

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) and Mulla Sadra Shirazi (980/1572–1050/1640) and the Primacy of esse/wujûd in Philosophical Theology

DAVID B. BURRELL, C.S.C.

University of Notre Dame

As an exercise in comparative philosophical theology, our approach is more concerned with conceptual strategies than with historical “influences,” although the animadversions of those versed in the history of each period will assist in reading the texts of each thinker. We need historians to make us aware of the questions to which thinkers of other ages and cultures were directing their energies, as well as the forms of thought available to them in making their response; but we philosophers hope to be able to proceed without having to arm ourselves with extensive knowledge of the surrounding milieu, trusting that others more knowledgeable will correct and extend our efforts. Our contribution should then be one of offering perspectives within which further discourse may profitably proceed, suitably challenged and amended in the course of a common inquiry. Since my familiarity is with Aquinas, and since he comes chronologically first, I shall begin with him, though there is no discernible connection between the two thinkers other than their preoccupation with establishing the primacy of *existing* in a metaphysical discourse which had hitherto obscured its significance.

One of Aquinas’s earliest writings is a short piece designed to clarify the maze of philosophical terminology which had come to characterize early medieval attempts to assimilate the thought of Aristotle. Its title, *De ente et essentia*, is regularly translated “On Being and Essence,” yet the text features an expression which does not appear in its title: *esse*, a Latin infinitive lexically rendered ‘to be’ yet virtually untranslatable, as we shall see, for it attempts to capture the subject of our inquiry: the very existing of things, including the universe itself.¹ A recent edition of an arguably earlier treatment of these

1. The best edition is that of M.-D. Roland-Gosselin, *Le “De ente et essentia” de s. Thomas d-Aquin*, 2d ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1948); English translation by Armand Maurer, *On Being and Essence*, 2d rev. ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1968). Citation from Aquinas’s later *Summa Theologiae* will be prefaced by (*ST*).

issues, in Aquinas's commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, shows how crucially the primacy of *esse* figured in his understanding of the relation of creator to creation from the very beginning of his reflections on the matter. The Latin language itself will invite Peter Lombard to cite Augustine to remind us that "essence is named from 'esse'," with an authoritative reference to the One "who said to his servant Moses: I AM WHO AM and *You shall tell the sons of Israel: HE WHO IS sent me to you*" (Exodus 3:14), and go on to insist that "He is truly and properly called Essence whose essence knows neither past nor future."² (Since the English 'being' is ambiguous as regards the Latin *ens* ['a being'] and *esse* [literally, 'to be'], in what follows 'being' will render the Latin *esse*, which in my own translations I prefer to render by 'existing'.)

Aquinas begins his commentary on Lombard's text by asking "Is *being* properly said of God?" He answers that it is indeed

the most proper name of God among the other names . . . according to the perfection of the divine *being*. . . For in the divine *being* nothing has gone past nor is anything to come; and so it has its whole *being* perfect[ly], and for this reason *being* belongs to it properly.

Indeed,

among all the other participations of the divine goodness, such as *living*, *understanding*, and the like, *being* is the first and, as it were, the principle of the others, . . . and so too God is the divine principle and all things are one in Him. (*M* 39–41)

He then addresses the citation from Exodus, citing Maimonides's witness, and interprets "the name 'He who is' [as] imposed by the very act of *being*, [and since] in God . . . His very *being* is His quiddity, . . . the name that is taken from *being* properly names Him" (*M* 43). The following article brings out the explicit role creation plays in this act of naming, by asking "Is God the *being* of all things?" and responding: "Nothing has *being* except inasmuch as it participates divine *being*, since it is the first being (*ens*); hence, it is the cause of every being (*entis*)." Noting how that causality must act neither univocally nor equivocally, but analogously, he details "that the divine *being* produces the *being* of a creature in an imperfect likeness of itself: and so the divine *being* is called the *being* of all things <for> all created *being* emanates effectively and paradigmatically from it" (*M* 47).

