To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Robert D. Prosser entitled "Participation in the Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Philosophy.

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PARTICIPATION IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this investigation was to arrive at an understanding of the theory of participation in the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas. Of central concern was the metaphysical use of that theory to explicate the relation of essence to existence.

Thomistic texts alluding to the theory of participation were explored to determine what Thomas meant when he made reference to the theory.

It was discovered that Thomas was indebted to other philosophers for much that is a part of his theory. Of crucial importance was the Platonic influence upon the formation of his theory. This influence is of interest to the student of philosophy in light of the traditional tendency to view Thomas as purely an Aristotelian.

Original contributions to the theory of participation were discovered. These contributions grew out of the way Thomas used the theory in his metaphysical structure. The pertinent elements of that metaphysical structure were explored so that the function of the theory of participation might be analyzed. The conclusion reached was that the theory of participation in the philosophy of Thomas was an original contribution to metaphysical theory.

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INTRODUCTION

In one of his comments on the writing of poetry, Robert Frost said:

> In poetry and under emotion every word used is "moved" a little or much--moved from its old place, heightened, made new. See what Keats did to the word "alien" in the ode. But as he made it special in that place he made it his--and his only in that place.[1]

If philosophy were substituted for poetry and intellect for emotion in the above quotation, it would seem to me to be a helpful way of understanding the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas. Especially is this true of the theory of participation. In this paper I shall show how Thomas "moved" the theory of participation from one place to another and thereby made it his.

Some have argued that Thomas had no philosophical ideas that were his own. When, in the fifth volume of his monumental history of world systems, Pierre Duhem reached St. Thomas Aquinas, he attempted to discover Thomas' original contributions to the world of ideas. Duhem concluded that he had made none. Instead of setting out in unexplored directions, Thomas limited himself to harmonizing the views of his predecessors and to taking from each one of them a

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[1]Elaine Barry, Robert Frost on Writing (New Brunswick, N.J., Rutgers University Press, 1973), p. 63.

part which seemed to Thomas consistent with the truth.[2]

According to Duhem this syncretism proved to be the undoing of Thomas as a philosopher. On the notions of being, matter, individuality, Thomas floated back and forth among contradictory views without seemingly knowing it. Desiring to reconcile Aristotelianism and Catholicism, Thomas adopted all possible modifications of Aristotle in order to keep the ideal of reconciliation alive. The result was philosophical incoherence.[3]

Duhem did not find in Thomas a single philosophical proposition of importance that did not belong to some other thinker. It is on this basis that he gave his judgment of Thomistic philosophy:

> If by Thomism is meant a single and co-ordinated doctrine belonging properly to St. Thomas either through the principles from which it flows or through the order that unites and brings together its several parts, we believe that we can boldly answer the question thus: There is no Thomistic philosophy.[4]

Some of the most respected modern interpreters of Thomas agree with Duhem's assessment for different reasons. Anton C. Pegis asserts, "He had no philosophy, not because

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[2]Pierre Duhem, Le systeme du monde. Histoire des doctrines cosmologiques de Platon a Copernic (Paris, Librarie scientifique A. Hermann et Fils, V, 1917), pp. 468-570.

[3]Ibid., p. 568.

[4]Ibid.

he failed in the effort to establish one, but because he never meant to create a philosophical synthesis for whatever purpose."[5] What he did mean to create was a theological synthesis. "He therefore set out to formulate philosophical principles in order to use them to the extent that this was necessary for his theology."[6] Pegis points to Thomas' understanding of the distinction between a philosopher and a theologian and attempts to show that in purpose and procedure, Thomas was a theologian.

Other Thomistic scholars disagree with both Pegis and Duhem by asserting that Thomas was both a philosopher and a theologian. They feel his philosophy can be judged on its own merits and apart from his theological purpose. It is this school of thought that I will be defending here. Admittedly, the theological question is a difficult one. But it seems to me that ideas must be judged on their own merits and not simply dismissed because they are presented by someone who is also, or even primarily, a theologian. James F. Anderson has reminded us that the definition of philosophy does not depend upon the subject performing the act, but upon the nature of the act being performed. If this is true, then "philosophy is subject

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[5]Anton C. Pegis, St. Thomas and Philosophy (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1964), p. 16.

[6]Ibid.

to the same rational criteria whether it exists in a Christian head or a non-Christian one."[7] Because Thomas used reason in pursuit of truth, his writings are philosophy and may legitimately be judged by rational criteria.

Still to be resolved, however, is the place of Thomas as a philosopher. If one simply explains the work of a previous philosopher the results may be called philosophy, to be sure, but the commentator can scarcely be thought of as a philosopher of note. Such a philosopher does not deserve to be given a place of high honor in the history of ideas for this should be reserved for the creative and original.

