MAYNOOTH PHILOSOPHICAL PAPERS ISSUE 4 (2007)

An Anthology of Current Research from the Department of Philosophy, NUI Maynooth

Issue Editor: Cyril McDonnell

General Editor: Thomas A. F. Kelly

Jean de la Rochelle's Formulation of the Distinction between Being and Essence

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ABSTRACT

The distinction between 'being' and 'essence' arose in the elaboration of the theory of universal hylomorphism, defended by the Franciscans, which maintained that there is a composition of matter and form in all beings other than the First cause. This paper focuses on a formula which Jean de La Rochelle (1190/ 1200–1245) borrows from Boethius (c. 480-524) to explain how the 'being' of the soul is distinct from the 'essence' of the soul. It concludes by raising the question whether Jean's formulation anticipates that of St Thomas Aquinas's (1224–1274) in his early writings on *De Ente et Essentia*.

Introduction

Jean de La Rochelle's *Summa de Anima* is testament to the growing interest in the new Greek-Arab sources which were made available in the thirteenth century. This paper is part of my on-going doctoral research into the *Summa de Anima* of Jean de La Rochelle, critically analysing its philosophical content and translating the text (288 pages) into English.[1] The aim of this paper is to set out Jean de La Rochelle's position on being and essence in the context of the debate between those who defended the theory of universal hylomorphism i.e., the theory that all of created being is composed of matter and form and those who, like Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274), rejected the doctrine which attributed a composite nature to the soul.

I

Jean raises the question in chapter 13 of the *Summa* 'What is the soul according to essence'? First he considers the origin of the soul which is understood in two ways, namely, that which concerns causality and that which concerns duration or time. Regarding causality Jean investigates the soul according to the four Aristotelian causes; with regard to the origin in time Jean sets out to prove that not all souls were created at one time, an issue which was vigorously debated in medieval philosophy.

When referring to the formal cause of the soul in chapter 17 of the *Summa* Jean employs the concepts of '*quod est*' and '*quo est*'. These have been called the 'forgotten formulae of Boethius', which, as Crowley notes, were re-introduced by Philip the Chancellor (d.1236).[2] Philip's work, entitled the *Summa de Bono,* is frequently the theological reference point for Jean in the *Summa*. The *quod est*, as interpreted by Jean, refers to the 'being' of the soul, the *quo est* refers to the essence of the soul. The 'being' of the soul has two modes, (1) essential being, as when we say that human beings are rational and (2) accidental being, as when we say that a person is just or wise. This distinction between *quod est* and *quo est* has

been variously interpreted by philosophers throughout the Middle Ages. Boethius (c.480–c.525) introduced the distinction in his treatise *De Trinitate* where he argues that the Divine Substance is form without matter and is its own substance. Jean quotes from the *De Trinitate*[3] (the first of Boethius's five treatises known as the *Opuscula Sacra* which survived into the Middle Ages) in support of the view that created being is of a composite nature whereas divine being is of a simple nature. In the third treatise, *Quomodo substantiae in eo quod sint bonae sint cum non sint substantialia bona* (How substances are good in virtue of their existence without being substantial goods) Boethius deals with being and goodness. He poses the following problem: if everything is good in that 'it is', and if everything receives its goodness from God, is everything, therefore, identical with God? Boethius's solution is contained in the distinction between *id quod est et esse*: 'Being and the thing that is are different. For simple being awaits manifestation, but the thing that is "is" and exists as soon as it has received the form which gives it being.'[4]

Jean states that the constitutive principles *quod est* and *quo est* are to be found in everything below the First cause since everything below the First is a being through participation. Therefore, the 'being' or the 'subject' (*quod est*) of an essence is different from its 'nature', the latter being that through which it is an essence (*quo est*). If we say that God is good through his essence, since by our understanding he is good, 'to be' and 'to be good' are the same for him. With regard to anything below the First cause, however, a creature is good because it is ordered toward the highest good. With regard to the soul it is a created 'being' (*quod est*) created by God out of nothing, the nature of the soul (*quo est*) is understood as an 'essence' received from God. In addition to their composition of matter and form which 'is a receptive and passive potential in a creature',[5] human beings, therefore, have this second composition, that of 'being and essence'.

