

Is *ENS PER SE* the Definition of Substance in Avicenna?¹

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Abstract:

This article begins with an examination of Professor Etienne Gilson's analysis of the statement by St. Thomas Aquinas, "*Ens per se*, is not the definition of substance, as Avicenna stated." Gilson confessed that he was unable to find the source of this claim in Avicenna, and came to the conclusion that Avicenna did not in fact make any such statement. In order to refute this conclusion, this paper proceeds to present a detailed analysis of the history of the term 'substance', focusing on the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle. The third and most important part of the paper is a close reading of the relevant passages of the works of Avicenna himself, revealing the sought for source of Aquinas's statement.

1. This article is dedicated to Professor George F. Mclean who in our time is a paragon in philosophical dialogue between cultures. In my opinion no dialogue is more profound than an intellectual and philosophical dialogue, as the one which we see among Muslim and Christian philosophers such as Avicenna and St. Thomas Aquinas. Such a dialogue did not come to a close with the end of Middle Ages but is a living reality today.

The late distinguished scholar and philosopher Etienne Gilson through his profound and prolific books on multifaceted subjects has made such a dialogue possible. I have learnt much from his books and articles. Reading his article about the definition of 'substance' in Avicenna engaged me for many years to find a solution in the philosophical works of Avicenna on the one hand, and also helped in finding an answer to a question which had puzzled me for a long time, namely: "Why did Descartes and Spinoza, among others, define substance as '*ens per se*'?" It also helped me to follow traces of Avicennan ontology down to Hegel and Heidegger, which I have not dealt with in this article.

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This is the question which the late distinguished neo-Thomist philosopher and historian of philosophy Etienne Gilson posed in his illuminating article entitled “Quasi definitio substantiae” as his contribution to the volume *St. Thomas Aquinas Commemorative Studies*.¹ While editing St. Thomas’s *De Potentia* he stumbled upon the abrupt statement: “*Ens Per Se non est definitio substantiae ut Avicenna dicit.*” Professor Gilson surprisingly says that in those days, “although well advanced in years” if anybody had asked him about the definition of substance, his immediate answer would be “*ens per se*” and consequently “*ens per aliud*” or “*ens in alio*” for an accident. In addition in his edition of the same treatise, reference was made to Avicenna’s *Metaphysics* Book 3, which Professor Gilson was unable to identify in the Latin version of Avicenna’s *Metaphysica*. He came to the conclusion: “Unless I am mistaken the reference is not correct; but the main reason for my failure to find the words “*Ens Per se non est definitio substantiae*” was that as a matter of fact, Avicenna never wrote them.” The quotation in question in *De Potentia* 9.7, reads as follows in Gilson’s translation.²

‘*To be through itself*’ (*ens per se*) is not the definition of substance, as Avicenna states. For indeed being cannot be the genus of a thing, as Aristotle proves, because nothing can be added to being that does not participate in it, while the difference must not participate in the genus. But if

1. Etienne Gilson, «Quasi Definitio Substantiae», *St. Thomas Aquinas Commemorative Studies*, (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies) vol. I pp. 111-129.

2. *Ibid*, p. 121.

substance is susceptible of definition, despite its being the *genus generalissimum*, that definition should run as follows: ‘substance is a thing to the quiddity of which it is due to be not in something.’ And thus the definition of substance will not befit God, who has no quiddity beside his *esse*. God, therefore is not in the genus of substance, but is above all substance.

