

**‘Persian Perspectives on Prima Philosophia: The Reception of Avicennian
Thought in the *De Ente et Essentia*’**

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PERSIAN PERSPECTIVES ON PRIMA PHILOSOPHIA: THE RECEPTION OF AVICENNIAN THOUGHT IN THE *DE ENTE ET ESSENTIA*

Alexis Szejnoga

1. Introduction

This article is an adaptation of my master thesis in which I examined the historical-philosophical context of the tractate *De ente et essentia*, a succinct treatment of Aristotelian ontology, written by Thomas Aquinas *infra magisterium*. The very first research question that I posed was: what was the wider historical-philosophical background against which Thomas Aquinas wrote the *De ente et essentia*? However, it did not take long before it became clear that one specific element of that historical-philosophical background was probably more influential on the metaphysical thought of Thomas than any other.

In the early thirteenth century, the philosophical landscape was primarily dominated by the interaction between Christian and Arabic culture. The mingling of cultures on the Iberian Peninsula generated an exchange on philosophical, theological, and literary levels. Among the most discussed works were commentaries on the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle by Ibn Sīnā, who would become known in the West by his Latinized name, Avicenna. Upon a first reading of the *De ente et essentia*, it immediately becomes apparent that Thomas refers to Avicenna quite a lot. It would seem that Avicenna's interpretation of Aristotelian metaphysics posed a major influence upon Thomas. Well-known scholars on the metaphysical thought of Saint Thomas have come to a similar conclusion regarding the *De ente et essentia*, although their reasoning is not always explicitly stated. James Weisheipl, a Dominican scholar who authored an extensive biography of Thomas Aquinas, says of the *De ente et essentia*: "This work is highly original, even though it is heavily indebted to Avicenna's

Metaphysics”.¹ Armand Maurer comments in the introduction to his English translation of the *De ente et essentia* that it has an affinity with Thomas’s commentary on the *Four Books of Sentences* by Peter Lombard, “both in their metaphysical notions and their dependence on Avicenna”.² Anthony Kenny states of the *De ente et essentia*: “The treatise is heavily influenced by the eleventh-century Arabic philosopher Ibn Sina or Avicenna, whose *Metaphysics* is referred to in the very first lines of Aquinas’ prologue”.³ All three authors cited above not only mention Avicenna as an influence on the metaphysical thought of Thomas, but they also do so in an exclusive manner (besides Avicenna no other influence is mentioned) and in terms which denote more than a casual or minor influence (“heavily indebted”, “dependent” and “heavily influenced”). This leads to a second specific question to engage the text with: how exactly does the influence of Avicennian thought upon Thomas become apparent within *De ente et essentia*?

Thus, my examination of the text of the *De ente et essentia* will be guided by questions regarding the historical-philosophical context of the tractate, and concerning visible signs of Avicennian influence within the text. This will be done in two consecutive steps. The first part will present the historical and philosophical context of the *De ente et essentia*. The second part will focus specifically on the influence of Avicenna, and his interpretation of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. This influence will be examined by looking at explicit and implicit references to Avicennian thought made by Thomas in the text of the *opusculum*, and by briefly reviewing a comparative study of the ontologies of Thomas and Avicenna prepared by De Raeymaeker.

A final opening remark concerns matters of methodology. All citations of the Latin text of the *De ente et essentia* are taken from the *Editio Leonina*.⁴ Citations from the English text are taken from Bobik’s *Aquinas on Being and Essence: A Translation and*

¹ J. Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas d’ Aquino: His Life, Thought and Works* (Garden City: 1974), p. 79.

² Thomas Aquinas, A. Maurer, *On Being and Essence* (Toronto 1968), p. 9.

³ A. Kenny, *Aquinas on Being* (New York: 2002), p. 1.

⁴ Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera omnia, Tomus XLIII, Roma 1976.

Interpretation.⁵ Reference to the titles of philosophical works is in the original language, with a translation in English within parentheses upon its first occurrence in the text. Whenever an original text was not written in Latin, the Latin title is used whenever Thomas refers to a Latin translation. Thus Avicenna's *Ilāhiyyāt* (*Metaphysics*) refers to the Arabic original, while Avicenna's *Metaphysica* (*Metaphysics*) refers to the Latin translation of the text. In those cases where Latin titles might be referring to different texts (for example, the *Sufficientia* or the *Metaphysica*), the context should clarify which version is meant.

2. Historical-philosophical context

In order to shed light on the historical-philosophical context of the *De ente et essentia*, it is first necessary to determine precisely when this *opusculum* was written. Bartholomew of Lucca (c. 1236 - c. 1327), disciple and confessor to Thomas Aquinas, mentioned the manuscript in his list of works by his fellow Dominican as *Tractatus de ente et essentia quem scripsit ad fraters et socios nondum existens magister* (*Treatise on Being and Essence, which he wrote for his Brothers and Colleagues, while not yet a Master*). Thomas's graduation at the theological faculty of the University of Paris has been reliably determined to have taken place in March 1256, and the *De ente et essentia* can therefore safely be assumed to have been written before then. It is generally agreed upon that he wrote the treatise while lecturing on the *Libri quattuor sententiarum* (*Four Books of Sentences*) of Peter Lombard (c. 1096 – 1164) at the University of Paris. This means that the *De ente et essentia* was probably written after his departure from Cologne, where he had been studying under Albert the Great (1193/1206 - 1280), in 1252. This limits the possible composition of the treatise within a four-year window (1252-1256). This means that for the construction of a summary of possible influences on Thomas's metaphysical thought, no events postdating 1252 will be considered.

⁵ J. Bobik, *Aquinas on Being and Essence: A Translation and Interpretation* (Notre Dame: 1965).

Aristotelianism

In the broadest sense, Aristotelianism denotes the entire field of philosophy that is primarily inspired by the thought of the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BCE). In a way, he himself can be thought of as the founder of the tradition that bears his name, seeing as how he started the Lyceum in Athens, a school that educated students in his peripatetic tradition. Later philosophical movements became interested in his thought, causing renewed interest in his teachings. The first resurgence of Aristotelian philosophy in the Common Era happened with the advent of Neo-Platonism in the third century, starting with the philosophy of Plotinus (204-270). Having become interested in the works of Plato (428-348 BCE), this school of thought extended its view to include the writings of his student Aristotle, commenting and expanding on them.