Jean asks whether there are specific differences between the soul and an angel even if it can be said that they share the same formal cause of their being. In so far as it can be a part of an angel's composition 'that through which' an angel exists is 'intellectuality' and 'that which it is' is an intellectual substance; in the case of human being 'that through which' it is a human being is rationality and 'that which it is' is a rational substance. Jean accounts for a number of differences according to species and according to essence, e.g., the angelic intellect is not directed towards sensation whereas the human intellect begins at this level and it is so directed. An angel has being as a person, a soul has being as a form and a perfection. An angel is like God in its intellect and according to act because from the beginning of its condition it has the forms imprinted on it for the purpose of knowing the nature of things. In contrast Jean holds that the human soul is like a clean writing tablet which contains possibilities for the forms but not the acts. Jean wants to present an argument for the formal cause of the soul in a manner which is acceptable to Christians but in admitting composition of *quod est* and *quo est* Jean seems to deny the simplicity of the soul.

It is interesting to note that according to Burrell it was philosophers in the Arabic tradition who were the first to distinguish 'what constitutes the individual, namely its existing, from what makes it the kind of thing it is';[6] but as we have seen these speculations were already familiar to medieval thinkers, 'especially from the ninth century when they first aroused interest.'[7] According to Parviz Morewedge, however, it is a matter of contention as to whether Aristotle made a distinction between essence and existence.[8] He acknowledges the monumental

work of A-M. Goichon[9] and N. Rescher[10] who refer to a passage[11] in Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*. In the same work Goichon also mentions several passages in Plato's dialogues where the essence-existence distinction is supposedly upheld. As part of my studies I am interested in finding out to what extent Avicenna's theory shaped Jean's thinking on the essence-existence distinction which was 'enormously important in post-classical Islamic intellectual history';[12] but, at present, it is suffice to note that Avicenna, as Wisnovsky remarks, 'laid down a limited number of positions on the distinction, positions that would eventually form the core of a radically expanded spectrum of positions.'[13]

II

Avicenna's famous 'flying man' argument is quoted verbatim at the beginning of Jean's *Summa* — it is called an argument but it is a thought-experiment in which man finds himself floating in the air or in a void in such a way that he is not conscious of his physical body and yet he is aware of the existence of his own essence, a dualistic perspective which, at first, appears to be similar to Descartes's *cogito*, but the similarity turns out to be superficial because as Wisnovsky points out both the context and the purpose of the 'flying man' thought-experiment are very different to those of the *cogito*. Avicenna's argument is a claim about essence, that nothing grasps a thing without grasping its own essence as grasping. Augustine, in a similar vein, states that infants have an 'implicit self-knowledge of themselves',[14] the soul never ceases to know itself, just as in memory we retain things even when we are not paying attention to them. While Descartes' *cogito* was written in the context of his search for first principles his doctrine of innate ideas has much in common with Augustine with regard to knowing the self as non-bodily. According to Descartes we have already received the 'ideas' of things through our capacity to think, imagine, feel, or experience but our 'ideas' with regard to God, the self and self-evident truths, these are already present in the baby in the womb. Descartes's theory is far more complicated than can be stated here but it would be more correct to say that Descartes's *cogito* is closer in meaning to Augustine than to Avicenna's thought-experiment. Avicenna's objective is, according to Hasse, to point to the independence of the soul and that the other theses pertaining to the existence of the soul, the self-awareness of the soul and the substantiality of the soul, are only implied.[15]

Despite his dualism Avicenna holds that there are close connections between the soul and the body. Describing Avicenna's psychology of the soul Deborah Black states that the body is the instrument of the soul and is a 'necessary condition for its creation and individuation'.[16] An angel or a separate intelligence (i.e., separated from matter) is a species unto itself but man belongs to a single species which is common to many individuals and is, therefore, composed of matter and form. As Black further states, Avicenna places the creation of human souls within the context of his theory of emanation. Where the conditions are present in the sublunary world, i.e., when a human embryo is conceived, the agent intellect (Avicenna's separate Agent Intelligence) creates a human soul to inform that body. Soul and body are thus made for each other, with the soul having a special attraction to its own body.

