

# Plato and Aristotle: the two eyes of the one Thomas

Scott R. Paine/VnB

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## Resumo

Este artigo discute aspectos fundamentais da influência de Platão e Aristóteles em Santo Tomás.

## Abstract

The article discusses fundamental aspects of the influence of Plato and Aristotle in St. Thomas.

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We are accustomed to regarding Patristic authors as characteristically Platonic in their speculative habits, and Scholastic authors as Aristotelian. Despite the obvious correctness of such attributions in a very general and schematic context, they can nonetheless lead us all too easily to overlook two equally obvious facts, and ones which ought to deeply qualify the way in which we understand these two characterizations. Though the facts I refer to are but simple points of chronology, they highlight lines of causation no less crucial to the temporal sequence than are those between a father and his son.

The facts are simple in the extreme: 1) Plato was the teacher of Aristotle, and 2) the Fathers were the teachers of the Schoolmen. Teachers precede their pupils, both in time and – presumably – in wisdom, at least as far as the pedagogical transfer is concerned. But to the degree that this transfer is a success, and the students' zeal in learning has resulted in a vital appro-

priation of the teacher's insights and habits, the newly endowed junior sage is ordinarily – let us say in the very line of duty – expected to transcend his teacher. This he may do either by correcting him, or by following the star of his teaching to places to which not even the teacher had yet ventured.

It is the far greater pertinence of the latter in the present case to which I wish to draw attention. It is easy, and easily facile, to sum up the relationship of Aristotle to Plato as that of a dissident disciple to his mistaken mentor; or to portray Thomas Aquinas' posture before Augustine of Hippo as one of careful reverence in expression, all the while hiding, beneath the deference, sweeping criticisms in substance. Such formulae fail to appreciate the way in which both Plato and Augustine had entered deeply and permanently into the mental makeup of their foremost pupils. The Fathers, of course, were all dead by the time the Scholastic era was inaugurated by St. Anselm in the early 12th Century; St. Thomas' tutela-

ge under St. Augustine could not be, as was Aristotle's under Plato, by oral transmission, but only by written word. Nonetheless, the written word of Augustine has proven to be one of the most potent teaching forces in the West, and few men turned his pages with more eagerness and alacrity than did the Dumb Ox of Aquino.

What I am maintaining is this: Plato did not just propose theses to the young Aristotle – he entered into his very thought as a permanent interlocutor. And though this student would later subject some of his master's teachings expressed in the dialogues to severe criticism<sup>1</sup>, *it was only in the spirit of the very dialogues that such criticism was possible to begin with*. This is the extremely pertinent point. Twenty years apprenticeship in the oft excited atmosphere of the Academy, vibrant with the most varied interpretations of Plato's basic insights, made Aristotle to be what he was. We are wrong to measure the relationship between the two philosophers on the unique scale of the *written* dialogues of Plato, which, on the author's own insistence, were largely dialectical experiments, explorations and tentative approximations to definitive answers. Moreover, what Aristotle learned in the hundreds of *unrecorded*

dialogues concerned a body of teaching about which Plato himself said:

I certainly have composed no work in regard to it, nor shall I ever do so in future, for there is no way of putting it in words like other studies. Acquaintance with it must come rather after a long period of attendance on instruction in the subject itself and of close companionship, when, suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining.<sup>2</sup>

Without entering into the immense body of scholarship surrounding the question of the "evolution" of Aristotle's thought in relation to that of Plato's, it is enough to point up the increasing consensus among scholars that the relationship was complex and intimate, and that one finds far more continuity between the two men than was ever to exist between the two historical schools they founded.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See 7th Letter, 341c, transl. L.A. Post. The foremost exponents of the centrality of the so-called "unwritten doctrines" of Plato are H.-J. Krämer, *Areté bei Plato und Aristoteles*, Heidelberg, 1959 (reprint, 1967), and K. Gaiser, *Platons ungeschriebene Lehre*, Stuttgart, 1962 (2nd ed. 1967), and more recently, G. Reale, *Per una nuova interpretazione di Platone*, Milan, 1989. The most notable critic of the position remains H. Cherniss, *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato and the Academy*, Baltimore, 1944 (reprint, 1964).

