



*Rudi te Velde*  
TILBURG UNIVERSITY, THE  
NETHERLANDS

## Aquinas on Being

By Anthony Kenny

Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002; 224 pp.; hb. £ 35.00, pb. £ 14.99;  
ISBN: 0-19-823847-9/0-19-927944-6.

[1] Anthony Kenny's new book *Aquinas on Being* is a thought-provoking study in its severe criticism and analytical disentanglement of the multiple confusions Aquinas' account of 'being' supposedly suffers from. But in the end it is also a disappointing and irritating book because of the total absence of a sufficiently contextual and synthetic attempt at interpretation. The book is written without much sympathy for Aquinas' metaphysical way of thinking, and without the interpretative ability to articulate the fundamental intuition underlying Aquinas' notion of being as *actus essendi*.

[2] Kenny's negative judgment on Aquinas' doctrine of being was already apparent from his earlier book on Aquinas, which appeared in 1969 in the Oxford series *Past Masters*. This earlier book contained a chapter devoted to Aquinas' philosophy of mind, about which Kenny was rather positive, and a chapter devoted to the ontology of Being. The chapter on Being concluded as follows:

The theory of the real distinction between essence and existence, and the thesis that God is self-subsistent being, are often presented as the most profound and original contributions made by Aquinas to philosophy. If the arguments presented here have been correct, even the most sympathetic treatment of these doctrines cannot wholly succeed in acquitting them of the charge of sophistry and illusion. (Kenny, *Aquinas*, Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 60)

[3] His favorable judgment of Aquinas' philosophy of mind was more fully developed in his book *Aquinas on Mind* (1993). Now, in *Aquinas on Being*, he wants to present a more argued and documented case for his earlier negative judgement of Aquinas' ontology.

[4] In *Aquinas on Being*, Kenny discusses a series of texts from Aquinas on the topic of being, discussed in chronological order. In each case he analyzes the text and tries to make sense of how the word 'being' is understood and characterized. He leaves no doubt that many passages impress him as confused and incoherent. Eager to establish in each passage the precise meaning with which Aquinas uses the word 'being', he comes to the conclusion that, in Aquinas' writings, 'being' has (too?) many different meanings that cannot be brought together into a coherent and systematic whole. At the end of the book, in the conclusion, Kenny draws up a list of twelve (!) different meanings of 'being' which he succeeded to identify in the selected texts under discussion. Confronted with this

overwhelming diversity of uses of the word ‘being’, Kenny can only conclude that Aquinas failed to produce a coherent overall account of being.

[5] There is, I think, something questionable about Kenny’s approach: he takes a selection of – sometimes rather difficult to interpret – passages in which Aquinas, always from a certain perspective and in view of the specific issue under discussion, makes some pertinent remark about how ‘esse’ must be understood and how it is related to the other ontological principles (form, matter, essence) by which the intelligibility of reality is accounted for; he then tries to establish and delineate the sense in which ‘being’ is spoken of in each passage, and finally, from all those different text fragments about different problems, he draws the conclusion that a consistent and coherent theory of being is missing. He is certainly right: nowhere in his writings does Aquinas offer a complete and reasoned survey of his understanding of being. There is, however, a very strong and consistent intuition as regards what it means for a thing *to be*. But that intuition is always pursued from a certain perspective, in a particular context and in view of a special problem. One can detect a lack of willingness on the part of Kenny to go beyond the analytical distinctions he found in the texts in order to reconstruct the leading intuition as regards the proper sense and place of being (in the sense of *actus essendi*) within the overall ontological framework of Aquinas’ writings.

[6] Kenny starts with the short treatise *De ente et essentia*, written when Aquinas was still a bachelor at the University of Paris. The subject of this treatise is the meaning of the terms ‘essence’ and ‘being’ (*ens*) as they appear on different levels of the description of reality (in describing material reality, spiritual reality and the ‘first cause’). In the prologue, Aquinas quotes Avicenna as saying that the notions of ‘being’ and ‘essence’ are the first things grasped by the intellect. Because they are basic and primitive notions underlying the whole of human knowledge of reality, it is important to clarify their meaning and their relationship to the logical notions of genus and species. The claim that ‘being’ is the first conception of the intellect is of crucial importance to Aquinas’ account of the ontological structure of reality. To Aquinas, ‘being’ (*ens*) is indicative of the proper intelligibility of reality. It is, however, disappointing to see that Kenny has difficulty in making sense of the priority of *being* in the order of knowledge. Clearly, what is meant is not any chronological priority, nor the priority of the metaphysical concept of being. All knowledge of reality starts with ‘being’, since insofar as a thing is understood to *be* it is asserted as intelligible and as such related to the intellect. ‘Being’ is the inner reason of a thing’s knowability, so to speak. One cannot avoid the impression that Kenny fails to appreciate Aquinas’ view concerning the intrinsic intelligibility of reality because of his own more empiricist view concerning the relationship between conceptual thought and ‘external’ reality.