Professor Gilson had undertaken the laborious task of perusing the entire Avicennan corpus in Latin translation in addition to scrutinizing the two citations of Avicenna in the writings of St. Thomas – the one by C. Vansteenkiste and the other by Aimé Forest¹ – but both of no avail. To solve the problem Professor Gilson made the following tentative suggestions: 1) "*Ut*" can be construed affirmatively in which case the sentence would mean “as Avicenna says it is”; but in that case St. Thomas would have used *quamvis* instead of *ut*.² Whether it is the object of an affirmation or a negation, the enunciation cannot be found in Avicenna. 2) The second solution is that a literal translation of Avicenna can seldom be found in Aquinas, because the Latin translation of Avicenna was so obscure that it would puzzle the average reader. “The text usually is quoted *in sensu*”³ but nonetheless it is recognizable “provided one accepts in its place what its involved syntax has become under the clear and pithy pen of St. Thomas Aquinas.”⁴ 3) Gilson tries to find out “the text of Avicenna that we think Thomas had in mind.” One such text he finds in chapter 4 of tract 8 of the *Metaphysica*, which by the way is the part devoted

1. *Ibid*, p. 111, footnote.

2. *Ibid*, p. 111.

3. *Ibid*.

4. *Ibid*, p. 112.

to special rather than general Metaphysics. Perhaps the reason why Professor Gilson has identified the definition of substance with this passage in *Metaphysica Specialis*, might be due to the assertion by St. Thomas at the end of the quoted passage to the effect that “the definition of substance will not befit God who has no quiddity beside his *esse*. God therefore, is not in the genus of substance, but is above all substance.”

The presumed passage in Avicenna which, according to Gilson, St. Thomas had in mind reads as follows in my translation:¹

Somebody might object and say: if you refuse to apply to the first being the name "substance" you certainly do not deny him its meaning; because He is *ens non in subjectum* and that is the meaning of substance which you have made a genus for Him.

To which we respond by saying: that is not the meaning of substance as a genus. But substance signifies a thing that has a persistent quiddity whose existence is not in a subject, such as for example a body or a soul. And a proof for the fact that if such is not the definition of substance it cannot be considered as a genus, is that what we signify by the word "*ens*" does not require it to be a genus. Moreover the negation (*non in subjectum*) which is associated with it, adds to it only a relation of disparity. It does not affirm anything positive beside existence. It does not signify anything by itself, but only in relation to something else. So the only positive meaning in *ens non in subjectum* which an essence is logically permitted to have is

1. Ibn Sina (Avicenna), *Kitāb al-Shifā' (Sufficiētia), al-Ilāhiyyāt (Bk of Theology)* (Cairo edition, 1960) pp. 348–9. The Latin translation is found in Gilson's article, *op. cit.* pp. 112-13.

ens, and what comes after it is privative and relative and outside the concrete reality (*huwiyyah*) which a thing possesses. The meaning of substance construed in this way would not be a genus. You have come to know about this point in the science of logic in a very precise way.

And again in the science of logic you came to know that when we say for example “every A”, what we mean by it is: “every thing qualified by A” even if it has a reality other than A-ness. Hence when we assert in our definition of substance “*ens non in subjectum*”, it means “it is a thing about which we say that it does not exist in a subject” – in other words “*existere non in subjectum*” is predicated of it, and that thing in itself has a quiddity such as man, stone and tree. In like manner we should conceive of substance in order that it might be a genus. The reason why there is a wide difference between the two and that genus can only be one of the two rather than the other is this: You can say concerning someone whose existence is unknown to you that necessarily he is a thing of which the existence is not in a subject. You would not say: “He is necessarily existing right now not in a subject.” It appears that we have amply discussed this issue in our logical works.

Professor Gilson came to the conclusion that if we are to look for what Avicenna said – that “*being through itself (esse per se) is not the definition of substance*” – anywhere in Avicenna’s *Metaphysica*, it is not this passage. If, however, we take the import of “*not to be in a subject*” as an equivalent for “*to be through itself,*” in that case the two passages (of St. Thomas and

