

# ÉTIENNE GILSON AND THE ACTUS ESSENDI

Lawrence Dewan, o.p.

## Introduction

Étienne Gilson<sup>1</sup> rightly focused attention on Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of the act of being (signified by the Latin infinitive *esse*, the verb "to be," used as a noun to indicate a special target of metaphysical analysis). It seemed to Gilson something that distinguished Thomas, not only from Aristotle, but from all his predecessors in metaphysics and theology. How true that is remains a question.

Relatively late in his career, Gilson undertook to write a book with the object of exhibiting Thomas's notion of *esse*, the book called *Elements of Christian Philosophy*.<sup>2</sup> At its heart, some twenty-four pages in its fifth chapter, a chapter entitled "The Essence of God," we have a presentation of what Gilson calls Thomas's "own approach to *the particular notion of being that lies at the core of his own metaphysical view of reality*." (112, my italics) The *SCG* 1.14-22

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<sup>1</sup> Gilson was born Friday, June 13, 1884 and died Sept. 19, 1978. For a biography, see Laurence K. Shook, *Etienne Gilson*, Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984. In this paper, "SCG" is for *Summa contra gentiles*, "ST" for *Summa theologiae*, and "CM" is *Commentary on Aristotle's METAPHYSICS*.

<sup>2</sup> Etienne Gilson, *Elements of Christian Philosophy*, Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday and Co. 1960. The *imprimatur* is dated Nov. 14, 1959. Speaking of it in a letter of July 14, 1958, Gilson told Anton Pegis:

... *Object of the book*: to convey to minds the meaning of the notion of *esse*. *Method of the book*: to show the notion at work in the thomistic treatment of being, of the transcendentals, of causality, of man, of intellection, of love and of social life (i.e. the *being* of society). ... At the centre, the omnipresent notion that only one single object fully answers the notion of being, namely God. [All italics are in Shook's presentation, presumably from Gilson.]

Concerning the excerpt from the letter of Gilson to Pegis 1958.7.14, see Shook, p. 341. He tells us that Gilson was tempted to *drop the treatment of the Five Ways from the book!* It would be interesting to see the whole letter. On the book not being "hasty," see p. 347.

(especially 21-22) and *ST*1.3, treatments by Thomas of the divine simplicity, are what Gilson discusses primarily.<sup>3</sup>

Here I intend to review Gilson's understanding of Thomas's conception of *esse* as found in those twenty-four pages. In so doing, I will touch upon (1) Gilson's attempt to bring Thomas into the camp of those who say that God has no essence (a view that stems from Gilson's conception of essence, strangely dissociated from the *esse* of things); (2) Gilson's position that the properly Thomistic distinction between essence and *esse* in things other than God cannot be demonstrated (which stems from Gilson's idea of *esse* as something other than actual existence [!]); (3) Gilson's misconception of the causality which Thomas attributes to *esse*.

### **God Beyond Essence?**

Gilson sees Thomas's *esse* as a revolutionary factor in the history of metaphysics. It lies beyond what other theologians and philosophers, speaking of created being, have meant by distinguishing between a thing's essence and its existence. Thomas's *esse* is not mere actual existence as others have discussed actual existence. To catch sight of this new target of metaphysical attention, Gilson sees the need to consider closely what Thomas says about God. Only in God does the notion of *esse* find its proper meaning. That is why Gilson reads over and meditates on the texts I mentioned above.

This brings us already face to face with a problem. Thomas tells us that, while God's essence and his *esse* are identical, they are both beyond our minds. Thus, it does not seem possible to find the properly Thomistic meaning of "*esse*" through a consideration of divine *esse*. Rather, the very texts which Gilson is following show that we are supposed to know about *esse* first, and through it we reach some conclusions about God. For example, if we consider the arguments used by Thomas in *SCG* 1.22, we see how sure *he* is that *we* understand what is meant by "*esse*" in things. Consider the following:

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<sup>3</sup> He includes in the discussion *ST* 1.4.2, on God's perfection containing the perfections of all things (cf. pp. 122-124). He does not really give the argument for 1.4.1, but invents one of his own for saying that God is absolutely perfect; he then cites in its connection 1.4.1 *ad* 3 (p. 123, n. 22). At the very end of the chapter, p. 135, he makes a passing reference to divine infinity, saying that the problem "does not really arise" in the theology of Thomas; it would have been interesting to watch him read 1.7.1, which very designedly depends on the doctrine of form and of *esse* as "most formal of all." - Such topics as Thomas discusses in 1.7-10, God's infinity, ubiquity, immobility, and eternity, do not get attention in the book. Ch. 6 is in "God and the Transcendentals," mainly the one, the true, the good, and the beautiful (Gilson breaks away from the order of the *prima pars* of the *ST* here).

