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Aquinas's Metaphysical Use of the Metaphor of Distance, Proximity and Conjunction

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Abstract: In *Contra impugnantes*, Thomas Aquinas describes creatures as becoming "distant" from God (*ab eo distare incepit*) according to their diverse essences; in fact, it falls to the rational creature to reconnect (*religio*, *re-ligare*) with God. This language reflects Aquinas's use of the metaphor of distance applied to exemplary, efficient, and final causality. While the metaphor is valuable for expressing the Creator–creature relation, its semantic entailments of proximity and conjunction also illuminate Aquinas's account of ontological intermediaries and the hierarchical ordering of causality. In exemplary causality, beings closer to God have a greater participation in the transcendental perfections. In efficient causality, creation is a certain distancing of the creature, since its idea, considered in itself, is initially "one" with God. In final causality, creaturely operation is understood as an approximation (*appropinquare*) towards ordered ends, culminating in God. The distance metaphor entails the requirement of mediums for the transmission of causal force. On the one hand, the metaphor implies the *convenientia* of intermediaries to bridge ontological "gaps" and a stepwise causal *applicatio* of lower ontological orders by higher ones, in such a way that inferior levels attain perfection by the action (*usus*) of the superior level. Properly understood, ontological distance does not signify metaphysical evil but participated causality. In particular, the distance of intelligent beings becomes a sharing in God's free and intelligent operation.

Keywords: Aquinas, metaphysics, metaphor, entailments, distance, causality, force, medium, proximity, conjunction, creativity

1. Introduction: The Distance Metaphor in *Contra impugnantes*

At the beginning of the first chapter of his treatise *Contra impugnantes Dei cultum et religionem*,[1] Aquinas describes creatures as removed from God (*ab eo*

[1] This early treatise written in the summer or early fall of 1256 was intended as a defence of the mendicant orders against attacks, notoriously represented by William of Saint-Amour's *De periculis novissimorum temporum*; see A. Traver, *The Forging of an Intellectual Defense of Mendicancy in the Medieval University*, in: *The Origin, Development, and Refinement of Medieval Religious Mendicancies*,

distare incepit) through creation (*per creationem*); in fact, it falls to the rational creature to reconnect (*religio, religatio*) with God to whom it was previously joined (*coniunctus*). Such language speaks to Aquinas's adoption of Neoplatonic metaphysical analysis, and particularly to the use of the metaphor of distance, proximity and conjunction applied to diverse types of causal analysis. The metaphor of distance used to contextualize this discourse on religion refers primarily to formal or exemplary causality by which beings are "nearer" or "farther" from God the Creator according to their essences (*quodammodo ab eo distare* […] *secundum essentiam*), that is, according to each one's degree of participation in being. The metaphor, however, also entails consequences for efficient and final causality. With respect to efficient causality, the act of creation itself is a kind of distancing of the creature from God; the creature – Aquinas tells us – originally exists first (*prius*) in God, then in itself (*in se*), insofar as God's ideas of creatures are one with Him, while creation involves a certain proceeding from (*processit*) God. Final causality is also considered in terms of distance and proximity, where creaturely operation (in the case of human beings – intelligent operation) is understood as returning and reconnecting (*religari debet*) to God. In fact, the entailments of the distance metaphor for efficient and final causality are illustrated by the Angelic Doctor by a biblical proof text from the Book of Ecclesiastes 1:7 – to the place (*ad locum*) from where rivers flow (*exeunt*), they return (*revertuntur*).[2]

The metaphysical use of the distance metaphor raises a number of questions. A first line of questioning has to do with the value of the metaphor in the target domain. Whereas the general structure of the metaphor may be applicable to the relationship between Creator and creature, it may be instructive to inves-

ed. D. Prudlo, Brill, Leiden 2011, pp. 170–171. The full citation is *Contra impugnantes Dei cultum et religionem*, caput I: "Ut autem religionis naturam cognoscere valeamus, huius nominis originem inquiramus. Nomen igitur religionis, ut Augustinus in libro de vera religione innuere videtur, a religando sumptum est. Illud autem proprie ligari dicitur quod ita uni adstringitur quod ei ad alia divertendi libertas tollatur. Sed religatio iteratam ligationem importans, ostendit ad illud aliquem ligari cui primo coniunctus fuerat, et ab eo distare incepit. Et quia omnis creatura prius in Deo extitit quam in se ipsa, et a Deo processit, quodammodo ab eo distare incipiens secundum essentiam per creationem; ideo rationalis creatura ad ipsum Deum religari debet, cui primo coniuncta fuerat etiam antequam esset, ut sic ad locum unde exeunt flumina revertantur, Eccle. I, 7. Et ideo Augustinus in Lib. de vera religione dicit: *religet nos religio uni omnipotenti Deo:* et habetur in Glossa Rom. XI, 36, super illud, *ex ipso et per ipsum* et cetera." All citations from Aquinas are taken from the *Corpus Thomisticum*, URL: https://www.corpusthomisticum.org.

[2] The full verse in the Latin Vulgate translation: "Omnia flumina intrant in mare, et mare non redundat; ad locum unde exeunt flumina revertuntur ut iterum fluant."

tigate how the entailments regarding physical causality can be carried over to the metaphysical domain.[3] In particular, the Thomistic requirement – inherited from Aristotle – of physical conjunction to the mover for the transmission of force (*virtus*) to an object moving over a distance would metaphorically entail metaphysical conjunction between creatures and their ultimate efficient and final causes. Secondly, there is the question of ontological distance and conjunction between creatures. Less perfect creatures are presumably further from God and will have an existentially more arduous time at returning to God. Moreover, the Aristotelian theory of physical mediums necessary for the transmission of force over distance would metaphorically entail necessary metaphysical intermediaries for the interaction of distinct ontological orders and for ordering of creatures' operations one to another. Finally, creation as distancing occasions a certain perplexity to those accustomed to think of God as good and free. Why should such a God freely will to create, when by that very fact, the creatures created by Him find themselves distant from God and thereby imperfect?

