstract being") *with*, and/or the disengagement of this concept *from*, the objects of our experience. You doubtless recognize this confusion as a move from the mental to the extra-mental, which has been also named the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness" according to Whitehead.<sup>3</sup> For to equate being with unity is really only to describe what a *concept of being* must be in order for it to be intelligible to human understanding; it does not describe *being as found outside that concept*.

In the next generation after Parmenides, there is evident his strong influence on Socrates and also on Plato, who devoted a whole *Dialogue* to him, and who posits a whole realm of ideas, prominent among them the idea of *being* and the idea of the *one*, which, it seems, is even superior to being.<sup>4</sup> Not until Aristotle does there arise a serious attempt to exorcize that ghost of Parmenides.

In his own *Metaphysics*, Aristotle credits Parmenides with an advance over the early philosophers of nature by looking beyond the material causes of the universe and by positing *being* as the

unitary explanation of nature.<sup>5</sup> But, it is in his *Physics* that Aristotle directs himself more critically to Parmenides' concept of being. For, Aristotle points out, Parmenides falsely assumes that "being simply considered" (in thought) exists in that one way only (as in thought), whereas being is common to diverse things, like substance, accident, etc.<sup>6</sup> This is, as you recognize, Aristotle's way of saying "fallacy of misplaced concreteness." And he will then finalize this position by pointing out that *being* can never be a genus (class-name),--even in thought!<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, in his own metaphysical system, Aristotle was concerned with the being of the things we experience, not with a concept of absolute being or being considered as a genus. The passages wherein he sets forth his realist metaphysics are well known. "There is a science which investigates being qua being and what belongs essentially to it." This being is neither universal nor equivocal, but is predicated analogically because substance is the primary analog for all the multiple senses of the term.<sup>8</sup>

However, Aristotle then proceeded to state what was to become a stumbling block for metaphysicians in the centuries to follow. "If, now, being and unity are the same and are one nature in the sense that they follow each other in the same way in which a principle and a cause do, . . . , seeing that *one man* and *being a man* and *a man* are the same and that the added word in "one man exists" does not make it signify something other than what "a man exists" does, . . ." <sup>9</sup> That is, it makes no difference in understanding what a thing is, to add that it is an existing thing. Further, "what a thing is" is substance. "Although 'being' is used in so many senses, it is evident that of these the primary sense is whatness, and used in this sense it signifies a substance."<sup>10</sup> So, Aristotle did not escape the haunting ghost of Parmenides after all. He merely substituted for Parmenides' and Plato's concepts of being, another concept, namely, "substance," confirming this substitution by excluding actual existence from the *concept of substance*.

Moreover, this is what subsequent Aristotelian metaphysicians understood him to have done, providing difficulties for them. On the other hand, for Platonists and Neo-Platonists, there continued to be identification of being with the One, the Good, or simply essence, or even, as in Plotinus, exclusion of being from the One, while Christian Neo-Platonists, like Marius Victorinus and St. Augustine, strove to establish the identity of Being, One, Good, etc. in God. All of this is common knowledge.

Historically, the first Aristotelian to address himself to Aristotle's identification of being with substance, but, in order to distinguish them, seems to be Boethius. Like Aristotle, he recognized that in every individual thing of our experience, there is

a complexity of parts, i.e., substantial form plus numerous determinations (accidents). This totality is what-a-thing-is (*id quod est*), whereas, none of these parts separately is what-a-thing-is. But, unlike Aristotle, Boethius reasoned that there must be some binding element for the whole. This constitutive element is its being, its *esse*. Hence Boethius' oft-quoted phrase: "*diversum est esse et id quod est*." (Being is diverse from that which it is.)<sup>11</sup> To what extent Boethius is here making a real distinction between essence and existence, as he was credited with doing by the medieval Christians, is hard to establish, even though Thomas Aquinas so credited him, as will be discussed later. But that he introduced into Aristotelianism in the West a splitting of Aristotle's identification of being with substance is obvious. Parmenides' ghost thinned a little.

Yet the Medievals had another Aristotelian thinker, besides the Christian, Boethius, for the non-identification of being with substance. This source was the line of Arabian Mohammedans, the first of whom, affirming a distinction between essence and existence, seems to be Alfarabi who lived about 873-950.