<sup>3</sup> See especially I. Düring, *Aristoteles. Darstellung und Interpretation seines Denkens*, Heidelberg, 1966, and E. Berti, *Profilo di Aristotle*, Rome, 1979.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, *Metaphysics*, 987a29-988a16, 990a33-993a10.

In brief, Aristotle was indebted to Plato not only for offering him material against which he could whet his own critical sense, but more typically, and indeed more fruitfully, for siring him as the complementary philosopher he needed. The two men separately explored and mapped out the north and south poles of the intellectual globe of human thought; they traced out the right and left lobes of reason's brain. And if Aristotle turned from his earlier – and largely lost – dialogues to the composition of long systematic treatises, it was not so much in order to criticize the excesses of his master as to supplement the dialectical mode in which Plato excelled with the scientific mode those very dialectics had made possible.

The dialogues, after all, had already been written. Socrates had "fixed thought for the first time on definitions",<sup>4</sup> and Plato had showed how to ask the right kind of questions which lead us to such definitions. The dialogues, in short, teach us how to dialogue with discipline, for without rigorously ordered conversation, questions may easily turn us outward and away from the truth, rather than inwards and toward it (as suggested by the Latin word: *con-versari*). Plato simply laid down the great paradigms of

dialectic, forever to serve as the outlines of rational enquiry.

Aristotle, having learned his lessons well, but having remained leery of some of the proffered answers (as leery, indeed, as Plato himself had often remained!), went on to isolate and analyze the constant structures of rational thought in the *Organon*, and to apply them methodically to the various areas of knowledge in his other treatises. My point is simply this: the dialogue was going on in Aristotle's mind all the while he penned the careful treatise. Plato was in him – and through him, not despite him, Aristotle went beyond him.

We love to point out how Aristotle loved truth more than Plato, and that "while both are dear, piety requires us to honour truth above our friends".<sup>5</sup> What we often miss is that it was from Plato, more than from anyone else, that he had learned to observe such protocols of academic priority.

The dialogues of Plato and the treatises of Aristotle belong together, not only on our library shelves, but also in our minds. Their hermetic separation, both in school and in temperament, has lain at the root of perhaps the greater number of misunderstandings and antagonisms that have plagued Western thought throughout its history. From the Academicians and

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<sup>4</sup>*Met.* 987b3-4.

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<sup>5</sup>*Nich. Ethics* 1096a16-17.

the Peripatetics, to the students of Plotinus and those of Alexander of Aphrodisias, to the Augustinians and the Averroists, to the Thomists and the Scotists, and then on into the modern modulations of the selfsame polarization: to the Florentine Academy and the Alexandrists of Padua, and on – *mutatis mutandis* – to the rationalists and the empiricists, to the Idealists and the positivists, and in our own century, to the phenomenologists and the analytic philosophers – in each case, two rational exigencies all too often expending their respective energies in blissful disregard of their brother, and potentially compensatory, pole.

It was not like this with Aristotle himself. He succeeded Plato by succeeding with Plato, and in this, neither principally negated him nor superceded him. If we read Aristotle well, we will find ourselves turning back again and again to the dialogues in which the great questions, to which so often Aristotle found answers, were first uncovered and – as if in ecstasy – asked. The *Nicomachian Ethics* will send us back to the *Republic* and the *Meno*, the *Metaphysics* to the *Sophist* and the *Parmenides*, the *Politics* to the *Laws*. And we will return to those works not for old time's sake, but for the sake of new insight, for Plato's dialogues are the great wombs in which most of the seminal questions of philosophy first gestated; very many

of them were born. As we follow their adolescence and budding manhood in Aristotle, the continuity of organic growth is unmistakable, even when adolescence shakes off the carefreeness of childhood, and adulthood corrects youthful precipitation. There is something everlastingly playful and provocative about the Platonic nursery of Ideas, for being intelligibles by definition, Aristotle refuses to stop thinking about them. As he does, the Ideas begin to grow, to evolve and to solidify, as they rendezvous with their often surprising destinies in his mind.

