

BETWEEN PLATO AND DESCARTES— THE MEDIAEVAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE ONTOLOGICAL STATUS OF THE IDEAS

I

Even the most casual reader of philosophy senses the abyss that separates Descartes from Plato. In Descartes' work, a concern for certainty overshadows and, in fact, transforms the original Platonic conception of philosophy. Such a conception, as exemplified by the figure of Socrates, fundamentally involves a love of wisdom. Wisdom—σοφία—is not the same as certainty. That which I can be certain of does not necessarily make me wise (see *Phaedo*, 98 b ff.)

We can mark out the difference between Plato and Descartes in terms of two contrasting pairs of terms: trust and opinion for Plato, doubt and certainty for Descartes. Plato describes our attitude to the visible realm as one of trust—πίστις (see *Republic*, 511 e). Descartes begins his *Meditations* by doubting his perceptions. For Plato, the examination of opinion is a necessary first step in the philosophical ascent to the highest things. He depicts Socrates as enquiring into the opinions of the most various sorts of men. There is in Socrates a certain trust in the existence of "true" or "right" opinions. At times, such opinions can become "hypotheses"; they can become stepping stones leading to "what is free from hypothesis" (*Republic*, 511 b). For Descartes, precisely the opposite attitude is assumed. Because of his lack of such trust, he begins his *Meditations* by withdrawing from society and systematically doubting every opinion he has hitherto accepted on trust. His position is summed up by the statement: "reason already persuades me that I ought no less carefully to withhold my assent from matters which are not entirely certain and indubitable than from those which appear to me manifestly to be false . . ." ("Meditation I," *Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. E. Haldand and G. Ross, p. 145).

This lack of assent, of qualified trust, reveals the transformation that philosophy undergoes in Descartes' hands. It changes from a love of wisdom to a love of certainty. Certainty, even if it concerns what is apparently trivial, becomes the philosopher's goal. The certainty Descartes pursues has an abso-

lute, almost mathematical character. His assent will be given only to matters "entirely certain and indubitable." This is a sign that certainty, rather than wisdom, has become the object of his philosophical love. What a philosopher loves and, hence, pursues is generally what he takes as absolute. For Descartes, this absolute is nothing less than certainty itself.

How did this transformation occur? My claim is that it is the result of a transformation in the minds of philosophers of what it means for an idea or εἶδος to be. More precisely put, it is the result of a transformation, occurring in the Middle Ages, in the philosophical notion of the *ontological status* of the idea. Because of this transformation, doubt replaces trust in our perceptions. In the consequent shifting world of doubt, certainty becomes our paramount object. It is both the initial and final goal of our philosophical enquiries.

II

Before I present the historical evidence for this thesis, we must be clear on what is meant by the term *ontological status*. The term signifies "status of being." An entity can be said to have the status of a merely *possible* being. Alternatively, it can be said to have the status of an *actual* existent. Here, we must note that the question of the content of a being—the question of its essence or "whatness"—is a question distinct from that of its ontological status. *Whether* something is, i.e., whether it is actual or merely a possible existent, is not answered by giving a concept delineating *what* the entity is. As Thomas Aquinas puts this, "I can know what a man or a phoenix is and still be ignorant whether it exists in reality" (*De Ente et Essentia*, ch. 4, ed. M. D. Roland-Gosselin, p. 34). Kant expresses the same point by writing, "'Being' is obviously not a real predicate; that is, it is not a concept of something which could be added to the concept of a thing" ("Kitrik" B 636). If it were a real predicate, i.e., part of the concept of a thing, then from knowing the what, I could know the whether—i.e., whether the concept refers to an actual or a merely possible existent. That this is not the case is shown by the fact that there is not the least difference in content between the thought of a possible existent and the conception that arises from its actual presence. As Kant observes, the thought of a hundred possible thalers contains the same number of coins as a hundred actual thalers (see *ibid.*, B 637). Because of this loans can be repaid or, more generally, what we think of as merely possible can be encountered and recognized in reality. If being did make a conceptual difference, if it were something "added to the concept of a thing," then when I was actually repaid, I would reply, "This is *not* what I had in mind when I thought of the possibility of repayment."

