

Existence and Subsistence in St. Thomas

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*Beatae Mariae Semper Virgini,
Mediatrici, Coredemptrici, et Advocatae*

I. Existential Thomism

For over fifty years, the dominant interpretation of the metaphysics of St. Thomas Aquinas in academies and philosophical publications has been that of existential Thomism. Its influence is marked even among those Thomists who eschew the label. This interpretation endows to-be (*esse*), that is, the act-of-being (*actus essendi*), with a purely existential character, making it in every respect ontologically prior to essence (*essentia*). Out of this extreme position are drawn the existential Thomist's peculiar polemics against "essentialism." For the purposes of this essay, and in agreement with common usage, an "essentialist" metaphysics will be defined as one that accords some priority to essence (*essentia*) over to-be (*esse*), not only in the order of specification, but in the very order of to-be (*esse*). It is a metaphysics that grants essence an ontological, as well as morphological, character. This interpretation, so denigrated by the existential Thomists, is in truth more coherent and more faithful to St. Thomas. In the existence of creatures, *esse* does have priority over *essentia*, but in subsistence *essentia* has priority of a different sort over *esse*. The aim, then, is to demonstrate in accordance with right reason that the to-be of existence (*esse existentiae*) must be distinguished from the to-be of subsistence (*esse subsistentiae*), and that support for such a distinction is indeed found in the writings of the Common Doctor. Consequently, existential Thomists have made an untenable identification of *esse* with existence, rendering their critiques of "essentialism" empty and fruitless. In fact, this fatal identification represents a surrender to Bergsonian metaphysical influences. Étienne Gilson, one of the founders of this school, and certainly one of its most prolific evangelists, expresses well the intellectual intentions and fears of the movement. Metaphysically eloquent, he makes a convenient foil against which a more profound interpretation can be articulated.

Before proceeding to a critique, the existential interpretation of Thomistic metaphysics must be properly grasped. Gilson maintains, and it must be granted, that St. Thomas originated the metaphysics of to-be (*esse*) understood as the very act-of-being (*actus essendi*). Aristotle had taught that material substance is a composite of matter and form, matter serving as potency, and form as act. That which has being in itself and through itself is called "substance," whereas that which cannot of itself have being is called "accident." Accidents, such as whiteness, can only have being in a substance, such as a man. They do not have a separate being as "whiteness in itself." Substance therefore has primacy over accident and, whereas accident is a composition of accidental form with secondary matter, substance is a composition of substantial form with primary matter. Secondary matter is not pure potency, for it always has some form. For example, the bronze in a statue is secondary matter with respect to the form of the statue, but it does itself have form, namely the form of bronze. Because the resolution of the principles of form and matter must end with a first and principal being, namely substance, substantial form and prime matter are, respectively, principles of pure act and pure potency that cannot be further resolved or distinguished. The substantial or essential form of a thing, standing above every other form in the substance, is responsible for its very being, for it actualizes prime matter to a determinate nature, thus yielding a substance capable of receiving accidents.

St. Thomas goes beyond the Aristotelian metaphysics of form and eternal matter to identify the very contingency of all created being. His metaphysics is therefore a potent instrument of his Catholic theology. To the composition of prime matter and substantial form in material substance, he adds a second composition between the substance thus composed and the to-be (*esse*) that makes the substance to be something rather than nothing. Moreover, he expresses this second composition in the Aristotelian division of being into act and potency. The substance, itself in act through its form, is as potency with respect to the constituting to-be (*esse*). Whereas to-be (*esse*) had often been understood as either actual essence (*essentia in actu*), or the mere fact of being (*utrum sit*), it now is to be understood as the act-of-being (*actus essendi*). Being (*ens*), which is denominated from to-be (*esse*), has the same relation to it as running (*currens*) has with to-run (*currere*). It is the relationship of the present active participle to the infinitive, the former designating a determinately acting subject, the latter an indeterminate act.

All of this may sound rather recondite and impractical, but such a distinction has important consequences for Christian theology. First, since it posits composition in spiritual creatures that have no material composition in their essence, it allows St. Thomas to distinguish them from God, in Whom there is no composition whatsoever. Whereas an angel is composed out of that-which-is (*quod est*), namely its substance (*substantia*), and that-whereby-it-is (*quo est*), namely its to-be (*esse*), God is To-Be Itself Subsisting (*Ipsum Esse Subsistens*). His essence is not to be a horse, or a man, or an angel, or any limited nature. His Essence, as revealed to Moses, is simply to be: "I Am Who Am."¹ Excepting God, every being is radically contingent, because its essence (*essentia*) is not to-be (*esse*). It can only have to-be (*esse*) from that Being that possesses to-be (*esse*) essentially, that is to say, from God. In the words of M. Gilson:

Each essence is set up by an act-of-being which it is not and which includes it as its own determination. Outside the pure act of existing, if it exists, nothing can exist save as a limited act-of-being. It is therefore the hierarchy of the essences which establishes and governs that of beings, each of which expresses only the proper area of a certain act-of-being.²

In other words, the indeterminate *esse* is contracted to a specific nature by the essence. The hierarchy of *esse* is determined by the hierarchy of essences. Prior to their having to-be (*esse*), these essences were literally nothing, confirming in the strongest metaphysical terms the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. It is no wonder that countless popes, bishops, and saints have found the metaphysics of St. Thomas so congenial to the elucidation and propagation of the Catholic Faith.

To have realized as much is truly to the credit of existential Thomists, who have brought to the fore the centrality and originality of the Angelic Doctor's speculation concerning *esse* after a period of relative neglect. But presumption and unrestrained zeal have caused many of them to revile almost all that passed between St. Thomas and their own investigations. They went to war against the ancient Thomists, whom they regarded as having failed to recognize that *esse* is no mere essence (*essentia*), but the very act-of-being (*actus essendi*). They dismissed these learned

men out of hand, either for a presumed failure to understand according to the newly discovered light, or simply for using a terminology foreign to St. Thomas's own works. But, truth be told, these Thomists, facing radical criticism from other scholastic philosophers, grappled with certain ambiguities in the written doctrine of St. Thomas. While a defense of even one of these theologians demands the scholarship of a specialist, it does fall within the scope of this essay to show that this new light of metaphysical understanding is itself tainted by the philosophical prejudice of the existential Thomists. And if, lacking the requisite expertise, one cannot exonerate these scholastics of the charges made against them, one can from a dispassionate examination of the difficulties still appreciate their struggles to faithfully defend St. Thomas.

II. Gilson Against the Essentialists

Existential Thomists, such as Étienne Gilson, have a fixation upon what they refer to as "essentialism." To be sure, in *Being and Some Philosophers* Gilson demonstrates that every philosophy, excepting that of St. Thomas, must be either an "essentialist" philosophy or one consequent upon the failure of "essentialism." If these influences are to be bundled under a single designation, it is the "Platonic" attitude that Gilson rejects. He sees the ignorance of the existential import of *esse* and the making of being into a "whatness" (*quidditas*) as the root of the difficulty. There is in the works of Gilson a deep dissatisfaction with essence, which, when expressed, occasionally betrays a Bergsonian motivation:

Because abstract essence is static, while existence is dynamic, such a metaphysics of being must needs be a dynamic one.³

Gilson does not explain why stasis, or stability, should be construed as a deficiency. Moreover, how can the to-be (*esse*) fixed and determined by essence (*essentia*) be any less "static" than essence itself? His rejection of traditional strains of Thomism is likewise overtly Bergsonian:

Now, as we have seen, the principal and direct signification of *ens* is not the act of existence, but the existing thing. Thomism thus becomes a "thingism," which can be freely charged with turning into things all the concepts it touches, thereby transforming the living tissues of the real into a mosaic of entities enclosed in their respective essences.⁴

Gilson's underlying assumption is that essence is dead form and that life is rather to be found in existence. His is no longer the world of St. Thomas, but that of modern evolutionary philosophy. For Thomas the essence of a thing is also its operative principle. It is for this reason that created being is itself incapable of creating: It has existence, but existence does not belong to it essentially. Now St. Thomas indeed teaches that "being" (*ens*) is derived from "to-be" (*esse*). But how can "being" (*ens*), taken precisely as a participle, imply anything but changelessness? Further, St. Thomas teaches that "thing" (*res*) is one of the transcendentals. That is to say, it is convertible with "being." How then can one repudiate things without repudiating being itself?

Gilson's treatment of Plato evidences his own metaphysical attitude in the clearest terms. The traditional objection voiced by Aristotle against Plato is that the latter separated essence from the material subject and granted it a subsistence that rightly belongs only to the concrete material substance. Gilson opines:

This common property of all that truly is constitutes what Plato himself calls οὐσία, a word which can be correctly rendered by *essentia*, or *essence*, but which points out, beyond what we usually call the essence of a thing, the very reality of that which truly is. In other words, the οὐσία points to the property which belongs to the really real as such and makes it to be a being. Now, we know the metaphysical cause of that property: it lies in that very self-identity which, according to Plato, both constitutes being and justifies its attribution.⁵

For Plato, the “really real,” or more literally and tellingly the “beingly being” (ὄντως ὄν), is the essence. Gilson objects to the claim that essence is of itself real, of itself a being. In the retrospect of existential Thomism, essence is made real by the act-of-being (*actus essendi*). Essence is formally the delimitation and determination of *esse*, but has no ontological efficacy, no constitutive role. Plato's confusion of the essential and existential orders is summed up for Gilson in a single phrase: “the very essence of to-be” (οὐσία αὐτῆ τοῦ εἶναι).⁶ Here, presumably, is realized in the starkest terms the very making of *esse* into a thing, against which Gilson repeatedly warns.

One very quickly learns that outside of Saint Thomas and his existential interpreters, Platonic “essentialism” is as widespread as original sin itself. Plato begat Avicenna:

What we are now witnessing in Avicenna's philosophy, is the rise of a curious type of being, the *esse essentiae* of Henry of Ghent and of so many other scholastic philosophers. It is not a being of existence (*esse existentiae*), yet it is some sort of a being, namely, the very one which belongs to essence as such, irrespective of the fact that it is or that it is not actualized in any knowing subject or in any individually existing thing.⁷

Whereas Plato spoke of the essence (*essentia*) of to-be (*esse*), in the process making *esse* into a thing, these scholastic theologians have subsumed to-be (*esse*) under essence (*essentia*), thereby making essence real of itself. In fairness to Plato, it must be pointed out that Aristotle, though he emphatically located essence (οὐσία) in the concrete subject, likewise made it being in the highest sense. Moreover, among those unnamed “scholastic philosophers” who defended the *esse essentiae*, there were also a great many Thomists of the highest caliber. On the basis of so flimsy and superficial a critique, the existential Thomists have consigned these great doctors, no matter their ecclesial approbation, to irrelevance and oblivion. It seems that Gilson's existential critique targets not only Plato, but all traditional philosophy.