As we look more closely now at the particular way in which the Aristotelian pole of Western thought got magnetized in the Scholastic era, and how the "Platonism of the Fathers" (a term made famous by R. Arnou in an article on the same in the *Dictionnaire de Theologie Catholique*) generated the Aristotlianism of the Schoolmen, I think we will find a significant exception to the customary picking of sides at the great speculative divide. For although Alfred North Whitehead maintained that we are born either Platonists or Aristotelians, I fear this categorization fails to take account of those few who managed to be pupils of both masters. There are, you see, a few epochal thinkers who passed beyond their genetic fate, and were reborn – nay baptized – in the fire of the very intuitions which linked Plato and Aris-

total in a far more binding brotherhood than any of their formal differences could afflict.

St. Augustine of Hippo was one such thinker; St. Thomas Aquinas, another. That the towering mind among the Latin Fathers is considered a (Neo-)Platonist, and the foremost Schoolman an Aristotelian, only underscores the inadequacy of such pigeonholes to those who have read long and deeply in either man's books. To be sure, there were precious few tracts of Aristotle available to the bishop of Hippo, whereas middle Platonist resumé's were easier to come by, and his own admission of Neoplatonist influence is hard to gainsay.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, St. Thomas himself points out that

whenever Augustine, who was imbued with the doctrines of the Platonists, found in their teaching anything consistent with faith, he adopted it; and those things which he found contrary to faith, he amended.<sup>7</sup>

Conversely, few dialogues of Plato were available to Thomas, but with time nearly all of Aristotle's treatises were provided in Latin translation. Nor can one deny the obvious "Platonic" style of Augustine, more a rhetorician and dialectician than a

scientific philosopher; nor the Peripatetic method preferred by Thomas, complete with the clipped diction and style we are familiar with in Aristotle (bringing one unsympathetic commentator to remark that reading Aristotle is like chewing on egg shells). But here again we are in danger of throwing two complex vitalities into convenient slots, and overlooking a far deeper affinity which ought to hold our attention far more than first blush similarities. Augustine was quite precisely a "Father," and though he had countless intellectual and spiritual "sons," Thomas was most certainly one of them.

You receive from a father only what a father has to give, and not that which a son can only develop by investing his inheritance. Solomon was wiser than David, but he became so only by learning from his father. Augustine was a pioneer in Christian wisdom, and in that domain, explored the questions in the same way that Plato had done in the domain of Greek philosophy. He ventured answers as Plato had done; and often enough his answers were found wanting. But fathers teach their sons how to walk, but do not necessarily teach them where to go.

When St. Thomas corrects St. Augustine, it is only because he has found something which St. Augustine himself would want corrected if it were pointed out to him. Both men

<sup>6</sup> See *Confessions*, VII, 9,13.

<sup>7</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 5, in A.C. Pegis, *Basic Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Random House, NY, 1945, vol. I, p. 804.

were, like Plato and Aristotle before them, quite simply on fire for the truth – day and night athirst for further draughts of the water of wisdom. As Aristotle had learned everything that Plato had to teach, and then took off from his master as an arrow from a bow, so did Thomas emerge from his apprenticeship with the Fathers, and above all with Father Augustine.

Augustine's writings, and along with them the various Neoplatonic treatises known to his age (the *Liber de Causis*, the *Corpus Areopagiticum*, among others), brought the fullness of Plato into the mind and mentality of Thomas. His own reading of Aristotle and his commentators introduced the complementary fullness of Aristotle into his ever deepening resources. Although the Scholastic regime of the 13th century dictated that his teaching be cast in articles, questions, textual commentaries and summae, there is in the most personal thought of St. Thomas Aquinas a mind that thinks with both lobes of the Western brain. He is usually Aristotelian in method, often Platonic in insight, but always both in synthesis. It remains now to highlight a few of the more salient speculative features of his thought as they bring this Platonic-Aristotelian harmony before our eyes. Those eyes, of course, are prejudiced by the dryness of style and plodding method to presume Aristotelian hegemony in content as

well, and to see Plato as extraneous. But those eyes are crossed, and see double; let us try and focus them, and attempt to see the one Thomas as he really is.