... Each thing is [est] through its *esse*. Therefore, what is not its own *esse* is not “through itself necessary being” [*per se necesse esse*]. But God is “through itself necessary being.” Therefore, God is his own *esse*.<sup>4</sup>

We are certainly supposed to be able to grasp the proposition: “each thing *is* through its own *esse*.” We are even supposed to be able to entertain the idea of something *not being* its own *esse*. Obviously, for Thomas, *esse* is already known to us, as found in material beings.<sup>5</sup>

Gilson’s attempt to equate Thomas’s doctrine concerning God with the view that God has no essence reveals a conception of *essence* which is other than that of St. Thomas. And the very fact that Gilson has a different conception of essence entails his having a different conception of *esse*, the act of the essence.<sup>6</sup>

It is no exaggeration to say that Gilson really does favour the doctrine of God having no essence. Even when he is directly paraphrasing Thomas, he shows this. For example, at p. 121, speaking of the article on there being no accidents in God (*ST* 1.3.6), he says:

Thomas could have settled the question at once by observing that *He Who is beyond even essence* cannot possibly receive accidents, but he preferred lesser arguments.  
[my italics]

If we wish to capture some idea of the mind of Gilson, we should note such passing comments. Thomas has not said that God is “beyond essence.” It is one thing for Gilson to have said that a. 4 takes up the act of being, and thus goes beyond a. 3, which considered only God’s identity with his essence. There is a “beyond essence” *in the sequence of our ontological notions*.<sup>7</sup> This is totally

<sup>4</sup> *SCG* 1.22 (ed. Pera, #206; Pegis, #5).

<sup>5</sup> Remember the text in *SCG* 2.52 (#1274), which clearly takes it for granted that there is a composition of *esse* and subsisting thing in things composed out of matter and form.

<sup>6</sup> Capreolus tells us that form is related to the *esse* we are speaking about [*esse de quo loquimur*], as a receiver or the disposition of a receiver; not, indeed, as the subject of a common accident, but as the subject of a proper accident, such that the subject occurs in the *definition* of the accident. *If ESSE were defined, form would be placed in its definition, since ESSE is nothing else but the act which the form gives to its matter or subject.* And thus *esse* follows upon form as a property follows upon its own subject: though *esse* is not properly an accident, but has the mode of an accident. And, therefore, it is in this way that the form is related to the *esse*, i.e. as the receiver of the act of being, or as the disposition and intelligibility [*ratio*] of the receiver: for it is impossible that anything receive *esse* unless it be a form or something having a form. Cf. Johannes Capreolus, *Defensiones theologiae divi Thomae Aquinatis*, ed. C. Paban et T. PPgues, Turonibus, 1900: Alfred Cattier, t. IV, 108b.

<sup>7</sup> I am reminded of *ST* 1.44.4.ad 4, as to whether God is the final cause of all things. The objector notes that the final cause is prior to the efficient cause; thus, if God is not only the agent but also the final cause, there will be priority and posteriority within God. Thomas answers that God is efficient, exemplar and final cause of all: these are thus all one as to the reality spoken of, i.e. “*secundum rem*.” And he concludes:

Nevertheless, nothing prevents there being considered in him many as to notion

different from saying that *God is beyond essence*. “A small error in the beginning...”<sup>8</sup>

However, once we get into Gilson’s reflections on the texts he has paraphrased, the point becomes crystal clear. Gilson’s own question remains: what is meant by “esse”? His technique for finding an answer is to follow a pathway of “the patient effort of the philosophers, pagan, Moslem, Jewish, Christian, to elaborate an always less and less imperfect notion of God.” (125)

Coming to Avicenna, he says:

... [For] Avicenna ... In order to understand the notion of God, one must think of Him ... as *having no essence*, or, in Avicenna’s own language, no quiddity. (126-127, my italics)

Here, we get a reference to Thomas and his use of Avicenna. Gilson does mention that it is “especially in the first half of his short career” (127) that Thomas used the very argument of Avicenna along these lines. Gilson here quotes from the *De ente et essentia* the argument for the distinction between essence and act of existing.<sup>9</sup> He notes that later in the work Thomas comes to a being, the first, whose essence is his very act of existing, i.e. God.<sup>10</sup> This, Thomas says, explains why we have some philosophers who say that God has no quiddity. Gilson refers this to Avicenna.<sup>11</sup>

[*secundum rationem*], some of which occur by priority to others *in our mind*.

Obviously, as to perfection, *esse* has priority over essence in the order of our notions, which order corresponds to the mode of being of these items in created reality.

<sup>8</sup> *De ente et essentia* prologue:

Because a small error in the beginning is great in the end, according to the Philosopher in I *De coelo*; and “that which is” [*ens*] and “essence” [*essentia*] are what are firstly conceived by intellect, as Avicenna says in the beginning of his *Metaphysics*, therefore, lest error come about through ignorance of them, in order to display their difficulty it is to be said... (Leonine lines 1-7)

<sup>9</sup> On this argument, see my paper “St. Thomas, Joseph Owens, and the Real Distinction between Being and Essence,” *The Modern Schoolman* 41 (1984), pp. 145-156.

<sup>10</sup> The language of Thomas in the *De ente et essentia* is indebted to the *Liber de causis*. Thus, God is referred to as “*esse tantum*” at *De ente* 4 (Leonine ed. at line 114, at 116-117, at 141 and 142, at 145) and 5 (lines 15-16). See *Super LIBRUM DE CAUSIS expositio*, ed. H.D. Saffrey, O.P., Fribourg and Louvain, 1954, Société Philosophique/Nauwelaerts, at prop. 9, p. 57 (tr. V.A. Guagliardo et al, Washington, 1996: CUA Press, p. 65), where God is referred to as the “*causa prima*” which is “*esse TANTUM*”; which is notably rephrased by Thomas, commenting upon it, at prop. 9, p. 64., line 18 (tr. Guagliardo, p. 71), as “*esse PURUM*,” really a far better expression.