III. The “To-Be of Essence”

There are two basic ways in which one can express essence: abstractly or concretely. One can either say that “the essence of man is humanity,” or that “the essence of man is to be human.” In the former no metaphysical difficulty arises for the existential Thomist, but in the latter to-be (*esse*) seems to be included in the very essence. Again, when asked what Socrates is, one may answer, “Socrates is a human being.” It is precisely this to which Gilson objects, namely, that when asked, “What is it?” one should reply, “It is a being.” He objects to this because being (*ens*) is denominated from to-be (*esse*), and therefore does not lie within essence as such.

One can take a hard line against such speech by calling it solecism without metaphysical import. But the meaning of speech approved by intelligent people ought to be clarified, rather than abolished. Now the “to be” included in the concrete essence is manifestly not the to-be of existence (*esse existentiae*), for it is indifferent to the existence or non-existence of man. Indeed, only God has existence essentially. Moreover the copula, “is,” already serves to compose the subject and predicate, leaving one to wonder what the “to be” can possibly signify here. Gilson appears to have seen the difficulty:

But the metaphysics of St. Thomas has much more to it than this. When it is reduced to the quidditative order, it becomes a science of the notion of being and of the thing, that is to say, the abstract expression of what, in the real, is capable of definition. Thomism thus conceived has been the object of a good many syntheses, at least one of them being a masterpiece, but it is not the Thomism of St. Thomas. What characterizes his is that in it every concept of a thing connotes an act of existing. His metaphysic of being as being “consignifies” existence. It does not “signify” it unless precisely it uses the second operation of the understanding and employs all the resources of judgment.⁸

The most that could be said, then, is that *esse*, and therefore *ens* as well, is consigned by *essentia*. Since a finite essence requires an act-of-being (*actus essendi*) to make it real, essence (*essentia*) somehow points to its corresponding to-be (*esse*), yet without including to-be (*esse*) in its definition. To consignify existence is therefore nothing more than to signify a deficiency on the part of essence, namely its potency in need of further act.

As regards creatures, one need not debate the truth of Gilson’s doctrine of consignification, which is entirely consistent with the doctrine of St. Thomas. But he fails to see that to-be (*esse*) must also in some manner be a perfection deriving from essence in order that essence may directly consignify existence. St. Thomas himself distinguishes the signification of the terms, “nature,” “quiddity,” and “essence”:

Non enim res est intelligibilis nisi per diffinitionem et essentiam suam. Et sic etiam philosophus dicit in V metaphysicae quod omnis substantia est natura. Tamen nomen naturae hoc modo sumptae videtur significare essentiam rei, secundum quod habet ordinem ad propriam operationem rei, cum nulla res propria operatione destituatur. Quiditatis vero nomen sumitur ex hoc, quod per diffinitionem significatur. Sed essentia

dicitur secundum quod per eam et in ea ens habet esse. Sed quia ens absolute et per prius dicitur de substantiis et per posterius et quasi secundum quid de accidentibus, inde est quod essentia proprie et vere est in substantiis, sed in accidentibus est quodammodo et secundum quid.

For a thing is intelligible only through its definition and essence. And in this way the philosopher also says in *Metaphysics V.* that every substance is a nature. Nevertheless the name, “nature,” taken in this manner seems to signify the essence of the thing inasmuch as it has an order to the proper operation of the thing, since no thing is deprived of its proper operation. But the name, “quiddity,” is taken from the fact that it is signified through the definition. And “essence” is said insofar as through it and in it a being has to-be. But because being is said absolutely and primarily of substances and secondarily and, as it were, relatively of accidents, thence it is that essence is properly and truly in substances, but is in accidents in a certain manner and relatively.⁹

The first thing to note is that a thing is intelligible in two respects: its definition (or quiddity) and its essence. One must refrain from a facile identification of the two. Moreover, the operation of something derives from its essence, for which reason it is called a “nature.” Thus, essence is not a dead thing, but the very principle of life and operation. But more troubling for the existential Thomist is the Common Doctor’s declaration that “essence is said inasmuch as through it and in it a being has to-be.” Explicating in a footnote this troublesome text of St. Thomas, Gilson says:

In order to remove all uncertainty from the mind of the reader, let us get at the exact meaning of this last phrase. It does not mean that *essentia* confers *esse* on substance. It means that in and by the mediation of the *essentia*, the substance receives *esse*.¹⁰

The terms “confer” and “mediation” are Gilson’s, not Thomas’s. Clearly, to confer *esse* means to confer existence, because, for Gilson, *esse* means existence alone. But what does “mediate” mean precisely? And why can some quiddities receive *esse*, whereas others cannot. Gilson cannot offer a satisfying explanation without repudiating his purely existential interpretation.

In keeping with these definitions of St. Thomas, only quiddities capable of subsisting are able to consignify existence immediately, for these quiddities alone can enter into composition with the act-of-being (*actus essendi*) to make a real being. It is for this reason that one is justified in calling them “essences,” for the quiddities of accidents can be called “essences” only by an abuse of terms, in which case “essence” means nothing more than “quiddity.” These accidents can only be said to consignify *esse* mediately, or by analogy to essence, that is, inasmuch as each has a different real relation to substance. If, as M. Gilson maintains, *esse* can only be signified in an existential judgment, then there is no criterion for distinguishing between that which is capable of subsisting and that which is not. One could say that whiteness does not subsist, but never that whiteness cannot subsist. The subordination of accident to substance would be completely subsumed under the contingencies of existence. Indeed, the categorical distinction between substance and accident would be abolished entirely. Not a few modern philosophers may applaud

the abolition of a distinction which they themselves do not admit, but it is certainly not the doctrine of St. Thomas.

Aquinas himself is explicit about such a distinction in his definition of substance. The question is acute with respect to the preservation of the accidents of bread and wine during Transubstantiation. In some manner these accidents must survive the change of substance from that of bread and wine to that of Jesus Christ, without themselves becoming a proper subject or substance. If substance were merely a matter of the relative primacy of existence, then, by their existence independent of the substance of bread and wine, these pre-existing accidents would themselves be substance. But St. Thomas has a different notion of substance:

Sicut probat Avicenna in sua *Metaph.*, per se existere non est definitio substantiae: quia per hoc non demonstratur quidditas ejus, sed esse ejus; et sua quidditas non est suum esse; alias non posset esse genus: quia esse non potest esse commune per modum generis, cum singula contenta in genere differant secundum esse; sed definitio, vel quasi definitio, substantiae est res habens quidditatem, cui acquiritur esse, vel debetur, non in alio.

As Avicenna proves in his *Metaphysics*, “to exist through itself” is not the definition of substance, because by this its quiddity is not demonstrated, but [rather] its to-be. And its quiddity is not its to-be. In other words, it could not be a genus, because to-be cannot be common through the mode of genus, since singulars contained in a genus differ according to [their] to-be. But the definition, or quasi-definition, of substance is “a thing having a quiddity, to which it is added or owed to be not in another.”¹¹

St. Thomas defends here the notion that the genus of substance requires a quiddity to which it also belongs “to be not in another,” that is, to be a proper subject. In other words, it must also be an essence. Because a creature’s *esse* is not its quiddity, and because *esse* varies within the genus of substance, a definition touching upon mere existence is inadequate to determine the genus.

IV. Nature and Supposit

To be exact in the use of terms, one must consider the role of the supposit in creatures. St. Thomas distinguishes metaphysically between supposit and nature in the following manner:

Esse consequitur naturam non sicut habentem esse, sed sicut qua aliquid est, personam autem, sive hypostasim consequitur sicut habentem esse.

To-be accompanies nature not as having to-be, but as that by which it is something, but it accompanies the person or hypostasis as having to-be.¹²

To speak correctly, the person, hypostasis, or supposit, is that which has to-be (*esse*). By nature, on the other hand, it is determined to be something. This distinction must be kept in mind to avoid confusion. Although the term, “*esse essentiae*,” was well established in scholastic circles, it is liable to misunderstanding. Essence (or substance) possesses the ontological character of the participle (*ens*), not the infinitive (*esse*). *Esse* is, properly speaking, the act of the supposit

(*suppositum*), for which reason one ought to shun the use of “esse essentiae” as potentially misleading. There are only two ways in which the created supposit has *esse*: either through another (*per aliud*), which is here designated “esse existentiae,” or through and in itself (*per se et in se*), which is designated “esse subsistentiae.” This refinement of terminology by no means indicates a repudiation of the ontological perfection of essence, but it does serve to make the argument more intelligible, avoiding many fundamental misunderstandings.

V. The Theological Derogation of Substance

Abandoning the tradition of Catholic theology since the Council of Nicaea, Gilson makes an extraordinary claim for his existential interpretation of Thomistic metaphysics:

The Thomistic distinction of essence and existence is thus implied in the Thomistic conception and definition of the notion of substance. Strictly speaking, only God is an *ens per se*, that is, as we shall see, a being whose essence is its act-of-being. Also, God is not a substance. The term “substance” always designates an essence, or quiddity, which exists in virtue of act-of-being (*esse*) really distinct from his essence.¹³

This derogation of substance yields insuperable difficulties for both Trinitarian and Eucharistic theology. If God is not a Substance, then how can the Son, according to the Nicene Creed, be consubstantial with the Father (*consubstantialem Patri*)? The Greek has ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρὶ, clearly designating God as substance (οὐσία). Would St. Thomas, learned in the Fathers and the Councils, have subscribed to such a view as M. Gilson espouses? Clearly, it is the latter who errs in his interpretation. Again, in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, is one constrained to say that the substance of bread and wine is changed to the substance of Jesus Christ, Body, Blood, and Soul, but not Divinity? Would St. Thomas, the ardent defender of the doctrine of Transubstantiation, have blundered so badly? But such are the theological consequences of this revolutionary doctrine M. Gilson attributes to the Common Doctor of the Church. On theological grounds alone this subversive notion must be refuted.