This distinction has a technical name. It is called *the distinction between being and essence*. "Essence," as Aquinas says, "is what the definition of a

thing signifies" (*De Ente et Essentia*, ch. 2, p. 7). It is the content of an idea, the idea, say, of a man or a phoenix as delineated by its definition. Being, as distinct from essence, refers to ontological status. Admitting this distinction between being and essence, we must also admit that what is defined conceptually is not specified according to its mode of being. The question of its ontological status, the question concerning the *actual or merely possible* being of what is defined, is not answered through its definition.

This point applies directly to our thesis about the ideas. It does so because the ideas, considered simply in themselves, are the same as essences. An essence, we said, is the content of an idea or εἶδος. An idea, however, is just its own content and nothing more. It is a *pure* conceptual unit. It is such by virtue of being, in itself, simply the conceptual content that a definition delineates. Given the fact that *idea* and *essence* denote the same thing, what we said about the essence applies to the idea. The latter, too, is necessarily silent on the question of being. Otherwise put, no examination of an idea as it is in itself—i.e., as a pure conceptual unit—can answer the question of actual versus possible being. This silence on the question of being, based as it is on the very nature of the idea, is absolutely general. It, thus, applies to the question of the idea's own ontological status. If we attempt to answer it by considering the conceptual content that is the idea, we are always free to answer it in two possible ways. We are free to give the idea the ontological status of a possibility or an actuality.

III

The history of philosophy gives ample evidence of this freedom. For the moderns, the idea has the ontological status of a possibility. To illustrate this, I shall take three prominent figures: Kant, Whitehead, and Husserl. According to Kant, every conception that the understanding itself grasps is grasped under the aspect of possibility (see "Kritik d. Urtheilskraft," *Kants Werke*, V, 402). For very different reasons, Whitehead concurs: ideas or essences are "eternal objects." But, as he says, "the metaphysical status of an eternal object is that of a possibility for an actuality . . . actualization is a selection among possibilities" (*Science and the Modern World*, p. 144). Husserl, who would not at all be found in Whitehead's camp, agrees on this one point: possibility and essentiality are the same. The reason he gives for this is that the being of an idea is the being of an ideal or pure possibility (see *Logische Untersuchungen*, 5th ed., I, 129, 240, II/1, 115, II/2, 103). Such examples could be multiplied. In modern times, the idea is universally given the status of a possibility: an empirically grounded possibility for the empiricists, an ideal or "pure" possibility for the non-empiricists. In neither case are ideas considered to be actualities.

For Plato, however, this was just what the ideas or εἶδη were when he introduced them into philosophical discourse. He names them οὐσία which is

taken from the participle of the verb to be, εἶναι. A corresponding root is found in the word *essence*, in Latin, *essentia*. The root *esse* means “to be.” To call something οὐσία or *essentia* was to say that it actually is. It has what is signified by the verb *to be*. The same point can be made by looking at the divided line (see *Republic*, 509 d–511 e). In a proportion involving the ratio between reality and image, the ideas are at the top. They are supremely real. They possess οὐσία in the highest degree.

One of the ways to see why this is so is to look at Parmenides’ statement: τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἔστιν τε καὶ εἶναι (*Poem*, Fr. 3). We can translate this as “the same thing exists for thinking and being, and take this to mean: “the same thing can be thought as can be.” So understood, we have a statement of logical equivalence: Thinkability implies being and being implies thinkability. Now, whether or not this understanding agrees with Parmenides’ original intention, it does yield a notion that for Plato is crucial for the status of the ideas. This is that thinkability and being pertain to the same thing. More precisely expressed, that which makes it possible for a thing to be *also* makes it possible for it to be thinkable. The common ground of these possibilities is self-identity or self-sameness. This self-identity will turn out to be a mysterious quality. For the moment, however, we may define it as the quality of something remaining the same with itself.