To aid in giving a satisfactory interpretation of the distance metaphor applied metaphysically to creation and creatures, I propose to first discuss distance – and its entailments relating to local motion, physical force and mediums – as a metaphor for framing metaphysical causality: exemplary, efficient and final. I then discuss the particular question of conjunction between creatures and the causal need for ontological intermediaries. I end by critiquing a certain negative interpretation of distance (as metaphysical evil) and proposing a possible positive interpretation (distance as participated causality and a sharing in the existential order of intelligent being).

2. The Distance Metaphor for Understanding Metaphysical Causality

Asserting that Aquinas uses the term "distantia" in a metaphorical way does not mean that it is consciously used as a literary figure. Rather, the word itself exhibits polysemy, which points to some sort of analogical relation between its different meanings. Thus Aquinas will speak of "distantia secundum locum," "distantia

[3] For a general presentation of metaphors and their entailments, see Chapter 8: *Metaphorical Entailments*, in: Z. Kövecses, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*, Oxford University Press, New York 2002, pp. 93–104.

secundum tempus," "distantia secundum essentiam," "distantia secundum proprietatem naturae," and so on. Even without the tools of contemporary metaphor theory, which stresses that many ordinary words and expressions mean what they do because of some metaphor, we find the Angelic Doctor stating that analogical words take their meanings from that which is better known *quoad nos*, to then be transferred to signify things less evident to us – even though perhaps more intelligible *quoad se*.[4] Aquinas distinguishes how a signified reality can be "properly said" regarding what the word signifies (*quantum ad rem significatam*) and regarding the reason for which the word is used (*quantum ad rationem a qua nomen imponitur*). For example, what the word "light" signifies is more properly said of material reality, while its quality of splendour or self-manifestation makes the word "light" more properly said of spiritual things. In the case of "distantia," the term most properly refers to a spatial reality. Citing Aristotle's *Metaphysics* 10.4, Aquinas asserts that the notion of distance (*nomen distantiae*) has been transferred from things that are separated according to place (*ab his qui sunt secundum locum*), to then signify other kinds of contrariety or difference (*processit* […] *ad omnia contraria*).[5]

In its spatial context, distance also signifies a measure of local motion.[6] In fact, physical motion takes its quantity from the distance between the two terminuses. Aquinas agrees with Aristotle on the direct proportion between distance and movement: the greater the distance, the greater the movement.[7] In local motion,

4 Cf. *Super Sent*. 1.22.1.4.

5 Cf. *Summa theologiae* I-2.7.1: "Respondeo dicendum quod, quia nomina, secundum philosophum, sunt signa intellectuum, necesse est quod secundum processum intellectivae cognitionis, sit etiam nominationis processus. Procedit autem nostra cognitio intellectualis a notioribus ad minus nota. Et ideo apud nos a notioribus nomina transferuntur ad significandum res minus notas. Et inde est quod, sicut dicitur in X Metaphys., ab his quae sunt secundum locum, processit nomen distantiae ad omnia contraria, et similiter nominibus pertinentibus ad motum localem, utimur ad significandum alios motus, eo quod corpora, quae loco circumscribuntur, sunt maxime nobis nota."

6 Cf. Aristotle, *Physics* 4.12, 220b28–31: "καὶ μετροῦμεν καὶ τὸ μέγεθος τῇ κινήσει καὶ τὴν κίνησιν τῷ μεγέθει. πολλὴν γὰρ εἶναί φαμεν τὴν ὁδόν, ἂν ἡ πορεία πολλή, καὶ ταύτην πολλήν, ἂν ἡ ὁδὸς ᾖ πολλή"; cf. *In Physic*. 4.19.7: "Mensuramus autem et magnitudinem per motum, et motum per magnitudinem. Dicimus enim multam esse viam, quando percipimus motum nostrum fuisse multum: et e converso, quando consideramus magnitudinem viae, dicimus motum nostrum fuisse multum."

7 Cf. *Super Sent*. 4.5.1.3.3.ad: "in motibus virtus moventis proportionetur distantiae quae est inter terminos, ideo contingit, quia ab illa distantia motus accipit quantitatem. Quanta enim est via, tantus est motus, ut dicitur in 4 Physic. Motus autem est proprius effectus virtutis moventis, inquantum hujusmodi, ei proportionatus."

the perfection of the movement is measured by the nearness of the mover to its final terminus. Furthermore, in an extended moving object, that part of the object, and by extension that part of the movement which is closer to the final terminus, is more perfect.[8]

Here is where we introduce the entailments[9] of the relationship of distance and local motion to force (*virtus*). From the point of view of the starting terminus, a non-self-moving object must be receiving force from its mover. There is a direct proportion between the *virtus* of the mover and the distance to be travelled between the two terminuses. The *virtus* may not be constant throughout the movement and is proportional to the proximity to the source, for the *virtus* of a mover acts on what is distant only through what is closer.[10]

At this point, we need to make a small digression with regards to the Aristotelian and Thomistic concept of force over distance. Plato – reducing all motion to self-motion – asserts that what exists, insofar as it exists, has power (*dynamis*) *ad extra*.[11] Aristotle adopts this idea of force in material substances as *physis*, or in

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8 Cf. *Summa theologiae* I-2.107.1: "Sicut patet quod motus differunt specie secundum quod ordinantur ad diversos terminos, secundum vero quod una pars motus est propinquior termino quam alia, attenditur differentia in motu secundum perfectum et imperfectum."