In this paper I shall discuss the originality of Thomas. I hope to show that in his theory of participation Thomas develops a metaphysical principle of such significance that it alone entitles him to a distinguished place in the history of ideas. Whether other such significant ideas exist will be beyond the scope of this paper. But if my thesis is correct, this theory in itself will be sufficient grounds for the inclusion of Thomas as a philosopher of note.

I shall also treat a closely related point. Thomas has traditionally been interpreted as depending upon Aristotle for his philosophy. That is easy to understand

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[7]James F. Anderson, "Was St. Thomas a Philosopher?", New Scholasticism, Vol. 38 (April, 1964), p. 436.

in light of the medieval schoolman's almost constant reliance upon Aristotle, whom he refers to as "the Philosopher."[8] What is often overlooked is that Aristotle was thought of as "the philosopher" because of his logic, not because of his metaphysics. It wasn't until the first part of the thirteenth century that the physical and metaphysical works of Aristotle were available in Latin. These works shook the Christian world. Plato's ideas had been seen as looking forward to Christian revelation for adequate completion and statement and as such were accepted and used in the medieval world, but Aristotle's metaphysics was so complete that it seemed to rule out Christian revelation altogether. Aristotle's world, for example, was independent of God, so far as existence is concerned (De Caelo 279 b 12 ff). The only way God could fit into Aristotelian metaphysics was possibly as the prime mover, the source of movement but not the source of being. Too, Aristotle rejected the Platonic idea of creation. He taught that the world is and must be eternal.[9] These views threw the Christian world into turmoil. The teaching of his physical and metaphysical works was prohibited in many universities. Aquinas carried out the revolutionary task of interpreting Aristotle to the Christian world.

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[8]F. C. Copleston, Aquinas (Baltimore, Penguin Books, 1955), p. 62.

[9]Vernon J. Bourke, The Pocket Aquinas (New York, Washington Square Press, Inc., 1960), p. 46.

To be an Aristotelian, then, was not a safe, dull, lifeless thing as it has so often been pictured by the modern mind. This in itself helps us to approach Thomas with a little more sympathy toward the possibility of his having something interesting to say. But to think of Thomas purely as an Aristotelian is a mistake. "Participation," after all, is a Platonic word.

In this paper I will show that Thomas drew from Platonic and Neo-Platonic as well as from Aristotelian sources. I will also show that Thomas did not simply adopt, without change, ideas contained in his sources but modified them to fit his own philosophical purposes.

I. PARTICIPATION IN ST. THOMAS

The theory of participation is used in two ways in the thought of Thomas. It is used both to talk about how different individuals can be members of the same species, and how many species take part in existence. In the latter usage Thomas deals with the metaphysical question of being. Charles A. Hart has called this usage the one which deals with the ". . .most radical real composition of essence and existence. . . ."[1] I am not so much interested in the composition of form and matter which explains individuals within the species as with the composition of essence and existence which explains being itself, the being, for example, of dogs, trees and men. Though Thomas does use the theory of participation to explicate the way individuation and multiplication come about within a species, this usage is unclear. As Hart points out, this application is "highly analogical" and "half conceptual."[2]

My purpose is to show Thomas' use of Plato's theory of participation. By this I mean that he took a Platonic notion and applied it in a way that Plato never did. Plato, as we shall see, used the theory of participation

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[1]Charles A. Hart, "Participation and the Thomistic Five Ways", New Scholasticism, Vol. 26, (1952), p. 267.

[2]Ibid.

to describe how the individual relates to the species. The Thomistic alteration was to apply the theory of participation to the metaphysical question of how the species relates to existence. This is the original Thomistic contribution. I am using "participation" to show that Thomas was not simply an Aristotelian and I am using Thomas' theory of participation to show that Thomas was not simply eclectic but was a philosopher in his own right.

If there is one guiding text that contains the essentials of what I wish to explain, it must be a text from the Qu. disp. de Anima. In attempting to put into words his metaphysical theory, Thomas adopts a Platonic word.

> . . .to be is the ultimate act, which is participable by all, yet itself participates in nothing; hence, if there is such a thing as a self-subsisting to be, which we say that God is, we also say that it participates in nothing. But the case of other subsisting forms is not the same because they must participate in existence itself and, consequently, be related to it as potency to act. Thus because in a way they are in potency, they can participate in something else.[3]

This passage ties the theory of participation directly to the question of existence. It also sets the stage in Thomas' own words for the exposition that will follow.

Most explanations of St. Thomas' use of the word "participation" focus upon the way it was used by Plato. H. D. Gardeil, for example, defines participation as:

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[3]Aquinas, Qu. disp. de Anima art. 6, ad 9[m].

> 1. The fact of having part in a form;
> 2. There are two basic types of participation. By composition, when a subject receives a form which in its source subsists by itself; by similitude or likeness, when a form is only imperfectly what another form on which it depends is perfectly or in fullness.[4]

Such a definition of participation is completely inadequate and, in fact, misleading as a description of Thomas' use of the term in his metaphysical theory.

