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TOMASZ STEPIEN

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# Aquinas against spiritual matter

Tomasz Stepien

The problem of the nature of angels is today the issue of theological investigations, but the historical approach to this matter suggests that it used to be a rather metaphysical issue. It may be seen in thirteenth-century discussions on the nature of angels since at that time a significant turn in the approach to the problem occurred. David Keck in his extensive study *Angels and angelology in the Middle Ages* aptly describes what might be called the „metaphysical turn” in the study of angelic nature.<sup>1</sup> Scholars shifted their interest from the biblical and monastic view of angels to the approach based on the study of their nature as such. This change commenced in the twelfth-century but it reached its fully developed form in the thirteenth-century upon re-discovery of the works of Aristotle. The study of the nature of angels also acquired its proper place dictated by the sequence given by Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*.<sup>2</sup> It seems that the understanding of the nature of angels and its composition became the main topic in this new study of angels. Spiritual matter becomes commonly perceived as a necessary element of the nature of angels.

Aquinas’s view on the matter is unique. He was the only one who completely rejected the concept and defended his position in various places of his works. John F. Wippel showed well Thomas’s original approach in a thorough study on the composition of the nature of angels. He compared the point of view of Aquinas with that of Bonaventure and Godfrey of Fontaines, but explaining St. Thomas’s position he concentrated on the *De ente et essentia* and *Summa contra gentiles*.<sup>3</sup>

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1. KECK 1998, 83-92.

2. David Keck wrote commenting the words of Bonaventure: «His use of the phrase *in proper sequence* suggests that the consideration of angelic nature was no longer an *ad hoc* theological topic, as it had been for Bernard, but rather a subject with clearly defined place in theology». KECK 1998, 87-88.

3. John F. Wippel extensively presents Aquinas’s theory contained in *De ente et essentia* 4 (WIPPEL 2012, 53-62), *Summa contra Gentiles* II, 52 (WIPPEL 2012, 62-64) and he limits his discussion on *De substantiis separatis* to the fourth argument, which corresponds to the topic of his article (WIPPEL 2012, 64-65).

He briefly referred to *De substantiis separatis*, but in my opinion this work presents the mature position of Aquinas as it was written at the end of his life.<sup>4</sup> *On separated substances* also contains the most developed polemic with Salomon Ibn Gabirol (Avicbron) whom Aquinas identifies as the source of hylomorphism - the opinion playing the key role in the discussion on spiritual matter. St. Thomas's polemic contained in *De substantiis separatis* is very well presented in the already classical study by James Collins: *The Thomistic Philosophy of The Angels*.<sup>5</sup> He very accurately points out that the goal of Aquinas is to separate logic from ontology and that he can do it only by a revision of existing metaphysics.<sup>6</sup> However, in his analysis Collins uses an inaccurate version of the Latin text (the only one available at his time), which has a lot of problematic fragments, as Francis J. Lascoe showed it.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, James Collins often seems to understand *esse* from the original text as "being", and thus he loses some metaphysical context certainly intended by St. Thomas.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the refutation of spiritual matter in *De substantiis separatis* needs to be revised. In my article, I intend to analyze those fragments in the context of the new understanding of *esse*, but I would also like to show that the problem cannot be closed within strictly theological borders because it refers to wider metaphysical questions concerning the nature of the spiritual

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4. TORRELL 2005, 350; 435. Francis J. Lascoe quotes in his introduction to the Latin text of *De substantiis separatis* the opinions of many scholars who underlined the importance of this treaty to understand the metaphysics of Aquinas (LASCOE 1962, 2-3).

5. COLLINS 1947, 44-50; 54-74.

6. COLLINS 1947, 57. «In view of this care to keep distinct the fields of logic and ontology and to insist upon the analogy of being, St. Thomas' polemic had a wider bearing than simply as propaedeutic to his pneumatology. It also served to lay the foundation for his entire metaphysical effort to clarify the notion of being and to make it central in Christian philosophy. To achieve this purpose meant subjecting such common notions as essence and existence, potency and act, to searching criticism and revision. This is the larger import of the critique of universal matter».

7. LASCOE 1962, 23-34 (Francis J. Lascoe published his English translation for the first time in 1959. The newly established Latin text from 12 medieval manuscripts was published in 1962, and one year later he issued side-by-side Latin-English version of the *De substantiis separatis*).

8. It can be seen best in his presentation of Aquinas answer to the third argument, COLLINS 1947, 71-72. He devotes next chapter to Thomas's division of the act of being and essence addressing other works of Aquinas, COLLINS 1947, 75-86.

being as such. Those questions were asked already in Ancient Greek Neoplatonism.