As is typical for existential Thomism, errors derive from a partial and prejudiced reading of texts. Gilson’s claim is, to his own mind,¹⁴ sustained by a remark of St. Thomas:

Aliquid enim est, sicut Deus, cujus essentia est ipsummet suum esse; et ideo inveniuntur aliqui philosophi dicentes quod Deus non habet quiditatem vel essentiam, quia essentia sua non est aliud quam esse ejus.

For there is something, namely God, the Essence of Whom is His very own To-Be. And there are therefore found certain philosophers saying that God does not have a quiddity or essence, because His Essence is not other than His to-be.¹⁵

M. Gilson understands this to mean that St. Thomas adheres to this view. The remark, however, is clearly intended to explain the origin of other philosophies, not to put forth his own. To be exact, St. Thomas credits these philosophers with discerning, at least in some rudimentary form,

a metaphysics of *esse*, and of concluding from it that God is not a substance. However, since he himself does not explicitly approve such a saying, while he contradicts such a notion in other passages, the saying does not adequately represent his true thought. To be sure, Gilson in a later work acknowledges that St. Thomas does not elsewhere speak of God in this way:

Because “what” a thing is usually receives the name of “essence,” or of “quiddity” (its “whatness”), some say that since he is “being only” (*esse tantum*), God has no essence or quiddity. Thomas Aquinas does not seem to have favored this way of expressing the purity of the divine act of being. He prefers to say that the essence of God is his *esse*.¹⁶

It apparently does not occur to M. Gilson that there are weighty theological issues at stake, and that St. Thomas does not favor the expression, first, because it repudiates the theological precisions developed over the course of a millennium, and second, because it is false.

At the root of Gilson’s rejection is the notion that substance is, by definition, pure potency in the line of to-be (*esse*): “The term ‘substance’ always designates an essence, or quiddity, which exists in virtue of an act-of-being (*esse*) really distinct from its essence.”¹⁷ That St. Thomas taught a real distinction and real composition of essence (*essentia*) and to-be (*esse*) in creatures is admitted by all faithful Thomists. To deduce that this real distinction would likewise have to apply to the divine substance is to assume that substance is potency and nothing else. Otherwise, by purifying substance of its potency, one could arrive at a substance really identical with *esse*.

Before drawing any conclusions, one ought to consider an article in which St. Thomas directly addresses the predicability of the divine Substance. He asks whether God is a substance in the categorical sense in which Aristotle used the term, namely, as that which stands accidents:

Deus simpliciter non est accidens, nec tamen omnino proprie potest dici substantia; tum quia nomen substantiae dicitur a substando, tum quia substantia quidditatem nominat, quae est aliud ab esse ejus. Unde illa est divisio entis creati. Si tamen non fieret in hoc vis, largo modo potest dici substantia, quae tamen intelligitur supra omnem substantiam creatam, quantum ad id quod est perfectionis in substantia, ut non esse in alio et hujusmodi, et tunc est idem in praedicato et in subjecto, sicut in omnibus quae de Deo praedicantur; et ideo non sequitur quod omne quod est substantia, sit Deus; quia nihil aliud ab ipso recipit praedicationem substantiae sic acceptae, secundum quod dicitur de ipso; et ita propter diversum modum praedicandi non dicitur substantia de Deo et creaturis univoce, sed analogice. Et haec potest esse alia ratio quare Deus non est in aliquo genere, quia scilicet nihil de ipso et de aliis univoce praedicatur.

God simply is not an accident, and yet can in no way be properly called a substance, both because the name, “substance,” is said from “substanding” [accidents] and because “substance” names a quiddity which is other than its to-be. Whence it is a division of created being. Nevertheless, if it were not taken with this force, He can in a broad manner be called Substance, which yet is understood [to be] above every created substance, with respect to that which belongs to the perfection of substance, such as not to be in another

and such like, and then it is the same in predicate and subject, just as in all things that are predicated of God; and therefore it does not follow that everything that is a substance is God, because nothing other than Him receives a predication of substance received in the way it is said of Him; and, thus, on account of the diverse mode of predicating, “substance” is not said of God and creatures univocally, but analogously. And this can be another reason why God is not in some genus, namely, because nothing is predicated of Him and creatures univocally.¹⁸

The answer is that God is definitely not in the Aristotelian category of substance. If by “substance” one means categorical substance, then one must grant that God is indeed supersubstantial or superessential, a manner of speaking common among theologians influenced by Neoplatonism. However, St. Thomas forthwith offers a wider notion of substance that transcends the categories, but which includes whatever perfection belongs to substance as such: God is a substance insofar as it does not belong to Him to be in another, *etc.* He goes on to say that “substance” is predicated analogously of God and creatures. Clearly, God is the prime analogate and creatures the secondary analogates. But for such an analogy to hold, substance cannot, even in the order of to-be (*esse*), be pure potency entering into composition with *esse*. Were it so, then God could not be considered in any manner a substance without importing potency into God. This analogy of substance points to a perfection that is retained when all manner of imperfection has been removed. The existential Thomist, on the other hand, refuses to accord any perfection to substance in the line of *esse*, so he is constrained to say that God is not a substance, except perhaps metaphorically. M. Gilson continues his own line of thought:

In other words, God is the being of which it can be said that, what in other beings is their essence, is in it what we call “to be.”¹⁹

For Gilson, *essentia* is by its very definition incapable of comprehending *esse*. In God, therefore, *essentia* cannot be really the same as *esse*. Instead, *esse* displaces *essentia*. Gilson may speak in tortured tones of divine Essence and creaturely essence, but he predicates “essence” equivocally, not analogically. Thus, he also unwittingly destroys the analogy of being that is regulated by the hierarchy of these very essences.

Existential Thomists will likely fall back on one last support in the writings of the Angelic Doctor. They see in his definition of “substance” what appears to be a denial that God is also a substance:

Secundum Avicennam, non potest esse substantiae: substantia est quae non est in subjecto. Ens enim non est genus. Haec autem negatio ‘non in subjecto’ nihil ponit; unde hoc quod dico, ens non est in subjecto, non dicit aliquod genus, quia in quolibet genere oportet significare quidditatem aliquam, ut dictum est, de cuius intellectu non est esse. Ens autem non dicit quidditatem, sed solum actum essendi, cum sit principium ipsum; et ideo non sequitur: est non in subjecto, ergo est in genere substantiae; sed oportet addi: est habens quidditatem quam consequitur esse non in subjecto; ergo est in genere substantiae. Sed hoc dictum Deo non convenit, ut dictum est.

According to Avicenna, this definition, “substance is that which is not in a subject,” cannot belong to substance. For being is not a genus. Moreover, this negation, “not in a subject,” posits nothing. Whence I say that “a being is not in a subject” does not name any genus, because in any genus it is necessary to signify some quiddity, as was said, the understanding of which does not include to-be. Being however does not indicate a quiddity, but only the act-of-being, since it is the principle itself; and therefore it does not follow: “it is not in a subject, therefore it is in the genus of substance.” But it has to be added: “it is that having a quiddity to which it belongs to be not in a subject; therefore it is in the genus of substance.” But this statement does not apply to God, as was said.²⁰

St. Thomas points out, for reasons similar to those in the previous discussion, that being cannot be a genus. He says, moreover, that “not in a subject” is a mere negation, not itself a positive perfection. For this reason his corrected definition remains, in his words, a quasi-definition: “that having a quiddity to which it belongs to be not in a subject.”

Existential Thomists read into this passage their own contention that God cannot be a substance: “But this statement does not apply to God...” They infer that because God is not a quiddity, He likewise cannot be a substance. But to make this inference is to assume that the extension of essence is included within that of quiddity. As seen previously, there are quiddities that are not essences, which are called “accidents.” But there is also an essence that is not a quiddity, namely the divine Essence, which is simply *Ens*. This *ratio entis* is the positive perfection corresponding to the negation, “not in a subject.” To be pure being does not place in the genus of substance because *ens* refers to the capacity of essence to appropriate *esse*, not to specify it. The essence of a creature, the existence of which depends wholly upon the divine will, can only signify *esse existentiae*, but it must signify *esse subsistentiae*. The valid inference, then, is that God cannot be in the genus of substance, which belongs properly to the secondary analogates of substance, but can be and is a Substance transcending the category. To summarize, one can distinguish between that which is form (*forma*) but not being (*ens*), namely accident, that which is form (*forma*) and being (*ens*), namely finite substance, and that which is Being (*Ens*) but not form (*forma*), namely the divine Substance.

VI. Substance in Divine Revelation

The existential Thomist’s derogation of divine Substance or Essence is also confounded by the divine name revealed to Moses. The Septuagint has:

Εγώ εἶμι ὁ ὢν.²¹

The pronoun, “Εγώ,” acting as subject of the sentence, is singular and first person. The finite verb, “εἶμι,” is in the present tense and indicative mood, identifying “ὁ ὢν” with the subject. This present participle is used substantively in the attributive position. As a participle, it carries an adjectival character, and the article, “ὁ,” indicates that it is singular and masculine. (There can be no confusion with “τό ὢν,” or *ens commune*, that is, with being conceived abstractly.)

Unfortunately, the Vulgate translation of the Septuagint does not bring out clearly the substantiality of God. As classical Latin did not possess a present participle of the verb, “to be,” a word-for-word translation of the Greek was impossible. St. Jerome translated it thus:

Ego sum qui sum.²²

“Ego sum” corresponds literally to “Εγώ εἰμι.” However, “ὁ ὢν” is rendered as “qui sum,” a relative clause. This is no careless rendering, for “qui” is singular in number and masculine in gender, while “sum” indicates the present time of the verb “to be,” as does “ὢν.” However, although the nominal character (and nominative case) of “ὁ ὢν” is preserved by “qui,” the adjectival character of the participle has been lost. The finite verb, “sum,” also repeats the grammatical attribute of first person, something not to be found in the original Greek. The reference of “ὁ ὢν” to substance is occluded by the insistence on person in “qui sum.” What is explicitly adjectival in the Septuagint is only implicitly so in the Vulgate. The difficulty of the translation is made even clearer by the subsequent use of “qui est” (“He who is”),²³ rather than “qui sum,” to translate “ὁ ὢν.” When man speaks of God, he necessarily uses the third person, whereas, when a divine Person speaks of Himself, He naturally uses the first person. The Greek “ὁ ὢν” serves elegantly in both roles, signifying both the Substance common to each “Εγώ εἰμι,” itself signifying divine Subsistence, and the common aspect of the divine Persons in their works *ad extra*. It is not difficult to see that one who considers the divine name in the Vulgate may overlook the substantial character of divine Being if he brings to it opinions at variance with the Magisterium.

