

MENTAL EXISTENCE IN THOMAS AQUINAS AND AVICENNA*

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Traditionally it was the case that in philosophical circles, when the name of Thomas Aquinas was raised, the doctrine that would most readily come to mind was the distinction between essence and existence, and the related claim that the act of existence (*esse*) rather than Aristotelian form is, in the oft-cited words of the *Disputed Questions on the Power of God*, “the act of all acts” and “the perfection of all perfections.”¹ Thomism more often than not meant “existential Thomism,” and Aquinas’s interpreters emphasized the centrality of this insight for virtually all aspects of his philosophy.

It was, of course, recognized by existential Thomists—at least the most historically sensitive among them—that the distinction between essence and existence itself, as an addition to the basic Aristotelian metaphysics of form and matter, was not a Thomistic innovation, but primarily one of the many legacies bequeathed to Aquinas by his Islamic predecessor Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā, 980–1037). From the early *De*

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¹ *De potentia dei*, 7.2 ad 9: “Unde patet quod hoc quod dico esse est actualitas omnium actuum et propter hoc est perfectio omnium perfectionum.”

All citations of Aquinas are from the new Leonine edition, or from the Marietti edition where no Leonine edition is available, with the following exceptions: I have used the the revised Ottawa edition of the *Summa theologiae* (Ottawa, 1953), and for the *Expositio super librum de causis* I have used the edition of H. D. Saffrey (Fribourg and Louvain, 1954). In the case of Aquinas’s commentary on Aristotle’s *De anima*, I have included references to both the Leonine and Marietti editions; and for the *De unitate intellectus contra Averroistas* I have included the section numbers of the edition of L. W. Keeler (Rome, 1936) as well as the pagination of the Leonine edition.

ente et essentia on, Aquinas adopted Avicenna's arguments for the distinction between essence and existence as his own, along with a related Avicennian doctrine that became pervasive throughout the later medieval period, namely, that of the "common nature."² While Aquinas later took issue with certain difficulties that he perceived within the Avicennian formulation of the essence-existence distinction, it remains true that this core element in Aquinas's philosophy was thoroughly Avicennian not only in its origin, but also in the general contours of its development within Aquinas's philosophical and theological writings.

It can hardly be said, however, that this "existential" side of Thomism remains prominent today among the ranks of practicing scholars of medieval philosophy. For a variety of reasons, philosophers working within the analytic tradition rejected, if not the essence-existence distinction itself, then at least the intelligibility or interest of the claim that existence is prior to essence. Even analytic philosophers sympathetic to Aquinas's philosophy have by and large repudiated the traditional view that his recognition of the primacy of existence constituted Aquinas's most important philosophical insight. Other areas of Aquinas's philosophy and of medieval philosophy in general that have been perceived to have more in common with the interests of contemporary philosophers have tended to predominate. Ironically enough, one such topic that is of much current interest is also one in which Aquinas and his predecessor Avicenna deployed the basic essence-existence distinction in ways that reflect both their common philosophical commitments and the fundamental differences that

² The date and place of composition of the *De ente et essentia* are generally accepted as Paris, 1252–56. See J.-P. Torrell, *St. Thomas Aquinas Volume I: The Person and His Work*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, D.C., 1996), 348. Aquinas's dependence in this work upon Avicenna's *Metaphysics* was definitively established by M.-D. Roland-Gosselin in his edition and commentary on the text, *Le "De ente et essentia" de S. Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris, 1948). For general discussions of Aquinas's dependence upon Avicenna in his metaphysics, see John F. Wippel, "The Latin Avicenna as a Source for Thomas Aquinas's Metaphysics," *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 37 (1990): 51–90, and David B. Burrell, "Aquinas and Islamic and Jewish Thinkers," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. N. Kretzmann and E. Stump, 60–84 (Cambridge, 1993), esp. 62–70.

separate them. But few philosophers who have taken up this aspect of Aquinas's philosophy in recent years have attended much either to its Avicennian roots, or to its dependence upon the basic metaphysical distinction between essence and existence.

The topic to which I refer is that of medieval cognitive psychology. Recent work in this field has shown a resurgence of interest in topics relating to the devices and mechanisms whereby human beings perform their cognitive acts—sensible and intelligible species, intentions, concepts, and mental words—all of them central and familiar notions not only in Aquinas's theory of knowledge, but also in that of a majority of authors in the later Middle Ages.³ And like modern philosophers, when addressing these topics medieval authors too were concerned with basic issues about the directness and immediacy of our knowledge of the world around us, issues that go under the now-familiar labels of realism versus representationalism. My intention in the present study, then, is to examine these areas of more recent interest in medieval cognitive psychology in the light of the traditional theme of the distinction between essence and existence, with specific reference to one aspect of that distinction, namely, the peculiarly mental order of existence, *esse in intellectu*.

A comparison between Thomistic and Avicennian cognitive psychology on this topic is not only timely, it is also of interest in its own right because of the tensions between Avicenna's and Aquinas's basic philosophical commitments in the areas of human nature and human knowledge. Despite the great debt that Aquinas owes to Avicenna in the formulation of many of his philosophical principles, in

³ The most recent study which includes Aquinas is Robert Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1997); other studies pertaining to the medieval period as a whole include Katherine Tachau, *Vision and Certitude in the Age of Ockham: Optics, Epistemology and the Foundations of Semantics, 1250–1345* (Leiden, 1988); Claude Panaccio, "From Mental Word to Mental Language," *Philosophical Topics* 20 (1992): 125–47; Leen Spruit, *Species Intelligibilis: From Perception to Knowledge. Volume One: Classical Roots and Medieval Discussions* (Leiden, 1994); and Martin Tweedale, "Mental Representations in Later Medieval Scholasticism," in *Historical Foundations of Cognitive Science*, ed. J. C. Smith, 35–51 (Dordrecht, 1990).

their theories of mind and cognition Avicenna and Aquinas almost always come down on opposite sides of the fence: Avicenna is an avowed dualist who rejects the mind's essential dependence upon images or phantasms for its intellectual operations, whereas Aquinas is a committed Aristotelian who upholds the intimacy of the mind-body connection even in the face of the intellect's subsistence, and who steadfastly adheres to the Aristotelian dictum that "the soul never thinks without an image."⁴

In what follows I will turn first to Avicenna and consider both the basic metaphysical doctrines that constitute his principal legacy to the West in this area, as well as his peculiar account of human knowledge and its bearing upon his understanding of mental existence. I will then briefly consider Aquinas's adoption of the Avicennian metaphysical framework before turning to his rather different account of human knowledge, in particular the place within it of the *species intelligibilis*, a notion wholly absent from Aquinas's Persian predecessor. What I hope will emerge from this is a recognition of how, in subtle but important ways, the mechanics implied by the intelligible species radically transformed Aquinas's understanding of the mental mode of existence that he had inherited as an integral part of the distinction between essence and existence.

I. AVICENNA

A. *The Common Nature and the Essence-Existence Distinction in Avicenna's Metaphysics*

Avicenna's arguments for the distinction between essence and existence are inseparable from his notion of the so-called "common nature" (*natura communis*), or as Avicenna prefers to call it, the quiddity (ماهية, *māhīyah/quidditas*) considered simply in itself.⁵

⁴ *De anima* 3.7, 431a16–17: διὸ οὐδέποτε νοεῖ ἄνευ φαντάσματος ἢ ψυχῆ

⁵ The term "common nature" (*natura communis*) is a Latin coinage that has some Avicennian resonances—in the *Metaphysics* of the *Shifā'* 5.1–2, the term *ṭabī'ah* (طبيعة)

Avicenna considers the common nature and its modes of existence in three principal texts within his *Shifā'* (*Healing*)—Book 1, chapter 5 of the *Metaphysics* (*Ilāhīyāt*);⁶ Book 1, chapter 12 of the *Isagoge*;⁷ and Book 5, chapters 1 and 2 of the *Metaphysics*⁸—each of which approaches the topic with a different concern in mind. The first text seeks to establish the primary concepts that the metaphysician considers in his role as the investigator of “being *qua* being”⁹; the second considers the status of the Porphyrian predicables in relation to the problem of universals; and the third considers the problem of universals again, this time from the metaphysical perspective that Avicenna believes is most strictly appropriate to them.¹⁰ In each of these three contexts in which the common nature is discussed, Avicenna holds that the nature is in itself utterly indifferent to either of the two modes of existence to which it is open: the concrete existence exemplified in the everyday world of material singulars, and the mental or conceptual existence conferred upon it by a knowing mind. Indeed, in each case it is precisely because Avicenna is able to discern multiple modes of

‘nature’ is frequently employed as a synonym for the quiddity. See Avicenna, *Al-Shifā': Al-Ilāhīyāt (Healing: Metaphysics)*, ed. M. Y. Moussa, S. Dunya, and S. Zayed, 2 vols. (Cairo, 1960), 201.9, 204.17, and especially 207–9 passim, and 211.9–212.2. (Hereafter this text will be abbreviated as *Meta*.) The medieval Latin version of this text is available in the *Avicenna Latinus* series, *Liber de philosophia prima sive scientia divina*, ed. S. Van Riet, 3 vols. (Leiden and Louvain, 1977–83). Page and line references will be given only to the Arabic text, since the Latin includes marginal references to the pagination of the Arabic. Except where otherwise indicated, all translations of Arabic and Latin texts are my own.

⁶ *Meta*. 1.5, 29–36. This chapter of the *Metaphysics* is translated and commented upon by M. E. Marmura, “Avicenna on Primary Concepts in the *Metaphysics* of his *al-Shifā'*,” in *Logos Islamikos: Studia Islamica in Honorem Georgii Michaelis Wickens*, ed. R. M. Savory and D. A. Agius, 219–239 (Toronto, 1984).

⁷ *Al-Shifā': Al Madkhal (Isagoge)*, ed. G. Anawati, M. El-Khodeiri, F. al-Ahwani and I. Madkour (Cairo, 1952). Hereafter this work will be cited as *Isagoge*. There is an English translation of this chapter by Michael Marmura, “Avicenna’s Chapter on Universals in the *Isagoge* of his *Shifā'*,” in *Islam: Past Influence and Present Challenge*, ed. A. T. Welch and P. Cacia, 34–56 (Edinburgh, 1979). This article also contains an excellent overview of Avicenna’s views on the essence-existence distinction and its relation to the common nature and the problem of universals (34–47).

⁸ *Meta*. 5.1–2, 195–212.

⁹ *Ibid.* 1.1, 9.8: الموجود بما هو موجود، *al-mawjūd bi-mā huwa mawjūd/ens inquantum est ens*.

¹⁰ On this point see Marmura, “Universals,” 36–39.

existence that he is able in turn to certify that existence is distinct from the essence or quiddity itself.

In Book 1, chapter 5 of the *Metaphysics* of the *Shifā'*, these points are raised in order to establish that the science of metaphysics, as the study of being *qua* being and its properties, requires the consideration of not one but two principal concepts, corresponding to the essence or quiddity on the one hand and to existence on the other.¹¹ Avicenna treats these two aspects of being as primary “ideas” (معاني, *ma'ānī/intentiones*) or “concepts” (تصورات, *taṣawwurāt/ imaginationes*), by which he means that they are the ideas in terms of which we implicitly conceive all other ideas, and which all other ideas therefore presuppose as a precondition of their being thought by us. They are, Avicenna explains, the analogues on the level of simple concepts to Aristotle’s primary propositions, such as the law of contradiction, which form the absolutely first principles of complex judgements and demonstrative reasoning.¹² These two ultimately basic primary concepts are, then, the concept of “the existent” (الموجود, *al-mawjūd/ens*) and the concept of “the thing” (الشيء, *al-shay'/res*), which Avicenna identifies as linguistically equivalent, in common parlance, to the concept of the essence or quiddity.¹³ It is the concept of the existent, however, to which Avicenna gives the most attention. For he recognizes that it is not immediately obvious that to be a thing and to be an existent are distinct. They must, however, constitute two different primary concepts, precisely because it is never evident upon examining any given quiddity or essence, such as humanity or horseness, whether, or rather how, that quiddity exists. And this is precisely because existence admits of two distinct modes, one the familiar mode of

¹¹ Avicenna adds to these two primary concepts the modal concept of the necessary, which lies outside the scope of our concerns. For discussion of this see Mamura, “Primary Concepts,” 233–35.