9 That Aquinas was also aware of what contemporary metaphor theory calls "entailments," can be shown in the particular case of motion (and thus of distance) in *De virtutibus* 1.11. After reciting Aristotle concerning the derivation of meanings of "motion" from what is most known (*secundum locum*), Aquinas extends the metaphorical usage to related notions (*nomina convenientia motui*) of the basic meaning, for example "augmenting" (*augeri*) and "numerically great" (*magna*): "Sciendum est ergo, quod cum nomina sint signa intellectuum, ut dicitur I Periher.; sicut ex magis notis cognoscimus minus nota, ita etiam ex magis notis minus nota nominamus. Et inde est quod, quia motus localis est notior inter omnes motus, ex contrarietate secundum locum derivatur nomen distantiae ad omnia contraria inter quae potest esse aliquis motus; ut dicit philosophus X Metaph. Et similiter, quia motus substantiae secundum quantitatem est sensibilior quam motus secundum alterationem; inde est quod nomina convenientia motui secundum quantitatem derivantur ad alterationem. Et inde est quod, sicut corpus quod movetur ad quantitatem perfectam dicitur augeri, et ipsa quantitas perfecta dicitur magna respectu imperfectae; ita illud quod movetur de qualitate imperfecta ad perfectam, dicitur augeri secundum qualitatem; et ipsa qualitas perfecta dicitur magna respectu imperfectae. Et quia perfectio uniuscuiusque rei est eius bonitas; ideo Augustinus dicit, quod in his quae non magna mole sunt, idem est esse maius quod melius. Moveri autem de forma imperfecta ad perfectam, nihil est aliud quam subiectum magis reduci in actum: nam forma actus est; unde subiectum magis percipere formam, nihil aliud est quam ipsum reduci magis in actum illius formae."

10 Cf. *Super Sent*. 3.3.1.1.2.1: "Sed virtus alicujus agentis prius pervenit ad ea quae sunt sibi propinquiora, et per ea ad magis distantia."

11 Cf. M. Jammer, *Concepts of Force*, Courier Corporation, North Chelmsford 2012, p. 29.

Latin, *natura*. Since force is inseparable from substance, the objects being moved locally by another must be in constant contact with the subject of the force.[12] If Aristotle has to explain how an arrow moves through air once separated from the archer's bow, he resorts to proposing the existence of a fluid *medium* between the bow and the moving arrow – air – along with a complex explanation of how the air in front of the advancing arrow receives the force of the bow, and being displaced, circles behind to fill the void left at the tail of the arrow. The moved air thus in turn imparts force to the arrow to continue its forward motion. It is important to note that the physical medium both enables the transmission of the force but also resists it, such that the force diminishes as distance from the source increases.[13] Later Neoplatonism will explain action-over-distance by at least some kind of sympathetic or connecting activity (even if not physical contact); Latin terms such as *coniunctio*, *contagio*, *cognatio*, or *continuatio* refer to the connection required for physical force to be transmitted to a moving object.[14] Such a concept of force-over-distance is taken up by Thomas and his medieval contemporaries;[15] Aquinas, in fact, criticizes John Philoponus's impetus theory – the view that something internal to a body is the source of its local movement.[16]

Now, the concept of force has a direct relation to that of cause.[17] In fact the sign that something is the cause – and not only a participant – of a perfection is the observation that the "closer" one is to that something, the more one participates in that perfection. We have been exemplifying this regarding the "perfection"

[12] Cf. *Physics* 7.1, 242b24–27: "ἀλλ᾽ εἰ τὸ κινοῦν πρώτως κατὰ τόπον καὶ σωματικὴν κίνησιν ἀνάγκη ἢ ἅπτεσθαι ἢ συνεχὲς εἶναι τῷ κινουμένῳ, καθάπερ ὁρῶμεν ἐπὶ πάντων, ἀνάγκη τὰ κινούμενα καὶ τὰ κινοῦντα συνεχῆ εἶναι ἢ ἅπτεσθαι ἀλλήλων, ὥστ᾽ εἶναί τι ἐξ ἁπάντων ἕν"; *In Physic*. 7.1.2: "Dicit ergo primo, quod id quod localiter et corporaliter movetur primo et immediate ab aliquo mobili movente, necesse est quod tangatur ab eo, sicut baculus tangitur a manu; vel quod continuetur ei, sicut continuatur una pars aeris alteri, et sicut pars continuatur animali. Et hoc videtur contingere in omnibus, quod movens semper coniungitur mobili altero istorum modorum"; *Physics* 7.1, 244a14–244b2: "ἀδύνατον δὲ ἢ ἀφ᾽ αὑτοῦ πρὸς ἄλλο ἢ ἀπ᾽ ἄλλου πρὸς αὑτὸ κινεῖν μὴ ἁπτόμενον, ὥστε φανερὸν ὅτι τοῦ κατὰ τόπον κινουμένου καὶ κινοῦντος οὐδέν ἐστι μεταξύ"; *In Physic*. 7.1.3: "Sic ergo remota hac dubitatione, concludit quod movens et motum sint simul, et quod inter ea nihil est medium"; M. Jammer, *Concepts of Force*, op. cit., p. 36.

[13] Cf. N.R. Hanson, *Aristotle (and Others) on Motion through Air*, "The Review of Metaphysics" 1965, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp. 133–136.

[14] Cf. M. Jammer, *Concepts of Force*, op. cit., p. 44.

[15] Cf. L.J. Elders, *St. Thomas Aquinas's Commentary on Aristotle's* Physics, "The Review of Metaphysics" 2013, Vol. 66, No. 4, p. 720.

[16] Cf. N.R. Hanson, *Aristotle (and Others) on Motion through Air*, op. cit., p. 137.

[17] Cf. M. Jammer, *Concepts of Force*, op. cit., p. 15.

that is local motion; the closer one is to the mover, the greater one will participate in the force or *virtus* of the mover. We find this regarding the "perfection" of quality as well. Thomas is fond of illustrating the cause–distance relationship by observing that the closer one is to a heat source, like fire, the hotter one gets. Conversely, the sign that a thing *is* the source of heat is that the closer to it another thing gets, the hotter the latter gets. That is, if a greater or lesser participation in a perfection is observed among things, it is a sign that there must be a "cause" of that perfection, and the proximity to the cause is proportional to the magnitude of perfection.[18] Note that in the example of qualities such as heat and light, there is still no action-over-distance; the source of heat heats a medium, which in turn heats more distant objects (with some loss of heat proportional to the distance).