That such a quality is at the root of being is affirmed by Plato when he writes that “the very being of to be—αὐτὴ ἡ οὐσία τοῦ εἶναι—is to be “always in the same manner in relation to the same things.” As Plato explains, this is to be “unchanging” and, thus, to remain the same with oneself. The ideas “beauty itself, equality itself, and every itself” are called *being*—τὸ ὄν—and this, because they “do not admit of any change whatsoever” (*Phaedo*, 78 d). Plato’s position follows from Parmenides’ statement and an analysis of what change means. Its fundamental intuition is that change is always change of something. This something is an underlying self-identity. The consequence is that real loss of self-identity is not change, but rather annihilation, pure and simple, of the individual. Now, the presence of self-identity not only makes possible the persistent being in time of the individual, it also makes possible the predication of an idea of this individual. If change negated all self-identity, then nothing in our changing world could have any intelligible name or sense. Let us take an example, a person proceeding from a newborn baby to extreme old age. The presence of some self-identical element in this process allows us to predicate the idea “human” of this individual. When the person dies, this is no longer possible. What answers to the concept “human” is no longer there. The point is that self-identity is required both for being and being thought. What is not self-identical cannot be thought and cannot be.

A number of consequences follow from this reasoning. The first is that the ability to recognize being and the ability to predicate an idea of a thing

always occur together. They must, if they are both based on the apprehension of an underlying self-identity. Given that predicating an idea of a thing is the same as the recognition of the thing as intelligible, *being* and *intelligibility* must be understood as coextensive terms. One cannot ascribe the one without ascribing the other; whatever has a share in being must also have a share in intelligibility. Now, participation—μετέχειν—means literally “having a share in.” It, thus, follows that participation must be understood as participation in *both* being and intelligibility. We can put this in terms of the Platonic doctrine that a thing is intelligible by virtue of its participating in its idea. The idea itself is the conceptual expression of the self-identity that Plato calls the οὐσία of *to be*. Thus, one can also say that a thing has being by virtue of its participating in its idea—i.e., participating in the self-identity that the idea expresses in terms of an unchanging concept. From this it follows that participation demands a single notion of being, one common to both the thing and its idea. A thing could not possess its being by virtue of its participation in its idea if both thing and idea did not exist by virtue of the same οὐσία of *to be*. This is self-identity or self-sameness. This self-identity is what allows us to take the divided line and see it as a hierarchy of beings with the ideas at the top. Levels of being could not be ordered and ranked if there were not a single standard of being by which to measure them. This, for Plato, is the self-sameness which images, things, mathematical objects and ideas respectively possess to a more and more perfect degree.

IV

How did the transformation between Plato and the moderns occur? How do the ideas, from being understood as pure actualities—i.e., entities capable of being called τὸ ὄν—become, for the moderns, expressions of possibility? From a philosophical standpoint, the answer to this question has already been indicated. Our claim is that self-identity is not a sure criterion of being. In particular, it does not point to the actual as opposed to the merely possible. The reason for this is that, like any other conceptual content, self-identity is part of the essential determination of a thing. As forming part of a thing's essence, it is silent on the question of the status of the being of a thing. Thus, to return to Kant's example, we can say that a possible entity—a hundred possible thalers—possess as much self-identity as an actual identity. Granting this, we must admit that self-identity does not distinguish between the actual and the possible. An argument for the actuality of the ideas, which is based like Plato's on their self-identity, is, thus, bound to fail. Here, indeed, we can find the underlying reason for the ambiguity which, as we shall see, characterizes the use of the term *self-identity*. The concept per se is not ambiguous, its meaning being simply “sameness with self.” It becomes ambiguous when we attempt to make it

into a criterion of being, something no concept is fitted to do.

For Plato, the attempt to make self-identity a standard of being arises in connection with his doctrine of participation. As we have seen, entities have being to the point that they participate—or have a share—in self-identity. How are we to understand the self-identity that is to be shared in? We cannot understand it as simple *identity with self*. That which shares with another its identity with self would either absorb the other into its own identity or else lose itself in the identity of the other. Thus, if the ideas and things are related by virtue of their sharing in self-identity, either the idea would absorb the thing or vice versa. A similar difficulty arises when we take self-identity as the quality of *being one*. Is the oneness to be referred to the oneness of a thing or to the oneness of the idea?