Socrates – a master as much in Plato as in Aristotle – taught us to seek out essences and work hard to formulate definitions. Plato pointed to a transcendent root of the universality and necessity such essences and their definitions would require, if they are indeed what we think we are looking for. He emphasized the transcendence of archetype, and the derivative, imperfect nature of the imitating, this-worldly reflection. Aristotle listened long and hard to the manifold articulation of this emphasis, and finally convinced of this sovereign truth, followed it wherever it went, like Mary her lamb. And alas, it went back to the world. Like Plato, he had begun, in the footsteps of Socrates, to search the world for a resting place for the mind's eye, and that eye came with Plato to rest on a reality beyond, an archetypal world of stability and light. But while Plato nearly exhausted his energies mapping out that world and analyzing its inner logic, Aristotle could not fail to notice something supremely important about archetypes that one overlooks, over and over again – the fact that they are *archetypes!*

The Platonic Ideas are primordial *types*, first models for the modelled. The very fact that they evince such architectonic finality indicates that the world herebelow is far from peripheral. An archetype intrinsically poised to communicate its formal excellence to a world of participants already bespeaks of itself the value of that world as an end providentially foreseen – that world is already there, if I may put it thus, within its own design. In a sense, the world is even more important than the archetypes themselves, since the Ideas are all pointing toward things as their ontological addressees.

Perhaps we can put the matter like this: Plato said this world is *only a reflection* of a more real world of Ideas; while Aristotle said that this world *is* a reflection of an even more real world. That is to say – as in the optimist's and pessimist's quarrel over whether the glass is half empty or half full – you may emphasize the fact that all in this world is but an imitation of a higher world, and dwell on the higher world's superiority, *or* you may emphasize the far more suggestive fact that if this world is succeeding at all in imitating a higher order of existence, it can only be due to some strength and significance of its own, or, even more suggestively, to some positive interest the higher world has taken in the lower. In short, this is the difference between saying, "This world is *but* a

symbol of higher archetypes," and saying, "This world is a *true* symbol of higher archetypes." Aristotle did not deny the first statement, but, crawling slowly upon the broad shoulders of the divine Plato and continuing to follow the gaze of his master after age and death had finally dimmed it, saw the fuller truth of the second statement. This is why the founder of the Lyceum began to take such an interest in the world of rocks and organisms.

There are four guiding concepts in the philosophical thought of St. Thomas Aquinas which mark off, like four pillars, the imposing edifice of his vision. I suspect that it was the combined effect of these four lights which gave to his mind a metaphysical reach which has probably never been matched. Many have attempted to isolate one dominating insight, or one sovereign principle, which seems to lie at the root of all the varied wisdom of the Angelic Doctor. For Manser, it was simply the adoption and development of Aristotle's doctrine of act and potency;<sup>8</sup> for Gilson, it was the real distinction between act of being and essence;<sup>9</sup> for Fabro, who I think is closer to the truth than most others, it was the development of Aristotle's notion

<sup>8</sup> G. Manser, *Das Wesen des Thomismus*. 3. ed. Friburgo, 1949.

<sup>9</sup> E. Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, Toronto, 1949.

of causality from within a context of Platonic participation.<sup>10</sup> Only Fabro has attempted to bring into full focus the full three-dimensionality given to Thomas' vast opus by the double oculars of the twin geniuses of Athens.

The four concepts which I think best sum up the combined contributions of Plato and Aristotle to St. Thomas' vision are the following: abstraction and analogy on the epistemological level; substance and creation on the ontological level. The first of each pair is a fruit, above all, of Aristotle's legacy; the second, of Plato's. However, no one of these concepts, in Thomas' mind, can be lifted intact from the dialogues of Plato or from the treatises of Aristotle. All four achieve a resolution – in the *Disputed Questions on Power*, or in the *Summa Theologiae*, for example – which only a mind primed *both* by the exigencies of Platonic transcendence and those of Aristotelian immanence, could have effected. In what follows, I offer only inaugural reflections on the contours of these concepts in Thomas' work. Shelves of books have been written on them in relative isolation; a synthetic presentation perhaps will one day follow.

When we begin knowing on a rational level, we begin abstracting.

