

The “Forgottenness of Being”

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The great merit of Fr. Cornelio Fabro is that he offers a response to the errors and confusion of modern philosophy. In this presentation, the goal is to consider atheism under the aspect of *being*. Specifically, it will analyze how modern thought has managed to forget something so basic and so fundamental as being.

To begin, there are three initial points worth clarifying. First, the study of *philosophy* is understood in its most basic form as a search for truth. The manner in which a person approaches philosophy will affect the way they see and interact with reality – formalism, realism, idealism. Fabro says the *philosophies of immanence* are intrinsically atheistic because they prevent man from finding the truth that his nature impels him to seek.¹ Comparing philosophy as a search for truth and the blockade caused by immanence helps us to understand the necessary frustration caused by this atheistic framework. Secondly, the exchange of ideas between people and across time and history entails a cause and effect relationship. It could be incorrectly assumed that thought happens in a vacuum or that a philosopher’s influence is contained to his own lifespan. Perhaps this is evident, but nevertheless, it seems helpful to remind ourselves that ideas from the past can really affect contemporary society and that ideas from today can really influence future societies. Related to this causality is the belief that history can be studied in a way that problems can be identified and treated. Thirdly, this paper will refer to three general periods of history. The Scholastic period which includes the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, the Decadent Scholastic period which drifted away from authentic Thomistic thought, and the period of Modern Thought which is dealing with the effects of this deviation.

The Catholic historian, G.K. Chesterton, understood history in a way that fits nicely into the comparative analysis Fabro gives between the Scholastic period and modern period.

¹ Fabro in *Appunti di un itinerario*, p102 (cited in *Universa Phil*, 2017 Ch9)

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Chesterton saw a very unnatural phenomenon present in modern thought which made it unique among all other times in human history.² Chesterton says

In so far as there was ever a bad break in philosophical history, it was not before St. Thomas, or at the beginning of medieval history...it was never interrupted or lost through such trifles as the sack of Rome, the triumph of Attila or all the barbarian invasions...only recently has the long thread from distant antiquity been broken; the thread of that unusual human hobby; the habit of thinking.³

The philosophy of Thomas is not to be understood as one point of arrival among many, but rather as a definitive arrival and apex of intellectual inquiry. Not to say that thinking was no longer necessary after the time of Aquinas, but rather to say that he articulated the fundamental elements of truth with such clarity and precision that future generations were free to build from a foundation rather than having to find the foundation.

Chesterton's claim is that modern times have a biased understanding of the Renaissance period. "Many [talk] of the Renaissance as the time when certain men began to believe in Life. The truth is that it was the time when a few men, for the first time, began to disbelieve in Life."⁴ And grasping the fundamental point and strength of Thomistic philosophy he concludes

If the [Renaissance] intellectual is supposed to say, "To be or not to be – that is the question," then the medieval doctor does most certainly reply in a voice of thunder, "To be – that is the answer."

In "God in Exile", Fabro gives an in-depth analysis of modern atheism. The 1,200 pages give a thorough treatment of the effects of atheism that are often times observed and many times disliked but rarely understood.⁵ Fabro describes immanentism as a type of mental snare from which modern thought has become trapped. The advantage of studying the problem by its principles is that atheism is understood by its intrinsic attributes and cause. To understand

² "It is not really so much a question of access to the facts, as of attitude to the facts." – Chesterton, Saint Thomas Aquinas-The Dumb Ox, p46

³ *ibid*, p58

⁴ *ibid*, p88

⁵For instance, the problems of relativism rather than objective truth or the imposition of ideologies with their economic and social consequences. The conception of truth is so fundamental that it influences all the other parts of society and culture.

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its cause is also the way to de-mystify its presence and to provide the needed remedy. Fabro traces all of this back to the proper understanding of *being* as understood by Aquinas.

Francisco Suarez (1548-1617), the famous 16th Century Jesuit philosopher, is a key person to know if one wishes to understand the drift from authentic Thomism thought. Suarez is said to be among the greatest thinkers of the Scholastic period, and he is certainly one of the most influential. In the field of Metaphysics, he developed a systematic body of doctrine that separated itself from the metaphysical books of Aristotle. Considered by some to be the greatest work of Jesuit Theology, others say it was their first big error.⁶ The influence of Suarez extended to the great learning institutions of his time – Paris, Cologne, Genoa, Salamanca.⁷ In the future, his thought would influence thinkers like Descartes, Christian Wolff, and Kant.

