

31

John Buridan on Essence and Existence

In the eighth question we ask whether essence and existence are the same in every thing. And in this question by “essence” I mean the thing itself, and thus the question is whether a rose is the same as for the rose to be [*rosam esse*], or a man is the same as for a man to be [*hominem esse*], etc.

And we first argue that these are not the same. The reason is that I can think of a rose or of thunder without thereby thinking that there is a rose or thunder. Therefore, these are not the same. And likewise, I can have scientific knowledge of roses or thunder, and yet I may not know whether there is a rose or whether there is thunder. Therefore, if one of these is known and the other is unknown to me, then it follows that the one is not the same as the other.

Again, names and definitions signify essences, but they do not signify existence or non-existence, as it is stated in Book 1 of the *Posterior Analytics*. And this is so because they signify without time; therefore, essence and existence are not the same.

Furthermore, the questions “What is it?” and “Is it?” are very different, as it is clear from Book 2 of the *Posterior Analytics*. But they differ only because of the difference between essence and existence, namely, because the question “What is it?” asks about the essence or quiddity of a thing and the question “Is it?” asks about its existence.

Again, nothing is an accident of itself. But its existence is an accident of a thing, for it is an accident of a rose that it exists or it does not exist, since a rose may or may not exist. Therefore, a rose is not its existence.

Again, if essence and existence were the same in all things, then it would follow that the intelligences [angels] would be just as simple as God, which is false, as is clear from Book 12 of the *Metaphysics*. And the consequence is clear because they are not composed of matter and form, or of quantitative parts, or degrees, whence no sort of composition can be assigned in them any more than in God, unless they are composed of essence and existence. And this is proved by the arguments of Avicenna: if the essence and existence of a rose were the same, then it would be tautologous to say that a rose exists, and it would be no different from saying that a rose is a rose, except only verbally [*non/nisi solum secundum vocem*], which is absurd.

Again, the predication “A rose exists” would be quidditative, and not denominative, just as this is quidditative, “A rose is a rose.” But the consequent is false; because the proposition

“A rose exists” is accidental and contingent, whence it can be false; therefore, it does not seem to be quidditative.

The opposite opinion is said by the Commentator to be Aristotle’s in the present fourth book, where he says that a man is the same as an existing man and one man; and by “existing man” Aristotle seems to understand a man’s existence.

Again, you should know that older philosophers [*antiqui*], including St. Thomas [Aquinas], stated that in every being other than God there is a composition of essence and existence. And thus existence has to differ somehow from essence, for which reason only God is absolutely simple.

Others even said that existence and non-existence are some accidental modes that pertain accidentally to essence, and so with generation an essence acquires existence and by corruption it acquires non-existence. Thus, some people claimed essences to be perpetual, although these modes are successively attributed to essences, as when we sometimes say that a rose exists and sometimes that it does not, and so these people admitted quidditative predications to be true even when the thing does not exist. And perhaps this was the opinion of the cardinal who issued the bull that the proposition “A man is an animal” or even “A horse is an animal” is necessary because of the inclusion of terms, and would be true even if God annihilated all horses. But Grosseteste [*Lincolniensis*] in his *Commentary* on Book 2 of the *Posterior Analytics* seems to be of the contrary opinion; for he says that everything that is predicated of God predicates or signifies God’s simple essence, but existence predicated of anything other than God predicates or signifies its dependence from God, and this dependence, as he says, causes no multiplicity in the dependent thing.

And I say with Grosseteste and the Commentator that for each and every thing, the thing itself and for the thing to exist are the same, so that essence does not differ from existence, or existence from essence. And this can be proved as follows.

One cannot say that a rose is different from its existence, unless one says that its existence is a distinct mode added to it and acquired by generation, and that its quiddity or essence is eternal, as held by the above-mentioned opinion. But this entire position is impossible; therefore, etc. The major proposition appears obvious, because it was precisely this point [namely, that existence is an accidental mode added to the eternal essence of the thing] and nothing else that the arguments brought up at the beginning of this question appeared to argue for, and which moved these people to posit the distinction between essence and existence. But the minor proposition, namely, that this position is impossible, is proved as follows. First, it would follow that we would not need to posit prime matter. For that is posited only because the subject undergoing transmutation has to remain in both termini of the change, but then that subject would be the quiddity or essence, now existing, now not-existing, and so we would not need to posit matter. In the second place, it would follow that in a dead body there would remain humanity, although it is on account of humanity that something is a man; therefore, a dead body would still be a man, which is false. And the first consequence is proved, because humanity can be nothing but the essence or quiddity of man that remains after the corruption of a human being, and it would either be separate or it would remain in the matter of the cadaver. If it were to remain in the matter of the cadaver, then we have what we wanted to prove. If it is said that it remains separately from matter, then this would amount to positing the Ideas of Plato, which Aristotle refuted. And the argument I made about man and humanity can be made about horse and equinity or a stone and its quiddity. Arguing about these would actually lead to

greater absurdity, because we concede that the human soul is separable, which someone would perhaps claim to be man's quiddity.