Because of his assiduous study and translation of Aristotle's logical work, Alfarabi did not fail to note Aristotle's remarks that what-a-thing-is does not entail that-it-is, especially as this is carefully delineated by Aristotle in his *Posterior Analytics*.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, in his metaphysical work, *Gem of Wisdom*, Alfarabi states, "We admit that essence and existence are distinct in existing things. The essence is not the existence, and it does not come under its comprehension." And, to the question: What then, is existence? Alfarabi adds that existence is not a constitutive character of substance but only an "accessory accident."<sup>13</sup> Let it be noted that this position only affirms that existence is a predicate of essence and that it is in the category of accident; it does not posit the "real distinction" of the later Middle Ages as found in Giles of Rome.

Nor was such a real distinction posited by Avicenna (980-1037) who affirmed the position of Alfarabi in the following century and added that essence and existence must not be regarded as two things (*duae res*).<sup>14</sup> What is more, Avicenna pointed out an evident fact, which Thomas Aquinas will adopt and repeat many times, that "being is what first enters into our intellect."<sup>15</sup> Then, secondarily, the quiddity (essence) of that being is understood as substance, or it is not understood as essence, but as an accident.<sup>16</sup> The ghost of Parmenides was becoming very pale, indeed.

Moreover, this Avicennian primacy of the intellectual grasp of being, plus the non-identification of essence and existence in the beings of our experience, was correctly understood and summarized by Algazel (died 1111) in the following century,--but,

in order to rebuke Avicenna as an unorthodox Mohammedan.<sup>17</sup> So also did Averroes (1126-1198) understand and rebuke Avicenna, not, however, for being an unorthodox believer, but for being too religious in his philosophy.<sup>18</sup>

Not so Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), who accepted as both orthodox Jewish and Mohammedan faith, as well as good philosophy, Avicenna's teaching that existence is an accident of essence and that it is directly caused by God.<sup>19</sup>

The first medieval Christian who introduced this Avicennian non-identification of essence and existence was William of Auvergne (1180-1249), who became bishop of Paris in 1228. The newly translated texts of Avicenna, having been introduced into Paris at the turn of the 13th century, were read by Auvergne who did not hesitate to endorse the distinction and to posit existence (*esse*) as an accident. Yet he added a new dimension in speaking of existence (*esse*) of created things as caused by *participation* in the divine existence (*esse*).<sup>20</sup>

In turning now to Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), it is striking to note the introduction of his own metaphysical discovery in his commentary on that problem text of Aristotle.

For it must be borne in mind that the term *man* is derived from the quiddity or the nature of man, and the term *thing* from the quiddity only; but the term *being* (*ens*) is derived from the act of being (*actu essendi*), and the term *one* from order or lack of division; for what is one is an undivided being.<sup>21</sup>

And then, just three paragraphs later, he also rejects Avicenna's misinterpretation of the same text of Aristotle to the effect that unity and being are not substance but are accidents of substance.

But it must be noted that Avicenna felt differently about this; for he said that the terms being and one do not signify a thing's substance but something added to it. He said this of being because, in the case of anything that derives its existence (*esse*) from something else, the existence (*esse*) of such a thing must differ from its substance or essence. But the term being (*ens*) signifies existence (*esse*) itself.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, after acknowledging that Avicenna had a mathematical notion of unity which led him to view unity and existence as accidents, Aquinas says:

For even though a thing's existence (*esse*) is other than its essence, it should not be understood to be something added to its essence after the manner of an accident, but something established, as it were, by the principles of the essence. Hence the term being (*ens*) which is applied to a thing by reason of its very existence (*esse*), designates the same thing as the term which is applied to it by reason of its essence.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, for Aquinas, being is a concept, to be sure, but this concept does *not* have a referent, as such, extra-mentally. In objects of our experience, being refers to two non-identical aspects, namely, *essence* as distinct from *existence*.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the *act* of existence (*esse*) is the very actualization of every form in any existing thing, both substantial form and accidental forms. "Existence is the actuality of all acts, and that is why it is the perfection of all perfections."<sup>25</sup> This insight has been called a philosophical revolution,<sup>26</sup> and the equation of essence to potency, in relation to the act of existence, has been likened to the importance of the discovery of zero in mathematics.<sup>27</sup> Most importantly, the ghost of Parmenides was exorcized completely! Why? Because "being" is only a concept, whether it is our primordial, imprecise, cognitive awareness, common to everyone, or the being *qua* being (abstract being) which is the formal perspective of the metaphysician. Even in the case of God, Aquinas prefers to speak of Him as Supreme Existence, instead of Supreme Being.<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, as is well known, after the death of Aquinas, the controversy concerning the "real" distinction of essence from existence, as held by Aquinas' pupil, Giles of Rome (c. 1247-1316), only served to revive the ghost of Parmenides. But now, there were two ghosts: essence as actual in its own right and existence as actual also.<sup>29</sup> Neither of these was Aquinas' position, and so there ensued a series of supporters and opponents of Aquinas, most of them still not understanding his philosophical revolution. Their history will not be recounted here.<sup>30</sup>

Instead, let us note how the founder of modern philosophy, Rene Descartes (1596-1650), followed the footsteps of the famed theologian among his Jesuit teachers, Francis Suarez (1548-1617), who rejected any real distinction between essence and existence, speaking only of a mental distinction with a foundation in reality.<sup>31</sup> As a consequence, we have again two Parmenidean ghosts, that of being (substance) as mind, and that of being (substance) as matter.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, as is well known, this Cartesian bifurcation then spawned both Benedict Spinoza's (1632-1677) identification

of being as substance with mind and matter, as well as Gottfried Leibniz' (1648-1716) dispersion of being as intellectual substance into countless monads.

On the other hand, let us note how Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) revived the distinction between essence and existence (being), but only to relegate the latter to a category of the mind. "Being' (*sein*) is obviously not a real predicate; that is, it is not a concept of something which could be added to the concept of a thing."<sup>33</sup> Precisely,--existence is not a necessary predicate of any essence; existence and essence are non-identical. Yet, to know of some existing dinosaur, say in Alaska, would surely add to our knowledge, would it not? It adds to our knowledge by way of a cognitional judgment asserting truth or falsity; it does not add to our knowledge by another concept! So, Kant is right in asserting that being, as identical with another essence or predicate, is only a concept,--and a meaningless one at that. But Kant is also overlooking that being, as a term for the act of existence, is not a concept; it is an understanding reached by a cognitive judgment and expressed in a proposition. This one does not find Kant saying, nor any of his successors either in Kantian or Hegelian Idealism. For most of the latter, the abstract concept of being is identified with extra-mental reality. Parmenides ghost was dimmed a little by Kant, but it returned fully operational under Georg Hegel (1770-1831).

Nevertheless, the exorcism of this ghost of Parmenides was not long in coming. Existentialists, beginning with Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), were joined by Empiricists of all varieties, and by our contemporary Analytic and Linguistic philosophers. This is well-known to all of us today. Some, like Sidney Hook (1902- ) thought that now "we can banish the term 'being' from the vocabulary of philosophy."<sup>34</sup> Others, like Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) even went so far as to affirm that this spells the end of philosophy insofar as it entails the "overcoming" of the metaphysics of being.<sup>35</sup>

On the other hand, it seems that to say that an exorcism of the ghost of Parmenides entails an end of metaphysics is a *non-sequitur*. I say this because to affirm that being is only a concept only jeopardizes a metaphysics of being; it does not jeopardize a metaphysics of existence. It does not jeopardize the latter because the act of existence is attained by that mental process which *joins and separates* those concepts which represent reality and not by the mental process which forms those concepts in the first place. And note well; that mental action of joining and separating, traditionally called judgment, is also the action by which we affirm truth and falsity. No scientist nor any other cognitive researcher studies concepts; they study real things by way

of concepts. But they express their respective truths about real things in propositions which are the linguistic expressions of their judgments, which are about things!

The same is true for metaphysicians who use the concept of being, which only symbolically represents real things, but use their judgment to affirm or deny the existence of those things, and to grasp that existence itself, as possible to be cognized. I say, "possible to be cognized" because if we view "existence" as just another concept, it will only revive the ghost of Parmenides again. True, we can, linguistically, use "existence" as if it were a concept, a predicate, as in "the existence of a tumor in his brain was verified," but this can logically be re-phrased as "his brain has a tumor." On the other hand, a statement like, "dinosaurs no longer exist" cannot be re-phrased. Consequently, the metaphysician can attain truth or falsity about existence by use of judgment, just as other scientists can, but no one can form a proper *concept* of existence.