The *Parmenides* shows Plato's awareness of the difficulty we are pointing to. He has Parmenides ask Socrates if things must participate either in the whole of an idea or in a part of it. Socrates agrees that these are the alternatives. Both, however, seem to be impossible. Participation by parts would make the ideas divisible by parts. It would also make us say that we can predicate "part" of an idea of a thing. Such notions are strictly speaking unintelligible. Ideas, which are not material things, are not materially divisible. But neither are they conceptually divisible. A *simple* idea cannot be conceptually divided. As it has no parts, part of it cannot be predicated of a thing. A *complex* idea, so divided, would become a different idea. Here, the notion of the idea as maintaining its self-identity by virtue of its unity precludes all division. If, however, we say that the *whole* of the idea is participated in, we still cannot maintain the necessary oneness of the idea. If individuals participate in the whole of the idea, then, as Socrates admits, "the whole idea is one and yet, being one, is in each of the many" (*Parmenides* 131 a, in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B Jowett, vol. 2, p. 91). This, however, implies that "one and the same thing will exist as a whole at the same time in many different individuals and therefore will be in a state of separation from itself" (*ibid.*, 131 b). Self-separation seems the opposite of self-identity when we understand this latter as the quality of being one. To be as a whole in many is to be many rather than being one.

As is obvious, at the basis of Parmenides' dialectic is the ambiguity of the meaning of being one. There is being one in the sense that an idea or concept is one; there is also being one in the sense that an individual thing is one. If, with Plato, we understand participation in terms of a single notion of being, one common to both the thing and the idea, then we are faced with the problem of trying to put together these two different ways of being one. This, of course, is the famous problem of the universals: How can the idea or species be present in the individuals, or how can the distinct individuals share in the unity of the species? The endless debate on the question is actually about the notion of being. Both sides agree that the very being of *to be* is being one, but disagree on what this last means. If *to be* means to be one thing, then the ideas, which

have only conceptual unity, are not. They are nothing but "common names" produced by habit, circles of association, historical processes—the list is endless. An illegitimate child who is not owned up puts everybody under the suspicion of parentage. If we reverse this and say that to be means to be a conceptual unity, then the same fate befalls individual things. *What* a thing is, its form or common nature, is what is. In itself, in its own individual unity, the thing is not. Both solutions are obviously one-sided. For just as our senses convince us that there are individual things, so without conceptual unities we would have no specifically human mental life.

The debate points out a problem, but it does not give a solution. When, in the Middle Ages, a solution does arise, it occurs by virtue of a transformation of the ontological status of the idea. The context of this solution is set by Aristotle. More specifically, it is set by his denial that ideas or essences exist in themselves as opposed to being either in the mind or in objects (see *Metaphysics*, 991b, 1–3, 1039a, 24 ff). For his medieval followers, this denial of the self-subsistent idea or essence does not solve the problem of the universals. The denial leaves intact the two notions of being on which the problem revolves. The facts of predication show this. What is predicated is the idea in the mind. Viewed in terms of the activity of predication, the idea has the characteristic of universality. As engaged in the individual object, however, the idea has the characteristic of singularity. Thus, we do not predicate Socrates' "humanity" of Plato. The "humanity" of Socrates is part of his individuality. It is an informing form that makes him into a definite individual—i.e., into what Aristotle calls a *primary substance*. We do, however, predicate the idea of humanity which is present in our mind of both Socrates and Plato. It has the characteristic of universality: the character of one thing being applicable to many. How is this possible? How do we recognize that the humanity of a sensibly perceived singular is the same as the intellect's universal idea of humanity?

This is the question that Avicenna, an eleventh century Persian philosopher, asked himself. His answer is that such recognition is possible only by abstracting the idea or essence from both forms of being one. The unity of a universal and the unity of an individual must both be seen as accidental to the essence considered in itself. Without such an understanding, predication is impossible. Let me quote Avicenna on the essence "animal": "'Animal' is the same thing whether it be sensible or a concept in the mind. In itself, it is neither universal nor singular. If it were in itself universal so that animality were universal from the bare fact of being animality, the consequence would be that no animal would be a singular, but every animal would be a universal. If, however, animal *qua* animal were singular, it would be impossible for there to be more than one singular, namely the very singular to which animality belongs, and it would be impossible for any other singular to be an animal" (*Logica*, III, fol. 12r, col. 1).