Furthermore, such additional modes of existence would be posited entirely in vain. For if its existence would be a mode added to a thing, say, to a rose, acquired through its substantial generation, then the same difficulties that we had concerning the rose would at once recur concerning that existence. Because just as the rose can exist and can not exist, so that mode can exist and can not exist as well, and I would be able to think of that mode without thinking that it exists, indeed, perhaps thinking that it does not exist. For I would be able to think of the existence which existed when Aristotle existed, and yet whatever it was, I understand that he now does not exist. Hence it is clear that such an additional mode would do nothing for preserving definitions.

Again, Aristotle seems to indicate here an argument that the Commentator explicates in the following manner. That which would persist if a rose persisted, excluding everything that is additional to the rose, does not differ from the rose. But if the rose alone persisted in this way, then it would still exist, because it obviously entails a contradiction to claim that something persists and yet it does not exist. And if the rose existed, then its existence would exist as well; therefore, its existence is not different from it.

Again, as it has been said about existence and unity, they are generated by the same generation and corrupted by the same corruption. This is because the same generation that generates a rose generates its existence, for generation proceeds from the non-existence to the existence of the thing; therefore, etc.

But for the sake of answering the objections it seems that we should say in this question that essence and existence differ in their concepts. For the name "rose" and this name or expression "that a rose exists" are imposed from different concepts. Therefore, when it is said that I think of a rose, while I do not think that it exists, this I concede. But from this it does not follow that, therefore, that a rose exists differs from the rose; what follows is only that it is according to different concepts or on different accounts that the rose is thought of in terms of the name "rose" and the expression "that a rose exists."

But you will argue by means of the following expository syllogism: "This rose I understand, and this rose is the same as for this rose to exist; therefore, this rose to exist I understand." And I accept the entire syllogism. Thus, I concede that it is impossible that rose for you to understand, unless that rose to exist you also understand. But this consequence is not valid: "That rose to exist I understand; therefore, I understand that rose to exist." Here you need to know that we recognize, know, or understand things according to determinate and distinct concepts, and we can understand one thing according to one concept and ignore it according to another; therefore, the terms following such verbs as "understand" or "know" appellate [i.e., obliquely refer to] the concepts according to which they were imposed [to signify], but they do not so appellate their concepts when they precede these verbs. It is for this reason that you have it from Aristotle that this consequence is not valid: "I know Coriscus, and Coriscus is the one approaching; therefore, I know the one approaching." And this is because to know the one approaching is to know the thing according to the concept according to which it is called the one approaching. Now, although I know Coriscus, it does not follow, even if he is the one approaching, that I recognize him under the concept according to which I know him to be approaching. But this would be a valid expository syllogism: "Coriscus I know; and Coriscus is the one approaching; therefore, the one approaching I know." Therefore, the situation is similar in the case under consideration: I understand a rose, but I do not understand a rose to exist, although a rose

to exist I understand. The same applies to the other case: I concede that I have scientific knowledge about roses and thunder in terms of several conclusions, yet, I do not have scientific knowledge about roses or thunder in terms of the conclusion that a rose or thunder exist.

Again, in response to the other objection the same point can be conceded concerning signification that was conceded concerning understanding, because names are imposed to signify by means of acts of understanding [*intellectiones*, i.e., concepts] of things. Therefore, the name "rose" signifies a rose, but does not signify a rose to exist, although this rose it signifies and this rose to exist it signifies as well [because this rose and for this rose to exist are the same], and the same goes for definitions.

Again, I say that the existence of a rose is not an accident of the rose, but the predicate "exists" is certainly an accidental predicate of the subject "rose"; therefore, the proposition "a rose exists" is contingent, and can be false. But the same applies to the proposition "a rose is a rose," for it would be false, if there were no roses. And when it is said that a rose can not exist, I concede this and even further that a rose can not be a rose. Because when no rose exist, its quiddity does not exist and it does not persist.

To the other objection I reply that God is absolutely simple, for he is neither composed of parts, nor can he be composed with another thing. But the intelligences [angels], although they are not composed of parts, nevertheless, they can be composed with accidents; for they understand or can understand by acts of understanding [*intellectiones*] added to them, which is not the case with God; but this sort of simplicity will be discussed in greater detail in Book 12 of this work.

The other arguments from Avicenna are solved in terms of mere conceptual difference, as they were solved in connection with existence and unity, etc.