Starting in the ninth century, Islamic philosophers and theologians began translating and commenting upon Aristotle's work. Al-Kindī (801-873, also known by his Latin moniker Alkindus), al-Fārābī (872-950, known in the West as Alfarabius), al-Ghazālī (1058-1111, also called Algazel in Latin) and Ibn Rushd (1126-1198, known as Averroës) all wrote treatments of different parts of the Aristotelian corpus. The interest in the works of Aristotle in the Islamic world provided an impulse to Aristotelian research in the Latin West.

Liber de causis and Fons vitae

A specific work of philosophy that deserves mention here is the *Liber de causis* (*Book of Causes*), which in 1252 was still attributed to Aristotle. It treats the problematic relationship between the One and the Many, or how multiplicity can originate from unity. To bridge the apparent chasm between simplicity and diversity, the author posits the Spirit, which is both singular and a principle of diversity, and which includes in itself the multiplicity of Forms. Through the mediation of the Spirit, the One brings about the existence of the Soul, which in the Neo-Platonic tradition must be understood as the Soul of the World. It should be clear that this

mediated creation of the Soul posed a problem for Islamic and Christian philosophers, as it touched upon certain tenets of Gnostic heresies.

Although unknown to Thomas Aquinas when he wrote the *De ente et essentia*, he later discovered that the *Liber de causis* had in fact not been written by Aristotle, as its contents were largely drawn from the *Stoicheiosis theologikè* (*Elements of Theology*, better known by its Latin title *Elementatio theologica*) by Proclus (412-485). Thomas made this discovery after having received a translation of this work of Proclus from his friend and fellow Dominican William of Moerbeke (1215-1286), and reported on his findings in the *prooemium* of his *Super librum de causis expositio* (*Commentary on the Book of Causes*).⁶ Although the author of the *Liber de causis* has still not been identified with certainty, it is believed that he was a Muslim philosopher or theologian, who set forth to synthesize the Neo-Platonic doctrine of emanation with the Islamic theology of creation. As such, the work is a combination of thoughts from both Proclus and Plotinus (204-270).

Another proponent of Neo-Platonism that has exerted a major influence on the *De ente et essentia*, was the Hebrew philosopher Solomon Ibn Gabirol (1021-1058) from al-ʿAndalus, who became known in the Latin West as Avicbron. Although an accomplished poet, he will primarily be remembered as one of the first philosophers to introduce Neo-Platonism to Western Europe. A collection of five tractates on matter and form, known by its Latin title as *De materia et forma*, or alternatively as *Fons vitae* (this is the name that Thomas refers to), was translated from Arabic into Latin in 1150. It should be noted that Thomas Aquinas, and his scholastic intellectual heirs, were of the opinion that the author of the *Fons vitae* was a Christian philosopher. It was only in 1846, when Solomon Munk discovered a Hebrew translation of the

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Book of Causes*, transl. by V. Guagliardo O.P., C. Hess O.P., R. Taylor (Washington D.C.: 1996), p. 4. For the Latin text: Thomas Aquinas, *Super librum De Causis expositio*, ed. by H.D. Saffrey O.P. (Freiburg/Leuven: 1954), or *Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera omnia*, Tomus XLIX, Roma (in preparation).

Arabic original of the *Fons vitae*, that it was concluded that Avicbron was in fact none other than Solomon Ibn Gabirol.

The five tractates of the *Fons vitae* presented several aspects of the doctrine of matter and form. Among these were the relationship between matter and form in physical substances, the existence of *substantiae simplices* which form an intermediary level between the *prima essentia* (God) and physical creation, and the thought that all created substances are composed of matter and form, even spiritual substances (a point of contention with Thomas, which was taken up by the Franciscan school of thought, for example in the works of Bonaventura). Moreover, Avicbron posits that all matter is one, although it becomes less spiritual as it is farther removed from the *prima essentia*. As Avicbron tried to strictly separate his philosophical thoughts from his religious beliefs, it can be contested whether the *Fons vitae* presents an attempt to reconcile Neo-Platonic philosophy with Jewish theology.

Avicenna

The final influence on Thomas Aquinas to be individually treated here, and the one of which the influence will be traced throughout the *De ente et essentia*, is that of Avicenna. This Persian polymath, who had the reputation of being somewhat of a genius (he claimed to have known the Qur'ān by heart at age seven), wrote extensively on such diverse subjects as medicine, geology, metaphysics and psychology. In addition to this, Avicenna also wrote multiple volumes of poetry, as well as composing parts of his scientific works in verse. He was also a devout Muslim, and part of his intellectual calling was to synthesize *kalām*, or Islamic theology, with the philosophical schools of Plato and Aristotle.

Avicenna was in fact so successful in reconciling Islamic theology with Greek philosophical thought, that he became the main proponent of Islamic philosophy in the twelfth century. However, in Europe his teachings would not be accepted as easily. His writings were met with heated discussions, about the real distinction between being and essence for example, which lead to a proscription of his work in the city of Paris in 1210 (sharing the fate of Aristotle's intellectual heritage). By the time that Thomas

Aquinas arrived in Paris in 1252, this prohibition must have been lifted or otherwise weakened, as Maurer notes that Avicenna was “in vogue” while Thomas taught in Paris.⁷

The thought of the real distinction between existence and essence, or between *esse* and *essentia* to use Latin nomenclature, was arguably first formulated by Avicenna. It means that on an ontological level, there is a difference between what an object is (its *essentia* or essence), and that an object is (its *esse* or existence). Admittedly, the distinction itself was already formulated by Aristotle in his *Analytica posteria* and his *Metaphysics*. However, it is argued that Avicenna is the first to uphold the distinction on a metaphysical level, whereas Aristotle limited it to an analytical level. The real distinction between being and essence will be one of the specific points that will be traced in the *De esse et essentia*. Its formulation by Avicenna and the context in which it arose will be treated in the second part of this article.