This pregnant passage adumbrates all of Aquinas's subsequent development of the primacy of *esse* and the role which creation plays in bringing

2. E. M. Macierowski, trans. and ed. *Thomas Aquinas's Earliest Treatment of the Divine Essence: Scriptum super libros Sententiarum Book 1, Distinction 8* (Binghamton N.Y.: Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1998), citation at p. 23. Further references will be cited as *M* in the text.

us to recognize that primacy. Moreover, those familiar with Mulla Sadra, notably his summary text *Kitâb al-Mashâ'ir*, will be struck by the manifest similarities.³ Everything turns on the role which *esse* plays as the vehicle, one might say, of God's creating activity. (Aquinas will later identify *esse* as the "proper effect of the first and most universal cause, which is God," who needs no intermediaries to bestow it since "God alone is his own existence" [*ST* 1.45.5].) Moreover, we will find that the mediating notion of *participation* that Aquinas introduces in this early text will play a central role in Mulla Sadra's account of the way in which *wujûd* comes forth from the One to all beings, even though he will not employ a corresponding Arabic term for it.⁴ We shall also see how their concerns mirror one another: to find a way to highlight the metaphysical primacy of individual existing things—a goal that Aristotle had set for himself in the face of Plato, but was never able to complete satisfactorily; as well as finding a strategy to capitalize upon Ibn Sina's celebrated distinction of *essence* from *existing* while neutralizing the characterization of *being* as "accidental" to essence.⁵

ESSE/WUJÛD AS ACCIDENTAL TO ESSENCE?

In his opusculum, *De ente et essentia*, Aquinas cites the *Liber de Causis* in support of his argument to distinguish *esse* from *essentia*, and explicitly utilizes Avicenna's insistence that "the quiddity of a simple substance is the simple entity itself" in assembling the components of his demonstration, yet he is careful not to remark on the infelicity of his Islamic predecessor's identifying the ensuing relation as "accidental."⁶ Instead, he offers a prescient correction, presenting *esse* as the act of *essentia*, thereby using Aristotle's more general *potency/act* distinction to enrich his metaphysics of *matter/form*, in which essence would invariably prevail, to one in which essence itself would be in potency to the "act of existing" [*actus essendi*].⁷ At the same time, however, he fails to correct the language whereby *esse* "comes to" and is "received by" *essentia*, so perpetuating the impression of accidentality that left

3. The Arabic text has been published by Henry Corbin under the title of his accompanying translation: *Le Livre des Pénétrations métaphysiques* (Teheran: Institut Franco-Iranien/Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1964).

4. For a recent account of the role that *participation* plays in Aquinas's thought, see Rudi te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996). The author reprises and refines the earlier treatments of Fabro and Geiger.

5. For a comprehensive and illuminating treatment of the reception of Aristotle's unfinished project, see Edward Booth, *Aristotelian Aporetic Ontology in Islamic and Christian Writers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

6. *De ente* 4.2, 4.4.

7. See *De ente* 4.8–9. Many have translated *esse* as 'act of existing', not only to emphasize the existential character of this reality, but also because Aquinas himself uses the expression *actus essendi* synonymously with *esse*, see *M* 42.

Avicenna vulnerable to the searing critique of Averroës.⁸ Nevertheless, the transposition from accident to act was accomplished so clearly and unequivocally that the lingering language could hardly threaten it, though what has proved far more elusive has been the proper way to characterize this new-found “act of existing.” Aquinas will invoke it steadily in terms suggestive of the pinnacle of created reality: “the proper effect” of the creator, as we have seen; that which is “most interior and profound in anything” (*ST* 1.8.2.1), the “most formal” (*ST* 1.7.1) dimension of things—an infelicitous expression connoting an act in the direction of form yet exceeding it. His reticence about further explicating it, of course, may be traced back to Aristotle’s insistence in the *Metaphysics* that *act* cannot be spelled out except by way of examples, perhaps as a sidelong bow to Plato’s *Seventh Letter*; where the noblest of realities will finally outstrip our language.⁹

In any case, Mulla Sadra will confirm and complete Aquinas’s move here, as he explicitly locates *wujûd* as that which links the universe to its originating cause:

Now contingent beings, [that is, those not necessary in themselves], need something proper to them [*thuwât*] constituting what they are in themselves [*huwiyât*], for should one consider them apart from the One who originates them by that very fact they must be considered to be empty and impossible. [That factor proper to them, then, must be] the act constituted by the One who originates them, much as the quiddity of a composite species is constituted by its difference. For the *ratio* [*ma’ana*] of being an existence which is necessary is that it belongs to it properly to exist, without needing to be united with an originator nor have any receptacle to receive it; while the *ratio* of being an existence which exists [that is, contingent] is that it is something attained, either by itself or by an originator. What it does not need, however, in order to realize its own being, is that another existence be achieved in it. This is what differentiates it from what lacks existence [*viz.*, essences]: in order for them to exist, one needs to consider existence and its connection to them. (par 42)

Mulla Sadra’s central disclaimer here represents an acute polemic against considering the *wujûd*, which constitutes the very being of individual things, to be something apart from them, with its own proper existence, as it were, for this [*wujûd*] is precisely what makes individual things to be themselves:

indeed, the very being of existence is identical with the quiddity as it exists outside the mind, for once we remove accidental existence from the rest, the entire set of existent things must exist in a way that is not accidental. (par 73)

8. Esp. *De ente* 4.8–9. Averroës’s critique of Ibn Sina’s understanding of *existence* as an “accident” can be found in the eighth discussion in his *Tahafut al-Tahafut*, trans. Simon van den Bergh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), 235 sq.

9. *Metaphysics* 9.6 (1048a25–b36).

This assertion concludes an extended argument proving that *wujûd* cannot be accidental to an existing thing, for were that the case, the thing would have first to exist in order to exist, since accidents demand existing subjects.

Yet while it is simple enough to refute the impression with which Ibn Sina left us, it is not as easy to employ the mode of discourse proper to philosophy to articulate what is neither essence nor accident. We could, however, shift to the linguistic mode to put more simply what Mulla Sadra struggles to articulate here, by insisting (with Aquinas) that propositions always refer to the existing individual. Living individuals, which served as Aristotle's paradigms for individual substances, offer the test cases here: when friends die—be they dogs or persons—we can no longer name what we encounter—the body—with the person's or dog's name, but only refer to the corpse. Anything else sounds strange because it is philosophically incoherent: whatever *kind* of thing it may be figures only obliquely into our references, which are always to this individual; and since the *esse* of living things is to be alive (as Aquinas never tired of quoting Aristotle), when they die we no longer confront the same thing. Unlike accidental features, were existence able to be removed, the thing itself could hardly perdure. Mulla Sadra indeed comes close to this manner of articulating things when he later expands on the contention that “existing itself is the quiddity in its individuality, [to insist] as well that existence itself is the very affirmation of the thing rather than something affirmed of the thing” (par 80).

The unique case that forces Aquinas to greater precision in this matter is, of course, the incarnation of the Word of God in Jesus, notably as defined by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 in terms of “two natures in one person.” In this case alone, one must specify, when speaking of the person of Jesus, which operative principle (or nature) one has in mind: is he acting *qua* divine or *qua* human? Here and only here does this essential specification become all-important; otherwise, the statements we make envisage the individual existing thing, where its kind can simply be presupposed. Notice, however, how we can only call attention to the reality of existing by stepping outside of language itself (*langue*) to consider how we use it (*parole*) to make assertions, for if we inquire about it directly, we invariably find ourselves asking what kind of thing it is. Yet that is precisely what both Aquinas and Mulla Sadra deny of *existing*: that it is a *kind* of thing! For a more positive account, then, we must move to its source, and what it tells us about that source.

ESSE/WUJÛD AS THE LINK TO THE CREATOR/ORIGINATOR

To move beyond the abstract analysis that appeared to find two “things” in acknowledging the real distinction between essence and existing, Mulla Sadra shifts his attention to things

as they obtain outside the mind: the principle of an existing thing is existence, for it properly belongs to existence to emanate from the One who originates, with the quiddity united to it and predicated of it [as statements are made of individuals]. Not, however, as accidents are predicated of what they are joined to; for the quiddity is predicated of existence and united with it in the measure that it is itself the very individuality proper to this existence. (par 77)

So *wujûd* becomes the trace that the cause leaves in the caused, as Mulla Sadra makes clear when responding to one who objects that “we cannot conceive the existence of something caused while neglecting the existence of the cause which necessitates it, for then that cause would cease to be constitutive of the thing caused.” Indeed, but that is an impertinent objection to our argument, he retorts,

since we say that it is not possible to attain to knowledge of the precise particularity of a mode of existence unless its very individuality be unveiled [*moshâhada*], and that cannot be realized without some kind of unveiling of the cause of its emanation. That is why they say that knowing what possesses a cause is only attained by knowing its cause. Ponder this well! (par 92)