¹² *Meta.* 1.5, 29.5–30.5.

¹³ *Ibid.* 31.2–4. What Avicenna seems to mean by this is that whenever I refer to any being as a “thing,” I am indicating that I take it to be something with a determinate, identifiable nature or quiddity, rather than pointing to the simple fact that it is.

existence in the concrete singulars in the material world around us (في الاعيان, *fī al-a'yān/in singularibus*)—which is what we usually mean when we ask whether some quiddity exists—and the other the existence of that quiddity or nature in souls (في الانفس, *fī al-anfus/in anima*).¹⁴ This second mode of existence is none other than mental existence: it reflects the idea, traceable ultimately to Aristotle's *De anima*, that when any nature is cognized, either through sensation or by an intellect, the form of that thing is in some way in the soul.¹⁵ On Avicenna's construal, then, to say that some thing is in the soul is to say that an essence or quiddity *exists* in some way in that soul. Avicenna is emphatic that this is truly a mode of existence or being, and that as such it is completely on a par with concrete existence in the external world. Neither one nor the other mode is less “realized” (المحصل, *al-muḥaṣṣal*) or “established” (المثبت, *al-muthbat*) than the other, to use Avicenna's own synonyms for the existential order.¹⁶ Avicenna adds that mental existence comprises the quiddity's existence not only in the intellect (العقل, *al-'aql*), but also in the estimative faculty (الوهم, *al-wahm*), by which he probably means the entire sensitive soul, comprising the five external and the five internal senses.¹⁷ This means that the natures or quiddities of even such fictional beings as phoenixes and unicorns do indeed exist, although they have only a mental, and not a concrete, mode of existence.¹⁸ In fact, Avicenna argues on the basis of this point that although essence and existence are distinct, existence is a necessary

¹⁴ *Meta.* 1.5, 31.15–32.2.

¹⁵ *De anima* 3.8, 431b26–432a3. In one of his latest works, *Al-Ta'liqāt (Notes)*, ed. A. R. Badawi (Cairo, 1973), 162.13, Avicenna explicitly identifies “formal existence” (الصوري الوجود, *al-wujūd al-ṣuwarīy*) with “intellectual existence” (الوجد العقلي, *al-wujūd al-aqlīy*).

¹⁶ *Meta.* 1.5, 31.3. See Marmura, “Primary Concepts,” 225, for a discussion of the *kalām* background to these texts.

¹⁷ The view of the estimative faculty as comprising and controlling the entire sensitive soul is both explicitly defended and implicitly assumed in a number of passages in Avicenna's psychological writings. For discussion of the point see my “Estimation (*Wahm*) in Avicenna: The Logical and Psychological Dimensions,” *Dialogue* 32 (1993): 219–58, esp. 227.

¹⁸ For a critical examination of Avicenna's views on fictional beings see my “Avicenna on the Ontological and Epistemic Status of Fictional Beings,” *Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale* 8 (1997): 425–53.

concomitant of essence, that is, there is no such thing as an authentic, possible essence that does not exist somewhere, even if only in a mind or soul: “The concept of existence always necessarily follows [the concept of thing], because the thing is either existent in singulars or it is existent in the estimation and the intellect.”¹⁹ But we cannot tell whether any thing is realized in concrete, material reality, or whether it is merely fictional, simply by examining the content of that essence itself.

In Avicenna’s two main discussions of the common nature and the problem of universals, he also puts mental existence on a par with conceptual existence as part of his overall assertion that essence is utterly indifferent to existence and therefore utterly distinct from it. In the discussion of the predicables in *Isagoge* 1.12, Avicenna remarks that the universal generic concept “animal,” for example, “is in itself a concept (معنى, *ma‘nan*), whether it be existent in singulars (في العيان, *fī al-‘ayān*) or conceptualized in the soul (النفس مُتَصَوِّرًا فِي, *mutaṣawwaran fī al-naḥs*).”²⁰ And in *Metaphysics* 5.1, Avicenna again emphasizes the nature’s equal indifference to either mode of existence, arguing that “in itself and in its reality, [the nature] is devoid of any other condition, even if it be conjoined with a thousand conditions externally.”²¹ Horseness, for example, may be found qualified by the property of blackness in Black Beauty or grayness in the Old Gray Mare, two properties that pertain to its existence in concrete individual horses. But however often horseness comes to exist in reality or in minds, in itself it remains always the same:

But [horseness] in itself is nothing at all but horseness. It is in itself neither one nor many, neither existent in concrete singulars nor in the soul, nor in anything among these [existents], neither

¹⁹ *Meta.* 1.5, 32.4–5.

²⁰ *Isagoge*, 1.12, 65.11–12.

²¹ *Meta.* 5.1, 204.7–8.

potentially nor actually, with respect to what is intrinsic to horseness, or rather, inasmuch as it is just horseness.²²

These, then, are the basic tenets of Avicenna's understanding of the essence-existence distinction: the common nature, the essence or quiddity taken in itself, is constituted solely by the properties definitive of it, properties that are unaffected by whatever further qualifications attach to it in either mental or concrete existence. And just for that reason, the common nature itself is able to come into existence, without affecting its essential features, in either minds or in individual material things. The nature itself remains the same in both these existential "places." There are, however, some further complications in this picture that are relevant for the understanding of mental being. These complications are introduced by the simple fact that the minds and sensitive faculties "in" which mental existence takes hold are of various sorts, and thus they themselves constitute distinct instances of the nature's concrete existence. Thus mental existence extends all the way from the minds of God and the other separate intellects to the individual minds and sense-faculties of particular human beings (and perhaps animals as well, although Avicenna ignores this complication). Thus, in order to understand fully the Avicennian conception of mental existence, it will be necessary to consider in more detail how mental existence is manifested in separate, immaterial intellects, and how it is manifested in the cognitive faculties of human knowers.

B. Mental Existence in the Divine Intellect

One reason for Avicenna's assumption that conceptual being is existentially on a par with concrete being may be his tendency to identify the existence of natures in the mind of God as a form of conceptual or mental being. In both the *Isagoge* and the *Metaphysics* of the *Shifā'* Avicenna alludes to a mode of being which he calls "divine

²² Ibid. 196.10–13.

existence” (الوجود الإلهي, *al-wujūd al-ilāhī/divinum esse*) in the *Metaphysics*, identifying it with the providence (عناية, *‘ināyah/intentio*) of God. For while Avicenna is well-known for his denial of divine providence over particulars, he does not deny divine providence over creation in general.²³ Genera and species are included under a providential order in Avicenna’s system, and only those particulars individuated by matter escape direct inclusion under that order. As Avicenna says in *Metaphysics* 5.1, “the cause for [the nature]’s existence insofar as it is an animal is the providence of God; as for its being accompanied by matter and accidents and this individual, even if this is through (ب, *bi-*) God’s providence, it is because of (بسبب, *bi-sabab*) the particular nature.”²⁴

The nature’s divine providential being refers for Avicenna to the familiar doctrine, also upheld by Aquinas, that every nature or essence that comes to be exemplified in real, concrete singulars somehow pre-exists as an idea in the divine mind. On Avicenna’s understanding, God then creates the world through the mediating activity of the lesser separate intellects or angels in accordance with the familiar emanational scheme adopted from a hybrid of Greek Neoplatonic sources.²⁵ This creation is in turn understood in accordance with the model of knowledge, in this case, the productive knowledge that is characteristic of artisans, “because the relation of all existing things to God and the angels is [the same as] the relation of the artifacts we have to the productive soul.”²⁶

In the *Metaphysics* Avicenna takes the quiddity’s divine existence in God’s providential understanding to be identical with the common

²³ See especially *Meta.* 8.6, 358.7–362.11, for Avicenna’s famous claim that God knows particulars “in a universal way” (على نحو كلي, *‘alā nahw kullīy*, 359.12–13). For discussion see M. E. Marmura, “Some Aspects of Avicenna’s Theory of God’s Knowledge of Particulars,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 82 (1962): 299–312.

²⁴ *Meta.* 5.1, 205.2–4.

²⁵ Avicenna’s version of the theory of emanation is presented in Book 9, chapters 1–5, of the *Metaphysics* of the *Shifā’* (373.1–414.13); chapter 4 contains the principal account of the emanation of the separate intelligences and human souls (402–409).

²⁶ *Isagoge* 1.12, 69.10–11; trans. Marmura, “Universals,” 50.

nature itself: “But animal taken along with its accidents is the physical thing, whereas taken in itself it is the nature whose existence is said to be prior to natural existence, ... and it is that whose existence is characterized as divine existence.”²⁷ In the *Isagoge*, where the causal relations between divine, concrete, and conceptual being are considered more fully, divine existence is again treated as a type of conceptual existence. Here Avicenna notes that it is possible to view the causal function of the nature’s mental existence from two different perspectives, depending upon whether the mind in question is divine or human. In the first case, the nature’s existence in a mental mode of being is “prior to multiplicity” (قبل الكثرة, *qabla al-kathrah*) that is, it is prior to the nature’s instantiation in multiple individuals. From this perspective, it is the form or nature as “understood” (الصورة المقولة, *al-ṣūrah al-ma’qūlah*) by the divine intellects that functions as the cause for its subsequent existence in concrete singulars.²⁸ In the second and more familiar case, the nature exists first in the realm of concrete singulars, and only afterwards does it come to be conceived in an intellect, as happens in the normal course of human knowledge:

But the thing which is the nature of the understood genus may occur in two ways: for sometimes it is first understood and then it is realized in singulars, that is, in external multiplicity. ... And sometimes it may be realized in singulars and then be conceptualized in the intellect. ... In sum, the understood form may sometimes be a cause in some way of the occurrence of the form existent in singulars, and the form existent in singulars may sometimes be a cause in some way of the understood form, that

²⁷ *Meta.* 5.1, 204.16–205.2.

²⁸ See *Isagoge* 1.12, 69.11–13: “What is in the knowledge (علم, *‘ilm*) of God and the angels of the reality (حقيقة, *ḥaqīqah*) of what is known and perceived (المعلوم والمدرك, *al-ma’lūm wa-al-mudrak*) of natural things is existent (موجوداً, *mawjūdān*) prior to multiplicity, and every intelligible among them is a single intention (معنى واحد, *ma’nan wāḥid*).”

is, it only arises in the intellect after it has been realized in singulars.²⁹

It is easy to see why Avicenna assumes that the nature's divine existence must constitute a type of mental being. As we have seen, for Avicenna existence is a necessary concomitant of the essence even though the two are distinct, and thus it follows that every truly possible quiddity must always be found in one of the two existential orders. And since Avicenna upholds the existential dependence of all beings upon God and the other separate intellects, all real quiddities must pre-exist in the divine intellect in some way. Since they cannot be concrete singulars in virtue of their existence in a mind, the only alternative is for their divine existence to be a form of mental being. So, if there were any order of priority between the two existential modes, it would be mental being, not concrete being, that would claim priority in the Avicennian system.³⁰

C. Mental Existence in the Human Intellect

This latter point, however, applies only to mental existence in the divine intellect. As a general principle, the parity of conceptual and concrete being is observed by Avicenna throughout his discussions of the common nature. There is a sense, however, in which concrete existence can be viewed as having some priority over mental existence when we are considering the relation between human cognitive faculties and the natures exemplified in the manifold concrete singulars

²⁹ Ibid. 1.12, 69.2–9; trans. Marmura, "Universals," 50 (slightly modified).