We owe the term *hyle* to Aristotle, but we can find certain approach to the matter even in the teaching of Ionian natural philosophers. The concept of matter can also be found in Plato's *Timaeus*<sup>9</sup> as a receptacle (*hypodochē*), and the scholars often agree that those two philosophers understood matter differently. It was Aristotle who invented the term "spiritual matter" (*hyle noete*),<sup>10</sup> but it reached its full development and metaphysical foundation in the *Enneads* by Plotinus. What is interesting the understanding of matter which we find in Ibn Gabirol whom Latin writers called Avicbron is highly dependent on the Neoplatonic view of matter as the universal substratum which occurs at all levels of reality. Avicbron's argumentation in his work *Fons vitae* bears profound resemblance to *Enneads* by Plotinus, especially to the tractate *On the Two Kinds of Matter* (*Enneads* II, 4). This similarity can be seen not only in contents but also in the way of presenting the problem. Ibn Gabirol, just like Plotinus, starts with the objections against the concept of spiritual matter. Then he addresses those objections rejecting them one by one. According to John M. Dillon we cannot demonstrate direct dependence of Ibn Gabirol on Plotinus, but we can see "two incisive and highly original minds working within the same tradition and reaching similar conclusions about the structure of the universe".<sup>11</sup>

The problem becomes more complicated when we look at it from Bonaventure's perspective. His view is important because it is perceived as typical for the thirteenth century.<sup>12</sup> We will see in further analysis that the problem of spiritual matter is deeply linked with the problem of plurality of forms, but the source of this claim is unclear. Bonaventure accepted this position, but it is impossible to trace that he knew *Fons vitae*. That is why some modern scholars attempt to show St Augustine as the source of Bonaventure's homomorphism.<sup>13</sup> This issue should certainly become the object of further studies, but we can

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9. DILLON 1992, 43.

10. DILLON 1992, 48.

11. DILLON 1992, 51.

12. KECK 1998, 93.

13. John F. Wippel presents primarily the arguments of Roberto Zavalloni, see WIPPEL 2012, 46.

suggest that the *Enneads* by Plotinus were also a point of reference for St Augustine. Five arguments on the necessity of spiritual matter from the second Ennead could certainly suggest that there is the necessity for a kind of material element from the highest (except the One) to the lowest levels of reality. Nevertheless, for Aquinas as well as for various thirteenth-century writers it was obvious that Avicbron was the source of hylomorphism.<sup>14</sup> The purpose of his work *Fons vitae* was to investigate the nature of reality and especially to prove that the universe at all levels is made up of matter and form. Since it is obvious that the mundane reality is material, the key difficulty of hylomorphic view lays in the concept of spiritual matter as an element to be found in spiritual beings.

It seems that the problem touches upon deep metaphysical questions concerning the structure of reality. As we will see, the concept of spiritual matter brought a very elegant solution to the main issue of the distinction between the Primal Cause and lesser beings. The question of the nature of spiritual beings becomes even greater in the Jewish and Christian perspective. In theology based on the Holy Scripture a spiritual being is no longer merely an intellectual concept, but it becomes a live being having a great influence on ordinary human life; playing very important role in medieval cult and Medieval Society.<sup>15</sup>

A fragment of the unfinished *Treatise on separate substances* (*De substantiis separatis*) is certainly the most interesting Aquinas's critique of the existence of spiritual matter in the nature of angels.<sup>16</sup> St. Thomas refers in this work to the positions of all his predecessors whom he regards as having important opinions on angels. He presents

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14. WIPPEL 2012, 46.

15. KECK 1998, 3.

16. In this work Aquinas fully developed his polemic, but in other works we can also find mentions of Avicbron in the polemical context. In the first article of *Quaestio disputata de spiritualibus creaturis*, Thomas evokes Avicbron three times only to refute briefly his opinions. In the *Treaty on Angels in Summa theologiae*, Aquinas devotes more place to a polemic with the Jewish philosopher. In the second article of the fiftieth question, Aquinas start his response by saying: «Some assert that the angels are composed of matter and form; which opinion Avicbron endeavored to establish in his book of the *Fount of Life*» (ST I, q.50, a.2, co.). Also the second objection of this article is told to be Avicbron's opinion about the simple form, which cannot be called subject to accidents (ST I, q.50, a.2, 2; ad 2).