We are indebted to Etienne Gilson for an excellent treatment of the central problem of such a definition. In Being and Some Philosophers Gilson points out that existence is not a form for Thomas.[5] It is not some thing added on to other things (i.e., form and matter in corporeal substances), the addition of which causes those things to be. Existence is not of the same order as form and matter, it is an act. The form determines the shape of that action and every finite act is the act of a substance of some kind, but act itself is of a different order than substance. As Thomas himself says: "The composition of matter and form is not of the same nature as

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[4]H. D. Gardeil, Introduction to the Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas, Vl. 4. Metaphysics (St. Louis, B. Herder Book Co., 1967), p. 314.

[5]Etienne Gilson, Being and Some Philosophers (Toronto, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1949), p. 170.

that of substance and existence, although both of them are compositions of potency and act."[6]

The above definition of participation, then, though applicable to the use of participation to explicate difference within a species, is not at all applicable to the basic metaphysical question of difference within being. A much more satisfactory definition is the one given by Thomas himself in On the De Hebdomadibus of Boethius, Chapter 2. There he speaks of participation as "receiving in a particular manner what belongs to something else in a universal manner." What is left out of this definition is the identification of "what belongs to something else in a universal manner" with form.

In order to see why this is a crucial point we must examine the changed relation between form and the act-potency distinction that is brought about by the Thomistic metaphysical insight. Let us recall that to Greek thought, the act-potency distinction was used to describe the difference between an ordered thing and matter which has potential to be a thing but, as long as it is unformed, is not a thing. To be, to exist is to be formed. Form is to matter as act is to potency. Existence is clearly linked to form.

What Thomas does that Gilson calls ". . .the greatest contribution ever made by any single man to the science

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[6] Aquinas, Contra Gentiles, II, 54.

of being. . ."[7] is to dissociate the notions of form and act when he talks about existence and to associate form with potency. "Those subsisting forms which, because they themselves are forms, do not require a formal cause for both being one and being, do nevertheless require an external acting cause, which gives them to be."[8] Notice that the cause spoken of is not a form. The forms themselves are forms and do not require that another form give them form. Thus, within the form-matter distinction in the substance, act can be associated with form. But when we talk about the "to be" of a substance, form finds itself as potency. It is in potency to another act, namely existence. Existence is pure act. It is not in potency to any other act. And in St. Thomas' mind this pure act is God.

Thomas explains this theory in terms of participation. If we go back to the quotation from the de Anima with which I began, we will notice that "to be is the ultimate act, which is particable by all, yet itself participates in nothing; hence, if there is such a thing as self-subsisting to be, which we say that God is, we also say that it participates in nothing."

One is frustrated by the inability to say precisely

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[7] Gilson, op. cit., p. 174.

[8] Aquinas, op. cit.

what participation means without bringing in a whole set of metaphysical concepts. This, however, helps us to see something of the character of participation. Participation in the metaphysics of Thomas is not a simple notion that can be taken up apart from its framework. Its meaning is in fact given to it by its function within the framework. Perhaps this is why, in the writings of Thomas, "there is no elaborated treatment of it in any one place."[9] The theory rather runs throughout his works.

One of the most helpful ways of getting at the meaning of the theory of participation for Thomas is to see it in relation to the way the potency-act distinction functions for him. Thomas A. Hart identifies the "potency-limiting-act principle" and the "principle of participation" as one and the same principle.[10] I prefer to see them as negative and positive statements of the same principle, with participation being the positive aspect. But I agree that the same principle is involved. I will treat later the Aristotelian origin of the Potency-Act distinction and its transformation by Thomas, but for now, I wish to describe Thomas' use of it.

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[9]Sister Annice, "Historical Sketch of the Theory of Participation", New Scholasticism, Vol. 26(Jan., 1972), p. 29.

[10]Charles A. Hart, Thomistic Metaphysics (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., Prentice Hall, Inc., 1959), p. 9.

"Thomistic metaphysics holds that if the act of existing, or "to be", of beings, from which they get their name of "being," was not related to some principle of limitation then there could be only one being."[11] Yet there are many beings, our senses insist. How can this be the case? Of itself, the act of "to be" carries no implication of limitation so the principle of limiting must come from something other than existence. Thomas ascribes the limiting function to the essence or nature of the particular being. This essence is not nothing for "nothing does not limit anything."[12] Neither is it existence. Rather it must be something between these two. Thomas calls it a certain potentiality for existing to be realized only by receiving its proper act of "to be." Each being exercises its received act of "to be" to the extent or degree that its limiting essence permits. The receiving of the act of "to be" is called participation.

This term is made necessary because of the multiplicity of beings. We have no need to say of existence itself that it participates in itself. We only have need to say this of beings which have being, but are not the completeness of being. When asked why it is that they are said to be, we reply that they participate in existence and may thus be said to be, but unlike God, they are not being.