The literary output of Avicenna was enormous. Most famous among his many works is the *Kitāb ash-Shifā’* (*Book of Healing*), an encyclopedia of philosophical thought. It was entitled “*Book of Healing*” because through the wisdom that it held, it “healed” the reader of his ignorance, which according to Avicenna should be regarded as a sickness of the mind. Parts of this encyclopedia would be translated into Latin, and as such they were known to Thomas. That part of the *Kitāb ash-Shifā’* which had theological and metaphysical subjects as its topics (*Ilāhiyyāt*), was translated into Latin as the *Metaphysica*. This was a new treatise on the subject, not a commentary on the work of the same name by Aristotle. Likewise, the part which treated on physics was translated into Latin and was known by the name of *Sufficientia*, which is also the Latin title for the entire *Kitāb ash-Shifā’*. That part of the encyclopedia dedicated to psychology (*al-Nafs*) was translated as *De anima*. Finally, *al-Mantiq*, the part that expounded Avicenna’s thought on logic, was known in Latin as the *Logica*. Although only the *Metaphysica* and the *De anima* are explicitly referred to by Thomas, we can trace the influence from all these four parts of the *Kitāb ash-Shifā’* in the *De ente et essentia*.

⁷ Thomas Aquinas, A. Maurer, *On Being and Essence*, Toronto 1968, 8-9.

3. Avicennian influence on the *De ente et essentia*

Explicit references to Avicenna and his works

We will start by examining those instances in which Thomas thought it prudent to explicitly refer to Avicenna and his works to construct or strengthen his argument. In total, there are thirteen of these explicit references to be found in the *De ente et essentia*. In fact, Avicenna is the most referenced author in the *opusculum*, with the exception of Aristotle.

If we look at the explicit citations of Avicenna, we note that Thomas mentions the name of the literary work to which he is referring in only six out of thirteen cases. In total, Avicenna's *Metaphysics* is referred to four times, while his *On the soul* is mentioned only two times, with both references being made to the beginning of the book (i.e. first book, chapter one). If we take all explicit references to Avicenna into account, we note the same skewed ratio: in ten out of thirteen explicit references, Avicenna's *Metaphysics* is used as a source, while reference is made to his *On the soul* on only three occasions. Furthermore, all references to *On the soul* are made within the confines of the fifth chapter of the *De ente et essentia*, in which Thomas discusses the composition of the intelligences. Of the ten times that Thomas refers to Avicenna's *Metaphysics*, eight times reference is made to the fifth book of that literary work, the only two exceptions being the first two references. This is quite understandable, as they occur not in the main narrative of the *De ente et essentia*, but in the introduction in which the importance of the work is explained, and in the first chapter in which the different terms used to refer to *essentia* are listed. Considering the above, it would not seem to be an exaggeration to label the fifth book of the *Metaphysics* as the main Avicennian influence on the *De ente et essentia*, with the first book of his *On the soul* as a remote and far less important second.

The first explicit reference is worth commenting upon because it cites a general principle, formulated by Avicenna, which is then combined by Thomas with a citation of Aristotle, in order to accentuate the importance of the *De ente et essentia*. Considering

that 'being' and 'essence' ('*ens et essentia*') are the first notions conceived by the intellect, as Avicenna posits, it is very important to understand these two concepts, as they constitute the fundament on which all other knowledge rests. The science of being-qua-being, i.e. metaphysics, thus starts with the exploration of the notions of 'being' en 'essence'; ontology constitutes the *prima philosophia*. The explicit mentioning of Avicenna in this first sentence of the *De ente et essentia*, in combination with a referral to Aristotle, could be considered a clear indicator that the works and thought of Avicenna are going to represent a major influence on the *opusculum*.

However, it seems that Thomas severely misquotes Avicenna, as the Latin translation of his *Metaphysics* reads 'being and thing and necessity' as the first notions ('*ens et res et necesse*').⁸ Wisnovsky puts forward the thesis that Avicenna introduced the Arabic word for essence (*māhiyya*), as a substitute for the Arabic word for thing (*shay'*). This substitution occurred over time, while considering the theological discussion on the distinction between things and existents, and had the abstract noun thingness (*shay'iyya*) as an intermediary.⁹ It is therefore possible that Thomas either possessed a manuscript of the Latin translation of the *Metaphysics* of Avicenna in which the translator used *essentia* instead of *res*, or Thomas might have substituted *essentia* for *res* himself, having knowledge of Avicenna's later work. Interestingly, the omission of *necesse* implies a purely philosophical interest in Thomas, as necessity in the teachings of Avicenna refers to necessary being, which is limited to the being of God, in contrast with his creation, which exemplifies contingent being.

Moreover, as Delfgaauw notes, being appears to be more intuitive as a first impression upon the intellect than essence.¹⁰ But this is instantly explained by Delfgaauw: we should not interpret

⁸ M.-D. Roland-Gosselin O.P., *Le De Ente et Essentia de S. Thomas D'Aquin* (Kain : 1926), p. 1 note 2.

⁹ R. Wisnovsky, *Avicenna's Metaphysics in Context* (London: 2003), pp. 145-180.

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, B. Delfgaauw, *Over het zijn en het wezen*, (Kampen: 1986), pp. 71-72 noot 4.

Thomas here as positing that the understanding of an essence is a first impression upon the intellect, but simply that 'being' is instantly perceived as being in this or that manner. A third complication regarding this explicit reference to Avicenna may occur in translating the Latin word '*ens*'. Considering the lack of indefinite articles in Latin, this word may be alternatively translated as 'being' or as 'a being'. The first possibility poses a problem as it may be read as either an abstract noun or a gerund, and is therefore ambiguous. The alternative seems to be synonymous to 'thing' and should therefore be rejected; a thing clearly refers to the composite of existence and essence, and should therefore not be used for one of its principles.

The second explicit reference merits extra attention, not because of its content, but because of the apparent uncertainty of its origin. Thomas refers to Avicenna to include the word '*forma*' as another name for *essentia* in his list of synonyms in the first chapter of the *De ente et essentia*. This is the only occasion in which Roland-Gosselin and the editors of the Leonina edition disagree on the place in the *Metaphysics* that is referred to. The Leonina gives two options: the sixth chapter of the first book or the second chapter of the second book.¹¹ Since Thomas himself refers to the second book ('*ut dicit Auicenna in II Metaphysice sue*'), the first option seems a bit puzzling, even more so because the word '*forma*' is not encountered in the line cited from book 1, chapter 6 ('*unaqueque res habet certitudinem propriam que est eius quidditas*'). To add to this enigma, Roland-Gosselin's text, which is based on eight Parisian manuscripts, reads '*ut dicit Auicenna in tercio Methaphysice sue*'. As a possible source of this reference Roland-Gosselin proposes the fifth chapter of the third book, but with caution.¹² Roland-Gosselin's critical apparatus notes no variations within the eight Parisian manuscripts. However, the Leonina edition notes five variations among its sources, consisting of inversion of '*Metaphysice*' and '*sue*', and different ways in which

¹¹ *Metaph.* 1/6:72v a or *Metaph.* 2/2:76r a. See Leonina edition, book 43, page 369, note 36.

