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GILSON'S INTERPRETATION
OF ESSE IN ST. THOMAS

by Brother Hermes Pius Ebner, F.S.C.

Thesis presented to the Faculty of Philosophy
of the University of Ottawa
as partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Philosophy

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CURRICULUM STUDIORUM

Name: James Donald Roy Ebner

Birth: Keewatin, Minnesota; October 15, 1915

Religious Name: Brother Hermes Pius, F.S.C.

B.A.: 1936, Saint Mary's College

M.A.: 1952, De Paul University

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INTRODUCTION

Since existence is a basic theme in St. Thomas, and since existence is a favorite topic in modern philosophy, we would expect it likewise to be a leading problem in Gilson, an outstanding champion of Thomism today.

What Gilson teaches about esse as taught by the Angelic Doctor, then, is the object of this present study, which aims to investigate Gilson's views as a whole, without developing any particular phase exhaustively.

Because Gilson's awareness of esse is so recent, and perhaps also because Gilson's doctrine is so profound, far-reaching, and controversial, there is as yet relatively little literature evaluating his position. Most of this literature, in fact, has been occasioned immediately by the appearance of some new work; outside of these book reviews, possibly the only formal attempt to give an over-all appreciation of Gilson's stand on esse is Noonan's article in New Scholasticism, "The Existentialism of Etienne Gilson."

The works upon which the present study is based are Gilson's existential books of the past fifteen years, particularly Réalisme thomiste et critique de la connaissance, the fifth edition of Le thomisme, and Being and Some Philosophers. This last-named volume, especially with the Appendix added in the second edition, is to be considered not only as the re-

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vised version of L'être et l'essence but also as Gilson's latest word on the subject.

In accordance with the purpose of the thesis, the method of development will be to detail Gilson's interpretations along with the pertinent Thomistic texts; unless otherwise mentioned, St. Thomas is cited from the Leonine edition, with the works remaining from Marietti. As the need arises, there will be reference to esse as viewed by other contemporary Thomists.

Since the plan of development here is governed by the nature of the subject matter, there can be no arbitrary division of the thesis into chapters of equal length. The ruling chapter must be that on the metaphysics of esse (what it is to exist); following that comes the noetics of esse (how man knows existence), which, due to its complexity and difficulty, will be the longest section.

These two chapters will be preceded by the usual historical outline, in this case a resume of the history of esse drawn partly from a pioneering work in the field, Being and Some Philosophers; this outline will conclude with a sketch of the evolution of esse in Gilson's own thinking.

Then, finally, the thesis will be concluded with Gilson's appreciation of Thomistic doctrine viewed as the only genuine existentialism.

CHAPTER ONE

HISTORY OF ESSE

To Gilson, history is one vast laboratory where down through the ages philosophers have been experimenting to find out what is really real in reality. Plato thought it was unity, Aristotle substance, and Avicenna essence; but parvus error in principio, magnus in fine again proved to be true, if not immediately in these masters, at least in their disciples. Only St. Thomas evolved a properly proportioned doctrine: things are real through the act of existence.

A. The Platonic Experiment¹

Gilson pictures the earliest Greeks as having sought the primal element: Was it water, air, or fire? The first to identify it as being was Parmenides, but unfortunately he began with a being that was existentially neutral. For him, what is simply is, what is not simply is not. Being then is eternal, unchangeable, symbolized by the sphere. And so one must deny being to the plurality, diversity, mutability, and caducity that the senses report every moment; true being is absolutely one, indestructible, ingenerable, and thus a pure object of the intellect.

¹ Etienne Gilson, Being and Some Philosophers, 2nd ed., Toronto, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1952, pp. 6-40.

Plato continued Parmenides, Gilson says, although on a more spiritual level. True being is selfhood, identity of self: therefore one, homogeneous, simple, unchanging. To be is to be the same, and otherness is its negation. To Plato the really real was not only supremely intelligible; it was nothing but intelligibility: Ideas or Forms.

These were known only by the concept, which sifts out all disturbing elements and leaves us with truth, the pure and unalloyed essence of things, eternally the same and perfectly unified. Only the concept admits us to this serene world; we must mistrust as illusion the confusion and seething activity perceived by the senses. So that by excluding the existence of things and considering only the tranquil Ideas, Plato saw being, of course, in its unity and self-identity.

But to close one's eyes to existence is not to eliminate existential problems. Hence, as Gilson brings out, Plato had no scientific explanation for the physical world. He could only say there were real beings (Ideas) and then those not so real (sensibles), which participate being to a certain degree. And since Ideas can produce nothing, he resorted to an existing god as cause of the existing (if not truly real) world.

And to explain how each Idea could actually be one, he has to posit a super-transcendent One. And to explain the inter-relation of Ideas, he had to posit a Good.

In punishment, then, for excluding existence, Plato finished by subordinating his being and intelligibility (the

truly real Ideas) to a super-transcendent One and Good that soared out into a mystic stratosphere beyond mere vulgar being and intelligibility.

This One and Good, Gilson further explains, was the core of Plotinus's Neoplatonism. As transcendence able to share its one-ness with things, it was One; as the actual sharer, it was Good; but all this it could do only because it itself was no thing and no object; it was too good to be being or any thing, nor could it even be thought of.

However, the being caused by this One was intelligible; to be is to be thinkable, so that being, reality, and intelligible nature are the same ousia or essence. And all intelligible relations are unified in a supreme Intellect, a nous, which is the first being and is identified with being but is below the One and is begotten by it. So that here also being is clearly no kind of first principle.

Then Christians came along with their faith in Him Who Is. Thus Proclus found it natural (if illogical) to make the One and Good into God. In time there followed Victorinus, the Pseudo-Dionysius, John the Scot, and Meister Eckhart--all characterized by a certain philosophical mysticism, because their being was not anchored to existence.

Thus ended the first noble experiment, Gilson concludes. It was a failure insofar as it neglected the most necessary element: the act by which all things are real.

B. The Aristotelian Experiment²

Aristotle was Plato's pupil but he did his own thinking. More scientist than poet, he was more existential than Plato; he stressed the real existents in the physical world and criticized the Ideas. His really real (ousia) was individual, not general, and a concrete subject to which predicates are given. But he never exploited his initial tenet.

Consequently, Gilson believes, Aristotle developed a being that was above all substance and nature. He identified id quod est with substantial essence as determined by form. Thus in a concrete individual, what truly is is the form, by which the individual is a substance. Form is the supreme act that makes a substance in act; form is then the really real in reality.

This doctrine, too, excluded existence and was not a complete fulfillment of Aristotle's vocation. But so far as he went, he was right, and how he prepared for St. Thomas is to be seen in the next chapter.

Gilson then represents Averroes, in his turn, advancing Aristotelian substance to its logical climax, refusing to raise it instead to a new level, as did Avicenna (and, later, St. Thomas); Averroes could see no valid philosophical implication in the revelation of God as He Who Is. In fact, he

² Ibid., pp. 40-73 and 154-167.

said, Avicenna was mixing philosophy and religion when holding that existence is an "accident" befalling essence, that being is therefore a contingent compound of esse and essence, that essence alone is not real being but mere possibility.

Whereas the truth was, Averroes stated, that since existence was neither quantity nor quality, nor substance either, it was nothing and simply unthinkable. For him, to say "man is" was to say "man is a being"; man and existence blend together so as to be identified.

In this way Averroes disposed of existence. His was a world never changing, eternally self-identical. To be a being and to be what it is are the same, and there is no need of appending anything unnecessary to it--such as existence.

Among the Christian followers of Averroes, the chief name is Siger de Brabant. Convinced likewise that the distinction of essence and existence was not of philosophical but of religious origin, he felt obliged to refute both St. Albert and St. Thomas in showing that such distinction was unnecessary to safeguard the dependence of creatures and the simplicity of God; the notion of participation was sufficient.

For Siger, all substance exists by the very actuality of its essence. To be is to be substance in virtue of the form, and any fully constituted essence exists in its own right. For while substances do depend upon something else in the order of efficient cause, they are per se in the order of formal causality. Substances owe their being to the Maker and

Mover, but this being does not include a separate thing named existence. For Siger's world, obviously, is Aristotle's, where there are concrete things, but no existents.

In this way, Gilson concludes, the second great experiment ended in failure also because it too excluded from reality its most truly vital ingredient.

C. The Avicennian Experiment³

Avicenna, according to Gilson's analysis, accepted Aristotle's form as the truly real, but he employed it in the sense of essence, or of form as possible object of intelligible definition. In fact, he dealt with essences as if they were Plato's ideas, and thus Avicenna and all his imitators down to this day are in collateral line from Plato.

It is true that Avicenna never did say that essences in themselves can exist alone; in act they will exist either in minds or in things and are found nowhere else. But he does speculate upon essences as being neither in mind nor in thing: as being mere possibles. And he does imply that what makes these essences real is their abstract necessity. They are immutable; they have selfhood, incommunicability, self-identical intelligibility.

Moreover, they will be strictly neutral in regard to all determinations, being neither singular nor individual nor

3 Ibid., pp. 52-58 and 76-155.

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universal. In actual substances, as a consequence, the essences will have to take on two qualities or accidents: first, the oneness that belongs to the substance undivided within itself; secondly, existence which makes possible essences actual in substance.

Since the very essence of essence is pure possibility, true essence is markedly devoid of existence and it does not deserve existence; it exists by the sheer will of *Necesse Esse*, either in minds as universals or in substances as individuals. But when they do exist, they exist of necessity. For in God and in things existence is necessity.

This Greco-Arabian determinism the Franciscan School set out to exorcise; the leading light, Duns Scotus, retained Avicennian essences but placed them in a series of actuality according to their condition in the free realization of God.

Hence, they are first divine ideas, then creabilia as producible, then possibilia, and finally natures; and then last of all there is their determination in singulars by hecceitas. All these degrees have a corresponding modality of essence, for essence is being, no matter what its condition.

While this hecceitas pointed out what was actual existence in Thomism, yet to Duns there was never any real distinction between esse and essence, since his being was univocal, determined by the actual condition of its essence. Existence is nothing then but some definite modality of

essence itself; and an essence exists in as much as it is.

Gilson believes that while Suarez was more or less a disciple of Scotus, he did not accept the Scotist exclusion of existence from being, though he did define being as the intrinsic possibility for existence. This being is expressed in a single concept but can be interpreted in two ways.

First, as a noun, it can denote, by abstraction from actual existence, a possible being, a "real essence"; this is not an essence imagined or chimerical but one true in itself and susceptible of actual realization; thus the test of realness of an essence is its fitness for existence.

Secondly, being as a verb can denote actual being, reality in its actual existence by a contraction or limitation of intrinsic possibility of existence; thus actual being is a restricted area of being in general (which includes both actual and possible being).

Thus actual being and possible being are the same being; actual being is simply a case when being in general does exist. Being therefore is essence; actual being is actualized essence. Essence is in act through its own actualization qua essence (instead of a Thomistic essence being in act through existence).

And since being is a universal neither including nor excluding actual existence, there can be no real distinction but only a distinction of reason. It is the same for an

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essence to exercise its essence, and to exist. For being is going to be either an essence that is real (i. e., possible, but not actually existing yet not contradictory to existence) or else it will be an actual possible (an actual essence, so that it needs no further supplementary thing or res that the Thomists call existence). To be essence equals to exist.

Gilson contends that this classical essentialism was the Suarezian bequest to Scholasticism, which to this day bears the marks of the wound. And while Suarez himself did not discard existences, he so identified being with essence that his followers had only to complete the process. Thus a Kleutgen would write that the real should not be confused with the existing.

And whatever modern philosophers have known of Scholasticism (and even of St. Thomas) has really been this Suarezian essentialism. Surely this was true for Descartes (pupil of disciples of Suarez) and Spinoza, to both of whom existence is but the complete actuality of essence.

And when Wolff came along to revive metaphysics, he claimed to use the Scholastic vocabulary, though with a truly scientific rigor. Being to him was what is possible. Essence is what is first in being, and existence is something to be added to a thing to make it exist: a complementum possibilitatis. At this point existence is foreign not only to essence but to being as well.

It was this Wolffian ontology of the possible that formed Kant and against which he later protested with his critical idealism, a sort of naive realism he had to repress in favor of his postulates.

Gilson judges that the degradation of existence was completed when Hegel set about deducing it a priori, and against this extreme abstraction there came the protest of Kirkegaard, essentially a religious call to return to existents, to persons, to myself. But Kirkegaardian existence was itself a new sort of essence, a lack of being which is an obstacle to eternity.

D. The Thomistic Experiment

The fundamental error of the three great experiments was to have taken as complete reality what could be known in the easy, natural, and proper object of the human intellect: abstracted essences, concepts.

Pare off the existences of things by the abstractive process of simple apprehension and there will be left only incomplete being, whether the unum of Plato, the substance of Aristotle, or the essence of Avicenna.

1. St. Thomas Discovers Esse

On the other hand, as Gilson never ceases to represent him, St. Thomas embraced all of reality that could be included by the intellect in this present state: essences by

the concept (so that he had the unum, substance, and essence claimed by the other philosophies), and by judgment the existences actualizing those essences (so that he attained what was the really real in all things along with the essence, giving him complete being).

St. Thomas saw that the solution to the problem of reality lay in recognizing the imperfection and mixture of the human knower and the things known: composite man and composite concrete being.⁴ Only by using all of his powers can man recognize in things both the essence and the esse, or, more precisely, esse localized in a particular essence.⁵

And this essence and its act are two principles, identical in He Who Is and distinct in all His participations:

Possum enim intelligere quid est homo vel phoenix, et tamen ignorare an esse habeant in rerum natura. Ergo patet quod esse est aliud ab essentia vel quidditate: nisi forte sit aliqua res cuius quidditas sit suum esse; et haec res non potest esse nisi una et prima.⁶

This doctrine, apparently the magnificent real distinction in full bloom, burst forth in one of St. Thomas's very earliest works, the De ente et essentia, when he was

⁴ "Pour formuler une expérience comme la nôtre, dont tous les objets sont des substances composées, il faut une pensée elle-même composée." Etienne Gilson, Le thomisme, 5e éd., Paris, Vrin, 1947, p. 63.

⁵ The metaphysics and the noetics of St. Thomas as viewed by Gilson will be outlined respectively in Chapters II and III.

⁶ De ente et essentia, c.V.

scarcely more than thirty. If this be his fully developed teaching, then never after did he have to alter his position,⁷ and at his first stroke he produced the basic thesis by which he distinguished God from creatures.⁸ Gilson, for his part, has not made any statement on the development of esse in St. Thomas, but he does declare that the Angelic Doctor was the first by reason to reach the ultima Thule of metaphysics.⁹

And Gilson does recommend Fr. Del Prado, who has speculated on how St. Thomas reached his conclusions on esse: the doctrine was debated upon by men like Averroes and Avicenna, suggested in texts of Aristotle and Plato, in books like Liber de causis and De divinis nominibus; more important, however, were the Fathers, and most important of all, there was Scripture.¹⁰ In fact, as Del Prado sees it, St. Thomas reveals his Scriptural source when explaining that names signify natures and that God Himself has revealed His own name:

7 "Sa fermeté, sa précision, son estime très sûre de l'importance du problème s'affirment dès le début." M.-D. Roland-Gosselin, Le "De ente et essentia" de S. Thomas d'Aquin, Paris, Vrin, 1948, p. 185.

8 "Solus Deus est suum esse; in omnibus autem aliis differt essentia rei et esse eius." This is one stylized form of St. Thomas's primary intuition given by N. Del Prado in De veritate fundamentali philosophiae christianae, Fribourg, Société Saint-Paul, 1911, p. xxx.

9 Le thomisme, p. 139.

10 "Fons tamen principalis, in quo D. Thomas hanc sublimem veritatem conspexit, est ipsa notio Dei prout traditur in S. Scriptura et explicatur a Patribus." Op. cit., pp. xxxv-xxxvi. Gilson's recommendation: Le thomisme, p. 43, footnote.

Dei igitur essentia est suum esse. Hanc autem sublimem veritatem Moyses a Domino est edoctus: qui cum quaereret a Domino, Exod. III 13, 14, dicens: Si dixerint ad me filii Israel, Quod nomen eius? quid dicam eis? Dominus respondit: Ego sum qui sum. Sic dices filiis Israel: Qui est misit me ad vos, ostendens suum proprium nomen esse Qui est. Quodlibet autem nomen est institutum ad significandum naturam seu essentiam alicuius rei. Unde relinquitur quod ipsum divinum esse est sua essentia vel natura.¹¹

From this St. Thomas derives the first half of his basic thesis: the identity in God of His essence and esse. This revelation to Moses implies as well a revelation of the distinction of essence and esse in creatures, as St. Thomas makes clear in another characteristic passage:

Impossibile est igitur quod substantia alterius entis praeter agens primum sit ipsum esse. Hinc est Exodi III, 14, proprium nomen Dei ponitur esse Qui est: quia eius solius proprium est quod sua substantia non sit aliud quam suum esse.¹²

Thus through a literal interpretation of texts, St. Thomas is the first in philosophy or theology to view all in a truly existential light.¹³

But of course philosophy does not depend upon revelation, and in this case neither the identity of esse and

¹¹ Contra gent., I, c.22. "Hanc etiam veritatem Catholici doctores professi sunt," continues St. Thomas, and he quotes from Hilary and Boethius.

¹² Contra gent., II, c.52. This and the citation preceding are the two passages pointed out by Del Prado as the Scriptural source of St. Thomas's notion of esse. Op. cit., p. xxxvi. Gilson makes much of these two texts in Le thomisme, pp. 136-139, and frequently in God and Philosophy he refers to the He Who Is of Exodus.

¹³ Le thomisme, p. 137.

essence in God nor the real distinction in creatures are revelata since they are purely within the scope of reason; yet, nonetheless, they are revelabilia, rational truths that can be revealed, and here have been.¹⁴

If, then, we consider the philosophy of St. Thomas under the aspect of revelabile, the theological order it follows brings it at once to grips with the problem of God's existence, and with some understanding of the notion of being and esse. St. Thomas himself seemed to have felt the urgency of the problem, since from the outset he wrote De ente et essentia. Thus the theology of St. Thomas is dominated by existence, and so in turn is his metaphysics, and consequently his entire philosophy.¹⁵

2. Loss of Esse after St. Thomas

But if St. Thomas was the first to posit existence in being as a constituent element of being, he has also been very nearly the last. "What was perhaps deepest in the

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 137; also pp. 19 and 24.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 43. On this point Pegis writes: "Living within the orbit of theology, the philosophy of St. Thomas is from the beginning concerned with the problem of the existence of God. This concern raises for St. Thomas the most commanding issue in philosophy, namely, the nature of being and existence." See "Gilson and Thomism," in Thought, Vol. 21, No. 82, 1946, p. 449. Reporting an interview with Gilson, Fr. M.-D. Chenu quotes him as saying this of St. Thomas's metaphysics: "Sa métaphysique est une doctrine de l'habens esse comme suspendu à l'Ipsum Esse." See review of Le thomisme in Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques, Vol. 30, 1942, p. 47.

philosophical message of Thomas Aquinas seems to have remained practically forgotten since the very time of his death."¹⁶

Even those who should have been most eager to keep the discovery alive seem either to have forgotten it or else deformed it; no wonder it is difficult to determine precisely who among his early disciples remained faithful--supposing that his own disciples had really grasped the true notion.

For example, Giles of Rome likely had been a student under the Angelic Doctor at Paris. Still, when opening wide the controversy of the real distinction, Giles related esse and essence as duo res (distinguuntur ut res et res). This is scarcely the actus essentiae of his master.¹⁷

But, then, Giles was a Hermit of St. Augustine and perhaps he could be forgiven. Such excuse could not save Cardinal Cajetan, whose commentary on the Summa theologica has been incorporated in the Leonine edition, a sort of canonization process in matters Thomistic.

Yet Gilson questions Cajetan's grasp of the very key to the doctrine of St. Thomas. For instance, in one of his most glowing passages on existence, St. Thomas says: "Ipsum esse est perfectissimum omnium: comparatur enim ad omnia ut actus." And again: "Ipsum esse est actualitas omnium rerum,

¹⁶ Being and Some Philosophers, p. 154.

¹⁷ Etienne Gilson, La philosophie au moyen âge, 2e éd., Paris, Payot, 1944, p. 547.

et etiam ipsarum formarum."¹⁸

Here, if nowhere else, is surely the place for a devoted disciple to point out the radically new meaning that his master attaches to esse: the supreme and ultimate act of all, the unique perfection of the act by which anything is. Yet what does Cajetan do with his opportunity? "Esse autem est communissimum per modum actus: quia ad omnia comparatur ut receptum ad receptiva, ut patet."¹⁹ What he says is not wrong, but he is like an art critic who examines a painting and then expatiates upon the frame. Non ad rem.

Leaving aside other cases of esse-blindness and proceeding at once to Cajetan's classic commentary on De ente et essentia, we could hope at least here to find a loyal interpretation. But verbally at least he attributes to St. Thomas the Thomistic position as outlined by Scotus and Trombetta (quidditas et ejus esse actualis existentiae distinguuntur realiter); he stresses the unity of substantial esse; he even insists on the composition of things ex duabus rebus realiter distinctis; he talks of an essence quidditatively complete outside of all actual existence. As Gilson sees it, Cajetan's preoccupation is substance on Aristotle's level.²⁰

¹⁸ Summa theol., Ia, q.4, a.1, ad 3.

¹⁹ Cited in Gilson's article, "Cajetan et l'existence," in Tijdschrift voor filosofie, Vol. 15, No. 2, issue of June 1953, p. 268. See Cajetan's Commentaria in Summam theol., Leonine ed., Vol. 4, p. 51, col. b.

²⁰ "Cajetan et l'existence," pp. 272, 275, 278, 279.

It is not necessary to catalog further instances to indicate that Cajetan has two manners of speaking: one when he details St. Thomas's own words; another when, on his own, he justifies the Thomistic view. Why this difference?²¹

Gilson conjectures that in the first case Cajetan is writing as he must, according to the text of St. Thomas and the directives of the Dominican order; in the second case, Cajetan is glossing St. Thomas in view of truth. What truth? The truth of Aristotle.²²

21 Ironically, it was Gilson a decade previous who had appealed to Cajetan to show how tardy the existentialists were: Thomism is an existentialism and was interpreted "comme une doctrine centrée sur l'existence en un temps où les philosophies existentielles n'étaient pas encore nées. Le thomisme tel que je crois qu'il est, sur le point en question, remonte au moins au XVII^e siècle puisque ce fut alors celui de Cajetan. ...Cajetan soutenait la distinction thomiste d'essence et d'existence contre Duns Scot." See "Le thomisme et les philosophies existentielles," in La vie intellectuelle, Vol. 13, No. 5, issue of June 1945, p. 145.

See also Gilson's essay "Compagnons de route," in the symposium Etienne Gilson, philosophe de la chrétienté, Ed. du Cerf, Paris, 1949, pp. 293-294: "Nous avons la chance de vivre un de ces rares instants où la vérité connue, oubliée, retrouvée, brille dans tout son éclat. Cajetan l'a déjà connu au XVII^e siècle lorsqu'il écrivait, sous le coup d'une illumination qui s'est tant de fois renouvelée depuis et tant de fois perdue: Essentia in Deo significat ipsum esse ejus." And again, p. 295: "Il y aura toujours, de siècle en siècle, quelque solitaire pour se dire, comme se le dit un jour Cajetan lorsque l'idée s'en offrit soudainement à lui: Mihi autem aliter dicendum occurrit. Une fois de plus, la découverte de l'ipsum esse, quo res est, se trouvera faite."