³⁰ While Aquinas too holds for the pre-existence of divine ideas for all things in the creative knowledge of God, he treats divine ideas, like human intelligibles, as similitudes and instruments by which things are known, so that God's own essence functions like an intelligible species for his knowledge of what is other than himself. On this point see in particular *SCG* 1.46 and 1.53. In the latter text (n.445), Aquinas even declares the divine essence to be "the likeness of all things" (*similitudo omnium rerum*). Aquinas is aware that this expression of the likeness-relation goes against our normal way of speaking about God, but he argues in 1.29 that it is in fact more proper to liken creatures to God than the converse: "Non igitur Deus creaturae assimilatur, sed magis e converso" (n.274).

of the material world around us. There are two reasons for this. The first, to which I shall return shortly, is because there is some temporal priority of the concrete singular over its conceptualization, since, in the language of the *Isagoge*, the universal being that the quiddity has in human minds is a form of existence “after multiplicity” (بَعْدَ الكثرة, *ba'da al-kathrah*),³¹ where multiplicity again refers to the multiplicity of concrete singular instances of the nature, to the particular horses and human beings we encounter around us. The second reason is that humans, unlike separate intellects, are intelligent beings who are themselves multiple instances of the nature “humanity,” each of whom possesses faculties in which the mental existence of other quiddities can be exemplified. This means that the quiddity’s mental existence in human minds can also be viewed as a special type of concrete, individual existence. Simply put, my idea of “horse” or of “human being” is my idea, and it is numerically distinct from your idea of the same nature. So our individual ideas are themselves concrete instances of universalized natures, insofar as they exist in many different individual minds. Thus, although Avicenna holds that “universality” is the principal property conferred upon the nature in virtue of its mental existence in human minds,³² those human minds are themselves individuals, and the quiddity as a form inhering in a human mind is a singular thing in virtue of the singularity of its subject, just as much as the paleness inhering in my skin is a distinct singular instance of “whiteness” from the paleness inhering in Socrates’ skin:

Insofar as this form is a disposition in a particular soul, it is one of the individual sciences or concepts. For just as something may be a genus and a species from different perspectives, so too it may be a universal and a particular from different perspectives. Thus insofar as this form is some form among the forms in some

³¹ *Isagoge* 1.12, 65.3.

³² *Meta.* 5.2, 207.10–13; 209.3–8.

soul, it is particular; but insofar as many share in it, ... it is a universal.³³

These two perspectives on the quiddity's mental existence—its universality and its particularity—are not incompatible, Avicenna continues, “because it is not impossible to reconcile one essence having community befall it in relation to many.”³⁴ As to why Avicenna is interested in the possibility of viewing the quiddity's mental existence from the perspective of the individual mind, the discussion of this topic is immediately occasioned here by the need to dissolve any paradox that might seem to be generated by the multiplicity of human minds in which the nature is capable of taking up mental existence as a universal, a one over many.³⁵ Avicenna is also interested in the ability to view the nature's mental existence as a type of individual accident because the particularity of the intelligible as an item common to my knowledge and to yours provides a foundation for the important notion of “second intentions” or second-order concepts, which the sciences of logic and psychology study, and which are of paramount concern in much of Avicenna's philosophical corpus.³⁶ But there is no evidence in these contexts of any desire to downgrade the quiddity's mental existence as a full-fledged mode of being on a par with its existence in concrete

³³ Ibid. 209.8–13.

³⁴ Ibid. 209.13–14.

³⁵ Ibid. 208.10–210.3.

³⁶ Ibid. 210.1–3: “And the soul itself also conceptualizes another universal which unites this form with another one in this soul or in another soul; but all of them, insofar as they are in the soul, have a single definition.” Cf. 5.1, 205.14–206: “And even if this form, in relation to the individuals, is a universal, in relation to the particular soul upon which it is impressed, it is an individual, for it is one of the forms which are in the intellect. And because individual souls are many in number, therefore it is possible for these universal forms to be many in number in the respect in which they are individual. And it may have another universal intelligible, whose relation to it is like its relation to an external.” Avicenna adds further that once a nature has assumed mental existence in a particular soul, it can become an object of understanding as an individual in its own right: “And because it is in the power of the soul to understand and to understand that it understands, and to understand that it understands that it understands, and to compose relations of relations, and to construct many states belonging to one thing from among these relations, potentially to infinity, it is necessary that there be no end for these intelligible forms ordered to one another” (5.2, 210.14–18).

singulars. It is still the quiddity as such to which both conceptual being and concrete being, in their various manifestations, accrue.

Thus far, all the aspects of the Avicennian common nature which I have examined are accepted, indeed embraced, by Aquinas. As I will show below, not only are the basic essence-existence distinction and the recognition of a distinctive mode of *esse in intellectu* put to good use by Aquinas, the claim that the individual instances of the quiddity's mental being ground the community of intelligibles amongst individual human minds is a key point in Aquinas's refutation of Averroism. But if we now go back to the first of the two reasons why concrete being appears to have a certain priority over conceptual being where human intellects are concerned—namely, because individuals outside the soul are temporally prior to our understanding of them—we run up against the central point of divergence between the Avicennian and the Thomistic theories of intellectual knowledge.

Avicenna's basic rationale here appears to be rather innocuous, and in itself it is wholly acceptable in Thomistic terms: in all of our normal cognition—save in productive, artistic activity—it is the case that we first encounter the nature as realized in external singulars and then come to conceptualize it so that it takes on a mental being “after multiplicity,” which occurs “when one happens to see individual men and retains the human form.”³⁷ Indeed, in his elaborate and important consideration of the relationship between universality and the two modes of existence of the common nature in *Metaphysics* 5.2, Avicenna, in true Aristotelian fashion, upholds the position that although universals only exist in the mind—universality being proper to the mental mode of being—there is a real basis for universality in the concrete singular instances of the nature: “For the intelligible in the soul of a human being is what is universal, whereas its universality is not owing to its existence in the soul, but rather, to its being related to many concrete or imagined singulars, the judgment (حکم, *hukm*) of

³⁷ *Isagoge*, 69.6; Marmura, “Universals,” 50.

which is a single judgment.”³⁸ All of this is quite standard, and once again, it is adopted by Aquinas in his own account of universals. The conflict arises, however, when we turn to Avicenna’s causal explanation of how the common nature acquires its mental being “after multiplicity.” Just what, for Avicenna, does the “after” here entail?

For Avicenna, the term “after” means just that and nothing more: it refers to the normal temporal succession of thought upon the sensible observation of material particulars, but it entails no causal connection at all between the sensible images thus culled and the resultant abstract intelligible. Indeed, Avicenna is well-known for his radical modification of Aristotelian psychology through the rejection of any form of abstraction. And although Avicenna does use the language of abstraction throughout his psychology and metaphysics, and although he is willing to speak of concrete individuals as “in some way” causes for the nature’s existence as a universal in the human mind, Avicenna’s writings are full of explicit disclaimers which reject any truly causal role for images to play in the acquisition of concepts by the rational soul. Rather, Avicenna uses the term “abstraction” (تجريد, *tajrīd*) to describe, not the *process* by which intelligibles are acquired, but rather, the *mode* of the quiddity’s mental existence in cognitive faculties. Abstraction, then, means nothing more than immateriality in its various degrees, that is, the various degrees to which the quiddity exists in the senses and the intellect in detachment from the material, individuating properties that pertain to concrete singulars.³⁹

Avicenna is, then, an occasionalist when it comes to the relation between sensation and imagination on the one hand, and intellectual

³⁸ *Meta.* 5.2, 209.6–8.

³⁹ See *Al-Shifā’ : Al-Nafs*, ed. F. Rahman, *Avicenna’s De anima, Being the Psychological Part of Kitāb al-Shifā’* (London, 1959): “It is likely that all perception (إدراك, *idrāk*) is simply the extraction (أخذ, *akhdh*) of the form of the perceived thing in some way; so if the perception is a perception of a material thing, it is the taking of its form abstracted in some way from the matter” (2.2, 58.4–6). The medieval Latin translation of this text is available in the *Avicenna Latinus* series: *Liber de anima, seu sextus de naturalibus*, ed. S. Van Riet, 2 vols., (Leiden and Louvain, 1968–72); marginal references are provided by the editor to the pagination of the Arabic original.

knowledge on the other. In the normal course of human learning, we usually need sense experience and its resultant store of images to “prepare” us to receive intelligibles. But that is exactly and only what the images do for us—we receive the intelligibles as such directly and immediately from the Agent Intellect, which is for Avicenna a separate substance and not a part of the individual human soul. Nowhere is this point put more clearly than in Book 5, chapter 5 of the *De anima* of the *Shifā’*:

For when the rational soul comes into some relation with the form by means of the illumination of the Agent Intellect, something comes to be in that soul from that form which is in one respect of the [same] kind [as the form], and in another respect not [the same], in the same way as when light hits a colored object and produces in vision an impression which is not in every way of [the same] kind [as the object]. Thus the images which are intelligibles in potency become intelligibles in actuality—not they themselves, but rather, what is gleaned from them.⁴⁰

Now Avicenna’s decidedly non-Aristotelian views on the nature of intellectual cognition no doubt reflect in part his other non-Aristotelian dualistic commitment to the intellect’s ultimate independence from the body—which he refers to as the rational soul’s “beast of burden” or “riding animal” (دابة, *dābbah*) in his more colorful moments.⁴¹ But it is also a view that is intimately tied to the very notion of the essence-existence distinction insofar as this distinction depends upon the acceptance of a thoroughgoing parallelism between the common nature’s concrete and conceptual modes of existence. It is just this

⁴⁰ *Avicenna’s De anima* 5.5, 235.11–16. The text goes on to extend the analogy with vision as follows: “Rather, just as the impression realized by the mediation of light from the sensible forms is not itself these forms, but rather, something else related to them which is engendered by the mediation of light in the receiver facing [it], so too when the rational soul views these imagined forms and the light of the Agent Intellect is conjoined to it in some way, it is prepared for the abstractions of these forms from their admixtures [with matter] to be engendered in it by the light of the Agent Intellect” (235.16–236.2).

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 5.3, 222.16–223.10.

parallelism that allows Avicenna to assign to the Agent Intellect the role of Giver of Forms (واحب الصور, *wāhib al-ṣuwar/dator formarum*) both in his emanational account of the creation of the sublunar world, as well as in the foregoing occasionalist account of intellectual learning.⁴² For as the argument for the distinction requires, every instance and every mode of the quiddity's existence counts fully as an instantiation of that quiddity. And by the same token, there is no need for the quiddity to cross over from one mode of existence to another in order to be fully realized.

When applied to human cognition, this commitment translates perfectly into Avicenna's occasionalist view of the roles of sensation and imagination, articulated in the passage just cited. The Agent Intellect's illumination and "abstraction" of images is not a transferal of those images to the individual's rational soul through their transformation into more immaterial entities, nor is it a case of the sensible object producing, with the help of the Agent Intellect, an abstract likeness of itself in the human intellect. While Avicenna occasionally uses the language of representation to describe mental existence, "representation," like "abstraction," is no more than a convenient and conventional label for referring to the mental existence of the nature itself, as is clear from such remarks as the following, taken from Avicenna's mature work, *Al-Ishārāt wa-al-tanbīhāt (Directives and Remarks)*: "To apprehend a thing is for its reality (حقيقة, *ḥaqīqah*)⁴³ to be represented (تمثلة, *mutamaththalah*) in the perceiver, ... and this reality is the very same reality as the thing external to the perceiver."⁴⁴ Knowledge for Avicenna is no more the acquisition of representative likenesses of the nature than it is the abstraction of such

⁴² On the Agent Intellect's place in the scheme of emanation, see *Meta.* 9.4, 406.16–407.4; on its function as the Giver of Forms to matter see 9.5, 410.1–411.9.