The present participle (*ens*) of the verb, “to be” (*esse*), was coined in a subsequent age to meet philosophical and theological demands. Certainly, the authority and antiquity of Jerome’s translation merit the deepest respect. However, for the purpose of bringing out in this essay the simultaneous verbal, adjectival, and nominal character of the Greek, a more literal translation is preferable:

Ego sum ipse ens.

The relative clause, “qui sum,” is replaced by the present participle, “ens,” used substantively, thereby indicating present (eternal) time and the divine Substance. As Latin does not possess a definite article, “ὁ” is rendered with the intensifying pronoun, “ipse.” This has a two-fold purpose. First, the intensifier enables one to identify God in the masculine case, as does the Greek. Second, it brings attention to the fact that God subsists precisely as being, without limits or determinations. Every Christian theology must be an onto-theology; to reject onto-theology is to reject the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

It should now be clear that revelation posits a divine Substance, but if the existential Thomist still refuses this straightforward reading of the divine name, there remains the explicit testimony of Scripture. The Apostle to the Gentiles refers to the Son of God as “the figure of His substance”²⁴ (“figura substantiae ejus”²⁵). However one wishes to understand “figura,” there can

be no doubt from the Vulgate text that God is a substance. A possible objection arises from this translation of the Greek, which has “*χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ*.”²⁶ The Greek, “*χαρακτήρ*”, can be rendered as “figure,” “form,” “stamp,” or “impress,” each of which carries its own connotations. But “*τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ*” suggests the literal translation, “of His Hypostasis,” which would indicate a personal, rather than substantial, aspect. St. Thomas was, in fact, well aware of the Greek terminology, as is demonstrated by his discussion of the term, “*ὑπόστασις*”:

ὑπόστασις, apud Graecos, ex propria significatione nominis habet quod significet quodcumque individuum substantiae; sed ex usu loquendi habet quod sumatur pro individuo rationalis naturae, ratione suae excellentiae.

“Hypostasis,” among the Greeks, in the proper signification of the term signifies any individual of a substance; but in the common manner of speaking it is taken for the individual of a rational nature, by reason of its own excellence.²⁷

Therefore, even if “*τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ*” is rendered “of His Hypostasis,” the very definition of “*ὑπόστασις*” includes substance. St. Thomas further confirms this interpretation, proving that “*ὑπόστασις*” spoken elsewhere has the same force:

Hoc nomen “persona” dicitur ad se, non ad alterum, quia significat relationem, non per modum relationis, sed per modum substantiae quae est ὑπόστασις.

This name, “person,” is said in respect to itself, not to another, because it signifies relation, not through the mode of relation, but through the mode of substance, which is the hypostasis.²⁸

Each of these excerpts from the *Summa Theologiae* answers objections raised against the Angelic Doctor’s Trinitarian doctrine. This renders impossible the notion that substance has been imported improperly from Aristotelian commentaries into questions concerning God.

VII. The To-Be of Existence

If the existential Thomist is correct that *esse* means existence only, then St. Thomas is guilty of some glaring contradictions. For St. Thomas says that “to-be, however, is something fixed and at rest in a being” (“*esse autem est aliquid fixum et quietum in ente.*”)²⁹ And yet elsewhere, speaking of separate substances, he says:

Unde si sit aliqua forma subsistens, statim est ens et unum, nec habet causam formalem sui esse; habet tamen causam influentem ei esse, non autem causam moventem, quae reducat ipsam de potentia praeexistenti in actum.

Whence, if there be some subsisting form, immediately it is a being and one, and does not have to-be as a formal cause of itself; nevertheless, it has to-be as a cause flowing into it, not however, a moving cause, which reduces it from pre-existing potency into act.³⁰

If to-be (*esse*), taken as existence, is “a cause flowing into it,” then in what sense is it “fixed and at rest” as well? In a word, it is impossible. St. Thomas writes:

Esse autem rerum creatarum deductum est ab esse divino secundam quamdam deficientem assimilationem.

The to-be of created things has been led down from the divine to-be according to a certain deficient assimilation.³¹

By this assimilation God resides in creatures “through essence, presence, and power” (“per essentiam, praesentiam, et potentiam”).³² If created *esse* were truly fixed in existence, there could be no assimilation to the divine *Esse*, for this would introduce potency into God. But this assimilation, according to St. Thomas, implies no composition in God:

Operatio Dei potest considerari vel ex parte operantis vel ex parte operati. Si ex parte operantis, sic in Deo non est nisi una operatio, quae est sua essentia: non enim agit res per actionem aliquam quae sit media inter Deum et suum velle, quae sunt ipsius esse. Si vero ex parte operati, sic sunt diversae operationes, ipsum factum, sed per suum intelligere et diversi effectus divinae operationis. Hoc autem compositionem in ipso non inducit.

The operation of God can be considered either from the part of the one working or from the part of the work. If [considered] from the part of the one working, in this way there is but one operation, which is His own Essence: for He does not actualize things through some action which is midway between God and His act of willing, which are His To-Be. But if [considered] from the part of the work, in this way there are diverse operations, the very thing made, but through his act of understanding, and diverse effects of the divine operation. However, this does not yield composition in Him.³³

This divine operation of creating can be considered into two ways: either on the side of God, in which case it is His own Essence; or on the side of creatures, in which case it is the very existence of the creature. St. Thomas speaks of this “influx” of *esse*, this assimilation to the divine *Esse*, in other texts as well:

Licet causa prima, quae Deus est, non intret essentiam rerum creatarum, tamen esse quod rebus creatis inest non potest intellegi nisi ut deductum ab esse divino.

Although the first cause, which is God, does not enter the essence of created things, nevertheless the to-be which is in created things can only be understood as having been led down from the divine To-Be.³⁴

Creatura enim non habet esse nisi secundum quod a primo ente descendit, unde nec nominatur ens nisi inquantum ens primum imitatur.

For a creature does not have to-be unless it descend from the first Being, whence it is called a being only inasmuch as it imitates the first Being.³⁵

Great care is taken by St. Thomas to express this operation as one of intimate vertical presence, whereby the Creator resides in His creature as its agent cause. There is no exemplary cause of existence, as there is of form, for there is as yet no subject to receive existence. The subject itself is constituted by the divine action. Most importantly from a theological perspective, this divine operation cannot be limited, contracted, or restrained by any principle outside of God without doing violence to the divine omnipotence. It can only be specified by an intention lying in the very bosom of God. And even if this operation of creating were considered on the side of creatures, it still could not be fixed by potency, for existence is ontologically prior to essence.

It is precisely as an influx, so to speak, that *esse* comes from without. St. Thomas proves this by analyzing the notion of essence:

Quicquid enim non est de intellectu essentiae vel quiditatis, hoc est adveniens extra et faciens compositionem cum essentia, quia nulla essentia sine his, quae sunt partes essentiae, intelligi potest. Omnis autem essentia vel quiditas potest intelligi sine hoc quod aliquid intelligatur de esse suo: possum enim intelligere quid est homo vel phoenix et tamen ignorare an esse habeat in rerum natura. Ergo patet quod esse est aliud ab essentia vel quiditate.

For whatever is not of the understanding of essence or quiddity, this is coming from outside and making composition with essence, because no essence can be understood without those things which are parts of essence. Every essence or quiddity, however, can be understood without something being understood of its to-be: for I am able to understand what a man or phoenix is and still be ignorant whether it has to-be in the nature of things; therefore it is clear that to-be is other than essence or quiddity.³⁶

In short, one can understand what a thing is without recourse to whether it exists or not. This “to-be in the nature of things” means nothing other than the to-be of existence, and the choices of man and phoenix to illustrate the distinction are aptly made, for the existence of the one is certain, but of the other highly doubtful. Because existence is not included in the essence, it must come from without. That is, the creature does not exist through its own operation, which derives from its essence, but through the divine operation, which is God’s Essence. Because God and creature are really distinct, the divine action is from without.

It is just this last assertion that Gilson cannot accept, for if existential *esse* were under any aspect a divine action, he could not permit *essentia* to enter into composition with it, for this would destroy either the divine simplicity or omnipotence:

The expression *hoc adveniens extra* here does not signify that the act of existing is added to the essence from outside, as is the case of an accident, but that it comes from an efficient cause which transcends essence, and which is therefore exterior to it. This cause is God... The *esse* caused by God in the essence is as intimate to it as anything can be, since, although it comes from outside, it constitutes it from within.³⁷

Despite the contention of St. Thomas that the divine action of creating is, on the side of God, His very Essence, Gilson attempts to evade the difficulty by placing God beyond essence, thereby making God exterior to *esse existentiae*. The “act of existing” of the creature is no longer the divine action of creating. Rather, existence is only on the side of the creature, emptying the doctrine of participation of any real content. Had Gilson spoken in this way of the “act of subsisting,” rather than the “act of existing,” there would be no cause to object. But he cannot distinguish.

VIII. Creation and Motion

A clearer understanding of the to-be of existence (*esse existentiae*) can be obtained by contrasting it to the act of motion. Indeed, St. Thomas explicitly invites this comparison in a text previously brought forward:

Unde si sit aliqua forma subsistens, statim est ens et unum, nec habet causam formalem sui esse; habet tamen causam influentem ei esse, non autem causam moventem, quae reducat ipsam de potentia praeexistenti in actum.

Whence, if there be some subsisting form, immediately it is a being and one, and does not have to-be as a formal cause of itself; nevertheless, it has to-be as a cause flowing into it, not however, a moving cause, which reduces it from pre-existing potency into act.³⁸

It would seem that because there is an influx of *esse*, there must also be motion, but the Angelic Doctor is careful to distinguish creation from motion, lest one think of the former as a type of the latter. He says that the created supposit “has to-be as a cause flowing into it,” but he wishes to be clear that there is no pre-existing potency to be reduced to act. One must consider St. Thomas’s understanding of motion in order to interpret this statement rightly.

The doctrine of Aquinas concerning motion can be gleaned from his treatment of the *Physics* of Aristotle. It is very important to note that for Aristotle and Aquinas the act of the mover and the act of the moved are the same:

Ostendit quod idem sit actus moventis et moti. Movens enim dicitur inquantum aliquid agit, motum autem inquantum patitur; sed idem est quod movens agendo causat, et quod motum patiendo recipit. Et hoc est quod dicit, quod movens est activum mobilis, idest actum mobilis causat. Quare oportet unum actum esse utriusque, scilicet moventis et moti: idem enim est quod est a movente ut a causa agente, et quod est in moto ut in patiente et recipiente.