Avicenna) are “the same, but couched in different words.”¹ According to Gilson this particular text sets up a pattern that St. Thomas will follow in his different writings wherever the same theme is taken up in relation to different problems, but always with reference to the teachings of Avicenna in his *Metaphysica*. According to Gilson, even if Avicenna has dealt with the same problems in his logic, St. Thomas nevertheless follows Averroes, rather than Avicenna, in matters of logic [for more on this, see APPENDIX]. After a brief reference to the theory of substance in Aristotle and the distinction he makes between the primary and secondary substance, Gilson makes an analysis of why substance is not susceptible of definition. This resistance to definability is due to the fact that substance in the order of logical predication is the supreme term and since it has no genus above it, it can not be defined. That is why St. Thomas, and following him Gilson, called “*ens per se*” and “*per se existere*” as “*circumlocuti verae descriptionis*” and “*definitio vel quasi definitio substantiae*.”²

In the second part of his article, Gilson deals extensively with the second question in St. Thomas’s quotation, namely “*Is God a substance?*” Reviewing some key concepts in Avicenna such as *ens*, *quidditas*, *res*, *aliquid*, *esse* and *essentia*, Gilson rightly affirms that even if *ens* and *res* have the same referendum, yet they do not have the same connotation: “*ens* points out the *esse* of a thing while *res* points out its quiddity. . . . The key to the problem of the true definition of substance and its applicability to God, therefore is the celebrated distinction of essence and *esse* in finite beings each and every one of them definable as an essence that has an *esse*.”³

1. Gilson, «Quasi Definitio Substantiae» p. 114.

2. *Ibid*, p. 115.

3. *Ibid*, p. 119. Gilson, using the Latin translation of Avicenna and the relevant texts in St. Thomas, rightly concludes that *ens per se* is not a real definition because being cannot be considered a genus, and using the above passage from Avicenna he demonstrates that quiddity should be taken as the *genus generalissimum*. As we

This essence–existence distinction is the core of the Avicennan–Thomist philosophy and the very foundation of their metaphysics. In beings other than the prime being such a distinction holds because their essence does not require their existence, the latter being endowed to them by their ontological cause.

Now, *ens non in* subjectum cannot be a definition of substance because being is not a genus and every genus must be a quiddity. So the definition of substance is reduced to the following: “A quiddity that does not require a subject for its existence.”

Now, substance cannot be applied to God, because he has no quiddity to stand under (sub-stare, substantia) his essence. He is pure and infinite actuality of *esse*.¹

Gilson summarizes the reasoning of St. Thomas in the following statements:²

- 1) Being is not a genus; 2) To be a being through itself is a pure negation; 3) For a substance to be a genus it must be “a thing to which it belongs to be not in a subject”; 4) The name “thing” is derived from the quiddity as the name “being” is derived from “to be”; 5) So a substance should be defined as a quiddity to which it belongs to be not in

shall see in what follows, like St. Thomas and Avicenna, Gilson takes «thing» to refer to the quiddity of a thing rather than to its being. Averroes in his great commentary of Aristotle's *Metaphysica*, severely attacked and refuted the Avicennan essence–existence distinction. He maintained that it was due to the mistranslation of Greek «*om*» as *mawjūd* which may be construed in Arabic as a quiddity which exists [‘what is found to be’]. In Averroes’ opinion, had the Greek term «*om*» been translated in Arabic as *shay’* (thing = *res*), then the essence–existence distinction would not ensue. Most probably St. Thomas, in construing «thing» as quiddity rather than existence, had Averroes’ objection in mind.

1. Gilson, *op. cit.* p. 120.

2. *Ibid*, pp. 120-121.

another; 6) In no way then is God in the genus of substance, since he has no quiddity save His being.

Thus in the Avicennan–Thomist Metaphysics based on the essence–existence distinction, unlike in the Aristotelian, substance cannot be predicated of God. But still we are left in the dark concerning the real meaning of *ens per se* in Avicenna. We are only told that it is equivalent to *ens non in alio* or *ens non in subjectum* and that *ens per se* is pure negation.¹