ancient philosophers (Plato, Aristotle), Church Fathers (Origen and also Manicheans), and finally Arabic philosophers such as Avicenna. St. Thomas devotes 4 chapters to *Fons vitae* of Ibn Gabirol, first recapitulating thoroughly his arguments, then rejecting them and proposing his own solutions. The first part summarizes briefly Avicenna's theory of universal matter and plurality of forms.<sup>17</sup> The subsequent part outlines five arguments which St. Thomas found in *Fons vitae*.<sup>18</sup> In the two following chapters Aquinas argues why the position of Avicenna cannot be correct. In chapter VI, he formulates four arguments against spiritual matter,<sup>19</sup> and in chapter VII, St. Thomas criticizes the opinion that spiritual and corporeal substances cannot be one matter with different qualities, what he sees as the key to the refutation of Avicenna's point.<sup>20</sup> In the last chapter on Avicenna's theory we find the systematic refutation of his five arguments.<sup>21</sup>

I would like to start my analysis with the second and the third argument discussed by St. Thomas. Especially the third argument is in my opinion the most important because it sets a foundation to understanding of Aquinas' position. The second question deals with the concept of spirituality and corporeity.<sup>22</sup> Avicenna claims that the spiritual and the corporeal have something in common as far as they are substances. Their difference does not lie in their substantiality but in being corporeal or spiritual, and that means that «just as in the case of corporeal substance, substance is as matter upholding corporeity, so in the case of spiritual substance, substance is as matter upholding spirituality».<sup>23</sup> Spirituality (*spiritualitatis*) is perceived as the form in which the substance participates, and can be more or less spiritual as far as it participates in the form of spirituality.<sup>24</sup> Aquinas explains that this claim may be summarized by saying that for Avicenna substance

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17. AQUINAS, *Tractatus de substantiis separatis*, V, 18-21.

18. AQUINAS, *Tractatus de substantiis separatis*, V, 22-23.

19. AQUINAS, *Tractatus de substantiis separatis*, VI, 24-31.

20. AQUINAS, *Tractatus de substantiis separatis*, VII, 32-36.

21. AQUINAS, *Tractatus de substantiis separatis*, VIII, 37-45.

22. AVICENNA, *Fons vitae*, I, 2-4.

23. AQUINAS, *Tractatus de substantiis separatis*, V, 22: «sicut in substantia corporali, substantia est tanquam materia sustentans corporeitatem, ita in substantia spirituali, substantia est quasi materia sustentans spiritualitatem».

24. COLLINS 1947, 45-46.

is matter, which is the subject of accidental attributes of spirituality and corporeity. The consequence is that the form is an accident, which in some cases must be perceived as *substantial* when it belongs to the definition as «whiteness belongs to the definition of the white man».<sup>25</sup> In his answer St Thomas says that spirituality or corporeity are not related to substance as forms to matter or accidents to the subject. Those two features come from substance, which in itself is spiritual or corporeal, and thus we can describe it in such way.<sup>26</sup> The problem of Avicbron then is not the claim of how the thing is, but rather of how we describe it. Thus the addition of corporeity or spirituality to the substance must be perceived as adding the difference to the genus, where genus is the substance and spiritual or corporeal substances are the species created by adding the differences of spirituality or corporeity.<sup>27</sup> Aquinas clearly refers here to his main objection to Avicbron formulated at the beginning of his polemic that for his adversary the intelligible composition (*intelligibilem compositionem*) of the species (composed of genus and difference) is the same with the composition of things themselves (*in rebus ipsis compositio*).<sup>28</sup> In other words, in the understanding of spirituality and corporeity Avicbron perceived a real thing in the same way as the thing which exists in our cognition. The simple distinction between the real thing and the cognized thing allows for refuting his opinion.

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25. AQUINAS, *Tractatus de substantiis separatis*, VI, 26: «Sic igitur si substantia quae praedicatur de omnibus, compararetur ad spirituale et corporale sicut materia et subiectum eorum, sequetur quod haec duo adveniant substantiae per modum accidentalium passionum; et similiter in omnibus aliis consequentibus: quod ipse expresse concedit ponens omnes formas secundum se consideratas accidentia esse; dicuntur tamen substantiales per comparisonem ad aliquas res in quarum definitionibus cadunt, sicut albedo est de ratione hominis albi».