Avicenna is here arguing that we cannot explain predication by identifying the essence either with the universality of the concept or the singularity of the thing. Predication requires both the thing and the concept, and they must be brought together through an essence that is recognizably present in each. If this is the case, then Avicenna's conclusion apparently follows. It is that we conceive something "accidental" to animality when beyond its bare content we think of it as singular or universal (see *ibid.*; see also Avicenna, *Metaphysica*, V, fol. 86 v, cols. 1–2).

Avicenna's position is in some sense a return to Plato, but it is a return that transforms Plato's original conception. Plato has Parmenides ask: "In the first place, I think, Socrates, that you, or anyone else who maintains the existence of absolute essences, will admit that they cannot exist in us?" To this Socrates replies: "No, for then they would not be absolute" (*Parmenides*, 133 c, *The Dialogues*, trans. B. Jowett, vol. 2, p. 94). Now, it seems to be part of the logic of the notions that make up Plato's thought that they are incapable of being completely absorbed in incompatible philosophical systems. They have, in other words, a certain resistance to their being misunderstood. This resistance is evident here. Attempting to follow Aristotle, Avicenna begins with the position that essences are either in the mind or in things. But then he examines predication, and the logic of the notion of an essence compels him to say that essences cannot be identified either with being in the mind or being in things. In themselves, absolutely considered, they are, as Avicenna admits, in neither. Yet the very way in which Avicenna affirms this exhibits the transformation he has wrought in Plato's essence. It is a transformation of the criterion of being which underlies Plato's notion of participation.

The problem with this criterion in Avicenna's eyes is its equation of being and being one. How can we understand oneness with respect to the ideas? How can an idea or essence be—that is, be one—in many individuals, each of which is also called one? Avicenna's answer is to split the category of being by asserting that *to be* does not necessarily mean to be one. Let me restate this. If asked how the idea can be one and yet, being one, *be* in each of the many individuals, Avicenna would reply that it is precisely because unity is *accidental* to the being of an idea that its being in the many does not prejudice the idea's own inherent being. To make the idea one is to make it present either in the mind or in things. It is to make it *either* an idea in the mind which is predicable of many *or* an individual which is a subject of predication but not itself predicable of another. Both forms of being one are accidental to it as it is in itself. In itself, it represents a form of being that is other than predicable notion or physical object. Itself neither, it has the possibility of being either. In other words, from the point of view of mental notion or physical thing, it is just this possibility of being either and nothing more. Its ontological status is simply that of a *possibility*.

The transformation that Avicenna has worked on Plato's original position can be indicated by noting the following. For Plato, participation is based on a single notion of being. As a consequence, participation in an idea is also participation in being. For Avicenna, this is not the case. The essence, insofar as it lacks unity, has not the same being that an individual entity has. Thus, participation in an essence does not mean participation in actuality. How could it if the essence, instead of being supremely actual, represents only a possibility? In fact, for Avicenna, the function of sharing being is taken over by God, the only necessary being. Things cannot become actual by participating in their essence, since essence has, for Avicenna, no inherent status of actuality.

We need a further step to come to the modern notion of an essence or idea. Once again it can be looked upon, at least in a superficial way, as an attempt to return to Plato. This return attempts to restore to essence some notion of unity.

While Avicenna's influence was spreading through the Arab world, the Latin West was independently developing a doctrine of the transcendent properties of being. These are the properties of being irrespective of where it is found. There are a number of these properties, but we need only mention one: unity. The doctrine taught that being and unity are coextensive properties. Where being is present, unity is present. To the point that being is lacking, there is a corresponding lack of unity.² When Avicenna entered the West with his assertion that an essence had being but not unity, only two alternatives seemed possible to those who thought being and unity were coextensive. They could accept Avicenna's denial of the unity of an essence, but reject his teaching on the proper being of an essence. Alternately, they could accept his assertion that an essence has a proper being and reject his doctrine that unity does not apply to the essence as such.³ The first course was followed by Aquinas who writes that essence, considered in itself, abstracts from "any being whatsoever" (*De Ente et Essentia*, cap. 3, p. 26). In other words, lacking unity, it must, in itself, lack being. This is part of what Aquinas means when he writes that essence and being are "really distinct." The famous defense of this distinction is his treatise, *On Being and Essence*.