What we have been calling the "distance metaphor" thus has a certain conceptual structure. At minimum, it asserts a quantitative relation between two terminuses. Yet, when combined as a measurement of local motion, the metaphor entails gradation of causal force inversely proportional to the distance in the direction of the movement, where those objects in contact or proximate to the source participate more in the perfection than distant objects. The metaphor also entails the presence of mediums which are necessary to transmit force over distance (in a diminished way) and which must be conjoined to both source and object.

Thomas does not hesitate to apply the distance metaphor to pure perfections: truth, goodness, life, intelligence, and the like. If we discover that these perfections are found in different degrees in things, they are only so graded due to their closeness or distance from the source of that perfection, which is the cause of that perfection.[19] We find such an argument in the famous Fourth Way – *ex gradibus qui in rebus inveniuntur* – for demonstrating the existence of God as Absolute Source of truth, goodness, life, intelligence and the like.[20] Now the most fundamental

[18] Cf. *Summa contra gentiles* 3.64.8: "Unde, si aliquid tanto participatur perfectius ab aliquibus quanto alicui rei magis appropinquant, signum est quod illa res sit causa illius quod diversimode participatur: sicut, si aliqua magis sunt calida secundum quod magis appropinquant igni, signum est quod ignis sit causa caloris."

[19] Additionally, one can argue that in the case of "pure perfections," that is, perfections which in their very notions do not contain any limit, the source of that perfection must be Absolute (unlimited) and separate (in a transcendent order).

[20] *Summa theologiae* I.2.3: "Invenitur enim in rebus aliquid magis et minus bonum, et verum, et nobile, et sic de aliis huiusmodi. Sed magis et minus dicuntur de diversis secundum quod appropinquant diversimode ad aliquid quod maxime est, sicut magis calidum est, quod magis

perfection is being, and in general, the degree of ontological distance from God is measured by similarity to God's being.[21] So, for example, immobile things are more similar to God than mobile things.[22] In general, the simpler (less composed of act and potency) something is, the closer it is to the First Cause, thus participating more in its being and operation.[23] So "ontological distance" is a metaphor for measuring "ontological perfection" or perfection in being. All creatures participate in God's essence by an imperfect similitude.[24] In this sense, ontological distance speaks specifically to exemplar causality and to creatures' participation in being.[25] Those creatures that are more ontologically distant from God have

appropinquat maxime calido. Est igitur aliquid quod est verissimum, et optimum, et nobilissimum, et per consequens maxime ens, nam quae sunt maxime vera, sunt maxime entia, ut dicitur II Metaphys. Quod autem dicitur maxime tale in aliquo genere, est causa omnium quae sunt illius generis, sicut ignis, qui est maxime calidus, est causa omnium calidorum, ut in eodem libro dicitur. Ergo est aliquid quod omnibus entibus est causa esse, et bonitatis, et cuiuslibet perfectionis, et hoc dicimus Deum."

21 Cf. *Quodlibet XI* 1 ad 5: "Ad quintum dicendum, quod huiusmodi distantia et propinquitas creaturarum ad Deum non est secundum locum, sed secundum similitudinem et dissimilitudinem: nam illa quae magis assimilantur Deo, dicimus esse sibi propinquiora; quae vero magis recedunt a similitudine ipsius, dicimus esse sibi remotiora."

22 Cf. *Summa contra gentiles* 3.72.4. "Quanto aliqua sunt propinquiora Deo, tanto magis de similitudine ipsius participant: et quanto magis distant, tanto magis a similitudine ipsius deficiunt. Illa autem quae sunt Deo propinquissima, sunt omnino immobilia: scilicet substantiae separatae, quae maxime ad Dei similitudinem accedunt, qui est omnino immobilis."

23 Cf. *Compendium theologiae* I.102, citing *Liber de causis*, prop. 9, nn. 3–9: "Quia vero causa prima est maxime una, quanto aliqua res fuerit magis simplex et una, tanto magis appropinquat ad causam primam et magis participat propriam operationem ipsius."

24 Cf. L.-B. Geiger, *La participation dans la philosophie de S. Thomas d'Aquin*, J. Vrin, Paris 1953, p. 29: "*La participation exprime l'état diminué, particularisé, et, en ce sens, participé, d'une essence, chaque fois qu'elle n'est pas réalisée dans la plénitude absolue de son contenu formel*" (italics in original).

25 As an aside, Aquinas repeatedly states that the distance between God and creatures is infinite, and the ontological distance between inferior and superior creatures is almost nothing (*quasi nihil*) in comparison to the distance between even the highest creature and God (for example, *Summa contra gentiles* 3.57.3): "Distantia intellectus secundum ordinem naturae supremi ad Deum est infinita in perfectione et bonitate. Eius autem distantia ad intellectum infimum est finita: finiti enim ad finitum non potest esse infinita distantia. Distantia igitur quae est inter infimum intellectum creatum et supremum, est quasi nihil in comparatione ad illam distantiam quae est inter supremum intellectum creatum et Deum." These "distances" are not of the same order. In fact, the entailment of spatial "distance" here breaks down, since the "distance" between creatures is in the order of essence, or categorical, while the "distance" between God and any creature is in the order of *esse*, or transcendental. Still, some spatial entailments are conserved here, for example, conjunction. God is infinitely distant, yet necessarily omnipresent to creature and in every place (cf. *Summa theologiae* I.8.1 and 2).

essences that participate less in being. And since the power of a creature is related to essence, creatures more distant have a less perfect way of operating.