Of course, even the expression “*esse tantum*,” if it means simply to indicate simplicity, non-composition, rather than exclusion of essence, is sometimes helpful. Cf. e.g. *De substantiis separatis* 8 (ed. Leonine, line 183).

<sup>11</sup> I note that Thomas, *Sent.* 1.2.1.3 (Mandonnet, p. 67), associates the doctrine that God is “*esse sine essentia*, being without essence, with both Moses Maimonides [the reference is to his *Guide* at book 1, chs. 57 and 58] and Avicenna, albeit to a work of the latter [?]

What I would underline here is that Thomas himself, in the *De ente et essentia* itself, makes the very careful and explicit point that *essence is found in God MORE TRULY than in other beings!*<sup>12</sup> Thus, at the very outset in the *De ente*, we read:

... But because “*ens*” is said absolutely and primarily of substances, and posteriorly and in a somewhat qualified sense of accidents, thus it is that *essentia* also properly and truly is in substances, but in accidents it is in a certain measure and in a qualified sense. But of substances, some are simple and some are composite, and in both there is *essentia*; but in the simple *in a truer and more noble degree* [*ueriori et nobiliori modo*], inasmuch as they also have more noble *esse*; for they are the *cause* of those which are composite, at least [this is true of] the first simple substance which is God.<sup>13</sup>

Thomas certainly has no inclination to say that God has no essence.

One would hardly suspect this from the way Gilson talks. He says:

The way followed by the Moslem philosopher and the Christian theologian is the same. In *both* doctrines, the notion of *a God without an essence*, or whose essence is his very *esse*, is reached at the term of an induction which consists in removing all composition from the notion of God. (127, my italics)

For Gilson to talk this way, he must think that the doctrine of identity of essence and *esse* comes to altogether the same thing as denying essence of God. This, in fact, turns out to mean that to affirm something in the highest degree is to deny it altogether!

We must stress that, for Thomas Aquinas, the best presentation of his doctrine in this matter is surely such as we find in the *Summa theologiae*. (And, indeed, this is the text Gilson purports to be interpreting.) There, in his *via remotionis*, Thomas speaks in a way which hardly co-operates with the Gilsonian line of thinking. In q. 3, on the divine simplicity, a. 2 tells us that God is “.. *by his very essence form...*” [*per essentiam suam forma*]. Such an expression is not to be brushed aside as “a manner of speaking” which would misrepresent the divine Being. Then, in a. 3, we are told that “*God is identical with his essence or nature*” [*Deus est idem quod sua essentia vel natura*]. Obviously, to deny God an essence would be to eliminate God. And in a. 4, we have *anything but* the elimination of essence in favour of *esse*. The conclusion is rather than God is *not only* his essence, but *also* is his *esse*. The conclusions are worth underlining:

... It is therefore impossible that in God *esse* be one item and essence another [*aliud esse et aliud eius essentia*]...

and:

Therefore, his essence is his *esse*...and:

God, therefore, is his *esse*, and *not only* his essence.<sup>14</sup>

entitled “*De intelligentiis*.”

<sup>12</sup> In fact, the necessary implication is that essence is found in God most truly of all.

<sup>13</sup> *De ente et essentia* c. 1 (ed. Leonine, lines 53-63). My italics.

<sup>14</sup> *ST* 1.3.4 (the conclusions of the three arguments in the *corpus*). Notice that the *ad 2* here identifies *esse* as the “*actus essendi*.”

Gilson's conception of the *via remotionis* in *ST* 1.3 is wrong. Thomas is not eliminating essence from God. He is eliminating *composition*, and thus coming to the identity of essence and *esse* (and concrete thing, as well).<sup>15</sup>

In still further reflection, Gilson feels the need to bring in essence somehow. We read:

[Thomas's] own formulation of the conclusion is significant. Before Thomas Aquinas, Avicenna had bluntly said that the First has no quiddity: *Primus igitur non habet quidditatem*.<sup>16</sup> Thomas himself seems to have avoided this uncompromising language.<sup>17</sup> Not that he had any objection to the truth of what it says, for if essence is understood as something in any way different from God's act of being, then it must be conceded that God has no essence. But Thomas Aquinas does not want us, or himself, to lose contact with the quiddity of sensible things, our necessary starting point for investigating the nature of God. To know something is for us to know what it is. If God has no essence, He has no "whatness," so that to the question: What is God? the correct answer should be, nothing. Many mystics have not hesitated to say so, in the definite sense that God is no-thing, but they certainly were not doubting God's existence. To say that God has no essence would be to render Him completely unthinkable. (133)

Here, one wants to know whether the reasons for sticking with essence have to do merely with *our* mode of knowing. Would God still know himself, or does he have some better mode of being than that? Is he, in a Neoplatonic mode, beyond knowability?<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *SCG* 4.11 (ed. Pera #3472-3473) is a passage from St. Thomas which shows something of the variety of intelligible roles of the various items in the metaphysical analysis:

... it has been shown in the First Book (ch. 31) that those things which in creatures are divided are unqualifiedly one in God: thus, for example, in the creature essence and being [*esse*] are other; and in some [creatures] that which subsists in its own essence is also other than its essence or nature: for this man is not his own humanity nor his being [*esse*]; but God is his essence and his being.