The second course was taken by Scotus. Scotus agrees with Avicenna that essences have a proper being. He thus argues against Aquinas's attempt to conceive of essence apart from being (see *Opus Oxoniense*, lib. IV, d. 11, q. 3, n. 46, Vives ed.). He also asserts that essences do have a unity—not the unity of a mental idea or physical thing, but something slightly less than this, called *minor unity*.⁴ This unity corresponds to Avicenna's being of an essence. Such unity is demanded by the fact that the essence in the individual perceived through sensation and the essence in the mind's universal notion are, in fact, the same essence.

How does Scotus know that they are the same essence? The answer can be drawn from the elements of Scotus's position. The first of these is that

essence in itself does not express reality, be this the reality of a mental idea or an extramental thing. It expresses only the possibility of a reality. Its ontological status—i.e., the status of its being—is that of a possibility (see *Op. Ox.*, lib. I, d. 2, q. 1, n. 56). The second is that the examination of this possibility is the examination of the essence's "minor unity." This means, for Scotus, that the terms that make up the definition of an essence must not be contradictory. They must be compatible, that is, capable of forming a unity. The insight here is that, without this capability, the essence defined by these terms cannot be instantiated as a unity either in the mind or in things. It cannot be so instantiated in the mind for, as Scotus observes, contradictories cannot be thought of as single notions (see *Opus Oxoniensen*, lib. I, d. 2, q. 1; *Duns Scotus, Philosophical Writings*, ed. A. Wolter, p. 73). This applies to analytical contradictions such as "p and not-p." It also applies to synthetic contradictions such as the concept of a red tone. In such a case, the notions are so "distant" from each other that neither determines the other. If we leave the notion of figure out of account, color and tonality can only be thought of as separate, unrelated notions. The same criteria of compatibility apply to instantiation in things. To say "this one" in the sensible world implies that there is a subject of predication there. It presupposes that the predicates we express are *unifiable* in this subject. Otherwise, there would not be one but two subjects of predication there.

A further element in Scotus's position is that we never leave the field of being when we talk about an essence. There is a being of an essence; in fact, there is an existence of an essence. Essences themselves are only possibles; but as Lychetus, Scotus's authorized commentator, remarks: "It is simply contradictory for any essence to have its being of a possible and not to have its existence of a being of a possible" (*Opus Oxoniensen*, lib. II, d. 3, q. 1, n. 7). In other words, because essences have being, they also have existence. For Scotus, this means that degrees of existence follow upon degrees of essence (see *Opus Oxoniensen*, lib. II, d. 3, q. 3, n. 1). I can illustrate this by an example, the person of Socrates. We start out with the most general essence we can think of, that of thinghood or substance. We now begin to specify this essence, adding successively the predicates, living, animal, two-legged, rational, capable of laughter, in Athens, engaged in dialectic, snubnosed, and so forth. The essence, as it is further specified, gradually narrows and makes more definite its unity. The possibility corresponding to its unity becomes more defined. The possibility of a rational animal living in Athens is not the possibility of thinghood in general. Now, the ultimate determination is, of course, one of singularity, in this case, the *numerical singularity* of an individual thing. When we reach it, then according to Scotus, we have an existence corresponding to this grade of determination. We have the actual existence of an individual man. This view can be summed up by saying that all individual existents are completely full essences. They are specified down to the here and now of their being. Let me make a

comparison. If we say that such essential determinations must take account of every element of a person's life and, in this, also his relations to all other actual existents, we shall be able to see the monads of Leibniz peeping over Scotus's shoulder. Such monads also owe their actual existence to the fullness of their essence (see *Discourse on Metaphysics*, XIII, in *Basic Writings*).