He shows that the act of the mover and the moved are the same. For [something] is called a mover inasmuch as it actualizes something, but moved inasmuch as it is passive. But that which the mover causes by acting and that which the moved receives by being passive are the same. And this is what he says, that the mover is active upon the mobile thing, that is, it causes the act of the mobile thing. For which reason it is necessary that

there be one act of both, that is, of the mover and the moved: For that which is from the mover as an agent cause and that which is in the moved as patient and recipient are the same.³⁹

Now if the act of the moved thing is the same as the act of the mover, so much more so the act of existence, which is the first act of the created supposit, must be the action of the Creator. For prior to existence there is nothing but the Creator. And this dual aspect of existence is precisely why St. Thomas must warn his reader not to conceive creation as a motion. One ought then to inquire under what aspect the act-of-being (*actus essendi*), while remaining a single act, belongs to each. This can be understood by an analogy with motion:

Respondet ad tertium inconueniens destruens hanc illationem, qua concludebatur quod si actio et passio sunt unus motus, quod actio et passio sunt idem. Et dicit quod finaliter dicendum est, quod non sequitur quod actio et passio sint idem, vel doctio et doctrina, sed quod motus cui inest utrumque eorum, sit idem. Qui quidem motus secundum unam rationem est actio, et secundum aliam rationem est passio. Alterum enim est secundum rationem esse actum hujus ut *in hoc*, et esse actum hujus ut *ab hoc*. Motus autem dicitur actio secundum quod est actus agentis ut ab hoc: dicitur autem passio secundum quod est actus patientis ut in hoc. Et sic patet quod licet motus sit idem moventis et moti, propter hoc quod abstrahit ab utraque ratione, tamen actio et passio differunt propter hoc, quod has diversas rationes in sua significatione includunt. Ex hoc autem apparet quod, cum motus abstrahat a ratione actionis et passionis, non continetur in praedicamento actionis neque in praedicamento passionis, ut quidam dixerunt.

He responds to the third difficulty, destroying this inference by which it was concluded that if action and passion are one motion, then action and passion are the same. And he says that it must be finally said that it does not follow that action and passion, or teaching and learning, are the same, but that the motion in both of these is the same. Indeed, this motion according to one aspect is action, and according to another aspect is passion. For according to the aspect, it differs to be the act of this thing as “in this thing” and to be the act of this thing as “from this thing.” For motion is called an action insofar as it is the act of the agent as “from this thing,” but it is called passion insofar as it is the act of the patient as “in this thing.” And thus it is clear that although the motion is the same for mover and moved because of the fact that it abstracts from each aspect, nevertheless action and passion differ on account of the fact that they include diverse aspects in their significations. And from this it appears that since motion abstracts from the aspect of action or passion, it is contained neither in the category of action nor in the category of passion, as certain people have said.⁴⁰

The analogy is rather clear: The *esse existentiae* is the act of the created supposit as “in this thing” and the act of the Creator as “from this thing.” But Gilson denies that existence is extrinsic: “Between the Avicennian extrinsicism and the Thomistic intrinsicism of existence, no conciliation is possible.”⁴¹ Indeed, no conciliation is possible between “Avicennian extrinsicism” and Gilson’s “Thomistic intrinsicism” if one denies that the action of the Creator and the to-be (*esse*) of the creature are a single act. No conciliation is possible if one believes that existence is

that-which-is (*quod est*), rather than that-by-which-it-is (*quo est*). But if, on the other hand, existence is *quo est*, then it is also a divine action, for the creature cannot bring itself into existence. If this were not sufficiently clear, St. Thomas himself, whom M. Gilson manifestly contradicts, teaches exactly what sort of cause is to be designated “extrinsic”:

Communiter autem invenitur aliquid denominari ab aliquo extrinseco, vel secundum rationem causae, vel secundum rationem mensurae; denominatur enim aliquid causatum et mensuratum ab aliquo exteriori. Cum autem quatuor sint genera causarum, duo ex his sunt partes essentiae, scilicet materia et forma: unde praedicatio quae posset fieri secundum haec duo, pertinet ad praedicamentum substantiae, utpote si dicamus quod homo est rationalis, et homo est corporeus. Causa autem finalis non causat seorsum aliquid ab agente: intantum enim finis habet rationem causae, inquantum movet agentem. Remanet igitur sola causa agens a qua potest denominari aliquid sicut ab exteriori.

And something is commonly found to be denominated from something extrinsic, either according to the aspect of cause, or according to the aspect of measure, for it is denominated as caused or measured from something exterior. But although there are four genera of causes, two of these are parts of the essence, namely matter and form. Hence the predication that could be made according to these two pertains to the category of substance, for example, if we were to say that man is rational and that man is corporeal. Moreover, the final cause does not cause anything outside the agent. For the final [cause] has the aspect of cause only inasmuch as it moves the agent. The agent [cause] remains therefore as the only cause from which something can be denominated as from without.⁴²

Of the four genera of causes, then, only the agent cause can be designated “extrinsic.” Now it is precisely in this sense that the to-be of existence (*esse existentiae*) is also an action of God. Therefore, although the to-be of existence is the first act of the created supposit, it remains nevertheless extrinsic to the creature.

But in what manner, then, do creation and motion differ? St. Thomas answers that creation is terminated by a relation to the Creator, just as motion is terminated by a relation to its mover. However, motion is a progression between two terms, whereas creation has but a single term, namely, the beginning of being. Creation therefore signifies the newness of being together with a relation, not a passion, whence it follows that creation is not the actualization of a potency. That is to say, it is not a motion:

Creatio potest sumi active et passive. Si sumatur active, sic designat Dei actionem, quae est ejus essentia, cum relatione ad creaturam; quae non est realis relatio, sed secundum rationem tantum. Si autem passive accipiatur, cum creatio, sicut iam supra dictum est, proprie loquendo non sit mutatio, non potest dici quod sit aliquid in genere passionis, sed est in genere relationis. Quod sic patet. In omni vera mutatione et motu invenitur duplex processus. Unus ab uno termino motus in alium, sicut ab albedine in nigredinem; alius ab agente in patiens, sicut a faciente in factum. Sed hi processus non similiter se habent in ipso moveri, et in termino motus. Nam ipso moveri, id quod movetur recedit ab uno termino motus et accedit ad alterum; quod non est in termino motus; ut patet in eo quod

movetur de albedine in nigredinem: quia in ipso termino motus iam non accedit in nigredinem, sed incipit esse nigrum. Similiter dum est in ipso moveri, patiens vel factum transmutatur ab agente; cum autem est in termino motus, non ulterius transmutatur ab agente, sed consequitur factum quamdam relationem ad agentem, prout habet esse ab ipso, et prout est ei simile quoquomodo, sicut in termino generationis humanae consequitur natus filiationem. Creatio autem, sicut dictum est, non potest accipi ut moveri, quod est ante terminum motus, sed accipitur ut in facto esse; unde in ipsa creatione non importatur aliquis accessus ad esse, nec transmutatio a creante, sed solummodo inceptio essendi, et relatio ad creatorem a quo esse habet; et sic creatio nihil est aliud realiter quam relatio quaedam ad Deum cum novitate essendi.

Creation can be taken actively or passively. If it is taken actively, in this way it designates the action of God, which is his Essence, together with a relation to the creature, which is not a real relation, but according to intelligibility only. If however it is taken passively, since creation, as was already stated above, is not properly speaking a change, it cannot be said that it is something in the genus of passion, but is in the genus of relation. This is shown thus: In every true change and movement a twofold process is found, one from one term of motion into the other, as from whiteness to blackness, the other from the agent into the patient, as from the maker into the thing made. But these processes differ from each other in the act of being moved, and in the term of motion. For in the very act of being moved, that which is moved recedes from one term of motion and accedes to the other, [but] is not in the term of motion, as is clear in that which is moved from whiteness to blackness. For in the very term of motion it no longer accedes to blackness, but begins to be black. Similarly, while it is in the act of being moved the patient or the thing made is transformed by the agent, but when it is at the term of its movement, it is no longer being changed by the agent. Rather, the thing made acquires a certain relation to the agent, inasmuch as it has its to-be from it and is in some way similar to it, just as in the term of human generation the offspring acquires sonship. Now creation, as was said, cannot be taken as an act of being moved, which is before the term of motion, but is taken as to-be in the thing made. Whence there is implied in creation neither some accession toward to-be, nor a transformation by the Creator, but merely the beginning of being, and a relation to the Creator from whom it has to-be. And thus creation is really nothing other than a certain relation to God, together with the newness of being.⁴³

One ought not to think of the influx of *esse* as either a motion or something in motion, for existence is the first ontological moment of creation, and there is no prior subject of motion. To conceive creation as a motion is to make the nothingness prior to existence into the term of a change. It is to yield to imagination, which can represent the passage from non-being to being in no other way. But if one is to go beyond these representations, creation must be apprehended by a purely metaphysical conception: The change from non-existence to existence is existence itself.

One should therefore consider the influx of *esse* as the divine action residing in the newly created supposit. This residence (*residentia*) in the supposit of the to-be of existence (*esse existentiae*) can be distinguished from the inherence (*inhaerentia*) of the to-be of subsistence

(*esse subsistentiae*). While resident act (*actus residens*) can be either intrinsic or extrinsic, inherent act (*actus inhaerens*) can only be intrinsic. For this reason, inherent act, as such, is incommunicable, and subsistence implies incommunicability. To be philosophically exact, by “inherent act” (*actus inhaerens*) is meant an act conjoint with its formal intelligibility (*ratio*), but by “resident act” (*actus residens*) an act disjoint with its formal intelligibility. And to foreclose possible misunderstandings, it must be specified that in neither case are the act and formal intelligibility separable. Rather, in resident act intelligibility and act are sustained distinctly, whereas in inherent act there is realized the coherence of act and intelligibility. A physical analogy, though imperfect, may yet be helpful: Inherent act is like a solid that includes within itself the very limits of its shape, whereas resident act is like a motionless fluid that takes its shape from the limits of its container. But a caveat is in order: For this analogy to hold, one must conceive the container itself to have been produced together with the liquid.