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[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

Their reception of the act of to be is limited by their particular potency or essence. A tree is not a horse because its essence keeps it from existing in such a way as to be able to move from place to place, for example. A horse is not a man because its essence limits it so that it cannot have rational existence. But each existent thing has the potential to participate in existence in its own fashion or to its own limit.

Perhaps it would be helpful at this point to see the role God plays in the metaphysics of Thomas. Let us remember that Thomas described God as the "self-subsisting to be." This being the case, any study of all actual beings from the standpoint of what they hold in common, namely their existence, would necessarily lead us to study the existence of God. It is in this existence that all beings participate and are thus said to be. It is inconceivable to Thomas that the only being that is fully being and not being to a limited degree could be omitted from a study of being as being. God functions in the metaphysics of Thomas as the source of the existence of the many participated beings.

The existence of God can be known by the human intellect only through inference. But Thomas considers the inference necessary. In order for there to be participated being, there must be unparticipated being (i.e., something to participate in). This is why Thomas, in following

unaided reason as far as he can, arrives at the existence which he calls God. This is also why Sister M. Annice can say that ". . .if the Summa be considered in one sweeping view it may be seen that the author has envisioned a complete system of participation. Here in his philosophy of God as first and proper efficient, final and exemplary cause, St. Thomas points to an absolute being and perfection which reason finds it necessary to posit. . . ."[13]

In an article in New Scholasticism (July, 1952), Charles A. Hart follows out the implications of the theory of participation as it applies to the five ways by which St. Thomas concluded to the existence of God.[14] I want to recount a part of that discussion here to show how the theory of participation is central to Thomas' mature metaphysical outlook. These arguments are given both in the First Book of the Summa Contra Gentiles and at the beginning of the Summa Theologica. The statement of the argument in the latter has been chosen for review. The fourth, or so-called henological argument, is the clearest and most immediate expression of the participation principle, so it alone will be recounted.

Thomas sets forth his argument as follows:

> Among Beings there are some more and some less good, true, noble and the like. But more and less are predicated of different things

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[13]Annice, op. cit., p. 49.

[14]Hart, "Participation and the Thomistic Five Ways", op. cit., pp. 267-282.

> according as they resemble in their different ways something which is maximum. . .so there is something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection, and this we call God.[15]

The argument notes that degrees of participation in the universal perfection of existence cannot be explained solely by reference to the essence of a thing. What is essential to a thing must be fully in the nature of that thing.

> Therefore, such de facto limited existence as these beings possess, not being of their essences, can come only from some extrinsic source, ultimately from a being which has all the perfections of existence without limitation, a unique unparticipated Being whose nature is to exist.[16]

This being is properly called God.

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[15] Aquinas, Summa Theol., Qu. 1 Ar. 3.

[16] Hart, op. cit., p. 270.

II. THE PLATONIC HERITAGE OF PARTICIPATION

In surveying the heritage of the theory of participation, we must turn to Plato to find the earliest examples. Throughout his dialogues, Plato searches for a way to describe how sensible things and particular instances of qualities are related to the separately existing universals. Such a description is necessary if the universal is to explain the particular instance. Participation becomes the constant term in this search. Many other descriptive terms are tried. Some prove to have some value, but participation carries the burden of this difficult task.

I will be relying heavily upon the scholarship of Sir David Ross[1] in the following presentation. The theory of participation is not simple in either Plato or Aquinas. There are ambiguities, developments, and nuances of meaning that require interpretation. When such questions of interpretation arise, I will appeal to Ross as an accepted standard of Platonic interpretation. Though Ross does not deal explicitly with participation in Plato, treatment of the subject is implicit in his discussion of the development of the theory of Ideas throughout Plato's dialogues. This developmental approach will be followed in setting forth Plato's theory of participation.

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[1]Sir David Ross, Plato's Theory of Ideas (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1963).

In the early dialogues, Plato does not seem to have come to a theory of Ideas that makes necessary a theory of participation. The language is rather that of the form being embodied in particular materials. In the Cratylus, for example, the carpenter looks to the form of shuttle to make a particular shuttle, but when the carpenter is skillful, he may succeed in embodying the form in particular materials.[2] "He has not yet reached the point of thinking that an Idea is never perfectly exemplified, but only imitated."[3] In fact, Ross states that the language of the early dialogues does not necessarily imply the existence of the form before it is embodied.