Modern problems show the effects of poor philosophy in a more dramatic fashion, and Fabro spent significant time sifting through these modern ideas and distinguishing truth from error. However, before studying the complexities of such thinkers as Hegel and Heidegger, it is necessary to understand the initial problem. The conceptions of Suarez in regard to his understanding of *being* marked the transition point that departed from the thought of Thomas and began the period which we now call Decadent Scholasticism. The complicated part of this saga is that many times a person is considered to be a disciple of Aquinas when in reality they ascribe to an entirely different system of thought – though they reference Thomas as their guide. Suarez studied St Thomas and is incorrectly thought by many to have been a Thomist. This point is more clearly manifested when Fabro critiques the error of Heidegger (1889-1976) who recognized the poor foundation of Suarez.

Heidegger quite rightly notes that [Suarez] had a profound influence on the inception of modern metaphysics; but Heidegger entirely fails, here as everywhere else in his writings, to take into account the great gulf that separates [his position from the position of St Thomas himself!]⁸

⁶ Ferrater Mora, *Diccionario de Filosofia*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid 1984, tomo 4, p.3137 (Univera Phil – Participation & Analogy)

⁷ Catholic Encyclopedia – New Advent, “Francisco Suárez”

⁸ Fabro, *God in Exile* (Newman Press Edition, Editrice Studium, 1964), p961 footnote 7

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The problem with Suarez is that he does not understand “being” in the same way as Thomas. Only when this difference is acknowledged does one have the capacity to see the consequences that come from the error of Suarez. Stemming from this difference is the “famous *essential-existentia* controversy” that has deadlocked Western metaphysics in an aimless search for answers.⁹

When we hear the name Suarez, we should immediately think of *Formalism*. That is, the unwarranted and preferential treatment given to the *essence*. What occurs here is the *esse* of Thomas is equated with *existence*.¹⁰ This formalistic mentality considered the essence to be the fundamental aspect. When we say fundamental, we mean that it is considered the primary and most important element of being. This however, is certainly not true because the essence cannot explain all parts of being. It is not the deepest part of the being. As Fabro would say, it is not the – fundament constituent. Men have an innate desire to know the cause of things and to explain the reality around them. In man’s history of thought, there has always been a search to know where things come from. When essence is considered the most fundamental part of being, it is impossible to find a definitive solution. The essence is a part of being, but it is not the part that explains all else. The true answer to the problem is had in an intensive conception of *esse* – which is the true thought of Aquinas.

Fabro explains one of the consequences that result from Suarez which is the overly abstract conception of reality. The intellect somehow takes the upper hand and begins to assert itself on reality. When the intellect takes such a role, it is only able to do so because *esse* was understood in an empty fashion, devoid of content, and disconnected from reality.¹¹ Following this point, the formalism of Decadent Scholasticism introduced misunderstandings about the relationship between the creator (first cause) and creatures.

Thomas understood that *Ens* was composed of two elements, *Essence* and *Esse*.

Ens = *Essence* + *Esse*

⁹ Ibid 958

¹⁰ Henry of Ghent (1217-1293). Nominalism. See Stanford Encyc of Philosophy – Essential Being

¹¹ Fabro, *Manual de Metafisica*, p 159 (as quoted in *Metaphysics Dispense* 2012/2013)

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It is fairly easy to see what will happen if *Esse* is impoverished. For instance, we can come to see that reducing the significance of *Esse* will in turn put over-emphasis on the *Essence*. If we consider the difference between a tree in reality and a tree existing in my mind, in one case there is the real thing and in the latter case there is a mental idea. If *Esse* is impoverished and is no longer considered to be that deepest part of the *Ens* -- that part which gives existence to all else -- the consequence is fairly straight forward. There would be hardly any difference between concrete realities and mental ideas. The real tree is thought to be an *Essence* plus some weak form of *Esse* – which Suarez took as *Existence*. When the *Ens* is studied in such a way, one naturally wonders how the creature compares to God. Thomas said God was “*ipsum esse subsistens*”. In the method of Suarez, *esse* is rather poor and insignificant which also diminishes the exalted meaning of the aforesaid description of God. Additionally, one also wonders how it is possible to defend individuality. If the only purpose of the *esse* is to give existence to the *essence*, what distinguishes you from me? We both have human *essences*, we have both been given *esse/existence*, and yet we are different. The original Thomistic thought has the capacity to answer these deeper questions because the *esse* is not seen as giving existence but is rather seen as that which all else comes from.¹² It does away with ambiguity and gives exaltation in the appropriate place and where it is due.