[7] Kenny continues his analysis by discussing the distinction between the two senses of *ens*, introduced at the beginning of *De Ente*. Being, according to Aquinas, is spoken of in two ways: the first type of being is that by which something is postulated in reality according to one of the (Aristotelian) categories: substance, quality, quantity, etc. The second type of being is that by which the truth of propositions is signified (‘it is true that...’). The different categories

of being may be described as originating in a classification of different kinds of predicate. ‘To be’ is always said together with a predicate, which corresponds to a particular entity belonging to one of the categories. We may say, according to Kenny’s example, that Aquinas was a human being (substantial predicate) or that he was fat (quantity), clever (quality), etc. In each case, the predicate relates to a form according to which a thing in question possesses a certain *esse* (being fat, being clever). There is no *esse* without form and the form – which makes something the kind of thing it is – is the ontological correlate of the predicates which are true of something. So far, Kenny does not seem to have any particular problem with Aquinas’ doctrine of being. Aquinas follows, more or less faithfully, the Aristotelian tradition in which ‘being’ primarily refers to individual substances, composed of form and matter, and endowed with accidental properties.

[8] This changes when Aquinas leaves the familiar (Aristotelian) world of changeable and material substances and begins to speak of immaterial substances, in which the essence appears to coincide with the principle of form. Here we enter into a more Platonic world of subsistent forms without matter, hence, of forms which are no longer forms *of something*. It is hard to see, Kenny says, how the notion of pure form can be explained by reference to predication. While the notion of form was introduced as that which in reality corresponds to true predicates (substantial or accidental), now Aquinas seems to come near to the Platonic doctrine of Ideas or Forms, which he nevertheless claims to reject.

[9] As long as the verb ‘being’ (*esse*) is used in conjunction with a predicate falling under one of the categories, Kenny seems to feel more or less safe. Depending on the text, the meaning of *esse* can then be identified as *substantial being* or *accidental being*; but there are other places where Aquinas speaks of ‘being’ as common to all things that are. Being in this sense, used without a special predicate, apparently stands for an empty and universal predicate. Aquinas, however, does not stop here. He even acknowledges a type of being where no predicate can be attached, being in an absolute sense or ‘subsistent being’, which he identifies with God. According to Kenny, it is especially in this absolute use of being that the confusion reaches its peak. In identifying God with subsistent *esse*, Aquinas seems to transform *esse* as the thinnest possible predicate (common being), into a Platonic Idea. In other words: Thomas isolates the verb ‘to be’ from its context in the proposition and renders it into a Platonic way as absolute *esse*.

[10] It is clear that Kenny is trying to interpret Aquinas’ doctrine of being as an analytical philosopher after the ‘linguistic turn’, someone who intends to reformulate Aquinas’ metaphysical statements about being as *actus essendi* into statements about the use of the verb ‘to be’ in the context of predication. To a certain degree, as long as Aquinas focuses on being from the perspective of the Aristotelian system of categories, such a reformulation seems to be possible. But what appears to Kenny as ‘sophistry’ really begins when Thomas carries out the metaphysical reduction of the categorial sphere of material and composed substances to their simple principles and causes, ultimately to the first cause, which must be simple in all respects.

[11] When reading this book I had the persistent impression that Kenny as

reader of Aquinas did not give him a fair chance to explain and defend himself. One must say that a real hermeneutical dialogue between interpreter and text did not take place. What Kenny does is to discuss a series of passages on 'being', more or less isolated from their context and, subsequently draws up a catalogue of different senses in which 'being' is used in all those passages in order to conclude, finally, that a coherent and overall account of being is lacking in Aquinas' writings.