It is in the Phaedo that the language of participation is used extensively to express the relation of sensible things to ideas.[4] This usage coincides with the first clear expression of a belief in the separate existence of Ideas. We also find here the beginnings of the use of the language of resemblance, though participation is the dominant thrust. In this early work, Plato does not insist on any particular name for the relation between the Idea and the particulars even though he uses the term participation in 100, 101 and 102. What he does insist on is the

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[2] Ibid., p. 19.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., p. 25.

fact that it is by reason of the Ideas that particulars are what they are, that "by the beautiful all beautiful things are beautiful."[5]

In Plato's mature thought the absolutely real is the separated Idea, the form existing extra-mentally. This conclusion is reached in The Republic 479 b9-e9 where he asserts "that no particulars are fully real and that only forms are so."[6] It is this world of forms that constitutes the world of permanency and the absolute norm. The forms do not exist in order that lower manifestations may participate in them. Yet the same characteristics are found in individual concrete objects which somehow participate in the essence of the Idea.[7]

These forms are many, corresponding to the variety of perfections within the world. From snub-nosedness to truth, goodness and beauty, the perfection of a quality or thing is somehow a participation in the absolute form of that quality or thing. Plato speaks of the Ideal Bed of which the beds we see are mere copies. In the Republic, Book X, 597c, Plato does assert that there is one essential Idea which all Ideas must share. But this Idea of the Good is set alongside other Ideas such as snub-nosedness in Plato's complete philosophy.

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[5]Plato, The Phaedo, 100, 7.

[6]Ross, op. cit., p. 39.

[7]Sister Annice, op. cit., p. 51.

The Idea of the Good is not God for Plato. Etienne Gilson has pointed out that although we can hardly refrain from reading God into the famous lines of the Republic where Plato says of the Idea of Good that "it is 'the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in the visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual,'"[8] such an inference is not justifiable. Yet the fact remains that "Plato himself has never called the Good a god. But to persuade his historians that since Plato himself does not say that the Good is a god we had better not make him say it, would be a practically desperate undertaking."[9]

It now remains to be seen how the Platonic word "participation" and certain of the ideas associated with that word came to be the word used by Thomas in his metaphysical theory. The first point that needs to be made in such a study is that Thomas had little if any direct acquaintance with the writings of Plato. "There was available to the Latin West in the Thirteenth century only three works of Plato - the Meno, the Phaedo and the Timaeus. It

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[8]Gilson, God in Philosophy (New Haven, New Haven Press, 1914), p. 25.

[9]Ibid., p. 26.

is certain that St. Thomas did not use either the Meno or the Phaedo and there is no convincing evidence that he was directly acquainted with either Cicero's or Chalcidius' translations of the Timaeus."[10] R. J. Henle has made an exhaustive study of the sources of the Platonic tradition in Thomas, but only as it relates to direct references to Plato in Thomas' works. This will prove an excellent starting point. The present investigation has both a broader and a narrower scope, however. It is broader in that it will be an attempt to grasp the sources of the Platonic tradition even when Plato is not referred to as the source of the tradition. It is narrower in that it will deal only with the notion of participation, and not with all Platonic notions. It is a more limited objective that is before us too in that only the outlines will be sketched and not the detailed particulars.

The two sources most often referred to by Henle as sources of Platonic references in relation to participation are Aristotle (particularly his Metaphysics) and St. Augustine.[11] What is most interesting in the development of Thomas' use of the term "participation" is that Aristotle specifically argued against the theory. He based his refutation on his metaphysical denial of the separated

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[10] Robert J. Henle, Saint Thomas and Platonism (The Hague, Nijhoff, 1956), p. XXI.

[11] Ibid., pp. 7-288.

ideas. However, he does reflect the Platonic understanding, and it is from this source that Thomas probably drew the corpus of his knowledge of Plato. For him to take up the theory, even in part, seems to me evidence of his independent thought.

St. Augustine is the other dominate source. He reconciled the theory of participation of creatures in the Absolute which had been developed by Plotinus with the Christian concept of the all-perfect divine Being. This being in some way shared the plentitude of his perfection with creatures. In De Trinitate VIII, c. III, 4-5, Augustine sets forth this doctrine as it relates to the good which he identifies with God. God is Good per se. All other things are good only by participation. This doctrine is attributed by Augustine to Plato, and it and its many variations in Augustine become one of the chief sources of Thomas' knowledge of Platonic thought on participation.

The same kind of thought is common to Boethius and the Pseudo-Dionysius.[12] W. Norris Clark thinks of Boethius' De Hebdomadibus as a treatise on participation.[13] St. Thomas was familiar with this work which asserts that any unparticipated form must be infinite. Therefore every

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[12] Ibid., p. 222.

[13] W. Norris Clarke, "The Limitation of Act by Potency: Aristotelianism or Neoplatonism", New Scholasticism, Vol. 26, (1952), p. 189.

finite creature must be a composite of form and receiving, limiting matter.

> The identical principle is taken over by St. Thomas but transposed in a highly original stroke of genius, so that the ultimate perfection now becomes the "quasi-form" of esse, the act of existence, instead of form-essence, and the latter becomes itself the limiting, participating principle.[14]

One further source of Platonic thought for Thomas was Plotinus. This source was probably not immediately available to Thomas, but the basic thought came to him by way of Proclus in his famous "textbook of Neoplatonic participation metaphysics entitled The Elements of Theology."[15] In the thirteenth century The Elements of Theology was not widely available, but St. Thomas himself discovered that the celebrated Liber De Causis was only a compilation from that work. The Pseudo-Dionysius enters in here as well because these works were only thinly veiled Christian adaptations of The Elements of Theology.