In the history of philosophy, the insight of Thomas Aquinas that existence (*esse*) is the actuality of all other actuations in a thing seems to be most meaningful and cognitively relevant because existence is most intimate to anything.

As the most basic actuality of the thing, existence is most intimate. It is the most inward of all the thing's characteristics. It is the core of all else, the axis around which all the rest revolves, even though it is not part of the thing's nature. From within, however, it is actuating everything in the nature. It has both features, and it has them by exercising the one role of existence. It could not be the existence of something other than itself unless at the same time it both lay outside the thing's nature and actuated the nature most intimately from within. Both features are imperative. The one complements the other.<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, in a metaphysics that places primacy on judgment about existence, instead of conceptualizing about being, the philosopher is oriented constantly to the extra-mental world as is, and against which any concepts or even whole conceptual systems must be confronted. This is the added fruitfulness of Aquinas' insight into existence as the act of all acts and the perfection of all perfections.

For he [Aquinas] insists that metaphysics is not a science of concepts, but that it is instead, and

uniquely, a science of judgment. Judgment, however, not only unites or separates concepts, in so doing, it refers the mind to the original context out of which the concepts have been formed. Judgment embraces context; judgment returns the mind to the world.<sup>37</sup>

Indeed, it returns the mind to the world where its actual plenitude is the basis for our non-exhaustive concepts about its principles, forces, elements, and so on. Note what the same author continues to state:

What is more -- and it is this that Thomas Aquinas has made explicit -- the context into which the principles are to be resolved as into actuality is the context of being taken precisely as actuality (*esse*), i.e., as the order of principles that are themselves ordained to their functions within the context of actuality. Now, it is just this resolution of all principles into actuality that is to be understood through the existential force of the judgment.<sup>38</sup>

To conclude, then, it must be said that until metaphysicians recognize that the proper cognitive function for attaining the subject-matter of metaphysics is the judgment concerning the existence of things, and not a concept of being, then they will be haunted by the ghost of Parmenides.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 4th ed. (London: Black, 1930) 178.
- <sup>2</sup> Milton C. Nahm, *Selections from Early Greek Philosophy*, 4th ed. (New York: Appleton, 1968) 93, 94.
- <sup>3</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1967) 51.
- <sup>4</sup> Plato, *Parmenides*, #128-135. trans. T. V. Smith, *Philosophers Speak for Themselves: From Thales to Plato* (Chicago UP, 1963) 182.
- <sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, bk. 1, 986b. trans. H. G. Apostle, *Aristotle's Metaphysics* (Indiana UP, 1970) 22.
- <sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *Physics* bk. I, 185b-186a. trans. H.G. Apostle, *Aristotle's Physics* (Indiana UP, 1969) 11-12.
- <sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, bk. II, 998b. Apostle, *op. cit.* 45. Aristotle, *Physics*, bk. I, 186-187a, Apostle, *op. cit.* 12-13.