One will not find such terminology, or even such distinctions, in the works of St. Thomas. These have been proposed to make explicit the anterior principles under which the distinction in a single act between “from this thing” and “in this thing” will have a real foundation. To deny the extrinsic residence of act is to make impossible not only creation and motion, but even the indwelling of the Blessed Trinity by sanctifying grace. In the face of a purely existential interpretation of *esse*, one is simply constrained to undercover these unspoken suppositions.

IX. The To-Be of Subsistence

St. Thomas himself obliterates the purely existential interpretation of *esse* by showing that essence embraces *esse* in an equally important, if yet different, manner:

Esse enim rei, quamvis sit aliud ab ejus essentia, non tamen est intelligendum quod sit aliquod superadditum ad modum accidentis, sed quasi constituitur per principia essentiae. Et ideo hoc nomen “ens” quod imponitur ab ipso esse significat idem cum nomine quod imponitur ab ipsa essentia.

For the to-be of a thing, granting that it is other than its essence, nevertheless must not be understood to be something superadded in the manner of an accident, but as though constituted through the principles of essence. And therefore this name, “being,” which is imposed from its to-be, signifies the same as the name which is imposed from its essence.⁴⁴

The Angelic Doctor indicates very clearly that *esse* is not superadded in the manner of an accident precisely because the creature has an essence, and not, as Gilson maintains, because the Creator lacks one. To quote Thomas, the to-be (*esse*) of a creature is “constituted through the principles of essence.” This is to return to a previous point: It is only through essence that a supposit receives to-be, and this is because *essentia* includes within it a capacity to appropriate *esse*, a capacity that is lacking to the quiddities of accidents. Thomas subsequently indicates that

the name of “being” (*ens*) is imposed from both *esse* and *essentia*, a point generally overlooked by existential Thomists. Surely, essence possesses in some manner the perfection of being (*ens*), for as St. Thomas says, “every essence is derived from the divine Essence” (“*omnis essentia derivatur ab essentia divina*”).⁴⁵ The existence and essence of the creature imitate God in diverse but coordinated ways, for each derives from a God in which the two are really the same.

There are then two aspects under which a supposit possessess to-be: the to-be of existence (*esse existentiae*) and the to-be of subsistence (*esse subsistentiae*). The first is an “influx” of *esse* from God; the second is the *esse* fixed in the creature by its essence, and therefore at rest. The Angelic Doctor also expresses this distinction in terms of the “formal cause” of *esse*:

Esse creatum non est per aliquid aliud, si per dicat causam formalem intrinsecam; immo ipso formaliter est creatura; si autem dicat causam formalem extra rem, vel causam effectivam, sic est per divinum esse et non per se.

Created to-be is not through anything else, if “through” expresses the intrinsic formal cause; rather, it is by it formally a creature. If, however, it expresses a formal cause outside of the thing, or an effective cause, in this way it is through the divine to-be and not through itself.⁴⁶

Created substance has to-be extrinsically from the divine Essence, but intrinsically through itself, with the latter subsistence wholly subordinated to the former existence.

The Common Doctor, in his *Commentary on the Hebdomads of Boethius*, gives what is perhaps his clearest word on the matter. In this passage, he elevates essence far beyond the confines imposed by the existential Thomist:

Quorum primus est quia ipsum esse non significatur sicut subjectum essendi, sicut nec currere significatur sicut subjectum cursus. Unde sicut non possumus dicere quod ipsum currere currat, ita non possumus dicere quod ipsum esse sit; sed id quod est significatur sicut subjectum essendi, velut id quod currit significatur sicut subjectum currendi; et ideo sicut possumus dicere de eo quod currit sive de corrente quod currat in quantum subicitur cursui et participat ipsum, ita possumus dicere quod ens sive id quod est sit in quantum participat actum essendi. Et hoc est quod dicit quod “ipsum esse nondum est” quia non attribuitur sibi esse sicut subjecto essendi, sed id “quod est, accepta essendi forma,” scilicet suscipiendo ipsum actum essendi, “est atque consistit,” id est in se ipso subsistit. Non enim dicitur ens proprie et per se nisi de substantia cujus est subsistere; accidentia enim non dicuntur entia quasi ipsa sint, sed in quantum eis substantia est aliquid ut post dicitur.

Of these things the first is that to-be is not itself signified as a subject of being, just as to-run is not itself signified as the subject of running. Whence, just as we are unable to say that to-run itself runs, so we are unable to say that to-be itself is; but that-which-is is signified as the subject of to-be, just as that-which-runs is signified as the subject of running. And, therefore, just as we are able to say of that which runs, or of a running

thing, that it runs inasmuch as it is subject to running and participates it, so we are able to say that a being, or that-which-is, is inasmuch as it participates the act-of-being. And this is what he says: that “to-be itself as yet is not” because to-be is not attributed to it as to the subject of being, but “that which is, with the form of being having been received,” namely by taking up the very act-of-being, “is and stands together,” that is, subsists in itself. For being is not said properly and through itself except of substance, to which it belongs to subsist; for accidents are not called beings as if they themselves are, but inasmuch as by them a substance is something, as will be explained later.⁴⁷

This passage of St. Thomas evidences a real concern with the role of being (*ens*) in created substance. Most notable is the clarification and change of emphasis in Boethius’s phrase, “forma essendi accepta.” St. Thomas further specifies this with “scilicet actum essendi suscipiendo.” The two emendations to the text of Boethius are obvious. First, St. Thomas clarifies “forma” by identifying it with “actus.” The existential Thomist will not be at all surprised by this, for St. Thomas understands *esse* to be the act of all acts, and in this sense more formal than any other form. So, whether or not Boethius himself considered it as such, “forma essendi” is not to be understood here as substance, but as “actus essendi,” that is, *esse*. The second change is more subtle, but equally critical to the interpretation of St. Thomas’s metaphysics of *esse*: he changes the ablative absolute to the gerund plus accusative construction of medieval Latin. Moreover, he replaces the verb, “accipere” (“to take to”), with “suscipere” (“to take up”). The first change emphasizes the important role that substance plays in its own subsistence: Whereas the perfect passive participle, “accepta,” frames the matter from the point of view of *esse*, the active voice reverse this and assigns to “quod est” an active appropriation of *esse*. The second change also tends toward this end: The verb, “accipere,” employed by Boethius, signifies a horizontal relationship between *esse* and “quod est,” but “suscipere” indicates a vertical relationship, with “quod est” in this case standing above *esse*. The typical manner of translating both verbs as “to receive” obliterates the distinction and raises a valid question as to why St. Thomas would go out of his way to change the verb if no change in meaning or perspective were intended.

Any doubts as to the intended meaning and the significance of his clarification will be resolved if one follows his thought into the subsequent lines. There he makes a pointed distinction between substance and accident, one that develops naturally from the foregoing interpretation. He says, in effect, that accidents do not have the wherewithal to subsist, whereas this is the distinctive character of *quod est* or substance. Accidents are not to be accounted beings (*entia*) precisely because they do not subsist. Instead, they inhere in substance, thereby determining substance to be something (*esse aliquid*), but not simply to be (*esse*). In view of these further comments it cannot be doubted that by “actum essendi suscipiendo” St. Thomas means the appropriation of *esse* in subsistence. There must be within that-which-is (*quod est*) the aspect of being (*ratio entis*) whereby to-be (*esse*) is appropriated. Otherwise, accidents would have the same capacity to receive *esse* as substance. One is fully justified, then, in speaking of two distinct ontological moments. The name of being (*nomen entis*) is imposed from *esse subsistentiae* no less than from *esse existentiae*.

X. Real Distinction and Real Composition

St. Thomas speaks of a real distinction (*distinctio realis*), or at other times a real composition (*compositio realis*), of essence (*essentia*) and to-be (*esse*). This distinction has come down from the scholastics as the distinction between essence (*essentia*) and existence (*existentia*). Gilson is no advocate of the latter terminology:

Centuries have passed judgment on the Thomistic distinction between essence and existence, and never has a doctrine been so bitterly discussed and so little understood. The very title under which this controversy has become notorious explains why. To speak of the distinction between essence and existence is to express oneself as if existence were itself an essence—the essence of the act-of-being. This is to treat an act as though it were a thing.⁴⁸

Once again Gilson exhibits a Bergsonian concern with “essentialism,” an unwillingness to express or further determine what is meant by *esse*. One need not dwell on this any longer, except to note that he prefers to conceive the real distinction as one between *esse* and *essentia*, rejecting the precision given by subsequent commentators:

The problem, then, of the relation of the essence to its act-of-being (*esse*), arises inexorably about every being whose essence is not to exist. Such also is the so-called distinction between essence and existence, which it would be better to call the distinction between essence (*essentia*) and the act-of-being (*esse*).⁴⁹

At face value, this would appear to be a reasonable approach. It has the merit of preserving the language of St. Thomas without emendation, and consequently the apparent merit of preserving the thought of St. Thomas. It would, in fact, be the proper response if *esse* meant but a single thing. It has, however, been repeatedly shown in this essay that *esse* can be either *existere* or *subsistere*. One should expect, then, that the scholastic upholders of Thomism made this specification to clarify, not to corrupt, the doctrine, for there have been many who, having examined the merits of the Common Doctor’s argument and rejected them, declared that there cannot in a meaningful sense be a real distinction between *esse* and *essentia*. They in fact argued strenuously against it.

When Gilson and the existential Thomists speak of the real distinction of *esse* and *essentia*, they adopt the terminology of St. Thomas, but empty it of its meaning. They are, in fact, capitulating to the critics of the real distinction by redefining what it means for one thing to be “other than” another:

Existence is not distinct from essence as one being from another being; yet, in any given being, that whereby a being both is and actually subsists is really “other than” that whereby it is definable as such a being in the order of substantiality.⁵⁰

M. Gilson errs. Properly speaking, the term of the relation of otherness or alterity (*alteritas*) is the subject (*subjectum*) or supposit (*suppositum*), not being (*ens*). For this reason there can be, and there is known by Faith to be, a real distinction between the Persons of the Blessed Trinity. Positing a real distinction between essence and existence is an empty formality unless one can indicate the reason for this alterity. The distinction of act and potency of itself cannot account for the real distinction, for these are divisions of being (*ens*), but neither, as such, indicates a subject of being. God has no potency by which the divine Persons can be really distinct, and prime matter is really distinct from substantial form not because matter is a potency, but because it is a subject in potency. And there is again a confusion of existence and subsistence.