22 "La seule explication de cette différence que nous puissions imaginer est que, dans le second cas, il fait ce que lui-même dit qu'a fait saint Thomas à l'égard d'Aristote: il le glose en vue de la vérité. Dans le premier cas, il récite simplement Thomas d'Aquin, comme sa fidélité au texte et aux directives de l'Ordre Dominicain lui en font un devoir." In "Cajetan et l'existence," p. 283.

Moreover, getting down closer to the root of the trouble, Gilson would think that Aristotle has been the biggest obstacle to the dissemination of the genuine Thomism of St. Thomas, even inside the Dominican order.²³

And then there is the most fundamental reason of all: the true Thomistic idea of esse is hard to grasp and is still more difficult to keep.²⁴ For there is a kind of philosophical original sin involved which accounts for the declination of the intellect from the level of esse to essence. "The rebellion of human reason against what of reality remains impervious to its abstract concepts has probably more to do with it than any single philosopher we might quote."²⁵

23 "L'histoire de ce que l'on nomme commodément l'Ecole Thomiste n'a jamais été écrite. Nous ne prétendons donc pas la connaître, mais ce que nous en savons nous invite à penser que le principal obstacle à la diffusion du thomisme de saint Thomas, même à l'intérieur de l'Order Dominicain, fut l'influence d'Aristote." See Gilson's article "Cajetan et l'existence," p. 284.

Gilson is ever careful to distinguish The Philosopher from the Angelic Doctor: "So many Christian theologies, during the Middle Ages and after, have expressed both themselves and their philosophies in the language of Aristotle. This is eminently true of the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas, so much so that, deceived by what is an irresistibly misleading appearance, too many of his historians have mistaken him for an Aristotelian. Radically speaking, he was not, but it is true that he has, so to speak, absorbed Aristotelianism, then digested it and finally assimilated its substance within his own personal thought." Being and Some Philosophers, p. 70.

24 "La notion thomiste de l'existence, parce qu'elle est malaisée à saisir et que, de par sa nature même, il est encore moins difficile de la saisir que de ne plus la laisser échapper." Le thomisme, p. 44.

25 Being and Some Philosophers, pp. 106-107

Hence if Suarezian essentialism has been the ruling discipline during the past three centuries even in Catholic institutions, it is not simply because one is to blame Suarez or the Jesuits, Scotus or the Franciscans, Avicenna or Plato or Aristotle. These are only the external temptations appealing to an inborn concupiscence: "the overwhelming tendency of human understanding to sterilize being by reducing it to an abstract concept."²⁶

Thus the history of philosophy is mostly a chronicle of failures--systems based on no more than can be enclosed in the concept, philosophies of pure essence and possibility.

3. Re-discovery of Esse

To expose this philosophy of the concept, this essentialism, has become a leading interest with Gilson. As a front-rank historian of philosophy, he has come to see clearly that "from Plato down to our days, everything has gone on as if the fear of existence has been the beginning of wisdom."²⁷ Philosopher after philosopher has excluded existence from what each has called being, and ever after that it is a never-ended

²⁶ Ibid., p. 213. See also pp. 5, 210, 211. This idea, repeated many times in Gilson's recent existential works, is elaborately worked out in Being and Some Philosophers.

²⁷ Etienne Gilson, "Limites existentielles de la philosophie," an essay in L'existence, essais par Albert Camus, Benjamin Fondane, et al., Paris, Gallimard, 1945, p. 72: "De Platon jusqu'à nos jours, tout se passe comme si la crainte de l'existence était le commencement de la sagesse."

attempt to touch reality. By reducing philosophical history to absurdity, Gilson filters out this law: "Once removed from being, existence can never be pushed back into it, and, once deprived of its existence, being is unable to give an intelligible account of itself."²⁸ If we learn nothing else from Plato, Aristotle, Avicenna, and the rest, we learn much if we learn this. Put in positive fashion, "the history of philosophy is there to show that the awareness of existence is the beginning of philosophical wisdom."²⁹

Having thoroughly examined the symptoms of what has ailed history, Gilson is the expert physician who is in a position to prescribe the proper medicine: "To restore existence to being is therefore the first prerequisite to the restoration of being itself to its legitimate position as the first principle of metaphysics."³⁰

Here, perhaps, could be Gilson's guiding principle of action in the realm of philosophy. And he points out Thomism as the only true philosophy since it is a metaphysics granting primacy to existence and a noetics attaining existence in judgment.

Yet it has not always been thus with Gilson. He did not come to the field fully armed with the weapons of esse, as apparently St. Thomas was equipped.

²⁸ Being and Some Philosophers, p. 40.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 214.

³⁰ Ibid.

Gilson did not have the benefit of a Scholastic training in school, to say nothing of Thomism. At the university his most influential master was Bergson. Oddly enough, at the suggestion of a Jewish professor, he studied Descartes by going back to Middle Ages, where he remained.³¹ He then went through a period of enthusiasms; he was St. Francis when writing on St. Francis, St. Bonaventure when writing on St. Bonaventure, and so on. But the days of being "liberal" and "objective" passed, and today "Gilson the historian has become, through history, a philosophical purist and dogmatist."³² Not only has he turned into a Thomist but a Thomist of the Strict Observance.³³

But all this did not happen of a sudden the first time that Gilson made contact with St. Thomas. As he himself confesses, he had known and taught St. Thomas many years before really understanding the master's inner meaning. (For

31 In reporting an interview, Paul Guth tells us that Gilson took his classics from priests. "Mais celui que m'a donné saint Thomas d'Aquin, maître de ma vie, c'est Lévy Bruhl, le disciple d'Auguste Comte, ennemi de toute religion et de tout métaphysique: 'Vous devriez étudier les relations de Descartes et la Scolastique, me dit-il. Lisez saint Thomas.' Il m'envoyait faire un tour au moyen âge pour me remener à la philosophie moderne. Il ne pensait pas que j'y resterais." Quarante contre un, Paris, Ed. Corrêa, 1947, p. 138.

32 Pegis, op. cit., p. 439.

33 The epithet is Marrou's: "un thomisme de stricte observance." See his essay "De la philosophie à l'histoire" in the symposium Etienne Gilson, philosophe de la chrétienté, Paris, Ed. du Cerf, 1949, p. 82.

example, the first edition of Le thomisme, an appreciation of 174 pages, appeared in 1919.)

Yet, in Gilson's own words, only when he came to write God and Philosophy in 1940 did the light first dawn.³⁴ Or, to use perhaps a more precise figure, it was then that the sun came from behind the cloud, because once the original intuition was achieved, the whole universe apparently lighted up at once and completely, and thereafter Gilson's work consisted in re-examining each part and principle over again in the new light.

But how did this illumination come about? One would no doubt include the climate of French existentialism among the influencing factors (as Noonan included it in trying to account for Gilson's initiation into esse³⁵). So plausible is this explanation that it has been put up to Gilson himself; but while he cannot give an explicit record of what forces did work upon his mind, he categorically denies that German

³⁴ Gilson speaks of himself in the third person: "Hanté dès l'origine par le mystère de l'existence, il ait pu s'attacher d'abord à S. Thomas d'Aquin comme en vertu d'une obscure affinité élective, le lire, l'enseigner et l'exposer à mainte reprise au cours de tant d'années, prononcer même à sa suite les paroles qui le disaient, sans avoir compris que tardivement, en écrivant God and Philosophy, que la réponse coïncidait ici avec la question même. On n'explique pas l'esse c'est lui qui explique tout le reste, avec la durée et l'évolution créatrice même." This is from Gilson's own essay "Compagnons de route" in the symposium named above, pp. 291-292.

³⁵ John Noonan, "Existentialism of Etienne Gilson," in New Scholasticism, Vol. 24, No. 4, issue of October 1950, p. 421.

or French existentialism was one of them.³⁶

To say, however, that not until 1940 did Gilson have a complete insight into St. Thomas is not to say that up to this time he was in darkness. We need only read the final section of Chapter II and all of Chapter V in his Réalisme méthodique (1937), and the final two chapters of Réalisme thomiste et critique de la connaissance (1939) to recognize that here already was a perfected doctrine based on the certitude of perceived existents and the role of judgment in our knowledge of existence.

This much, it is true, is not the climactic moment in Thomism, but this is the proper approach to the inner mysteries as well as being the highest point, possibly, yet reached in formal noetics. It is with good reason, then, that Fr. Gerard Smith has remarked that these two books "are a date

³⁶ In tracing Gilson's road to existentialism, Fr. L.-B. Geiger writes: "M Gilson a bien voulu me dire (referring to a letter of October 14, 1949) que ses recherches sur l'esse chez S. Thomas ne doivent absolument rien à l'existentialisme contemporain. C'est in 1940, en écrivant son livre, God and philosophy, qu'après une maturation dont lui-même ne saurait retracer l'histoire, il a eu clairement cette notion pour la première fois. A ce moment-là, il n'avait pas lu une ligne de Heidegger ou de Jaspers. Il ne savait rien de Kierkegaard ni de Sartre. Aussi bien, si à l'occasion, M Gilson a rapproché sa propre position, plus exactement celle de S. Thomas, de l'existentialisme contemporain, c'est non point pour combiner ces deux doctrines, mais dans l'espoir de voir se constituer une authentique 'phénoménologie de l'existant garantie et dirigée par un métaphysique de l'esse.'" See "Quelques aspects du thomisme contemporain à propos de publications récentes," in Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques, Vol. 34, 1950, pp. 321-322.

ante Gilson, post Gilson, in the history of epistemology."³⁷ It is also worthy of note that because of the profound insights into existence manifest in Realisme thomiste, Noonan counts Gilson's existential period as beginning with this particular book.³⁸ However, the existential values dealt with do not extend beyond the structure of reality and noetics.

Gilson's maturation in 1940, rather, would seem to consist in a penetration even into the theological value of esse. If a natural theology will treat of a God who is Being and who creates, then it must find the reality in metaphysics. To have a Creator we must have a Being who transcends yet also remains within being to be the origin of being.

Gilson...is saying that only a metaphysics which looks at being from the point of view of existence can study things without losing them, as did Plato, or without being lost in them, as did Aristotle... Considered historically, the metaphysics of St. Thomas Aquinas has resolved the antinomies and dilemmas of St. Thomas' Greek, Arabian and Christian predecessors by studying being from the only genuinely transcendental point of view possible, namely, the point of view of existence itself.³⁹

As a consequence, Gilson has elevated his position and has "flatly refused to consider St. Thomas as a pure philosopher." He has refused to separate the philosophy of St. Thomas from the theology, though his introduction to Le thomisme

³⁷ Gerard Smith, "A Date in the History of Epistemology," in Thomist, Vol. 5, the Maritain issue, 1943, p. 248.

³⁸ Noonan, op. cit., pp. 418-421.

³⁹ Pegis, op. cit., p. 451.

would prove that few persons see more clearly the proper province of each discipline. But to him a science of being is at once a science of Being and of beings; it must be a metaphysics of esse and a natural theology of Esse. The second that we grasp the existence of a creature we have the means of knowing the Creator's existence, and we will know in what they are distinct.⁴⁰

Gilson's entrance into the inner sanctum of Thomism, then, represents not so much a step-by-step evolution as a long, final leap. Hence a study of his present position in relation to his previous ideas would be chiefly a comparison of before and after.

The Gilson before his initiation is represented by the masterful Unity of Philosophical Experience,⁴¹ the Gilson after by Being and Some Philosophers. In both he uses his command of history to deduce the laws of the history of philosophy; in both he describes history in terms of laboratory experiment, successes and failures through the trial-and-error method. But in the first book the conclusions are in terms of mere metaphysics; it is a vindication of metaphysics against all other substitutes tried for it (such as logic, sociology,

⁴⁰ Pegis, op. cit., p. 437. In Le thomisme Gilson insisted on following the order of the Summa theologiae, and one of his most existential and superb chapters, the fourth, explicated He Who Is.

⁴¹ New York, Scribner's, 1937, xii-331 pp.

and so forth). Whereas in the second book he moves on the highest level of both metaphysics and its term, natural theology; the book is a vindication of existence against the substitutions (unity, substance, essence) tried for it.

Thus to go from his Unity to his Being is like entering a city first by night, then traveling through it next day in the full sunshine. Nothing in the first experience is wrong, nothing needs correction, but it has none of the value of the second experience.

As for determining precisely who should be credited with having re-discovered St. Thomas's esse, obviously some sort of priority should be given to Maritain; at least he appears to have been the first to talk about the existentialism of St. Thomas.⁴² But Fr. Geiger maintains that Gilson surpasses Maritain.⁴³

And another Dominican, Fr. Isaac, apparently distinguishing between existential import in general and the deeper, fuller insight, would grant Gilson the honors for unearthing,

⁴² In Le thomisme, p. 43, footnote, Gilson does not hesitate in referring the reader to Maritain. "Sur le caractère 'existentiel' de la notion thomiste d'être et sur les conséquences métaphysiques qu'il entraîne, voir le profond travail de J. Maritain, Sept leçons sur l'être...particulièrement pp. 26-30 et p. 45, n. 13."

⁴³ "L'existentialisme thomiste, tel que le conçoit M Maritain, est bien une découverte qu'il doit avant tout à l'étude de la pensée même de S. Thomas." Geiger, op. cit., p. 319. Then he adds on p. 321: "L'existentialisme thomiste de M Gilson recouvre, pour ce qui est du contenu positif, celui de M Maritain."

after seven centuries of neglect, the true ipsum esse of the Angelic Doctor.⁴⁴

In any event, Gilson is ranked with Maritain as being among the most prominent propagators of St. Thomas today.

But it is at once a sad commentary on history, as well as a promise of hope for the future, that the Angelic Doctor should have to wait seven centuries for faithful and knowing disciples, that anyone should be able to point to a philosopher and say: "Gilson is a Thomist, only saying what St. Thomas has said before: here is both his strength and his originality."⁴⁵

⁴⁴ While reviewing together L'être et l'essence and Being and Some Philosophers in Bulletin thomiste, Vol. 8, No. 1, Fr. Jean Isaac states on p. 59: "M Gilson a redécouvert sept siècles après S. Thomas, l'ipsum esse quo res est. Souhaitons que l'ampleur et la clarté avec lesquelles il a exposé les données qui conduisent à ce principe des principes et les conséquences qui en découlent, valent à celui-ci un succès plus durable que dans le passé."

⁴⁵ Noonan, op. cit., p. 417.

CHAPTER TWO

GILSON'S METAPHYSICS OF ESSE

At the beginning of an investigation of a problem, the ordinary procedure is to define terms; yet history stands as a warning to those who would be so rash as to investigate the mysteries of existence by any ordinary procedure. Gilson sketches for us the picture of Siger de Brabant wise in his own eyes and triumphant; in this instance, however, as usual, not to understand what one is talking about is such an advantage in any kind of discussion that one is bound to score along the whole line. For, what he does is to ask Brother Thomas: "What is existence?" and, of course, Brother Thomas cannot answer. Unfortunately, unable as he was to say what existence is, he had at least tried to point it out...so that we might at least realize that it is.¹

Siger had rushed in where angels fear to tread for the simple reason that he had not learned the first lesson: "existence is that whose essence is not to have essence."² And as a result, "since it has no essence, esse has no quiddity."³ So that only a person unconscious of the real issue

1 Etienne Gilson, Being and Some Philosophers, 2nd ed., Toronto, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1952, p. 67.

2 "L'existence est ce dont l'essence est de ne pas avoir d'essence." Etienne Gilson, "Limites existentielles de la philosophie," in L'existence, essais par Camus, Fondane, et al., Paris, Gallimard, 1945, p. 80.

3 Being and Some Philosophers, p. 230.

would think of asking: *Quid est existentia?*⁴

Instead, the proper question to pose is this: What is it to exist? And by way of answer the very first thing to do is to point to an existent, to a concrete material being possessing existence.

A. Substance Eternal

This being, this unit existence, this ens per se is what St. Thomas called a substance, as did Aristotle before him.⁶ And, Gilson continues, all that Aristotle taught on substance and being St. Thomas also taught.⁷ For Aristotle

4 Of course St. Thomas used nominal definitions. "La langue latine, dont usait saint Thomas, mettait à sa disposition deux vocables distincts, pour désigner un être, ens, et pour désigner l'acte même d'exister, esse." Etienne Gilson, Le thomisme, 5e éd., Paris, Vrin, 1947, p. 44. In the footnote he adds: "L'emploi de cet infinitif correspond presque toujours au sens existentiel dans la pensée de saint Thomas. La seule exception importante à cette règle de terminologie est le cas où, conservant le langage d'Aristote là où il dépasse le plus décisivement sa pensée, saint Thomas emploie le terme esse pour désigner la substance."

5 In his God and Philosophy, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1941, p. 63, Gilson calls " 'What is it to be?' ...this most difficult of all metaphysical questions."

6 "Substance, essence, quiddité, c'est-à-dire l'unité ontologique concrète prise en elle-même, puis prise comme susceptible de définition, enfin prise comme signifiée par la définition, tel est le premier groupe de termes dont nous aurons constamment à faire usage." Le thomisme, p. 45.

7 "What Aristotle had said...was not the whole truth, yet it was true, and it always was Thomas' conviction that no already acquired truth should be allowed to perish." Being and Some Philosophers, p. 70.

was a good model to copy, since he had already worked out a notion of existents as a result of his effort to explain what made them really real.

Thus on the one hand Aristotle eliminated those traits like color and sound which have no being of their own but merely inhere in a subject; on the other, he rejected Ideas like man-ness and stone-ness, which can be predicated of real beings but do not have any actuality of their own.

These non-concept subjects of accidents, then, are the focal points of reality. "Being (ousia), in the true, primitive, and strict meaning of this term, is that which neither is predicable of a subject, nor is present in a subject; it is, for instance, a particular horse or a particular man."⁸ In such fashion Aristotle narrowed down his quest for reality to existing substances.

But common observation makes it plain that while these substances are not directly known in themselves, still they reveal themselves as intrinsic sources of the movement, change, and act that we see, hear, and touch; as sources of operation, substances can be called natures, or substances in second act.

But in order to give forth these external manifestations, each substance must first be an essentially determined act, an act basically one and fundamental, a subsisting

⁸ Aristotle, *Categories*, I, 5, 2 a 11, as quoted in Being and Some Philosophers, p. 43.

energy, a thing concretely real and dynamic through and through. This is not the substance we can see but it is the one we inevitably conclude to: substance in first act.

Aristotle understood full well that to be is to be in act--it is, in fact, to be an act--but to say what an act is was another matter. At this point he reached his limit.

"Among the many meanings of being," Aristotle says, "the first is the one where it means that which is and where it signifies the substance." In other words, the is of the thing is the what of the thing, not the fact that it exists, but that which the thing is and which makes it to be a substance.⁹

To the Stagirite, then, the whatness is its very being. Yet within the whatness of this actual thing existing there are, so to speak, metaphysical layers, so that we can go further yet in search of what is most real, even what is most real within a substance whereby it is in act.

At once we eliminate matter, which is mere passive potency--leaving whatever actualizes matter to be the key to reality as viewed by Aristotle.

In an animal, for example, the inner principle which simultaneously accounts for its organic character, for all its accidents, and its operations, is none other than the form. "The form then is the very act whereby a substance is what it is, and if a being is primarily or, as Aristotle himself says, almost exclusively what it is, each being is

⁹ Being and Some Philosophers, p. 46, quoting Aristotle, Metaphysics Z, 1, 1028 a 13.

primarily and almost exclusively its form."¹⁰

Form therefore is supreme in substance and is therefore supreme in all reality of the Aristotelian variety.

But the particular conclusion Gilson is at pains to point out is that for Aristotle "existence, a mere prerequisite to being, plays no part in its structure."¹¹ Aristotle does not in any way deny existence, but neither does he recognize it; the existence of his substances simply is no problem; Thus, as a consequence,

to be and to be a substance are one and the same thing, so much so that no question can be asked as to the origin of the world, any more than any question can be asked about its end. In short, Aristotelian substances exist in their own right.¹²

Hence the world of Aristotle is an eternal world of a reality that absolutely cannot possibly not exist. It is a world where men die but the species remains.

And, as Gilson represents him, when St. Thomas in his turn comes to ask what it is to be, he begins indeed with Aristotle's position: "Ista tria, res, ens, unum, significant omnino idem, sed secundum diversas rationes."¹³ Aristotle speaks of matter, form, and substance, and St. Thomas repeats. Aristotle speaks of an eternal world and St. Thomas echoes:

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 47.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 46.

¹² Ibid., p. 160.

¹³ In IV Metaph., lect 2, Cathala ed., n. 553.

Creaturarum autem naturae hoc demonstrant, ut nulla earum in nihilum redigatur: quia vel sunt immateriales, et sic in eis non est potentia ad non esse; vel sunt materiales, et sic saltem remanent semper secundum materiam, quae incorruptibilis est, utpote subjectum existens generationis et corruptionis.¹⁴

We have the Angelic Doctor's word for it that the Judeo-Christian universe is just as enduring and unannihilatable as that of Aristotle. Furthermore, he cites Scripture: "I have learned that all the works which God hath made continue forever."¹⁵

B. Substance Contingent

But Gilson insists that St. Thomas, in so expressing himself, is not merely copying the Metaphysics. He is simply using it as his point of departure. He begins where Aristotle ended. Or, to change the figure, he adds the "form" to Aristotle's matter.

For St. Thomas has to transform, to baptize the Greek notion of substance so that it will have its proper place in the Christian world; the necessarily eternal world of the Stagirite is radically and totally different from the contingent world gratuitously created from nothing by Him Who Is. Through revelation, philosophy found that it had been disregarding what was most ultimate and most profound in reality,

¹⁴ Summa theol., Ia, q.104, a.4.

¹⁵ Ecclesiastes iii, 14.

not only in the things we can see and feel but also in the beings we inevitably conclude to.¹⁶

In the Christian world, far from existing in their own right, all things are granted or lent their existences, and were they deserted for a second by *Necesse Esse*, they would be extinguished, just as the sky goes dark the moment the sun is gone. "*Quia non habet radicem in aere, statim cessat lumen, cessante actione solis.*" And this is the case for all substances; "*sic autem se habet omnis creatura ad Deum, sicut aer ad solem illuminantem.*"¹⁷

A new dimension has been added to philosophy: obviously the real substance or essence of a concrete thing is other than its existence, which can be taken away unannounced; obviously essence belongs to an order really different from existence. For what are not necessarily identified in

¹⁶ "By positing, as the supreme cause of all that which is, somebody who is, and of whom the very best that can be said is that 'He is,' Christian revelation was establishing existence as the deepest layer of reality as well as the supreme attribute of the divinity. Hence, in so far as the world itself was concerned, the entirely new philosophical problem of its very existence, and the still deeper one whose formula runs thus: What is it to exist?" God and Philosophy, pp. 44-45

¹⁷ Summa theol., Ia, q.104, a.1. Commenting upon this text, Gilson says: "It would be difficult indeed to find stronger expressions: existence has no root in even actually existing things. In short, whereas the substance of Aristotle exists qua substance, existence never is of the essence of any substance in the created world of Thomas Aquinas." Being and Some Philosophers, p. 161.

themselves are necessarily distinct. "In creatura differt essentia rei et esse suum, nec habet essentia esse nisi propter comparationem ad habentem essentiam."¹⁸

But the fact that esse and essence are distinct does not mean that they are two separate things. Rather, they are the two principles quo constituting an unum per se, a unit existence, a thing. "Unumquodque secundum idem habet esse et individuationem."¹⁹

In every real thing we posit the intrinsic formal element of essence real-ized or actual-ized by some energy coming from outside the intrinsic specification, yet somehow entering into the very constitution of the concrete thing. "Esse enim rei quamvis sit aliud ab eius essentia, non tamen est intelligendum quod sit aliquod superadditum ad modum accidentis, sed quasi constituitur per principia essentiae."²⁰

There is a real distinction, then, because there is first a real composition, a res resulting from the mysterious fusion of these metaphysical elements:

omne quod est in genere substantiae, est compositum reali compositione; eo quod id quod est in praedicatione substantiae est in suo esse subsistens, et oportet quod esse suum sit aliud quam ipsum, alias non

¹⁸ In I Sent., d.2, q.1, a.4, ad 1, Mandonnet ed., p. 74. See also d.4, q.1, a.1, ad 2.