Scotus's proof for the existence of God nicely illustrates this position. The proof involves a redefinition of Anselm's formula for God. In Scotus's version, it runs: "God is that without contradiction than which a greater cannot be conceived without contradiction" (*Duns Scotus, Philosophical Writings*, p. 73). The addition of the words, "without contradiction," points to the fact that Scotus's attention is on the essence of God. Since essences are possibles, to demonstrate an essence is to demonstrate a possibility. Yet, as we said, the basis of essential possibility is minor unity. This is the same as the absence of self-contradiction. Thus, according to Scotus, what one has to first demonstrate is that the essence of God "non contradicit entitati," "does not contradict entityness." This phrase is typical of Scotus. Less literally translated, it means "does not contradict that which every entity must be in order to be." This, for Scotus, is being self-compatible. Every entity must have compatible attributes if it is to be. Thus, the major part of Scotus's argumentation is directed toward showing that God, as Christians conceive him—as causally active, as intelligent, as willing, as infinite and perfect, but especially as the first or highest—is, in fact, a compatible essence. This means, for example, demonstrating that the notion of causality is compatible with that of a first cause. It means demonstrating that the notion of perfection is compatible with the notion of a highest or first degree of perfection (see *Duns Scotus Philosophical Writings*, pp. 39–45, 48–49).

All of these demonstrations, if we grant them, prove that God is possible as an essence. What about the proof that he is an actual existent, that he is a numerical singular? To demonstrate this, we have to establish that he is unique. This is because the grade of actual existence corresponds to that of an essence specified down to the uniqueness and singularity of an actual individual. To manage this step of the proof, Scotus points out that the notion of a first in the order of causality—as well as in the orders of perfection, will, intelligence, and so forth—can involve only the same unique singular. The notion of two firsts, as he argues, is simply contradictory. It is, for example, contradictory to conceive of more than one being which, *as first*, is defined as the necessary and sufficient cause of the world's existence. If there were more than one, neither cause, by itself, would be a sufficient cause. The result of such arguments is the assertion that, if God is possible, he must necessarily be an actual existent. This follows because God's notion specifies in the order of possibility a unique singular. His essence includes his actual existence, for it is an essence which is only possible as that of a *Uniqueness* *Material*

There are a number of ways Scotus makes this point. For example, he notes that a first cause is essentially possible only as an actual existent. It is, he argues, contradictory to the notion of a first cause of existence to receive its actual existence from some other cause. Thus, if it is, indeed, *possible* for a first cause to exist, it must actually exist of itself. The *possibility* of its existence, however, has already been demonstrated by Scotus's arguments showing that the essence of a unique first cause is a compatible essence. As a consequence, we must say that a first cause does, indeed, actually exist of itself. It is an actually existent entity (see *Duns Scotus, Philosophical Writings*, p. 46). A similar argument is made about God as the measure of perfection.

Whatever else we might think about this proof, we should keep an essential point in mind. It only works for God. In other words, since nothing else is first, nothing else can be proven to be unique and, therefore, actual by this method. We can express this by saying that God is a deductive singular. From his notion as a *first*, we deduce he can *be* only as an actual singular. All other beings, like our example of Socrates, are singular inductively. They are singular by the inductive addition of conceptual formal note to conceptual formal note, each further conceptual determination working to further specify the essence in question.

What happens when we say that such "notes" or specific differences are infinite in number, that they comprehend the specification of the relations of our finite being to every other finite being? If we believe this, then Leibniz's God is capable of seeing in our essence the necessity of our actual existence. But we, with our limited understanding, are not. In other words, *for us*, every actual existent other than God is, in terms of its conceptual essence, essentially unprovable. The conclusion follows from our adoption of Scotus's metaphysics. The result of this metaphysics is ultimately to collapse being and essence together. In Scotus's words, "It is simply false that being is other than essence" (*Opus Oxoniense*, lib. IV, d. 11, q. 3, n. 46). Granting this, the proof of a being is also the proof of an essence. Thus, if we say that a finite being has an infinite number of specifying differences in its essence, then a proof of its actual being, as based on the examination of its essence, is a proof necessarily involving this infinity. It requires the demonstration of the compatibility of an infinite number of formal notes. Such a demonstration is impossible for a finite mind. In terms of our limited, human conceptions of individual beings, we never cross the boundary between possibility and actuality. This is because we can never inductively specify an entity down to this one thing, to an actually existing unique singular. We mention this to point out the transformation that Scotus has worked on the original Parmenidean equation between conceivability and actual being, $\nu\omicron\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu$ and $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu\alpha\iota$. The equation no longer involves, as it did for Plato, the identification of a *limited* number of underlying, self-identical elements.