¹² *Metaph.* 3/5:80 b. See M.-D. Roland-Gosselin o.p., idem, 4:2-3 and note 1.

'*Metaphisice*' is altered, but not one manuscript seems to refer to the third book of the *Metaphysics*. Moreover, in their introduction, the editors of the Leonina edition signal that some of the earliest manuscripts gloss Avicenna's *Physics*, rather than his *Metaphysics*. They evaluate this odd variation as an early misreading which was corrected at a very early stage, because 'the *Sufficientia* does not refer to *forma* in this sense'.¹³ In conclusion, it would appear that all manuscripts selected to be used by the editors of the Leonina edition refer to the second book of the *Metaphysics*, while all manuscripts which were used by Roland-Gosselin refer to the third book. In addition, the exact place that is referred to by Thomas is uncertain, both for Roland-Gosselin as for the editors of the Leonina. That this reference to Avicenna poses a problem also becomes evident from the commentary on the *De ente et essentia* by Thomas (cardinal) Cajetan. Although the 1907 Roman printing of the Latin text glosses '*sicut dicit Avicenna in II Metaphysicae suae*', Kendzierski and Wade seem fit to translate 'as Avicenna says in III Metaphysicae' while referring to the fifth chapter of the third book, their translation being based upon the 1934 printing by Marietti.¹⁴

At this point, it should be noted that Roland-Gosselin draws attention to the fact that the Latin translation of the *Metaphysics* often uses the word '*certitudo*' where the Arabic word for essence appears in the original text.¹⁵ Taking into account all of the above, and the fact that Roland-Gosselin's text antedates the Leonina edition of the *De ente et essentia*, the following solution to the described enigma seems highly plausible: the text should read '*II Metaphisice*' and refers to *Metaph. 2/2:76r* a '*hec certitudo... est forma*', as suggested by the Leonina edition. The text variation of the Parisian manuscripts could be explained by a common original, whether included in those eight or lost, in which the text was altered by mistake (creating a corruption) or even on purpose by a scribe

¹³ 'la *Sufficientia* ne touche pas ce sens de *forma*'. Leon. 43.350 :c.5, p25.

¹⁴ S. Thomae Aquinatis, *Opusculum De Ente et Essentia: Commentariis Caietani Illustratum*, Romae 1907, p. 30. Cajetan, L. Kendzierski, F. Wade, *Commentary on Being and Essence* (Milwaukee 1964), p. 72.

¹⁵ Also in note 1, *ibidem*, 4.

who thought he was correcting an error made by a previous copier of the manuscript. The alternative source for the reference quoted by the Leonina edition (i.e. *Metaph.* 1/6:72v a) might be taken from Roland-Gosselin, who presents it as an example of the use of the word ‘*certitudo*’ by the translator of the Arabian original of the *Metaphysics*, rather than a possible source of the explicit reference made to Avicenna by Thomas. The seemingly incorrect translation of the work of Cajetan can also be explained by a contrast between Italian and Parisian versions: in a footnote on the very first page of their translation, Kendzierski and Wade remark that they have used two Latin texts. One prepared in Turin by Laurent and printed by Marietti in 1934, and one prepared in Paris in 1883.¹⁶ This seems to corroborate the thesis that the Parisian versions refer to the third book, while Italian versions cite the second book.

On several occasions, the reference to Avicenna does not introduce a new element to Thomas’s argument; rather it strengthens a thought introduced by Thomas or others, and therefore constitutes an appeal to authority. In two cases, Avicenna is referred to as agreeing with other philosophers: once he is cited in agreement with Boethius and Averroës, and once in agreement solely with Averroës. In both these cases, the keyword used in the conjunctive clause is ‘*etiam*’. In other instances, Thomas uses a reference to Avicenna as the natural outcome of his own argument. These references are all introduced by the keywords ‘*unde*’, which is invariably translated by ‘whence’, and ‘*ideo*’, which is translated as ‘this is why’. The fourth and final keyword used by Thomas to introduce a citation of Avicenna is ‘*ut*’, translated by Bobik with ‘as’. When this keyword is used, a thought or principle of Avicenna is introduced which is new, or which is cited in contrast to the preceding argument.

Implicit references to Avicennian thought

In addition to the abovementioned cases in which Thomas himself felt it opportune to mention the author of the incorporated

¹⁶ Cajetan, L. Kendzierski, F. Wade, *Commentary on Being and Essence*, Milwaukee 1964, 39 note 1.

influences on his *opusculum*, there are quite a few instances in which commentators on the *De ente et essentia* have noticed a striking similarity with parts of Avicenna's work, where Thomas does not reference his sources.

Three implicit references are included in the Appendix without specifying an Avicennian work as a source. All three of these are taken from the notes of Roland-Gosselin. In no. 2 he notes that the opinion that he rallies against is that of Averroës, and that Thomas agrees with the alternative opinion, as he himself wrote in his commentary on the Aristotelian *Metaphysics*¹⁷. In no. 3, Roland-Gosselin notes that the technical term '*materia signata*' entered the scholastic vocabulary because the translator of Avicennian works used it. In contrast, the translator of the works of Averroës used the term '*materia demonstrata*' for the same gloss; no specific literary source is mentioned. In no. 7, Roland-Gosselin remarks upon Avicenna's multiple attacks on the Platonic notion of separate forms. In this instance, reference to Avicennian sources is given (*Metaph.* 5/1:87r b E, *Metaph.* 7/2:96r and *Metaph.* 7/3:96v) but these are not included in the table as their relevance to the citation from the *De ente et essentia* is not self-evident.