¹⁹ Q. d. de anima, a.1, ad 2.

²⁰ In IV Metaph., lect. 2, Cathala ed., n. 558.

posset differe secundum esse ab illis cum quibus convenit in ratione suae quidditatis; ...et ideo omne quod est directe in praedicamento substantiae, compositum est saltem ex esse et quod est.²¹

And this fusion of esse and essence shall ever remain a contingent fact which did not have to happen, but which did happen by the free action of the Creator. The fusion once made, there is established a fundamental thesis which entails far-reaching consequences.

For, as Gilson brings out, the real composition was not posited by Thomas as a means of distinguishing finite beings from God, but once posited it settled the whole question. Hence the mark by which we can know the necessary being from the contingent is the auto-possession of esse: "Ita solus Deus est ens per essentiam suam, quia eius essentia est suum esse; omnis autem creatura est ens participative, non quod sua essentia sit eius esse."²²

Yet in affirming that the creature does not possess his own esse necessarily but only on a borrowed basis, do we

21 Q. d. de veritate, q.27, a.1, ad 8.

22 Summa theol., Ia, q.104, a.1. "If there is a distinction between essence and existence in each and every being, then any being is distinct from God in virtue of the composition which makes it to be 'a being.'" Being and Some Philosophers, p. 173. And if such fused, 'borrowed existences' do exist, "the only possible explanation...is that they have been freely given existence by 'Him Who Is,' and not as parcels of His own existence...but as finite and partial imitations of what He Himself eternally is in His own right." God and Philosophy, p. 53.

not flatly contradict what we before asserted? Is a world of creatures that can be wiped out in a trice truly consonant with a world that can and must endure? Gilson thus points the way to a solution:

This is, I think, one of the most difficult points to grasp in the whole metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas, because we are here invited to conceive creatures as being, at one and the same time, indestructible in themselves, yet wholly contingent in their relation to God.²³

The very formulation of the difficulty announces that here we are confronted with two different levels: substance, versus existence. From the viewpoint of existence, the world is contingent. From the aspect of substance, it is eternal; St. Thomas's substances, like Aristotle's, are in their own right.

The difficulty here is more apparent than real; it arises from the illusion that corruptibility is of the essence of temporal things. Corruption does not belong to created things inasmuch as they are created but only to created things as composites of matter and form. "Omnis enim corruptio est per separationem formae a materia."²⁴

And even with their potency to corruption or change, these composites have a simple, indestructible element--matter. Definitely they have no potency to annihilation. "In

23 Being and Some Philosophers, pp. 161-162

24 Contra gent., II, c.55.

omni corruptione, remoto actu, manet potentia: non enim corrumpitur aliquid in omnino non ens."²⁵

A human being, for instance, is destroyed with death, but not entirely. Even though the corpse breaks up at once into its chemical components, still the prime matter remains, simple and incorruptible.

And the human soul remains, for by its God-given substance it is both incorruptible and simple and therefore immortal. For the soul, immortality is not a special gift over and above its nature, but immortality follows from its very nature. So long as the human soul is a form, it must remain a spiritual substance. God created the soul and God can annihilate it, but as substance, in itself, the soul cannot possibly lose its existence. St. Thomas strongly insists on this in Chapter 55 of the Contra Gentiles:

Quod per se alicui competit, de necessitate et semper et inseparabiliter ei inest. ...Esse autem per se consequitur ad formam:...unumquodcumque autem habet esse secundum quod habet formam. Substantiae vero quae sunt ipsae formae, nunquam possunt privari esse. ...

In omni quod corrumpitur, oportet quod sit potentia ad non esse. ...In substantia autem intellectuali non est potentia ad non esse.

Existence, then, depends entirely upon the free will of God, so that for each thing there is a possibility not to be, but the possibility is not in them, at least certainly

²⁵ Ibid. Gilson treats of these ideas in Being and Some Philosophers, pp. 163-165, putting special emphasis on Summa theol., Ia, q.104, a.4: "Creaturarum naturae demonstrant ut nulla earum in nihilum redigatur." See p. 164.

not in spiritual substances. And, says Gilson, if a composite is corruptible, it is corruptible because it is composite and its constituted elements of their very nature are separable; it is in no way corruptible because God could annihilate it.²⁶ So in any kind of created being, spiritual or material, the form when taken in itself is fully entitled to its own being. "Esse autem secundum se competit formae: unumquodque enim est ens actu secundum quod habet formam."²⁷

Analysis shows, therefore, that the contradiction of a world substantially eternal and existentially contingent is really an illusion. The truth is that these characteristics are but two different aspects of creation: existence (due to God's efficient causality) and substance (due to matter and form through material and formal causality).

Existence is what will make things exist, as either corruptible or incorruptible existents, but existence is not what will corrupt or immortalize them. On the other hand,

²⁶ Being and Some Philosophers, p. 165; Gilson here refers to Summa theol., Ia, q.50, a.5, ad 3: "Per hoc ergo quod dicitur quod omnia deciderent in nihilum nisi continerentur a Deo, et etiam angeli, non datur intelligi quod in angelis sit aliquod corruptionis principium: sed quod esse angeli dependeat a Deo sicut a causa. Non autem dicitur aliquid esse corruptibile, per hoc quod Deus possit illud in non esse redigere, subrahendo suam conservationem: sed per hoc quod in seipso aliquod principium corruptionis habet, vel contrarietatem, vel saltem potentiam materiae."

²⁷ Summa theol., Ia, q.50, a.5. Cited on p. 165 of Being and Some Philosophers, where Gilson comments: "Form as such is fully entitled to its own being."

substance cannot in any way make things to exist but it does determine whether they will exist corruptibly or incorruptibly. This, says Gilson, means that the efficient cause lending existence to substances will always be outside the substances, while the formal cause determining the corruption or incorruption of the substance will always come from the very nature of the substance.²⁸

For Gilson, consequently, the world of St. Thomas can be both incorruptible like that of Aristotle and yet, to speak absolutely, wholly destructible by the will of God. But while annihilation remains possible, it would be as marvelous an event as creation, and "an almost scandalous marvel to boot, since it would mean that incorruptible substances have been created in order to be, not at all corrupted, for, indeed, corrupted they cannot be, but annihilated."²⁹

St. Thomas insisted not only that creatures demonstrate that none of them will be reduced to nothingness, but also that among spiritual creatures any potency to non-being lies more in God Himself than in the nature of the spirits:

Esse per se consequitur formam creaturae,
supposito tamen influxu Dei: sicut lumen sequitur

²⁸ Being and Some Philosophers, p. 165, referring to Q. d. de anima, a.14, ad 5: "Corruptibile et incorruptibile sunt essentialia praedicata, quia consequuntur essentiam sicut principium formale vel materiale, non autem sicut principium activum; sed principium activum perpetuitatis aliquorum est extrinsecus."

²⁹ Being and Some Philosophers, p. 165.

diaphanum aeris, supposito influxu solis. Unde potentia ad non esse in spiritualibus creaturis...magis est in Deo, qui potest subtrahere suum influxum, quam in forma vel in materia talium creaturarum.³⁰

Again and again, in many ways, St. Thomas tells us that God does not wipe out what He has once created, even though what He has created never will hold its own title to its own existence.

C. Esse: Act of an Act

According to Gilson, then, St. Thomas was strikingly original. In transforming Aristotle's substance, St. Thomas not only pointed out that in things there was a level of meaning never rightly understood, but he also further revolutionized metaphysics by developing the technique by which we can recognize, even if we cannot analyze, that which makes reality really real: he established

a clear-cut distinction between the two orders of formal causality and of efficient causality. Formal causality is that which makes things to be what they are, and, in a way, it also makes them to be, since in order to be, each and every being has to be a what. But formal causality dominates the whole realm of substance, and its proper effect is substantiality, whereas efficient causality is something quite different. It does not make beings to be what they are, it makes them "to be."³¹

On the one hand, then, these two types of causality are very distinct. One cannot be deduced from the other. The

³⁰ Summa theol., Ia, q.104, a.1, ad 1.

³¹ Being and Some Philosophers, pp. 168-169.

fact that a thing is tells us nothing at all about what it is, and vice versa.

And on the other hand, because he explicitates this distinction of causes, St. Thomas can show all the more clearly how they are related. As Gilson points out, essence can be distinct from its esse only "in virtue of its very act of existing," since its esse alone is what enables the essence "to act as a formal cause, and to make actual being to be such a being." On this score, Gilson believes, many mistakes are made because people forget the reciprocal character of the distinct efficient and formal causalities; and he appeals to the dictum "Causae ad invicem sunt causae, sed in diverso genere."³²

Thus efficient cause bestows upon substance that esse without which it cannot be, while formal cause grants substantial being to actual existence. "Forma enim manente, oportet rem esse: per formam enim substantia fit proprium susceptivum eius quod est esse."³³ And so in real beings each "form is the cause of actual existence, inasmuch as it is the formal cause of the substance which receives its own act of existing."³⁴ With good reason, then, has St. Thomas laid

³² Ibid., p. 172, citing In V Metaph., ch.2, lect.2.

³³ Contra gent., II, c.55.

³⁴ Being and Some Philosophers, p. 174. Hence in De ente et essentia, I, ad finem: "Essentia dicitur secundum quod per eam et in ea res habet esse."

stress upon the fact that "esse per se consequitur formam: unumquodque enim habet esse secundum propriam formam."³⁵ However, this existence follows not as effect but as consequence: "Esse comparatur ad formam sicut per se consequens ipsam, non autem sicut effectus ad virtutem agentis."³⁶

Conclusively, says Gilson, form causes esse, for where there is no form, there is nothing that can be. And the same reason accounts for the formula...that "to be" is quasi constituted by the principles of an actual essence. In point of fact, Thomas Aquinas has sometimes been even more positive about it...:Esse in re est, et est actus entis, resultans ex principiis rei, sicut lucere est actus lucentis. If "to be" always belongs to a being, it certainly results from the constituent principles of that being.³⁷

And regarding form, even more plainly has St. Thomas said: "Omne esse a forma aliqua inhaerente est."³⁸ Time and again, just as Aristotle did, St. Thomas reaffirms the domination of form over all substance. By being the act of matter and the determinant of substance or essence,³⁹ form is the

³⁵ Q. d. de anima, a.14.

³⁶ Ibid., ad 4.

³⁷ Being and Some Philosophers, p. 174, citing In III Sent., d.6, q.2, a.2. Concerning the formula "quasi constituted," Gilson refers the reader to In IV Metaph., lect. 2, Cathala ed., n. 558, where St. Thomas makes it obvious that esse is not an accident nor is constituted by the essence yet comes from the outside and assuredly enters the composition somehow: "Esse enim rei quamvis sit aliud ab eius essentia, non tamen est intelligendum quod sit aliquod superadditum ad modum accidentis, sed quasi constituitur per principia essentiae." (Underscoring added.) See Le thomisme, p. 58.

³⁸ In I Sent., d.17, q.1, a.1, Mandonnet ed., p. 393.

³⁹ "Essentia comprehendit materiam et formam. ...Per formam enim, quae est actus materiae, materia efficitur ens actu et hoc aliquod." De ente et essentia, c.II.

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supreme, ultimate act in the order of substantiality. There can be no form of this form; it is final in itself.

Hence if form itself needs something additional to make it be, this something has to come from an order other than formal causality. "Forma non habet esse per aliam formam."⁴⁰ The existence which does come to form comes by way of efficient causality. "Ea quae sunt formae subsistentes, ad hoc quod sint unum et ens, non requirunt causam formalem, quia ipsae sunt formae; habent tamen causam exteriorem agentem, quae dat eis esse."⁴¹

Thus the form is an act which can receive no further form but which does receive further act; for while all forms are acts, not all acts are forms. It was indeed a revolutionary discovery of St. Thomas to see that while esse is formale in regard to everything, yet it is no form and still it is an act. "Esse actum quendam nominat."⁴²

Thus esse is not the name of a state but of an act; nor is it a form. So that in saying that esse is "formale respectu omnium quae in re sunt,"⁴³ St. Thomas is firmly

⁴⁰ Q. d. de spiritualibus creaturis, a.1, ad 5. St. Thomas continues: "habet tamen causam influentem ei esse."

⁴¹ Q. d. de anima, a.6, ad 9.

⁴² Contra gent., I, c.22.

⁴³ Summa theol., Ia, q.8, a.1.

steering a safe course through the reefs. And in another passage he calls esse "maxime formale omnium,"⁴⁴ leaving no doubt as to his assurance in the matter. "What he means in such cases," Gilson remarks, "is that, analogically speaking, existence is to form as form itself is to matter."⁴⁵ To the extent that act belongs to actuality and not to potency, existence behaves formally and not materially in respect to essence.

Existence, then, is an act to which all else, forms included, is somehow simply a potency; here is the fundamental view of existence, and all else that St. Thomas says of it merely is an elaboration upon this theme.

To arrive at this profound and far-reaching conclusion by starting out from Aristotle was no mean success. In fact, Gilson declares, St. Thomas's decision to posit esse above form

was nothing less than a revolution. He had precisely to achieve the dissociation of the two notions of form and act. This is precisely what he has done and what probably remains, even today, the greatest contribution ever made by any single man to the science of being.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Summa theol., Ia, q.7, a.1.

⁴⁵ Being and Some Philosophers, p. 170.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 174. Hence: "Supreme in their own order, substantial forms remain the prime acts of their substances, but, though there be no form of the form, there is an act of the form. In other words, the form is such an act as still remains in potency to another act, namely, existence."

The true relation of existence to reality, therefore, is the most manifest from its relation to form. As supreme and ultimate act in order of substance or essence, the form makes a thing to be what it will be if it is to be; but supreme and ultimate as it is, form cannot make this thing to be a being. For there is needed from another order an act which is still more supreme and still more ultimate: "Ipsum esse est actus ultimus qui participabilis est ab omnibus, ipsum autem nihil participat."⁴⁷

This means that in concrete reality there are three basic principles: "In substantiis enim ex forma et materia compositis tria invenimus, scilicet materiam et formam, et ipsum esse." In explaining the order of precedence among them, St. Thomas continues: "Cuius quidem principium est forma." And why is form the matrix, as it were? "Nam materia ex hoc quod recipit formam, participat esse."

We see here the full measure of respect being paid to the rights of form. Existence does not monopolize the entire actuality of an existing subject; even if it is the supreme and ultimate act, esse is not act with respect to all that there is in any given substance. Hence the conclusion to this illuminating passage is a notion that the Angelic Doctor comes back to often and again: "Sic igitur esse consequitur

⁴⁷ Q. d. de anima, q.6, ad 2. "Nihil autem potest addi ad esse quod sit extraneum ab ipso...nisi non-ens."
Q. d. de potentia, q.7, a.2, ad 9.

ipsam formam."⁴⁸

But in the process whereby existence actuates form while form actuates matter, the three principles are inter-related in such a way that they constitute not three but two levels of metaphysical composition.⁴⁹

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 iam composita et esse; quae etiam potest dici ex quod est et esse; vel ex quod est et quo est.⁵⁰

Yet while each of these two levels is made up of potency and act, they are not potency and act in the very same way. "Non est autem eiusdem rationis compositio ex materia et forma, et ex substantia et esse; quamvis utraque sit ex potentia et actu."⁵¹ Commenting on this text, Gilson points out that what makes it hard for us to realize the difference is that both compositions result in one and the same effect--in a being.⁵² This is why in its own order, form is a formal cause of existence, the supreme constituent of the

⁴⁸ Q. d. de anima, q.6. And in Quodlibetales XII, q.5, a.1: "Esse est complementum omnis formae." See Being and Some Philosophers, pp. 170-171.

⁴⁹ Gilson believes that Cajetan betrays ignorance of the true notion of esse by saying there are four principles. See "Cajetan et l'existence," in Tijdschrift voor filosofie, Vol. 15, No. 2, issue of June 1953, pp. 273 and 283, footnote.

⁵⁰ Contra gent., II, c. 54. See Le thomisme, p. 50.

⁵¹ Contra gent., loc. cit.

⁵² Being and Some Philosophers, p. 173.

the substance which exists in virtue of its esse.

The form, then, is the act of its potency, matter, while at the same time it itself is as a potency to existence, though existence is the act of the entire substance:

Ipsam esse non est proprius actus materiae, sed substantiae totius. ...Ad ipsam etiam formam comparatur ipsum esse ut actus. Per hoc enim in compositis ex materia et forma dicitur forma esse principium essendi, quia est complementum substantiae, cuius actus est ipsum esse.⁵³

Gilson points out that here complementum means "perfecting act," and that this text is illustrated with the "pet example" of St. Thomas: diaphaneity is the reason why air shines and why there is light.⁵⁴

The primacy of esse could not be made more clear than it has been made in passages such as these. St. Thomas is at pains not to be misunderstood: since existence must actualize the very forms of things which is supreme in its own order, therefore existence has to actualize all that is actualized through the form, i. e., matter and consequently substance itself. Which means that not only is form somehow in potency to existence, but everything else is also according to its fashion, with the result that existence is not only the most ultimate and supreme act of all but also the most perfect. "Esse est actualitas omnium actuum, et propter hoc est

⁵³ Contra gent., II, c.54.

⁵⁴ Being and Some Philosophers, p. 174, text and footnote.

perfectio omnium perfectionum."⁵⁵

St. Thomas waxes eloquent when writing upon this key doctrine, as we see in the glowing description which Gilson considers one of the places where the Angelic Doctor lets his speculative tenderness for esse shine through:

Ipsium esse est perfectissimum omnium: comparatur enim ad omnia ut actus. Nihil enim habet actualitatem, nisi in quantum est: unde ipsum esse est actualitas omnium rerum, et etiam ipsarum formarum. Unde non comparatur ad alia sicut recipiens ad receptum, sed magis sicut receptum ad recipiens.⁵⁶

Furthermore, as the actualization of every potency through the form, existence will be what is in and through everything, that which is closest and most pervasive. "Esse autem est illud quod est magis intimum cuilibet, et quod profundius omnibus inest: cum sit formale respectu omnium quae in re sunt."⁵⁷

Moreover, if anything has any degree of perfection and worthiness in itself, this worth and perfection will come from the fact that it is; and whatever is deficient in a thing is in proportion to its lack of existence. "Sicut autem omnis nobilitas et perfectio inest rei secundum quod est, ita

⁵⁵ Q. d. de potentia, q.7, a.2, ad 9. For similar texts and their significance, see Being and Some Philosophers, pp. 174-175.

⁵⁶ "Entre les passages où Thomas d'Aquin laisse percer la tendresse spéculative qui l'anime envers la notion d'esse, tous les thomistes se souviennent de Summa theologiae, I, 4, 1, ad 3m." In "Cajetan et l'existence," p. 267.

⁵⁷ Summa theol., Ia, q.8, a.1.

omnis defectus inest ei secundum quod aliququaliter non est."⁵⁸
 In fact, so exalted is the act of existence that it is more noble than the gift of life: "Esse est nobilius quam vivere."
 (However, living things are more noble than existence.)⁵⁹

With descriptions such as these St. Thomas seems to exhaust the power of language, for the act by which all things are is so ineffable that it can be enclosed within neither concepts nor words. Yet he must do whatever can possibly be done with phrases like actus essentiae, actus omnis formae, actus substantiae, actus omnium actuum--for it is here that he has found the energy that makes reality real. Rightly, therefore, does Gilson affirm:

This doctrine (is) situated at the center of Thomism... To say that esse is related as an act, even to the form itself--ad ipsam etiam formam comparatur esse ut actus--is to assert the radical primacy of existence over essence... Understood in this way, the act of existence is put at the heart, or, if one prefers, at the very root of reality. It is therefore the principle of the principles of reality.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Contra gent., I, c.28.

⁵⁹ Q. d. de potentia, q.7, a.2, ad 9. He adds: "Viventia s(u)nt nobiliora quam existentia...: viventia enim non tantum habent vitam, sed cum vita simul habent et esse."

⁶⁰ "Cette doctrine, dont la place est centrale dans le thomisme, mérite qu'on s'y arrête assez longuement pour en saisir le sens... Dire que l'exister se comporte comme un acte, même à l'égard de la forme--ad ipsam etiam formam comparatur esse ut actus--c'est affirmer le primat radical de l'existence sur l'essence. ...Ainsi entendu l'acte d'exister se situe au coeur ou, si l'on préfère, à la racine même du réel. C'est donc le principe des principes de la réalité." Le thomisme, p. 50.

D. Consequences of the Primacy of Esse

Gilson enumerates three principal results of this supremacy of esse over essence: being is ontologically stable; essence is harmoniously related to esse; being is intrinsically dynamic.

1. Being Is Ontologically Stable⁶¹

Gilson stresses that the world of St. Thomas is both radically contingent and literally indestructible. On the one hand, matter cannot be created alone but must be concreated with a form, and the nature resulting from the two needs existence or actuation in order to be a being.

On the other hand, this being is somehow indestructible. For this being is not some essence that was once the very core of a possible being and now is a real essence; such an essence, of course, would be too manifestly ready to fall back into its possibility, losing the existence it had from some external cause and never ceasing to receive it.

But reality is not essence but being. Essence is form primarily, and form is that which existence makes to be a being which, if it have matter, makes its matter to be.

What the contingency of existence means is, that all actual beings are contingent with respect to their cause, and this is but another way of saying

⁶¹ Being and Some Philosophers, pp. 178-179.

that they might not exist; but, if they are actually produced by their cause, they do exist, and what they are in themselves is being. The primacy of existence means precisely that the radical contingency of finite beings has been overcome, and, once it has been overcome, we should no longer worry about it. Such is the true Thomistic meaning of the neoplatonic formula... "Prima rerum creaturarum est esse."⁶²

In other words, the very first thing to be said about the effects of Actus Purus is that they are. They are perhaps pure form, or at least mixed form, but each of them is a being because it first of all is. "Primus autem effectus est ipsum esse, quod omnibus aliis effectibus praesupponitur et ipsum non praesupponit aliquem alium effectum."⁶³

And to be is not only what comes first but it remains in a thing and involves the whole of a thing, making it a being. Existence permeates the innermost recesses of each thing. "Ipsum enim esse est communissimus effectus, primus, et intimior omnibus aliis effectibus."⁶⁴

Thus while contingent as to its cause, reality is "being" to the core, as appears from its very name. "The noun ens (being) means esse habens..., so that it is derived from the very verb esse (to be): 'Hoc nomen ens...imponitur ab ipso esse.' "⁶⁵

⁶² Being and Some Philosophers, pp. 178-179.

⁶³ Q. d. de potentia, q.3, a.4.

⁶⁴ Ibid., q.3, a.7.

⁶⁵ Being and Some Philosophers, p. 179, citing In IV Metaph., lect. 2, Cathala ed., no.558.

2. Essence Belongs to Esse⁶⁶

Gilson presents the second trait of existential being as following from the first. There is really no antinomy between the two, nor, generally, between being and existence.