The “unveiling” required to capture the uniqueness of *wujûd* signals that we are in the logical domain of a creator/creation relation. For to speak of things as created implies some knowledge, however imperfect, of their being created and hence of a creator. So it would follow that even to perceive the uniquely non-conceptual character of *wujûd/esse* would require a sort of “unveiling” analogous to the Sufi “knowing” [*ma’arifâ*] of God as *al-Haqq* [the True Reality]. Here Mulla Sadra helps us to appreciate the import of the subsequent accolades Aquinas gives to *esse*, expanding as they do the spare yet quite explicit assertion of the *De ente*: “the quiddity . . . must be potential with regard to the *being* it receives from God, and this *being* is received as an actuality” (4.8). Yet referring to the Avicennian strategy that Aquinas employs in his proof of the distinction of *essence* from *esse*, Mulla Sadra notes how that approach is proper to a purely

intellectual analysis of existing things into essence and existence, an analysis which yields two complements, so that one of them is judged to be prior to the other in such a way that the other is attributed to it. (par 77)

This is indeed a fair description of Ibn Sina’s celebrated argument; however, Mulla Sadra goes on to the consideration of “things as they obtain outside the mind,” of *wujûd* as a reality and not a merely analytic component of existing things. It is this treatment which brings us closer to Aquinas’s assertion that *esse* alone provides the only opening allowing us to speak of a

similarity between creator and creation: “things receiving *esse* from God resemble him precisely as things possessing *esse* resemble the primary and universal source of all *esse*” (*ST* 1.4.3).

Aquinas can make this strong claim because he has already explicitly identified *esse* as an *act* rather than an *accident* (as we have seen in *De ente*)—the central claim in which these two thinkers concur. Mulla Sadra begins by characterizing *wujûd* as “the reality [*haqîqa*] of each thing” (par 16), indeed “what pertains to the individual beyond the nature it shares [with others], . . . and unless species were realized in particular individuals, nothing would exist at all” (par 27).

For taken by itself, the quiddity does not have any being from another by which it would be derived from that other, so that given its lack of being, it could only be related to the One who originates it and gives it being by the very being which we mean by *wujûd*. (par 30)

This complex statement recalls Ibn Sina’s crucial proposal that the first consideration of essences take them simply as essences, prescinding from their being—a proposal that takes the form of an insistence, given the ambiguity of ‘being’, for they are certainly essences.¹⁰ The very need for such insistence helps to explain the contortions of Mulla Sadra’s exposition at this point. He then goes on, however, to concede that this addition to essence “cannot be understood or perceived except through a ‘presencing witness’ [*ash-shuhûd al-hudûrî*]” (par 30). The phrase alludes to a mode of knowing familiar to readers of *ishrâqî* or “eastern” philosophical theology, such as Mulla Sadra’s predecessor, Suhrawardi. The strong links between “presence” and “act” suggest parallels with Aquinas’s more sober prose, however, and again offer ways in which Mulla Sadra helps to bring out what may be obscured by Aquinas’s concern to fit the mold of *scientia* given to him.

The point of this elucidation, however, is expressed in a formula which brings us closer to seeing *wujûd* as *act*: “what is necessary is that *wujûd* be that thing by which quiddity exists and is united with it existentially, even though they be distinguished analytically in meaning and understanding. Ponder this well!” (par 33). The next step for Mulla Sadra will be to show us how *wujûd* is “the act constituted by the One who originates it” (par 42). As with Aquinas, it is the identification of *wujûd/esse* with *act* which also bespeaks its direct dependence from the One who originates, the creator. Mulla Sadra makes this point clearly in an extended argument that shows that quiddities have no way of multiplying themselves; in other words, we need an objective correlate for the term ‘instantiation’ if it is not to remain an empty expression. He finds that the only coherent candidate for explain-

10. See Armand Maurer’s note on the term *precisio* [‘prescinding’] in his translation of the *De ente*, p. 39, n.15.

ing multiplicity is “that which emanates essentially and is initially originated in the line of multiplicity, namely, the modes of attainment, that is, those things to which it is proper to exist individually. A single quiddity is found in many by their multiplicity” (par 94). Whence this *wujûd* which constitutes individual realities? From “a simple act of a simple nature which is the act of its act: God acts in each thing by eliminating good and breathing the spirit of existing and of life” (par 96).