Of the two questions posed in St. Thomas' quotation, we obtained a definite and clear answer to the second about the impermissibility of predicating the word "substance" of God both according to the Muslim sage and the Christian saint. But the answer to the first question, which is by the way the main one and as a matter of fact is the title of the present article, was left quite undetermined. I think most probably the reason why Gilson was unable to identify the proper text related to the issue in question was that he merged the two questions into one, and since in the quotation there was also emphasis on the problem of the substantiality of God, he tried to find both the solution and the relative texts in the *Metaphysica specialis*, overlooking the more pertinent *Metaphysica generalis* whose sole theme is *ens qua ens*. Let us follow Avicenna meticulously and patiently in the latter mentioned part of his *magnum opus* to see whether we can find any traces of the question at issue, first with regard to *ens per se* and second with regard to *ens per se* as the definition of substance.²

1. Gilson at the end of this argument summarizes it as follows: "To define substance as «a being that is not in a subject» is accordingly to say nothing;" *ibid*, p. 119.

2. Avicenna is the originator of the generalis-specialis distinction in Metaphysics which are respectively the same as ontology and theology. Basing himself on an elaborate methodology of demonstrative sciences he had articulated in his *Logic* and which he has alluded to in the introductory chapter of the *Ilāhiyyāt*, concerning the proper subject matter of Metaphysics, he came to the conclusion that only «being

There are two passages in *Metaphysica generalis* where *ens per se* is met with. The first time the term *ens per se* occurs is in Book One, chapter four where Avicenna presents the summary of the main issues dealt with in general metaphysics. But the much more extensive discussion about the subject occurs in chapter one of Book Two where Avicenna treats the problem of *ens per se* in connection with that of substance. So let us begin with the first passage which reads as follows:¹

Concerning a summary of what is discussed in this Science

Therefore it behooves us to make known in this discipline the relationship of thing (*shay' =res*) and being (*mawjūd =ens*) to the categories; and the state of non-being and the state of necessity-of-being or the necessary being and its conditions and the state of possibility and its reality, which is exactly the same as theorizing about potency and act. We should also look into the state of that which is *per se* (*bi-l-dhāt*) and that which is *per accidens* (*bi-l-'araḍ*) and also into the real and the unreal (*al-ḥaqq wal-bātil*). We should also inquire into the state of substance: how many kinds of substance there are. Because a being in order to be substance does not need to be either physical or mathematical; there are also substances beyond these two. It is also necessary to inquire into the state of the substance called matter (*al-hayūlā*) and how it is – Is it separable or not? Is it of one kind or of different kinds? What is its relationship to form? And what is the nature

qua being» can be the proper subject matter of metaphysics and so founded the science of systematic ontology in the proper sense of the word.

1. Ibn Sīna, *ibid*, p. 25. As we shall see the four senses of 'being' mentioned here are: 1) being in the sense of potency and act, 2) being as divided in the categories of substance and accidents, 3) being per se as against *ens per accidens*, and 4) being in the sense of true and non-being in the sense of false. These are the fourfold divisions of being which we will discuss below.

of formal substance? Is it likewise separable or non-separable? And what is the state of the compound substance? What is, moreover, the state of each of them in definition? And what is the mutual relationship between their definitions and their definiendums? And because the accident is, in some way, against substance, so it befits us in this science to seek to know the nature of accident and its different kinds and how are the definitions by which accidents are defined, and also we must get to know the state of each and every category of accident. We should also enquire about what is supposed to be substance whereas in reality it is not; and so we should elucidate its being as an accident. We should also make known the rank of the different kinds of substance with respect to each other in the order of priority and posteriority. In the same way we should make known the state of accidents.

Of course the summary of the problems discussed in metaphysics mentioned in this chapter is much more extensive and is not restricted to the problems mentioned in the above citation. But this much is necessary and sufficient for a discussion about *ens per se* and its connection with the being of substance and that of accidents.