Three longer tracks of text which betray Avicennian influence deserve more attention. The editors of the Leonina note that lines 105-150 of chapter 2 are comparable to Thomas's commentary on the *Four Books of Sentences* of Peter Lombard, and that in that work reference is made to Avicenna (no. 5).¹⁸ Also, a direct reference to Avicenna is incorporated in the critical apparatus.¹⁹ Most interestingly, Roland-Gosselin has not noticed this Avicennian influence on Thomas. Another major passage of the *De ente et essentia* is thought to be of Avicennian origin by the editors of the Leonina: lines 195-222 of chapter 2.²⁰ A third large portion of the *opusculum* which might be of Avicennian origin is lines 26-155 of

¹⁷ In *Met.* L. VII, l. 9 (t. 25, p. 3 b).

¹⁸ *Super Sent.* I d. 25 q. 1 a. 1 ad 2, referens Avicennam. Leon. 43.371: note on 105-150.

¹⁹ *Metaph.* 5/3:88r a A.

²⁰ *Metaph.* 5/5:89v D-E.

chapter 3, making up most of that particular chapter.²¹ This is a reference to Avicenna's threefold consideration of essences, as described in 2.4 below.

In conclusion, it can be said that the list of implicit references to Avicennian sources includes a wider variety of literary works than that of the explicit references. In addition to his *Metaphysics* and his *De Anima*, his implicit references also include his *Logica* and the *Sufficientia*. Two sources are notable for their frequency: the fifth book of the *Metaphysics* and the first book of the *Logica*, occurring three and four times respectively. If we look at the length of the passages which show Avicennian influence, we note that some are considerably larger than those that Thomas cites while mentioning Avicenna as their author. Therefore, it might be said that the unmarked influence of Avicenna on the text of the *De ente et essentia* is significantly larger than is betrayed by explicit citations.

Avicennian influence on the De ente et essentia: De Raeymaeker

A third mode of influence is neither marked by Thomas himself, nor by the compilers of (semi)critical editions of the text of the *De ente et essentia*. In contrast, it is remarked upon in handbooks and articles on Thomist metaphysics. To give a broad indication of the extent to which Avicennian thought is regarded as highly influential on the works of Thomas in general, and on his *De ente et essentia* in particular, I will briefly review a short treatise precisely on this topic written by the Flamish Thomist Louis De Raeymaeker (1895-1970), as it focuses most specifically at the topic at hand.²² He starts by noting Avicenna's accent on the priority of three concepts: being, thing and necessity. These concepts are prior in that they constitute the first experience of the intellect and because one is not able to explain them in simpler or prior concepts. Existential knowledge is always a mixture of the experience of existence which

²¹ *Metaph.* 5/1-2:86v a-87v b.

²² L. De Raeymaeker, *Vergelijkende studie over de betekenis van het "zijn" in de metafysiek van Avicenna en die van Thomas van Aquino* (Brussel: 1955).

is mediated or ‘troubled’ by quiddity: both sensory and mental experiences refer to being-in-this-or-that-manner. However, since Avicenna contents that existence is not included in any essence, they must in one way or the other, be separate. De Raeymaeker sets out to clarify their distinction within the Avicennian corpus. First, he summarizes Avicenna’s understanding of quiddity or essence. First of all, an essence can be considered in three ways: absolute (*in se*), extramental (*in re*) or mental (*in intellectu*). Regarding these last two, it is posited that individuality characterizes an essence *in re*, while universality characterizes an essence *in intellectu*. De Raeymaeker comments on the similarity to the *Elementatio theologica* of Proclus and the *Liber the causis*, attributed by the Arabian philosophers to Aristotle, in which a threefold causal hierarchy was described: (1) absolute perfection, (2) universal perfection and (3) individual things. That Avicenna was influenced by the Neo-Platonic tradition is almost a matter of certainty; Wisnovsky even refers to him as a ‘Neo-Platonizing’ Aristotelian. However, Avicenna does reject the Platonic notion of individual participation in an otherworldly idea; his teaching on essences is constructed in an Aristotelian fashion.

Most importantly, according to De Raeymaeker, Avicenna considers existence to be superadded to essences, labeling existence as mere accident. However, this does not denote one of the nine categories of accidents as described in Aristotle’s ten genera. Rather, Avicenna calls existence concomitant to essences (*concomitans*), denoting that it is a necessary property of the essence. These concomitant properties either belong to the essence on account of itself (De Raeymaeker poses the property of unevenness which belongs to the number three on account of its own essence), or on account of some extrinsic principle, as is the case with existence, since it is caused by an action of creation by God. The external causation of existence is necessitated by the fact that existence permeates the ten genera, since it is found in all its categories. Therefore, the cause of existence of all essences should be sought outside the categories. This also explains why we can understand the nature of a being (a *djinni* for example) without knowing if such a being actually exists in reality, since its existence is not included in its essence. But even though it comes from

without, existence still belongs to the essence as an attribute. Essences therefore seem prior in Avicenna's ontology. De Raeymaker succinctly summarizes Avicenna's stance by stating that in his ontology 'existence is a derivative of the totality of quidditative principles'.²³

Avicenna also claims that an essence which has non-being as a concomitant attribute (i.e. something which does not exist in reality), still sustains itself in an absolute sense, on account of its inner quidditative structure, independent of any relationship to external reality, including existence. An essence considered absolutely (*in se*), possesses an 'inner firmness' (cf. *certitudo*) and presents itself as such to our intellect.²⁴ We may then conclude that for Avicenna both existence and non-being present itself as concomitant properties of essences; but while existence comes from without, having its cause in God who transcends the ten genera, it is supported by non-being, in which 'the inner firmness inherent to the essence absolutely considered is directly and necessarily expressed'.²⁵ Existence does not exhibit the independence of quiddities. On the contrary, existence is always related to an essence, and cannot be considered absolute. Existence therefore only has relative value, while essences have absolute value. From the above, De Raeymaker concludes that for Avicenna, ontological priority lies with quiddities or essences, which he states is understandable given the influence of Neo-Platonic sources on his philosophy. Given the emphasis on the absolute quality of essences and their inherent connection to necessary being, Avicenna's ontology may rightly be called 'essentialism'.