⁴³ This label is used as a synonym for the nature or quiddity throughout the *Metaphysics'* chapter on primary concepts. See especially *Meta.* 1.5, 31.5–9. The pure nature or quiddity is here described as the "reality by which a thing is what it is" (حقيقة هو بها ما هو, *ḥaqīqah huwa bi-hā mā huwa*). The term is rendered in the Latin as *certitudo*.

⁴⁴ *Al-Ishārāt wa-al-tanbīhāt (Directives and Remarks)* ed. J. Forget (Leiden, 1892), 122.5–7.

a likeness from an image. Rather, as Avicenna depicts the process, knowledge involves the re-production and re-creation of a new instance of the quiddity in a mental, rather than a material, mode of being.

On the basis of this understanding of cognition as a new instantiation of the quiddity in a mental mode of being, Avicenna is also led to reject the classical Aristotelian conception of knowledge as the identity of knower and known, to which I will refer as the principle of cognitive identification.⁴⁵ Despite the fact that Aristotle explicitly formulates this principle in several passages in his *De anima*,⁴⁶ Avicenna charges that cognitive identification is a perverse innovation traceable to the lost *De intellectu* of Porphyry.⁴⁷ The immediate reason for Avicenna's discomfort with the theory of cognitive identification is that he understands it quite literally, that is, as requiring the intellective soul to become substantially transformed into its intelligible object while still remaining itself, an impossibility that violates the basic principles of change. Avicenna will allow that forms of things "take up residence in the soul and adorn it," echoing Aristotle's approval of those who call the thinking soul a "place of forms" (τόπος εἰδῶν).⁴⁸ But the soul cannot become another actual existent because to become another thing is to be destroyed oneself. What does it mean, Avicenna wonders, to say that the soul itself *becomes* its object, or in general that any substance becomes another?

But what some say, that the soul itself (ذات النفس, *dhāt al-nafs*) becomes the intelligibles, this is entirely impossible in my view, for I do not comprehend their saying that one thing can become another thing, nor do I understand how this could occur. For if it

⁴⁵ Ibid. 178.17–181.2; *Avicenna's De anima* 5.6, 239.1–241.4. For further discussion see Lenn E. Goodman, *Avicenna* (London and New York, 1992), 169–70.

⁴⁶ E.g., *De anima* 3.4, 430a3–5; 3.7, 431b17; 3.8, 431b21–432a1.

⁴⁷ *Avicenna's De anima* 5.6, 239.3–6: "The one who has most bewildered people in this matter is he who wrote the *Isagoge* for them. For he was eager to speak imaginative, poetic, mystical discourses, by which he limited himself and his followers to the imagination. And his books *On the Intellect* and *On the Soul* indicate this to those who are discriminating." Cf. *Ishārāt* 180.5–9.

⁴⁸ *De anima* 3.4, 429a27–28.

were by removing one form and then putting on another form, [the intellect] being one thing when accompanied by the first form and another thing when accompanied by the other form, then in reality the first thing would not become the second thing, but instead, the first thing would be destroyed, and only its subject, or a part of it, would remain.⁴⁹

Avicenna's explicit concern in his polemics against cognitive identification is that the principle ultimately rests upon a misapplication of the paradigm of divine understanding to human intellects. In God and the separate substances there is a complete identity of knower and known, but "the intellect, the one understanding, and the thing understood are not a single thing in our souls."⁵⁰ Cognitive identification, then, is meaningful only when applied to beings whose mode of knowing is a form of self-knowing, Aristotle's "thinking of thinking" (νοήσεως νόησις).⁵¹ But in addition to reflecting these overt concerns, Avicenna's rejection of cognitive identification is a natural corollary to his understanding of the mental being of the common nature as it applies to the explanation of cognition.

At first glance such a claim might seem improbable. The principle of the identity of knower and known has been described as a theory of knowledge in which cognition is "a way of being," and the mental existence of the common nature can easily be understood as fleshing out the details of this cognitional mode of being: the known quiddity *becomes* the knowing mind in the sense that it becomes existent in it. But for Avicenna this way of looking at mental existence is exactly the reverse of the correct perspective. The crucial point in the traditional theory of cognitive identification is that it is the knower who somehow becomes the object known. For Avicenna, however, cognition is a way

⁴⁹ Avicenna's *De anima* 5.6, 239.12–15. Both in this text and in the *Ishārāt* Avicenna musters an arsenal of additional arguments against the theory of cognitive identification designed to illustrate the various absurdities that it entails, but these do not concern us here.

⁵⁰ Avicenna's *De anima* 5.6, 240.18–19.

⁵¹ *Metaphysics* 12.9, 1074b34–35.

of being, but for the quiddity that is known, not for the knower.⁵² And even then, cognition does not effect any transformation in the known object itself, if by that we mean the concrete instances of the nature in the external world, or the images of them in the sensible soul. Neither individual material singulars nor their sensible images contribute causally to the intellectual process: it is the pure quiddity itself, as indifferent to its various modes of existence, that becomes instantiated anew in every act of knowing of which it is the object.

D. The Function of the Common Nature in Avicennian Cognitive Psychology

What can be said in general regarding the explanatory function of the common nature in Avicenna's cognitive psychology? At bottom the constant thread that links the foregoing elements together in his theory is the utter separation of the essential and the existential orders. That is, Avicenna's theory as applied to cognitive processes reflects the centrality of his insight that the nature as such is completely indifferent to any of its possible modes of existence. Taken seriously, this proposition leads quite naturally to the coherentist emanationism that underlies Avicenna's epistemological as well as his cosmological system: natures pre-exist prior to multiplicity in the separate intellects, in particular the closest of these to us, the Agent Intellect. Those separate intellects generate emanationally all the instances of the natures, in mind as well as in matter. Each order of existence coheres with the other because each ultimately has its origin in the same place, the providential divine existence of God and the other separate

⁵² See Joseph Owens, "Aristotle—Cognition a Way of Being," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 6 (1976): 1–11; reprinted in *Aristotle: The Collected Papers of Joseph Owens*, ed. J. R. Catan, 74–80 (Albany, 1981). These two ways of looking at cognitive identification are not always kept distinct, however. In this article, Owens begins the discussion of Aristotle from the perspective of the knower becoming the known (76–77), but he concludes his interpretation with reference to the mental existence of the known object in the knower with reference to Avicenna and Aquinas (80).

intellects. Indeed, since for Avicenna the quiddity itself is utterly indifferent to every mode of existence, its actual embodiment in any of its modes of existence must be explained by a new act of creation—concrete being cannot causally produce conceptual being, because as modes of being the two orders are utterly distinct.⁵³ This is why abstraction is rejected as a process, and why the principle of cognitive identification is untenable. The fact that quiddity x exists in concrete singulars does not explain how it can come to exist in sensible faculties, nor in turn does the existence of x in the imagination explain how x can come to exist in an intellect. One individual existent does not become another individual existent; but one and the same quiddity can come to exist an infinite number of times, just because it is not in itself an existent of any particular kind.⁵⁴ And because it is the very same quiddity that is existent in mental conceptualization and in concrete singulars, one can speak of that quiddity itself as the object known, and even use the language of conformity and correspondence to singulars to describe the truth of thought, although there is no direct or even indirect action of these singulars on conceptual faculties.⁵⁵ Nothing more than the nature itself, its existence in a cognitive faculty, and the ultimate origin of all quiddities in the divine intellects, is needed to explain the representational capacities of the mind in the Avicennian system.

⁵³ There are also parallels here to Avicenna's influential views on the differences between metaphysical and physical efficient causality, only the former of which constitutes true agency for Avicenna, since it alone involves bringing a new instance of the nature into existence. For that reason Avicenna holds that true agency can only be attributed to the causality of separate intellects, and that physical causes are merely preparatory and instrumental, i.e., they merely dispose matter so that it is suitable to receive a particular kind of form. Here as in his account of cognition, then, the paradigm of physical change cannot explain the instantiation of any quiddity into a new existent substrate. At best it explains how the conditions for such an embodiment come about. See *Meta.* 6.1–2, 259.11–268.7.

⁵⁴ This explains why Avicenna appears to have no need for instrumental or intermediary mechanisms in his cognitive psychology—whether they be internal mediators, such as species and mental words, or external mediators, such as instantiating images. It is the very same quiddity that is existent in a mind when known and in the singulars in the external world.

⁵⁵ For references to “correspondence” (مطابقة, *muṭābaqah*) in Avicenna, see *Meta.* 1.8, 48.6–7, 10–11; and 5.2, 210.8–11.

II. INTELLIGIBLE SPECIES AND THE COMMON NATURE: THOMISTIC MODIFICATIONS OF AVICENNA

A. Aquinas and the Avicennian Distinction

Aquinas's adoption of the Avicennian the distinction between essence and existence is well known and calls for only a brief rehearsal. From the early *De ente et essentia* onwards Aquinas accepts the basic Avicennian arguments for the distinction and many of its corollaries, including the doctrine that being or existence (*ens*) is a primary concept and the use of the common nature to solve the problem of universals.⁵⁶ In chapter 3 of the *De ente*, for example, Aquinas provides a clear paraphrase of the Avicennian doctrine:

Understood in this sense, a nature or essence can be considered in two ways. First, absolutely, according to its proper meaning. In this sense nothing is true of it except what belongs to it as such In a second way a nature or essence can be considered according to the being it has in this or that individual. ... This nature has a twofold being: one in individual things and the other

⁵⁶ There is, of course, a large body of literature on the question of Aquinas's adoption of a "real," as opposed to a logical or conceptual, distinction between essence and existence in the *De ente*, which focuses on the issues of whether such a distinction depends upon a proof for the existence of God, and whether a real distinction can be found in any of Aquinas's predecessors, including Avicenna. I am not at present concerned with these particular issues, since they do not directly bear on the topic of mental existence, and since they reflect technical concerns that are foreign to Avicenna's own. For some discussions of these issues, see the articles by Wippel and Burrell cited in n. 2 above; see also Leo Sweeney, "Existence/Essence in Thomas Aquinas's Early Writings," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 37 (1963): 97–131; Joseph Owens, "Quiddity and Real Distinction in St. Thomas Aquinas," *Mediaeval Studies* 27 (1965): 1–22; idem, "Stages and Distinction in *De ente*: A Rejoinder," *Thomist* 45 (1981): 99–123; idem, "Aquinas's Distinction At *De Ente Et Essentia* 4.119-123"; J. F. Wippel, *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas*, Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy 10 (Washington, D.C., 1984), chaps. 5–6, 107–161; Scott MacDonald, "The *Esse/Essentia* Argument in Aquinas's *De ente et essentia*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 22:2 (Apr 1984), 157–172; Walter Patt, "Aquinas's Real Distinction and Some Interpretations," *The New Scholasticism* 62 (1988): 1–29.

in the soul, and accidents follow upon the nature because of both beings. ... So it is clear that the nature of man, considered absolutely, abstracts from every being, but in such a way that it prescind from no one of them; and it is the nature considered in this way that we attribute to all individuals.⁵⁷

Despite this early debt to Avicenna, and the continued importance of the common nature and the essence-existence distinction to many aspects of Thomistic metaphysics, it is also widely recognized that Aquinas, both implicitly and explicitly, took issue with Avicenna on a number of points associated with the distinction, in ways that traditionally were interpreted as reflections of Aquinas's allegedly more "existentialist" bent, captured in the *De potentia*'s assertion that existence is the "act of all acts and the perfection of all perfections."⁵⁸ The most egregious of these points, particularly in Aquinas's later works, is Avicenna's description of existence as an "accident" (عرض, 'arad) of the essence or common nature, a point that Aquinas eventually comes to interpret in accordance with the distinction between the accidental categories and the category of substance.⁵⁹ While this point does not impact directly on the notion of mental being, the underlying rationale for Aquinas's position on the accidental character of being appears to rest upon a misinterpretation of Avicenna's commitment to the indifference of the common nature to either mode of existence, and to this extent it reflects concerns similar

⁵⁷ Aquinas, *De ente* c. 3, 374.26–30, 45–47, 52–54, 68–72; trans. A. A. Maurer, *On Being and Essence*, 2d ed. (Toronto, 1968), §§ 1–4, 45–47. Cf. *Quaestiones quodlibetales*, 8.1.1 c.: "Dicendum quod, secundum Avicennam in sua *Metaphysica*, triplex est alicuius naturae consideratio. Una, prout consideratur secundum esse quod habet in singularibus.... Alia vero est consideratio alicuius naturae secundum esse suum intelligibile.... Tertia vero est consideratio naturae absoluta, prout abstrahit ab utroque esse...."