And though these in God are one in the truest way, nevertheless in God there is whatever pertains to the intelligible role [*ratio*] of the subsisting thing, or of the essence, or of the being [*esse*]; for it belongs to him not to be in another, inasmuch as he is subsisting; to be a what [*esse quid*], inasmuch as he is essence; and being in act [*esse in actu*], by reason of being itself [*ipsius esse*].

<sup>16</sup> Gilson gives us no reference at this point, having earlier relied upon a reference to Fr. Armand Maurer's translation with notes of the *De ente et essentia* (*ECP*, p. 305, n.28).

In *Liber de prima philosophia* (ed. S. Van Riet, Louvain/Leiden: Peeters/Brill, 1997), see 8.4 (p. 402, lines 44-62). There Avicenna says several times that the first does not "have a quiddity." On p. 398, line 67 and following, Avicenna speaks frequently of the "*essentia*" of the first. And at line 83-84 (pp. 398-399), he says that the first has no quiddity *SAVE anitas*, i.e. *esse* (according to S. Van Riet's note, *ad loc.*).

<sup>17</sup> This is a howler. Thomas, as we have seen, even in the very Avicennian *De ente*, says that essence is found *most truly* in God.

<sup>18</sup> See ample references in John N. Deck, *Nature, Contemplation, and the One: A Study in*

In any case, Gilson has not finished. He continues:

... More important still, it would be to betray the true meaning of the negative method in theology. A negation necessarily requires an affirmation; namely, the very affirmation it denies. To say that God has no essence really means that God is a beyond-essence. This is best expressed by saying that God is the being whose essence is to be beyond essence or, in other words, God is the being whose essence it is to be. (133-134)

Whether Gilson's reformulation of "God is a beyond-essence," as "God is the being whose essence is to be beyond essence," is the best expression of the former proposition I leave to the reader to judge. The fact is that Thomas Aquinas normally, and when speaking for himself, never says anything even approaching "God is beyond essence."<sup>19</sup> In the *De ente*, as I have insisted, he

*the Philosophy of Plotinus*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967, pp. 17-21 [reprint: Burdett, N.Y.: Larson, 1991, pp. 30-34]. Deck favours a doctrine of wakefulness as "super-knowledge" in the One rather than merely an "above knowledge."

<sup>19</sup> I notice that Joseph De Finance, S.J., "L'esse dans la philosophie chrétienne d'Étienne Gilson," *Doctor Communis* 38 (1985), pp. 269-278, when discussing Gilson's *Introduction à la philosophie chrétienne* (1960) notes that Gilson says that God is above intellect (*IPC* p. 62). However, this is a somewhat deceptive reference, since in fact Gilson is there quoting Thomas Aquinas! *IPC* chapter IV is entitled "Beyond Essence," and has at its outset a quotation from Thomas's *Commentary on the BOOK OF CAUSES* prop. 6 (Saffrey p. 47; Guagliardo pp. 51-52). Thomas is *commenting* on the doctrine that the first cause, God, is beyond intellectual knowledge "*supra intellectum*," and there is no doubt that Thomas brings in Proclus's explanation, states its Platonic meaning, and then says what the truth of the matter is. He says:

But as regards the truth of the matter, the first cause is above that-which-is [*supra ens*] inasmuch as it is precisely the infinite act of being [*ipsum esse infinitum*], but "that which is" [*ens*] expresses "that which finitely participates in being" [*id quod finite participat esse*], and this is proportionate to our intellect [*intellectui NOSTRO*], whose object is *the what it is* [*quod quid est*], as is said in *De anima* 3 [429b10ff.]; hence, that only is within the capacity of our intellect [*capabile ab intellectu NOSTRO*] which has a quiddity participating in being [*quod habet quidditatem participantem esse*]; but the quiddity of God is being itself [*Dei quidditas est ipsum esse*], hence he is above intellect [*supra intellectum*]. And it is in this way that Dionysius spells out [*inducit*] this argument, in *On the Divine Names*, ch. 1 [cf. Thomas, I lect. 2, #75], speaking thusly: "If all thoughts are of existents, and if existents have limit [*finem habent*]," inasmuch, that is, as they finitely participate in being, "the one who is above all substance is segregated from all knowledge." [Saffrey p. 47, lines 11-22]

What one notices here is that Thomas's own argument really carefully speaks only of "our intellect," though he concludes about "intellect," in keeping with the language of the Neoplatonic setting. One notices also that his own line of presentation has harmonized with Dionysius. Thus, one cannot hit Gilson for repeating Thomas, though it would be wrong to make "above intellect" or "beyond intellect" the best expression of the proper teaching of Thomas on the matter. We could point out that, in the fairly contemporary (to the *In Liber de Causis*) *De substantiis separatis*, c. 15, Thomas gives all his usual discussions of the

says that essence is found *most truly* in God, and this remains his thought from beginning to end. In the *SCG* he carefully explains how subsistence, essence, and *esse* are each true of God.<sup>20</sup> In the *ST* we are formally taught that essence and being are identical in God.