It is true that textbooks commonly represent essence as selfhood and immutability, opposed to actual existence as perpetual otherness because it is perpetual becoming. Thus has the problem been posed from Plato to Kierkegaard. According to Gilson's analysis,

it always rests upon the assumption that essence and becoming are incompatible, whereas, the very reverse is true. Far from being incompatible with becoming, essence is both the final cause of becoming and the formal condition of its possibility.⁶⁷

Where existence is pure and alone, of course, there is no becoming: God's is no particular essence but simply the pure act of esse; He is all that He is and there is nothing more that He can become; He merely is.

But where there is a particular essence there is otherness distinguishing it from its own possible existence and its possibility of becoming. Especially is this the case of composite substances. For no form engaged in matter can simply be; " 'to be' is to become, and its 'being' is 'becoming.' " ⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Being and Some Philosophers, pp. 180-184.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 180.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 181.

The very fact that such a form needs matter for support reveals some privation of being in the form and a potency to a more complete existential actualization. This is not the privation of essence but that of a substance which is not yet fully its own essence. Hence the very motion or change needed to achieve this fulfillment; for change and movement is the esse frantically rushing to fill up the incompleteness. "Motus est actus existentis in potentia."⁶⁹

This principle is most evident in the case of man, whose soul is put into union with a body to aid man to fill up his incompleteness in actuality. If there were no need of a material body, the human soul (like the angelic) would be able to perform its own proper operations and would be fully actual in itself from the first moment of its existence. It would then be a pure subsisting form existing not in time but in eternity.

However, Gilson points out, such is not the case; the human soul is an act that stands in need of further

⁶⁹ Contra gent., III, c.20. "Toute essence qui ne réalise pas complètement sa définition est acte dans la mesure où elle la réalise, puissance dans la mesure où elle ne la réalise pas, privation dans la mesure où elle souffre de ne pas la réaliser. En tant qu'elle est en acte, elle est le principe actif qui va déclencher le mouvement de réalisation; et c'est de l'actualité de la forme qui partiront toutes les tentatives de ce genre; elle est l'origine du mouvement, la raison du devenir, elle est cause. ...Des êtres qui se meuvent sans cesse par un besoin foncier de se sauver et de se compléter, voilà ce qui nous est donné." Le thomisme, p. 499.

actualization. It has no further need of form; it is already its own nature, but it yet has to become more fully that which its definition calls for. As Gilson indicates,

this is a purely existential problem, since the question never is for a soul to become what it is (it is such qua form) but to become that which it is. In other words, a human soul has more and more to actualize its very definition.⁷⁰

The essences of real beings, then, are not the static entities of Plato or Leibniz, nor mere possible beings whose reality coincides with possibility. Essence is what a being will become if it does exist, and when it exists, it is actually becoming in succession of time, even if God sees it by eternal truth as already fulfilled.

For composite substances, then, to exist in time is to achieve their essence progressively.

3. Being Is Dynamic⁷¹

Gilson develops the full import of this notion of essence being completed as the third trait of existential being: its intrinsic dynamism.

Of course the very first thing esse does is to make its essence to be, to constitute a being in first act--in other words, to place a substance outside its causes (for only substance properly has existence: "Et sic esse...

⁷⁰ Being and Some Philosophers, p. 181.

⁷¹ Ibid., 184-187.

attribuitur soli substantiae per se subsistenti; unde quod vere est, dicitur substantia"⁷²).

It is the esse which, at a stroke, unites component principles into one supposit: "Unum scilicet esse resultans ex his ex quibus eius unitas integratur, quod proprium est esse suppositi substantiale."⁷³ And thus a being is itself and existing together: "Unumquodque secundum idem habet esse et individuationem."⁷⁴ Here, says Gilson, is the solution to the problem of metaphysical structure, especially in the case of the human being.

At once, then, an essence is definitely fixed and definitively;⁷⁵ for even though this essence existing in time will not at any one moment have all its perfection, nevertheless even though unfulfilled it will always be a being, for there is no middle ground between being and non-being.

72 Quodlibetales IX, q.2, a.2. "We may even say that subjects (supposits) occupy all the room there is in the Thomist universe, in the sense that, for Thomism, only subjects exist, with the accidents which inhere in them, the action which emanates from them." J. Maritain, Existence and the Existent, translated by L. Galantiere and G. G. Phelan, New York, Pantheon, 1948, p. 62.

73 Ibid.

74 Q. d. de anima, a.1, ad 2, to which Gilson adds this precision: "Cette thèse ne s'oppose pas à ce que, dans la substance corporelle, la matière soit principe d'individuation. Pour que la matière individuelle, il faut qu'elle soit; or elle n'est que par l'acte de sa forme, qui n'est elle-même que par son acte d'exister." Le thomisme, p. 516, footnote.

75 "It would be much more correct to speak of the essence of an existence than to speak, with Duns Scotus, of the existence of an essence." God and Philosophy, p. 69.

This primary function of esse we could designate as subsistere; for when speaking of certain beings St. Thomas mentions the "esse quo subsistunt." But in the same passage he is careful to observe that esse includes not only the subsistere, but tension and rest as well,

cum eiusdem rationis sit tendere in finem, et in fine quodammodo quiescere... Haec autem duo inveniuntur competere ipsi esse. Quae enim nondum esse participant, in esse quodam naturali appetitu tendunt; unde et materia appetit formam.⁷⁶

Clearly, esse is never a state of being inert and static. Esse is act always, even if not action, as in the case of the infinite, immobile, immutable actuality of God in eternity; and esse is action in the case of composite creatures frantically striving in succession of time to reach their goal: requiescere, i. e., actuality completed and without need of change, mobility, or any other sign of deficiency in their be-ing.

And so in so far as they fall short of requiescere, their esse is expressed by their tendere and they operate according to their nature; thus their agere. Hence, as St. Thomas expresses this relationship,

primus autem effectus formae est esse: nam omnis res habet esse secundum suam formam. Secundus autem

⁷⁶ Q. d. de veritate, q. 21, a. 2. Referring to this text Gilson says: "To be (esse) is to act (agere), and to act is to tend (tendere) to an end wherein achieved being may ultimately rest. But there is no rest for being in this life, where to be is to become." Being and Some Philosophers, p. 186.

effectus est operatio: nam omne agens agit per suam formam.⁷⁷

This agere is obvious not only from the fact that beings act but also in the very effects of the operations; the effects are those of efficient causality. For although creatures cannot create existence, yet, as Gilson stresses, they do have efficient causality of their very own.⁷⁸

Of particular interest to us is our own tendere, a slow and painful process from cradle to grave: each of us begins as an infant, progresses through youth and maturity, and perhaps lives on to wither away with old age--always the same supposit striving for its completion minute by minute, yet at no one second ever reaching perfection, fulfillment. Gilson thus expresses the situation:

It takes each of us a lifetime to achieve his own temporal individuality. True enough, essence itself is there from the very beginning, and in a way, it is whole, but its wholeness is not that of a thing.⁷⁹

In man this tending to full essence is especially well brought out in the immanent intellectual operations by which he can become all other things while remaining wholly himself, though an increased and highly perfected self. Hence

77 Summa theol., Ia, q.42, a.1, ad 1.

78 Being and Some Philosophers, pp. 184-185; also Le thomisme, p. 515, where Gilson quotes In V Metaph., lect. 1, Cathala ed., n. 751: "Causa importat influxum quemdam in esse causati."

79 Being and Some Philosophers, p. 184.

intentionally intellectus est quodammodo omnia. But no matter what his acts of knowledge or of love, in this world of becoming man cannot find his requiescere; that can come only in the bosom of He Who Is.

Thus esse can be viewed as first act, subsistere; as second act, tendere; as ultimate act, quiescere. However, the need for analysis should not obscure the fact that even natural things have their own actions which do not merely belong to their esse but which are their very esse; because it is not a choice of "to be, then to act but: to be is to act."⁸⁰

This intrinsic dynamism of St. Thomas entails a radical transformation of Aristotle's substance, matter, and form. It is true that "Aristotle's metaphysics was already a thorough dynamism, but it was a dynamism of the form."⁸¹

To this valid dynamism St. Thomas applied his dynamism of esse. So hence forth a thing is not only individuated by its reception into matter, but it enjoys individuality through its esse. "Unumquodque est per suum esse."⁸² And while such individuals are determined by their forms, yet that does not mean that they are self-realizations of forms hampered by matter; they are really individualities achieving their full

⁸⁰ Being and Some Philosophers, p. 184.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 185.

⁸² Contra gent., I, c.22.

and complete essence through esse. Form now is an end to be achieved, the requiescere to be earned by agere through the energy which is esse.⁸³

E. Evaluation of Gilson's Metaphysics

To judge the validity of Gilson's metaphysics is doubly difficult because any evaluation must not simply determine whether Gilson's doctrine makes philosophical sense taken by itself, but also whether it is authentically Thomistic.

For Gilson does not pretend to invent a metaphysics of his own but only to interpret his master, pointing out the foundations and developments and conclusions therefrom. So that in one sense there can be no metaphysics of Gilson but merely Gilson's view of what St. Thomas says. Yet in another sense, to interpret is to re-create, and in the case of the Angelic Doctor, neglected for seven centuries when not disformed by would-be disciples, the work of re-creating must be highly personal and individual, and truly original.

⁸³ "The philosophy of St. Thomas is an existential dynamism; that is, it is a fulfillment of the 'to be' by the 'to act,' and in a certain sense, the fulfillment or completion of the 'to act' by the 'to be.' The reason is that not only is the 'to be' of an agent the fundamental reason for action, but the 'to be' of generation is its term. 'In every action,' says St. Thomas, 'to be in act (esse in actu) is the principal intention, and the term of generation.' " Henri Renard, "Essence and Existence" in Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association, Washington, D. C., Catholic University of America, Vol. 21, 1946, p. 59.

Thus to measure Gilson's success in this prodigious undertaking is itself a task, since any evaluation demands an intimate knowledge of both the interpretation and the interpreted. Hence it would not be enough to read Gilson and finish by declaring: "How simple it looks now. How could St. Thomas be understood in any other way?" This reaction could be attributed to the magical spell that Gilson can cast upon his readers; a superb teacher, he knows how to win minds by artful unification, clarification, comparison, repetition. But still the main question would remain: Is this interpretation really St. Thomas? So that the proper judges of Gilson's "orthodoxy" must be the professional Thomists.

Fr. Geiger, for example, seems to find Gilson's view of esse precisely what St. Thomas meant: the primacy of existence in being and the real distinction which follows.⁸⁴

While for his part Fr. Isaac bestows his approval, yet with certain reservations, which are of considerable interest. He believes that Gilson has accurately presented

⁸⁴ "Pour ce qui est de S. Thomas, nous croyons que les vues de M Gilson sont entièrement exactes en ce qui a trait à cette primauté de l'esse ou acte d'exister dans la définition de l'ens. On peut d'ailleurs se demander si, en dehors d'une telle vue, il est possible d'entendre correctement le caractère transcendantal, absolument universel de l'être... (Gilson) s'étend particulièrement sur la distinction d'essence et d'existence, dont il souligne le caractère réel, et dont il montre en même temps que la nécessité, l'interprétation authentiquement thomiste." L.-B. Geiger, "Quelques aspects du thomisme contemporain à propos de publications récentes," in Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques, Vol. 34, 1950, p. 326.

the two perspectives of esse to be found in the Angelic Doctor, but that Gilson has not sufficiently shown why these two exist and how they are related.⁸⁵

First, there is the Aristotelian level, where esse comes to essence or substance already determined by form but again in potency on a new level, though of course as a potency actuable in a very different way from matter, and the perfection coming to this potency is of another order than formality. Esse is this perfection, a sort of actualization of values not contained within itself and to which it comes simply as the supreme value: the ultimate perfection of another order and the crown of all others. Potency-act is the conceptual instrument used here to express both the composition and the distinction of essence and esse. This view seems allied to physics, derives from Aristotle's interest in natural history; it is represented in St. Thomas by his adoption of substance as the base of being, by his exclusive recourse to the potency-act concept, by his view of esse as complementum essentiae.

The second level Gilson also describes (says Fr. Isaac) but perhaps he does not sufficiently insist upon it,

⁸⁶ Fr. Jean Isaac details his criticisms in the process of reviewing together both L'être et l'essence and Being and Some Philosophers: briefly in Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques, Vol. 34, 1951, pp. 269-272; and at length in Bulletin thomiste, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1953, pp. 39-59.

even though it is the view properly metaphysical, the view most profound and most original with St. Thomas although perhaps less frequently asserted by him.

On this second level, according to this second view, essence as it were comes to esse. Gilson correctly, if but briefly and seldom, says that the Thomistic universe is constituted by acts of esse delimited by essences. From Ipsum Esse issue the participated esse which are the totality of each being in which the essence is only the limit or the act or its measure. Here esse is absolute; it is the whole of a being, while essence is the measure of the esse. Thus the real distinction can be effectively demonstrated, immanent composition can be explained, and at once the creator is brought in as source of esse. Here "measure" is the physical concept, but as in the Quarta Via it can be transposed into metaphysics as degrees of perfection. This second view of esse does not suppress the first but strengthens it.⁸⁷

In this manner Fr. Isaac would gloss Gilson's interpretation, especially to make more clear how the unity of created being is saved in St. Thomas despite the real

⁸⁷ "Dans le second cas, on se place en face de l'Ipsum esse subsistens, d'où viennent par voie de création des actes d'esse qui sont en chaque être la totalité de ce qu'il est, son essence, elle, n'étant plus désormais que la limite ou, mieux, la mesure de cette plénitude. ...C'est en ce sens absolu, et non plus relatif, que toute perfection n'est jamais qu'une certaine dimension selon laquelle on existe. ... (L'essence) est seulement le degré selon lequel on participe dans l'exister à l'acte pur." Bulletin thomiste, p. 53.

distinction. This end is better achieved by taking the metaphysical aspect of esse as measure than the dialectical and Aristotelian-like view of act coming to potency. Fr. Isaac is careful to add, however, that his comments change nothing in Gilson; they merely clarify him.⁸⁸ And to give proof of his esteem, Fr. Isaac credits Gilson (as cited above, on page 26) with having re-discovered the genuine notion of esse which had been lost for seven hundred years.

A third Dominican, Fr. Regis, while one of the most telling critics of Gilson's noetics, seems to have little else but praise for Gilson's metaphysics. In a lengthy article reviewing Being and Some Philosophers, Fr. Regis remarks the theological values it brings to light: "Thus Thomistic metaphysics is at the same time a metaphysics and a natural theology, that is, a wisdom."⁸⁹

Further, Fr. Regis finds that Gilson's analysis of contingency and necessity in creatures "extremely penetrating," and he has admiration for the exposition on God as Pure Esse and efficient cause in relation to creatures:

In the course of these pages, which are the most beautiful pages the author has written on the universe and God, he shows us the infinite distance which separates Thomistic being from Aristotelian being.⁹⁰

88 Ibid., pp. 54-55.

89 L.-M. Regis, "Gilson's 'Being and Some Philosophers,'" in Modern Schoolman, Vol. 28, No.2, 1951, p. 116.

90 Ibid.

Moreover, according to Fr. Regis, Gilson's exposition of the real distinction, the primacy of esse, and the dynamism of being are written of

in pages remarkable for their clearness and penetration. One must read and meditate on them to extract from them what constitutes the very soul of Thomistic wisdom.⁹¹

This is high tribute indeed from a man not given to loose words or easy praise.

In short, Fr. Regis believes Gilson to be "a great master of contemporary metaphysical thought,"⁹² whose Being and Some Philosophers is "a volume which...should constitute a turning point in the philosophical speculation of our time."⁹³

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 116.

⁹² Ibid., p. 112. It is interesting to compare these opinions with those of others who have reviewed the recent existential works of Gilson. For example, Fr. Hayen writes: "Depuis de longues années, M Gilson s'est imposé comme un maître de l'histoire de la philosophie. L'être et l'essence révèle en lui un philosophe de grande classe." See Nouvelle revue théologique, Vol. 82, No. 5, 1950, p. 518.

Referring to the same volume, another Jesuit, Fr. H. Renard, comes to the same conclusion: "Mr. Gilson has often modestly contended that he is a mere historian. We have always suspected that, besides being without doubt the most important historian of Thomistic philosophy, he is also a profound metaphysician. In this last of his publications, he proves himself to be indeed a very great philosopher." See New Scholasticism, Vol. 23, No. 1, 1949, p. 62.

⁹³ Regis, op. cit., p. 111. Of Gilson's Being and Some Philosophers, Fr. R. Henle writes: "For, if his main thesis is true--and to this reviewer it indubitably is--one of the principal practical conclusions must be that what we have called the Thomistic tradition, and especially the tradition of our textbooks and our teaching, stands in need of some fundamental revision." See Thought, Vol. 24, 1949, p. 597.

CHAPTER III

GILSON'S NOETICS OF ESSE

The metaphysics of esse properly precedes the analysis of its cognition.¹ Only after having determined what we know of esse can we ask: How do we know existence?

To begin with, obviously, we can not know esse by knowing sheer existence, for the simple reason that existentia non est.² As Gilson insists, "the act of existing is always that of an existing thing."³ Consequently "any empirically given existence is that of a given being, and our knowledge of existence is therefore bound to be that of an existing being."⁴ Thus we grasp existence every time that we know an actual thing is. "Here," we say, "is your book."

But while the objects we can know existentially are beyond counting, nevertheless there is absolutely only one way for us to know existence: to know existents. And since in

1 Etienne Gilson, Réalisme thomiste et critique de la connaissance, Paris, Vrin, 1947, p. 213.

2 Cajetan, Commentaria in Summam theologicam, Ia, q.2, a.1, Leonine ed., Vol. 4, p. 29, col. b. See also St. Thomas in Super Boetium de hebdomadibus: "Sicut non possumus dicere quod ipsum currere currat, ita non possumus dicere quod ipsum esse sit." C. II, Mandonnet ed., p. 172.

3 Etienne Gilson, Le thomisme, 5e éd., Paris, Vrin, 1947, p. 66: "L'exister est toujours celui de quelque chose qui existe."

4 Etienne Gilson, Being and Some Philosophers, 2nd ed., Toronto, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1952, p. 209.

this life man's cognitive powers are proportioned to concrete things, he will know existence only by first sensing concrete existents. And the process, as Gilson sees it, is this:

What comes first is a sensible perception whose object is immediately known by our intellect as "being," and this direct apprehension by a knowing subject immediately releases a twofold and complementary intellectual operation. First, the knowing subject apprehends what the given object is, next it judges that the object is, and this instantaneous recomposition of the existence of given objects with their essences merely acknowledges the actual structure of these objects. The only difference is that, instead of being simply experienced, such objects now are intellectually known.⁵

Thus our apprehension of esse begins with sensation and is completed and perfected in existential judgment. This is as we would expect, for "an epistemology in which judgment, not abstraction, reigns supreme, is necessarily required by a metaphysics in which 'to be' reigns supreme."⁶

From the outset, then, it is clear that existence is known only when certain conditions are fulfilled:

- 1) There is an existing object.
- 2) There is an existing knower, who
 - a) perceives the existing object in sensation,
 - b) abstracts its quiddity in simple apprehension,
 - c) identifies both sense perception and abstract conception with the affirmation of the existing individual: "This object is."

5 Ibid., p. 204.

6 Ibid., pp. 207-208.

A. The Object

The objects which give us our apprehension of existence are simply those "quae secundum esse totum completum sunt extra animam: et hujusmodi sunt entia completa, sicut homo et lapis."⁷ So that here at the start we are confronted with the existentialist, realistic character of Thomism; its object is not thought, nor thoughts about thought, but existents: the world, man, God.

As interpreted by Gilson, Thomism clings by the five senses to concrete objects as its only sure hold upon reality. And Gilson adopts as his own these words of Maritain and St. Thomas: "The res sensibilis visibilis is the touchstone of every judgment, ex qua debemus de aliis judicare, because it is the touchstone of existentiality."⁸

On account of this continual existential contact with real things, St. Thomas never deemed it necessary to question the genuineness of an extramental universe. The pretensions of method and criticism never occurred to him. It took a Descartes to decree that henceforth the method of metaphysics would be that of mathematics, which moves always from thought

7 In I Sent., d.19, q.5, a.1, Mandonnet ed., p. 486.

8 Le thomisme, p. 506: "La res sensibilis visibilis est la pierre de touche de tout jugement, ex qua debemus de aliis judicare, parce qu'elle est la pierre de touche de l'existentialité." Gilson is citing Maritain, Sept leçons sur l'être, Paris, Téqui, (1934), p. 29; in his turn Maritain is citing De veritate, q.12, a.3, ad 2.

to things. And because he had immured himself within the dungeon of Thought, Descartes had to take his pale possibles for full realities. As Gilson puts it, the Cogito ergo sum turned into Cogito ergo res sunt.⁹

Whereas for a realist, the order is reversed: Res sunt, ergo cognosco, ergo sum res cognoscens.¹⁰ So that from knowing extrinsic things he knows even himself as the knowing subject. And from knowing material things the realist rises even to a knowledge of God, since for the realist it is no act of piety but of unreason to posit the Deity, as Spinoza did, and then to have to try to attain real things. It is irrefutable that the world existing by the utterly free decree of God cannot possibly be deduced by any necessary nexus.¹¹

In fact, the realist takes as his point of departure no sort of postulate or metaphysical reasoning.¹² He sees clearly that it is doubly sophistical "to want to demonstrate evidence, and to demonstrate it as though it were deduced from premises of an order other than its own."¹³

9 Etienne Gilson, Le réalisme méthodique, 3e éd., Paris, Téqui, (1937), p. 3.

10 Ibid., p. 93. Cf. Summa theol., Ia, q.87, a.3.

11 Ibid., p. 44: "Le monde n'existe que par un décret libre de Dieu, donc il est impossible de l'en déduire."

12 Ibid., p. 47. Cf. Réalisme thomiste, p. 194.

13 Réalisme thomiste, p. 198: "Il est doublement sophistique de vouloir démontrer une évidence, et de vouloir la démontrer comme conclue de prémisses qui relèvent d'un autre ordre que le sien."

This sophistical demonstration is the method of those who would want a principle which they could use as a thermometer to distinguish a sick man from a healthy one, and then they would want this thermometer-like principle itself to be demonstrated. When dealing with such persons, Gilson advises, answer with Aristotle: "Rationem quaerunt quorum non est ratio, demonstrationis enim principium non est demonstratio."¹⁴

Thus the realist's reality is neither postulate nor demonstration. But then what can it be? "The existence of the exterior world is for man evidence."¹⁵ This is sensible evidence, the evidence of perception. So that to the basic question of epistemology, How can we be sure a thing exists?--realism replies: "By perceiving it."¹⁶ On this point Gilson is emphatic. "There is no a priori way to deduce the possibility of such knowledge," he states; "it must be possible because it is a fact."¹⁷

This then is evidence: seeing is believing. "Videte manus meas, et pedes," pleaded the risen Christ; "palpate et

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 199. Gilson quotes at length from In IV Metaph., lect. 15, Cathala ed., n. 708-710, on the demonstration of a criterion to tell who is sick, etc., and he ends by referring to Aristotle, Met., IV, 6, 1011 a 13.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 195: "L'existence du monde extérieur est pour l'homme une évidence."

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 203: "Réalisme répond: en la percevant."