26. COLLINS 1947, 70-71.

27. AQUINAS, *Tractatus de substantiis separatis*, VII, 40: «Cum enim dicimus aliquam substantiam corporalem esse vel spiritualement, non comparamus spiritualitatem vel corporeitatem ad substantiam sicut formas ad materiam, vel accidentia ad subiectum, sed sicut differentias ad genus: ita quod substantia spiritualis non propter aliquid additum substantiae est spiritualis sed secundum suam substantiam, sicut et substantia corporalis non per aliquid additum substantiae est corporalis, sed per suam substantiam».

28. AQUINAS, *Tractatus de substantiis separatis*, V, 19.

In the third argument, Aquinas further explores the problem. To give a proper answer to the question concerning the existence of spiritual matter it is necessary to start with the understanding of matter as such. It is so important because it touches upon the most profound metaphysical question of what is the basis of the existence (*esse*) of being. In his understanding of matter, Avicbron refers to the problem of *esse* saying that *esse* could be found in common both among spiritual substances as in higher beings, and in corporeal substances as in lower beings.<sup>29</sup> So this means that there is a common *esse* of all things and the existence of each substance is provided by its matter. According to the claim of plurality of forms we can say that *esse* is placed at the basic material level and all forms added to that matter make the difference between beings.

To understand better this opinion we must refer to the kinds of matter described by Avicbron. He claimed that there was “universal natural matter” and adding forms to this universal matter produced different kinds of matter. Such forms are understood as qualities, which differentiate the kinds of matter. Avicbron then distinguished three orders of matter:<sup>30</sup> 1) matter supporting quantity but also supporting contrary qualities (matter of elements - earth, water, air and fire), 2) matter supporting quantity but not supporting contrary qualities (matter of heavenly bodies), 3) matter not receptive of quantity (spiritual matter). Because “universal matter” is present in all created beings it seems that universal *esse* is the foundation of every being. For Aquinas such position means that *esse* is present in the same way in all beings, and all beings exist in the same way. Such claim cannot be true because for example: accidents exist not because they have their own *esse* but rather they have a share in the *esse* of substance.<sup>31</sup> St. Thomas explains that the perfection of substance depends on how it participates in *esse*. This *esse* is understood by St. Thomas as an act and therefore it cannot be present in being thanks to matter, which is potential. That is why: “... those substances which share in “to be” most perfectly, do not have

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29. AVICEBRON, *Fons vitae*, IV, 4; AQUINAS, *Tractatus de substantiis separatis*, V, 23.

30. AQUINAS, *Tractatus de substantiis separatis*, V, 21; COLLINS 1947, 48.

31. AQUINAS, *Tractatus de substantiis separatis*, VIII, 41: «Accidentia enim entia dicuntur, non quia in se ipsis esse habeant, sed quia esse eorum est in hoc quod insunt substantiae».



in themselves something which is a being only in potency. That is why they are called immaterial substances<sup>32</sup>.

Aquinas then discusses the true nature of *esse*, which must be perceived as an act (*actus*). He explains:

Again, as we consider the matter further, it becomes clear that a given being has a higher place among beings according as it has a greater share in “to be”. It is clear, however, that since being is divided by potency and act, act is more perfect than potency and has a greater share in “to be”. For we do not say without qualification that what is in potency, is; we say this only of what is in act. It is therefore necessary that that which is higher among beings approach more closely to the act, and that what is lowest among beings, be nearer to potency.<sup>33</sup>

We can see that the stress on understanding *esse* as an act totally turns around the understanding of the universe. Existence cannot be perceived as a substratum or basis to which required forms are added to define it in as a certain type of being, but rather pure *esse* is something which takes the highest place in the universe. If anything exists by itself and is totally independent in its existence it must be the most perfect being in the universe. In such *esse* all things can only participate in a certain way and the level of this participation corresponds to the level of perfection. That is why the concept of spiritual matter is not necessary to explain the existence of spiritual substance.

The new understanding of *esse* clarifies Aquinas’ discussion of the first argument on the metaphysical structure of separate substances. Avicbron claimed that there would be no diversity among spiritual substances unless they were composed of matter and form.<sup>34</sup> They cannot be simple forms because they could not be distinguished neither from

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32. AQUINAS, *Tractatus de substantiis separatis*, VIII, 41: «Illae enim substantiae quae perfectissime esse participant, non habent in se ipsis aliquid quod sit ens in potentia solum: unde immateriales substantiae dicuntur».

33. AQUINAS, *Tractatus de substantiis separatis*, VII, 34: «Manifestum est autem quod cum ens per potentiam et actum dividatur, quod actus est potentia perfectior, et magis habet de ratione essendi: non enim simpliciter esse dicimus quod est in potentia, sed solum quod est actu. Oportet igitur id quod est superius in entibus, magis accedere ad actum; quod autem est in entibus infimum, propinquius esse potentiae».