The Plotinian contribution to the idea of participation is bound up with the central doctrine of the supreme One. In this view of the universe, the old Platonic order of limited, intelligible essences, composed of form as perfecting limit imposed on the infinity of sensible matter is still preserved. But their relation to the supreme One by

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[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., p. 188.

emanation from it introduces a new function of the limiting principle. In this perspective, all the intelligible essences below the One now appear as limited and thus imperfect participations of this perfect first principle. The One is therefore above all particular essences. It somehow embraces within itself the perfections of all the lower essences, but it is none of them in particular.

Even though the route to the thought of Plotinus is indirect, the influence upon Thomas is obvious. "Even the central intuition of the Thomistic limitation principle, namely, that a perfection cannot be limited except by something else, is formulated explicitly with all the clarity and vigor desirable."[16] There are, of course, many differences between Neo-Platonic and Thomistic metaphysics of being. One of the most important is that Plotinus, still following Plato on this point, identifies being with limited essence and hence is forced to place the One above being and intelligibility and to identify the ultimate perfection of the universe as unity rather than existence.

From this survey of the Platonic heritage of the theory of participation, it becomes clear that the mature theory of Thomas is deeply indebted to Platonism and Neo-Platonism. The relation of the act of existence to substances is analogous to the relation of form to matter in Plato. But

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[16] Ibid., p. 186.

Thomas wants to posit the first relationship as primary with the second being analogous to it. The lack of precision in the use of the term "participation" is even reminicent of the inability of Plato to say precisely what it is, choosing rather to say what it is not and depending upon the structure within which the term is placed to give it its meaning.

The idea of non-being as a limit to being is Platonic. Parmenides had said that "the only way beings could differ, and therefore be many would be by non-being."[17] According to Arthur Little, S.J. in The Platonic Heritage of Thomism, Plato establishes the reality of non-being. It is the real exclusion of other possible perfections. "Being can differ from being if it lacks what makes another being what it is. Its denial in itself of the being of the other, or the non-being in itself of the other, can be real."[18] This is the heart of the limiting or participation principle for Thomas. The essence of a thing, being potential to existence, but only potential to a limited participation in existence, is, for Thomas, the real exclusion of being.

Thomas differs from Plato in his final application of participation. Each idea is a separate unit for Plato. It is true that the sharing of ideas is talked about by Plato. As early as the Phaedo, Plato says that the idea of three

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[17]Charles A. Hart, Thomistic Metaphysics, op. cit., p. 78.

[18]Arthur Little, The Platonic Heritage of Thomism, (Dublin, Golden Eagle Books, Ltd., 1950), p. 177.

imports into a particular group of three the idea of oddness. In the Sophist, this intercommunication of ideas is explained, but the ideas, even that of Being, are the same kind of reality. Plato does move toward an understanding of some of the ideas within the population of the world of ideas being greater than others. But even here the idea of existence is placed alongside "sameness and difference" and "rest and motion."[19] What this amounts to is that Plato had no God. "The Platonic types are not archtypes existing in a divine Intellect. Nor does Plato treat of an efficient cause giving existence to the perfections of creatures."[20]

Plato worked out the scheme used by Thomas in his theory of participation, but he never established an absolute in the way that Thomas did. Plato is perhaps searching for such a notion with his Idea of the Good. The Good is not a mixture of limit and infinity, like other Ideas, but the Platonic correlation of infinity with imperfection would certainly not allow him to call it infinite. Clarke suggests that "perhaps the most accurate answer is to say that he was groping for a new category to express the absolute and the transcendent and that the inadequacy of his metaphysical terminology, chiefly his concept of infinity,

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[19]Ross, op. cit., p. 167.

[20]Sister Annice, op. cit., p. 53.

did not allow him to formulate satisfactorily what he dimly intuited."[21]

This leads us to the question of the source of Thomas' idea of infinity which becomes the final building block in his metaphysical scheme.

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[21]Clarke, op. cit., p. 178.

III. THE HERITAGE OF THE FINITE-INFINITE DISTINCTION

In order to understand how the theory of participation functions in Thomas' philosophy, we must understand that Thomas held a different view of the finite-infinite distinction to that held by Plato. For Plato, the infinite participates in the finite while, for Thomas, the finite participates in the infinite. This difference is crucial because Being is infinite in Thomas' thought and if participation is to function as a true metaphysical theory, it must explain the way finite species are related to the infinite act of Being.

The idea of the infinite had its origin as a description of a kind of inexhaustible womb of nature from which proceeds the endless sequence of generations of new beings. It is in fragments of the writing of the pre-Socratic, Anaximander, that we first find the term. He used it in his philosophy as a first principle of all things. He stood in awe of this quasi-divine principle but never attempted to analyze it in detail.[1] The Greek mind was hesitant at first, not sure of whether to identify the infinite with the supremely perfect, or with the supremely imperfect.