⁵⁸ See n.1 above. It should be noted that Avicenna too calls existence a "perfection." See *Meta.* 8.6, 355.14: "For existence is pure good and pure perfection" (فالوجود خير محض وكمال) (fa-al-wujūd khayr maḥḍ wa-kamāl maḥḍ/et ideo esse est bonitas pura et perfectio pura).

⁵⁹ For discussion of this point see Wippel, "The Latin Avicenna," 70–72; and Thomas O'Shaughnessy, "St. Thomas's Changing Estimate of Avicenna's Teaching on Existence as an Accident," *Modern Schoolman* 36 (1959): 245–61.

to those that lead Aquinas to reject Avicenna's understanding of mental existence.

In particular, Aquinas's disagreement with Avicenna on this point is usually interpreted as resting upon the belief that Avicenna upholds the ontological priority of essence over existence, or worse yet, that his position implies that there is some murky realm of free-floating non-existent essences.⁶⁰ Yet Avicenna is insistent that the essence is indifferent to either of its modes of existence, *not* in the sense that there is any such thing as an essence that does not exist, but simply in the sense that an examination of the quiddity alone cannot tell us anything about which mode of existence it has or what belongs to it in virtue of its having that mode of existence. Essence and existence are nonetheless inseparable for Avicenna—in his terms, existence of some sort is always and everywhere a “necessary concomitant” of the essence.⁶¹

On a closely related but subtler point, the later Thomistic polemic against the Avicennian labeling of existence as an “accident” does mirror a real disagreement between the two philosophers' metaphysical stances, one which Joseph Owens suggested long ago was implicit in the very language used by Aquinas in the *De ente*, and one which in part reflects the basis for the modifications that Aquinas introduces into his interpretation of the nature's mental mode of being.⁶² For where the later Aquinas explicitly denies that existence can be called “accidental” to the common nature, even in his earliest paraphrases of Avicenna he passes in silence over Avicenna's brief remark that when viewed in its

⁶⁰ The two most extreme presentations of this charge against Avicenna are Gerard Smith, “Avicenna and the Possibles,” *New Scholasticism* 17 (1943): 340–57; and Beatrice Zedler, “Another Look at Avicenna,” *New Scholasticism* 50 (1976): 504–21. For a more neutral examination of Avicenna's views and their interpretation by Latin authors, see Wippel, “Thomas Aquinas, Henry of Ghent, and Godfrey of Fontaines on the Reality of Nonexisting Possibles,” c. 7 of *Metaphysical Themes*, 163–89.

⁶¹ See p. 6 above. For a sustained defense of Avicenna's position on these points, see F. Rahman, “Essence and Existence in Avicenna,” *Mediaeval and Renaissance Studies* 4 (1958): 3–16.

⁶² Joseph Owens, “Common Nature: A Point of Comparison Between Thomistic and Scotistic Metaphysics,” *Mediaeval Studies* 19 (1957): 1–14.

own right, the pure quiddity can be assigned a “proper being” (الوجود الخاص, *al-wujūd al-khāṣṣ/esse proprium*) of its own.

In his discussion of the common nature in *Metaphysics* 1.5, Avicenna remarks that the “reality” (حقيقة, *ḥaqīqah/certitudo*) of the quiddity taken in itself might perhaps be called the quiddity’s “proper being,” although this concept of existence must be kept distinct from the concept of “affirmative existence” (الوجود الاثباتي, *al-wujūd al-ithbātī/esse affirmativi*)⁶³ that is, from both mental and concrete existence. This remark, like the claim that existence is an “accident,” has also been interpreted as granting to the common nature itself some shadowy type being independent of its instantiation in concrete singulars and individual thoughts, thereby diluting the force of the essence-existence distinction that Avicenna has just made.⁶⁴ But when Avicenna’s point is read in context, no such drastic metaphysical conclusions emerge. The point being made is purely linguistic—Avicenna is merely noting that in common speech people sometimes use “the term ‘being’” (لفظ الوجود, *lafẓ al-wujūd/verbum ens*)⁶⁵ to refer to the nature itself rather than to the fact of existence. “Being” or “existence,” is an equivocal term.⁶⁶ Moreover, to the extent that the nature’s proper being has any truly existential force for Avicenna himself, it is to be identified with divine existence, that is, with the pre-existence of the nature in the providential knowledge of the separate intellects, a point which is explicitly stated by Avicenna in *Metaphysics*

⁶³ *Meta.* 1.5, 31.7–8.

⁶⁴ Owens, “Common Nature,” 4: “So in the Latin translation of Avicenna, the nature of essence taken just in itself appeared as a kind of being, an *esse* that is prior to being in reality and in the mind... The essence taken just in itself has then its own proper being, which is not the being of the thing in reality nor its being in the intellect. These latter two are accidental to it while proper being is essential to it.” More recently see Jorge Gracia, “Cutting the Gordian Knot of Ontology: Thomas’s Solution to the Problem of Universals,” in *Thomas Aquinas and His Legacy*, ed. D. M. Gallagher, 16–36 (Washington, D.C. 1994), esp. 24–27, 36. Gracia follows Owens’s interpretation of Avicenna’s *esse proprium* and thus he fails to recognize that natures are “ontologically neutral” for Avicenna as much as for Aquinas (36).

⁶⁵ *Meta.* 1.5, 31.8.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 31.8–9; trans. Marmura, “Primary Concepts,” 226: “For the expression ‘existence’ is also used to denote many meanings, one of which is the reality a thing happens to have. Thus, [the reality] a thing happens to have is, as it were, its proper existence.”

5.1.⁶⁷ Nonetheless, it is clear that Aquinas himself was not comfortable with Avicenna's linguistic observations in this regard, and as a result that he took care to excise this language from his general account of the common nature. It is also likely that the motivation for this was Aquinas's desire to emphasize the primacy of the existential order over the essential in a way fundamentally incompatible with Avicennian principles.⁶⁸ But the incompatibility between Avicenna and Aquinas on this point lies not in Avicenna's supposed "essentialism," as has traditionally been held, but rather, in the differences between Avicenna's and Aquinas's understanding of the nature's peculiarly mental mode of being itself. And to see this we need to turn to one of the centerpieces of Aquinas's own cognitive theory, the notion of the intelligible species.

B. Abstraction from Phantasms and Intelligible Species

As is well-known, Aquinas, unlike Avicenna, is fully committed to the Aristotelian dictum that intellectual knowledge depends upon sensation and imagination both for its acquisition and for its exercise—"the soul never thinks without an image." This is a recurrent theme throughout Aquinas's writings, but it is best known from the central articles in the "Treatise on Human Nature" of the *prima pars* of the *Summa theologiae*, particularly question 84, articles 6 and 7. In the former article, Aquinas affirms that the agent intellect (which is for him a faculty in the individual human soul) "causes the phantasms received

⁶⁷ See the passage cited on p. 8 above, where Avicenna states that the quiddity 'animal,' "taken in itself, is the nature whose existence is said to be prior to natural existence, ... and it is that whose existence is characterized as divine existence" (*Meta.* 5.1, 204.17–205.2, my emphasis).

⁶⁸ Indeed, my interpretation of Aquinas suggests an even stronger move in an "existentialist" direction than the traditional interpretation, since I hold that Aquinas eventually denies not only *esse proprium* to the nature itself, but even *esse in intellectu*. But it remains unclear whether it is consistent for Aquinas continue to appeal to the doctrine of the common nature as a basis for an essence-existence distinction when cognitive faculties have been all but eliminated from the existential realm.

from the senses to be actually intelligible, by a process of abstraction” and that therefore “on the part of the phantasms, intellectual knowledge is caused by the senses,” in such a way that images function as “the matter of the cause.”⁶⁹ Article seven contains the famous notion of the “conversion to images” (*conversio ad phantasmata*) in which Aquinas holds that even after the intellect has abstracted intelligibles from images, it must still rely upon images in the actual exercise of its knowledge, precisely because the proper objects of embodied human minds are the quiddities or natures of material things whose nature it is to exist in individuals possessed of corporeal matter: “Therefore, it is clear that for the intellect to understand actually, not only when it acquires new knowledge, but also when it uses knowledge already acquired, there is need for the act of the imagination and of the other powers.”⁷⁰ Both of these points, familiar as they may be, stand out in stark contrast to the account of “abstraction” in Avicenna, in which the image is, if not entirely dispensable in practice, then at best an accidental accessory to the intellectual process from start to finish.

In addition to this fundamental difference in the Thomistic and Avicennian approaches to the acquisition and exercise of intellectual knowledge, Aquinas also has a much more elaborate account of the psychological mechanisms by which intellectual knowledge is produced. In particular, Aquinas’s development of the view that what the human mind acquires through abstraction are the “intelligible species” of things, by which those things are known, has a profound though easily overlooked effect on Aquinas’s understanding of the mental existence of the common nature.⁷¹ For intelligible species are entirely absent from Avicennian cognitive psychology, and indeed from

⁶⁹ *ST* 1.84.6c.; trans. A. C. Pegis, *Thomas Aquinas: Basic Writings*, 2 vols. (New York, 1945). Unless otherwise indicated all translations of the *ST* are from Pegis.

⁷⁰ *ST* 1.84.7c. The doctrine of the conversion to images is ultimately derived from Aristotle, *De anima* 3.7, 431b2.

⁷¹ For the purposes of this paper I am ignoring the distinction that Aquinas makes, particularly in his later writings, between the intelligible species and the mental word (*verbum*). Where this distinction is present, the *verbum*, like the species, is also treated as possessing mental being and as functioning instrumentally not objectively.

the Arabic Aristotelian tradition as a whole.⁷² Nonetheless, Aquinas consistently interprets the Avicennian concept of the mental existence of the common nature as nothing but the presence of the intelligible species in a human soul.⁷³

⁷² Indeed, one of the most striking features of Aquinas's discussion of human knowledge in the *Treatise on Human Nature* is the central role that the species doctrine plays not only in Aquinas's own account of human knowledge, but also in his readings of all of his predecessors. Not only Avicenna's views, but also those of Averroes, and even the Platonic ideas, are read as including a notion of instrumental *species intelligibiles*, and critiqued accordingly. In *ST* 1.84.3 c., for example, Aquinas treats Platonic ideas as innate intelligible species: "propter hoc Plato posuit quod intellectus hominis naturaliter est plenus omnibus speciebus intelligibilibus..." (On Plato compare chapter 4 of Aquinas's *De substantiis separatis*, where *species* is used throughout as a label for Platonic ideas.) Similarly, in 1.84.4 c., Avicenna's account of the direct acquisition of intelligibles from the Agent Intellect is interpreted as involving the reception of intelligible species and thereby assimilated to Platonism: "a quo, ut ipse dicit, effluunt species intelligibiles in animas nostras, et formae sensibiles in materiam corporalem. Et sic in hoc Avicenna cum Platone concordat quod species intelligibiles nostri intellectus effluunt a quibusdam formis separatis..."