De Raeymaecker then comments on Thomas's reception of Avicennian thought. He notes that especially Thomas's earlier works (such as the *De ente et essentia*) show a profound influence

²³ 'zo is het bestaan een derivaat van het geheel aan quidditatieve principes'. Ibidem, 11.

²⁴ 'de loutere quidditeit, d.i. de niet-zijnde quidditeit, de quidditeit waarvan het niet-zijn een eigenschap is, bezit een inwendige stevigheid en dringt zich als zodanig op aan ons verstand'. Ibidem, 11.

²⁵ 'waarin de *inwendige* stevigheid eigen aan de op zichzelf (*absolute*) beschouwde quidditeit rechtstreeks en noodzakelijk tot uitdrukking komt'. Ibidem, 11.

by Avicenna. Thomas too posits the priority of being in relation to the human intellect. It is precisely being which is first experienced by the human intellect, and which in fact constitutes its formal object. In addition, Thomas primarily connects the understanding of being with sensory experience of reality, or the world, following Aristotle. This goes against Platonic thought and several mental experiments proposed by Avicenna, in which the human mind experiences itself in an exploration of the inner world. However, for Thomas, the awareness of being is inherently linked to a fundamental openness of the human intellect to the world.

The threefold division of essences (*in re, in se, in intellectu*) can also be found in Thomas's works, for example in this excerpt from chapter 4 of the *De ente et essentia*:

Now, a nature or essence signified as a whole can be considered in two ways. In one way it can be considered according to its proper content, and this is an absolute consideration of it [...] In the other way, an essence is considered according to the existence it has in this or that [...] This nature has a twofold existence, one in singular things, the other in the soul.²⁶

Taking into account that with 'soul' (Lat. 'anima') Thomas here refers to the human intellect, the Avicennian influence becomes evident. As noted above, this entire passage of the *De ente et essentia* has been linked by Roland-Gosselin to the first two chapters of the fifth book of Avicenna's *Metaphysics*.

Also with regard to the argument on the distinction between *esse* and *essentia*, the influence of Avicenna's thought is unmistakable to the point where De Raeymaecker claims that the evidence that Thomas gives for the distinction is actually identical to that given by Avicenna:

²⁶ 'Natura autem vel essentia sic accepta potest dupliciter considerari : uno modo secundum rationem propriam et haec est absoluta consideratio ipsius [...] Alio modo consideratur secundum esse quod habet in hoc vel in illo [...] Haec autem natura duplex habet esse : unum in singularibus, aliud in anima'. Leon. 43.3:26-29, 45-47, 52-53.

Whatever is not of the understood content of an essence or quiddity is something that comes from without and makes a composition with the essence [...] it is clear, therefore, that existence is other than essence or quiddity.²⁷

So, although Thomas acknowledges the distinction between existence and essence and the external causation of existence on account of its independence of the essence's content, he still posits a strong relationship between the two principles of being, as they form a composition with each other. In accord with Avicenna, he sees existence as a concomitant property of essences (although that terminology is not yet used in the *De ente et essentia*), which is added to it by an external cause, which he claims to be God.

At this point, I would like to briefly comment upon the real distinction between essence and existence as proposed by Avicenna. It did not develop within an intellectual vacuum. In fact, the discussions among the different factions of *mutakallimūn* (Islamic theologians) on the relationship between the concepts of "thing" (*shay'*) and "existent" (*mawjūd*), appear to have provided Avicenna with the necessary impetus to develop his thought. Moreover, the discussion on things and existents did not merely arise out of philosophical interest in ontology, but rather from a theological interest to revolve apparent paradoxes which presented itself in the interpretation of various verses of the Qur'ān. The *mutakallimūn* were faced by two distinct problems: one the one hand, they sought to resolve the question whether or not it could be said that God is a thing. On the other hand, they were trying to make sense of the Qur'ānic verses in which the creative power of God was exalted, for example sura 36:82: "Verily His command, when He intends a thing, is *only* that He says to it, 'Be!,' and it is". What is this thing, the object of God's command to be, that is before it exists? How was this description of divine creative power to be reconciled with Neo-Platonized Aristotelian ontology, of which the Islamic dogmatists were the intellectual heirs? It was within the context of these theologically driven debates that the conceived

²⁷ 'Quidquid enim non est de intellectu essentiae vel quidditatis, hoc est adveniens extra et faciens compositionem cum essentia [...] Ergo patet quod esse est aliud ab essentia vel quidditate'. Leon. 43.4:94-95, 102-103.

relationship between things and existents gave rise to the Avicennian distinction between essence and existence.

We find Avicenna's approach of the subject matter in his *Kitāb ash-Shifā'* (*Book of Healing*), and more specifically in chapter 5 of the first book of the *Ilāhiyyāt* (*Metaphysics*). Here, Avicenna makes three important points: first, that 'thing' and 'existent' signify primitive, basic, and immediately apprehensible concepts. As such, they cannot be put in a genus. Second, he emphasizes that there is a clear difference in meaning between *shay'* and *mawjūd*: *shay'* refers to an entity with regards to its essence, while *mawjūd* refers to an entity with regard to its existence. Third, he affirms that thing and existent are co-implied (*mutalāzimāni*), and by inference, that neither term is logically prior to the other.

The development of the concept of *mawjūd* (existent) into *wujūd* (existence) seems obvious, but some explanation is required to follow the conceptual development of *māhiyya* (essence; lit. 'whatness') from the concept *shay'* (thing). A possible explanation is offered by a careful reconstruction of an argument in the *Ilāhiyyāt*, in which Avicenna shows in what sense thing and existent differ from each other. He does this by differentiating between specific existence (*al-wujūd al-khāṣṣ*) and affirmative existence (*al-wujūd al-ithbātī*). Predications of specific existence assert *what* something is, and is also called 'inner reality' (*haqīqa*, which would be translated into Latin as *certitudo*). It is called specific because it denotes existence in a class (species) of things. On the other hand, predications of affirmative existence assert *that* something is. Since inner reality and specific existence are identical, argues Wisnovsky, and inner reality is also identical to *māhiyya*, it follows that specific existence is identical to *māhiyya*. The three concepts of specific existence, inner reality and whatness/essence are therefore intensionally identical. And since affirmative existence is distinct from specific existence, it follows that existence is distinct from essence.

