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## Platonic Participation without Platonic Forms: Thomas Aquinas on the Key Insight of Dionysius's *De divinis nominibus*

Patrick Zoll (*Munich School of Philosophy*)

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### Abstract

According to Aquinas, the Platonic doctrine of participation can be disentangled from a commitment to the theory of Forms which Aristotle attributes to Plato. In this article, I argue that we can learn three important things from close examination of this key insight. First, we can better understand Aquinas's view of how the participation of an effect in its cause works. Second, the Platonic doctrine of participation can play an important role in explaining and defending Christian doctrines such as the doctrine of creation and the doctrine of divine simplicity. Third, it is possible to combine the Platonic doctrine of participation with Aristotle's alternative account of forms into a coherent and powerful metaphysical synthesis.

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According to Aristotle's influential interpretation of Plato, Plato is committed to three metaphysical views. First, there are Forms which exist in separation from material things.<sup>1</sup> Second, material things participate in Forms. Third, the participation of material things in Forms explains why material things are such-and-so in actuality.<sup>2</sup>

According to the metaphysical worldview which results from these three views and which Aristotle attributes to Plato, Forms are causes responsible for a material thing's being and coming to be in actuality.<sup>3</sup> For example, Socrates has being in actuality as a human being in virtue of participating in the Form or idea of a human

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, A9, 991b1–3: "Further, it would seem impossible for the substance and that of which it is the substance to be separate. And so how could the Ideas, if they are substances of things, be separate from them?". The English translations are taken from Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2016).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, A6, 987b6–9: "He, then, called beings of this sort 'Ideas,' and the perceptible ones are beyond these and are all called after these. For the many things have the same name as the Forms are [what they are] through participation in them."

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, A9, 991b3–4: "In the *Phaedo*, however, the Forms are causes both of the being and the coming to be of things."

being, i.e., *man-itself* or separately existing *humanity*.<sup>4</sup> However, Aristotle criticizes that the Platonic theory of Forms in conjunction with the Platonic doctrine of participation (henceforth: PDP) does not explain what it is supposed to explain, namely, the becoming to be of material things and their being such-and-so in actuality.<sup>5</sup>

Aristotle has usually been interpreted as providing the following alternative account of forms: forms of material things do not exist in separation from them but are rather intrinsic to them. Ordinary material things as human beings, cats, or trees are metaphysical composites of matter (*hyle*) and form (*morphe*)—material substances—which are such-and-so in actuality in virtue of forms which are intrinsic to them.<sup>6</sup> For example, Thomas Aquinas attributes to Aristotle the view that a form is the metaphysical part of a matter-form composite by which (*quo est*) a whole is actual as that what it is.<sup>7</sup> And he himself adopts this view: what accounts for a material thing's being such-and-so in actuality—in his terminology, a material substance's substantial and accidental *esse*—are substantial and accidental forms which are intrinsic to it.<sup>8</sup> For example, the substantial form *felineity*—a cat's soul—intrinsic to cat Kitty explains the fact that she has *esse* as a cat.

To sum up, according to Aquinas's interpretation of Aristotle, forms are causes or principles responsible for the substantial and accidental *esse* of material substances. But these forms are not Platonic forms because they do not exist in separation from

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, A9, 991a27–29: “Also, there will be more than one paradigm of the same thing and so more than one Form—for example, the Form of man will be animal and two-footed, as at the same time will be man-itself.”

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, A9, 991a20–22: “To say that they are paradigms and that the other things participate in them is to utter empty words and speak poetic metaphors.”

<sup>6</sup> For example, see Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction* (Heusenstamm: Editiones scholasticae, 2014), 164–71.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia super Metaphysicam* (henceforth *In Meta.*), Liber V, lect. 10, 904: “Essentia enim et forma in hoc conveniunt quod secundum utrumque dicitur esse illud quo aliquid est. Sed forma refertur ad materiam, quam facit esse in actu; quidditas autem refertur ad suppositum, quod significatur ut habens talem essentiam. Unde sub uno comprehenduntur forma et species, idest sub essentia rei.” All Latin texts and English translations of Aquinas's works in this article are from the editions published by the Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, Lander, Wyoming. They are accessible at <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~ST.I>. Unless otherwise noted, bold style and italics are taken over from these editions. According to Aquinas, the essence or nature of a material substance—a material supposit—is not identical with its substantial form because its essence also comprises matter. However, since the distinction plays no role for the purposes of this paper, I use the terms ‘essence’, ‘nature’, and ‘substantial form’ interchangeably as referring to that by which a matter-form composite or material supposit is actual as that what it is.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *De principiis naturae* (henceforth *De Princ. Nat.*), cap. 1: “Sed duplex est esse, scilicet esse essenziale rei sive substantiale, ut hominem esse, et hoc est esse simpliciter; est autem aliud esse accidentale, ut hominem esse album, et hoc est esse aliquid. [...] Et quia forma facit esse in actu, ideo forma dicitur esse actus; quod autem facit actu esse substantiale est forma substantialis, et quod facit actu esse accidentale dicitur forma accidentalis.” However, as Rudi te Velde has pointed out, many problems of the Platonic theory of Forms such as the problem of the unity of a material thing can be solved only if one adopts—as Aquinas does—the additional doctrine of the unicity of substantial form, Rudi A. Te Velde, “Aquinas's Aristotelian Science of Metaphysics and Its Revised Platonism,” *Nova et Vetera* 13, no. 3 (2015): 745–50.

the material substances of which they are forms. Rather, forms as principles or causes of the substantial and accidental *esse* of material substances exist only in and with the material substances of which they are forms.<sup>9</sup>

If one interprets Aristotle's account of forms in this way, namely, as an alternative to the Platonic theory of Forms, one might be inclined to interpret Aristotle's rejection of the Platonic theory of Forms as a rejection of the PDP. There seems simply nothing left to explain if one adopts the Aristotelian account of forms instead of the Platonic one. However, it is important to note that Aquinas does not draw this conclusion. To the contrary, the PDP plays an important role in his own metaphysical framework.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, according to Aquinas's interpretation of Aristotle, Aristotle himself is committed to the PDP.<sup>11</sup> Thus, in Aquinas's view, it would be a serious mistake to interpret Aristotle's rejection of the Platonic theory of Forms as a rejection of the PDP.

In this article, I offer a reconstruction and close examination of a key insight which Aquinas attributes to Dionysius in his commentary on Dionysius's *De divinis nominibus* (henceforth '*In DDN*').<sup>12</sup> This key insight helps us see why Aquinas regards

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones de quodlibet* (henceforth *Qdl.*), IX, q. 2, a. 2, corp.: "Omnibus vero quae non per se subsistunt sed in alio et cum alio, sive sint accidentia sive formae substantiales aut quaelibet partes, non habent esse ita quod ipsa vere sint, sed attribuitur eis esse alio modo, id est ut quo aliquid est, sicut albedo dicitur esse, non quia ipsa in esse subsistat, sed quia ea aliquid habet esse album." In Aquinas's view, the only exception is the human soul which is a subsistent material form, i.e., the existence of a human soul is not dependent on the existence of the material composite of which it is the form. However, I name this fact only to leave it aside because this exception is not relevant for my argument.