As a preliminary remark it should be stated that Avicenna is the unique founder of a systematic ontology. Unlike his peripatetic predecessors, he made 'being *qua* being' the only subject matter of metaphysics, and hence he was the first philosopher to make the *metaphysica generalis* and *metaphysica specialis* two totally separate and distinct disciplines, unlike the other peripatetics whose ontology was a sort of onto-theology. Moreover, Avicenna made this distinction on the basis of a rigorous methodology of science in his logical works wherein the nature of apodictic philosophical propositions and the relationship of subject and predicates in such propositions on the one hand, and the nature of axioms and definitions presupposed in each

science on the other, are well defined. Briefly stated, the problems in each science (as he has demonstrated in the *Logic* of *al-Shifā'*) are the "essential attributes" of its subject matter, metaphysics being no exception. So the problems mentioned in the above citation can be considered as essential attributes of being *qua* being – some of them being peculiar to the metaphysical teachings of Avicenna, and the rest found or derived from the metaphysical principles of Aristotle. As to problems peculiar to the metaphysics of Avicenna, one can mention necessity of being, the necessary and the contingent being – which in Aristotle unlike Avicenna are logical rather than ontological and metaphysical concepts. As to the rest, namely being as potency and act, being *per se* and being *per accidens*, being as true and false (as real and unreal), and being as divided into ten categories of substance and accidents, are all to be found in the Aristotelian corpus, and perhaps tracing back the problems to their fountainhead in Aristotle would better clarify the issue.

According to Aristotle, and following him both Avicenna and St. Thomas, being is the first thing which we grasp with our intellect, since it is the most general and what is the most general is prior in intellectual cognition. "Being *qua* being" is the proper subject matter of metaphysics: "*there is one science which considers being as being and the attributes which it has as such. This particular science differs from all particular sciences.*"¹ All the particular sciences get the proof and the definition of their subject matter from this higher science, that is metaphysics, but the latter cannot take over the definition of its subject matter from any higher science, since it is not subordinate to any other science. Hence its subject matter must be self-evident.²

Being has no definition, for being does not have genus and differentia. Thus we should never treat being *qua* being as if it possessed a genus. So how should we proceed to discuss the problem of being if it does not have a definition nor a genus and consequently no species? We must resort to a different form of exposition, and in the case of being this can be done by distinguishing the different

1. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IV, 1. 1003 a.

2. *Ibid*, XI 7, 1064e8.

senses of being, by separating its proper from the improper senses, and by including the proper senses in the subject matter of metaphysics and by excluding the improper ones from its domain.¹

What are the proper and improper senses of being? This is the theme of the book by Brentano, *Von der mannigfachen Bedeutung des Seienden nach Aristoteles*, the gist and upshot of which is reiterated by Avicenna in the above citation. According to Aristotle, "Being is said in various ways (*To On legetai men pollachos*)." In *Metaphysics* IV, 2, he states, "one thing is said to be because it is substance, another, because it is an attribute of substance, still another because it is a process toward substance or corruption of substance, or privation of substantial forms or quality of substance, or because it produces or generates substance or that which is predicated of substance, or because it is a negation of such a thing or of substance itself. For this reason we also say that non-being is non-being." According to Brentano, the various sorts of being enumerated here can be reduced to four kinds: 1) Being which has no existence outside the mind; 2) The being of movement and of generation and corruption; 3) Being which has complete but dependent existence (affections, qualities); and 4) The being of the substances.²

Again in *Metaphysics* VI, 2, Aristotle states: "But since the unqualified term "being" has several meanings of which one was seen to be the accidental and another true (non-being being the false), while besides these there are figures of predication (e.g. the "what", quality, quantity, place, time and any similar meanings which being may have), and again besides all these, there is that which "is" potentially or actually."³

Brentano observes that the four senses of being are mentioned here: 1) accidental being (*on kata symbebekos*) as against *ens per se* (*on kath hautou*); 2) being in the sense of being true and non-being in the sense of being false (*on hos alethes kai me on hos pseudos*); 3) being as it is divided into the categories (*to on kata ta schemata ton*

1. See Brentano, *On the Several Senses of Being in Aristotle*, trans. by Ralf George (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975) p. 2.

2. *Ibid*, p. 3.