¹⁷ Being and Some Philosophers, p. 207.

et videte."¹⁸ Obviously we can not demonstrate sensation, "because it itself is a principle."¹⁹ This basic idea was pointed out centuries ago by St. Thomas. "Quia primum principium nostrae cognitionis est sensus, oportet ad sensum quodammodo resolvere omnia de quibus judicamus."²⁰

Nor does it avail anything to say that we could be imagining our sensations, that our perceptions could be mere dreams. "Sentire non potest aliquis cum vult," says the Angelic Doctor; "quia sensibilia non habet in se, sed oportet quod adsint ei extra."²¹ Even those who dream or "qui dormiendo syllogizant, cum excitantur, semper recognoscunt se in aliquo defecisse."²²

We have discovered, therefore, the secret of the Olympian calm displayed by the realist; as Gilson expresses it, "since it is sensation which vouches for existences, we need no other existential criterion than the certitude that comes with sensation."²³

18 Luke, xxiv, 39.

19 Réalisme thomiste, p. 200: "On ne peut pas démontrer la sensation, parce qu'elle-même est un principe."

20 Q. d. de veritate, q.12, a.3, ad 2.

21 In II De anima, lect. 12, Pirotta ed., n.375.

22 Summa theol., Ia, q.84, a.8, ad 2.

23 Réalisme thomiste, p. 204: "Puisque c'est la sensation qui atteste les existences, nous n'avons pas besoin d'autre indice existentiel que la certitude dont la sensation s'accompagne."

And unfortunately there is little that the realist can do for the poor idealist wildly chasing after certitude; because the only way we can help a person who does not discern a thing is simply to make him see it.²⁴

"Videte et palpate" is the quintessence of the lesson in epistemology which St. Thomas has tried to teach the doctors. Still, as history shows, "what men so infallibly know qua men, they so often overlook qua philosophers."²⁵ The result is that the concrete existence to which Thomism adheres--the commonplace, everyday things we see and feel--gives an air of newness to Thomism, which it has never lost, while other philosophies have never ceased being born only to wither away and die.²⁶

B. The Subject

As we have seen, man cannot know the act of existence without knowing an actual, existing thing. But at once we run into a difficulty: to which faculty can we attribute our apprehension of existence? On the one hand we cannot understand

²⁴ Réalisme thomiste, p. 197: "La seule chose que celui qui voit puisse faire pour celui qui ne voit pas un objet, c'est de le lui faire voir."

²⁵ Being and Some Philosophers, p. ix.

²⁶ Etienne Gilson, La philosophie au moyen âge, 2e ed., Paris, Payot, 1944, p. 590: "La permanente nouveauté du thomisme est celle de l'existence concrète auquel il adhère."

esse by our senses since esse is not sensible; yet on the other hand, although the term "existence" can denote a nominal concept, we can in no way grasp actual existing act in simple apprehension, for only individuals exist, whereas the intellect conceives universally.²⁷

Thus, apparently, we are up against a dilemma, the terms of which St. Thomas clearly defined: "Est enim sensus particularium, intellectus vero universalium."²⁸ It is true that the problem outlined here concerns explicitly the apprehension of the singular, yet the grasp of the existing individual is included.²⁹

So that it matters little that esse is singular; since it is not a sensible quality, the senses cannot perceive it. It matters little that esse is intelligible; since it is singular, it cannot be conceived by the intellect. "Singulare in rebus materialibus intellectus noster directe et primo cognoscere non potest."³⁰

27 Cf. Réalisme thomiste, p. 184: "Une sensation est l'appréhension d'un sensible propre; un sensible propre est une qualité sensible...; or l'existence n'est pas une qualité sensible et nous n'avons aucun organe sensoriel pour la percevoir." Further, p. 185: "Il n'y a d'existence actuelle que celle des individus; or l'intellect ne conçoit que le général; donc l'existence comme telle échappe aux prises de notre intellect."

28 In II De anima, lect 5, Pirotta ed., n.284.

29 Réalisme thomiste, pp. 187, 213.

30 Summa theol., Ia, q.86, a.1.

In order to resolve the difficulty, we must turn from metaphysics to psychology.³¹ And here again St. Thomas has laid down the principles for a solution: "Non enim, proprie loquendo, sensus aut intellectus cognoscit, sed homo per utrumque."³² The senses alone, then, do not know, nor the intellect alone, but the whole man.

But why does a composite of matter and spirit know instantly and together on both corporeal and immaterial levels? Because of the substantial unity of man.

Licet anima habeat esse completum, non tamen sequitur quod corpus ei accidentaliter uniatur; tum quia illud idem esse quod est animae communicat corpori, ut sit unum esse totius compositi.³³

And the purpose of this substantial union is plain: "Patet quod propter melius animae est ut corpori uniatur, et intelligat per conversionem ad phantasmata." Otherwise, if human souls had been made to know as separated souls do, "non haberent cognitionem perfectam, sed confusam in communi."³⁴

31 Réalisme thomiste, p. 205. Fr. M.-D. Philippe thinks that Gilson has not sufficiently distinguished the relations of epistemology: by nature it is part of metaphysics, yet in the order of acquisition it follows after psychology. See Bulletin thomiste, Vol. 8, No. 2, 1952, p. 504.

32 Q. d. de veritate, q.2, a.6, ad 3. Upon this point Gilson writes: "Aristote l'avait déjà dit dans son De anima ... 'mieux vaudrait d'ailleurs ne pas dire que l'âme souffre, apprend ou raisonne, mais l'homme, par l'âme.' De telles opérations, commente saint Thomas, non sunt animae tantum, sed conjuncti." Réalisme thomiste, p. 188.

33 Q. d. de anima, a.1, ad 1.

34 Summa theol., Ia, q.89, a.1. Cf: "sensus propter intellectum," ibid., Ia, q.65, a.2.

Hence in this life the proportionate object of our intellect is not pure thought or separated essences: "Intellectus autem humani, qui est conjunctus corpori, proprium objectum est quidditas sive natura in materia corporali existens."³⁵

Not only deduction, says Gilson, but common observation bears out the substantial unity of man the knower. First whereas the beast has vis aestimativa, man has the vis cognitiva, also called the particular reason because the sensible part of man is capable of operations closer to reason than is the sensible part of the beast. And why is this so? "Because, St. Thomas says, our sensibility possesses aliquam affinitatem et propinquitatem ad rationem universalem, secundum quamdam refluentiam."³⁶

Then there are the abstract concepts, in which the influence is reversed from thought back to things. To understand we first need sensation, and to reflect and think we employ sense images. And while the mind directly knows only the universal, yet it knows it only in the species and ultimately in the perception of the singular.³⁷ "Necesse est quod ad hoc

35 Summa theol., Ia, q.84, a.7.

36 "Parce que, dit saint Thomas, notre sensibilité possède aliquam affinitatem et propinquitatem ad rationem universalem, secundum quamdam refluentiam. ...:l'osmose qui se produit entre l'entendement et la sensibilité dans l'unité du sujet connaissant humain." Réalisme thomiste, p. 207, citing Summa theol., Ia, q.78, a.4, ad 5.

37 Réalisme thomiste, p. 209: "L'intellect ne connaît que l'universel, mais il ne le connaît que dans l'image, donc, en fin de compte, que dans la perception du singulier."

quod intellectus actu intelligat suum obiectum proprium, quod convertat se ad phantasmata, ut speculetur naturam universalem in particulari existentem."³⁸

Lastly, we observe in our immediate perceptive judgments that we see. These intellectual apprehensions are named accidental sensibles because, "although intelligible in themselves, the objects of these apprehensions are somehow seen or sensed."³⁹

Gilson is emphatic upon the part played by the senses in our intellectual grasp of the individual, and again he has recourse to the Angelic Doctor:

Thought, he tells us, "continuatur viribus sensitivis...secundum quod motus qui est ab anima ad res, incipit a mente, et procedit in partem sensitivam, prout mens regit inferiores vires; et sic singularibus se immiscet mediante ratione particulari."⁴⁰

And Gilson appeals to another clear-cut passage where St. Thomas talks about "statim quod ad occursum rei sensatae, apprehenditur intellectu," and where St. Thomas supplies a classic example of perceptive intellection: "Statim cum video aliquem loquentem, vel movere seipsum, apprehendo per intellectum vitam eius, unde possum dicere quod video eum

³⁸ Summa theol., Ia, q.84, a.7.

³⁹ "Bien qu'ils soient en soi des intelligibles, les objets de ces appréhensions sont en quelque sorte vus, c'est-à-dire, sentis." Réalisme thomiste, p. 215.

⁴⁰ "La pensée, nous dit-il, 'continuatur viribus sensitivis...mediante ratione particulari.' " Réalisme thomiste, p. 210, citing Q. d. de veritate, q.10, a.5.

vivere." This is why, adds Gilson, that whenever we see a certain person, we do not react to the nature man but to this man as an individual; and here also, the reason is expressed by St. Thomas: "Quia vis sensitiva in sui supremo participat aliquid de vi intellectiva in homine, in quo sensus intellectui conjungitur."⁴¹

This seeing and understanding together, Gilson insists, is possible only in the Thomistic universe where singular existences are the only existences possible; and only Thomistic man has both concrete body and immaterial soul whereby as a single knowing unit he is in immediate contact with two worlds: that of spirit, and the quantified world of knowable unit existences. Thomism, without equivocation, "definitely rests on seeing."⁴²

Only in Thomism, therefore, do we have a philosophy "where man somehow conceives the singular and somehow perceives the universal," where "the realist's abstraction is an apprehension of the universal in the singular and of the singular by the universal."⁴³

⁴¹ In II De anima, lect. 13, Pirotta ed., nn.396-397. Cf. Réalisme thomiste, p. 211.

⁴² Being and Some Philosophers, p. 212.

⁴³ "Une doctrine où l'homme conçoit en quelque sorte le singulier et perçoit en quelque sorte l'universel... L'abstraction réaliste est une appréhension de l'universel dans le singulier et du singulier par l'universel." Réalisme thomiste, pp. 211, 212.

Hence we have found in the human conjunctum the integrating force that allows us to know instantly both the universal quiddity and the singular it is abstracted from. Now, consequently (and here is what we set out to discover) this is the same unitary force that allows us to identify instantly both the universal essence and the act by which it exists as a singular incommunicable substance. Thus the problem of existential judgment, for St. Thomas, belongs to the analogous problem of the apprehension of the singular.⁴⁴

And we can transpose all that has been said about apprehension of the singular into terms of apprehending the singular existence.

If we view as a whole the problem of the judgment of existence such as it is henceforth presented to us, it really turns out to be a description of the complex act by which man grasps the existence which his intellect conceives but does not perceive and which his sensibility perceives but does not conceive.⁴⁵

Therefore the central psychological fact in the very mysterious act of knowing existence is the substantial unity of dual man, composite of two worlds and at home in both.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 210: "Le problème du jugement d'existence vient ainsi rejoindre, chez saint Thomas, le problème analogue de l'appréhension du singulier. Il ne peut en être autrement dans une doctrine où le singulier seul existe."

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 204: "Si nous envisageons d'ensemble le problème du jugement d'existence tel qu'il s'offre désormais à nous, il se réduit en effet à décrire l'acte complexe par lequel l'homme appréhende l'existence que son intellect conçoit mais ne perçoit pas et que sa sensibilité perçoit mais ne conçoit pas."

C. Sensation

What do we know of actual existence from our senses? Categorically Gilson states that "existence is not a sensible quality...: existence can not be perceived by the senses."⁴⁶

But while this much is true, it is not the whole story; for although the senses themselves do not know esse, they do know the sensibilia that exist, and in so knowing they make possible an intellectual knowledge of existence.

What the senses perceive does exist and the existence is included in that which the senses perceive of it, but they themselves are only the bearers of a message they cannot read and it is the intellect alone which can decipher it.⁴⁷

So that when the senses know the concrete material things proportioned to them, they do attain esse, but only blindly; as St. Thomas phrases it, "sensus autem non cognoscit esse nisi sub hic et nunc."⁴⁸ Thus when the eye is seeing color and the ear is hearing sound, these are none but actual

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 213-214: "L'existence n'est pas une qualité sensible...: l'existence ne peut pas être perçue par le sens."

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 218: "Ce que le sens perçoit existe et l'existence est incluse dans ce que le sens en perçoit, mais lui-même est porteur d'un message qu'il est incapable de lire et c'est l'intellect seul qui le déchiffrera." See a parallel passage in Maritain: "Le sens atteint l'existence en acte, sans savoir lui-même que c'est de l'existence;...et que l'intelligence, elle, connaît," in the essay "L'existentialisme de saint Thomas," in Esistenzialismo, Acta Pont. Acad. Romanae S. Thomae Aq., Nova Series, Vol. 13, 1947, p. 44.

⁴⁸ Summa theol., Ia, q.75, a.6.

and presently existing color and sound from presently operating substances, for among men "the order of concrete knowledge rests in the final analysis upon efficient causality."⁴⁹ There can be no actual hearing of past or future sounds, and surely not of possible sounds, simply because we hear only present, extramental, existential sounds. That is why St. Thomas observes: "Sentire non potest aliquis cum vult."⁵⁰

Consequently, Gilson declares, so long as the senses are being stimulated,

we can say that existence accompanies all our perceptions, for we cannot directly apprehend any existences other than those of sensible quiddities, and we cannot grasp any one of them except as an existent.⁵¹

The fact is that the senses in act are immersed in actual existence. "The whole cycle of operations which begins in sensible intuition ends in the very same sensible intuition, and at no moment, supposing that it takes more than one, does it get out of it." This "feeling" of the existence in things, this "intuitive experience of their very acts of existing," is possible in us only because our material organs

⁴⁹ H.-D. Gardeil, Initiation à la philosophie de S. Thomas d'Aquin, Paris, Ed. du Cerf, Vol. 3, 1953, p. 126: "En nous l'ordre de la connaissance concrète repose en dernière analyse sur celui de l'efficacité causale."

⁵⁰ In II De anima, lect. 12, Pirotta ed., n.375.

⁵¹ Réalisme thomiste, p. 226: "On peut donc dire que l'existence accompagne toutes nos perceptions, car nous ne pouvons appréhender directement d'autres existences que celle des quiddités sensibles, et nous ne pouvons en appréhender aucune que comme un existant."

are informed by the very same esse as our intellect, so that when we the existing knowers are confronted by the concrete existents to which we are proportioned, there is a spontaneous reaction. Hence, Gilson continues,

sensory perception is the vital exchange which constantly takes place between existing intellectual souls and actually existing things. It is, in fact, the meeting point of two distinct acts of existing.

This is why sensible perception is a first principle of human knowledge.⁵²

D. Simple Apprehension

In the first operation of the intellect, what do we know of esse? We know, says Gilson, absolutely nothing.

Such is the nature of our intellect: "Quidditas rei est proprium objectum intellectus." Since it has no essence, esse has no quiddity, and therefore it does not yield itself to discursive knowledge.⁵³

In other words, quiddity is the object of concept; esse is no quiddity; therefore esse is no object of concept. In this stark syllogism we crystallize a cardinal principle of Gilson's noetics, a principle he has not ceased to insist upon. And this principle, as we saw in Chapter I, is the

⁵² Being and Some Philosophers, pp. 206-207. Cf. In Boet. de Trin., q.6, a.2, Mandonnet ed., p. 132: "Principium igitur cuiuslibet nostrae cognitionis est in sensu." In Le thomisme, p. 503, Gilson credits St. Thomas with "souci vigilant de clore toutes les voies qui conduiraient à une intuition directe de l'intelligible pour ne laisser ouvert que le chemin de la connaissance sensible."

⁵³ Being and Some Philosophers, p. 230, citing In VII Metaph., lect. 5, n.1378. Esse "cannot be known by the simple conceptual apprehension of an essence, which it is not."

theme of Being and Some Philosophers, his most recent and intensive study of esse, and perhaps his masterpiece:

"Existence itself cannot possibly be conceived."⁵⁴

A study of the major of the syllogism should make clear, first, what quiddity is in itself and why it is de-existentialized, and then what relation it has to judgment.

1. The Nature of Quiddity

To see quiddity in its perspective we must first recall that the human soul is the lowest on the spiritual scale and as such it lacks the bright light of immediate intellection.⁵⁵ Whereas "intellectus angelicus et divinus statim perfecte totam rei cognitionem habet," the poor human mind knows but imperfectly. "Cum intellectus humanus exeat de potentia in actum, similitudinem quandam habet cum rebus generabilibus, quae non statim perfectionem suam habent, sed eam successive acquirunt."⁵⁶

Even though this intellection of man is an immanent perfection of immobility, still it has beginning and end. "Principium quidem ad apprehensionem pertinet, terminus autem

⁵⁴ Being and Some Philosophers, p. 3. This key statement is repeated in the Appendix, p. 217, by Fr. Regis, who also remarks that "the problem of the knowledge of existence is the alpha and omega of our author's book (Being and Some Philosophers)."

⁵⁵ Summa theol., Ia, q.58, a.4.

⁵⁶ Ibid., Ia, q.85, a.5.

ad iudicium, ibi enim cognitio perficitur."⁵⁷ Of these two operations, "prima ordinatur ad secundam: quia non potest esse compositio et divisio, nisi simplicium apprehensorum."⁵⁸

The first operation of the spiritual phase of human cognition is merely what Aristotle and St. Thomas call the "intelligentiam indivisibilem, quae consistit in apprehensione quidditatis simplicis," the matter for which comes from the senses.⁵⁹

What the senses perceive, says Gilson, is interpreted by the intellect, but in its initial step the mind can merely attempt to answer the elemental question: Quid est? Hence the term quiddity, or definition, used instead of essence to denote what the intellect sees in the sense data.

While it is true, then, that "essentia est id quod per definitionem rei significatur,"⁶⁰ yet by this we must understand that the intellect ordinarily does not grasp the essences either directly or fully, but reaches them only "ad nudam quidditatem rei."⁶¹ The reason is that substantial forms are in themselves unknown to us, and this "quia

57 In Boet. de Trin., q.6, a.2, Mandonnet ed., p. 132.

58 In I Periherm., lect. 1, n.1.

59 In I Sent., d.19, q.5, a.1, ad 7, Mandonnet ed., p. 489.

60 De ente et essentia, c.II.

61 Q. d. de veritate, q.10, a.6, ad 2.

differentiae essentiales sunt nobis ignotae."⁶²

However, Gilson remarks that each time when St. Thomas affirms substantial forms are unknown to us, "he does not fail to add something like this: innotescunt autem nobis per accidentia propria."⁶³

In this way, from the superficies of a thing reported by the senses, and by repeated researches beginning with ideas the most general and universal, we can attain a practical, approximate, working knowledge of essences. "Quandoque enim proprietates et accidentia rei quae sensu demonstrantur, sufficienter exprimunt naturam rei...et huiusmodi sunt omnes naturales."⁶⁴

In this sense, Gilson explains, we can speak of the intellectual apprehension of an essence, but it is simply a grasping of the essence insofar as it is perceptible by its external, sensible operations. So that if we use the term "nature" to denote the essence insofar as it controls operations, then we can say that intellectually we grasp the quiddities of sensible natures.⁶⁵

62 Q. d. de veritate, q.4, a.1, ad 8.

63 Réalisme thomiste, p. 222: "Il ne manque pas d'ajouter quelque chose comme ceci: innotescunt autem nobis per accidentia propria." Gilson is citing De spiritualibus creaturis, a.11, ad 3.

64 In Boet. de Trin., q.6, a.2, Mandonnet ed., p. 132.

65 Réalisme thomiste, pp. 218, 223.

Therefore, when we perceive a concrete contingent thing, all we can know of it conceptually is quiddity, and everything we can possibly know about it will be per modum quidditatis, for quiddity is the formal aspect under which simple apprehension grasps anything. St. Thomas expressed the truth succinctly: "Intellectus enim humani proprium obiectum est quidditas rei materialis."⁶⁶ That much, but no more.

2. The De-existentialized Quality of Quiddity

Now as a body informed by soul, man can begin by knowing only the individual, concrete, contingent, existing things that impinge upon his senses. Yet in the spiritualizing abstraction of simple apprehension, "anima per intellectum cognoscit corpora cognitione immateriali, universali et necessaria."⁶⁷

As a consequence, we can never tell from our idea of the thing whether it is actual or merely possible. "Possum enim intelligere," says St. Thomas, "quid est homo vel phoenix, et tamen ignorare an esse habeant in rerum natura."⁶⁸ And the reason for this situation brings us back to the minor of Gilson's syllogism: quiddity is not esse, esse is not quiddity. In the first operation the mind grasps only under

⁶⁶ Summa theol., Ia, q.85, a.5, ad 3.

⁶⁷ Ibid., Ia, q.84, a.1.

⁶⁸ De ente et essentia, c.V.

the aspect of quidditas, or notitia, and it has a blind spot in what concerns esse. "Extra genus notitiae...est existentia rerum."⁶⁹ Gilson has stated the case forcefully:

All that we can say about existence is: est, est, non, non. Discourse may be needed in order to establish esse, but there can be no discourse about it.⁷⁰

And if with Gilson we reserve the word "concept" or "conceptus" for the fruit of simple apprehension,⁷¹ then we must agree also that conceptual knowledge has the remarkable quality of being "existentially neutral." And the reason for the neutrality is that we are dealing with logical beings.

Intellectus habet verum iudicium de proprio objecto, in quod naturaliter tendit, quod est quidditas rei; but the quiddities or essences grasped by the intellect have no other existence than that of a being of reason: quidditatis esse est quoddam esse rationis.⁷²

In its very first motion, then, the intellect is cut off from existence. For no matter how long we try, we will never succeed in locating in the intelligible species of any actually existing thing that which causes us to know that the

69 Q. d. de veritate, q.3, a.3, ad 8.

70 Being and Some Philosophers, p. 230.

71 Ibid., p. 190, text and footnote.

72 Réalisme thomiste, p. 217: "Intellectus habet verum iudicium de proprio objecto, in quod naturaliter tendit, quod est quidditas rei; mais les quiddités, ou essences, appréhendées par l'intellect, n'ont d'autre existence que celle d'un être de raison: quidditatis esse est quoddam esse rationis." Gilson is citing In I Sent., d.19, q.5, a.1, ad 7, Mandonnet ed., p. 489.

thing exists.⁷³ Which means that the concept of the things really existing will not differ from the concept of things merely possible. "The concept of a hundred possible dollars and a hundred real dollars," observes Gilson, "are identically the same, namely, the concept of a hundred dollars."⁷⁴

But when declaring the utter impossibility of reaching esse in the concept, we must realize that by this esse we mean nothing else than the act of real being, the actus essendi. This, as Cajetan and Maritain precise it, is existentia ut exercitata, to be distinguished from existentia ut significata, which is the abstract concept of existence.⁷⁵

73 "On se tromperait également en cherchant dans une species intelligibilis de l'existence actuelle la cause de notre connaissance de l'existence de son objet." Réalisme thomiste, p. 225. Concerning objective concepts, Maritain remarks that "the object which we lay hold of in them is always presented as abstracted from actual existence." Formal Logic, trans. by I. Choquette, New York, Sheed & Ward, 1937, p. 19.

74 Being and Some Philosophers, p. 4. See an apparently dissenting opinion from J. Maritain, Dream of Descartes, trans. by M. Andison, New York, Philosophical Library, 1944, p. 136: While "actual existence adds nothing along the line of essence...it is not true that the concept of a hundred possible thalers is the same as that of a hundred real thalers; ...in the latter there is a notional complex (the concept of thaler and the concept of real existence joined together), in the former there is only the concept of thaler; and as the notional complex 'hundred real thalers' still falls under the head of 'first operation of the mind'...the actual existence which it involves is nothing but existence as represented."

75 See Maritain's Dream of Descartes, pp. 131-140, passim., and Cajetan's Commentaria in Summam theologicam, Ia, q.2, a.1, also Ia, q.82, a.3. But while they use the same terms, it may be questioned whether they mean the same thing. Cf. supra, pp. 15-18.

So there is, then, a "concept of existence," the very concept by means of which we have been working in this discussion. Its nature and formation are summed up by Fr. Owens:

The act of being is grasped in the second operation of the intellect, in judgment. This act, it is true, can also be later expressed in an act of simple intellection, when a judgment is logically analyzed. It can be expressed by the concept of act. ...In this way the concept of act, taken originally from form, may be extended analogously to the being which was attained originally in the judgment. In this way one may think and speak of "existence" or the "act of existing."