The Aristotelian doctrine of abstraction is accepted by Thomas and subjected to notable developments,<sup>11</sup> but the basic Thomistic grasp of the matter bears the unmistakable mark of both Plato's insistence on the *chorismós* between this world and the ideal (for, the universal must indeed be *ab-stracted* from this matrix of contingency and change in order to be known at all), and of Aristotle's insistence on the immanent world of experience as the point of departure of all, even abstracted, knowledge (for only things which bore some participated excellence akin to the idea to be generated, could serve as, to quote Porphyry, "launching points to the realm of mind").

It was clear to Thomas, of course, that the doctrine of abstraction was Aristotelian, and that along the main axis of its articulation, he stood foursquare with Aristotle's assertion that it is not intelligibles already alight which the mind simply poises itself to glimpse (as the letter of Plato suggests), but rather potentially knowable formalities that are *made intelligible* by the work of the agent intellect. But still, the "making intelligible," which is the proper work of abstraction effected by the mind, is possible at all only because the agent intellect "illuminates" the

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<sup>10</sup> C. Fabro, *Partecipazione e Causalità*, Torino, 1958; see also, *La Nozione metafisica di partecipazione*, ib., 3. ed. 1963.

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<sup>11</sup> See *De Trinitate*, q. 5, a. 3; *De Ver.* q. 10, a. 6; see also L. Ferrari, "Abstractio Totius' and 'Abstractio Totalis'", in *The Thomist*, 24 (1961).



phantasms of the imagination, and the light by which this is done is understood by Thomas as deriving from the divine intellectual light of God.<sup>12</sup> In a rich text whose theme is repeated in numerous subsequent works, an "Augustinian" point is made as unmistakably as could be wished:

The light of the agent intellect in the rational soul proceeds, as from its first origin, from the separate substances, especially from God... In the light of the agent intellect, all science is, in a certain sense, already furnished from the very origin, by means of universal concepts which are immediately known by the light of the agent intellect; through these concepts, as through universal principles, we judge all things, and have a certain precognizance of them in these principles.<sup>13</sup>

In a famous text, St. Thomas responds to an objection against the plurality of intellects in men, asserting that "it does not matter much if we say that intelligible things themselves are participated in from God, or that the light which makes them intelligible is

participated in from God".<sup>14</sup> One ought not, of course, to push these assertions too far. Whenever it is a matter of choosing sides between the Platonic view of intelligibles *already* intelligible by their very nature, and mere potentialities, Thomas is clearly on the side of Aristotle. But my point is that his mind is well steeped in the necessity of a transcendent foundation of all intellectual knowledge, so dear to Plato. And the hoary Augustinian theory of illumination, so Platonic in inspiration, is not once held up to scorn in Thomas' long treatise on human knowledge in the *Prima Pars*. Thomas is looking at the issue of abstraction with both perspectives fully engaged.

As the background of this transcendent referent in abstraction is examined in its own right, Thomas' analysis of the concept of being begins to extend a vista more explicitly Platonic before our eyes. The one concept forever presupposed in every judgment, and implicit in every abstraction, resists reduction either to subject or predicate in propositional analysis, or to a universal formality in abstraction. In fact, the univocities which are the glory of abstraction break down in the face of a concept for which all potential specific differences are already

<sup>12</sup> "The action of any created intellect depends upon God in two respects: first insofar as it has from him the perfection by which it acts, that is, light; and secondly insofar as it is moved by him." (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia-IIae, q. 109, 1 c. (my translation of all texts, where not indicated otherwise); see also Ia, q. 88, 1 c, and Ia-IIae, q. 50, 5c.

<sup>13</sup> *De Veritate*, q. 10, a.6c; cf. *Summa Theol.*, Ia, q. 12, a.2; q. 84, a. 5.

<sup>14</sup> *On Spiritual Creatures*, q. 10, response to objection 8, transl. by M. FitzPatrick, Milwaukee:Marquette Univ. Press, 1949, p. 122.

ady contained in the unity of its nature. It is also more radical than subject and predicate because these are what they are only through the copulative services of this very concept.

That light of the intellect which makes intelligible all abstractions, and joins in semantic wedlock all propositional terms, is the very primordial object of the intellect itself: being. The intellect is, in brief, the "faculty of being".<sup>15</sup> Without venturing into the Kantian approximations of Joseph Maréchal and company, it will be sufficient for the purposes of this article to point out how broad indeed is the horizon – how Platonically broad – to which Thomas' measured consideration of the Aristotelian doctrine of the agent intellect points. That background of being necessitates the underpinning of all intellectual knowledge – through all univocal abstractions and their varied propositional relations – by the very mother concept of all analogy: being.