This allusion to emanation from the One elicits a thesis said to be “inspired by the Throne,” that is to say, the heart (par 97).¹¹ In terms reminiscent of the *Kitab al-Khair* [*Liber de Causis*], Mulla Sadra identifies an “authentic initial emanation from the first cause, which is called the ‘true reality created by Him’, which is the source of world and its life and light, penetrating into everything in heaven and on earth” (par 97). This reality he relates to its divine source as sensible illumination derives from the sun, which offers a pregnant simile as the sun is the source of heat and vitality as well as light. He renders this figure of speech somewhat more straightforwardly by characterizing “the relation of what is originated with respect to its originator as that of imperfect to perfect, of weakness to power,” implying that nothing more can be said, because “it has already been established that *wujûd* is a simple reality” (par 102). Since this discussion takes place in a chapter preliminary to his exposition of the utterly simple reality of the One, it may be that he is seeking to differentiate the simple substances from one another by the ploy of more or less *wujûd*, much as Aquinas does in *De ente*: “these substances, moreover, are distinct from one another according to their degree of potency and act, a superior intelligence, being closer to the primary being, having more act and less potency, and to with the others” (4.10). Otherwise, one would have difficulty differentiating the Originator from what is originated.

Aquinas’s commentary on the *Liber de Causis*, where the author states that “the first of created things is being,” and “as a result, then, it came to be higher than all [other] created things, and to be more powerfully united,” is illustrative here.¹² After tracing this mode of discourse to “the Platonists” and to Dionysius, Aquinas clarifies:

it seems that it is not [the author’s] intention to speak about some separate being, as the Platonists did, nor about the being that all existing things participate commonly, as Dionysius did, but [rather] about being participated in the first grade of created being, which is higher being . . . both in intelligence and soul. (Prop. 4, *ET* 31–32)

11. Corbin offers a number of interpretations of the source, the Throne. His Persian commentator, sheik Ahmad Ahsâ’î, contends that this refers to the source of Mulla Sadra’s inspiration for what follows: that it was given to his heart.

12. *Sancti Thomas de Aquino super Librum de Causis Expositio*, critical ed. by Henri-Dominique Saffrey, O.P. (Fribourg: Société Philosophique, 1954); English trans. by Vincent Guagliardo, O.P., Charles Hess, O.P., and Richard Taylor (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996).

What is at issue here is whether *esse/wujûd* is a univocal term that spans the realm of being, including originated and originator, or whether it is a paradigmatically analogical term, like its complement, *good*, which may indeed be graded from more to less, but with the crucial marker that distinguishes “the Good” from all else that is good by the fact that the Good is its source.

Aquinas introduces the Platonic notion of *participation* at this point, noting that creation participates in the *esse/bonum* of the creator, who simply is *bonum/esse*. Mulla Sadra never quite states it so succinctly in the *Mashâ’ir*; but his language strains toward the notion that Aquinas adopts.

HOW TO CHARACTERIZE “THE DISTINCTION” OF CREATOR FROM CREATION

To speak of “the distinction” of originator from everything else is also to speak of the intrinsic dependence of everything that is on the One, whose very essence is *esse/wujûd*, and hence from whom all-that-is comes to be.¹³ So the *being* of everything other than the creator is a coming-to-be, even for those beings whose ontological status is to be not generated, but always to be. For *esse/wujûd* does not announce a status but the reality of things. This is the essential modification that both Aquinas and Mulla Sadra must work in Aristotle’s account of “necessary beings,” as well as any Neoplatonic emanation scheme that would construe creation as a descending ordering of the universe, in which each higher order has a share in the coming-to-be of the lower ones. *Esse/wujûd* must emanate wholly from the One; if it does so in an ordered fashion, which the canonical “emanation scheme” attempts to outline, that scheme itself must be wholly a product of the One. What this entails, then, is that there be a trace of the originator in everything originated, which both Aquinas and Mulla Sadra identify with *esse/wujûd*. Yet because *esse/wujûd* is neither an accident nor an essential feature of things, “it” will not be identifiable except as the very *act* of things, what allows them to “stand out” and to be agents themselves.¹⁴ So what is most significant about things, their individual reality, will escape the conceptualization proper to an essence/accident frame. Yet that very inconceivable *act* will also link existing things to their source, and inherently so, since (as Aquinas puts it) their very *esse* is *esse-ad*, their *being* is *to-be-related* (*ST* 1.45.3). Such is the mark of being a creature, and what