If Thomas were really following Gilson's path, he would have said, at 1.3.4, that "essence" signifies a potency with respect to *esse*, and that therefore it must be said that God has no essence, but rather is pure and simple *esse*; to which he might have added: unless someone would wish to call the *esse* his "essence." But this is not at all what Thomas does. He rather says that, it having been shown that God is his essence, to make his *esse* something else than it would be to make him a caused being. Again, if one makes essence other than *esse*, *then* the essence must be a mere potency; and there is no room for potency in God. Thirdly, *since* God is his essence, to make his *esse* something else would make him a being by participation. Everywhere the insistence is on the *value* of the already attained view of God as identical with his own essence. It is then shown that this essence must be *esse* itself. The line of thinking in no way resembles Gilson's.

However, Gilson is not finished. He continues, seemingly referring to his statements about God's "essence being to be beyond essence":

This personal approach to the problem is in keeping with the spirit of Thomism.  
(134)

I wondered at first if he meant here his, Gilson's, own personal approach. However, he means, rather, the (supposed) *retaining* of a *trace* of essence in the doctrine as Thomas's own personal approach, as distinct from saying that God has *no* essence. In making his case for the "spirit of Thomism," he compares it to a sea voyage, where one reckons one's position by one's distance from the land one has left behind. And we eventually come to this passage (which, I must say, is startling):

When we reach the question, what is God? the time has come for our intellect to cast off its moorings and to set sail on the infinite ocean of pure *esse*, or *act*, whereby that which is actually is. ... What is the very last thing a concrete substance would have to give up in order to achieve utter simplicity? *Its essence, of course.* In our attempt to describe God by removing from Him what is proper to the being of creatures, we must *give up essence* in order to reach the open sea of pure actual existence, but we must also keep the notion of essence present to the mind so as not to leave it without any object. This we do when, to the question, where do we find God? we simply answer, *beyond essence.* By establishing himself in *the definite negation of posited essence*, the theologian realizes that he is placing God above that which is *deepest in*

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divine *intellect* and its providential power. In ch. 14, his insistence is on God having knowledge of all. And his first argument, based on Aristotle's doctrine of God in *Metaph.* 12, is that because in him the substance is the very act of understanding, no knowledge of anything whatsoever is lacking. And since God's *esse* is "one, simple, fixed and eternal," God has eternal and fixed knowledge of all things by one simple act of looking [*uno simplici intuitu*]. [Spiazzi #120].

<sup>20</sup> *SCG* 4.11 (ed. Pera #3472-3473), quoted earlier.

*the only kind of reality he knows.* At that moment, the theologian is not beyond being; on the contrary, he is, *beyond essence*, at the very core of being. (134, my italics)  
This bears no resemblance to the Thomas Aquinas of *ST* 1.3. It is rather strongly reminiscent of Neoplatonic procedures. The formula, stemming from Plato's *Republic* 6 (509b), is, of course, famous. The Good is beyond essence.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, Gilson's contentions are astonishing. Why would his theologian (who presumably is a Thomist) say that essence is "that which is deepest in the only kind of reality he knows"? Surely Thomas tells us, and with good reason, that *esse is quod profundius omnibus inest*, i.e. what is most deeply *within* everything, as *formal* with respect to everything whatsoever which is within the thing!<sup>22</sup>

But the entire script bears no resemblance to what Thomas does in the work which we have learned from Gilson himself to take most seriously. Gilson gives no reference here, but his sea-voyage simile reminds one of the expression of Damascene concerning God as an infinite ocean of substance. (*ST* 1.13.12)<sup>23</sup>

A very different account of our approach to the divine simplicity would emerge if one based oneself on Thomas at *ST* 1.13.5:

... when some name pertaining to perfection is said of a creature, it signifies that perfection as distinct, in function of the definitional intelligibility, from the others; for example, when this name "wise" is said of a man, we signify some perfection distinct from the *essence* of the man, and from his *power*, and from his *esse*, and from all such

<sup>21</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, London\Cambridge, Mass.: Heinemann and Harvard, 1935: Paul Shorey translates:

... the objects of knowledge not only receive from the presence of the good their being known, but their very existence and essence [*to einai te kai ten ousian*] is derived to them from it, though the good itself is not essence but still transcends essence [*epekeina tes ousias*] in dignity and surpassing power. [6.509B]

It is worth noting that Plato goes on to refer to the good as highest in being:

... until the soul is able to endure the contemplation of essence [*to on*] and the brightest region of being [*tou ontos to phanotaton*]. And this, we say, is the good, do we not? [7.518C-D]

Allan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato*, New York: Basic Books 1968, translates the latter item as referring to "... looking at that which *is* and the brightest part of that which *is*." (his italics)

<sup>22</sup> *ST* 1.8.1 (41b46-49):

... *Esse autem est illud quod est magis intimum cuilibet, et quod profundius inest omnibus, cum sit formale respectu omnium quae in re sunt, ut ex supra dictis patet.*

The backward reference is to 4.1.*ad* 3 (and 1.7.1). To be "in" its subject is proper to first actuality; cf. *CM* 9.5 (Cathala #1828).