Everything is imbued with what Louis de Raeymaeker calls "the value of being".<sup>16</sup> Thomas' mind is forever poised between a univocal essence it is trying, by abstraction, to make more and more intelligible, and

an analogous value – that of being – which is forever transcending its necessarily limited this-worldly instances. *What* a thing is, is an immanent formality; *that* it is, is a transcendent referent. Between abstraction and analogy, a dialectic ensues, or better – to speak with Bernard Lakebrink – an "analectic",<sup>17</sup> for the analogical notion of being shows itself as the prior (if not *a priori*) cognition, the very condition of possibility for any abstraction at all.

Now both of these epistemological concepts are linked in Thomas' mind with two corresponding Aristotelian and Platonic ontological concepts, the interplays between which lay bare once again the three-dimensional horizon ever present in the saint's thinking. Aristotle had followed Plato's Ideas, in their sheer ontological force, back down into the world that mirrored them, only to find that the mirror was a far worthier reflection than the shadowland Plato's more rarefied considerations tended to denigrate. And so the work of abstraction took the world of things seriously, as the senses grappled with the manifold of accidents by which things secured their limited lease on existence. Holding aloft the agent intellect's klieglight-concept of being, the mind

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<sup>15</sup> "Being in common is the object of the intellect." *Summa Theol.*, Ia, q. 55, a. 1c; see also q. 79, a. 7c; q. 82, a. 4, ad 1m.

<sup>16</sup> *La Philosophie de l'être*, Louvain, 1948.

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<sup>17</sup> See Bernard Lakebrink, *Hegels Dialektische Ontologie und die Thomistische Analectik*, Cologne, 1955.

peered through the senses and on through to the accidents, to see that just as its concept of being was behind all its analyzing and abstracting, there was a reservoir of being lying out there deep within things too. In a word, there were *substances*.

Paradoxically, the highest compliment Aristotle ever paid to Plato's Ideas was his insistence on the existence of individual material substances. Here you see how powerful and paradigmatic the Ideas really are, for here are their children. Aristotle's careful analysis of the structure of finite existence, and its key concept, *ousia* (substance), is the objective pole to his likewise careful study of the subjective process of abstraction. And both follow out in ways unsuspected by Plato the whole epistemological and ontological implication in the Socratic and Platonic discovery of universal essences and of the import of the definitions we fashion of them. As St. Thomas thought the doctrine of abstraction all the way through to its deeper dependence on the doctrine of the analogy of being, he would likewise follow Aristotle's doctrine of substance to an even more surprising consummation: the doctrine of the creation of being.

It is in the metaphysical doctrine of creation where the deepest and most "original" thought of Aquinas is to be found. The other three concepts

are already developed, or, in the case of analogy, adumbrated, in Plato and Aristotle. The notion of creation, however – the production of the entire being of all limited things out of nothing at all – this notion was new. And it is in the constant rearticulation of his central insights about creation that we find the most characteristic note of St. Thomas Aquinas' philosophical thought.

He is not simply developing Aristotelianism, anymore than he is simply refuting Augustinianism. He is rather looking at the real with two eyes trained in the deepest exigencies first outlined by the two unmatched masters of Western reason. Platonic transcendence and Aristotelian immanence, unlocked by careful unfolding of the concepts of analogy and creation, on the one hand, and abstraction and substance, on the other, bring Thomas' vision into a three-dimensional focus which is his greatest legacy to all of us: the ability to look long and hard at what is there, and then to think coherently about it.

Although substantial being found its way into Aristotle's cosmos, God never did; He was transcendent only as Mover, and never immanent as creator. And though Plato's intelligibles were transcendent indeed, the Great Intelligence who is God never became quite substantial enough to create a universe. It is the most telling

instance of Thomas Aquinas' double perspective, nourished at once by Plato's *kósmos gnostós* and Aristotle's *kósmos physikós*, that he came to see the First Cause of all things, God, to be perfectly transcendent to the world He created only by being the fully immanent Cause of its very substantiality.