13. “The distinction” is Robert Sokolowski’s prescient way of summarizing the metaphysical implications of creation, in his *God of Faith and Reason* (Notre Dame Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

14. Joseph deFinance, S.J., *Etre et Agir dans la Philosophie de S. Thomas* 3d. ed. (Roma: Gregoriana, 1965) offers a classic treatment of Aquinas on this matter.

both Aquinas and Mulla Sadra bring to philosophy is the demand that creatureliness be incorporated into a Christian or Muslim metaphysics.

There is only one way to do this: to find a way of articulating both the similarity and the difference which obtains between creator and creatures. Aquinas will have recourse here to the Neoplatonic strategy of *participation* to encapsulate “the distinction” which at once links the One with all that emanates from it as well as differentiating their modes of *being*: the One whose very essence is *esse* must differ from everything else which *has* it. Mulla Sadra’s way of characterizing this similarity-cum-difference by way of an ordered emanation could be regarded as a commentary illuminating Aquinas’s use of the notion of *participation*, which forms the centerpiece of his argument for origination. As Rudi teVelde explicates it: “the point of Thomas’s argument is that subsisting being itself implies the existence of other beings, in such a way that no being can be conceived to exist unless as distinguished from the one who is being itself.” Since these modalities are so different, there is a negation involved, yet it proves to be a productive one:

it constitutes all other beings as distinguished from and related to God who alone is subsisting being itself. The positive side of the negation is expressed by the term participation: that which is as distinguished from God is not its being but participates in being which it has received from God.¹⁵

Yet that *participation* sees to it that

the first cause operates [in all creatures] *from within*, in a most intimate and immediate way [so that God is] more interior to the creature than that creature is to itself. This well-known Augustinian phrase formulates rather aptly what it means to say that God’s transcendence is not a transcendence outside and separated from the world, but a transcendence-in-immanence. . . . Even if one might say that God gives being to a creature which exists outside God, still God cannot properly be said to be outside the creatures.¹⁶

Sara Grant’s Teape lectures comparing Aquinas’s metaphysics of created being with Sankara’s *nonduality* focus on that feature of participation which identifies created *esse* as *esse-ad*—a relation that Aquinas insists is a

15. teVelde, *Participation and Substantiality*, p. 128.

16. teVelde, *Participation and Substantiality*, p. 181; for a parallel construction in a more properly linguistic mode, see Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), where she distinguishes “contrastive” from “non-contrastive” ways of articulating the relation. A further illuminating parallel can be found in Sara Grant’s Teape lectures: *Towards an Alternative Theology* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1991)

“non-reciprocal relation of dependence.”¹⁷ That is, the very existence of creatures involves the creator: since their *being* can only be from the One who simply *is*, creatures have no being apart from God. Yet, as teVelde notes, “participation enables Aquinas to conceive a domain of finite causality (secondary causes), a natural order of cause and effect [whereby] God works immanently in nature . . . by setting nature free in its own non-divine operation.” All the while, however,

no particular cause can by its own power account for the being as such of its effect, so no cause is capable of making its (particular) effect be in act unless it acts by the power of the first one whose power alone is sufficient ground of the being of any determinate effect.¹⁸

So what teVelde calls “the specific structure of participation which underlies the relationship between God and nature,” Sara Grant identifies with *non-duality*, utilizing Aquinas’s “non-reciprocal relation of dependence” to offer an interpretation of Sankara’s thought that removes it from western caricatures of “monism.” We can do the same with similar caricatures of Mulla Sadra (and of his mentor, Ibn al’Arabi) as propounding something called “existential monism.” It seems, rather, that he and Aquinas were engaged in a similar strategy, one for which Aquinas borrowed the Neoplatonic device of *participation*, using it to his own ends: to show how creatures are internally related to their creator. For if they are not, then the creator is a cause like other causes, rather than a cause of being; and if they are, then any account of their mode of being must attempt to show how they are.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