<sup>10</sup> Despite of a wide agreement that participation plays an important and central role in Aquinas's metaphysics, there is an ongoing controversy among Thomistic scholars about which different ways or modes of participation Aquinas in general recognizes and how they are to be understood. A list of some of the most important contributions to the debate includes Cornelio Fabro, "The Intensive Hermeneutics of Thomistic Philosophy: The Notion of Participation," *The Review of Metaphysics* 27 (1974); Cornelio Fabro, *Partecipazione e causalità secondo S. Tommaso D'Aquino*, 2 ed. (Turin: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1960); Louis Bertrand Geiger, *La participation dans la philosophie de s. Thomas d'Aquin*, 2 ed. (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1953); Rudi A. Te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden; New York; Köln: E.J. Brill, 1995); John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 94-131; John F. Wippel, "Thomas Aquinas and Participation," *Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy* 17 (1987); William N. Clarke, "The Meaning of Participation in St. Thomas," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 26 (1952); Andrew Davison, *Participation in God: A Study in Christian Doctrine and Metaphysics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *De substantiis separatis* (henceforth *De Sub. Sep.*), cap. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio De divinis nominibus* (henceforth *In DDN*). Contemporary scholars usually call the author of the book *De divinis nominibus* 'Pseudo-Dionysius' to mark the difference between the unknown author of book of the 6<sup>th</sup> century and the person called 'Dionysius' whose encounter with the Apostle Paul is mentioned in Acts 17:34 and whose name the author uses as a pseudonym. Furthermore, many contemporary scholars distinguish between 'Platonism' and 'Neoplatonism'. In this article, I do not take a stand on these issues. For the sake of simplicity, I follow Aquinas's usage and use the name 'Dionysius' to refer to the author of *De divinis nominibus* and terms such as 'Platonists' or 'Platonic' to refer to persons or views this author deals with in that work. Furthermore, it is important to note that in this article I confine myself to a reconstruction and explanation of views which Aquinas attributes to Dionysius in his commentary. I do not take a stand on whether Aquinas's interpretation accurately reflects Dionysius's

it not only as unproblematic but as beneficial to combine an Aristotelian account of forms with the PDP. As we will see in due course, for Aquinas the key insight of Dionysius's *De divinis nominibus* (henceforth 'DDN') is that the PDP can be disentangled from the commitment to the theory of Forms which Aristotle attributes to Plato.

We can learn three important things from a consideration of this key insight. First, we can better understand Aquinas's own view of how a particular kind of participation works, namely the participation of an effect in its cause, and why he attributes this view also to Aristotle. Second, according to *In DDN*, once the PDP is disentangled from the Platonic theory of Forms, the former can play an important role in explaining and defending Christian doctrines such as the doctrine of creation and the doctrine of divine simplicity. Third, due to the disentanglement, it is, Aquinas's commentary shows, possible to combine the PDP with an Aristotelian account of forms into a coherent and powerful metaphysical synthesis.

### 1. Aquinas on Platonic Participation: How It Works and What It Explains

To get a better grasp of what *In DDN* contributes to a better understanding of Aquinas's own view of how Platonic participation works, it is helpful to begin with his commentary on Boethius's *De hebdomadibus*. Within that work, Aquinas speaks about participation and states:<sup>13</sup>

This is taken in line with the account of participation. Now participating is as it were taking a part. Hence: whenever something particularly receives what

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thought or whether the views that Dionysius and Aquinas call 'Platonic' were actually held by Plato or the authors they call 'Platonists'. Rather, in this article I pursue only the aim to explain how Aquinas read and understood Dionysius's *DDN*. For more general overviews of the influence of Dionysius's work on Aquinas, see, for example, Wayne J. Hankey, "The Concord of Aristotle, Proclus, the Liber de Causis & Blessed Dionysius in Thomas Aquinas, Student of Albertus Magnus," *Dionysius* 34 (2016); Wayne J. Hankey, *Aquinas's Neoplatonism in the Summa Theologiae on God* (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2019); Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*, 2 ed. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio in librum Boethii De hebdomadibus* (henceforth *In BDH*), lect. 2, 24: "Quae quidem differentia sumitur secundum rationem participationis. Est autem participare quasi partem capere. Et ideo quando aliquid particulariter recipit id quod ad alterum pertinet universaliter, dicitur participare illud, sicut homo dicitur participare animal quia non habet rationem animalis secundum totam communitatem; et eadem ratione Socrates participat hominem. Similiter etiam subiectum participat accidens et materia formam, quia forma substantialis vel accidentalis, quae de sui ratione communis est, determinatur ad hoc vel illud subiectum. Et similiter etiam effectus dicitur participare suam causam, et praecipue quando non adaequat virtutem suae causae, puta si dicamus quod aer participat lucem solis quia non recipit eam in claritate qua est in sole." Stephen Brock has shown that Aquinas intends to harmonize Plato and Aristotle in *In BDH*, see Stephen L. Brock, "Harmonizing Plato and Aristotle on *Esse*: Thomas Aquinas and the *De hebdomadibus*," *Nova et Vetera* 5, no. 3 (2007). The results of his research fit nicely with what I am arguing for in this article, namely, that Aquinas interprets *DDN* as an intent to harmonize the PDP with an Aristotelian account of forms.

pertains universally to something else, it is said to participate in it. For instance, man is said to participate in animal, since it does not have the account of animal in its full generality. Socrates participates in man for the same reason. The subject likewise participates in its accident, and so does matter in form, since the substantial or accidental form, which is common in virtue of its account, is determined to this or that subject. The effect is similarly said to participate in its cause, especially when it isn't equal to the power of its cause—for example, when we say that air “participates” in sunlight because it doesn't receive it with the brightness there is in the sun.

Two things are important to note here. First, Aquinas provides a general characterization of participation. Participation takes place whenever something A receives in a particular way something B which belongs in a universal way to something else C. Second, Aquinas distinguishes different modes of participation which explain different things. Of interest for the purposes of this paper are the second and third mode of participation.<sup>14</sup>

To illustrate how the second mode of participation works and what it seeks to explain, let us take the classic example of white Socrates. In the case of white Socrates, Socrates participates in whiteness like a subject participates in an accidental form. Socrates (A) receives in a particular way whiteness (B) which belongs in a universal way to the form *whiteness* (C).