Gilson's contention that *esse*, taken as existence, is wholly intrinsic to a being has already been exploded in a previous discussion. One is therefore in no way constrained to accept his dilution of the real distinction. The to-be of existence (*esse existentiae*) is extrinsic because the Essence which operates is the very Creator. But the created essence is in the creature. There is therefore a real distinction of essence and existence in creatures because the former is intrinsic, whereas the latter is extrinsic.

Another difficulty arises: Where should the union, or composition, of essence and existence be located? It cannot lie in the Creator without introducing potency into the divine act and composition into the divine simplicity. Nor can it lie in the creature without subsuming the sustaining presence of the Creator, thereby destroying the creature's dependence upon God. But if it lies in neither, then it is nothing at all. Clearly, composition cannot obtain between an intrinsic and an extrinsic principle so long as the latter remains extrinsic.

Only by distinguishing ontological moments in the creature can one resolve the difficulty. Consider specifically the case of a separate substance, that is to say, an angel. (The order expressed here cannot be transferred indiscriminately to material beings because the latter are formed in matter as a pre-existing subject.) First, the angel is established in existence by *esse existentiae*. This participated *esse*, limited only by divine intention, is an extrinsic principle of divine creative presence, which constitutes the supposit and conveys the essence by its action. The essence (*essentia*) is received intrinsically and inherently as a single act under the double aspect of form (*forma*) and being (*ens*). Unlike prime matter and substantial form in material natures, this implies no composition in essence itself. There are not two really distinct principles in angelic essence, but a distinction in aspect (*ratione*) alone.

The essence is exercised under these two aspects, yielding a complex subsistence. Under the aspect of being (*sub ratione entis*) it appropriates the extrinsic to-be of existence (*esse existentiae*) as an intrinsic to-be of subsistence (*esse subsistentiae*). It now has to-be *per se* (*i.e.*, through its essence) and *in se* (*i.e.* inherently). The essence under aspect of form (*sub ratione formae*) makes with the intrinsic *esse subsistentiae* a single composite. The *esse subsistentiae* is therefore identical in act to the *esse existentiae*, but proportioned to the intrinsic potency of the essence. The principles out of which (*principia ex quibus*) the creature is composed are the

extrinsic to-be of existence (*esse existentiae*) and the intrinsic essence (*essentia*), whereas the composite (*compositum*) itself is the to-be of subsistence (*esse subsistentiae*) determined by essence (*essentia*). The latter are intrinsic, and so the composite can definitely be located in the creature. There is a real composition of these components because they are not identical, but proportional. Contra Gilson, it is indeed more exact to speak of a real distinction between essence and existence, for the real distinction is between *essentia* and *esse existentiae*, not between *essentia* and *esse subsistentiae*.

Although he cannot account for the real distinction, Gilson understands the necessity of locating the composite of *esse* and *essentia* in the creature:

The act-of-being (*esse*) is there distinct from all the rest because it belongs to a different order than the rest, being that without which the rest would not be. That is why his distinction between essence and existence ought never to be thought of apart from that other thesis which provides it with a basis, rather than completes it, the intimate union of essence and existence in the concrete existing thing. Such is the meaning of his criticism of Avicenna on this point. *Esse* (to be) does not come from *essentia*, but *essentia* comes from *esse*. We do not say of any object that it *is* because it is a *being*, but we say, or should so conceive it, that it is a *being* because it *is*.⁵¹

Gilson not only falls short again in his account of the real distinction, but he also inverts the relative order of real distinction and real composition. In truth, the union of *esse* and *essentia* is posterior to the real distinction between them. This union completes the composition; it is not the basis of it. Gilson himself indicates the inferential source of his odd reversal. Since he understands *esse* to be existence alone, we can render his final statement: “We do not say of any object that it exists because it is a being (*ens*), but we say, or should so conceive it, that it is a being (*ens*) because it exists.” This is absolutely true, but the converse is no less true for subsistence: “We do not say of any object that it is a being (*ens*) because it subsists, but we say, or should so conceive it, that it subsists because it is a being (*ens*).” In other words, the quiddity must include the aspect of being (*ratio entis*) in order to appropriate *esse*. Because subsistence is ontologically subsequent to the reception of essence, the real composition must be subsequent to the real distinction.

One need not be content to explain the matter in accordance with reason alone. The authority of St. Thomas can also be brought to bear upon the question. The very manner in which St. Thomas speaks about composition indicates that the real distinction does not arise within composition, but that the composition is out of really distinct principles:

In substantiis autem compositis ex materia et forma est duplex compositio actus et potentiae: prima quidem ipsius substantiae, quae componitur ex materia et forma; secunda vero ex ipsa substantia jam composita et esse; quae etiam potest dici ex quod est et esse; vel ex quod est et quo est.

In substances composed out of matter and form, however, there is a twofold composition of act and potency: the first indeed of the substance itself, which is composed out of matter and form; but the second out of the substance itself already composed and to-be; which [composition] can also be called out of that-which-is and to-be; or out of that-which-is and that-whereby-it-is.⁵²

The repeated use of the preposition, “ex” (“out of”), to indicate both the composition of matter and form and the composition of *esse* and *substantia* makes clear their prior distinction standing in readiness for composition. St. Thomas is speaking of the principles to be composed (*principia componenda*), not the components (*componentia*). M. Gilson, for his part, has not expounded a theory of composition at all, but of intrinsic differentiation, whereby created being resolves itself into two components. In this he is closer to Martin Heidegger than to St. Thomas.

The distinction between *esse existentiae* and *esse subsistentiae* also fulfills the demand of St. Thomas that the composition of *esse* and *essentia* should not produce a “third thing” (*tertia res*). If the composite is not a third thing, then it must be an intelligibility uniting both. St. Thomas expresses this possibility in the following way:

Aliquando ex his quae simul junguntur, relinquitur aliqua res tertia, sicuti ex anima et corpore constituitur humanitas, quae est homo, unde homo componitur ex anima et corpore. Aliquando autem ex his quae simul junguntur, non resultat res tertia, sed resultat quaedam ratio composita; sicut ratio hominis albi resolvitur in rationem hominis et in rationem albi; et in talibus aliquid componitur ex seipso et alio, sicut album componitur ex eo quod est album et ex albedine.

Sometimes out of these things which are joined together some third thing is left behind, just as humanity is constituted out of soul and body, which thing is a man. Whence a man is composed out of soul and body. But sometimes out of these things which are joined together, there does not result a third thing, but there results a certain composite intelligibility, just as the intelligibility of a white man is resolved into the intelligibility of man and white, and in such things something is composed out of its very self and another, just as the white thing is composed out of that which is white and out of whiteness.⁵³

The distinction between existence and subsistence avoids the production of a third thing while allowing the composite to be distinguished from the principles to be composed. When composition out of *esse existentiae* and *essentia* takes place, the result is *esse subsistentiae* duly informed by *essentia*. But *esse subsistentiae* is identical in act with *esse existentiae*, and the intrinsic essence, as determining and not determined, is clearly unchanged by the composition. The composition of *esse* and *essentia* is simply *esse*, now inhering in the creature rather than residing in it from without. The composite is indeed a being (*ens*), but denominated from both *esse existentiae* and *esse subsistentiae*. *Esse* retains its priority over *essentia* in creatures precisely as *esse existentiae*, for the reception of essence requires a prior to-be of existence whereby the supposit in its singularity has been actualized. Essence has priority over *esse* taken as *esse subsistentiae*, for it is only through the essence that *esse* inheres in the supposit. Finally,

esse existentiae has priority over *esse subsistentiae* in a double manner: formally, because it is prior to *essentia*, which in turn is prior to *subsistentia*, and materially, because subsistence demands *esse existentiae* as a previously residing act to be appropriated.

The Platonic stability of οὐσία is also retained by this distinction. Subsistence for Plato implied an identity or self-sameness opposed to change. This identity in Thomistic metaphysics is not abolished, but translated into the material identity of *esse existentiae* and *esse subsistentiae*. The fluidity of existence has been frozen, as it were, in subsistence, yielding no mere logical identity, but a real one.

XI. Existence and Subsistence in God

Does essence necessarily exclude actuality? This is impossible, for pure potency would be potency to every act-of-being, just as the pure potency of prime matter is potency to the substantial form of every corporeal substance. The act-of-being of the creature is proportioned to its essence, which means that created essence is potency only to its own act-of-being. There is always some active aspect of essence that appropriates its own *esse* and no other. When essence is purified of all potency, such an aspect must remain. It is in such a way that one must represent the divine Essence.

Before concluding to the appropriateness of the distinction between *esse existentiae* and *esse subsistentiae*, one must consider carefully its implications for Deity. When speaking of God, one cannot use the term, “existence,” in its original sense of standing outside (*ex-sistere*) of causes, for God is uncaused. Just as the divine Substance transcends the categorical substances of Aristotle, as a prime analogate transcending secondary analogates, so the Existence of God transcends the existence of creatures. For, removing the aspect of receiving *esse* from another (*ab alio*), one is still left with an *Esse* residing in the divine Supposit, an *Esse* understood by this residence to be common to all three divine Persons, and this can be called *Esse Existentiae*. Clearly, the *Esse Existentiae* of God is not a participated *esse*, because it is not *esse* received into the potency of a subject.

The divine Essence, *Ipse Ens*, does not enter into composition with *Esse Existentiae*, but it does serve to appropriate it personally. *Esse Existentiae* is eternally appropriated by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, according to their order of origin and consequently it is really identical with the *Esse Subsistentiae* of each divine Person. But significantly, these identities derive from the very action of appropriating, for which reason an identification of divine Persons is impossible. Personal identities hold only between resident and inherent act. Because the inherent act of a subsisting Person cannot be appropriated, one may reject as invalid any syllogism that uses the real identity of Persons with the divine *Esse* to infer a real identity of Person with Person. Thus, the distinction between *Esse Existentiae* and *Esse Subsistentiae* in creatures, when translated into the preeminence of the Divinity, reduces to that between essential *Existentia* and personal *Subsistentia*, that is, between divine Essence and divine Person. The unique Substance

of God is not compromised or multiplied by the threefold Subsistence, because the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each subsist through an Essence numerically one, and this essence, namely *Ipse Ens*, is really identical with the *Esse* thus eternally appropriated. Conversely, although *Essentia* is the same as *Esse Existentiae* in God, its threefold exercise in Subsistence is not subsumed and therefore does not abolish the real distinction of divine Persons.