- <sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, bk. IV, 1003a. Apostle, *op. cit.* 54.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 1003b. Apostle, *op. cit.* 55.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, bk. VII, 1028. Apostle, *op. cit.* 108.
- <sup>11</sup> The several Latin phrases used by Boethius are quoted, translated, and explained in Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York: Random, 1953) 104-105.
- <sup>12</sup> Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, bk. II, 7, 92b 8-11. trans. H. G. Apostle, *Aristotle's Posterior Analytics* (Grinnell: Peripatetic Press, 1980).
- <sup>13</sup> Text translated in E. Gilson 186, who adds, "This important text marked the moment when the logical distinction introduced by Aristotle between the conception of essence and the affirmation of existence became the sign of their metaphysical distinction."
- <sup>14</sup> The texts from Avicenna are translated and carefully discussed in Beatrice H. Zedler, "Another Look at Avicenna" *The New Scholasticism*, vol. 50, #4, Autumn, 1976, 504-521. See also her "Saint Thomas and Avicenna in the 'De Potentia Dei,'" *Traditio*, vol. VI (1948) 105-159.
- <sup>15</sup> Thomas Aquinas quotes from Avicenna's *Metaphysics*, bk. I, in his own work, *De Veritate*, q. 1, a.1: "Now, as Avicenna says, that which the intellect first conceives as, in a way, the most evident, and to which it reduces all its concepts, is being." trans. R. W. Mulligan, *Truth*, vol. I (Chicago: Regnery, 1952) 5; and again in q. 21, a.1: "But since being is what is first conceived by the intellect, as Avicenna says, every other noun must either be a synonym of being or add something at least conceptually." *Ibid.*, vol. 3. trans. R. W. Schmidt (1954) 6.
- <sup>16</sup> E. Gilson, *op. cit.*, 206-210. See also his analysis of the texts from Avicenna's metaphysics in his *Being and Some Philosophers*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1952), esp. 80-82.
- <sup>17</sup> E. Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, 216.
- <sup>18</sup> E. Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 52-53.
- <sup>19</sup> Moses Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*. trans. M. Friedlander (New York: Dover, 1957) pt. 1, ch. 57.
- <sup>20</sup> E. Gilson, *op. cit.*, 252-254.
- <sup>21</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*. trans. John P. Rowan, vol. I (Chicago: Regnery, 1961) 223, #553.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, #556.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* #558. I have inserted the Latin terms of Aquinas (enclosed in parentheses) to highlight the distinction he made between essence and existence.
- <sup>24</sup> Leo Sweeney, "Existence/Essence in Thomas Aquinas'

Early Writings" *Amer. Catholic Philos. Assoc. Proc.*, vol. 37, 1963, 97-131, in which the texts are arranged chronologically, and the arguments for this position are summarized, showing a life-long adherence by Aquinas.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in E. Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 175, where several like texts are gathered from Aquinas' later works as well.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>27</sup> Joseph Owens, "'Ignorare' and Existence," *The New Scholasticism*, vol. 46, #2, Spring, 1972, 210-219, especially 217.

<sup>28</sup> The various texts are collected and translated in Mary T. Clark, *An Aquinas Reader*. (New York: Doubleday, 1972) 87-88 and 124-127. His seeming lack of understanding of Aquinas' distinction of essence from existence as well as of Aquinas' identification of God with Supreme Existence may have led Arthur Lovejoy, in *The Great Chain of Being* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1936) to misinterpret Aquinas to be holding a concept of *being as plenitude* and necessitating God to create. Aquinas puts this plenitude and necessity *within* the Trinity of Persons, not outside God.

<sup>29</sup> John F. Wippel, "The Relationship Between Essence and Existence in Late-Thirteenth Century Thought," in Parviz Morewedge, ed., *Philosophies of Existence, Ancient and Medieval* (New York: Fordham UP), 1982) 131-164.

<sup>30</sup> The best history of this period is Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1985) vol. II, *Augustine to Scotus*, ch. XLII through LI. William Ockham's nominalist position that being is only a name did free him from the ghost of Parmendes, but he also denied the real distinction of essence from existence, leaving him with a metaphysics of the being of individuals only. cf. Copleston, *op. cit.*, vol. III, *Late Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy*, ch. 6.

<sup>31</sup> Copleston, *ibid.*, ch 22. cf. also, Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 96-107.

<sup>32</sup> Copleston, *op. cit.*, vol. IV, *Descartes to Leibniz*, ch. 4. Gilson, *op. cit.*, ch. IV.

<sup>33</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. trans. Norman Kemp Smith, (New York: St. Martin's, 1965) B 626-627.

<sup>34</sup> Sidney Hook, *The Quest for Being* (New York: St. Martin's, 1961) 14.

<sup>35</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy*. trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper, 1973) ch. 4 "Overcoming Metaphysics," especially page 86.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph Owens, *An Interpretation of Existence*. (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1968) 71. This small volume is the most comprehensive

and exhaustive treatment of this term by an author whose work on the concept of being in Aristotle, *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Inst. of Medieval Studies, 1963) is also recognized as authoritative.

<sup>37</sup> Kenneth L. Schmitz, "Metaphysics: Radical, Comprehensive, Determinate Discourse," *Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 39, #4, June, 1986, 675-694, quoting from page 693.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 693-694.