The second mode of participation explains why Socrates has whiteness. An explanation is required because Socrates is not whiteness, i.e., whiteness does not belong to him in virtue of what he is essentially. And the explanation of Socrates's being white is that there is an accidental form added to Socrates considered as that what he is in virtue of his essence.<sup>15</sup> In other words, white Socrates has whiteness because white Socrates is metaphysically composed of a subject—a principle of potentiality—who participates (*participante*) and the accidental form *whiteness* in which the subject participates (*participato*), i.e., a corresponding principle of actuality.<sup>16</sup>

The third mode of participation is the way in which an effect participates in its cause, especially when it is not equal to the power of that cause. Aquinas attributes this kind of participation to Plato and Aristotle:

For Plato held that all lower immaterial substances are one and good by participation in the first, which is essentially one and good. Now whatever participates in something receives that which it participates from the one from

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<sup>14</sup> I concentrate here on aspects of the second and third mode of participation which are relevant for the purposes of this article. For a more detailed analysis, see Daniel De Haan, "Aquinas on *Actus Essendi* and the Second Mode of Participation," *The Thomist* 82, no. 4 (2018); Gregory T. Doolan, "Aquinas on *Esse Subsistens* and the Third Mode of Participation," *The Thomist* 82, no. 4 (2018); Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 96–131.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, *Qdl.*, II, q. 2, a. 1, corp.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia super Physicam* (henceforth *In Phys.*), Liber VIII, lect. 21, 1153.

whom it participates; and to this extent that from which it participates is its cause, just as air has light, which it participates from the sun, which is the cause of its illumination. Therefore, according to Plato, the highest God is the reason why all immaterial substances are each one of them one and good. Aristotle, too, held this opinion because, as he himself says, that which is most being and most truth is the cause of being and truth for all other things.<sup>17</sup>

To illustrate how the third mode of participation works and what it seeks to explain, let us take Aquinas's example of the illuminated air. In the case of illuminated air, air (A) receives in a particular way light and with it in a particular way the power of light (B) from the sun (C).<sup>18</sup> Light and with it the power of light belongs in a universal way to the sun because the power of the sun is the source or first cause of light.<sup>19</sup> The sun has light in a universal way because as first cause of light the sun has the power of light in a maximal way.<sup>20</sup>

Look at it this way. According to Aquinas's interpretation of Aristotle's cosmology, the sun has light and with it the power of light in a universal way because all the effects which light might produce in things in which it is received preexist uniformly (*uniformiter*) in the power of the sun to produce light.<sup>21</sup> The sun has the power to produce light that illuminates, generates, vivifies, renews, perfects, and so forth.<sup>22</sup> However, what the reception of light effectuates and to what extent depends on that in which it is received. For example, light which is received by air illuminates the air but does not vivify it.

The third mode of participation provides a causal explanation of the fact that something A has a power or perfection B it does not have in virtue of what it is essentially. The explanation of A's having B is that there is a source C from which A receives B. Put otherwise, the explanation of A's having B is that there is a cause C which causes A to have B. B in A is an effect produced by C.

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<sup>17</sup> *De Sub. Sep.*, cap. 3: "Posuit enim Plato omnes inferiores substantias immateriales esse unum et bonum per participationem primi quod est secundum se unum et bonum; omne autem participans aliquid accipit id quod participat ab eo a quo participat, et quantum ad hoc id a quo participat est causa ipsius: sicut aer habet lumen participatum a sole, quae est causa illuminationis ipsius. Sic igitur secundum Platonem summus deus causa est omnibus immaterialibus substantiis quod unaquaeque earum et unum sit et bonum. Et hoc etiam Aristoteles posuit, quia, ut ipse dicit, necesse est ut id quod est maxime ens et maxime verum sit causa essendi et veritatis omnibus aliis."

<sup>18</sup> This triadic structure of participation is parallel to the one proposed by Proclus. For a detailed analysis and comparison of Proclus's and Aquinas's account of participation in terms of participant, participation, and the unparticipated, see Eric D. Perl, "Lessened by Addition: Procession by Diminution in Proclus and Aquinas," *Review of Metaphysics* 72 (2019); Eric D. Perl, "Proclus' Multi-Level Ontology: The Meaning of Monads vs. A Tale Told by Thomists," *Dionysius* 38, no. December (2020).

<sup>19</sup> *In DDN*, cap. 5, lect. 1, 646.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologia* I (henceforth *STh*), q. 44, a. 1, corp; cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestio disputata de potentia* (henceforth *De Pot.*), q. 3, a. 5, corp.

<sup>21</sup> *In DDN*, cap. 5, lect. 2, 662.

<sup>22</sup> *In DDN*, cap. 5, lect. 2, 662.

For example, the fact that air is illuminated requires an explanation because air is not illuminated in virtue of what it is by its essence or form. Air as air has not the power to illuminate. The second mode of participation explains that illuminated air has the power to illuminate because it participates light, i.e., because it is metaphysically composed of air and the accidental form *light*. However, this mode of explanation does not explain why illuminated air is metaphysically composed in this way, i.e., why illuminated air has the light it has and with it the power to illuminate. The required explanation is given by the third mode of explanation. Illuminated air is illuminated because the power of the sun causes in the air the accidental form *light* which has the power to illuminate.

Thus, according to the third mode of participation, there is something A which participates *in* (*participante*) something B (*participato*) and participates B *from* C which is the source and cause of B. B is restricted and limited by being participated by A, but C is not by causing A to have B.<sup>23</sup> What the active potentiality of participated light (B) can effectuate depends on the corresponding passive potentiality of the air in which it is received (A). But the power of the sun as the source or first cause of light (C) is not restricted or limited in any way by the fact that air or anything else receives light from the sun. The sun as source or cause of light remains to have the power of light in a maximal way.

## **2. Dionysius's Key Insight: Platonic Participation Without Platonic Forms**

Let us now turn to Aquinas's commentary on *DDN*. The commentary sheds further light on Aquinas's view of how the third mode of participation works. Furthermore, it helps us to understand why, in Aquinas's view, it would be a serious mistake to interpret Aristotle's rejection of the Platonic theory of Forms as a rejection of the PDP.

In the preface to his commentary, Aquinas makes the reader aware that Dionysius uses the PDP to explain why a multiplicity of effects of God's creative power bears a certain likeness to its cause, i.e., God.<sup>24</sup> For example, a certain likeness of perfections such as goodness, oneness, or *esse* which are predicated of God is found in a variety of material creatures. The explanation of this fact is that there exists one subsistent form—God—which is essentially goodness, oneness, and *esse* in which all these material creatures participate like an effect participates in its cause.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> It is important to note that the third mode of participation does not determine whether the relevant causality is efficient, formal, final, or exemplar causality. In this article, I will focus on the role that efficient and exemplar causality plays in an explanation of creation in terms of the third mode of participation. For a more detailed account of the unparticipability of that from which something A receives something B in which A participates, see Doolan, "Aquinas on *Esse Subsistens* and the Third Mode of Participation," 614–19.

<sup>24</sup> *In DDN*, prooemium,

<sup>25</sup> *In DDN*, prooemium.

In Aquinas's view, it is unproblematic to use the PDP to explain the Christian doctrine of creation. To see why, it is helpful to consider how Aquinas characterizes creation:<sup>26</sup>

It was proved that God creates things from the fact that there can be nothing besides himself that is not created by him. Now this cannot be said of anything else, because nothing else is the universal cause of being (*causa essendi*). To God alone, therefore, does creation belong as his proper action.

Further. Effects correspond proportionately to their causes, namely, so that we ascribe actual effects to actual causes, and potential effects to potential causes. In like manner, we ascribe particular effects to particular causes, and universal effects to universal causes, as the Philosopher teaches in 2 Physics. Now being (*esse*) is the first effect, and this is evident by reason of its universality. Therefore, the proper cause of being (*essendi*) is the first and universal agent, which is God. But other agents are the causes not of being simply (*essendi simpliciter*), but of being this (*essendi hoc*), for example, of being a man, or of being white. But being simply (*esse simpliciter*) is caused by creation, which presupposes nothing (*nihil*), since nothing can preexist outside being simply (*extra ens simpliciter*). By other makings (*factiones*), this or such a being (*hoc ens vel tale*) is made, because this or such a being is made from an already existing being. Therefore, creation is God's proper action.