<sup>23</sup> Perhaps Gilson is remotely following *Sent.* 1.8.1.1.*ad* 4 (Mandonnet, pp. 196-197). However, if so, he should have gone farther, since in that text Thomas himself says we must take away *esse* itself, as it is in creatures, and we are in the "*caligo*" [mist, fog, vapour] of which Dionysius speaks. In fact, even in this presentation, what are removed from God are not such intelligibles as "goodness and wisdom," unqualifiedly, but "according as they are found in creatures" (just as with the removal of "*esse*" itself).

items. But when we say this name about God, we do not intend to signify something distinct from his *essence*, or *power*, or *esse*. And thus, when this name “wise” is said of man, it in some measure circumscribes and grasps [*comprehendit*] the thing signified; but not when it is said about God, but rather it leaves the thing signified as escaping one’s grasp [*incomprehensam*], and as exceeding the signification of the name...<sup>24</sup>

Clearly, for Thomas, “essence” expresses a perfection which is to be found in creatures. That perfection is rightly predicated of God, but we must not think we know what it means when it is said of God. Following the formula Thomas uses in 1.13.2, we can say that what we call “essence” in creatures exists by priority in God, and in a higher mode. Such names, as he tells us there, imperfectly represent the divine essence.<sup>25</sup> And the same line of thinking is to be applied to the divine *esse*.

Again, to use a Gilsonism, “nothing happens as it was supposed to happen” according to Gilson’s doctrine. Thomas does things differently than Gilson leads us to expect. Gilson’s own doctrine works only if “essence” names something which *includes* imperfection in the very nature of the item. This is not how Thomas thinks of essence. And this affects one’s conception of the act of being.<sup>26</sup>

Gilson still has not finished his “Reflections of the Notion of Being.” He continues:

This is to point out, in a negative way, an object of thought more positive than all the definable ones. Were we to say that God is *this*, be it essence, our proposition would entail the consequence that God is not that. On the contrary, in saying that God is neither this nor that, we implicitly affirm that there is nothing that, in His own transcendent way, God is not. To affirm that God is only being is to deny of Him all that which, because it is a determination of being, is a negation of it. (135)

This suggests that essence is a negation of *esse*. It also suggests that all essence is particular or finite essence, both views foreign to the thought of St. Thomas.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *ST* 1.13.5 (80b35-51).

<sup>25</sup> *ST* 1.13.2 (77b38-47).

<sup>26</sup> On the intimate relation of form to *esse*, Capreolus (*Defensiones* IV.108b) says:  
... if *esse* were defined, form would be placed in its definition, since *esse* is nothing else but the act which the form gives to its matter or subject. ... Secondly, form stands related to *esse* in the role of form and formal vehicle [*illativum formale*], upon which *esse* follows by natural consequence, as upon its own natural and necessary antecedent, and as the proper effect to its own cause, not efficient but formal...

And note IV.151a:

... though form gives *esse* to the subject, nevertheless it does not follow that the form is the efficient cause: because such giving is not through any transformation [*transmutationem*] of the subject from potency to act, but through the natural sequel and resulting of *esse* itself from form; for as out of the union of the parts the whole results, so from the contact of the form upon the matter [*ex contactu formae ad materiam*], there results *esse* and actuation and the formation of the matter or subject.

<sup>27</sup> The thought that essence is negative relative to *esse* reminds one of the doctrine of matter

Can Gilson's approach to Thomas's doctrine of *esse* be right, when he misconceives Thomas's doctrine of essence, and the nature of the *via remotionis* Thomas is employing?

### Essence and Existence

A second point: Gilson's dissatisfaction with Thomas's proofs of the real distinction between essence and *esse* in things other than God. We see this first in his discussion of the move from *ST* 1.3.3 to 1.3.4, i.e. from subsisting thing and essence being identical in God (1.3.3) to essence and *esse* being identical in God (1.3.4). Gilson stresses his idea that with the move from 1.3.3 to 1.3.4 we are going beyond the point where Christian theology has usually stopped, and thus moving beyond essence, nature, or form, to being. And here we come to a paragraph from Gilson which bears quoting:

What does the word "being" mean in this context? Since we are invited by Thomas Aquinas to pass beyond the level of essence, the word necessarily means that which, in being, is not essence. Thomas Aquinas takes it for granted, in these words, that there is such a thing. The decision is a revolutionary one in the history of metaphysics.<sup>28</sup> Is there, in being, anything that lies beyond the reality of that, in it, which is? True enough, real being implies existence, but what is existence, after all, if not essence itself posited in actual reality by the efficacy of some cause? If it is a question of God, is not His existence the perfect actuality of an essence that is self-subsisting being itself? To posit God as the perfection of entity itself seems to many good minds a sufficient approximation of a being whose essence in any case exceeds our grasp. They see no

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which Aristotle criticized, i.e. the confusing of matter with privation. Cf. Aristotle, *Physics* 1.9 (191b35-192a13), and Thomas, *CP* 1.15 (ed. Maggiolo, #130 [2] ff.). Matter is not essentially negative, but rather is part of the essence and is thus positive. - Gilson's position thus resembles the Platonism which Thomas criticizes; cf. *ST* 1.5.2.ad 1 (28b9-18).