If the distance metaphor is to hold, there should be a medium connecting God, the Source of being, and creatures. What could this possibly mean for creation when the only possible candidate for a medium could be the Creator Himself? We could say, in an improper way, that God creates *by means of* divine ideas. The notion of "divine exemplar," for Aquinas, is the idea of a creature God wills to create.[26] Even so, divine exemplars are not really distinct from God's Being and thus can only be called a quasi-medium. Still, gradation of ontological distance would also need to correspond to some kind of gradation in the divine exemplars. Aquinas follows Aristotle on this point, comparing the differences of species to differences of numbers; where numbers increase and decrease by addition and subtraction, so, too, species are considered greater or lesser by the adding or subtracting of specific differences to their essential definitions.[27]

We can also understand grades of essential forms, and consequently their role as mediums, in considering the operation of real beings. Creation is not simply participation of a certain degree of essential perfection, but also participation in *being a cause in its own right*. Herein lies the Thomistic doctrine of secondary causality. Participated causality means that creaturely efficiency is truly both in the transcendental order (where God is the First Efficient Cause), and in the creatural order – where the operation is truly attributed to the creature. This double efficient causality is not part-God and part-creature, but fully transcendent and fully creatural. Each creature's operation is caused, through a series of

[26] Cf. *Summa theologiae* I.15.3: "cum ideae a Platone ponerentur principia cognitionis rerum et generationis ipsarum, ad utrumque se habet idea, prout in mente divina ponitur. Et secundum quod est principium factionis rerum, exemplar dici potest, et ad practicam cognitionem pertinet. Secundum autem quod principium cognoscitivum est, proprie dicitur ratio; et potest etiam ad scientiam speculativam pertinere. Secundum ergo quod exemplar est, secundum hoc se habet ad omnia quae a Deo fiunt secundum aliquod tempus."

[27] Cf. *Summa contra gentiles* 2.95.2: "Scire igitur oportet quod diversae rerum species gradatim naturam entis possident. Statim enim in prima entis divisione invenitur hoc quidem perfectum, scilicet ens per se et ens actu: aliud vero imperfectum, scilicet ens in alio et ens in potentia. Et eodem modo discurrenti per singula apparet unam speciem super aliam aliquem gradum perfectionis adiicere: sicut animalia super plantas, et animalia progressiva super animalia immobilia; in coloribus etiam una species alia perfectior invenitur, secundum quod est albedini propinquior. Propter quod Aristoteles, in VIII Metaph., dicit quod definitiones rerum sunt sicut numerus, in quo unitas subtracta vel addita speciem numeri variat: per quem modum in definitionibus, si una differentia subtrahatur vel addatur, diversa species invenitur."

per se subordinated efficient causes, by God, the Unmoved Mover and First Efficient Cause.[28] In other words, without the efficiency of the Uncaused Cause *hic et nunc*, none of the other members in the chain of subordinated efficient causes would have any efficiency respect to the effect. At the same time, each creature's operation is truly caused by the creature itself, according to its nature. Thomas uses the analogy of a craftsman and a chisel, where the former *applies* the latter, with its properties of sharpness and hardness, to its operation of cutting. In a similar way, God *applies* the forms and powers of creatures to their operations.[29] Indeed, in the sense of *applicatio* of the creative force of being, Thomas asserts that one can speak of two orders of "immediacy" in the line of efficient causality: in the transcendent order, the causality of the First Cause is the immediate cause of a thing's being, while in the creatural order, the proximate cause is the immediate cause of how a thing is effected.[30] In addition, in the creatural order, powers closer to their principle rule over those further away from the principle;[31] thus, for example, angels (separate substances), "closer" to God, govern celestial bodies, and these govern the elements.[32]

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28 See Aquinas's First and Second Ways, *Summa theologiae* I.2.3.

29 *Summa theologiae* I.105.5: "forma eius quod ab agente applicatur ad agendum (quamvis et ipsum agens per formam suam agat); ut patet in artificialibus. Artifex enim movetur ad agendum a fine, qui est ipsum operatum, puta arca vel lectus; et applicat ad actionem securim quae incidit per suum acumen. […] [O]mnia agunt in virtute ipsius Dei; et ita ipse est causa actionum omnium agentium. […] Deus movet […] res ad operandum, quasi applicando formas et virtutes rerum ad operationem, sicut etiam artifex applicat securim ad scindendum." We anticipate a deficiency in the metaphysical application of the distance metaphor in that it may mislead us to imagine the efficacy of God and that of creatures in the same order. Thomas speaks of a "quasi applicatio" precisely because the application of the creature to operation is not in the creaturely order, but on the transcendent order – through the creation and conservation of the being of the creature.

30 Cf. *Summa contra gentiles* 3.70.5: "Et sicut agens infimum invenitur immediatum activum, ita virtus primi agentis invenitur immediata ad producendum effectum: nam virtus infimi agentis non habet quod producat hunc effectum ex se, sed ex virtute proximi superioris; et virtus illius hoc habet ex virtute superioris; et sic virtus supremi agentis invenitur ex se productiva effectus, quasi causa immediata; sicut patet in principiis demonstrationum, quorum primum est immediatum. Sicut igitur non est inconveniens quod una actio producatur ex aliquo agente et eius virtute, ita non est inconveniens quod producatur idem effectus ab inferiori agente et Deo: ab utroque immediate, licet alio et alio modo."

31 Cf. *Summa contra gentiles* 3.79.3: "Potentia intellectiva quae est propinquior principio, semper invenitur regitiva intellectualis virtutis quae magis a principio distat."

32 *De potentia* 5.8: "Elementa ergo agunt in virtute corporum caelestium et corpora caelestia agunt in virtute substantiarum separatarum."

We can discover quasi-mediums, as well, in the line of the return of all creatures to God. Thomas cites the Pythagorean triplet – principle (*arché*), medium (*meson*) and end (*télos*) – to affirm that in general the natures of creatures are the medium by which they are (re-)connected to God, their Final End. Compared to the Creative Source of being, the essence of any creature is limited in being. In the metaphysical world, the imperfection in the order of essences is ordered to ulterior perfectibility in the operational order.[33] In other words, all creatures must operate (move) and operate towards an end proportional to their essence. The necessary medium, which connects the substantial order to the operational order, therefore is an interior *inclination*, a really existing nature, which orders a thing to its operation. In the operational order, things are more perfect insofar as they more approximate God, the ultimate goal of all natures. Intelligent natures are closest to God in the operational order, as their *intentio per se* is to know and love God. Non-rational natures are further away in the operational order, and their *intentio* towards God is only mediated, through their use and assumption by intelligent creatures.