In Aquinas's view, it is unproblematic to use the PDP to explain the Christian understanding of creation as *creatio ex nihilo* because Plato and Aristotle themselves are committed to the idea of creation *ex nihilo* and explain it in terms of participation.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* (henceforth *ScG*), Liber II, cap. 21: "Ex hoc ostensum est quod Deus creat res, quia nihil potest esse praeter ipsum ab eo non causatum. Hoc autem nulli alii convenire potest: cum nihil aliud sit universalis causa essendi. Soli igitur Deo competit creatio, sicut propria eius actio. Adhuc. Effectus suis causis proportionaliter respondent: ut scilicet effectus in actu causis actualibus attribuamus, et effectus in potentia causis quae sunt in potentia; et similiter effectus particulares causis particularibus, universalibus vero universales; ut docet Philosophus, in II Physicorum. Esse autem est causatum primum: quod ex ratione suae communitatis apparet. Causa igitur propria essendi est agens primum et universale, quod Deus est. Alia vero agentia non sunt causa essendi simpliciter, sed causa essendi hoc, ut hominem vel album. Esse autem simpliciter per creationem causatur, quae nihil praesupponit: quia non potest aliquid praeesistere quod sit extra ens simpliciter. Per alias factiones fit hoc ens vel tale: nam ex ente praeeistente fit hoc ens vel tale. Ergo creatio est propria Dei actio." It is important to remember that God as cause remains unparticipated by creating. According to Aquinas, this means that the participatory relationship between creatures and God is a mixed relation, i.e., a real relation (*relatio realis*) in creatures but only a relation in idea (*relatio rationis*) in creatures, see, for example, *STh* I, q. 13, a. 7, corp.: "Cum igitur Deus sit extra totum ordinem creaturae, et omnes creaturae ordinentur ad ipsum, et non e converso, manifestum est quod creaturae realiter referuntur ad ipsum Deum; sed in Deo non est aliqua realis relatio eius ad creaturas, sed secundum rationem tantum, in quantum creaturae referuntur ad ipsum." Cf. *ScG*, Liber II, cap. 11–14. I am thankful to an anonymous referee for making me aware that it is important to clarify this point.

<sup>27</sup> There is an ongoing exegetical controversy about the question of whether Aquinas attributes *creatio ex nihilo* to Plato and Aristotle. For a defense of the claim that he does, see, for example, Gaven Kerr, *Aquinas and the*



They are committed to this idea because they both share with Christians the following view: an explanation of the fact that a multiplicity of *entia* have *esse* in common requires the existence of a universal cause of *esse* in which these *entia* participate. For example, with respect to Plato, Aquinas states:<sup>28</sup>

Later philosophers, such as Plato, Aristotle, and their followers, attained to the study of universal being itself (*ipsius esse universalis*); hence, they alone posited a universal cause of things, from which all others came into being, as Augustine states.

To this view the Catholic faith also adheres. And it may be demonstrated by the three arguments that follow.

First, if in a number of things we find one thing that is common to all, this thing must be the effect of some one cause; for it is not possible that to each one, by reason of its very self, this common something belongs, since each one by itself is different from the others, and a diversity of causes produces a diversity of effects. Seeing, then, that being (*esse*) is found to be common to all realities, which are by themselves distinct from one another, it follows of necessity that being (*esse*) is attributed to them not from their very selves but from some one cause. This seems to be Plato's argument, since he required every multitude to be preceded by a unity not only as regards number but even in the natures of things.

However, Aquinas argues, Dionysius's use of the PDP to explain the Christian view on creation might give rise to confusion and a possible misinterpretation of *DDN* because PDP is also used by Platonists in connection with a Platonic theory of Forms to explain essential similarities and differences between material things. For example, Platonists argue that a multiplicity of human beings have humanity in common

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*Metaphysics of Creation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 25–45; Seth Kreeger, "Aquinas' Attribution of Creation Ex Nihilo to Plato and Aristotle: The Importance of Avicenna," *Studia Gilsoniana* 11, no. 3 (2022); Mark Johnson, "Did St. Thomas Attribute a Doctrine of Creation to Aristotle?," *The New Scholasticism* 63, no. 2 (1989); Mark Johnson, "Aquinas's Changing Evaluation of Plato on Creation," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (1992). It is important to note that Aquinas does not attribute to Plato and Aristotle the Christian view of creation in time, as, for example, te Velde pointed out in Rudi A. Te Velde, *Aquinas on God: The 'Divine Science' of the Summa Theologiae* (London: Routledge, 2006), 142, n. 4. Rather, Aquinas maintains that Plato and Aristotle are committed to the Christian view of creation understood as the causal dependence of any *ens* which is not identical with *esse* on an *ens* which is *esse* by its essence.

<sup>28</sup> *De Pot.*, Q. 3, a.5, corp.: "Oportet enim, si aliquid unum communiter in pluribus invenitur, quod ab aliqua una causa in illis causetur; non enim potest esse quod illud commune utrique ex se ipso conveniat, cum utrumque, secundum quod ipsum est, ab altero distinguatur; et diversitas causarum diversos effectus producit. Cum ergo esse inveniatur omnibus rebus commune, quae secundum illud quod sunt, ad invicem distinctae sunt, oportet quod de necessitate eis non ex se ipsis, sed ab aliqua una causa esse attribuat. Et ista videtur ratio Platonis, qui voluit, quod ante omnem multitudinem esset aliqua unitas non solum in numeris, sed etiam in rerum naturis." For Aquinas's attribution of this view to Aristotle, see *De Pot.* q. 3 a. 5, corp.; *STh.* I, q. 44 a. 1 corp.

because they participate in a separate human being which does not have but *is* humanity. Essential differences between material things are explained accordingly. For example, what explains the essential difference between a human being and a cat is that they do not participate in a common Form. Socrates but not Kitty participates in the Form *humanity* and Kitty but not Socrates participates in the Form *felinity*. Thus, participation in different Forms explains the essential differences between material things. However, Aquinas observes that such a combination of the PDP with the Platonic theory of Forms is incompatible with the Christian doctrine of creation for reasons I will explain in the next section.<sup>29</sup>

### 3. Dionysius's Defense of His Key Insight: The Nature of Exemplars

Let us now turn to chapter 5 of *In DDN*. This chapter illustrates how Aquinas interprets Dionysius as someone who uses the PDP to explain and defend the Christian doctrine of creation without committing himself to the existence of Platonic Forms. In the first two lectures of this chapter, Aquinas presents Dionysius as someone who argues not only that God is the universal cause of what is common to all created entities but also that God is the universal cause of all particular things according to their proper natures.<sup>30</sup> In other words, that creatures participate in God or God's creative power, as an effect participates in its cause, explains not only what they have in common—*esse*—but also their essential differences.