Avicenna, *Liber...* 8.3 (ed. Van Riet, p. 396, lines 24-28), in speaking of the essence of the creature, says:

And this is the meaning involved in a thing being created, viz that it is receiving *esse* from something other than itself, and it has a *privation* which belongs to it in its own essence absolutely, not a privation belonging to it because of its form [being] without matter, or because of its matter [being] without its form, but through its own totality.

Avicenna's essence of the creature seems to contain a kind of negation of being. For Thomas, on the other hand, essence is wholly turned towards *esse*. Cf. the criticism of Avicenna in *DP* 5.3: the essence of the creature has no possibility relative to non-being.

<sup>28</sup>We might recall Gilson's later rejection of "revolution" in philosophy, in *D'Aristote à Darwin et retour*, Paris: Vrin, 1971, p. 10:

... On lit dans le *Cahier de Notes* de Claude Bernard: "La science est révolutionnaire."

Je suis profondément convaincu que la philosophie ne l'est pas.

If, nevertheless, it is revolutionary in metaphysics to go "beyond essence," one cannot help but think of Plato, *Republic* VI (509b):

... the good itself is not essence but still transcends essence in dignity and power. (tr. Paul Shorey)

point in adding to the affirmation of its reality that, over and above being supremely real, it exists.<sup>29</sup>

Here, Gilson is presenting to us the minds of thinkers who have not gone as far as Thomas Aquinas. God's essence is "the perfection of entity itself" and "existence" *JUST posits it in actual reality*. Existence seems to add no new important target of metaphysical analysis.

At this point Gilson summarizes the three arguments of 1.3.4. And upon them he comments:

Dialectically speaking, the justification of the conclusion is faultless: "God is His own being, and not only His own essence." There must therefore be some reason why it has failed to win universal approval, and the reason is that all such dialectical demonstrations presuppose the notion of being proper to Saint Thomas Aquinas. If the ultimate meaning of the word "being" is the act of being, the *esse* or *actus essendi* in virtue of which alone things can be called "beings," then all the arguments of Thomas Aquinas are convincing and all lead to a necessary conclusion. To those who perceive that *to be* is, in every thing, the ultimate act that causes it to be a *being*, the demonstration becomes crystal-clear. One should rather say that there is nothing left to demonstrate. He whose true name is HE WHO IS necessarily is, *so to speak*,<sup>30</sup> by essence, the very act of being itself in its absolute purity. God does not own it, He *is* it.<sup>31</sup>

Here one cannot but agree that everything depends on one's understanding of the notions and their implications. This is true of any demonstration in any matter. I would hardly agree, however, that there is nothing left of the demonstration. It is an argument which presupposes that we know what is meant by the *esse* of things, and even presupposes that we find in some things that their essence is other than their *esse*.<sup>32</sup> Thus, for example, the second argument in the body of *ST* 1.3.4 has as a key premise:

... it is necessary that *esse* itself be compared to the essence which is other than it as act to potency.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> *ECP*, p. 118.

<sup>30</sup> My italics on this expression: Gilson regularly seems to wish to downplay "*per essentiam*," "by essence," said of God.

<sup>31</sup> *ECP*, p. 119.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. John M. Quinn, O.S.A., *The Thomism of Etienne Gilson: A Critical Study*, Villanova, PA: Villanova University Press, 1971. I agree entirely with Quinn that Gilson's approach to the real distinction between *esse* and essence in caused things is wrong. As Quinn says, if the identity of *esse* and essence in God is not based on the already known real distinction in other things, then that doctrine of identity loses all its force. [80-81] But Quinn thinks [83] that the reversal of order by Gilson, attempting to start with God, is what "accounts for Gilson's hesitancy about whether the real distinction is demonstrable." I believe that I offer a better reason, viz. Gilson's failure to identify Thomas's *esse* with the actual existence of the essence, what Gilson calls the "state" of existence.

<sup>33</sup> The Latin runs:

... *Oportet ... quod ipsum esse comparetur ad essentiam quae est aliud ab ipso sicut actus ad potentiam*. [Ottawa ed. 19a1012]

This is not presented as a mere hypothesis, but as a distinction which characterizes the things we already know, and which must be denied of God.

Again, somewhat further on, Gilson speaks of the doctrines of Avicenna and Thomas together as both involving:

... an induction which consists in removing all composition from the notion of God. The whole process, however, presupposes that there are beings, or substances, given in sense experience whose structure reveals itself to the metaphysician as a compound of essence and existence. If this is true, then the conclusion follows: *after REMOVING ESSENCE, only existence is left, and this is what God is.* But how do we know that empirically given beings are compounded of essence and existence? (127, my italics and caps)

Let the reader again note the ease with which Gilson radically transforms the procedure of Thomas, who said that “God is *esse*, and *not only* essence,” into the Gilsonian “God is *only esse*, *not essence*.”