According to Wisnovsky, there exists the possibility that the development of *māhiyya* from *shay'* was facilitated by Avicenna's use of the word *shay'īyya* (thingness). In another passage from the *Ilāhiyyāt* (38:20-23), he fulminates against people who defend the viewpoint that among all that is predicated, there are non-existent

entities which have no thingness. He boldly advises these people to ‘go back to whatever dogmatic formulae they babbled out unintelligibly’. As an aside, the entities that are referred to here are impossible entities, the third category of the triad necessary-contingent-impossible existence. The hypothesis that *shay’iyya* served as a bridge between the concepts of *shay’* and *māhiyya* faces two challenges: first, we would suspect broad usage of the term in the ninth and tenth century debates between *mutakallimūn*; and this is simply not the case. Despite the fact that only a fraction of *kalām* texts from that time period is available to modern scholars, there seems to be no indication that the term was widely used. There exists the distinct possibility that al-Maturidi is the original inventor of the term *shay’iyya*. This claim is even more credible given the fact that Avicenna grew up in the area outside Bukhara, where the influence of the Samarqandi Hanafism of al-Maturidi (a school of Islamic jurisprudence) was strongly felt. It appears to be a likely scenario that Avicenna encountered the term *shay’iyya* sometime during his early education. Naturally, it is also quite possible that Avicenna himself came up with the word *shay’iyya*; it is a straightforward abstract noun, constructed through use of the suffix *-iyya*, similar to the English suffix *-ness*, which serves a similar purpose. In his works, Avicenna showed a predilection to invent and use new abstract nouns.

However, Thomas was not merely influenced by the intellectual heritage of Avicenna; he would also significantly add to it. After his treatment of the argument for the real distinction between *esse* and *essentia* in all substances but God, he continues:

It is necessary therefore that the quiddity itself or the form, which is the intelligence, be in potency with respect to the existence which it received from God; and this existence is received as an act. It is in this way that potency and act are found in the intelligences.²⁸

Thomas here applies the Aristotelian notion of potency and act to the metaphysical relationship between existence and essence. This

²⁸ ‘Ergo oportet quod ipsa quidditatis vel forma quia est intelligentia sit in potentia respectu esse quod a Deo recipit ; et illud esse receptum est per modum actus’. Leon. 43.4:149-152.

also implies a radical opposition to the idea that essences are somehow prior to existence, and in fact, to the notion of essentialism. For following Aristotle, Thomas cannot but grant priority to act, although this sentiment is not yet fully voiced within the *De ente et essentia*. Not only because Aristotelian philosophy declares that act holds priority over potency, but also because potency can only be thought of in relationship to a corresponding act. Thomas's ontology could therefore be considered existentialist, rather than essentialist like that of Avicenna, if we are prepared to look beyond the limits of this first *opusculum*. Existence is the absolute ground of metaphysics as essences point to existence as *modus essendi* to *actus essendi*. Existence is the 'act of acts' and the 'perfection of perfections'. as Thomas would phrase it in his later works.

4. Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction above, the aim of this article was to examine the historical-philosophical context in which Thomas wrote his treatment of Aristotelian ontology, and to look at the *opusculum* with special attention for the philosophical influence of the Persian polymath Avicenna.

The historical-philosophical context was discussed in the first part. We saw that the environment in which Thomas wrote the *De ente et essentia* was one of new developments. The intermingling of cultures on the Iberian Peninsula facilitated the exchange between the bearers of Jewish, Christian and Islamic cultures. Thomas lived in a timeframe in which the translations of these works were becoming widely available, and as a result, their contents were fiercely debated by Christian theologians.

The influence of these debates on the *De ente et essentia* becomes clear in various passages where Thomas objects against the views of proponents of several distinct philosophical topics (such as the Franciscans with regard to the subject of spiritual matter, and the "Platonists" with regard to the real existence of essences independent of concrete individuals).

The *De ente et essentia* thus constitutes a treatment of Aristotelian ontology which includes mention of ways in which it

was received by later philosophers and other commentators. The question arises whether within this discussion of Aristotelian ontology, Avicenna's voice could be considered as the one closest to that of Thomas. In other words: does Thomas value the Avicennian treatment on the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle above all other commentaries? I believe that, at least within the confines of the *De ente et essentia*, such a conclusion is warranted. Three points support my conclusion: first, the evaluation of explicit references made to other authors in the *De ente et essentia* shows that Avicenna is referred to more than any other author. Secondly, while the mere quantity of references in itself does not prove anything, we see in the *De ente et essentia* that Thomas only refers to Avicenna in agreement with his statements, while other authors are at times referenced to present an argument contrary to the interpretation of Aristotle presented by Thomas. Thirdly, in addition to the quantity and content of explicit references to the works of Avicenna, various passages of varying length exhibit a likeness to Avicenna's treatment of similar topics. Some discuss the same thought in different wording, while others are either paraphrases or verbatim citations of Avicennian texts.

Taken together, the three points mentioned above make the proposition, that the metaphysical thought of Avicenna constitutes the major influence on Thomas's interpretation of Aristotelian ontology, at least plausible (it should be noted at this point, that Thomas saw the same viewpoint strengthened by the *Liber the causis* and in the work of Boethius). In my opinion, this proposition is not only plausible but also true. If we limit our evaluation of the metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas to the exposition of Aristotelian ontology which he presents in the *De ente et essentia*, then we must conclude that more than any treatment on the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle, the Latin translation of the *Ilāhiyyāt* determined the way in which Thomas interpreted Aristotelian ontology. Therefore, in the broadest sense we could say that Avicenna constitutes the most influential author with regard to Thomas's interpretation of Aristotelian ontology as presented in the *De ente et essentia*. The most specific identification of the major influence on the *De ente et essentia* would be the Latin translation of the *Metaphysics* of Avicenna.