But this simple conception of esse does not permit one to affirm that the act of existing is being exercised."⁷⁶

While Gilson himself seems reluctant to employ the term "concept of existence"--perhaps lest it further becloud the understanding of esse--still he surely does not disallow such a concept.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Joseph Owens, "Conclusion of the Prima Via--Continued," in Modern Schoolman, Vol. 30, No. 2, issue of January 1953, pp. 118-119. Fr. Owen's view seems the same as that of Maritain, as found in Existence and the Existent, trans. by L. Galantiere and G. B. Phelan, New York, Pantheon, 1948, pp. 23-24, 27-28, 33-34.

⁷⁷ Note two instances in Réalisme thomiste. On p. 225: "Notre pensée de l'être ne s'accompagne souvent que d'images plus ou moins vagues, parfois même d'images simplement verbales, qui ne conduisent le jugement à aucune existence concrète; d'autres fois, nous pensons des objets comme existants, mais sans faire plus qu'appliquer le concept abstrait d'existence aux images qui les représentent." And the concept of existence seems described in this second passage, from p. 205: "Lorsque je dis: 'je vois un homme', ou: 'je perçois l'existence de cette table', la moindre réflexion permet de constater combien impropres sont des expressions de ce genre. Je ne peux voir ni percevoir homme ni existence, qui sont des concepts de l'entendement. Ce que je veux dire, c'est que je sais par mon intellect que ce que je perçois par me sens est un homme, ou un existant."

3. Quiddity in Relation to the Apprehension of Esse

The truth is, then, that the proper object of human intellection is not that which is deepest in reality. But this is no more surprising than the fact that the eye sees only existing colored expanse or motion without knowing existence.

Sensation alone means nothing; conception alone means nothing: their meaning comes from the fact that they are integrated in the same human knower. For human cognition is one,⁷⁸ even if it has to have a beginning in order to have an end. For "an organic chain of mental operations links the sense perception of what is known as being to the abstraction and to the judgment through which man knows it as being."⁷⁹ Obviously a first operation of the mind unattended by a second is a mere fiction. Thus quiddity is simply a preparation for enunciation, i. e., simple apprehension prepares the way for judgment. Gilson further details the relations of these two acts:

Both operations are equally required for knowledge, which always is a cognition of actual being. Fundamental as it is, the distinction between abstract knowledge and judgment should therefore never be conceived as a separation. Abstraction and judgment are never separated in the mind, because essence and existence are never separated in reality.⁸⁰

78 Rightly does Fr. Regis stress "the unity of a real science of epistemology which starts with the unity of the source of all human operations." St. Thomas and Epistemology, Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 1946, p. 57.

79 Being and Some Philosophers, p. 206.

80 Ibid., pp. 203-204.

For just as human intellection, after all, is a unified act but not a simple one, so also a concrete thing is a unified being but not a simple one.

So that if we would know existence, we cannot merely know esse as some distilled, dehydrated element alone by itself. For man, existence does not exist; the only existence that he can now lay hold of is the existence of some material being.⁸¹ And on the other hand, "essence always is the essence of some being," and it cannot be known alone.⁸² Only beings exist, and, in the world we know, only concrete beings composed of esse, and of an essence in its turn composed of matter and form. Taken separately as separate, neither essence nor existence have any meaning; "they are merely two abstractions."⁸³

Stated briefly, being, although composite, is one, just as the knowing subject, although composite, is one.

So that when we know esse, we do not apprehend some vague or indeterminate or unlimited esse. Rather, we know the existence of something concrete, proportioned to our sensory-intellective operation, and thus we know a finite, fixed,

81 "Dans notre expérience humaine, l'existence n'existe pas; elle est toujours l'existence de quelque chose qui existe." Le thomisme, p. 49.

82 Being and Some Philosophers, p. 202.

83 "L'essence ni l'existence n'ont de sens à part l'une de l'autre. Prise en elles-mêmes, ce sont deux abstractions." Le thomisme, p. 51⁴.

determined, and limited esse--neither more nor less.⁸⁴

For of itself esse would be unlimited and indetermined: "Ipsum esse absolute consideratum infinitum est."⁸⁵ But the only existences men can perceive are restricted. Each existence open to us is specified by what it lacks.⁸⁶ The esse has been received into a potency which fixes a finite being in whatever degree of existence it does possess; the potency or essence expresses the degree of intensity of the act of existence.⁸⁷ And we know the degree of esse by knowing this fixative essence--or, more precisely, by knowing the quiddity, which is the essence as knowable and definable.⁸⁸

But the essence itself is not the ultimate explanation for the fixation of a being; this ultimate intrinsic principle is the form: esse consequitur formam. The consequences of this analysis are followed out by Gilson:

Thus the quiddity which the intellect defines conceals the essence which the quiddity defines; and in its turn the essence conceals the form, which causes

⁸⁴ "Lorsque, dans l'expérience sensible, tel ou tel être s'offre à la connaissance, l'intellect n'appréhende pas l'existence plus ce qui la fait telle ou telle...; bref, le mode selon lequel une chose existe se confond...avec sa manière propre d'exister." Réalisme thomiste, p. 220.

⁸⁵ Contra gent., I, c.43.

⁸⁶ "L'acte d'exister se spécifie donc par ce qui lui manque." Le thomisme, p. 54.

⁸⁷ "Essences, chacune d'elles n'exprimant que l'intensité propre d'un certain acte d'exister." Ibid., p. 55.

⁸⁸ "La quiddité (est) l'essence en tant que connaissable et définissable par nous." Réalisme thomiste, p. 222.

the being of the existent; and the act by which this form makes the thing exist is the very heart of reality.⁸⁹

In this way, then, quiddity is the key to existence. As St. Thomas puts it, "eiusdem scientiae est determinare quaestionem an est et manifestare quid est." In fact, it is necessary "quod quid est accipere ut medium ad ostendendum an est."⁹⁰

And even when our quidditative concept does not at all reach the essential definition of a thing but only the most general or confused whatness, still we can truly know the esse of a thing since "even the most superficial quality is enough to render an existential judgment valid."⁹¹

And while it is true that "similitudo rei recipitur in intellectu secundum modum intellectus, et non secundum modum rei,"⁹² nevertheless we see that there is the closest

⁸⁹ Réalisme thomiste, p. 219: "Ainsi, la quiddité que définit l'intellect, recèle l'essence que la quiddité définit; et l'essence recèle à son tour la forme, cause de l'être de l'existant; et l'acte par lequel cette forme fait que la chose existe, c'est le coeur même de la réalité."

⁹⁰ In VI Metaph., lect. 1, Cathala ed., n.1151. In Gilson's apt phrase, "la quiddité formulée par la définition marque donc le point d'affleurement d'une actualité existentielle que nous concevons en elle et par elle." Réalisme thomiste, pp. 221-222.

⁹¹ M.-D. Roland-Gosselin, "Peut-on parler d'intuition intellectuelle dans la philosophie thomiste?" in Philosophia perennis, pp. 721-722, cited in André Marc, L'idée de l'être chez saint Thomas, Paris, Beauchesne, 1933, p. 100: "Une qualification très superficielle peut suffire à permettre un jugement d'existence certain."

⁹² Summa theol., Ia, q.85, a.5, ad 3.

correlation between the structure of cognition and the structure of the concrete thing, between the dual operation of the intellect (with simple apprehension preparing for judgment) and the dual composition of concrete being (with essence composed of matter and form put into act by esse). And the fruit of the union of intellect and object is expressed in a dual enunciation (with static noun denoting subject and substance, with dynamic verb denoting the act). All this, Gilson is at pains to emphasize, follows from the exigencies of reality, for the "metaphysical distinction between esse and essentia ...entails the logical distinction between simple apprehensions and judgments, as well as the grammatical distinction between nouns and verb."⁹³

This deeply mysterious co-incidence of human knowing with concrete objects is duly remarked by St. Thomas:

Cum in re duo sint, quidditas rei, et esse ejus, his duobus respondet duplex operatio intellectus. Una quae dicitur a philosophis formatio, qua apprehendit quidditates rerum... Alia autem comprehendit esse rei, componendo affirmationem, quia etiam esse rei ex materia et forma compositae, a qua cognitionem accipit, consistit in quadam compositione formae ad materiam, vel accidentis ad subjectum.⁹⁴

Only in this way can the demands of a realist metaphysics be correlated with a realist psychology, and both be expressed precisely by the duality of language.⁹⁵

⁹³ Being and Some Philosophers, p. 231.

⁹⁴ In I Sent., d.38, q.1, a.3, Mandonnet ed., p. 903.

⁹⁵ Being and Some Philosophers, pp. 229-230.

E. Judgment

To answer the question, What does judgment know of existence? we need only apply the above analysis to the intellectual affirmation that accompanies every sensation and every simple apprehension: the existential judgment.

1. Judgment in Relation to the Conjunctum

The relation of quiddity to esse shows clearly how essence is assigned as proper object of simple apprehension and is expressed in the noun concept man; while the esse of a thing is given as proper object of judgment⁹⁶ and is revealed in the verb of the enunciation: This man is. The process is instantaneous and spontaneous, unified and integrated, marvelously vital and human, and in no way to be tampered with or halted midway, even by the will.

Hence, despite the impression left by textbooks, no such thing is possible, such as a pure grasp of sheer essence or of sheer existence. In such manner Gilson assures us:

The very notion of a purely essential cognition of being is self-contradictory, and, because being imperiously demands the immediate recognition, through judgment, of the esse which it includes, its knowledge is both essential and existential.⁹⁷

96 "Judgment itself is the most perfect form of intellectual knowledge, and existence is its proper object." Being and Some Philosophers, p. 202.

97 Ibid., p. 204.

This means simply that there are no such things as separated simple apprehensions unattended by judgments. As Gilson reiterates, "There are no concepts without judgments nor any judgments without concepts." Moreover, "not even the simple apprehension of being can be without a judgment."⁹⁸

For the fact is that the mind's recognition of any present (and therefore existing) sensation--whether due to a voice speaking, or to the wetness of falling rain, or to the itch of a mosquito bite--constitutes not only the simple apprehension that follows instantly but also the judgment of perceived existence that automatically follows every simple apprehension. This is the unique mode of knowledge possessed by man--possible neither to God, to angels, nor to beasts.

And this is why Gilson declares: "Being is neither intuited by a sensibility nor understood by an intellect; it is known by a man." Gilson demanded full rights for the whole person as knowing subject, for entire man as conjunctum of body and spirit. "Normally, man is not a thinker; he is a knower." He thinks only when what he knows is his own thought but he knows when what he thinks of is a thing actually

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 209. Cf. Le thomisme, p. 66: "L'être est donc bien premier dans l'ordre du concept, et puisque nos jugements sont formés de concepts, il est également premier dans l'ordre du jugement. Pourtant, le concept d'être enregistre toujours de la même manière une infinité d'actes d'exister qui sont tous différents. Faut-il imaginer, pour le remplir, une intuition...? Saint Thomas lui-même ne parle nulle part de cette intuition qui, s'il l'eût jugée nécessaire, aurait dû occuper une place d'honneur dans sa doctrine."

existing. As a consequence,

to know another being...always is to grasp its essence within its given existence, and, far from excluding it, all real knowledge includes a judgment of existence which is the last moment of a vital exchange between two actually existing beings.⁹⁹

Hence only sensible concrete things will be known as being, and these we reach only through the senses. "We directly know perceived data as beings." This is the only possible way that man can know. For unless we are to make of man a mere manipulator of detached Ideas, we must accept all the facts: man is an animal that is rational.

And if he will know existence, he must know it as a rational animal must: not by the senses alone, not by the intellect alone--not even by the judgment alone. Rather, he will know existence as the end-product of a complicated but integrated ratio-animal process: "To perceive is to experience existence, and to say through judgment that such an experience is true is to know existence."¹⁰⁰

This division of labor, simultaneous even if analyzed as successive in time, results from man's imperfect mode of knowledge, since he is highest among material composites but lowest in the hierarchy of intelligences. Thus the notion of beginning and end: "Principium quidem ad apprehensionem pertinet, terminus autem ad iudicium, ibi enim cognitio

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 206. "Au dynamisme de l'exister correspond celui du jugement." Le thomisme, p. 62.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 207.

perficitur."¹⁰¹ And thus the "duplex operatio intellectus":

una...quae consistit in apprehensione...; alia est quam dicunt fidem, quae consistit in compositione vel divisione propositionis: prima operatio respicit quidditatem rei; secunda respicit esse ipsius.¹⁰²

The facts hardly be phrased more succinctly or accurately: in its initial movement the human intellect through simple apprehension grasps the essence of an existing thing; in the completion of the movement through judgment the intellect has attained the very existence of this thing.

2. Existential Function of Judgment

Knowledge is completed and perfected in judgment because it is only in this last moment of cognition that we reach conscious truth, the good for which the intellect is craving. "Perfectio enim intellectus est verum ut cognitum." But what is this truth and how do we know it? "Per conformitatem intellectus et rei veritas definitur," continues St. Thomas; "unde conformitatem istam cognoscere, est cognoscere veritatem." And this knowledge of truth is fulfilled only in judgment:

Intellectus autem conformitatem sui ad rem intelligibilem cognoscere potest...quando iudicat rem ita se habere sicut est forma quam de re apprehendit

¹⁰¹ In Boet. de Trin., q.6, a.2, Mandonnet ed., p. 132. See Summa theol., II-II, q.173, a.2: "Judicium est completivum cognitionis."

¹⁰² In I Sent., d.19, q.5, a.1, ad 7, Mandonnet ed., p. 489.

tunc primo cognoscit et dicit verum. Et hoc facit componendo et dividendo... Et ideo, proprie loquendo, veritas est in intellectu componente et dividente.¹⁰³

So paramount is this realization of full-blown formal truth that this statement could be taken as the definition of judgment: "Cognoscere autem praedictam conformitatis habitudinem nihil est aliud quam judicare ita esse in re vel non esse: quod est componere et dividere."¹⁰⁴

This "Ita est" which the judgment says is anything but an arbitrary decision of the will. Rather, it is simply the spontaneous, inevitable expression of the intellect whenever it is confronted with its preparatory enunciation and reality. In the strictest sense, "verum sequitur esse."¹⁰⁵ Judgment is "de re secundum quod est."¹⁰⁶

But to understand the metaphysical truth of things, judgment must accept things in their fullness, just as they are existing. The whole truth of the mind exacts the whole truth of things. Hence, Gilson explains, judgment cannot leave a thing stripped and abstract as does simple apprehension; judgment is true only when it unites what in actuality is united, and when it separates what in actuality is really

103 Summa theol., Ia, q.16, a.2.

104 In I Periherm., lect. 3, n.9. Cf. Fr. Hoenen's La théorie du jugement d'après St. Thomas d'Aquin, Rome, Gregorianae, 1946, p. 7.

105 Q. d. de veritate, q.1, a.1, 3um sed contra.

106 Ibid., q.1, a.9.

separated. The reason for this necessity Gilson gives in the words of St. Thomas: "Prima quidem operatio respicit ipsam naturam rei... Secunda operatio respicit ipsum esse rei."¹⁰⁷

Because things are, true judgments are true inasmuch as they accept them as actual beings, and, because to be a "being" is primarily to be, veritas fundatur in esse rei magis quam in ipsa quidditate: truth is more principally grounded in the existence (esse) of the thing than it is in its essence.¹⁰⁸

Patently, judgment has an existential function in that it restores that existence to the mind's idea which belongs to the thing in reality. As Gilson says,

to judge is precisely to say that what a concept expresses actually is either a being or the determination of a certain being. Judgments always affirm that certain conceived essences are in a state of union with, or of separation from, existence. ...And what is thus united or separated is always existence, either how it is, or that it is.¹⁰⁹

3. Perceived Existence in Existential Judgment

The judgment telling the how a thing is gives us the attribute, the standard proposition analyzed in the treatises and illustrated by the standard example, "Socrates is white." Here we have the two objective concepts so dear to logicians, joined by the copula, denoting the identity in reality of the predicate with the subject in the thing, though each term by

¹⁰⁷ In Boet. de Trin., q.5, a.3, cited in Being and Some Philosophers, p. 203.

¹⁰⁸ Being and Some Philosophers, pp. 188-189, citing In I Sent., d.19, q.5, a.1, Mandonnet ed., p. 486.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 203.

its own nature is different from the other. "Manifestum est," remarks St. Thomas, "quod homo et albus sunt idem subjecto et differunt ratione."¹¹⁰

But while this attributive judgment is ultimately grounded on the actual existence of the subject, it does not specify whether or not the subject is now actually existing. St. Thomas outlines the situation briefly: "Cum dicitur, Socrates est albus, non est intentio loquentis ut asserat Socratem esse in rerum natura, sed ut attribuat ei albedinem mediante hoc verbo, est."¹¹¹

The psychological steps in this classical judgment are summed up in this sentence from John of St. Thomas:

(1) Praesuppositive compositio extremorum enuntiativa, (2) formaliter assensus intellectus comparans extrema enuntiata conformiter ad rem, (3) consecutive discretio unius a suo opposito.¹¹²

In these attributive judgments the preparatory enunciation is so separable from the final judicative proposition that months and years can intervene, as is evident in the scientist's search to test a doubtful proposition.

The second type of judgment, telling that a thing is, escapes the classical definition of judgment as the linking together of two objective concepts by the copula: this is the

¹¹⁰ Summa theol., Ia, q.13, a.12.

¹¹¹ In II Periherm., lect. 2, n.2.

¹¹² Cursus philosophicus thomisticus, Reiser ed., Turin, Marietti, Vol. 3, 1937, p. 371. (Numbers added)

"judgment of existence, x is, which affirms that a subject exercises the trans-essential act of existing."¹¹³ This is no mere attributive proposition with a preparatory enunciation, formal assent of the intellect to the terms compared with reality, and judicative proposition.

By some coincidence, it is true, this existential judgment might be formulated ahead of time in a tentative and enunciative fashion; for instance, on a map we might see this statement: There is treasure here. But the connection with what could follow would be merely accidental were the circumstances changed: "if we were actually hunting treasure we could, in the face of some discovery, formulate this proposition: 'A treasure is buried here.'" ¹¹⁴

"Treasure is here!" would be the existential judgment which spontaneously and inevitably the intellect must give forth the moment that the eye sees the coins or the hands feel them. In this situation there can be no preparatory enunciation, no concept distinct chronologically. All is simultaneous, instantaneous, and one. To repeat a key statement from Gilson, we could say here: "To perceive is to experience existence, and to say through judgment that such

¹¹³ Being and Some Philosophers, p. 209.

¹¹⁴ Maritain, Formal Logic, p. 85.

¹¹⁵ "L'intellect peut voir l'être dans le sensible que nous percevons." Realisme thomiste, p. 225.

an experience is true is to know existence."¹¹⁶

And existential judgment, if verum sequitur esse rerum, is preeminently the affirmation of truth; it completes adequation of mind to thing. "In ipsa operatione," observes St. Thomas, "intellectus accipientis esse rei sicut est per quamdam similationem ad ipsum, completur relatio adaequationis in qua consistit ratio veritatis."¹¹⁷ To which Gilson responds: "Existential judgment expresses that assimilation."¹¹⁸

Such assimilation demands the grasp of a term: an existing thing as it is in its fullness; this can be no kind of logical abstraction. On this point St. Thomas is clear: "Unde natura lapidis, vel cuiuscumque materialis rei, cognosci non potest complete et vere, nisi secundum quod cognoscitur ut in particulari existens." But try as it might, the judgment itself alone cannot reach this singular thing in order to touch the esse--no more than the de-existentialized concept could grasp it.

But the judgment can attain the existent individual because it is the judgment of homo conjunctus: intellectus continuatur viribus sensitivis. Or, as St. Thomas concludes the passage cited above: "Particulare autem apprehendimus

¹¹⁶ Being and Some Philosophers, p. 207.

¹¹⁷ In I Sent., d.19, q.5, a.1, Mandonnet ed., p. 486.

¹¹⁸ Being and Some Philosophers, p. 188. Gilson adds, p. 189: "The last word of Thomistic epistemology, then, is that our knowledge of being...is, or should be, the living and organic unity of a concept and of a judgment."

per sensum et imaginationem."¹¹⁹

Thus is the validity of existential judgment guaranteed by sensation, for the very second that we perceive a thing we affirm that it is: "In rebus autem sensibilibus, cum aliquid sentimus, asserimus sic esse."¹²⁰ This is the resolutio ad sensum of which Gilson speaks, again following the lead of the Angelic Doctor:

Oportet ad sensum quodammodo resolvere omnia de quibus judicamus; unde Philosophus dicit...quod complementum artis et naturae est res sensibilis visibilis, ex qua debemus de aliis judicare; et similiter dicit...quod sensus sunt extremi sicut intellectus principiorum; extrema appellans illa in quae fit resolutio judicantis.¹²¹

The existential judgment, therefore, follows as the term and perfection of cognition begun with the senses; and just as the objects known are not Ideas but extramental unit existences, so also the judicative proposition follows the contours of these existences. Hence, the use of the verb.

4. The Analysis of Language

The doctrine of existential judgment is further explicated by the investigation of language. It is noteworthy that in Being and Some Philosophers Gilson devotes nearly half of the chapter "Knowledge and Existence" to such an

¹¹⁹ Summa theol., Ia, q.84, a.7.

¹²⁰ In III De anima, a.4, Pirotta ed., n.632.

¹²¹ Q. d. de veritate, q.12, a.3, ad 2. See Réalisme thomiste, p. 203, and Le thomisme, p. 506.

analysis. He justifies this procedure in this way:

The deepest metaphysical problems are involved in the most common formulas we use in everyday life. There is no a priori reason to doubt that human thought goes straight to what is perhaps the very core of reality.¹²²

He believes that the scrutiny of words, especially of the verb to be, could prove to be the safest way to seize on knowledge at its source. Thus grammar is closely related to metaphysics since it is the spontaneous expression of common sense, which has furnished the vehicle for the existential judgment. After all, "men have not waited for metaphysicians to invent judgments of existence."¹²³

But from the start Gilson rejects the help of the logicians and assorted Aristotelians. Logic, he says, is the science and art of merely formal conditions establishing the validity of judgments; logic is directly concerned then with the formal aspect of judgments, not with their truth, so that a judgment can be correct yet not true. Especially is this the case with the existence of things, which is the primary preoccupation of metaphysics but the least concern of logic. And Gilson refers to St. Thomas: "Logicus enim considerat modum praedicandi et non existentiam rei."¹²⁴ Logic concerns

122 Being and Some Philosophers, p. 201.

123 Ibid, p. 202. Cf. André Marc, op. cit., p. 87.

124 In VII Metaph., lect. 17, Cathala ed., n.1658. Cf. Being and Some Philosophers, pp. 201, 226.

thoughts about thought. "Sed philosophus primus considerat de rebus secundum quod sunt entia."¹²⁵

As a consequence, "some types of predication are both logically possible and metaphysically impossible." For instance, logic can predicate substance of a subject, as though the subject man could be posited distinctly from is a substance. "In the mind of the metaphysician, Thomas says, 'non differt esse in subiecto et de subiecto.' "¹²⁶

Accustomed, then, to consider a tranquil world of second intentions, logicians therefore are embarrassed by the seeming intractability of verbs, especially the verb is. Hence in Socrates is such a person will want to reduce the proposition to the usual two terms or object concepts, since to him all judgments are attributions or reducible to them. Any is will have to be a noun, and so will run, shout, and the rest. The explanation for this is given by Gilson :

Because you cannot enter the realm of action without entering that of existence, and, if a grammarian is a logician of the sort that Aristotle was, he has no use for action. Hence the striking statement of Aristotle: "In themselves and by themselves, the words we call verbs are really nouns."¹²⁷

Whereas, actually, analysis should reveal that in the proposition about Socrates existing, "the verb signifies by

¹²⁵ In VII Metaph., lect. 13, n.1576.