One of a number of positions on the distinction is that between 'thing and existent'. Existence or being 'is recognized by reason itself without the aid of

definition or description. Since it has no definition, it has neither genus nor differentia because nothing is more general than it.'[17] According to Thérèse-Anne Druart, Avicenna 'centered his own metaphysics in his work entitled the *Shifā* on the distinction between existence and essence'.[18] For Avicenna the term 'existence' has many meanings, such as, for instance: the reality of something, the fact that it exists, the particular existence of something; but, it is clear that he means that the object is, i.e., that it is an existent. In *Metaphysics* 1.5 of the *Shifā* Avicenna uses the word 'thing' as an attribute of 'being' rather than essence, and so, 'thing' and 'existent', as Wisnovsky puts it, are 'extensionally identical but intensionally different',[19] that is to say, 'thing' and 'existent' are co-implied but they have different meanings. Avicenna explains what he means by this mysterious 'thing' by stating that there are three primary concepts, 'being', 'thing' and 'necessary'. Following Black's account priority is given to 'being': 'thing' is a substitute for the Platonic one, an attribute of being which she states is not in Aristotle. Wisnovsky and Black both argue that this concept is borrowed from *kalām* (Islamic doctrinal theology) 'and used by Avicenna to ground his distinction between essence and existence'.[20] Black states that 'thing' is not synonymous with essence, but whatever is a thing has an essence or *quiddity*. This distinction applies to all other beings and explains their contingency (upon a First Cause). In God alone there is no distinction between his essence and existence. Avicenna's third notion, that of the 'necessary' being, introduces his most original contribution to Islamic philosophy, namely, the distinction between necessary and possible existence. Everything is either necessary, possible or impossible, a concept which leads to Avicenna's famous proof for the existence of God.

Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) in *De Ente et Essentia* is especially indebted to Avicenna's remarks made on essence and existence, for, Thomas too argues that in God alone there is no distinction between essence and existence, 'no becoming, no potency, because he is pure existence without contingency or finiteness.'[21] He rejects the form–matter composition in non-bodily substances and, instead, ascribes the essence–existence composition to them. Thomas restricted hylomorphic composition to corporeal bodies while Bonaventure (1217-1274) held the opposite view — that angels must be hylomorphically composed 'otherwise they would be pure act and God alone is pure act'.[22] Bonaventure appealed to the doctrine of seminal reasons in order to explain how forms are imparted to matter in two modes: in one mode, the primary cause is God, but in a secondary manner we see that parents produce new life through their activity. There is, then, for Bonaventure, as one commentator puts it, 'something in matter, a seed, like an acorn which becomes an oak tree — *illud potest esse forma et fit forma, sicut globus rosae fit rosa* — the agent gives to the essence already present in matter a new form of existence, transforming an essence really existing in matter from a potential to an actual form.'[23] 'This then,' Bonaventure concludes, 'is our position: that no created agent produces any essence, be it substantial or accidental, but rather brings about a situation where an essence changes from one situation to another.'[24] While the souls of animals and plants arise entirely from seminal reason, the human soul enters the body after it has gone through a process which is explained in terms of the celestial bodies and the four elements. Thus the human body is a composite of many forms. Thomas, however, argued against this position in the debate on the plurality of forms which provoked lively discussion in the thirteenth century. For Thomas, form is ultimate, there is only one form of

the living human being, its soul, and as Gilson remarks there is no form of the form.[25]

Arguing for his position regarding angels Thomas appealed to the distinction between potency and act as something which runs through the whole of creation and as such he can claim that angels display potentiality in their performance of acts of will and intellect. There is a further distinction which he can make between God and a separated spirit, i.e., that no finite being exists necessarily; 'it has or possesses existence which is distinct from essence as act is distinct from potentiality'.[26] For Thomas, an angel is form alone but existence is that by which a form is. Therefore, there is composition in an angel, namely, composition of form and existence. In substances composed of matter and form, however, there is a double composition of act and potentiality, the first is a composition of matter and form, the second a composition of the latter with existence. This second composition is called by Thomas the *quod est* and *esse* or the *quod est* and the *quo est*.[27] In a chapter of the *De Ente et Essentia* entitled 'The Compositeness of Intelligences', Thomas makes use of the formula *quo est et quod est* as he states 'so some people say such things are composed of that which and that by which, or from that which exists and existence as Boethius says'.[28] However, the editors of the Leonine edition of the *De Ente et Essentia* point to a variant reading of the line in question and to its authenticity.[29] According to Etienne Gilson, there is great confusion regarding the use of Boethius's terminology in its Thomistic meaning.[30] In Gilson's view, 'the very precision of his [Boethius's] formulas was to make it more difficult for his successors to go beyond the level of substance up to the level of existence,' however, as Gilson also notes and continues, 'but they helped those who succeeded in doing [so] to formulate their own thought in strictly accurate terms.'[31] In fact, this formula is used by Thomas in thirty-six cases throughout his many works.[32]