In addition, the partial Avicennian origin of Thomas's interpretation of the real distinction between *esse* and *essentia* in composed substances is asserted by several authors. John Wippel comments in his handbook on Aquinas's metaphysics: "Avicenna has often been cited, both by thirteenth-century writers and by twentieth-century scholars, as an early defender of real distinction between essence and existence in such entities".²⁹ Wisnovsky examines the origin of the Avicennian interpretation of the real distinction between essence and existence in creatures in no less than three chapters of his *Avicenna's Metaphysics in Context*.³⁰ Even though he does not specifically refer to Thomas as a philosophical heir to the Avicennian distinction, he does examine the roots of the Avicennian distinction in the so-called Ammonian synthesis, a Neo-Platonic reconciliation of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, which Avicenna in turn tried to synthesize with theological claims made by Islamic dogmatic theologians. Parviz Morewedge connects the Avicennian formulation of the distinction to later Islamic and Scholastic philosophers:

However, Ibn Sina's distinction is important not only because it occupies such a significant place in his own philosophical system, but also because of the role it plays in the philosophical systems of later philosophers, such as Ibn Rushd, Aquinas, and Ockham, who took issue with what they believed to be his formulation of the distinction, and in so doing, centered some of their own significant doctrines around the alleged Ibn Sinian distinction.³¹

But maybe more important for a proper understanding of Thomas's early metaphysical thought is not the admission that it is influenced by, or indebted to, the thought of Avicenna, but the realization of the way in which Thomas went beyond Avicenna and developed his own philosophical notions to arrive at a new and innovative way

²⁹ J. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: from Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington: 2000), p. 134.

³⁰ R. Wisnovsky, *Avicenna's Metaphysics in Context* (London: 2003).

³¹ P. Morewedge, "Philosophical Analysis and Ibn Sina's 'Essence-Existence' Distinction", in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 92, No. 3, pp. 425-435, p. 426.

to view the relationship between creation and its creator. More specifically, it is precisely in the addition of the notion of an admixture of potency and act in created beings, that the *De ente et essentia* does not constitute a mere summary of Aristotelian ontology as interpreted by Avicenna, but a philosophical work which in and of itself is “highly original”, to once again quote Weisheipl. As a result of the addition of this new way of viewing the fundamental difference between God and the created simple substances, Thomas also shifts the ontological priority to existence, whereas Avicenna proposed the priority of essences over existence.

Considered within these two contexts, the historical-philosophical situation in which Thomas wrote the *De ente et essentia* and the major influence exerted on him by the *Book of Healing of Avicenna*, the importance of this early work within the *corpus Thomisticum* becomes apparent: although it might have been intended as a treatment of Aristotelian ontology written on behalf of his fellow Dominicans at the Chapelle Saint-Jacques in Paris, it actually affords us a first, partial look at the philosophical groundwork on which Thomas’s theology is built. In addition to being a treatment of Aristotelian notions interpreted in such a way that they may become the backdrop to Christian theological doctrine, Thomas presents a new and innovative interpretation of the distinction between creation and its creator. His notion of an admixture of potency and actuality in simple created beings is elegant in its simplicity, making the conjecture of incorporeal matter, as proposed by philosophers of the Franciscan school, obviously unnecessary. Furthermore, there is a foreshadowing here of the inherent connection between God and creation through the participation in existence: every being comes to be by receiving existence from the First Cause who is also Pure Being. In my opinion, this makes Aquinas’s interpretation of the difference between God and other simple substances more conducive to theological and spiritual needs than the (unnecessarily complicating) notion of incorporeal matter. However, this does not mean a wholesale rejection of (Neo-)Platonic doctrine; the notion of emanation from, and return to God is reconcilable with his admixture of potency and actuality and is thus retained (although this schema of *exitus* and *reditus* is not part of the content of the *De*

ente et essentia). Therefore, the characterization of Thomas as an Aristotelian as denoting a negative disposition toward Neo-Platonic thought seems unwarranted.

Appendix:

Implicit references to Avicenna in the *De ente et essentia*.

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|--------------|--|--|
| 1. 1 :50-52 | But it is called essence from the fact that through it and in it a real being has existence. | <i>Log.</i> P/1:3v b
<i>Metaph.</i> 1/6:72v a C
<i>Suffic.</i> 1/6:17r b |
| 2. 2:10-12 | Neither can the form alone of a composed substance be said to be its essence, although some try to assert this. | |
| 3. 2:73-75 | We should notice, therefore, that the principle of individuation is not matter taken in just any way whatsoever, but only designated matter. | |
| 4. 2:100-101 | [rather], whatever is in the species is also in the genus, but as undetermined. | <i>Metaph.</i> 5/3:88r a A |
| 5. 2:105-150 | We can see how this comes about if we examine how body taken as part of animal differs from body taken as genus; [...] And so the form of animal is implicitly contained in the form of body, when body is its genus. | <i>Metaph.</i> 5/3:88r a A |
| 6. 2:195-222 | From this it is clear why the genus, the difference, and the species are related proportionally to the matter, to the form, and to the composite in the real world, although they are not identical with them. [...] for we do | <i>Metaph.</i> 5/5:89v D-E |

not say that the definition is the
genus or the difference.

7. 3:16 [...] as the Platonists held [...]
8. 3:26-155 Now, a nature or essence signified as a whole can be considered in two ways. [...] and it is in this way, too, that the notion of the genus and of the difference belong to it. *Metaph.* 5/1-2:86v a-87v b
9. 4:11-13 The strongest demonstration of this is from the power of understanding in them. *De an.* 5/2:22v b A
De an. 5/2:23r b
10. 4:41 It is easy to see how this may be so.
11. 5:5-7 [and] this is why we find some philosophers who say that God does not have a quiddity or essence, because his essence is not other than his existence. *Metaph.* 7/4:99r b
12. 6:59-62 For, since the parts of substance are matter and form, certain accidents follow principally on form, certain others follow principally on matter. *Suffic.* 1/6:17r b
Log. 1:4r a b
13. 6:85-86 [and] this is why it remains in him after death. *Suffic.* 1/6:17r b
14. 6.102-103 But sometimes they cause accidents which are only aptitudes, their completion being received from an exterior agent. *Suffic.* 1/6:17r b

Fragments cited from the *Editio Leonina* of the *De ente et essentia*, book 43 (pp369-381), as [chapter]:[line numbers]. “P” stands for *prologus* or *proöemium* (introduction). References to Avicennian sources: *Metaph(ysica)*, *De An(ima)*, *Suffic(ientia)* or *Log(ica)*, [book/treatise]/[chapter]:[folio number][v(erso)/r(ecto)] [a/b] [A-F].