¹²⁶ Ibid., cited in Being and Some Philosophers, p. 226.

¹²⁷ Being and Some Philosophers, p. 199, citing Perihermeneias, c.III.

itself."¹²⁸ But if, like the logicians, we tried to turn the proposition Socrates is into Socrates is a being in order to make is a copula, then the predicate would mean the verb (for here being obviously means is), and thus we would be left with not a genuine predicate but a tautology.

So that even in logic we find a verification of the metaphysical truth that existence is no predicate. "There is no abstract essence of existence" for the simple reason that "existence is not a 'thing.'" Hence existence cannot play the part of a predicate "because it cannot be a term in a proposition." In the case of Socrates is there is no copula and we have "only one term and a verb," simply a "one-term proposition" which unites an act (without essence) to an essence.¹²³ No matter how clumsy or awkward this analysis may seem to the logician, it is the only one that can square with metaphysical truth, with the truth of reality.

Existential judgments are not predications, nor is there any predication of actual existence. ...We thus find ourselves confronted with the fact that, since is does not mean either a predicate or a subject, its meaning must needs be wholly contained in itself. There is no doubt that is does not signify apart from a subject, yet it does not signify its subject.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Being and Some Philosophers, p. 192.

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 193.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 196. This doctrine does not seem to line up with that of Maritain, at least not in terminology. Maritain calls I am a proposition with a "verb-predicate" which is equivalent to I am existing. Formal Logic, p. 51.

To show that not the logicians but the natural grammarians have found the truth of this matter, Gilson points to the case of Brunot, who wrote his masterwork to rid grammar once and for all of every trace of Scholasticism, and he so successfully accomplished his task that at the moment when the last trace of Aristotelianism was wiped out, "he found himself in complete agreement with Thomas Aquinas." Thus no genuine grammarian would hesitate in deciding which is the primary function of the verb is: they will hold that "to say x is is to say that x exercises the very first of all subjective acts, which is to be."¹³¹

And this is the serenely simple view of St. Thomas; any verb denotes "actionem per modum actionis."¹³² And when applying this principle to esse, he states explicitly:

Hoc verbum est quandoque in enunciatione praedicatur secundum se; ut cum dicitur Socrates est: per quod nihil aliud intendimus significare, quam quod Socrates sit in rerum natura.¹³³

Commenting on this text, Gilson emphasizes that "the verb est signifies...what in Socrates makes him to be a being, that is...esse," which esse is the ultimate foundation for the truth of this enunciation. And since this est signifies no essence nor anything conceived, it is not a predicate nor a term (and surely not a copula). Hence, as Gilson sees the

131 Being and Some Philosophers, p. 199.

132 In I Periherm., lect. 5, n.8.

133 In II Periherm., lect. 2, n.2.

problem, Socrates est is simply a one-term proposition which has absolutely no place in formal logic as now constituted.¹³⁴

And besides the primary use of est to point out actual existence (though not to predicate it), there is the secondary and derivative use: "Hoc verbum est... quandoque vero non praedicatur per se, quasi principale praedicatum, sed quasi coniunctum principali praedicato ad connectendum ipsum subiecto."¹³⁵ In such secondary judgment and the speech representing it, this conjunctive use of est is merely the signum identitatis of what exists in re.¹³⁶

So that by itself this conjunctive or copula est is no predicate or term either; rather, "in talibus, est, praedicatur ut adiacens principali praedicato...; simul cum nomine praedicato facit unum praedicatum."¹³⁷ Following out this line of thinking, Gilson then calls Socrates est albus a two-term proposition.

And as for the existential import of this copula est, St. Thomas carefully distinguishes, on the one hand, that it does not directly designate that the subject exists. "Cum dicitur, Socrates est albus, non est intentio loquentis ut

¹³⁴ Being and Some Philosophers, pp. 229; 225, 209; also pp. 190-201.

¹³⁵ In II Periherm., lect. 2, n.2. Est here is not a true predicate but a quasi predicate.

¹³⁶ Summa theol., Ia, q.85, a.5, ad 3.

¹³⁷ In II Periherm., lect. 2, n.2. Cf. Being and Some Philosophers, pp. 224-225, 191, 200.

asserat Socratem esse in rerum natura, sed ut attribuat ei albedinem mediante hoc verbo, est."¹³⁸

Yet, although not pointing out hic-et-nunc existence, copula-est is really "fundatur in esse rei, quod est actus essentiae."¹³⁹ So that here we have the most significant aspect of these judgments: "All judgments of attribution are meant to say how a certain thing actually is."¹⁴⁰ It is this function of attributes that explains why est has been used as copula, which function follows ex consequenti, secondarily, from the purely existential use of est: "Hoc verbum Est con-significat compositionem, quia non eam principaliter significat, sed ex consequenti."¹⁴¹

Manifestly, est always denotes existence: either expressly and principaliter, per se quasi principale praedicatum (Socrates est); or else obliquely and ex consequenti, quasi coniunctum principali praedicato (Socrates est albus). Such is the particular lesson we learn--if not from logic--then surely from the living language of men. And if "all that we can say about existence is: est, est, non, non,"¹⁴² then at least that much is what judgment does, preeminently.

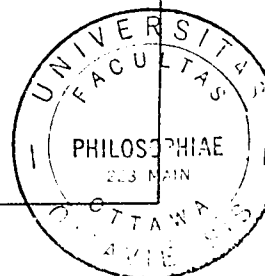
138 In II Periherm., lect. 2, n.2.

139 In I Sent., d.33, q.1, a.1, ad 1.

140 Being and Some Philosophers, p. 200.

141 In I Periherm., lect. 5, n.22.

142 Being and Some Philosophers, p. 230.



F. Evaluation of Gilson's Noetics

To judge the soundness of Gilson's noetics is doubly difficult since any criticism must not only determine whether his is good philosophy but also whether it is Thomistic philosophy; now noetics is difficult, as Gilson himself recognizes, and not everybody is qualified to evaluate Thomism.

But while at great pains to make himself understood, nevertheless Gilson is less concerned about vindicating himself than about clearing up "some confusions which the complexity of our own position might cause in the minds of our readers concerning the true position of Saint Thomas."¹⁴³

And here, in these few words, Gilson seems to give a clue to both his purpose in developing a noetics and his mode of approach: from the principles of St. Thomas he wants to evolve solutions for contemporary problems in contemporary terms. His purpose and method become more evident when he has to explicate his doctrine to the critics.

For Gilson's noetics has not gone without comment, and in attempting to gauge his success in achieving his end, it is helpful to find out how other professed Thomists have received his conclusions. Gilson does not hesitate to make his chief critics conveniently available in the Appendix to his Being and Some Philosophers, second edition.

¹⁴³ Being and Some Philosophers, p. 216. Not only in deeds but in words also Gilson has revealed his repugnance to mere controversy. See Realisme thomiste, p. 6.

1. Critical Observations of Fr. Regis

To begin with, Gilson reproduces intact an excerpt of five pages from an article wherein Fr. Regis draws up an impressive bill of particulars against the first edition of Being and Some Philosophers. The problem of the knowledge of existence, Fr. Regis perceives, is the theme of the book, and from the outset it is evident which way Gilson leads: (1) existence itself cannot possibly be conceived; and (2) since it is no concept, it cannot possibly be a predicate.¹⁴⁴

However, Fr. Regis counters, the true situation is very much otherwise, and he produces numerous telling texts from In Perhermineias to support his argument that: (1) esse can be conceived in the first operation; and (2) esse is a predicate. As to the first point, Fr. Regis says, in part:

It seems impossible to me that the name of concept be denied to the verb, since it is undoubtedly the fruit of the first operation of the mind. Here are a few texts: ...

It is to be said that, since the operation of the intellect is twofold..., he who expresses a noun or a verb by itself, establishes an understanding as far as the first operation is concerned, which is the simple conception of something. ...

But the verb "to be" is the verb par excellence; used alone in the present tense, which is the verb simpliciter, it is not capable of expressing

¹⁴⁴ Being and Some Philosophers, p. 217, citing Fr. Regis's review, "Gilson's 'Being and Some Philosophers,'" in Modern Schoolman, Vol. 28, No.2, 1951, p. 121.

truth or of constituting the enunciation and hence does not belong to the second operation of the mind.¹⁴⁵

Having shown from St. Thomas's own words that the verb, and the verb esse, are concepts as fruit of simple apprehension, Fr. Regis proceeds to the second point: esse is a predicate. "The truth, in Thomism," he affirms, "is that the verb is the predicate par excellence."¹⁴⁶ And to prove his statement, he quotes several Thomistic texts (given here in fragments, with Fr. Regis's underscoring):

...It is the verbs that are predicated, rather than means predicates.¹⁴⁷

...This verb is is sometimes predicated by itself in an enunciation, as when it is said, "Socrates is."¹⁴⁸

...Sometimes (is) is not predicated per se, as principal predicate.¹⁴⁹

Fr. Regis then concludes that "the knowledge of existence is had through and in a concept in Thomism, not a noun concept but a verb concept," and as a sign of its

¹⁴⁵ Fr. Regis's review article, p. 122, cited in Being and Some Philosophers, p. 218. The quotation within the quotation (about the verb being in the first operation of the mind) is from In I Periherm., lect. 5, n.17.

¹⁴⁶ Fr. Regis, p. 123, and cited in Being and Some Philosophers, p. 219.

¹⁴⁷ In I Periherm., lect. 5, n.9.

¹⁴⁸ In II Periherm., lect. 2, n.2.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. In the original article of Fr. Regis these Thomistic texts (in the last three instances) appeared on pp. 123-124, and in Gilson's reproduction in Being and Some Philosophers they occur on pp. 219-220.

conceptuability we do use it as a predicate.¹⁵⁰

These are apparently smashing blows at Gilson's foundations. However, we must not be so fascinated by the details of the attack as to miss seeing that the masters are situated on two different levels of operation. As Fr. Owens mentions, we can observe "Regis, approaching the question from the logical analysis given by St. Thomas."¹⁵¹

But Gilson alive needs no apologists. He begins his response with a gracious admission:

The remarks of Fr. Regis are fully justified. No Thomist, aiming to express the point of view of Thomas Aquinas as he himself would express it, should write that existence (esse) is not known by a concept. Historically speaking, our own formulas are inaccurate, and had we foreseen the objections of Fr. Regis, we would have used another language, or made clear that we were not using the language of Saint Thomas.¹⁵²

Gilson further admits that from the texts cited, it is obvious that in the terminology of the Angelic Doctor every cognition is a conception, even a concept, including verbs, and therefore esse. But, unfortunately, "the word 'concept' is susceptible of a more restricted sense, which however we may regret it, has become its most commonly received one," due to the essentialist interpretation of the metaphysical notion of being. For this modern development

¹⁵⁰ Being and Some Philosophers, p. 220, reproducing Fr. Regis's article, p. 124.

¹⁵¹ Owens, op. cit., p. 118, footnote.

¹⁵² Being and Some Philosophers, p. 222.

St. Thomas is in no way responsible, but some among his followers are. The result is that if one were to say that esse is a concept and a predicate, there are those, like the Suaresians, who would surely agree, since to them esse is an essence. Consequently, Gilson believes,

in such a situation a Thomist is entitled to maintain the language of Saint Thomas himself, which is the only correct one; and there is no question that Fr. Regis is right in doing so, but he has not a ghost of a chance of making himself understood. Rather...the terminology of Saint Thomas is likely to confirm a regrettable misunderstanding.¹⁵⁴

The situation, continues Gilson, is not a comfortable one. Only pedagogical reasons would lead one to sacrifice the words of St. Thomas in order to save the thought.

Desirous as we were to make ourself intelligible...we have introduced a distinction of our own between conceptio and conceptus, reserving for the latter the narrower sense of "simple apprehension of an essence" which it evokes in the minds of most of our own contemporaries.

As a result of this transposition of vocabulary,

every time we said that esse is "inconceivable," we intended to convey that, not being an essence, it cannot be grasped by a conceptus. Naturally, this does not prevent it from being an object of "conception."

Would St. Thomas condone such practice? Perhaps, continues Gilson, for to carry on the conversation he conceded impropre loquendo that esse can be called an accident. At any rate, concludes Gilson, "we are not recommending our own terminology, and everybody should feel free to reject it:

153 Being and Some Philosophers, p. 223.

sapientis est non curare de nominibus."¹⁵⁴ Thus Gilson deals with Fr. Regis's first objection: esse can be conceived.

As for the second point at issue, esse as predicate, Gilson answers that here too we are up against a problem of meeting the needs of modern minds. To Aristotle and to St. Thomas anything said of a subject is predicated of it, and so in this sense esse can truly be predicated. But times have changed, and if we tell our contemporaries that existence is a predicate, "they will certainly understand that, according to Thomas Aquinas, actual existence, or esse, can be predicated of its essence as one more essential determination."¹⁵⁵

But this is not all. Suppose that we do retain the vocabulary of St. Thomas and that we do grant that est is a predicate; the original difficulty yet remains. And why?

In the proposition "Socrates est," we still have a proposition made up of two parts, but one in which the predicate is a verb: "praedicatur per se quasi principale praedicatum." Obviously, the term "Socrates" refers to an essence; but does its predicate refer to an essence as in the case of "albus"?

Surely, Gilson continues, it is not a question of conception:

I have the concept of "existing Socrates," which is the intelligible import of this judgment. Our own question is: if est is a predicate, what kind of a predicate is it?¹⁵⁶

This matter of "predicating" esse, Gilson contends, is certainly outside the realm of mere logic. "It is a

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., citing In II Sent., d.3, q.1, a.1.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 224.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 225.

problem in noetics and in metaphysics, because it deals with the nature of being and of our knowledge of it."¹⁵⁷

This congenital lack of coincidence of logic with metaphysics (examined above under "Analysis of Language") is further accentuated in the present case by another vital factor singled out by Gilson: if we are going to speak the language of St. Thomas's commentaries on Aristotle's logic, then there is one important question to answer: "In his commentaries on Aristotle does Saint Thomas always express his deepest personal thought on a given question?"¹⁵⁸

So that in closing, Gilson writes: "To sum up...let us say that we fully subscribe to the criticism directed by Fr. Regis against our terminology on the level of logic." And on the same level he is right in maintaining esse is a predicate; but there is metaphysics to be considered too. Hence,

unless we consider it necessary to identify praedicare and dicere, there is some justification for distinguishing between the metaphysical conception of esse and its logical concept.¹⁵⁹

2. Critical Observations of Fr. Isaac

In the Appendix, Gilson also presents an outline of criticisms made by Fr. Jean Isaac. This latter declares his agreement with the strictures of Fr. Regis and then proceeds

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 225.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 224.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 226-227.

to propose a precision: "The one and the same intellectual representation rules over our different apprehensions of ens and of esse."¹⁶⁰ In bringing up this point, Fr. Isaac is preoccupied with the unity of knowledge, which he thinks could be endangered by Gilson's insistence upon essence only in the first operation and esse in the second.¹⁶¹

Accordingly, Fr. Isaac considers the noun and its corresponding verb as expressing not two distinct ideas but only two different apprehensions of one and the same thing. Running and runs leave the same abstract concept in the intellect, the first as subject, the second as act of the subject apprehended in judgment. So that in the case of ens and esse, both are concepts since the same intellectual representation rules the two different ways of grasping the idea.¹⁶²

For his part, Gilson agrees that being is grasped in a concept, that ens and esse are notions inseparably related insofar as they refer to the same object, and that the simple apprehension of any being implies the grasp of its esse to be later explicitated in judgment. But at this point Gilson's hesitation begins: "Does the verb is express just the same

¹⁶⁰ "Nous devons ajouter qu'une seule et même représentation intellectuelle préside à nos saisies différentes de l'ens et de l'esse." Bulletin thomiste, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1951, p. 57. (Paraphrased in Being and Some Philosophers, p. 228.)

¹⁶¹ "L'unité de la connaissance risque de souffrir si l'on n'y prend pas garde." Ibid., p. 55. Cf. pp. 52, 58.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 56.

object as the noun ens, or is it the other way around?" To which Gilson is compelled to reply: "The least we can say about it is that the answer is not evident."¹⁶³

Our composite process of knowing and expressing, he does hold, follows the contour of composite metaphysical structure; and nouns and verbs do not denote the same element in the metaphysical constitution of a particular being. Evidence that such is not the case is the fact that "in human knowledge, essences are many, distinct from each other and susceptible of definitions."¹⁶⁴ So much so that we have whole bodies of science built up on essences.

Yet while there is no science without some recognition of esse, nevertheless "there is no discursive cognition of esse" involved here. The truth, says Gilson, is that

discourse may be needed in order to establish esse, but there can be no discourse about it. ... Since it has no essence, esse has no quiddity, and therefore it does not yield itself to discursive knowledge... So long as we agree on this fundamental distinction, it does not matter very much whether we call our cognition of esse a "conception" or a "concept."¹⁶⁵

Thus Gilson does not think that ens as noun and esse as verb denote two different ways of grasping one and the

¹⁶³ Being and Some Philosophers, p. 228.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 230; here Gilson cites In VII Metaph., lect. 5, n.1378: "Quod quid est esse est id quod definitio significat."

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.; Gilson cites Summa theol., Ia, q.17, a.3, ad 1: "Quidditas rei est proprium objectum intellectus."

same thing. And in trying to determine the precise relation of ens to esse, he observes that ens signifies in abstracto the act concretely denoted by is, in the same way that life or running is the abstract cognition of a concrete act, lives or runs. Running marks off no essence; "that which runs has an essence, but running itself is an act." And so it must be with the ens family of denominations:

The noun essentia correctly designates that which has esse: "Vita non hoc modo se habet ad vivere, sicut essentia ad esse; sed sicut cursus ad currere: quorum unum significat actum in abstracto, aliud in concreto. Unde non sequitur si vivere sit esse, quod vita sit essentia." But the true noun answering to the verb "to be" is not essence, it is being. Ens signifies in abstracto the act concretely signified by is.¹⁶⁶

So that no matter what we call these functions fulfilled by ens and est, the only important thing is that the difference between them be preserved. If this can be done by calling them two different "ideas," then well and good; and if it can be done by saying the noun and verb are merely the same idea grasped in two different ways, then also good. In any event, says Gilson,

the expressions used by Fr. Isaac do not seem to adhere more closely to the authentic terminology of Thomas Aquinas than our own. Yet neither one of us has any other intention than to express the thought of our common master.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 232, citing Summa theol., Ia, q.54, a.1, ad 2.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 231.

In this response to Fr. Isaac (as also in his reply to Fr. Regis) Gilson deals with an elemental situation: the human intellect grasping finite being. "Can we know its unity," asks Gilson, "without acknowledging its complexity?" And in his pioneer effort to coordinate the duality of things with the duality of intellectual operation, Gilson runs into the problem of expression. "The gist of the difficulty, at least in our own mind, lies in an obscure metaphysical feeling, groping for its correct verbal formulation."¹⁶⁸

And if Gilson has not always found the exact formula, if he has not concealed occasional hesitation, if he has himself posed questions which he left unanswered, then at least the criticisms of Frs. Regis and Isaac¹⁷⁰ have provided him an opportunity to precise and re-emphasize his major theses: Esse is no essence and can not be conceived; esse is the actuality of all things and is affirmed only in judgment. Here, in a sentence, is a resume of Gilson's metaphysics and noetics.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 230. Reviewing L'être et l'essence and Being and Some Philosophers, Fr. Isaac asks similar questions such as: "Comment, en effet, pourrions-nous saisir l'être dans notre première appréhension simple, préalablement par conséquent à tout jugement, si l'esse qui en est le fond échappait à toute conceptualisation?" Fr. Isaac ends this trend of thought with the remark: "On voit que tous les problèmes historiques ne sont pas encore résolus." Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques, Vol. 35, 1951, p. 271.

¹⁶⁹ Gilson devotes his Appendix (17 pages) to their comments; he does not discuss criticisms of other reviewers, notably Romeyer and Van Riet, who published lengthy articles.

3. Appreciation of Gilson's Noetics

But criticisms and suggested precisions were not the only remarks from these two Dominicans. Fr. Isaac states that aside from his own proposals and the strictures of Fr. Regis, the content of Gilson's doctrine remains untouched.¹⁷⁰

And in his turn Fr. Regis finds much to admire in Gilson's exposition of judgment:

Everything that M. Gilson tells us about the nature of the act of judgment and the points of contact between the two acts (that of the objective being which is the reality and the subjective act which is the judicative activity) seems to me admirably expressed and endowed with great metaphysical and epistemological value (pp. 202-215).

Furthermore, says Fr. Regis,

one can only envy the keenness of this intellect which has so capably grasped what constitutes the proper value of judicative knowledge in the Angelic Doctor.¹⁷¹

In his concluding lines, Fr. Regis furnishes what could well stand as the general judgment to be passed on Gilson's theory of knowledge:

And though there be a few divergences between M. Gilson and the present writer on the meaning of certain Thomistic doctrines, it is nonetheless true that if I were to add a name to the Thomistic genealogical tree I would say in all sincerity: Thomas genuit Gilson.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ "L'essentiel de sa thèse demeure, en effet, intact." Bulletin thomiste, op. cit., p. 58.

¹⁷¹ Being and Some Philosophers, p. 221, reproducing Fr. Regis's review article, p. 125.

¹⁷² Ibid.

CHAPTER IV

GILSON'S EXISTENTIALISM

A. Existential Interpretation of St. Thomas

Having outlined Gilson's view of what is most fundamental in the metaphysics and noetics of St. Thomas, we are in a position to understand why Gilson can sum up the whole of Thomism in the term "existential." He believes it is so, for three reasons: Thomism treats of existents; it puts esse at the heart of reality; it establishes esse first in being.

1. Thomism Treats of Existents¹

As with all great philosophies, Gilson observes, that of St. Thomas can be viewed from many aspects, and in our day when men are seeking the real so long hidden by idealistic and essentialistic philosophies, it is natural that the interpreters of the Angelic Doctor would be sensitive to the role which existence plays in his doctrine.

In saying this, Gilson points to Maritain, who as early as 1932 was calling Thomism "existential,"² by which he was drawing interest to the fact that it dealt with all human

1 Etienne Gilson, Le thomisme, 5e éd., Paris, Vrin, 1947, pp. 505-510.

2 Ibid., p. 505, footnote. Gilson cites Sept leçons sur l'être: "Les leçons...datent elles-mêmes de 1932-1933."

knowledge as beginning with sensation and somehow ending with sensation. We grasp reality directly in and by sense knowledge, and that is why our judgments attain their objects only if they are directly or indirectly reduced to sensation. "The res sensibilis visibilis," says Maritain, "is the touchstone of all judgments...because it is the touchstone of all existentiality."³

This is a lesson of capital importance made necessary by man's natural inclination to remain on the level of abstracted concepts. And this inclination is strongly reinforced by the exigencies of classroom teaching; in fact, at this juncture Gilson again cites Maritain, who remarks that Thomistic metaphysics "must triumph without ceasing over its most intimate adversary, the Professor."⁴

The true method in metaphysics, then, is to accept the throbbing existences of things perceived first by the senses. Then we will not give in to the temptation of

³ "Ce réel, c'est dans et par la connaissance sensible que nous l'appréhendons d'une prise directe, et c'est pourquoi nos jugements n'atteignent leurs objets que si, directement ou indirectement, ils s'y résolvent: 'La res sensibilis visibilis est la pierre de touche de tout jugement...parce qu'elle est la pierre de touche de l'existentialité.'" Le thomisme, p. 506, citing Maritain, Sept leçons sur l'être, Paris, Tequi, (1934), p. 29, who in turn reverts to Q. d. de veritate, q. 12, a. 3, ad 2.