34. AVICEBRON, *Fons vitae*, IV, 2, 3; AQUINAS, *Tractatus de substantiis separatis*, V, 22.

God nor among themselves, and no cause of the differentiation could be found. Moreover, Avicenna claims that the difference between spiritual substances is the difference between perfection and imperfection, and he understands those as forms, which have to be added to the form of an angel. The form cannot be accepted by another form, so there must be some kind of matter in spiritual substance. The composition of spiritual matter and form is then once again indispensable.

Counterarguments put forward by Aquinas are against the plurality of forms rather than directly against spiritual matter. Avicenna thinks that perfection and imperfection are certain supervening forms or accidents that a subject needs, but on the contrary “one is more perfect than another according to the character of its own nature, insofar, namely, as the proper character of its species consists in a given grade of perfection”.<sup>35</sup> This statement cannot be called full explanation because it does not clarify the nature of perfection of form as such. That is why Aquinas once again proposes his own understanding of act and potency saying that form is more perfect according to its being in an act:

Thus, although they are only forms, nothing prevents us from positing a multiplicity among spiritual substances, on the basis that one is more imperfect than the other, provided we do so in such wise that the more imperfect is in potency in relation to the more perfect and so on upward to the first Form, which is act only, namely, God.<sup>36</sup>

Aquinas then again, just as we have seen above in the argument concerning *esse*, understands the order of the universe as the grades of being in act. He can also support such a view by his claim of the potency of spiritual substances. The gradation of more and less actual presumes the different relations between potency and act. Being that is more perfect must have less potency and participate in act in a better way. In this argument, once again the composition of the act of being

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35. AQUINAS, *Tractatus de substantiis separatis*, VIII, 39: «una est perfectior alia secundum rationem propriae naturae, inquantum scilicet propria ratio speciei in tali gradu perfectionis consistit».

36. AQUINAS, *Tractatus de substantiis separatis*, VIII, 38: «Sic igitur nihil prohibet in spiritualibus substantiis ponere multitudinem, quamvis sint formae tantum, ex hoc quod una earum est alia perfectior; ita quod imperfectior est in potentia respectu perfectioris, usque ad primam earum, quae est actu tantum, quae est Deus est...».

and essence plays the key role to provide diversity among spiritual substances and allows for refuting the existence of spiritual matter.

In the fourth argument, Avicbron truly points out that every created substance must be distinguished from the Creator, which is only one. Only God is absolutely simple and every created being must be composed of matter and form. Such composition allows drawing a borderline between the Creator and the creations. If we suppose that spiritual substances have no matter of any kind they would be simple forms and there would be no difference between them and God.<sup>37</sup>

The Aquinas' polemic with this argument reveals his views on the composition of the nature of separated substances.<sup>38</sup> We can also observe how he overcomes the limitation of Aristotle's metaphysics and changes it. Avicbron owed to Aristotle the conviction that the only composition of being was that of matter and form. In this composition form is the act and matter is potency. Thus the simple and most perfect being can be understood only as simple form, and all other beings have to be composed of matter and form. For Aquinas composition of matter and form is not the only act-potency relation that could be found in an individual being. He says that there is also a composition of *esse* and essence (*essentia vel substantia*), or - as he explains it in the answer to the same issue in *Summa theologiae* - the composition of *esse* and *id quod est*.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, in the created being there is another composition of act and potency in which the act is *esse* and the potency is the substance or essence. Aquinas explains: "...in every being other than the first, there is present both a 'to be' itself as the act, and the substance having the 'to be' as a potency receptive of the act of "to be".<sup>40</sup> Aquinas then says that there is no need to claim that spiritual beings must have spiritual matter in their essence to distinguish them from the Creator because they are composed of the act of being (*esse*) and essence. Spiritual matter is once again refuted.

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37. AVICEBRON, *Fons vitae*, IV, 6; AQUINAS, *Tractatus de substantiis separatis*, V, 23.

38. John F. Wippel presents this argument thoroughly in his article on the metaphysical composition of angels, see WIPPEL 2012, 64-65.

39. AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae 1889, Ia q. 50-119 cum commentaris Caietani*, I, q.50, a. 2, ad 3.

40. AQUINAS, *Tractatus de substantiis separatis*, VIII, 42: «Est igitur in quocumque, praeter primum, et ipsum esse, tanquam actus; et substantia rei habens esse, tanquam potentia receptiva huius actus quod est esse».