Finally, as many scholars have recognized, Averroes is consistently read by Aquinas as subscribing to some doctrine of intelligible species, for example, in *ST* 1.76.2 ad 3, ad 4; 1.85.1 ad 3. For discussion of the effect of this reading on Aquinas's criticisms of Averroes, see B. C. Bazán, "Intellectum Speculativum: Averroes, Thomas Aquinas and Siger of Brabant on the Intelligible Object," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 19 (1981): 425–46, and Edward P. Mahoney, "Aquinas's Critique of Averroes's Doctrine of the Unity of the Intellect," in *Thomas Aquinas and His Legacy*, 83–106. In "St. Albert, St. Thomas, and Knowledge," *ACPQ* 70 (1996): 121–135, at 128 n.12, Lawrence Dewan takes issue with Mahoney's legitimate observation (86 n.4) that the intelligible species is a "foreign element" introduced into Averroes by Aquinas, on the grounds that Averroes's *intentio intellecta* "had to do the jobs" of both Aquinas's intelligible species as well as his *intentio* (usually equivalent to the *verbum*). But Dewan misses the point here: in all Aquinas's critiques of his predecessors, the intelligible species is treated as if it functioned as an instrumental *quo* in the same way that it does in Aquinas. But neither Averroes nor Avicenna (nor Plato for that matter) introduce any instrumental mechanisms into their accounts of intellectual cognition. In the case of Averroes, moreover, I have shown that if there is anything that performs the function of the intelligible species, it is the *imagined* intentions or phantasms, not the intelligible intentions. See my "Consciousness and Self-Knowledge in Aquinas's Critique of Averroes's Psychology," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 31.3 (July 1993): 349–85, esp. 374–76.

⁷³ Because Aquinas still refers to the mental existence of the common nature even while interpreting that existence simply in terms of intelligible species, some prominent Thomists have continued to view "the *existence* of the known thing in the knower" as the principal Thomistic understanding of cognition. See Joseph Owens, "Aquinas on Cognition as Existence," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 48 (1974): 74–85, esp. 81. It is noteworthy, however, that most of the texts cited by Owens in this regard are early and taken from metaphysical rather than epistemological or psychological discussions.

C. The Intelligible Species and the Common Nature

That Aquinas understands the mental existence of the common nature to be nothing but the presence of intelligible species in a mind is especially apparent from his most well-known discussion of the role of the species in human knowledge in question 85, article 2 of the *Summa theologiae*'s "Treatise on Human Nature." But a similar interpretation of mental being which holds that it is not strictly speaking the quiddity itself which takes on mental existence, but rather, a likeness which is representative of it, can be found in Aquinas's *De anima* commentary without explicit reference to intelligible species.

This interpretation occurs in the course of Aquinas's comments on *De anima* 2.5, 417b21–28, in which Aristotle compares actual sensation with the exercise of knowledge. The topic of mental existence is occasioned for Aquinas by Aristotle's remark that the objects of sensation, as particulars, are external to the soul, whereas the objects of knowledge, as universals, are "in some way" (πῶς/*quodam modo*) in the soul itself. In offering his interpretation of how (*quomodo*) their existence in the soul is to be understood, Aquinas turns to the Avicennian common nature in its particular application to the problem of universals.⁷⁴ From the outset of his explication, however, Aquinas casts the mental being of the nature in terms of the presence of the similitude of the object known in the knower: "Every cognition comes about through the fact that the object known is in some way in the knower, namely, according to a likeness."⁷⁵ Despite the reference to a likeness (*similitudo*), however, Aquinas has no difficulty glossing his remark in terms of mental existence, or even strict cognitive identification: this, Aquinas claims, is precisely what is meant by the

⁷⁴ *Sententia libri de anima* 2.12, 115.95–116.151 (Marietti 2.12, nn.375–380). For a parallel use of the Avicennian common nature to solve the problem of universals, cf. *In Meta.* 7.13, nn.1570–71.

⁷⁵ *Sent. de an.* 2.12, 115.76–78 (n.377): "Cognitio autem omnis fit per hoc quod cognitum est aliquo modo in cognoscente, scilicet secundum similitudinem...."

Aristotelian dictum that the knower and the object known are a single actuality in the activity of cognition.⁷⁶

Indeed, this implicit equation of mental existence, cognitive identification, and knowledge by similitude is a characteristic feature of Aquinas's interpretation of Aristotle's general account of cognition in *De anima* 2.5. Aquinas glides smoothly from stronger identity claims to weaker similitude claims. In explaining the different ways in which sensible and intelligible objects exist in the knower, for example, Aquinas once again uses the language of similitude and representation: "Therefore it is clear that the similitude of the thing received in sensation represents the thing according as it is in singulars; but that received in the intellect represents the thing according to the notion of the universal nature."⁷⁷ That Aquinas takes this to represent a legitimate understanding of the mental existence of the common nature itself is evident from his allusions to the Avicennian common nature and its role in solving the problem of universals in the paragraphs that follow. The basic points of Aquinas's remarks are vintage Avicenna: although the common nature understood absolutely (*secundum se*) is sometimes loosely called a "universal," strictly speaking only when the nature exists in a mind does the "intention of universality" (*intentio universalitatis*) attach to it.⁷⁸ Moreover, Aquinas speaks of the *duplex esse* of the nature taken absolutely, and several times he alludes not only to the nature's *esse in rebus*, but also to its *esse in intellectu*.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Ibid. 115.78–79 (n.377): "nam cognoscens in actu est ipsum cognitum in actu."

⁷⁷ Ibid. 115.88–92 (n.377): "Manifestum est igitur quod similitudo rei recepta in sensu representat rem secundum quod est singularis, recepta autem in intellectu representat rem secundum rationem uniuersalis nature...." Cf. *ST* 1.87.1 ad 3: "Sicut enim sensus in actu est sensibile in actu propter similitudinem sensibilis, quae est forma sensus in actu; ita intellectus in actu est intellectum in actu propter similitudinem rei intellectae, quae est forma intellectus in actu."

⁷⁸ The distinction is exemplified linguistically by the contrast between abstract terms like "whiteness" and "humanity," which denominate the nature taken absolutely, and for that reason are not properly universal and not predicable of particulars, and terms like "white" and "human being," which are true universals predicable of many.

⁷⁹ *Sent. de an.* 2.12, 116.102–118, 139–151 (Marietti 2.12, nn.378, 380).

Aquinas's comments in this text suggest that he saw no tension between the claims that knowledge is by similitude and that it consists in a mode of existence of the known object in the knower. Whether Aquinas simply took the equation of mental being with the possession of a likeness as the obvious way to understand the Avicennian claim that the common nature has two modes of existence, or whether he was deliberating downplaying the existential character of *esse in intellectu*, is unclear. But if we turn to the central discussions of human knowledge in the *Summa theologiae*, in which the mechanisms of intelligible species and mental words play an explicit role in the account of mental being, Aquinas appears even more reluctant to grant the Avicennian claim that the quiddity itself—rather than its representation via some species—can properly be said to exist in the intellect. And in this context that reluctance appears to be rooted in Aquinas's unshakable commitment to the sensible foundations of all human knowledge.

This can be seen, for example, even in the language that Aquinas uses to describe the objects of human knowledge in his account of the *conversio ad phantasmata* in the exercise of human knowledge.⁸⁰ Aquinas is careful not to identify the proper object of the embodied human intellect as the common nature itself, but rather, as the “the quiddity or nature *existing in corporeal matter*” (my emphasis).⁸¹ Because the human intellect is naturally conjoined to a material body endowed with sense organs, its proper object is not an absolute quiddity, such as “stoneness” or “horseness,” but rather, the quiddity insofar as it exist in material individuals or, in Avicenna's terms, in concrete singulars. The same shift in expression is once again reflected in Aquinas's *De anima* commentary, in a discussion that parallels *Summa theologiae* 1.85.2.⁸² In this passage—which lays the

⁸⁰ See p. 22 above.

⁸¹ *ST* 1.84.7 c.: “Intellectus autem humane, qui est coniunctus corpori, proprium obiectum est quidditas sive natura in materia corporali existens. . . .”

⁸² *Sent. de an.* 3.2, 212.239–213.279 (Marietti 3.8, n.718).

foundations for an anti-Averroist argument⁸³—Aquinas distinguishes the intelligible species from the object understood (*obiectum intellectus*) on the familiar grounds that the intelligible species is merely the instrument (*quo*) of knowledge. Here too Aquinas is careful to identify the understood object, not as the nature itself, but rather, as the *quidditas que est in rebus*, the nature as exemplified in sensible, material things. While the shift in vocabulary may seem slight, its repercussions are fundamental. The quiddity itself ceases to be the principal object to which human intellects are directed. Rather, human intellects are directed to quiddities which are *already* qualified by the mode of concrete existence, and this mode of existence must accordingly be represented in the mind’s knowledge of them. But since the quiddity as concretely existent is no longer indifferent to all other possible modes of existence, what Aquinas has identified as the object of knowledge now lacks the characteristic feature of an Avicennian common nature. Something other than the quiddity itself, then, has been granted possession of *esse in intellectu*.

That something else is, of course, the intelligible species (along with the mental word), whose status in the activity of knowing is addressed in *Summa theologiae* 1.85.2, which poses the question, “Whether the intelligible species abstracted from phantasms are related to our intellect as that which is understood?” In this article in particular the mental existence of the common nature is tied explicitly to two central themes in Aquinas’s understanding of intelligible species: (1) the claim that the species is not itself the object understood, but that by which we understand intelligible objects; and (2), the characterization of the species as a likeness (*similitudo*) of the object known.⁸⁴

⁸³ Ibid. 213.280–85 (3.8, n.719): “Ex quo patet uanam esse rationem quorundam uolencium ostendere quod intellectus possibilis sit unus in omnibus ex hoc quod idem est quod est intellectum ab omnibus, cum oporteat esse plures numero species intelligibiles si sunt plures intellectus.” I consider this use of the common nature against Averroism in section D below.

⁸⁴ The identification of both the intelligible species and the *verbum* as *similitudines* is found in numerous texts in the Thomistic corpus. For a recent discussion see Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition*, 11–18, 86–89, and esp. 105–113.

Although the impact of the doctrine of the intelligible species upon Aquinas's understanding of the mental being of the common nature is principally manifested in the replies to the objections in this article, I will begin with a brief rehearsal of the body of Aquinas's reply, since it highlights the epistemological issue that the species is meant to solve in Aquinas.