But very soon the Greek mind oriented itself toward identifying the perfect with that which exhibited form and

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[1]Clarke, op. cit., p. 173.

structure. The infinite, being unformed, was thus imperfect and unfinished, a chaos of matter if unperfected by the limit of form. The Pythagoreans gave impetus to this orientation of thought by their doctrine that all things are composed of two sets of opposing principles: a principle of limit or perfection, and a principle of non-limitation or imperfection. The finished cosmos is formed by the primal Monad or One progressively extending its ordering activity outward from a defined center to the surrounding nebula.

The same idea reappears in Parmenides. The great sphere of the totality of Being must be limited precisely because it is complete and perfect. If it were unlimited, it would thus be imperfect. Similar notions can be traced through most of the pre-Socratics. Heraclitus, for example, in establishing fire as his fundamental took special note of the fact that it is kindled and extinguished according to measure and limit. The Atomists identified infinite space with non-being as opposed to the being of solid, limited atoms.

The identifying of the perfect with clear-cut limited form became the dominant mode of Greek thought and was reflected in Greek art and other cultural manifestations. It was characteristic of the great Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle. In the Philebus, Plato says of all things that are that they "draw their existence from the

one and the many, and have the finite and infinite implanted in them."[2] This means in Platonic metaphysics that at all levels it is the principle of limit or measure which imposes on the chaos of the infinite a definite limit which determines and defines it, thus giving it form, intelligibility and being.[3]

Aristotle gave us undoubtedly the most complete analysis of infinity in ancient thought. In both the Physics and the Metaphysics, he follows the logic of infinity to its conclusion. The essential nature of the infinite is to be indefinite, indetermined, and thus imperfect. No complete substance, therefore, can exist as actually infinite. Such a nature could never win the admiration of the Greeks.

A challenge to this view did not arise until Plotinus and Neoplatonism put forth a reversal of this classical Greek tradition. They presented a concept of the infinite which they correlated with the perfect and a concept of the finite which they correlated with the imperfect. This new idea of infinity was influenced by Judaism and the mystery religions of the East. It was Philo who first applied to God the synonym for infinite.[4] The Eastern

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[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., p. 185.

religions brought in a new notion of God as master of the limitless spaces of the heavens discovered by the new Syrian astronomy. It may seem strange to most modern Christians to realize it, but the idea of an infinite God came to Christianity from these outside sources. "Christianity itself seems to have had little traceable influence on the development of the concept. The first Christian texts calling God infinite do not appear till the fourth century, and precisely in those circles which are known to have been influenced by Neoplatonism."[5] In fact, the first Christian philosophers had said that God's will should not be called infinite or else it would be unintelligible even to himself.

Plotinus approached this issue through the theory of the One. The One is supreme, and above all things, yet "all things flow from it and it is imminently in all existence."[6] But the One is none of these essences in particular. "The One, therefore, must be above all particular intelligible determination or essence, and can be described only as a supreme indetermination or infinity, not of defect but of excess."[7] It was Plotinus who first

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[5] Ibid.

[6] Annice, op. cit.

[7] Clarke, op. cit., p. 186.

used the Greek word for the infinite to express this new idea that indetermination can be identified with the "plenitude of perfection of an unparticipated source as compared to the limited participations below it."[8]

Plotinus has thus posed and resolved the problem of the infinite in essentially the same way that Thomas does following him. Plotinus places the One above being, however. He still follows Plato in identifying Being with the intelligibility of the formed universe. Being for Plotinus meant limited and thus finite. It was Thomas' unique contribution to apply this theory to Being itself. In Thomas, it is not being that is finite while God is infinite, but it is Being that is infinite. God is infinite Being. To understand what this means requires an additional explanation of the Act-Potency distinction and its reversal by Thomas.

The Act-Potency distinction is distinctively Aristotelian. Act is identified with that which is complete. An actual substance is matter formed in a definite way. It thus has definite limits and is finite. The function of act is to impose a limit on potency, which is formless infinity. Potency is everything that could be. Actuality is everything that is, that has Being. In Physics III, 6,

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[8] Ibid.

207 a 30-37, Aristotle states clearly that ". . .the matter and the infinite are contained inside what contains them, while it is the form which contains."

The history of Thomistic interpretation reveals a decided shift in the manner of interpreting Thomas' relation to the limitation of act by potency in Aristotle. The traditional interpretation has been that this doctrine in all its essentials was taken over from Aristotle by Thomas. As recently as 1946 Fr. Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., a widely recognized leader of modern Thomism, has expressed this view:

> Aristotle already taught this doctrine. In the first two books of his Physica he shows with admirable clearness the truth, at least in the sense world, of this principle. Act, he says is limited and multiplied by potency. Act determines potency, actualizes potency, but is limited by the same potency. . .Aristotle studied this principle in the sense world. St. Thomas extends the principle, elevates it, sees its consequences, not only in the sense world, but universally in all orders of being, spiritual as well as corporeal, even in the infinity of God.[9]

This view sees Thomas as an interpreter of Aristotle. Aristotle had already taught the theory; Thomas simply explored its further meanings. Aristotle indeed is the originator of the terms in the distinction, but his use of them is completely different from that of Thomas.