The less perfect the creature, the "greater the distance it must overcome" to return to God due to its less perfect operation. For example, human beings, being further from God must come to know God through a long process of inquiry, while angels, closer to God, and more perfect in operation, can know God without inquiry.[34] It may seem ironic that less perfect creatures have a greater distance to overcome but have less perfect operation to do so. Aquinas overcomes this seeming paradox by affirming a stepwise order in the *reditio* of creatures to God. The different creatures of the universe are ordered one to another (by decree of Divine Wisdom), insofar as one helps another to achieve its end, and in this way to have the whole universe re-united with God.[35] Just as the more powerful creatures govern the lesser, the fulfilment of the lesser is a means to the fulfilment of the higher.

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[33] *Super Sent*. 1.3.2.2: "Perfectio autem creaturae non statim habetur in suis principiis, quae imperfecta sunt, ut patet in materia et forma, quorum neutrum habet per se esse perfectum; sed in conjunctione ipsius creaturae ad suum finem. Distantia autem natura non conjungit sine medio: et ideo in creaturis invenitur principium, medium et finis, secundum quae tria ponebat Pythagoras perfectionem cujuslibet creaturae."

[34] *Super Sent*. 2.7.1.2: "Datur autem homini longior via quam Angelo, quia erat magis a Deo distans, et oportebat quod in ejus cognitionem inquirendo perveniret; Angelus autem statim deiformi intellectu sine inquisitione in divina pervenire potuit."

[35] *Super Sent*. 2.9.1.6: "Sicut enim universi partes ad invicem ordinatae sunt, inquantum una alteram juvat ad consecutionem sui finis, et etiam ad ultimum bonum, quod est finis totius universi,

The Creator applies "creative force" to the medium (the natures) by being ever *conjoined* to every creature as that which creates and conserves each being in existence and its essence. The creative force metaphorically diminishes with the ontological distance of the inferior natures. Yet, in the operational order, these ontological mediums become the diverse natures, *natural inclinations*, towards an ever more perfect end. The finalities of creatures are also ordered in that material beings are ordered towards facilitating immaterial beings (human persons) to achieve their final end in being united to God through intellectual knowing and loving.

3. Metaphysical Conjunction

We have seen that ontological distance is stepwise and therefore displays ontological gaps. Metaphysically speaking, different grades of being can be manifest either as different strata of organicity in a single individual or differing complexities of metaphysical composition of act and potency in different individuals. An example of the first instance would be vegetative, sensitive and rational faculties in a single human person. An example of the second is seen in the ontological difference between water and a living thing. A living thing includes water, along with other heterogeneous physical and chemical parts, each of which has their own physical and chemical nature and properties; yet in the living thing, these parts are related as *matter* to living *form*, which form is not that of any of the parts, nor their mere sum.

We saw that in Aristotelian physics, conjunction of physical bodies was necessary for the effective transmission of causal force. For this reason, any physical gap between a source and its effect requires the existence of a physical intermediary in connection with both the source of force and the physical effect.[36] Applying this entailment metaphysically, for one ontological level to engage with another, ontological intermediaries should exist. The ontological medium must be some

ita etiam connexio hierarchiarum est et secundum relationem in unum finem ultimum, secundum quod omnis hierarchiae finis est unitas et similitudo ad Deum"; *In De div. nom.* 7.4: "ipsa divina Sapientia est omnium causa effectiva, inquantum res producit in esse et non solum rebus dat esse, sed etiam esse cum ordinae in rebus, inquantum res invicem se coadunant in ordinem ad ultimum finem."

[36] *Super Sent*. 3.2.2.1.2 s.c. 1: "ea quae sunt distantia, per aliquid utrique proximum conjunguntur."

one thing that "touches" or "bridges" two distinct ontological levels. Metaphysical conjunction is expressed in the adage extracted from Chapter 7 of Pseudo-Dionysius's *De divinis nominibus*, often cited by Aquinas: "Divine Wisdom joins the ends of the superior with the principles of the inferior";[37] or "the highest of the inferior nature touches that which is lowest in the superior."[38] In theory, in every order, genus or species, there can exist superior, inferior and middle-of-the-road members. So in the genus of animal, there are superior animal species and inferior ones; in the species of human beings, there could be superior individuals and inferior ones; and even in the meta-genus of angels, there would be higher and lower angels.

It is not clear whether Thomas accepted this as a universal metaphysical principle, as it seems to constrain the Creator's freedom; at least in accordance with what the distance metaphor entails, Thomas takes the Pseudo-Dionysian principle as pointing to the workings of Divine Wisdom regarding the interrelationship between creatures. The lower is raised up through its union with the higher. For example, with regards to the relationship between the faculties of intellection and sensation in a human being, Aquinas affirms that sensation is not only *for* the intellect, but actually *proceeds* from the intellect as from its active principle, like an (imperfect) participation of full power.[39] Although of less ontological perfection, sensation has greater efficacy in its lower order. But it is a case of causal *applicatio*; the higher power applies the lower power to one and the same object of both.

If we consider the universe of diverse beings, we should also find a whole slew of intermediate beings. For indeed, superior grades of being are not simply a complexification of the lower ones, but an ontological jump. The number of different ways of arranging and augmenting that an inferior level can explore are in some sense indefinite, but from the point of view of the ontological "space" of an inferior level, a superior level is unforeseen *a priori*. For example, we have most probably discovered all possible chemical elements (of the periodic table) that could naturally exist or be artificially constructed, and we can know each ele-

[37] *Summa contra Gentiles* 2.68: "beatus Dionysius dicit, in VII cap. de Div. Nom., quod divina sapientia coniungit fines superiorum principiis inferiorum."