3. Aristotle, *Met.* 1026a 33.

kategorion) and 4) potential and actual being (*on energeia kai on dynamei*).¹

After mentioning other classifications of being, Brentano comes to the conclusion that all of them can be reduced to the above-mentioned four meanings, which as we said above correspond to the classifications of the previously mentioned citation.

Leaving aside the last three senses of "being" because they are not immediately concerned with the problem at issue in this article, we place *ens per se* at the focus of our discussion here. We are especially anxious to know whether *ens per se* has anything to do with the definition of substance. Immediately after the quotation about the four senses of being, Aristotle takes up the problem of accidental being and expatiates on it in some detail.² Before giving a short analysis of his discussion on accidental being (*on kata symbebekos*) as against independent being (*on kata 'hauto*), we should bear in mind that we ought not to mistake this classification of being with the other one in his fourfold division which Aristotle names as "being as the figures of the categories" in which Aristotle elaborates on the ten categories into which being is divided. We should be on our guard lest we should identify the accidental and the independent being with the ten categories of substance and accidents – even if the two divisions or classifications of being are somehow related to each other.

In order to have a clearer notion of accidental being, we should see how Aristotle defines it. In Book Eleven of *Metaphysics* he states: "That is accidental which occurs but neither always nor necessarily, nor for the most part." Again in the second chapter of Book Six he says: "We call accidental what occurs neither always, nor for the most part."³ In Book Five chap. 30 again he asserts: "We call accidental that which belongs to the thing and is truthfully attributed to it, but neither with necessity nor for the most part."⁴ Also in chapter seven of the Book Five of the *Metaphysics* he provides this definition of the *ens per accidens*: "Something is said to have being per accidens when one

1. Brentano, *op. cit.*, p. 4

2. Arist. *Meta.* 1026b *et seq.*

3. *Ibid.*, *Met.* VI2, 1026b 31.

4. See Brentano, *op. cit.*, pp. 8–9.

says that the just man is musical, that the man is musical, that the musical person is a man. This is very much like saying that the musical person builds houses, since it is just an accident if a builder is musical or a musical person a builder. For in this case to say that one thing is another means the same as that the second thing accidentally belongs to the first.”¹ It is evident that here Aristotle by accidental being has nothing in mind but the fortuitous and that which exists in some other thing by mere chance. According to his exposition, the fortuitous (*apo tyche*) is the same as the accidental being in that in neither of them does the predicate inhere in the subject necessarily, nor always, nor again for the most part.²

Now let us ask Aristotle to tell us what he has to say concerning the accidental being. The first and most important point he mentions is that there is no scientific treatment of the accidental being. No science, whether practical, productive or theoretical troubles itself about it.³ In the *Posterior Analytics* II.8 Aristotle says that if we know that something is *kata symbebokas*, we do not truly know that it is because it does not help us in understanding the thing’s nature, since science always aims at universality and necessity. The accidents are changing and innumerable, whereas the constituents of the thing’s essence and its essential attributes (that is, attributes which are the necessary concomitants of a thing and follow necessarily from its definition) are few in number and provide us with certain knowledge about the thing. The architect does not produce all the attributes that come into being with house, “for these are innumerable... The science of building does not aim at producing any of these attributes.”⁴ To give another example the geometer is not concerned with any haphazard attribute of triangle, but only with those which intrinsically follow from its essence as represented in its definition.⁵ Here Aristotle hints at a very important point about a stratagem involved in the arguments of sophists (if they could ever be called arguments at all):

1. Arist. *Met.* V, 7.1017a 8.

2. See Sir David Ross, *Aristotle* (London: Methuen, 1949) pp. 75-78.

3. Arist. *Met.* 1026b 5.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Arist. *Met.* 1026b 11.

“For the arguments of the sophists deal, we may say, above all with the accidental being.”¹ He thus in a way corroborates Plato in ranking sophism as dealing with non-being.