However, in the third lecture, Aquinas observes that Dionysius deals with an important objection to his key insight. The Platonists who Dionysius criticizes could object, Aquinas argues, that the PDP cannot be disentangled from the Platonic theory of Forms to explain the Christian doctrine of creation. An explanation of the creation of a multiplicity of essentially different creatures in terms of participation seems to require that the latter participate their perfections not only from God but from Platonic Forms. In other words, there must be exemplars of material things—Platonic Forms—which play as secondary causes a role in the creation of a multiplicity of essentially different material things because the same thing cannot be the universal cause of what is common to many things—the *esse* of creatures—and the universal cause of what essentially differentiates such things, namely, the substantial forms or natures of things.<sup>31</sup>

Look at it this way. The mode of participation relevant for an explanation of the Christian doctrine of creation is the third mode, i.e., the participation of an effect in its cause. A putative objector could argue that every effect bears a certain likeness to its cause in virtue of participating in its cause. As we have seen above (see 1), any mode of participation involves that something A receives in a particular way something B which belongs in a universal way to something else C which means that A has a

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<sup>29</sup> *In DDN*, prooemium.

<sup>30</sup> *In DDN*, cap. 5, lect. 2, 651.

<sup>31</sup> *In DDN*, ch. 5, lect. 3, 664.

certain likeness to C in virtue of B. However, if this is the case, it seems that one and the same cause (C) cannot be the cause of effects (B) in virtue of which the participants (A) are essentially dissimilar. An explanation of the creation of essentially different material things with the help of the PDP seems to require the existence of one universal cause—God—responsible for what is common to that multiplicity *and* the existence of a multiplicity of exemplar causes, namely, Platonic Forms. Creatures have *esse* and are *entia* in virtue of participating in a particular way *esse* from God to which *esse* belongs in a universal way. And creatures have powers or perfections such as *per se* life and humanity in virtue of participating in a particular way *per se* life and humanity from Platonic forms to which *per se* life and humanity belong in a universal way. Thus, Platonic Forms are as exemplar causes involved in the creation of material things because they determine what forms or natures those material things have.<sup>32</sup> For example, the exemplar of a multiplicity of human beings is a separated human being—the Form *humanity* which is common to all human beings and which exists in separation from all particular human beings—that is the cause of humanity in all particular human beings.<sup>33</sup> Human beings are essentially different from cats because the latter do not participate in the exemplar *humanity* and the former do not participate in the exemplar *felinity*.

One could try to soften this result by claiming that Platonic Forms as exemplars of material things are secondary causes subordinated to God. God is the primary efficient cause of the creation of things because he is the universal cause of what is common to a plurality of created things, namely, their *esse*. Whatever the differentiating substantial forms or natures are that material things have in virtue of the participation in their respective exemplars or Forms, these exemplars must receive *esse* from God as first cause to exist in actuality.<sup>34</sup> However, even in this case, there is still a multiplicity of (exemplar) causes involved in the creation of a multiplicity of essentially different creatures. Thus, so a putative objector, it seems that Dionysius fails in his attempt to untie the PDP from Platonic Forms to use the former without the latter to explain the Christian doctrine of creation.

In Aquinas's view, it is instructive to see how Dionysius rebuts this objection. He does not reject root and branch the Platonic idea that the participation of material things in exemplars plays a role in an explanation of the creation of a multiplicity of essentially different material creatures.<sup>35</sup> Rather, Dionysius—Aquinas argues—,

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<sup>32</sup> *In DDN*, ch. 5, lect. 3, 664.

<sup>33</sup> *In DDN*, ch. 5, lect. 3, 664.

<sup>34</sup> *In DDN*, cap. 5, lect. 1, 635.

<sup>35</sup> According to Aquinas, exemplars must be involved in the creation of creatures because an exemplar cause is required for any effect to receive a determinate form, see, for example, *STh* I, q. 44, a. 3, corp. Thus, in Aquinas's view, efficient and exemplar causality play a role in an explanation of creation in terms of participation. Furthermore, since Aquinas attributes to Aristotle *creatio ex nihilo*, i.e., the view that there is a first and universal efficient cause responsible for the creation of a plurality of essentially different creatures out of nothing, he must attribute to Aristotle also the view that there are exemplars existing in God's mind, see, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, Liber I, dist. 36, q. 2, a. 1, obj.1. I am

rejects only the objector's premise that an explanation along these lines requires a commitment to the existence of Platonic Forms. In Dionysius's view, exemplars of material things in which material things participate and which insofar account for the differentiating intrinsic forms or natures of material things *do not exist in separation from material things* but rather *exist in God*.<sup>36</sup>

Aquinas reconstructs Dionysius's view on exemplars in the following way: God knows what forms of created things exist virtually in him by understanding his power which—according to the doctrine of divine simplicity which Aquinas accepts and believes Dionysius to embrace as well—is identical with his essence.<sup>37</sup> Thus, God knows what forms of created things exist virtually in him by understanding himself which means that God knows what *entia* that can be effects of his creative power. By understanding his creative power, i.e., his own essence or form, God knows all that he could create in virtue of his power or form, i.e., in virtue of what he is. The forms of *entia* that God knows can be effects of his creative power can be called 'understood notions' (*rationes intellectae*).<sup>38</sup>

However, not all such understood notions which exist virtually in the mind of God are exemplars. Rather, only those understood notions are exemplars in imitation of which something else is made in actuality. Exemplars are those forms of things which God *knows* he could create in virtue of his power and in imitation of which he *wills* to create things in actuality, i.e., in imitation of which he wills to bring something into existence/actuality by giving it *esse*. Aquinas uses the analogy of an artisan to illustrate the difference between an understood notion and an exemplar: An artist might have many ideas or forms of artworks in his mind which he could produce. However, only those forms in his mind are exemplars of artworks in imitation of which he produces artworks in actuality.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, in Aquinas's view, Dionysius rebuts the objection by showing that participation in exemplars plays a role in an explanation of the creation of a multiplicity of essentially different material things. Any created thing is determined with respect to its form, i.e., it has the particular form it has in actuality, in virtue of

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thankful to an anonymous referee for making me aware of the need to address this issue and for pointing me to this place.

<sup>36</sup> *In DDN*, ch. 5, lect. 3, 664.

<sup>37</sup> For Aquinas on divine simplicity, see, for example, *STh I*, q. 3. For a helpful exposition of and explanation of Aquinas's view on divine simplicity, see, for example, Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003), 92–130.

<sup>38</sup> *In DDN*, ch. 5, lect. 3, 665. For a more detailed explanation of this point and a general exposition of Aquinas's views on exemplars, see Gregory T. Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas as Exemplar Causes* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 13. For an excellent overview of the historical origins and development of the doctrine of divine ideas which sheds further light on Aquinas's view on divine ideas, see Vivian Boland, *Ideas in God According to Saint Thomas Aquinas: Sources and Synthesis* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

<sup>39</sup> *In DDN*, ch. 5, lect. 3, 665. In other words, exemplars are a given way (*ratio*) that God understands that a thing can participate in him and wills that it participates in him, cf. *STh I*, q. 15, a. 2, corp. I am thankful to an anonymous referee for suggesting this clarification and for pointing me to this place.

the fact that its form is an effect of God's power who creates things in imitation of the forms which exist virtually in his mind. This explanation of the creation of a multiplicity of essentially different material things with the help of the PDP works without a commitment to the existence of Platonic Forms which exist in separation from material things and outside of God.<sup>40</sup> In contrast to what the putative objector maintains, it is possible that there is *one* (efficient) cause—God—who is the universal cause of the *esse* which is common to a plurality of things *and* who is the (exemplar) cause of that which essentially differentiates this plurality of things.