[38] *Summa theologiae* I.78.1: "supremum inferiores naturae attingit id quod est infimum superioris."

[39] *Summa theologiae* I.77.7: "potentiae animae quae sunt priores secundum ordinem perfectionis et naturae (sunt) principia aliarum per modum finis et activi principii. Videmus enim quod sensus est propter intellectum et non e converso. Sensus etiam est quaedam deficiens participatio intellectus; unde secundum naturalem originem, quodammodo est ab intellectu, sicut imperfectum a perfecto."

ment's properties. But when we begin combining them together, we often cannot foresee what kind of properties the molecules will have given our knowledge of the elements' properties. A molecule of water is not merely a juxtaposed sum of hydrogen and oxygen atoms; water has many physical and chemical properties that may not have been suspected from just examining properties of hydrogen and oxygen. Something similar can be said of the relationship between amino-acid building blocks and functional proteins, or between individual variations within a biological species and higher species.

The examples just given illustrate the relationship between ontological levels like Russian *matryoshki*, in which lower ontological orders are virtually present in individuals of higher ontological orders. We can also observe that superior ontological orders have the capacity to facilitate individuals of lower orders to proliferate. Animals' eating of fruits allows trees to spread their seeds farther abroad than they could by themselves. Human beings can be stewards of the planet and the diversity of living species through their use of intelligence. Now which of the configurations at a given ontological level should be taken as the "highest" or more perfect? For example, they are not always the most complex macromolecules, which become the matter for the origin of living systems. Life on our planet uses a fairly small range of macromolecules, mostly carbon-based, with DNA/RNA molecules for information retention and replication. On planets where there is no life, there exists the possibility of the formation of different types of complex macromolecules, but on our planet – where there is life – they are the biological macromolecules that preferentially proliferate. Joseph de Finance proposes that what seems to be the "highest" or "predominant" in the inferior order is *only* such because it is somehow attracted by a higher level of organization that was sought out.[40] An ontological order is recognized to be at its "highest" only in relationship to a higher order. We have here a different kind of *intentio*, not of individual natures, but of the whole order of creation, where lower ontological levels tend towards giving rise to higher ones.[41]

[40] Cf. J. de Finance, *Cittadino dei due mondi. Il posto dell'uomo nella creazione*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 1993, pp. 73–74: "Quello che ci sembra il culmine dell'ordine inferiore, è stato raggiunto soltanto per l'attrazione […] di una forma superiore che si cercava (che *era cercata*)" (italics in original).

[41] This conclusion would be valid, given the metaphysical application of the distance metaphor, even without considering the possibility of the evolution of species. If we were to factor in the possibility of evolution, given the presence of ontological grades, we would still have to consider

In sum, Aquinas affirms a stepwise causal *applicatio* of lower ontological orders by higher (*usus*) ones, in such a way that inferior levels are perfected (even at their level) by the action of the superior level, and with the presupposition that there is a universal *intentio* of lower ontological levels being assumed or used by the next higher level. It should be noted that in this overarching metaphysical application of the distance metaphor, some anomalies result. For example, a rigid hierarchical view of nature is not always observable; for example, there is often a mutual symbiosis between levels, as happens with intestinal bacteria in cud-chewing animals and in humans. Furthermore, which members of an inferior order will end up being integrated or conjoined to the higher level cannot be foreseen. For example, it is not perhaps foreseeable that life can only be carbon-based, and not silicon-based. In human affairs, momentous historical events are not always effectuated by powerful or wise persons, but sometimes by the humble and otherwise marginal individual.

4. Ontological Distance and an Ordered Causal Network

Our final inquiry is whether the distance metaphor applied to creation implies a sort of intrinsic metaphysical evil. Not only would creation be the production of so many imperfect beings, but also distinction in creatures would put some beings at even greater distance from God, and therefore requiring a much more arduous return. Given our previous reflection on participated being as shared (secondary) causality, the distance metaphor's entailment of gradual imperfection should be recast as divinely-willed shared creativity.[42] Participation in causality opens up what could be called an "existential order," where without denying transcendent creative causality attributed to God, each creature is "possessor of one's own nature," and therefore, has its causality as proper to itself.

Participated causality can be seen too as a participation in God's freedom, in that there is always some degree of spontaneity and at least a modicum of indetermination in any creature's operation. Higher beings have greater and proper participation in God's freedom; they are *persons*. When acting freely, they choose

the universe of creatures as a whole, whose Creator is at once Cause of its evolution, and Ultimate End in the existence and action of intelligent creatures towards Himself.

[42] Cf. J. de Finance, *Existence et liberté*, Emmanuel Vitte, Paris 1955, p. 181: "Créér, pour Dieu, c'est *se vouloir comme participé*."

not only a good object judged according to what is good for their nature, but since they are also possessors of their nature, they concomitantly choose themselves as the agent cause of the action, thus determining the meaning of their existence. In this way, persons are truly a first cause in the existential order, attributing to themselves the moral goodness or evil of the act.[43] Thus God is truly the transcendent efficient cause of free acts – applying, as it were, the free agency of the person to their acts – without thereby being the agent of moral good or evil.

In sum, the negative axiological entailment of the distance metaphor does not apply. Creation is not a metaphysical fall, but the gracious capacity for shared causality, mediated by the nature of each participated essence, and ultimately being fulfilled in the ordered union of creation with God through the auspices of intellectual creatures. The distinction of creatures, moreover, allows subsidiary causal participation, where higher-order creatures assume in themselves the causal spontaneity of lower-order powers. In turn, lower-order creatures find their operational fulfilment – and dignity – in assimilation of members of their order into the next higher order. Divine Wisdom is again revealed in this creatural ecology, which should not be understood as a mechanistic roll-out of strict determinism, but rather the harmonious and mutual role of all creatural spontaneity towards a shared free *telos*.