Subsistence has been treated by some modern scholastics as a substantial mode. Although residence and inherence resemble modes of *esse*, they do not signify distinct aspects (*rationes*), but rather the union of aspect (*ratio*) and act (*actus*). But even conceived thus, purely modal subsistence is incomplete, for this still abstracts from the action of appropriating. Nor can a modal subsistence have a primary analogate in God, for the divine Persons are most definitely not modes of the divine Essence. One would therefore be predicating “subsistent” equivocally, rather than analogously, of God and creatures. The outcome would be to strip the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, a central article of the Catholic Faith, of any definite meaning. Subsistence is a pure perfection, much like being, truth, goodness, and wisdom. It can be predicated of God by eliminating everything in the subsistence of creatures that implies imperfection. One must eliminate from angels the concomitant formal proportion between potency and the to-be of subsistence (*esse subsistentiae*). The divine Essence (*Ipse Ens*) does not enter into composition with *Esse*, but appropriates it as an intrinsic act inhering in the Supposit. The modal definition of subsistence, far from impeding the existential Thomists, paved the way for a purely existential *esse* by evacuating subsistence of its ontological character.

XII. Subsistence and “Subsistit in”

Having distinguished carefully between existence and subsistence, one might ask how this distinction would be reflected in current ecclesial controversies concerning the definition of the Church. Prior to the Second Vatican Council, the Magisterium had always taught that the Catholic Church “is” the Church of Christ. It was decided during the Council to express the notion that there are “many elements of sanctification and truth” lying outside the visible structure of the Church. The Council itself declared:

Haec Ecclesia, in hoc mundo ut societas constituta et ordinata, subsistit in Ecclesia catholica, a successore Petri et Episcopis in ejus communione gubernata, licet extra ejus compaginem elementa plura sanctificationis et veritatis inveniantur, quae ut dona Ecclesiae Christi propria, ad unitatem catholicam impellunt.

This Church constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him, although many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure. These elements, as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward catholic unity.⁵⁴

The most controversial part of the document has been the notion that the Church of Christ subsists in (*subsistit in*) the Catholic Church. Naturally, theologians debate the nature of the relationship between “is” (*est*) and “subsists in” (*subsistit in*). Some falsely suggest that the new definition voids the former. But the preceding investigations into the meaning of existence and subsistence suggest that the “Church of Christ” ought to be understood as the existence of the Church, whereas the “Catholic Church” indicates the subject appropriating the to-be of this existence. In that sense, an identity in act would hold between the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church; the *est* follows directly from *subsistit in*. The Catholic Church in such an understanding would be the termination and perfection of the Church of Christ. Such an interpretation also appears to be supported by the answer of then Cardinal Ratzinger in reply to objections lodged against the encyclical, *Dominus Jesus*.

The concept expressed by “is” (to be) is far broader than that expressed by “to subsist”. “To subsist” is a very precise way of being, that is, to be as a subject, which exists in itself. Thus the Council Fathers meant to say that the being of the Church as such is a broader entity than the Roman Catholic Church, but within the latter it acquires, in an incomparable way, the character of a true and proper subject.⁵⁵

To be true to the thinking of the Common Doctor, one must say that this subsistence in the Catholic Church means that she alone is constituted in such a way as to assume this actuality.

The Magisterium needs to fully clarify the manner in which these “elements of sanctification and truth,” presumably sacraments and dogmatic teachings, continue to exist among the separated brethren. There are several ways in which this is possible. These can be existential participations in the sanctity and truth of the Catholic Church, or motive presences of the Catholic Church in these communities, or existences independent of the proper subject of the Church of Christ. Because these elements impel toward Catholic unity, it would seem that the third possibility, if not positively excluded, has at the very least not been addressed. The third seems inadequate especially in the case of the sacraments, which contain the grace that is conferred. An inherent grace of this sort would seem to belong to the proper subject of the Church of Christ. Either the first or second possibility, or some combination of the two, would then be demanded. Again, this is simply a matter that the Magisterium must clarify. A more exact specification of this “broader entity” of which the current Pontiff, Pope Benedict XVI, once spoke would also be desired. For it does not seem to be in keeping with perfection of the Catholic Church if “broader” be taken intensively, whereas there seems to be less of a difficulty if it be taken extensively.

XIII. The Weakness of Historical Exegesis

Existential diatribes against “essentialism” and the “essentialist” interpretation of St. Thomas only serve to corrupt legitimate insights into Thomistic metaphysics. This unwillingness to clarify the distinction between existence and subsistence at the level of *esse* leads one to speak in

contradictory ways of the act-of-being (*actus essendi*), ultimately driving one into positions incompatible with the Catholic Faith. It is only in explaining how *esse existentiae* through *essentia* terminates in *esse subsistentiae* that one can resolve and assign the seemingly contradictory statements of St. Thomas concerning *esse* and *substantia*.

The historical method of exegesis has valuable contributions to make to the study of the doctrine of St. Thomas, but one must always subordinate this method to the theological and philosophical disciplines. Failure to do so leads to precisely the kind of incoherence that plagues existential Thomism. The historical method is constrained to look only at St. Thomas and the doctrinal influences that preceded him. It assumes that these historical influences are a better means to apprehend the meaning of St. Thomas's teaching than the timeless Deposit of Faith, which he strove to elucidate, or the scores of commentators, who labored afterwards to expound his synthesis. To this way of thinking the latter can only fall short of the mind of St. Thomas, and may even corrupt his doctrine. But the philosophical attitude transcends historical limits. The philosopher or theologian sees in the successors to a master such as St. Thomas the progressive working out of the inner doctrinal tensions that remain after so far-reaching and profound a synthesis. In the clearer light of these disagreements and debates the internal coherence of the doctrine shines out more clearly, and the mind of St. Thomas is gradually revealed.

History is not the judge of philosophy, but philosophy of history. And yet philosophy itself must answer to the deposit of Faith, which is safeguarded by the successor to Peter and those bishops in union with him. Let the theses put forward here, therefore, be judged by their conformity to magisterial pronouncements. If there be anything in them that conflicts with the truth, let those who have adopted them accept the necessary corrections not only with filial obedience, but with gratitude for having been delivered from error.

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Notes

(All excerpts of St. Thomas are from the online editions at www.corpusthomicum.org.)
(All English translations, unless otherwise noted, are those of the author.)

¹ *Douay-Rheims Bible*, 1899 Challoner edition, (Rockford, Illinois: TAN Publishers, 1971), Exodus 3:14

² Étienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Rev. L. K. Shook, C.S.B. (New York: Random House, 1956), 36.

³ Étienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, (The Hague: Europe Printing, 1961), 184.

⁴ *Ibid.* 2, 43.

⁵ *Ibid.* 3, 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.* 3, 76.

⁸ *Ibid.* 2, 44.

⁹ *De ente et essentia*, cap. 1

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 2, 448.

¹¹ *Scriptum super Sententiis*, lib. 4, d. 12, q. 1, a. 1, qc. 1 ad 2

¹² *Summa Theologiae*, III^a, q. 17, a. 2, ad 1

¹³ *Ibid.* 2, 445.

¹⁴ Étienne Gilson, *The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 3rd ed., trans. Edward Bullough, (New York: Dorset Press), 107.

¹⁵ *De ente et essentia*, cap. 4

¹⁶ Étienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, (New York: Random House, 1955), 369.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 2, 445.

¹⁸ *Scriptum super Sententiis*, lib. 1, d. 8, q. 4, a. 2, ad 1

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 16

²⁰ *Scriptum super Sententiis*, lib. 1, d. 8, q. 4, a. 2, ad 2

²¹ *Septuaginta*, ed. A. Rahlfs, (Stuttgart: Biblia-Druck, 1979), Ἐξοδος 3:14

²² *Biblia Vulgata Clementina*, ed. Alberto Colunga, O.P., Laurentio Turrado, (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1999), Exodus 3:14

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.* 1, Hebrews 1:3

²⁵ *Ibid.* 23, Ad Hebraeos 1:3

²⁶ *Ibid.* 21, Προς Ἑβραίους 1:3

²⁷ *Summa Theologiae*, I^a, q. 29, a. 2, ad 1

²⁸ *Summa Theologiae*, I^a, q. 29, a. 4, ad 1

²⁹ *Summa contra Gentiles*, lib. 1, cap. 20, n. 27

³⁰ *Questiones disputatae De spiritualibus creaturis*, a. 1, ad 5

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- ³¹ *Expositio super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, cap. 1, lect. 1
- ³² *Summa Theologiae*, I^a, q. 8, a. 3, s. c.
- ³³ *Questiones disputatae De potentia*, q. 7, a. 1, ad 7
- ³⁴ *Questiones disputatae De potentia*, q. 3, a. 5, ad 1
- ³⁵ *Scriptum super Sententiis*, Pro., q. 1, a. 2, ad 2
- ³⁶ *De ente et essentia*, cap. 3
- ³⁷ *Ibid.* 2, 447.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.* 30
- ³⁹ *In libros Physicorum*, lib. 3, l. 4, n. 10
- ⁴⁰ *In libros Physicorum*, lib. 3, l. 5, n. 13
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.* 2, p. 39
- ⁴² *In libros Physicorum*, lib. 3, l. 5, n. 15
- ⁴³ *Quaestiones disputatae De potentia*, lib. 1, q. 3, a. 3, co.
- ⁴⁴ *Sententia libri Metaphysicae*, lib. 4, lect. 2, n. 11
- ⁴⁵ *Quaestiones disputatae De veritate*, q. 3, a. 5, s. c. 2
- ⁴⁶ *Scriptum super Sententiis*, lib. 1, d. 8, q. 1, a. 2, ad 2
- ⁴⁷ *Expositio libri De ebdomadibus*, lect. 2
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 2, 35.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 3, 172.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.* 2, 38-39.
- ⁵² *Summa contra Gentiles*, lib. 2, cap. 54, n. 9
- ⁵³ *Quodlibet* 2, q. 2, a. 1, ad 1
- ⁵⁴ *Constitutio Dogmatica De Ecclesia Lumen Gentium*, cap. 1.8 (Vatican translation)
- ⁵⁵ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Answer to Main Objections Against *Dominus Jesus*”, *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English, 22 Nov 2000, p. 10, 29 Nov 2000, p. 6, 6 Dec 2000, p. 8