Moreover that which is in itself (*ens per se*) is prior to that which has being *per accidens*. Hence substance is prior and first in every sense. It is prior in definition, for in the definition of each term the definition of its substance must be present. Substance is also prior in order of knowledge because we think we know a thing most fully when we know what it is, that is when we know its substance, rather than when we know its quality, its quantity or its place; we know each of these predicates when we know what they are. Again in another sense substance is prior, in that among the categories none can exist independently but substance alone.² Because substance is prior in every respect we can say that it is also prior in being, which permits us to say that it is in itself (*kata hauto, per se*). This priority in being is expressed by Aristotle in the following statement: “*And indeed the question which was raised of old and is raised now and always, and is always the subject of inquiry, namely what being is, is just the question: what is substance?*”³ Among some other features peculiar to accidental being one may mention the following: one cannot say of accidental being that it has a cause, “*for what is or becomes in an accidental way can only have a cause which is also accidental.*”⁴ Moreover for other things there are faculties productive of them, “*but to accidental results there corresponds no determinate art nor faculty.*”⁵ Again, the predication in accidental being is according to name (*kata to onoma*) but not according to definition (*kata ton logon*): the triangle’s attribute of having three angles, which moreover are equal to two right angles, follows from the definition of the triangle. So the unity between the triangle and these attributes is an essential unity; but the unity existing among the thing and its accidental attributes is a sort of accidental unity. They are, in other words, united in name but not in

1. *Ibid*, 1026b 15.

2. *Ibid*, 1028a 31.

3. *Ibid*, 1028b 1.

4. *Ibid*, 1027a 5.

5. *Ibid*, 1027a 4.

essence.¹ The last point is that things which have non-accidental being, come into being and pass away by a single process, but things which have accidental being do not.² The musician-architect, for example, does not have a single genesis like for example the rational animal. The musician comes into being through one process and the architect through another.³



Let us now return to Avicenna and see what he has to say about the *ens per se* and how it is related to his definition of substance. Let us read his text in *Kitāb al-Shifā'*.⁴

Concerning the Definition of Substance and its Divisions in General

We say: the being of something is either *per se*, as for example the being of man as man, or *per accidens*, like the being of Zayd as white. Things the being of which is *per accidens* are innumerable and without limit. So let us leave them aside and engage ourselves with the existent and the 'being *per se*' (*al-wujūd alladhī bi-l-dhāt*).

Among the divisions of being the most prior to be called being by itself [*ens per se* = *al-mawjūd bi-l-dhāt*] is substance. That is because being can be divided into two: one of them is that which exists in some other thing, which other thing has an independent existence and species in itself. Its existence (in something else) is not the being of a part, nor can it be separated from that other thing; that is a being in a *subjectum* (*wa huwa l-mawjūdu fī l-mawḍū* ').

1. *Ibid*, 1026a 14.

2. Brentano, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

3. *Ibid*, p. 10; & Arist. *Met.* 1025a 1.

4. Avicenna, *Kitāb al-Shifā'*, *al-Ilāhiyyāt* p. 57. The translation is ours.

The second division of being is Being without having to be in anything else whatsoever in the way we just described. It does not, of course, exist in a subject; and *this* we call 'substance'.

In this citation Avicenna tries to give a 'definition of substance' – which is by the way the beginning of a chapter whose very title indicates that it intends such a definition. But how can we define substance? Now, the best and the most real logical definition is the one by genus and specific difference, for example: the definition of man as a rational animal. If we want to define the genus "animal", we should again analyze it in terms of its genus "body" and its differentia – that is "living" or "having voluntary motion". Furthermore, if we are told to define the higher genus that is "body", we would have to define it in terms of its genus, that is to say its substance and its specific difference that is "extended in three dimensions." What if we are again demanded to define substance? In Aristotelian terms it is not definable because it has no genus (itself being the highest genus), and having no genus it has no specific difference.