⁴ "La métaphysique thomiste est appelée scolastique, d'un nom de sa plus cruelle épreuve. ...Il lui faut triompher sans cesse de son adversaire intime, du Professeur." Le thomisme, pp. 506-507, citing Sept leçons, p. 30.

rejecting whatever are not serene ideas distinct and clear--rejecting the very existences of things and pretending to retain the mere essences.⁵ The object of Thomism, then, is not Thomism, nor a scholasticism of abstractions from abstractions: entia tertiae intentionis or dead essences.⁶

Instead, the object of Thomism is "the world, man, and God grasped as existents in their very existing." Consequently, "it is then true to say that in this first sense the philosophy of St. Thomas is existential in its own right."⁷

2. Thomism Posits Esse at the Heart of Reality⁸

But there is a still more fundamental reason, Gilson believes, for calling St. Thomas's doctrine existential:

That which characterizes Thomism is its decision to posit existence at the heart of reality as an act transcending every concept, yet completely avoiding the double error of remaining speechless

⁵ Gilson quotes Maritain's advice about plunging oneself into existence, in Le thomisme, p. 506. And in Being and Some Philosophers, p. 229, Gilson cites Fr. Henle's advice on deriving metaphysics from experience; see R. Henle, Method in Metaphysics, Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 1951, p. 55.

⁶ Being and Some Philosophers, p. 215.

⁷ "L'objet du thomisme n'est pas le thomisme, mais le monde, l'homme et Dieu atteints comme des existants dans leur existence même. Il est donc vrai de dire qu'en ce premier sens la philosophie de saint Thomas est existentielle de plein droit." Le thomisme, p. 510.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 510-513.

before its transcendence or disforming it in order to objectify it.⁹

Essence alone comes in by the concept; a thing is apprehended as an essence, as an object. Yet esse is an act beyond objectification, beyond essence and concept; in a word, it is a "super-intelligible."¹⁰ But we do know esse in judgment at the same time we apprehend an essence existing--which is being, id quod est. Every being connotes esse.

And since being in itself is the first principle of knowledge, it is that in Thomism, which therefore is rightly designated as a "philosophy of being." To say that Thomism is an existential philosophy is to confirm this designation: "Nam ens dicitur quasi esse habens."¹¹

For it is the esse that makes a thing a being. Yet esse is no essence, nor is it a thing; if it were essence or thing, then surely there would be no purpose in defending the

9 "Ce qui caractérise le thomisme, c'est en effet la décision de situer l'existence au coeur du réel, comme un acte transcendant tout concept, tout en évitant la double erreur de rester muet devant sa transcendence, ou de la dénaturer en l'objectivant." Le thomisme, p. 511.

10 Maritain, Existence and the Existent, trans. by L. Galantieri and G. B. Phelan, New York, Pantheon, 1948, p. 18.

11 "Il peut donc être utile de qualifier le thomisme de 'philosophie existentielle.' Rappeler ainsi le sens plein du terme ens dans la langue de saint Thomas d'Aquin, c'est mettre en garde contre l'appauvrissement qu'on lui ferait subir, ainsi qu'à la doctrine dont il est le principe premier, en oubliant que le concept qu'il signifie implique référence directe à l'existence: nam ens dicitur quasi esse habens." Le thomisme, p. 512, citing In XII Metaph., lect. 1, Cathala ed., n.2419.

real distinction between essence and existence. These two principles are distinct and it is esse that makes essence to be. To call Thomism an existential philosophy is to emphasize this relationship of esse to essence.¹²

3. Thomism Establishes the Primacy of Esse¹³

However, it is not stating the whole case to say that Thomism is existential since the concept of every being connotes esse and since this esse should be posited as act.

The ultimate justification of Thomism as existential is the fact that esse is the act of the very being whose concept connotes that esse: "Nomen ens imponitur ab ipso esse." In every esse habens, the esse is the act of the habens possessing it. "Viewed thus, Thomistic metaphysics is characterized less by the distinction of essence and existence than by the primacy of existence, not over being, but within it."¹⁴

¹² Ibid., p. 513.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 513-517.

¹⁴ "Dans tout esse habens, l'esse est l'acte de l'habens qui le possède, et l'effet de cet acte sur ce qui le reçoit est précisément d'en faire un être. Si l'on prend cette thèse dans toute sa force et avec toutes ses implications ontologiques, on retrouve immédiatement la formule thomiste bien connue: nomen ens imponitur ab ipso esse. Autant dire que l'exister est le cœur même de l'être, puisque l'être tire de l'exister jusqu'à son nom même. Ce qui caractérise l'ontologie thomiste ainsi comprise, est moins la distinction d'essence et d'existence que le primat de l'exister, non pas sur l'être, mais en lui. Dire que la philosophie thomiste est 'existentielle,' c'est alors marquer...qu'une philosophie de l'être ainsi conçu est d'abord une philosophie de l'exister." Ibid., p. 513, citing In IV Metaph., lect. 2, Cathala ed., n. 558.

Thus to call Thomism existential is to emphasize that a philosophy of being is first a philosophy of existing.¹⁵

But Thomism is a philosophy of complete, full being, so that when we declare that it is an existentialism because esse is supreme in it, we do not abstract from essence or in any way deprecate essence. After all, essence is the intelligible stuff of the universe.¹⁶

And the entire history of philosophy, Gilson adds, is a record of men's hunt for essences; the question is whether men would bring back essences dead or alive. Dead ones are easier to handle; with them reason is secure for there are no surprises; a priori one could deduce their properties and predict their combinations. But it is another matter with the living essences; in their own acts of esse they have the real source of power which their naked definitions fail to account for. Hence the sole finite reality which the mind can know

¹⁵ "What distinguishes authentic Thomism from the many non-Thomist, or allegedly Thomist currents in Scholasticism...is precisely the primacy which authentic Thomism accords to existence and to the intuition of existential being." Maritain, Existence and the Existent, p. 2.

¹⁶ Le thomisme, p. 513: "Les essences sont l'étoffe intelligible du monde." See also a descriptive text from Gilson's Réalisme thomiste et critique de la connaissance, Paris, Vrin, 1947, pp. 221-222: "La quiddité formulée par la définition marque donc le point d'affleurement d'une actualité existentielle que nous concevons en elle et par elle, mais non autrement." In Existence and the Existent, p. 3, Maritain states that only an authentic existentialism affirms "the primacy of existence, but as implying and preserving essences or natures and as manifesting the supreme victory of the intellect and of intelligibility."

with profit are concrete beings, and in the case of man in the present state, a being free, unpredictable, with an essence inexhaustible through his act of esse.¹⁷

This principle of living essences, of dynamic being, is at the base of every solution which St. Thomas proposes to concrete problems.¹⁸ And since he was theologian above all, the principle appears in his theology as a source of brightness. "At each place," remarks Gilson, "where his theology makes contact with his philosophy, it seems illuminated by this new light which existence throws upon all within its range."¹⁹

Hence, as Gilson sees it, the Thomistic universe from end to end is a dynamism because of existence. Each being is self-contained energy: "Unumquodque est per suum esse."²⁰ And this energy manifests itself; operatio sequitur esse. But not merely because each being has its activity does this follow; "more than that, and above all, it is because the agere of a

17 "La seule réalité finie que l'entendement puisse explorer avec fruit, c'est celle de l'être concret lui-même, ...et dans le cas de l'homme, imprévisible et libre, d'une essence inépuisable par son acte propre d'exister." Le thomisme, p. 514.

18 St. Thomas's practical philosophy tends "to concrete acts which must be posited in existence." Maritain, Existence and the Existent, p. 24.

19 "Partout où sa philosophie touche à sa théologie, elle paraît éclairée de cette lumière nouvelle que l'exister projette sur tout ce qu'il touche." Le thomisme, p. 514.

20 Contra gent., I, c.22.

being is nothing else but the unfolding in time of the first act of existence, which establishes the agere in the being."²¹

And in analogical fashion, so it is the same in God. He is His Esse by His Essence. And since here also operatio sequitur esse, the operation proper to God is to cause existences, to create. This follows as a rigid necessity, so to speak: "Cum autem Deus sit ipsum esse per suam essentiam, oportet quod esse creatum sit proprius effectus eius."²² As Gilson makes clear, this conclusion once obtained becomes the principle from which radiate all manner of consequences.

Thus, since every effect resembles its cause, so all participated beings hark back to their Creator: "Omne ens, inquantum habet esse, est ei simile."²³

And since God is the cause of the esse of each thing, while the esse is the being of each thing, then God must be

21 "Si l'on peut dire...que l'agir d'un être découle de son exister--operatio sequitur esse--ce n'est pas simplement en ce sens que, tel est l'être, telle est son opération, c'est aussi et surtout parce que l'agir d'un être n'est que le déploiement dans le temps de l'acte premier d'exister qui le pose dans l'être." Le thomisme, p. 515.

22 Summa theol., Ia, q.8, a.1.

23 "Une fois obtenue, cette conclusion (esse creatum sit proprius effectus eius) devient à son tour le principe d'une nombreuse lignée de conséquences, car tout effet ressemble à sa cause, et ce par quoi il tient le plus profondément à elle et par quoi il lui ressemble le plus. Si donc l'être créé, sa ressemblance première à Dieu tient dans son propre exister; omne ens, in quantum habet esse, est Ei simile." Le thomisme, pp. 515-516, citing Contra gent., II, c.22.

most intricately bound up with each single existent: "Oportet quod Deus sit in omnibus rebus, et intime."²⁴

To prove that God is, then, we apply reason to any finite act of existence perceived by our senses--and at once we arrive at Pure Esse, the ultimate limit of human knowledge and the outermost point of intelligibility. "Having posited God as the supreme Existence, philosophy comes to an end and mysticism begins."²⁵ For God is not open to philosophical reflection except through the problem of the esse of God, which is followed by the problem of His nature, then that of His action and governance of the world.²⁶ As St. Thomas says:

Hoc est ultimum et perfectissimum nostrae cognitionis in hac vita, ut Dionysius dicit in Libro de mystica theologia..., cum Deo quasi ignoto coniungimur: quod quidem contingit dum de eo quid non sit cognoscimus, quid vero sit penitus manet ignotum.²⁷

In existence, then, St. Thomas located the energy by which reality is real; by which concrete being is constituted and operates and from which we rise to Pure Esse; further, existence is the essence of God, and the element of transcendence by which He is not only distinct from creatures but is also their Creator and Conserver. All this, the marvelous vision that Gilson sees through the works of St. Thomas.

²⁴ Summa theol., Ia, q.8, a.1.

²⁵ "Ayant posé Dieu comme l'Exister suprême, la philosophie prend fin et la mystique commence." Le thomisme, p. 516.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 517.

²⁷ Contra gent., III, c.49.

4. Thomism Is Not an Existentialism

Although he explains convincingly that the doctrine of St. Thomas is exactly existential in the best sense of the word, Gilson turns right around and declares flatly that we should not call it an existentialism. That is, every reason we can give for describing Thomism as existential is simply another reason why it should not be classified as such.

In taking such a stand, Gilson is not being inconsistent in any way; he is merely respecting a historical fact. For as used today the term existential evokes Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and the rest. It would be difficult to find a common denominator in these divergent systems, but insofar as they are phenomenologies prowling about in search of an ontology, they are diametrically opposed to Thomism.²⁸

Hence, in the present state of things, to apply the term existential to the genuine article would simply cause confusion. First, it would make Thomism appear ridiculous, as though it were trying to keep in style, or to rejuvenate its 'archaic' tenets by rubbing elbows with vigorous 'moderns.'²⁹

But worse than that, to call Thomism existentialism in our day would be cause for scandal; it would make it seem that Thomism is merely another existentialism, one more of its kind. Whereas the plain truth is that St. Thomas's

²⁸ Le thomisme, pp. 510, 511.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 510.

is the only existentialism. Were we to insist on appropriating the correct name to fit it, the problem would then be: What possibly could the other philosophies be called?³⁰

Therefore, since Thomism is not an existentialism, and since it is now too late to call it the existentialism, we will best serve the cause of truth by economizing truth: by not calling Thomism the name that belongs to it alone--existentialism.

B. Existentialism of Gilson

In again appealing to the jury of professional Thomists--this time for a judgment on Gilson's interpretation of the Angelic Doctor as the extentialist--we find a unanimous

³⁰ "Le premier et le plus grave de ces malentendus serait de faire croire que la doctrine de saint Thomas est, elle aussi, une philosophie existentielle, alors que la vraie question serait plutôt de savoir, si les doctrines dont on prétendrait ainsi le rapprocher méritent vraiment ce titre. Assurément, ce sont des philosophies où il est beaucoup question de l'existence, mais elles ne la considèrent guère qu'en tant qu'objet d'une phénoménologie possible de l'existence humaine... Si l'on cherche dans ce groupe une philosophie qui, dépassant ce point de vue phénoménologique, ait posé l'acte d'exister comme clef de voûte de toute la métaphysique, on aura, nous semble-t-il, grand peine à l'y rencontrer. Or c'est manifestement là ce qu'a fait saint Thomas lui-même. En tant que métaphysique de l'exister, le thomisme n'est donc pas aussi une philosophie existentielle, il est la seule, et toutes les phénoménologies en quête d'une ontologie semblent inconsciemment mues vers elle comme par le désir naturel de leur ultime justification." Le thomisme, pp. 510-511. In his Existence and the Existent, p. 1, Maritain declares: "The 'existentialism' of St. Thomas is utterly different from that of the 'existentialist' philosophies propounded nowadays. ...It is, in my opinion, the only authentic existentialism."

affirmative. Fr. Geiger, for instance, states his full agreement with Gilson's existential interpretation; he does not see how any other view can give a complete account of Thomistic metaphysics and noetics.³¹ Further, Fr. Geiger takes note of the fact that both Maritain and Gilson speak formally of Thomistic existentialism, although both derived their conclusions independently of the existentialists.³²

And another Dominican, Fr. Nicolas, underlines the fact that, though travelling along different routes, Maritain and Gilson nevertheless have arrived at the same existentialist view of what the Angelic Doctor taught.³³

³¹ For a symposium volume, Etienne Gilson, philosophe de la chrétienté, Paris, Ed. du Cerf, 1949, Fr. Geiger wrote a comparative study "Existentialisme, essentialisme et ontologie existentielle," pp. 227-274. Gilson's views, especially as they appeared in an essay "Limites existentielles de la philosophie" (forerunner of L'être et l'essence), were dealt with under "ontologie existentielle." Within this frame of reference, Fr. Geiger remarks on p. 258: "Pour ma part, je suis entièrement d'accord avec M Gilson pour penser que seule une interprétation existentielle, au sens défini plus haut, rend compte entièrement, et de la métaphysique et de la noétique de saint Thomas."

³² While reviewing current books, including Maritain's Court traité de l'existence et l'existant and also Gilson's L'être et l'essence and Being and Some Philosophers, Fr. Geiger made this statement: "Chez MM Gilson et Maritain, on parle explicitement d'un existentialisme thomiste; on veut souligner par là un certain primat de l'esse ou acte d'exister dans la conception authentiquement thomiste de l'objet de la métaphysique." Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques, Vol. 34, 1950, p. 316. Speaking of the existentialists in relation to Gilson and Maritain, he adds that "ces derniers ont d'abord élaboré leur position indépendamment de l'existentialisme." P. 318.

³³ Review of L'être et l'essence, in Revue thomiste, Vol. 48, No. 3, 1948, p. 547.

Then Fr. Henle, speaking of Being and Some Philosophers, asserts that "Chapter V (Being and Existence) is certainly the best presentation of Thomistic existentialism we have yet had in English." Going further, Fr. Henle adds: "Professor Gilson has done more than any other one man to present Thomism as an 'existentialism'...and patiently to establish the authenticity of this presentation."³⁴

And Pegis has this to say about Gilson:

He has come to look upon St. Thomas himself as a thinker who is to be distinguished from his Christian predecessors and contemporaries by the discovery and the formulation of an existentialism in metaphysics which is for Gilson the accomplishment of the Angelic Doctor.³⁵

In his concluding lines Pegis has written what may well be the judgment to be passed on Gilson's existential interpretation of St. Thomas:

It is Gilson's tribute to the existential metaphysics of St. Thomas Aquinas that it gave to the mystery of being its most authentic voice. Let it be our tribute to Gilson himself that he has been the docile disciple of that voice.³⁶

³⁴ R. Henle, review of Being and Some Philosophers, in Thought, Vol. 24, 1949, p. 594. For similar opinions, see the review of the same volume by an Anglican divine, E. L. Mascall, in Journal of Theological Studies, New Series, Vol. 1, issue of October 1950, p. 229: "One of the most interesting sections of the book is the discussion at the end of Chapter V of the fundamental dynamism of an existentially interpreted Thomistic metaphysics. If Whitehead could have read St. Thomas through M. Gilson's eyes..." Mascall also states: "To reopen philosophy to existence is...the task to which M. Gilson has set himself."

³⁵ "Gilson and Thomism," in Thought, Vol. 21, No. 82, 1946, p. 436.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 454.

CONCLUSION

An amateur coming to St. Thomas through Gilson can indeed feel convinced not only that the Angelic Doctor is the first in theology or philosophy to reconcile fully the evidence of facts with the exigencies of reason, but also that Gilson appears as one of the few genuine interpreters of the real St. Thomas.

This conviction of the amateur is due in no small part to Gilson's impressive demonstration from history: all philosophers and theologians have failed to solve their problems by reason to the extent that they relied on second intentions, on essences, in their search for the reality of things--refusing or neglecting that existence which men perceive by their senses and affirm only in immediate judgments. In this way have most philosophies become monisms of one kind or another: essentialisms, idealisms that do not know the real individual beings.

So that St. Thomas came upon the scene after centuries of unfulfilled promise; over foundations left by others he built his synthesis in which the heart of reality was that by which all things are. This most real within reality is the cosmic energy that continues to give a thing its realization and its actuality. Without this energy, the "thing" is really but an idea, a possible. Nothing we know in this existing world is unless it has this energy placing it outside of

nothingness. This energy is the act of existence: esse.

But while distinct from the essence that it real-izes, this esse is itself no essence nor anything quidditative, and consequently it cannot be analyzed or known by itself. Thus we can never know existence; but since we are integrated rational animals, we can know existents because simultaneously we can perceive the individual sensible thing presently existing, and at that moment we instantaneously and spontaneously affirm intellectually the perceived existent. We can not understand esse beyond that fact that we can affirm something does exist: to be, or not to be.

And our language reveals this impotence before esse. The very duality of words signifies the duality of mental operation: we grasp a concrete quiddity in the concept (hat, for instance, a static noun) at the moment we affirm its existence by the judgment (is, a dynamic verb), so that we merely say: My hat is there.

In this manner the metaphysical structure of real being coincides with the noetic processus of the human knower, a composite of body and soul. So that here, in small compass, we have the key theme of St. Thomas, esse, as it works itself out in metaphysics and noetics.

From this basic notion there flow consequences that lead at once from metaphysics to natural theology; for from the sense perception and intellectual affirmation of a finite existing thing we conclude directly to the First Existent.

And so we see, from our first grasp of any thing to our last assent to Pure Esse, the doctrine of St. Thomas is permeated by esse. This it is which distinguishes Creator from creature, that transcendent by which from existing effect we rise spontaneously to existing Cause.

Such, anyhow, seems to be the particular message that Gilson finds in the doctrine of the Angelic Doctor: by virtue of esse the facts are respected and reason is satisfied--in a way achieved by no other doctrine before or since.

In fact, as Gilson sees the situation, the true meaning of St. Thomas was not understood or appreciated in his own day, and only in modern times, perhaps, is St. Thomas coming into his own.

This, then, is the picture of Thomism, existential Thomism, as presented by Gilson. So masterful is the intuition, so skillful the treatment, that the reader finds it difficult not to be convinced. For here is not only an interpretation that seems to be self-consistent but also seems to be what the text of St. Thomas means.

And the approval which recognized Thomists have given to Gilson's existential commentaries is an extrinsic evidence that can only confirm anyone inclined to see St. Thomas through Gilson's eyes.

Gilson's view, of course, is but an interpretation; a key to be used to unlock the treasures of the Angelic Doctor; it is not itself a fully worked out doctrine. Rather, Gilson

sketches existential Thomism in broad lines. It is true that one could draw up a litany of theses that are scarcely more than touched upon. But in our time, perhaps, the needs of pedagogy might recommend that the major issues be highlighted and the details be left to look after themselves.

But all considered, St. Thomas seems to have found in our day disciples worthy of himself. And while Gilson, without undue controversy, seems to indicate that some are not as authentically Thomist as they think, and while he seems profoundly convinced that finally after half a century he himself has at least grasped the significance of Thomism, nevertheless we are still too close to the persons and issues to render a definitive judgment.

And besides the difficulty of judging whether present prophets are false or true, there is the other difficulty of matching the talent and inspiration of those who create: Gilson remarks that it would take a St. Thomas to comprehend the mind of St. Thomas; it could perhaps be said that it would take a Gilson fully to understand Gilson.

But pending the time when definitive judgments are in order, and using whatever privilege that some study of Gilson entitles him, this present writer is convinced that in the main Gilson presents an eminently satisfying interpretation of the esse that St. Thomas makes so much of.

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ABSTRACT OF

Gilson's Interpretation of Esse in St. Thomas¹

To Gilson, St. Thomas's is preeminently the doctrine of existence. In fact, by positing esse as first in reality, St. Thomas succeeded where other philosophers failed: that by which anything was really real was unum for Plato, substance for Aristotle, essence for Avicenna.

So that the fundamental problems Gilson sets out to solve are: What is it to exist? and How does man know esse?

As Gilson sees it, the esse of St. Thomas is ultimate act in relation to every other act, including the form of any thing; thus the essence or substance of a thing is a potency relative to its esse. Hence esse belongs to the level of efficient cause, while essence is formal cause determining or fixing esse at some particular point of being. Within essence, form is supreme as the act of matter; but essence is merely possible until actualized by esse, so that esse is actus omnium actuum and perfectio omnium perfectionum. In short, existence is the heart of reality.

This primacy of esse is at once a guarantee that any being is ontologically stable even if contingent, that essence is harmoniously related to esse, and that being is

¹ M.A. Thesis presented by Brother Hermes Pius Ebner, F.S.C., in 1955, to the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Ottawa, 144 pages.

dynamic, always tending by its operations to completion. Such are the main lines of Gilson's metaphysics.

As for the problem of knowing esse, Gilson draws upon Thomistic texts to develop a noetics in which man, substantial union of body and spirit, can know by his intellect immediately and spontaneously the very existence of a thing which he perceives by the senses. In some mysterious way the composite structure of beings is matched by simple apprehension (grasping essence or quiddity) and judgment (grasping esse), and this duality in both object and subject is expressed in the noun and verb of language. Esse is itself no quiddity and cannot be a concept, but it is intelligible, for in judgment we determine that something is or is not, while in simple apprehension we determine the something which is.

Because Thomism takes existents as its object, and posits esse as the core of reality and establishes it first in being, Gilson sums up Thomism in the word "existential." With esse as the keystone of its arch, then, Thomism has singled out the transcendent element making all things real; moreover, by knowing existing things of the concrete material world man is led to deduce Esse Pure and Infinite. Thomistic metaphysics and noetics finds a proper term only in natural theology.

In teaching this existentialist view of St. Thomas, Gilson seems to provide a valid and beautiful interpretation, which has met favor from other contemporary Thomists.