III
Conclusion

In some instances Thomas acknowledges two sources and two formulations, they are: *id quod est et esse,* attributed to Boethius; and that of *quod est et quo est,* the source of which is attributed to '*quidam*' or in another case to '*alii*' (translated respectively as 'certain persons' and 'others'). Considering the dates of two of the works in which Thomas employs the formulae indicates he maintained the distinction throughout most of his works, one example, which I have already referred to, is the *De Ente et Essentia*, written between 1252–1256, the second work, the *Quaestiones Disputatae de Anima* which was written in the year 1269.[33] However, if we examine some quotes from Jean's *Summa*, we see clearly that he had already made this distinction with regard to immaterial substances. Take, for example, in chapter 17 where he writes: '"that which exists" and "that through which it exists" is different in created being,'[34] and again, 'therefore it is clear that "that which exists" and "that through which it exists" namely the essence differ in the soul',[35] and further, 'therefore one should say that spiritual beings and the rational soul have a composition made from the essential parts, which are the parts "that which exists" and "that through which it exists".'[36] Thus Jean' *Summa*, written between 1235–1236 may have been the source for Thomas's position in *De Ente et Essentia*. Further evidence which connects the two authors can be

found in the preface to an edition of Thomas's *Quaestiones Disputatae De Anima.* The editor, B.C. Bazan, states that without doubt it was Jean's *Summa* which influenced Thomas's structure of the disputed questions on the soul. He points to Chapter 36 of the *Summa* where Jean explains the structure of his work in terms which anticipates the structure of Thomas's questions.[37] Jean's work was, therefore, well known to Thomas and it is testament to the quality of his work that it influenced Thomas in his writing on the soul, the question is to what extent; this will become clearer as my work progresses.

NOTES

[1] Jean de La Rochelle, *Summa de Anima*, ed. by Jacques Guy Bougerol (Paris: Vrin, 1995).

[2] Theodore Crowley, *Roger Bacon: The Problem of the Soul in Philosophical Commentaries* (Louvain & Dublin: Duffy & Co. Ltd., 1950), p. 81.

[3] *Summa de Anima*, p.68: 'Hoc videtur per Boecium, in libro De Trinitate: "In omni eo quod est citra Primum, est hoc et hoc".'

[4] Boethius, *De Trinitate*, ed. Steward-Rand, *Loeb classics*, vol. 74, ch. 2, p. 41: 'Diversum est esse et id quod est; ipsum enim esse nondum est, at vero quod est accepta essendi forma est atque consistit.' This distinction would appear to be echoed in Heidegger's meditation on the 'ontological difference' and the latter's famous attempt to raise anew the question of 'the meaning of Being (*Sinn von Sein*)' in its difference from 'that-which-is (*das Seiende*)'.

[5] *Summa de Anima*, p. 70: 'Secundum primum modum, est in creatura potencia receptiva et passiva; iuxta secundum modum, potencia activa.'

[6] David B. Burrell, 'Aquinas and Islamic and Jewish thinkers', in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. by Norman Kretzmann & Eleonore Stump (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 60–84 (pp. 64–65).

[7] David Luscombe, *Medieval Thought* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 21.

[8] Parviz Morewedge, *The 'Metaphysica' of Avicenna (Ibn Sinā)* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 182.

[9] A.-M. Goichon, *La distinction de l'essence et de l'existence d'après Ibn Sinā (Avicenna)* (Paris: de Brower, 1937), p. 132, cited in Morewedge, p. 183, n. 56.

[10] Nicolas Rescher, *Studies in Arabic Philosophy* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 1967), p. 73, cited in Morewedge, p. 185, n. 62.

[11] Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* (92 b 8): 'But further, if definition can prove what is the essential nature of a thing, can it also prove that it exists? And how will it prove them both by the same process, since definition exhibits one single thing, and what human nature is and fact that the man exists are not the same thing?'