Aquinas does not, of course, entertain the possibility that intelligible species need not be posited at all and for that reason alone they cannot be related to our intellect as the objects which we understand. Rather, as is characteristic of his approach throughout the "Treatise on Human Nature," Aquinas assumes that the species are a given and that they are a part of the cognitive theories of all his philosophical predecessors.⁸⁵ Nonetheless, Aquinas does reject the position that the intelligible species themselves can be identified as the objects of our knowledge, since he views that position as tantamount to epistemic solipsism, that is, the doctrine that "our intellectual powers know only the impressions made on them,"⁸⁶ and thus we only know the contents of our own minds. Aquinas associates this view with the extreme materialism of some pre-Socratic philosophers, and he argues that it is manifestly false since it fails to account for the occurrence of error.⁸⁷ More importantly, however, he objects to this position on the grounds that the human intellect is directed first and foremost towards things outside itself—the quiddities of material beings—and only secondarily towards itself.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ See n.72 above. There are good textual reasons for Aquinas's assumption that the intelligible species is a given in the Aristotelian system, as is evidenced by the proof text which Aquinas cites at the end of the response to 1.85.2. At *De anima* 3.8, 431b29–432a1, Aristotle declares, with reference to his principle of cognitive identification, that "the stone is not in the soul, but its form (τὸ εἶδος)." The Latin text cited in this article of the *ST* renders εἶδος as *species*: "lapis non est in anima, sed species lapidis."

⁸⁶ *ST* 1.85.2 c.: Dicendum quod quidam posuerunt quod vires quae sunt in nobis cognoscitivae, nihil cognoscunt nisi proprias passiones...."

⁸⁷ This objection against the early Greek materialists is Aristotelian. See, for example, *De anima* 3.3, 427a21–427b6.

⁸⁸ This position is also emphasized in all of Aquinas's discussions of the soul's knowledge of itself. See, for example, *ST* 1.87.1, *De ver.* 10.8, *Sent. de an.* 3.2, 213.264–296 (Marietti 3.8, nn.718–719).

Aquinas's argument for this position in the body of the article attempts to establish how it is that the intelligible species in the soul can secure our knowledge of what is outside the soul. Aquinas holds that inasmuch as the species is a likeness (*similitudo*) of the external object understood, it is able to function as an instrument or medium which enables the intellect to know the extramental things themselves. The intelligible species, then, is "related to the intellect as that by which (*quo*) the intellect understands."⁸⁹ The focal point of Aquinas's argument in support of this position is a general analysis of the function played by the form of an agent in all the activities which that agent performs. Aquinas attempts to show how this analysis applies to cognition, which has the peculiarity of being an immanent rather than a transitive action. Aquinas's aim in this analysis, which has a number of puzzling features, is presumably to establish that the immanence of the act of understanding is not in itself a threat to the claim that the species can provide us with knowledge of something other than itself. The gist of Aquinas's argument is simple: agents act in virtue of their forms, and the form which is the principle of action is a likeness of the object of the action, whether that object is immanent or not.⁹⁰ In virtue of the fact that the species, as "the form by which the intellect understands," is a likeness of the object known, then, it does not matter that it remains within the knower, for through its likeness-relation to the external object it allows us to claim knowledge of that object itself. Aquinas concludes, then, that "that which is primarily understood is the thing, of

⁸⁹ *ST* 1.85.2 c.: "Et ideo dicendum est quod species intelligibilis se habet ad intellectum ut quo intelligit intellectus."

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*: "Et sicut forma secundum quam provenit actio tendens in rem exteriorem, est similitudo obiecti actionis, ut calor calefaciens est similitudo calefacti; similiter forma secundum quam provenit actio manens in agente, est similitudo obiecti." Notice that here, as in the discussion of God's relation to creatures cited in n.30 above, Aquinas reverses the order of the likeness relation from what we would normally expect. Aquinas does not say that the agent produces a likeness of itself in the object, but that the form in the agent is a likeness of the object of the action—the heat in the agent is a likeness of the heat in thing heated, rather than the converse.

which the species is the likeness,” and so “it follows that by means of its intelligible species the soul knows the things which are outside it.”⁹¹

Of course, this account of the nature and function of the species in cognition raises a number of difficult questions, such as whether or not the species is a *similitudo* of the object known in the same way that the forms of physical agents are *similitudines* of their effects, and whether or not this interpretation of the species commits Aquinas to an unacceptable form of representationalism. These questions are not, however, directly germane to the issue of how Aquinas understands mental existence. What is significant in this exposition is that once again the common nature itself emerges as neither the object understood nor the subject possessing mental existence. For Aquinas the objects of understanding are the extramental things themselves, that is, the quiddities already under the guise of their concrete mode of existence, whereas the subjects which possess mental being are the intelligible species, which alone are said to be “in the soul.” These points, which are merely implicit in the body, are more clearly affirmed in Aquinas’s replies to the first two objections of 1.85.2, in which Aquinas both denies that the common nature actually exists anywhere but in concrete singulars and substitutes the intelligible species for the nature as the true subject of mental existence.

The first objection in the article alludes to the Aristotelian dictum that the knower and the object known are actually identical in the act of knowing and infers from this that an Aristotelian must hold that the intelligible species are themselves the *intellecta*—the objects understood—since these are the only things in the process of understanding that can claim identity with the knower.⁹² In keeping with the position upheld in the body of the article, Aquinas replies by allowing that the object known can be said to be in the knower

⁹¹ Ibid.: “Sed id quod intelligitur primo, est res cuius species intelligibilis est similitudo.... sequetur quod anima per species intelligibiles cognoscat res quae sunt extra animam.”

⁹² Ibid. arg. 1: “Intellectum enim in actu est in intelligente, quia intellectum in actu est ipse intellectus in actu. Sed nihil de re intellecta est in intellectu actu intelligente, nisi species intelligibilis abstracta.”

inasmuch as its likeness is the form of the actually understanding intellect. Precisely in virtue of its character as a *likeness* (not a new *instance* of the object's nature in a different mode of existence), the species allows the extramental thing which it represents to be the real object known. This is in marked contrast to the Avicennian view that the quiddity or common nature itself is what exists in the intellect. For Aquinas, although we may speak as if the nature itself is in the intellect, this is simply in order to emphasize the causal links that bind the species to the thing whose quiddity it represents. But all we really mean when we refer to *esse in intellectu* is that the thing's likeness, in the form of the intelligible species, exists in us: "The thing understood is in the knower by its own likeness. It is in this sense that we say that the thing actually understood is the intellect in act, because the likeness of the thing understood is the form of the intellect...."⁹³

In his reply to the second objection of this article, Aquinas likewise carefully avoids any talk of the quiddity itself actually existing in the mind. In this case Aquinas is addressing the objection that if the objects known by us are to be counted as something rather than nothing, the only place that they can exist is in the intellect, since what is outside the intellect is material and individual, not abstract and universal, and as such unintelligible.⁹⁴ And since the species alone fits the description of

⁹³ Ibid. ad 1: "Dicendum quod intellectum* est in intelligente per suam similitudinem. Et per hunc modum dicitur quod intellectum in actu est intellectus in actu, in quantum similitudo rei intellectae est forma intellectus...." (*I am retaining the reading of the Leonine edition over the Ottawa edition's reading of *intellectus*, which is clearly incorrect in this case.)

Cf. *SCG* 1.53, n.442, where Aquinas also insists that the external thing which is the object understood does not exist in our intellect according to its own nature, but rather, only through its likeness as found in both the species and the understood intention or mental word: "considerandum est quod res exterior intellecta a nobis in intellectu nostro non existit secundum propriam naturam, sed oportet quod species eius sit in intellectu nostro, per quam fit intellectus in actu. Existens autem in actu per huiusmodi speciem sicut per propriam formam, intelligit rem ipsam." Several of the same arguments as those presented in *ST* 1.85.2, including the analysis of immanent and transient actions, are also found in this earlier text.

⁹⁴ *ST* 1.85.2 arg. 2: "Intellectum in actu oportet in aliquo esse, alioquin nihil esset. Sed non est in re quae est extra animam; quia cum res quae est extra animam sit materialis, nihil quod est in ea potest esse intellectum in actu. Relinquitur ergo quod intellectum in actu sit in intellectu. Et ita nihil est aliud quam species intelligibilis praedicta."

an immaterial universal object, it follows that it is the only viable candidate to be the understood object. Aquinas's reply to this objection is of special interest, since it relies heavily upon Avicenna's distinction between the common nature and the universal.⁹⁵ Nonetheless, Aquinas reinforces the impression that while using Avicennian concepts and Avicennian language he has repudiated the literal sense of Avicenna's notion of mental existence.

Thus, without mentioning Avicenna by name, Aquinas employs the Avicennian notion of the ambiguity of "universal" to parse the objector's use of the phrase *intellectum in actu*—"understood in act". For this can be taken to mean either the object known, or the *fact* of its being known, in just the same way that "universal" may be taken to refer to the quiddity or nature itself (e.g., "humanity") or to its abstraction by the intellect with the intention of universality added to it (e.g., "human being"), only the latter of which can be said to exist in the intellect. Unlike Avicenna, however, Aquinas does not identify this mental existent as an instance of the quiddity in its own right. Rather, he is insistent that the nature or quiddity "exists only in singulars," and that the fact alone of its being understood as an abstract universal "is in the intellect." Aquinas is quite explicit on this point: "[T]he humanity which is understood exists only in this or that man; but that humanity be apprehended without the conditions of individuality, that is, that it be abstracted and consequently considered as universal, befalls humanity inasmuch as it is perceived by the intellect, in which there is a likeness of the specific nature, but not of the individual principles."⁹⁶

These remarks, then, taken in conjunction with Aquinas's persistent identification of *esse in intellectu* with the mind's possession of an instrumental species, suggest a deliberate attempt to downplay any

⁹⁵ This is essentially the same distinction as that presented in Aquinas's exposition of *De anima* 2.5, discussed at pp. 24–25 above.

⁹⁶ *ST* 1.85.2 ad 2: "humanitas quae intelligitur, non est nisi in hoc vel in illo homine; sed quod humanitas apprehendatur sine individualibus conditionibus, quod est ipsum abstrahi, ad quod sequitur intentio universalitatis, accidit humanitati secundum quod percipitur ab intellectu, in quo est similitudo naturae speciei, et non individualium principiorum."

sense in which the common nature can be said to exist except in material singulars. Aquinas is quite happy to accept the doctrine of the nature's mental mode of being from Avicenna insofar as it provides the philosophical grounds for distinguishing existence from essence as a basic metaphysical principle. But Aquinas appears to be uneasy about asserting any parity between the two existential orders: for him "existence" properly and principally means the concrete existence possessed by the singular, material things in the world outside us.⁹⁷

We have seen, however, that even for Avicenna there is one place in which the mental existence of the common nature itself impinges upon the realm of concrete existence, namely, when mental being is viewed, not from the perspective of the quiddity that it instantiates, but rather, from the perspective of the human mind in which the known quiddity subsists. And there is at least one context in which this aspect of the Avicennian notion of mental existence—appropriately translated into species-terms—does prove useful to Aquinas. For even though Aquinas hesitates to accept the claim that the quiddity itself actually takes up existence in the knowing mind, he is still quite ready to accept the claim that the universal likeness of the quiddity, in the form of the species, is a concrete existent multiplied amongst a variety of individual intellects. And from this perspective, mental existence provides him with a key argument against a favorite philosophical nemesis, Averroes's doctrine of the unicity of the human intellect.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ In a recent article on Aquinas's *De ente*, Joseph Owens claims that both mental existence "in a soul's activity" and concrete existence "in singular things themselves" are "genuine kinds of existence, though of different grades" for Aquinas. See "Aquinas's Distinction At *De Ente Et Essentia* 4.119–123," *Mediaeval Studies* 48 (1986): 264–86, at 275. While that this may implicitly be true for the early *De ente* and contemporaneous texts in which Aquinas follows Avicenna closely, questions of cognition are not explicitly raised in these early texts, and the topic of the intelligible species is not broached at all. In the later works which I have examined, where the common nature is discussed with explicit reference to problems of cognition, Owens' claim no longer seems applicable. Cf. Wippel, *Metaphysical Themes*, 112 n.14, who also raises the question of whether the Avicennian consideration of "the three ways in which a nature may be considered continued to be so central to the later Thomas."