V

Let us return to Descartes. In his *Meditations*, Descartes doubts the world and then finds it necessary first to prove God in order to assure himself of the existence, say, of his inkpot. Why begin with God rather than the inkpot? The procedure is in some sense intelligible if we take into account the philosophical world into which Descartes was born. As a number of historians have pointed out, the underlying philosophical influence in this world was that of Scotus.⁵ His influence can be seen by comparing Descartes' proof for the existence of God with Scotus' original. The former is actually a truncated version of the latter. Thus, at least historically, the reason that Descartes must begin with God's existence is clear. In the order of demonstration, God's existence comes first because it is, in fact, the only existence that we can, in this tradition, demonstrate.

What about Cartesian doubt? There are, as we maintained at the beginning, two sides to this doubt: doubt of perception and doubt of opinion. Both, we claim, can be traced to the transformation in the ontological status of the idea.

Let us consider, first, the value Descartes places on opinion. As indicated above, the transformation implies that every essential predication we can make about the world grasps its objects only under the aspect of possibility. In other words, the subject of our discourse, insofar as our discourse is concerned, is only a possibility. It is an essence which we can only incompletely specify. For all our talk, in terms of our statements' *essential* content, the object we are talking about may or may not actually be. The implication is that our statements, considered in themselves, express what may be called *mere* opinion. By this, we mean that they have no inherent claim to be "true" or "right." Because of this, their examination is not, as Plato thought, a necessary first step for philosophical enquiry. Since they are, in their essential content, inherently capable of expressing an actual reality, they must, as Descartes believes, be, one and all, doubted.

What about a direct perception of the object? Plato, as we said, associates the realm of the directly perceivable with the attitude of trust. Trust, as opposed to certitude, is all that we can have if we remain on the level of direct (or sensuous) perception. On this level, we cannot confirm a perception except through a further perception, and so we have ultimately to trust our perceptions. Between this trust and the Cartesian doubt of perception, there also lies the change in the status of the idea. The idea, for Plato, is etymologically and philosophically tied to perception. The Platonic term for the idea, εἶδος, is taken from εἶδω, which means "perceive." The philosophical link between the two appears when we take the ideas we garner from our perceptions of the world as the highest expressions of actuality. If we take the ideas as supremely

actual, we are inclined to trust rather than to doubt our perceptions; for then we say that our ideas *are* and that their images, the directly perceivable things, also are. The relation here is that of actuality to image as given by the divided line. For Plato, given that the ideas are, the directly perceivable things—which, as images, are dependent on the ideas—must also be.

This philosophical position is, of course, completely undermined once we say that the ideas have the ontological status of possibilities, i.e., that they express the fact that what sensibly instantiates them may or may not be. At this point, they cannot provide a philosophical basis for a belief in the existence of sensible things. Trust, therefore, turns to doubt, and like Descartes we must turn to the benevolence of God to assure us of the world we once took for granted. A sign of the new character of this doubt is the fact that this benevolence itself becomes an object of proof rather than a matter of direct perception. In the absence of any proof to the contrary, it is, for Descartes, possible that God may be an evil, deceiving genius. The direct experience of God's benevolence is grace. That grace could be considered a matter of demonstration is a sure sign that the modern age has been entered.⁶

Was this transition to modernity necessary? Was it necessary for us, with Descartes, to enter an age in which we attempt to demonstrate matters which we formerly took on trust or faith? What about modernity itself? Is *it* necessary? Given that the whole of the history we have recounted turns on the failure to distinguish being and essence, we cannot say this. What we can say is that the question of being, of that which, as Parmenides says, "is and cannot not-be," still remains open.