[12] Robert Wisnovsky, 'Avicenna and the Avicennian Tradition', in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. by Peter Adamson & Richard C. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 92–136 (p. 114).

[13] Ibid, p. 110.

[14] Richard Sorabji, *Self: Ancient and Modern Insights about Individuality, Life, and Death* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), p. 216.

[15] Dag Nikolaus Hasse, *Avicenna's De Anima in the Latin West* (London–Turin: The Warburg Institute & Nino Aragno Editore, 2000), p. 81.

[16] Deborah L. Black, 'Psychology: Soul and Intellect', in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, pp. 308–326 (p. 310).

[17] Morewedge, p.15.

[18] Thérèse Druart, 'Metaphysics' in *Cambridge Comapanion to Arabic Philosophy*, pp. 327–348 (p. 337).

[19] Wisnovsky, p.108.

[20] Druart, p. 337.

[21] Luscombe, p.101.

[22] Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* Vol 2. (New York: Image Books, 1962), p. 49.

[23] Michael Dunne, 'The Three Ways of St Bonaventure', *Milltown* Studies, 45 (2000), pp. 16–43 (p. 21).

[24] Bonaventure, *In II Sent.*, d. 7, p. 2, a. 2, q. 1, ad 6.

[25] Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1955), p. 376.

[26] Copleston, p. 51.

[27] Ibid., p. 52.

[28] Thomas Aquinas, *De Ente et Essentia*, in *Aquinas Selected Philosophical Writings*, ed. by Timothy McDermott (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1993), p. 105.

[29] Sancti Thomae de Aquino, Opera Omnia, *De Ente et Essentia*, Tomus XL111. Editori di San Tommaso, Roma, 1976. p. 351 ch. 4. line. 165: '[componi ex quo est et quod est, vel ex *quod* est et esse ut Boethius dicit] Au lieu de *quod*, les anciens – sauf β γ – ont *quo*: cette leçon de l'archétype ne peut se recommander ni de Boèce, qui écrit: "diversum est esse et quod est" (PL 64, 1311 B); ni de saint Thomas, dont l'autographe du *Contra Gentiles* 11, 54, lieu parralèle de celui-ci, porte exactement: "quibusdam dicitur ex quod est et esse, vel ex quod est et quo est".' (ms. Vat. lat. 9850, fol. 42 vb).

[30] Gilson, p. 421.

[31] Gilson, p. 105.

[32] A search in the *Index Thomisticus* at <http://corpusthomisticum.org/it/index.age> [accessed 5 September 2007] revealed this result.

[33] Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae de Anima*, ed. by B. Carlos Bazán. *Opera Omnia*, t. XX1V, 1, Rome, Paris, Commissio Leonina-Ed. Du Cerf (1966), p. 51: 'Et hinc est quod Boethius dicit in libro ebdomadibus, quod in aliis que sunt post Deum diiffert esse et quod est, vel, sicut quidam dicunt, quod est et quo est, nam ipsum esse est quo aliquid est, sicut cursus est quo aliquis currit.'

[34] *Summa de Anima*, p. 69: 'Et ideo erit differens in ente creato quod est et quo est.'

[35] Ibid.: 'Patet ergo quod differt in anima quo est, scilicet essencia et quod est.'

[36] Ibid.: 'Dicendum est ergo quod spiritualia et anima racionalis composicionem habent ex partibus essencialibus que partes sunt quod est et quo est, quia sunt a Deo et de nichilo.'.

[37] Bazán, 'Preface', in Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputante De anima*, p. 102: 'Saint Thomas a structuré soigneusement la série de questions disputes sur l'âme unie au corps: sept questions consacrées à l'essence de l'âme; sept questions consacrées à l'âme unie au corps; sept consacrées à l'âme séparée du corps. Cette structure lui a été suggéréé, sans doute, par la *Summa de anima* de Jean de La Rochelle. En effet, dans le chapitre 36 (XXX1V) de la première partie de cette somme, Jean de La Rochelle explique la structure de son oeuvre dans des termes qui rappellent la structure des questions de saint Thomas: "Dicto de anima secundum esse absolutum [...] secunda de modo essendi in corpore; tercia de esse post separacionem a corpore" (ed. Bougerol, p. 114).'