#### 4. The Benefits of Dionysius's Key Insight for an Explanation of the Christian Doctrine of Creation

In the remainder of the third lecture of chapter 5 of his commentary on *DDN*, Aquinas argues that Dionysius's key insight is beneficial for an explanation of the Christian doctrine of creation in two ways. First, Dionysius's defense of his key insight helps one to see why an explanation of creation in terms of participation does not conflict with the Christian view that God is perfectly simple. Second, with the help of the—rightly understood—idea that created things participate in God like effects participate in their cause, Dionysius can defend the Christian views on God's immanence and transcendence against possible misinterpretations.

Let us begin with the first point. Why should one think that Dionysius's explanation of creation in terms of participation conflicts with divine simplicity? In the previous section, we have seen that Dionysius defends his key insight by stating that material things participate in exemplars but that the latter do not exist in separation from the former but rather exist in God. A putative objector could argue that this defense conflicts with a commitment to the Christian view that God is perfectly one and simple because Dionysius's defense works only if one is willing to accept that there exists a *plurality* of exemplars in God. If this is the case, it seems that God is not perfectly simple and one but rather composed of a plurality of exemplars.

In Aquinas's view, such an objection does no damage to Dionysius's defense of his key insight for the following reason:<sup>41</sup>

Therefore because the divine essence so lavishes being upon all things, *he prepossesses all things in himself*, not indeed according to any composition, but *according to* a most simple unity, *refuting every* plurality. And therefore

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<sup>40</sup> In *DDN*, ch. 5, lect. 3, 666.

<sup>41</sup> In *DDN*, ch. 5, lect. 3, 669, 671: "Quia igitur sic omnibus esse largitur divina essentia, *omnia in seipsa praehabet*, non quidem secundum aliquam compositionem, sed *secundum* simplicissimam unitatem, *omnem* pluralitatem *refutans*. Sic igitur prima universalis habitudo est quod essentia divina *omnia in seipsa praehabet*. [...] Tertia universalis habitudo est quod singularis et una existens *participatur* ab omnibus, sicut *et vox, una et eadem existens, participatur a multis audientibus*: est enim vox una secundum principium, multiplex vero secundum diffusionem."

the first universal habitude is that the divine essence *prepossesses all things in* itself. [...] The third universal habitude is that existing as singular and one it *is participated* by all things, as *also voice, existing as one and the same, is participated by many hearers*: for voice is one according to principle, whereas manifold according to diffusion.

To understand what Aquinas's is saying here, it is helpful to consider the following:<sup>42</sup>

After Denys has shown that all existing things universally are from God, here he intends to show that all things universally are in him; [...] Therefore he says, first, that not only *from this* goodness of God, but also *in this* is *per se being itself*, which is the participation of God, *and all principles of existing things and all existing things*, both substances and accidents, *and all in whatever mode* are contained under *being*, as imperfect beings, as being in potency and motion and other things of this sort. And lest anyone were to believe that these are in God in the same mode as in themselves, consequently he excludes this. For in themselves all things caused are finite, yet in God they are infinite, because in God they are the divine essence itself; and for this reason he says, *and this incomprehensibly*. Again, in themselves they have opposition and diversity, yet in God they are joined together simultaneously; and for this reason he says, *and jointly*. Again, in themselves they have multitude, yet in God they are one; and for this reason he adds, *and singularly*, that is, unitedly.

According to Aquinas's interpretation of *DDN*, Dionysius carefully distinguishes between the mode in which forms of material things exist in material things as effects of God's creative activity and the mode in which these forms virtually preexist as exemplars in God's power which is identical with his essence. As effects of God's power, forms of material things exist in the things of which they are forms in a mode that involves plurality and mutual exclusion, i.e. a mode that is incompatible with simplicity and oneness. For example, the soul of a human being cannot co-exist in a human being with the soul of a cat. A cat and a human being cannot be one. However, forms of material things which exist as effects of God's power in material things in a

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<sup>42</sup> *In DDN*, ch. 5, lect. 1, 640–641: "Postquam Dionysius ostendit quod omnia existentia universaliter sunt a Deo, hic intendit ostendere quod omnia universaliter sunt in ipso. [...] Dicit ergo primo quod non solum *ex ipsa* Dei bonitate, sed etiam *in ipsa* est *ipsum* per se *esse*, quod est Dei participatio *et* omnia *principia existentium et omnia existentia*, tam substantiae quam accidentia *et* omnia *quocumque modo* continentur sub *esse*, sicut entia imperfecta, ut ens in potentia et motus et alia huiusmodi. Et ne aliquis crederet quod ista hoc modo sint in Deo sicut in seipsis, consequenter hoc excludit. In seipsis enim omnia causata sunt finita, in Deo autem sunt infinita, quia in Deo sunt ipsa divina essentia; et ideo dicit: *et hoc incomprehensibiliter*. Iterum, in seipsis oppositionem habent et diversitatem, in Deo autem coniunguntur simul; et ideo dicit: *et coniuncte*. Iterum, in seipsis habent multitudinem, in Deo autem sunt unum; et ideo addit: *et singulariter*, idest unite."

plural and mutually excluding way preexist in God's power uniformly (*uniformiter*), i.e., in a mode which is in accordance with God's unity and simplicity.<sup>43</sup>

It is helpful to consider Aquinas's commentary on one of Dionysius's examples to illustrate this idea:<sup>44</sup>

He posits a fourth example concerning the soul, which is the cause of the body both as efficient and as form and as end, as is said in the second book of the *De Anima*; and thus *in the soul*, as in a common cause, there preexist all the *virtues* of the parts of an animal, by which it is provided for the whole body. For all the virtues are rooted in the soul as in a common root.

The soul of an animal's body is the cause of all the powers that parts of the animal body have. For example, the soul of cat Kitty is the cause of the power of Kitty's eyes to see, the cause of the power of her nose to smell, and so forth. The power of Kitty's soul exists in its effects, i.e., in the different powers of the bodily parts of Kitty, in a plural, mutually excluding, and finite way. Kitty's eyes have the power to see but not the power to smell, her nose has the power to smell but not to see, and so forth. However, in the power of Kitty's soul all these powers of her bodily parts preexist (virtually) in an unlimited and uniform way, i.e., in a mode that is compatible with the oneness and unity of Kitty's soul. Otherwise, Kitty's soul could not be the common cause or root (*radix*) of the powers of her bodily parts.

In an analogous way, it can be explained why Dionysius's claim that forms of material things exist as exemplars in God's power does not conflict with a commitment to the Christian idea of divine simplicity. Forms of material things exist in God as their cause in a mode that is different from the mode in which they exist in material things, namely, a mode which does not involve opposition, diversity, and limitation, i.e., a mode which is compatible with God's simplicity.