⁹⁸ Outside of his polemical texts addressed at Averroes, Aquinas seldom mentions *esse in intellectu* from the perspective of the individual mind. The most explicit reference I have found occurs in *SCG* 1.46, n.392, in the course of a discussion of divine knowledge. Once again it is

*D. Mental Existence in the Refutation of Averroism*⁹⁹

But exactly what does the notion of the mental being of the common nature add to Aquinas's arsenal of weapons against Averroes and his more sympathetic Latin interpreters? The gist of Aquinas's argument, as represented in chapter 5 of the *De unitate intellectus contra Averroistas*, is to refute what Aquinas believes to be the underlying rationale for Averroes' claim that there is only one intellect—namely, a “closet Platonism” which implicitly assumes that only a single intellect could understand the universal as a one over many.¹⁰⁰ How, the Averroist wonders, can the intelligible object (*intellectum*) in me and in you be two in number and one in species, without violating thereby the

the intelligible species that is treated as having mental existence, not the quiddity itself, and the existence that the species does have represents a form of accidental being: “Amplius. Species intelligibilis in intellectu praeter essentiam eius existens esse accidentale habet: ratione cuius scientia nostra inter accidentia computatur.”

⁹⁹ I have focused my discussion on the polemical opusculum, *De unitate intellectus contra Averroistas*. But from his earliest attacks on Averroism, Aquinas uses some form of the argument based upon the mental existence of the intelligible in individual minds. See *De ente* c. 3, 375.102–107: “Et quamvis hec natura intellecta habeat rationem uniuersalis secundum quod comparatur ad res extra animam, quia est una similitudo omnium, tamen secundum quod habet esse in hoc intellectu uel in illo est quedam species intellecta particularis.” See also *De veritate* 2.5 ad 15, 64.421–24, which uses existential language to describe cognitive identification, although neither the species nor the quiddity is mentioned (“cognitio non dicit effluxum a cognoscente in cognitum sicut est in actionibus naturalibus sed magis dicit existentiam cogniti in cognoscente”); as well as *ST* 1.76 ad 4; and *Super librum de causis*, prop. 4, (Saffrey 32.24–34.18).

¹⁰⁰ I do not believe that Aquinas accurately represents Averroes' philosophical motivations in this text or in parallel accounts. Averroes's principal argument is that if the intellect were individuated, then it would have to receive its objects in a way consonant with its nature, namely, as material individuals, a point which Aquinas does not directly address. See *Averrois Cordubensis commentarium magnum in Aristotelis de anima libros*, ed. F. S. Crawford (Cambridge, MA, 1953), Bk. 3, comm. 5, 401.424–403.472. The Averroist argument that Aquinas cites is presented by the Averroes himself as a felicitous *consequence* of his view, not the principal argument establishing it—that is, Averroes claims that his position does not even allow that problem to arise. See *Commentarium magnum* Bk. 3, comm. 5, 411.707–412.728. Aquinas paraphrases this passage at this at *De unit. intell.* c. 5, 312.243–313.268 (Keeler §113).

very properties—universality and immateriality—that make it an intelligible rather than an image?¹⁰¹

As Aquinas represents the Averroist position, the crucial problem, then, is the unity of the intelligible object. Suppose two or more human minds both know the same object or *intellectum*, say the nature “humanity.” If the *intellectum* is a form existing in these multiple individual intellects, then that *intellectum* would in turn seem to be an individual member of another species or class in which it participates with all its counterparts in other minds. Such an *intellectum* would not be intelligible *per se* (since individual particulars are not intelligible), or it would only be intelligible in virtue of there being a more comprehensive intelligible over it that expressed *its* intelligible form. Essentially, then, we would have an infinite regress of intellects, so it would be better to assume that for the entire set of specifically different intelligible forms there is only one intellect.

On Aquinas’s reading, Averroism is tantamount to Platonism in this regard because it undermines the intelligibility of the sensible world. For if “the intelligible is one immaterial species existing in the intellect,” Aquinas reasons, then knowledge cannot properly be had “of sensible things,” but only of “a single separate form.”¹⁰² This diagnosis itself echoes the shift we have seen in Aquinas’s general treatment of the mental being of the common nature. Any move to give the intelligible object itself *esse in intellectu* is to be avoided. But once the

¹⁰¹ *De unit. intell.*, c. 5, 311.119–128 (§106): “Querunt enim utrum intellectum in me et in te est unum penitus, aut duo in numero et unum in specie. Si unum intellectum, tunc erit unus intellectus; si duo in numero et unum in specie, sequitur quod intellecta habebunt rem intellectam: quemcumque enim sunt duo in numero et unum in specie sunt unum intellectum, quia est una quiditas per quam intelligitur; et sic procedetur in infinitum, quod est impossibile.” It is interesting to note the similarity between Aquinas’s formulation of this objection and Averroes’s presentation, in a slightly different context, of an argument of Ibn Bājjah (Avenpace) regarding the multiplication of intelligibles in human intellects. See *Commentarium magnum* Bk. 3, comm. 7, 491.335–353.

¹⁰² *De unit. intell.* c. 5, 312.165–170 (§109): “Si enim dicant quod intellectum est una species immaterialis existens in intellectu, latet ipsos quod quodammodo transeunt in dogma Platonis, qui posuit quod de rebus sensibilibus nulla scientia potest haberi, sed omnis scientia habetur de forma una separata.”

intelligible species is introduced as a representational instrument of knowing, and accorded the place once assigned to the quiddity's mental being, the way is paved to salvage fully the claim that it is the quiddity in its extramental—and sole—mode of existence that is the true *intellectum*.

Thus, Aquinas argues, the “one intelligible” that is shared by all human knowers is not some single intelligible species, but “the very nature or quiddity of the thing.” For “if the intelligible were not the very nature of the stone which is *in things*, but the *species* which is in the intellect, it would follow that I would not understand the thing which is the stone, but only the intention which is abstracted from the stone” (my emphasis).¹⁰³ If all that is in the intellect is the intelligible species—which is ontologically individual but representationally universal—then clearly it cannot be the object understood. Rather, it is the quiddity of the extramental stone itself that I know by means of the species. Once again, the Avicennian alternative, that the selfsame quiddity could actually exist in my intellect and in yours as well as in concrete singulars, is not entertained by Aquinas. Instead, Avicenna's remarks on the conceptual being of the quiddity as the accident of a particular mind are translated into the language of instrumental species. Thus, Aquinas may conclude, “It is therefore one thing which is known by me and by you, but it is known differently by me and by you, that is, by another intelligible species. Thus my understanding and yours are different, and so are my intellect and yours.”¹⁰⁴ Although he cites the

¹⁰³ Ibid. 312.186–194 (§110): “Est ergo dicendum secundum sententiam Aristotilis quod intellectum quod est unum est ipsa natura uel quidditas rei; de rebus enim est scientia naturalis et alie scientie, non de speciebus intellectis. Si enim intellectum esset non ipsa natura lapidis que est in rebus, sed species que est in intellectu, sequeretur quod ego non intelligerem rem que est lapis, sed solum intentionem que est abstracta a lapide.” Compare this with the continuation of the passage cited in the previous note: (312.170–76): “Nichil enim refert ad propositum, utrum aliquis dicat quod scientia que habetur de lapide habetur de una forma lapidis separata, an de una forma lapidis que est in intellectu: utrobique enim sequitur quod scientie non sunt *de rebus que sunt hic*, se de rebus separatis solum” (my emphasis).

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 312.226–230 (§112): “Est ergo unum quod intelligitur et a me et a te, sed alio intelligitur a me et alio a te, id est alia specie intelligibili; et aliud est intelligere meum et aliud tuum; et alius est intellectus meus et alius tuus.”

Categories, Aquinas's immediate source is an appropriately transformed Avicenna: knowledge is "singular with regards to its subject," the individual soul, even though what the intellect understands is "something universal."¹⁰⁵

III. CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion I would like to address briefly the implications of these modifications that Aquinas makes in his Avicennian heritage, first from an epistemological and then from a metaphysical perspective.

Aquinas continues to follow Avicenna inasmuch as he upholds the dual status of the intelligible, particularly in the context of his polemics against Averroism. Any intelligible is a singular individual when viewed from the perspective of the soul in which it inheres, whereas it is a universal insofar as it prescind from individuating matter while embodying a relation to many individuals. This much agreement is to be expected, for both Avicenna and Aquinas, however different their anthropologies of the body, hold that the intellective soul is subsistent in its own right. But unlike Avicenna, Aquinas does not view the individually existing intelligible either as the object known or as the nature itself residing in a new conceptual substratum. Rather, he views it as an instrument and as the likeness of a common nature that only truly exists in external things.

Aquinas's move away from Avicenna in this aspect of his cognitive psychology is presumably necessitated by his adherence to Aristotelian abstraction and its insistence on the importance of sensibles in human knowledge. This is also Aquinas's motivation for making the intelligible species an instrument rather than an object of knowledge.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 312.229–238 (§112): "Vnde et Aristotiles in Predicamentis dicit aliquam scientiam esse singularem quantum ad subiectum, «ut quedam grammatica in subiecto quidem est anima, de subiecto uero nullo dicitur». Vnde et intellectus meus quando intelligit se intelligere, intelligit quendam singularem actum; quando autem intelligit intelligere simpliciter, intelligit aliquid uniuersale."

For if the species—which is clearly an individual accident in an individual intellect—were the object known, knowledge would never be *de rebus*, as Aquinas rightly asserts. Still, it could be argued that Avicenna's more literal and direct view of the common nature's mental being circumvents the problem that Aquinas is trying to solve in one fell swoop, and that it ultimately leads to a more direct realism than Aquinas's own. For if it is the quiddity itself, and not merely its likeness, that exists in the intellect, it makes no difference which order of being it is in which our knowledge of things resides. It is only when the common nature's mental existence is transferred to representative intelligible species that the problem of indirect knowledge of things arises in the first place. But undoubtedly Aquinas recognized on some level that it was the thoroughgoing acceptance of the quiddity's indeterminacy to either mode of existence that permitted Avicenna to formulate his emanationist theory of knowledge and thereby to repudiate the essentials of Aristotelian abstraction, a price that would be too high for Aquinas to pay for a more direct grasp of the common nature.

Aquinas's epistemological motivations for rejecting the details of the Avicennian concept of the quiddity's conceptual existence are to this extent fully consonant with the Aristotelian spirit that infuses all elements of his epistemology and his cognitive psychology. But what about its consequences metaphysically? The Avicennian legacy of the essence-existence distinction is fundamental to Aquinas's metaphysical outlook: it grounds Aquinas's conception of God as creator and his understanding of the relation between God and creatures. Indeed, Thomists have long argued that Aquinas realizes the implications of the essence-existence distinction far more profoundly than its originator and his many loyal interpreters in the Latin West, at least insofar as Aquinas recognizes the primacy of the existential over the essential order. Indeed, the developments that we have seen in Aquinas's understanding of *esse in intellectu* seem to be just one more instance of this existential orientation: not only is the common nature to be denied

any existence in its own right—any *esse proprium*—it is to be denied all existence except in concrete singulars.¹⁰⁶

But if the sacrifice of abstraction is too high an epistemological price to pay for the Avicennian theory, it might well be argued that the metaphysical price of Aquinas's radical emphasis on the individual existent is equally high. For it seems to undermine the very ground on which the distinction between essence and existence is built, namely, the recognition that natures and quiddities are as such indifferent to existence. For if there is only one true existential order, just what does this indifference amount to in the end?

¹⁰⁶ And of course, in the divine intellect.