There is only one possibility for substance to have a genus, and this possibility was mentioned by Avicenna in the quotation from the *Metaphysica Specialis* cited by Gilson. Substance is a thing (that is, a quiddity such as man, stone or tree) of which "*being not in a subject*" is predicated. We have here 'quiddity' which is the genus of substance. But we should remember that quiddity is taken both in the definition of substance and that of accident, so it would not help us to distinguish substance from accident by quiddity alone, which is common to both and in which both of them equally share. What differentiates substance from accident is precisely their predicate, namely their mode of being in the sense that *one of them exists for itself as a subject, while the other exists in and for another considered to be a subject*. We should emphasize here that being is not to be considered as a genus (which it could never be), but as a real predicate.¹

1. There is a difference between Aristotle and Avicenna with regard to the definition of substance. According to Aristotle, substance is «*that which is not asserted of a subject but of which everything is asserted*» (see Ross, *Aristotle* p. 166). According

Avicenna gives as an example of substance as *ens per se* the being of man as man, which does not signify individual substance (*tode ti*), but rather the intelligible or secondary substance, or what Aristotle, and following him Avicenna, would describe as *to ti esti en einai* = ‘that by virtue of which a thing is what it is’; in other words it signifies *its essence by which a thing has a per se being*.

Another point to be learnt from the above passage is the reference which Avicenna makes to the fact that the accidents of a thing are indefinite in number and they would not help us in the least in the scientific and demonstrative knowledge of the thing under consideration.

Again the predication of being to its different modes is neither equivocal nor univocal but analogical. There is a logical order of priority and posteriority in the ranks of being. *Ens per se*, in other words, is ontologically prior to accidental being – «*of the things existing per se, the most prior is the being of substance*».

Avicenna is very meticulous and precise in his use of words throughout almost all his works. Here he is speaking about the divisions of being. Being should not be considered as a genus and *non in subjectum* as a differentia. In other words, *on kata symbebekas* or accidental being and *kata hauto* or independent being are not the species of being, but are rather the divisions (*aqsām*) of being as if taken as a definition. As we saw with Aristotle, they are the different senses or classifications of being.

Thus, in the metaphysical worldview of Avicenna which revolves around the problem of being as being, everything finds its proper significance only in the relationship it has with the reality of being – of which the first and the most primary kind is the being of substance.



to Avicenna, substance is «*a quiddity that if it were to exist, its existence would not be in a subject*». Quiddity here is the subject and *ens non in Subjectum* is the predicate. /This definition again, which does not take the being of the quiddity for granted, does not apply to God.

APPENDIX

Avicenna has dealt with the *per se* attributes amply in chapter two of the second article of his logical work *Kitāb al-Burhān* (Cairo edition, pp. 125–143) in which he enumerates the different senses of the essential versus accidental being, and elaborates especially on the two senses which are specific to the subject and the predicate in the science of apodictic demonstration. To give but a short account of the ‘being *per se*’ (*al-wujūd alladhī bi-l-dhāt*) I present here the translation of a short paragraph from the aforementioned chapter.

“That which is "by itself" (*bi-dhātihī*) is said in many senses, of which two are specific to the subject and predicate, and which are of special significance in the sciences. We say "by itself" of the essential constituent (*dhātī*) predicated of a thing by way of what it is (*‘alā ṭarīq-i mā huwa*). That thing is included in its definition. So it makes no difference whether you say "the essential constituent" or "predicated by way of what it is." The essential constituents in this sense comprise the genus of a thing and the genus of its genus, and its specific difference and the specific difference of its genus, and its definition. It also comprises each thing which is a constituent (*muqawwim*) of the essence of the thing, such for example as a line for a triangle and the "point" for a finite line in as much as it is finite and so on Moreover "by itself" is said in another sense, that is where something occurs to something else and in the definition of the occurring attribute (*‘āriḍ*) is taken either the definition of the object of the occurrence — as for example "nose" is taken in the definition of snub-nosedness, or number in the definition of "even", or line in the definition of straight or curved, or the subjectum of the object of the occurrence . . . or the genus of the subjectum of the object of the occurrence, provided that they are explicitly mentioned; all of these are said to be essential attributes”, and attributes which occur to a thing by way of ‘it is what it is’.”

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