The objector correctly observes that forms of material things are effects of God's power which exist in material things in a mutually exclusive, diverse, and limited mode. However, the objector commits the fallacy to infer from this fact that these forms exist as exemplars in God's power in the same mode. That this constitutes a fallacy can be recognized by analogy to cases where a multiplicity of mutually exclusive and diverse effects preexists in a uniform mode in its one cause, for example, the case of the diverse and mutually exclusive powers of bodily parts which preexist in a uniform mode in the one soul of the body.

In Aquinas's view, Dionysius's clarification of how the forms of material things participate in God's power is beneficial for an explanation of the Christian doctrine of

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<sup>43</sup> In *DDN*, ch. 5, lect. 3, 672.

<sup>44</sup> In *DDN*, cap. 5, lect. 1, 647: "Quartum exemplum ponit de anima, quae est causa corporis et sicut efficiens et sicut forma et sicut finis ut dicitur in II *De anima*; et sic *in anima*, sicut in causa communi, praeexistunt omnes *virtutes* partium animalis, quibus toti corpori praevidetur. Omnes enim virtutes radicanter in anima sicut in communi radice."

creation in a second way. With the help of the idea that created things participate in God like effects participate in their cause, Dionysius can defend the Christian views on God's immanence and transcendence against possible misinterpretations:<sup>45</sup>

The reason why he can be the cause of all things is this: because *he prepossesses all existing things* in his unity; and because from the fact that he has each thing and causes something unto his likeness, it follows that he who has all things in himself makes all things *to subsist, present to all things and everywhere*, not according to diverse parts of himself, but *according to one and the same and according to the same* he is all things, inasmuch as in his simple essence all things virtually preexist; and likewise according to the same he proceeds to all things causatively and nevertheless he remains *in himself*, existing as immutable in causing, *and he is standing* inasmuch as he is not changed *and moved* inasmuch as he diffuses his likeness to other things.

God is immanent in all created things because he is the creator of the intrinsic principles of *esse* of created things, namely, their forms. God is efficient, exemplar, and final cause of creatures and their intrinsic principles.<sup>46</sup> Since any effect of an exemplar cause bears a certain likeness to its cause and since forms of material things are effects of God's exemplar causality, a certain likeness of God's power—God's essence—is present in material creatures.<sup>47</sup>

However, this immanence does not jeopardize God's transcendence to his creation. God remains unchanged and immutable by creating things because the participation of an effect in its cause does not involve a change, restriction, or limitation on the part of the cause. Look at it this way. The fact that the powers of Kitty's bodily parts participate in Kitty's soul like effects participate in their cause does not imply that Kitty's soul or the power of Kitty's soul itself is diminished, restricted, or changed thereby. That the powers of Kitty's bodily parts participate in the power of her soul does not mean that Kitty's soul *from which* they receive their powers is split up and that each bodily part possess a part of Kitty's soul. Only this misconceived understanding of participation involves a change, restriction, or limitation on the part of the cause. The third mode of participation works in this way (see section 1): if

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<sup>45</sup> In *DDN*, cap. 5, lect. 3, 672: "Ratio quare potest esse omnium causa est ista: quia *omnia existentia praehabet* in sui unitate; et quia ex eo quod habet unumquodque et causat aliquid ad similitudinem sui, sequitur quod ille qui in se habet omnia, *subsistere* facit omnia, *praesens omnibus* rebus *et ubique*, non secundum diversas sui partes, sed *secundum unum et idem et secundum idem* est omnia, in quantum in sua simplici essentia, omnia virtualiter praeexistunt; et similiter secundum idem procedit ad omnia causative et tamen manet *in seipso*, immutabilis existens in causando *et stans* est in quantum non mutatur *et motus* in quantum diffundit ad alia sui similitudinem."

<sup>46</sup> For God as exemplar cause, see, for example, *STh* I, q. 44, a. 3, corp. For God as efficient and final cause, see, for example, *STh* I, q. 44, a. 1 and 4.

<sup>47</sup> An effect of an exemplar cause bears a likeness to its cause because an exemplar cause determines the form of its effect. See, for example, *STh* I, q. 44, a. 3, corp.



something A participates *in* (*participante*) something B (*participato*) and participates B *from* C which is the source and cause of B, it is B which is restricted and limited by being participated by A, but C is not by causing A to have B. Kitty's eyes participate *in* (*participante*) the form *sight* and the corresponding power to see and participate this form and corresponding power *from* Kitty's soul. It is the power of sight which is restricted and limited by being participated by Kitty's eyes but not Kitty's soul by causing Kitty's eyes to have that power.

The claim that God is "in" all creatures in virtue of the fact that creatures participate in God like an effect participates in its cause contradicts the Christian view that God is and remains transcendent to the world as their cause only if the former claim is (mis-)understood as giving expression to the idea that God is "in" creatures in the mode that a creature is in another creature, i.e., that God is made a part of creatures by creatures participating in him.<sup>48</sup> Such a mereological view of God's *in-ness* in his creation is wrong. God is unparticipated in this sense. The difference between creator and creatures is not a gradual difference. God is an *ens* but not an *ens* in the sense that he is just another more powerful or superior *ens* at the top of a hierarchy of all *entia*. Rather, God's transcendence as *ens* to all created *entia* consists in the fact that God is an *ens* which exists in no mode. Only because God as creator is an *ens* which exists in no mode, he possesses the whole power of *esse* and can be the universal cause of created *entia* which exist in different particular modes and have as *entia* only the power of *esse* their forms permit them to have.<sup>49</sup>

## 5. The Dionysian Synthesis: Platonic Participation and Aristotelian Forms

Let us finally turn to the fourth lecture of chapter 11 of *In DDN*. In this lecture, Aquinas shows that Dionysius's disentanglement of the PDP from the Platonic theory of Forms allows Dionysius to harmonize the former with an Aristotelian account of forms, i.e., the view that the principles or causes of the substantial and accidental *esse* or material things exist only in and not in separation from them.

The lecture is concerned with divine perfections such as *per se esse* and *per se life*. According to Aquinas's interpretation, Dionysius rejects the view that such perfections are Platonic Forms:<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> See, for example, *In DDN*, cap. 5, lect. 3, 673; Cf. *In DDN*, cap. 11, lect. 4, 938: "God who is imparticipable, since he is not made a part of anything."

<sup>49</sup> *In DDN*, cap. 5, lect. 1, 629. For a more detailed explanation of this point, see Fran O'Rourke, "Virtues Essendi: Intensive Being in Pseudo-Dionysius and Aquinas," *Dionysius XV* (1991).

<sup>50</sup> *In DDN*, cap. 11, lect. 4, 931: "Deinde, cum dicit: *hoc autem* etc., excludit erroneum intellectum. Ad cuius evidentiam sciendum est quod Platonici, ponentes ideas rerum separatas, omnia quae sic in abstracto dicuntur, posuerunt in abstracto subsistere causas secundum ordinem quemdam; ita scilicet quod primum rerum principium dicebant esse per se bonitatem et per se unitatem et hoc primum principium, quod est essentialiter bonum et unum, dicebant esse summum Deum. Sub bono autem ponebant esse, ut supra dictum est et sub esse ponebant vitam et sic de aliis. Et ideo dicebant sub summo Deo, esse quamdam divinam substantiam quae nominatur per se esse et sub hac aliam, quae nominatur per se vita."; *In DDN*, cap. 11, lect.