5. Conclusion

Is it legitimate to apply the distance metaphor to the metaphysical order? Are we not confronted with a typical example of anthropomorphizing reality, extrapolating our physical experience to speak about "superior" grades of being and operation? That we naturally fantasize minimally counter-intuitive agents to explain phenomena we cannot ourselves explain may be cognitive science's way of accounting for the fact of extending the metaphor of distance to imagined angelic and even divine causes.[44] Be that as it may, the ability to observe *grades* of perfection, operation, and causality is not the work of imagination, but of reason.

[43] Cf. C. Fabro, *Atto esistenziale e impegno della libertà*, "Divus Thomas" 1983, Vol. 86, Nos. 2–3, pp. 125–161.

[44] See, for example, P. Boyer, C. Ramble, *Cognitive Templates for Religious Concepts: Cross-Cultural Evidence for Recall of Counter-Intuitive Representations*, "Cognitive Science" 2001, Vol. 25, No. 4, pp. 535–564.

Reason – open as it is to being – can recognize that a certain mode of being is just that: *a* mode of being. Concepts like life, intelligence, and the like, the so-called pure perfections, *are* indeed comparisons of our self-awareness with other realities. Our reason grasps these *grades* of being as well as our own *grade* of being. Gradations of a perfection, as the distance metaphor entails, are a sign of the *participated nature* of each and every mode of being, thus requiring that such gradations be caused, not just in their coming to be (say by generation and corruption) at their ontological level, but in their very being. The metaphor of distance and causal force is an analogical shortcut to reveal that the very fact of *grades* of being requires a unique causal source: *Ipsum Esse*.

Cornelio Fabro proposes that Thomas's mature thought puts the way of participation as the metaphysically best way at arriving to God. As we mentioned, the Fourth Way in the *Summa theologiae* initiates this line of thought, even as it uses the distance metaphor as an illustration. Other instances of the Fourth Way in the Thomistic opus also employ the distance metaphor, for example, the Sun as light source mediated through the medium of air.[45] The entailments of the distance metaphor, based on Aristotelian *Physics*, do help in arriving at participated causality, a hierarchy of beings and an ordered causal network. Yet, imagining causal conjunction in a physical way may direct our minds to regard the conclusion of the Fourth Way as merely a *Maxime Ens*, the first in a series of beings – what is criticized by Martin Heidegger as "ontotheology"; indeed, *Maxime Ens* is the formulation given in the *Summa theologiae*. To this point, Fabro suggests that the most mature form of the Fourth Way arrives to God as *Ipsum Esse*, a transcendent and *separated* being. In this sense, Thomas appeals to Plato over Aristotle, sometimes using the metaphor of a hypothetical Absolute Whiteness.[46] The "maximum formulation"[47] of the Fourth Way may be found in the *Commentary on the Prologue of John*,[48] where the distance metaphor is notably not employed.

45 Cf. *De substantiis separatis* 3.

46 For example, in *Summa contra Gentiles* I.43: "si albedo esset per se existens, perfectio albedinis in ea non terminaretur, quominus haberet quicquid de perfectione albedinis haberi potest"; *Super librum De causis* 3: "si albedo esset separata, ipsa albedo simplex esset causa omnium alborum in quantum sunt alba, non autem aliquid albedinem participans"; *Quaestiones de quodlibet* 3.8: "ese enim subsistens non potest ese nisi unum, sicut nec albedo subsistens non potest ese nisi unum".

47 C. Fabro, *Appendix 2. Sviluppo, significato e valore della «IV Via»*, in: *L'uomo e il rischio di Dio*, Ed. Studium, Roma 1967, pp. 239–240.

48 *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis lectura*, Proeoemium 1: "Quidam autem venerunt in cognitionem Dei ex dignitate ipsius Dei: et isti fuerunt Platonici. Consideraverunt enim quod omne illud

Rather, the reasoning is straightforward from the fact of *participated* being.[49] Every perfection that is by participation is reduced to what has that perfection by essence. Since everything that exists participates in being, and thus is a being by participation, there must exist something at the peak[50] of all things: *Ipsum Esse*, being *per essentiam*, God. That the greatest in being is *separated* requires seeing that being is not a simply one among other categorical perfections, but a transcendental perfection. Being differs from any other perfection precisely in that all other perfections are such only insofar as they are made so by *act of being*.[51] *Ipsum Esse*, as separate, has no limitation or measure whatsoever in being, and wholly transcends the series of created beings. God is thus not conjoined in the order of essence to any creature, as if their essences emanated ontologically or dialectically from Absolute Being. No, *Ipsum Esse* transcends all beings as their creative and conserving cause, such that God, while being in all – by power, essence and presence[52] – is truly above all.

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quod est secundum participationem, reducitur ad aliquid quod sit illud per suam essentiam, sicut ad primum et ad summum; sicut omnia ignita per participationem reducuntur ad ignem, qui est per essentiam suam talis. Cum ergo omnia quae sunt, participent esse, et sint per participationem entia, necesse est esse aliquid in cacumine omnium rerum, quod sit ipsum esse per suam essentiam, idest quod sua essentia sit suum esse: et hoc est Deus, qui est sufficientissima, et dignissima, et perfectissima causa totius esse, a quo omnia quae sunt, participant esse."

49 Participated being is often identified as contingent being. However, this latter, if founded on the Avicennian notion of *possibile esse* (as opposed to *necesse esse*), would not include spiritual beings, like angels. Participated being includes anything whatsoever that has being, but is limited in being.

50 "Peak" is a metaphor for transcendence.

51 To see this requires taking *actus essendi* not simply as giving existence to an already-constituted essence, but rather in an *intensive* way, as what ultimately gives a thing its existence and its essence. See C. Fabro, *Appendix 2*, op. cit., pp. 236–237.

52 *Summa theologiae* I.8.3: "Sic ergo est in omnibus per potentiam, inquantum omnia eius potestati subduntur. Est per praesentiam in omnibus, inquantum omnia nuda sunt et aperta oculis eius. Est in omnibus per essentiam, inquantum adest omnibus ut causa essendi."

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