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[9]Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., Reality: A Synthesis of Thomistic Thought (B. Herder Book Co., St. Louis, Mo., 1946), p. 97.

The glaring error in traditional Thomism results not from a misreading of Thomas, but from a misreading of Aristotle. In some instances this misreading is almost inexcusable. For example, W. Norris Clarke has pointed out that in the first two books of the Physics there is no mention to be found of the idea of limit in connection with potency. Clarke has further undertaken a complete study of all the passages in Aristotle which deal either with act or potency and reports that nowhere could be discovered any text from which one could conclude, in accord with the accepted norms of objective historical interpretation, that Aristotle himself ever held the doctrine that potency plays the role of limiting principle with respect to act, which if unmixed with potency would be unlimited.[10] Neither is the idea of act as limited by potency present in Thomas' commentaries on Aristotle, including that of Book IX of the Metaphysics, which deals exclusively with act and potency.

The limitation of act by potency in Thomas is a completely different usage of the act-potency distinction to that in Aristotle because it is based on a different understanding of the absolute perfection. The absolute perfection is act, not potency. It is infinite, not finite.

In all created being essence, or potentiality, and existence, or act, are compositions.

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[10] Henle, op. cit., p. 408.

> God cannot create simply being; this would be to create himself. What he creates is an angelic being, a human being, and so on. There is consequently a limiting factor within each created being which is not being itself. This St. Thomas calls the creature's essence, quiddity, or nature.[11]

It is this essence that determines what it is possible for that creature to be. Or to put it the other way, this is what limits its being. The essence determines the degree to which created being participates in being, the kind of being it is, whereas God simply is being.

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[11]Armand A. Maurer, Medieval Philosophy (New York, Random House, 1962), p. 176.

IV. THE ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION OF ST. THOMAS

The thesis of this paper is that Thomas' use of the theory of participation displays an original approach to the central problem of metaphysics, the question of the nature of Being. In this section, the connection between the original Thomistic contributions to this question and his theory of participation will be summarized.

The original contributions that have been identified are the reversal of the act-potency distinction with regard to Being and the identification of Being with infinity. Stated in terms of these ideas, the Thomistic theory of participation is that beings as we know them are limited participations in unlimited or infinite Being. This infinite Being is pure act, not in potency to any further act. It is the essence of all finite beings to be in potency to this act of "to be." Each finite essence receives its being from its participation in the infinite act of to be.

The central feature of this theory, of course, is Thomas' idea of God. Treated philosophically, this is his idea of Being. Being, for Thomas, is unlimited and actual. Beings by participation are limited by their essence to certain participations in the possible perfections of Being. A graded order of the universe as a whole is thus established. "The less the essence as potential existence limits the act of to be, the higher the grade of existence and the nearer

to the Self-Existing Being, the more the essence limits the received act of to be, the lower the grade of being and the farther removed it is from Self-Existence."[1] In short, the principle of participation is also a principle of gradation in a universe oriented toward Self-Existence.

Thomas truly has a universe. His theory of participation establishes the unity of that universe in a way that previous philosophers had not done. Plato considered the individual as a mere temporary reflection of the universal and eternal idea. The universal had being; the particular did not. Aristotle was concerned with the essence of beings and did not direct his attention to the metaphysical question, "What is it to be?" In his approach to essence he differed from Aquinas in that one being is distinguished from another not by a limitation of being, but by the addition of some positive quality. This approach, at first view, looks like that of Thomas, but the difference is important. Thomas begins with Being that possesses all possible perfections and explains limited being as having those perfections by limited participation. Aristotle, on the other hand, has no unlimited Being. Perfections are added on, but no explanation of their origin as existing is given. Unlike Heraclitus and all subsequent philosophies

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[1] Hart, Thomistic Metaphysics, op. cit., p. 103.

of process, Thomas does not make change or becoming the unifying principle of the universe. Thomistic metaphysics does not have change without a being as the subject of change. His universe is firmly established upon the being of God.

Without the reversal of the act-potency distinction, Thomas' theory of participation could not have the metaphysical significance it has. If form were not in potency to another act, it would be the highest explanatory principle. No higher principle could be given. If this highest principle were identified with limit rather than infinity, the metaphysical significance would be lost to Thomas. Thomas wanted to explain everything that is in regard to the fact that it is. A limited first principle would not serve this purpose. The Thomistic metaphysical doctrine of participation is that participated being receives its being from God, the "self-subsisting to be." It receives that being to the limited degree that its form will allow it to take part in the act of Being.

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