One signal result of this comparative inquiry should be to make us appreciate how difficult it is to attain a “metaphysical standpoint,” and especially so when the “cause of being” is the free and self-revealing creator of the Hebrew scriptures and the Qur’an.¹⁹ Since the key reality of *wujûd/esse* is not itself conceptualizable, and when conceptualized turns into the common notion of being, something more than philosophical skills will be required to exe-

17. Grant, *Towards an Alternative Theology*, p. 35; Aquinas (in *ST* 1.45.3.1) puts this in a way that has offended those unfamiliar with his quasi-technical language:

In its active sense creation means God’s action, which is his essence with a relationship to the creature. But this in God is not a real relation, but only conceptual [*secundum rationem tantum*] The relation of the creature to God, however, is real.

18. teVelde, *Participation and Substantiality*, p. 182.

19. teVelde, *Participation and Substantiality*, p. 133.

cute the metaphysical strategy which we have identified as crucial to a proper understanding of both Aquinas and Mulla Sadra. There is a hint of paradox here, for we are suggesting that attaining the requisite “metaphysical standpoint” will call for a set of skills beyond what we normally associate with philosophy. Here is where we may profit from Pierre Hadot’s reflections on the relevance of spiritual exercises to the practice of philosophy, as conceived by “the ancients.”²⁰ The difficulty is nicely articulated by Rudi teVelde in his attempt to parse Aquinas’s characterization of God as *ipsum esse subsistens* [subsisting *being* itself]. He notes how the formula cannot capture God, but rather announces that

we have no concept of God. [Indeed,] it is by means of this formula, as expressing the way the human intellect in its understanding relates to God, that it is made clear that God is such a reality which defies any definition or conceptualization [on] our part.

Yet the formula is not meaningless; it “signifies God as he is knowable to us on the basis of his ‘reflection’ in the world.”²¹ Yet that reflection, embodied in *wujūd/esse*, is not conceptualizable either, so how can it be known—as a reflection?

Both Muslim and Christian traditions turn here to practices which can serve to move the understanding beyond formulations, especially when the very structure of the formulae demonstrates that they will not suffice. And Pierre Hadot reminds us that ancient philosophy did the same. A longtime translator of Plotinus, it appears that the very effort of translating—itsself a spiritual exercise—alerted him to the difference between a modern and a classical conception of the virtues required to “do philosophy.” Indeed, modern philosophy seldom alludes to “intellectual virtues,” contenting itself rather with “propositional attitudes”; yet when one presses the *attitude* part, something like virtue can in fact emerge. That is to say, modernity’s *account* of what philosophy is and how one engages in it may well prove inadequate to the activity itself, which could also explain why philosophy continues to criticize itself and not merely its findings. The focus of contemporary philosophers like Stephen Toulmin and Alasdair MacIntyre on practices can help us see how Hadot’s presentation of ancient philosophy is far more pertinent than an historical exercise, as his recent summary statement in *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie antique* articulates.²² Mulla Sadra explicitly contends, as we have seen, that we will need some special “illumination” to attain the appropriate metaphysical standpoint. Lacking something of that sort, teVelde intimates, Aquinas’s crucial formula cannot but appear un-

20. *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, 3d ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1993); *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. Arnold Davidson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995)

21. teVelde, *Participation and Substantiality*, p. 120.

22. *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie antique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995).

grammatical. Yet those who are attuned to what it displays rather than what it (cannot) say will be able to make connections with Plotinus's pointing to a One "beyond being," and find Aquinas and Plotinus engaged in a similar struggle to attain the requisite "metaphysical standpoint"—beyond the common conception of being.²³ And it was his own engagement with Plotinus's intellectual journey which taught Hadot the need for spiritual exercises to follow his mentor. Indeed, the master/disciple relationship, and all that it portends, offers a useful way of characterizing the exercises relevant to attaining this metaphysical standpoint. My own suspicion is that Hadot's suggestions may offer western philosophers a way to appreciate *ishrâqi* wisdom and the demands it makes on one who would practice it.

23. The work of Lloyd Gerson is illustrative here: see his *Plotinus* (London: Routledge, 1997).