Then when he says, *yet what we say is not oblique*, he excludes an erroneous understanding. For the evidence of which it must be known that the Platonists, positing separated ideas of things, posited that all things that are said thus in the abstract subsist in the abstract as causes according to a certain order; namely such that they said that the first principle of things is *per se* goodness and *per se* unity, and they said that this first principle, which is essentially the good and one, is the highest God. Yet under the good they posited being, as has been said above, and under being they posited life, and thus concerning the others. And for this reason they said that under the highest God there is a certain divine substance that is named *per se* being and under this another that is named *per se* life. [...].

And so that we might gather all things in the highest, we do not say that there are some separated essences and hypostases that are the principles of things and their creators, *which* the Platonists *said* were *gods* and creators of existing things, as though operating *per se* unto the production of things.

There are no separately existing Forms which are principles of created things and play a causal role in the creation of material things. But if such perfections are not Platonic Forms, what are they? In Aquinas's view, Dionysius gives a twofold answer. First, if such perfections are predicated of God, they signify God himself because God is identical with such perfections, e.g., God is an *ens* who is *per se esse* and *per se life*.<sup>51</sup> In other words, God as an *ens* is *esse* and God as a living *ens* is *life*, and so forth.

Second, if perfections such as *per se esse* or *per se life* are predicated of a creature they signify powers or perfections that creature participates:<sup>52</sup>

Yet in another way, *per se* being and *per se* life are called *virtues* or certain perfections according to the imparticipable providence of the one God given to creatures for participating. For although God, who is the principle of these virtues, remains imparticipable in himself and consequently is not participated, nevertheless his gifts are divided in creatures and partially received, whence

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4, 933: "Et ut in summa omnia colligamus, non dicimus esse aliquas essentias et hypostases separatas quae sint principia rerum et creatrices earum, *quas* Platonici *dixerunt* esse *deos* existentium et creatores, quasi *per se* operantes ad rerum productionem."

<sup>51</sup> *In DDN*, cap. 11, lect. 4, 934.

<sup>52</sup> *In DDN*, cap. 11, lect. 4, 934: "Alio autem modo, *per se esse* et *per se vita* dicuntur *virtutes* vel perfectiones quaedam secundum providentiam unius Dei imparticipabilis datae creaturis ad participandum. Licet enim Deus, qui est harum virtutum principium, in se imparticipabilis maneat et *per consequens* non participetur, tamen dona ipsius dividuntur in creaturis et partialiter recipiuntur, unde et participari dicuntur a creaturis; et secundum quod participantur secundum *proprietatem* uniuscuiusque participantium, secundum hoc *participantia et sunt et dicuntur* ex natura *existentia*, in quantum participant *esse*; *et viventia*, in quantum participant *vita*; *et divina* in quantum participant *deitate*; et simile est de aliis. Et quia principium imparticipatum, causa est et participationum et participantium, ideo Deus et participationum et participantium *substantificator* est."

also they are said to be participated by creatures; and according as they are participated according to the *propriety* of each of things participating, according to this things *participating both are and are called existing* from nature, inasmuch as they participate being; and living, inasmuch as they participate life; *and divine*, inasmuch as they participate deity; and it is similar concerning the others. And because the unparticipated principle is the cause both of participations and of things participating, for this reason God is the *substantifier* both of participations and of things participating.

In Aquinas's view, Dionysius makes use of the third mode of participation to explain why creatures —who are not identical with divine perfections such as per se *esse* or per se life—have these perfections. For example, an existing creature receives in a particular way per se *esse* which belongs in a universal way to God because he is per se *esse* by his essence. A living creature participates *in (participante)* per se *esse (participato)* and participates per se *esse from* God who is the source and cause of per se *esse* in existing creatures. Per se *esse* which is participated by an existing creature, and which exists in that creature as a principle or cause of *esse* of that creature, is restricted and limited by being participated by that creature.

For example, cat Kitty has not the fullness of per se *esse* and the corresponding whole power of per se *esse* because she is not identical with per se *esse*. Rather, she has *esse* and the powers of *esse* which a cat has. What accounts for this fact is that she is metaphysically composed of that which participates (*quod est*) and that in which she participates (*quo est*). In contrast to God, Kitty is an *ens* that is not identical with per se *esse* but rather metaphysically composed of that which is (*quod est*) and that in virtue of which she is (*quo est*), namely, per se *esse*.<sup>53</sup> What determines Kitty's capacity to receive perfections or powers such as per se *esse* or per se life is her substantial form. Due to her substantial form, she has perfections or powers such as per se *esse* or per se life in the mode of a cat, i.e., she has powers or perfections such as per se *esse* or per se life to the extent that members of the species *cat* can have such powers or perfections. However, while perfections such as per se *esse* or per se life are restricted and limited by the creatures which participate in them, God as the source or cause of such perfections or powers in creatures remains unparticipated. In other words, God is not restricted or limited by causing creatures to have per se *esse* or per se life inherent in them.

To sum up, according to Aquinas's interpretation of *DDN*, there exists only one cause responsible for the creation of a multiplicity of essentially different things, namely, God who is identical with divine perfections such as per se *esse*, per se life, and so forth. God causes creatures to have a likeness of divine perfections such as per se *esse*, per se life, and so forth in them. Creatures participate differently in divine

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<sup>53</sup> See, for example, *ScG*, Liber II, cap. 54.

perfections such as *per se esse* or *per se* life inherent in them in virtue of their different substantial forms.

Thus, in Aquinas's view, Dionysius's view on divine perfections found in creatures harmonizes perfectly with the Aristotelian account of forms according to which the principles or causes of the substantial and accidental *esse* or material things exist only in and not in separation from them. Creatures have the substantial *esse* they have in virtue of substantial forms inherent in them. Substantial forms give *esse* to the material things of which they are forms. However, substantial forms can only give *esse* to the whole because they constantly receive *esse*, i.e., they constantly participate *in* created *esse* which they participate *from* God.<sup>54</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

In this article, we have seen that Aquinas attributes a key insight to Dionysius in his commentary on *DDN*: the PDP can be disentangled from a commitment to the theory of Forms which Aristotle attributes to Plato. A reconstruction and examination of this key insight helped us better to understand Aquinas's view of how a particular mode of participation works, namely, the participation of an effect in its cause, and why also he attributes this view also to Aristotle. The PDP serves an important role in explaining the Christian doctrine of creation—understood as the causal dependence of everything created on a universal cause of *esse*—to which Plato as well as Aristotle are committed according to Aquinas. Finally, what we have learnt from Aquinas's commentary is that once the two Platonic views are disentangled, it is possible to combine the PDP with an Aristotelian account of forms into a coherent and powerful metaphysical synthesis.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> See, for example, *Qdl.* XII, q. 4, a. 1, corp.

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