Proper understanding of act of being (*esse*) allows Aquinas to answer the last argument concerning infinity. Avicenna says that the created being is finite thanks to its form.<sup>41</sup> In the hylomorphic view of the universe, as we have seen above, matter is perceived as the universal substratum present in every being, which provides existence and substantiality to all things. Universal matter is in itself unlimited and infinite, so each form added to universal matter defines it by providing a certain limitation, and thus many forms are needed to define a being as an individual. In his polemic, Aquinas says that the answer is evident from what was said in the explanation of the previous argument concerning the distinction between God and creatures.<sup>42</sup> Infinity of *esse* cannot be ascribed to universal matter but rather to God who is self-subsisting being (*ipsum esse subsistens*), because he is *esse* rather than participates in it. St. Thomas clarifies that: «since a spiritual substance participates in “to be”, not according to the infinity of its community, as is the case in the First Principle, but according to the mode proper to its essence, it is clear that its “to be” is not infinite but finite».<sup>43</sup> In the proper and absolute meaning (*modis omnibus*) infinity can be ascribed to an act, which is not limited by any potency. Aquinas underlines that there are the grades of infinity of created beings, but in each case infinity is lower because of increasing limitation by potency. In material beings form is limited to certain matter and act of being (*esse*) is limited to specific essence. In spiritual substances act of being is limited to specific form (which itself is essence), but is also infinite because it is not received in any matter.<sup>44</sup> Such form is finite because it received *esse* from the First Principle. Once again we can observe how

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41. AVICENNA, *Fons vitae*, IV, 6; AQUINAS, *Tractatus de substantiis separatis*, V, 23.

42. AQUINAS, *Tractatus de substantiis separatis*, VIII, 42-43.

43. AQUINAS, *Tractatus de substantiis separatis*, VIII, 45: «Quia enim substantia spiritualis esse participat non secundum suae communitatis infinitatem, sicut est in primo principio, sed secundum proprium modum suae essentiae, manifestum est quod esse eius non est infinitum, sed finitum».

44. AQUINAS, *Tractatus de substantiis separatis*, VIII, 45: «Nam materiales substantiae finitae quidem sunt dupliciter: scilicet ex parte formae, quae in materia recipitur, et ex parte ipsius esse, quod participat secundum proprium modum, quasi superius et inferius finita existens. Substantia vero spiritualis est quidem finita superius, in quantum a primo principio participat esse secundum proprium modum; est autem infinita inferius, in quantum non participatur in subiecto».

Aquinas uses his new understanding of *esse* and the relations between act and potency to disprove Avicbron's argument.

An analysis of Aquinas' polemic showed that he refuted completely the concept of spiritual matter giving his own answers to angelic dilemmas. Spiritual matter was very useful for thirteenth-century angelology because Christian writers saw no other solution to the key issues of distinction of spiritual substances among themselves and draw a clear borderline between God and creation. Due to Aristotle's metaphysics in which act could be understood only as the form and potency could be assigned only to matter, the only composition of potency and act could be the composition of form and matter. Therefore, the only way to claim potentiality of spiritual substances was to ascribe to them some kind of matter. Potency of angels was indispensable to explain their plurality and distinguish them from the simple being of God. That is why Avicbron's conclusions seemed unavoidable to many Medieval scholars, and Aquinas' solution was perceived as revolutionary and even unorthodox.<sup>45</sup>

St. Thomas Aquinas in his polemic proposes a new understanding of *esse* as an act which cannot be ascribed to potential matter. Pure *esse* is a pure act and such pure act could be only God, who is absolutely simple as *ipsum esse subsistens*. Thanks to a different understanding of *esse* Aquinas widens the perception of act and potency, which allows him to say that in relation to act of being (*esse*), the essence or substance of being is in potency. There were many scholars contemporary to Aquinas who wrote about the distinction between *esse* and *id quod est*, but only Thomas claimed that it was the real composition of an individual created being. Therefore, he is able to claim that spiritual substances are composed of act and potency (*esse* and *essentia*), while not being forced to admit their composition of matter and form. Aquinas then finally rejects the concept of spiritual matter, which is no longer needed to explain the potential character of spiritual substances.

Tomasz Stepien  
t.stepien@uksw.edu.p

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45. Some of Aquinas claims on metaphysical composition of angels were the subject of condemnation of 1277, see WIPPEL 1995, 243-248.

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