With its forgottenness of being, this formalist flavor of Scholasticism was not able to withstand the criticism of modern thought. Fabro even agrees with those who give the criticism. The critics saw little difference between a “possible thing” and a “real thing” – the only difference being the presence of divine causality in the latter. Speaking about this, Fabro interprets Suarez’s doctrine as suggesting an “external causation” that fails to consider the true structure of the finite being. Fabro says that the *esse* should have an original metaphysical value, and existence of a real being should be understood as following upon and coming as a result of the *esse*.¹³ Comparatively, with Suarez, the *esse* is something extrinsic, marginally important, and frankly not worthy of much consideration.

¹² Fabro, *Partecipazione y Causalita*, 28-29 (As quoted in *Metaphysics Dispense* 2012/2013, p77)

¹³ *Ibid* p 77

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Thomas is credited with finding harmony between the seemingly opposed doctrines of Aristotle and Plato.¹⁴ For Aristotle, *esse* refers to a being which is actualized in the sense that it is an existing being.¹⁵ The difference with Thomas is that he not only explains the fact of the existing being but also the variation within its species as well as the principle of its existence. It is the explanation of the “one and the many”. Aristotle could explain the reason a dog exists – the dog exists because matter (potency) is informed by the appropriate form (act). Thomas, however, was able to also explain individuality within the species. Dog #1 is different from dog #2. Both dogs have the same form (as Aristotle said) but they do not have the same act of being. The individual act of being is the reason for two things of the same species possessing their unique individuality. Thomas’ intensive understanding of *esse* was present in his earlier works such as *De Ente* where he explains that different beings have more or less act and potency.¹⁶

Furthermore, the correct understanding of *esse* helped Aquinas to see the value of transcendent participation in the doctrine of Plato. Aristotle understood a unity among creatures, but Plato understood the creature’s dependence on a transcendent cause. Plato supposed that separated perfections existed in the world of ideas. Thomas understood the separated perfection to be only one since it was the “*ipsum esse subsistence*” which admitted of no potency and was pure act. The maximum perfection is that which is participated by all the other finite beings. “*Esse* itself is the most perfect of all, for it is compared to all things as their act; for nothing has actuality except insofar as it is.”¹⁷

The intensive *esse* is both “first act” and “ultimate act”. It is first, because all the other parts (the essence and all individuating characteristics) of a finite being come to be through the

¹⁴ Fabro, “Platonismo, Neoplatonismo, e Tomismo: Convergenze e Divergenze,” *Tomismo e Pensiero Moderno* (Roma: Libreria Editrice della Pontificia Universita Lateranense, 1969), 453-54 (quoted in Vitz Thomistic 2010)

¹⁵ “Classical philosophy, in particular Aristotle, had understood being insofar as it was actualized – that is, as existing. Thomas’ great innovation was to take the notations of act and potency and develop them to account not only for the predicamental, but also the transcendental realm. Vitz (Referencing Fabro), “The Forgottenness of Being”, *Thomistic Studies*, Fulton Sheen House of Formation, 2010

¹⁶ *De ente*, c.4.

¹⁷ S.T. Iq.4,a.1 ad3. “*Ipsum esse est perfectissimum omnium: comparator enim ad omnia ut actus; nihil enim habet actualitatem nisi in quantum est, unde ipsum esse est actualitas omnium rerum et etiam ipsarum formarum.*” Leon.4.50 (Vitz Thomistic 2010)

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esse. It is also the ultimate act, because the “*ipsum esse subsistens*” does not participate in another but is that which is participated.¹⁸

Earlier it was said that Suarez developed a systematic body of doctrine that separated itself from the metaphysical books of Aristotle. Does this mean that Aristotle had the correct understanding of *esse*? *Esse* can be understood in several different ways and the term “*esse*” had been used long before the time of Aquinas. Aristotle reflected upon the existence of the concrete realities in front of him, but he did not consider the deepest element of being. For Aristotle *esse* and existence were the same. The difference between Aristotle and Suarez was that one of them only considered subsisting beings while the other considered being at the metaphysical level. When *esse* is taken to mean existence – the consequences are not as damaging in the case of Aristotle because it only means that being has not been fully understood. However, Suarez and those following him, were proposing a formula of thought which explained the foundation of all being. When analyzing realities at this level, there is a greater need of precision in terminology. This is the great merit of Thomas Aquinas – he questioned being at its deepest level, he discovered the solution, and he definitively preserved the answer in time. Drifting from this roadmap of truth is unsurprising and somewhat characteristic of man. The great minds of today like Chesterton, Fabro, JPII, and ardent lovers of truth seem to recognize the foundation laid by Aquinas. To the extent that minds are re-centered on the intensive understanding of *esse*, men will be free to progress into deeper understandings of truth and reality.¹⁹

¹⁸ De anima, q. 6 ad 2

¹⁹ Fabro explains that Thomas uses the term *esse* in three main senses – the logical, the formal, and the actual *esse*.