However, here our interest is in Gilson’s discussion of the “compound” of essence and existence. His problem is that he does not accept the arguments proposed to prove this composition in empirically given beings. He tells us:

The argument used by Avicenna, and several times invoked by Thomas Aquinas, is often quoted as a demonstration of the distinction between essence and existence in concrete substances, but *it does not really prove it.* The argument proves only that, in a created universe, existence must COME TO ESSENCES FROM THE OUTSIDE and, therefore, be SUPERADDED to them. Any metaphysics or theology that recognizes the notion of creation necessarily agrees on this point. All Christian theologies in particular expressly teach that no finite being is the cause of its own existence, but this does not imply that existence is created in the finite substance as a distinct “act of being” (*esse*) added by God to its essence and composing the substance with it. [127-128, my small caps, Gilson’s italics]<sup>34</sup>

This I find surprising. Whatever the argument means in Avicenna, Thomas provides the argument himself (Gilson is speaking of the *De ente* presentation). It does not start from “a created universe.” It starts from sensible things which have essences and actually exist. I would heartily agree that it implies that they are known to be *caused*: i.e. they come to be and cease to be, and so depend on another. However, one should not start from a doctrine of creation. If a thing has

<sup>34</sup> Gilson in the *L’Esprit de la philosophie médiévale* (2nd ed.), Paris, 1944: Vrin, p. 66, n. 1, in his chapter on creation, saw the doctrine of essence and existence as found in Thomas as one widely held; in *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, tr. A.H.C. Downes, New York: Scribner, 1940, p. 67 and 68, note 1 (at p. 435):

The Thomist distinction between essence and existence expresses the radical contingency of existence in all that is not God. Substantially contemporaneous with the very beginnings of Christian thought, it was inevitable that this fundamental intuition should find at length its appropriate technical formula. It appears for the first time clearly in William of Auvergne... [tr. Downes, p. 435]

This work dates from about 1930.

an efficient cause, it must have an act of being which is distinct from its essence. Thomas thinks so. He says in the *ST*:

... It belongs to the notion of the caused, that it be in some measure a composite, because at the very least its *esse* is other than the “what it is,” as will be made clear later.<sup>35</sup>

One should at least note that Gilson is here parting company with Thomas.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, just what Gilson thinks he is saying with the word “superadded” in the above is not clear to me. What is it for existence to “come to essences from outside” and yet not be distinct from those essences?

Gilson first takes the case of Avicenna. For brevity, we leave that aside. He goes on to say:

... For reasons of his own, Thomas did not like to call existence an accident of essence. (128)

No, indeed, he did not. And the “reasons of his own” have everything to do with the very notion of *esse*. It has a *kinship with essence* that Avicenna, as Thomas sees it, has missed.<sup>37</sup> In fact, the sort of mistake he sees Avicenna making is one which would incline someone to say that “God has no essence”! Perhaps Gilson should be paying more attention to that issue right here.

Still, let us consider what Gilson’s own problem is. He says:

<sup>35</sup> *ST* 1.3.7.*ad* 1:

... Est autem de ratione causati, quod sit aliquo modo compositum, quia ad minus esse eius est aliud quam quod quid est, ut infra patebit.

The Ottawa editor sends us to *ST* 1.50.2; the *ad* 2 must be meant. The text says that, even though the angel is not composed out of form and matter, there is still act and potency, inasmuch as the form is potential with respect to the distinct act of being. - Still, it is not a text on all caused things being composed of quiddity and act of being. It is a text helping us to understand the situation in the case of seemingly simple substance.

<sup>36</sup> I think Thomas adequately proves the distinction in such a text as *SCG* 2.52 (ed. Pera, #1278):

... The substance of each thing belongs to it just by virtue of itself and not through another: hence, to be actually illuminated is not of the [very] substance of air, because it belongs to it through another. But for any created thing, its *esse* belongs to it through another: otherwise it would not be *caused*. Therefore, of no created thing is its *esse* its substance.

[... Substantia uniuscuiusque est ei per se et non per aliud: unde esse lucidum actu non est de substantia aeris, quia est ei per aliud. Sed cuilibet rei creatae suum esse est ei per aliud: *alias non esset causatum*. Nullius igitur substantiae creatae suum esse est sua substantia.]

Notice that the argument bears generally on all caused things as such. - I have discussed the problem of proving the composition in my paper “St. Thomas, Joseph Owens, and the Real Distinction between Being and Essence,” *The Modern Schoolman* 41 (1984), pp. 145-156. See also my paper “St. Thomas and the Distinction between Form and *Esse* in Caused Things,” *Gregorianum* 80 (1999), pp. 353-370.

<sup>37</sup> *CM* 4.2 (#556 and 558).

... Still, *like Avicenna*, he [Thomas] considered it as “other than” essence, so that as soon as existence had been conceived as a distinct metaphysical element, it was necessarily to be described as that which in a substance is both distinct from, and united with, essence. The way of remotion therefore leads to the notion of a God Whose essence is his very act of existing; but it does so only if it sets out from a world of concrete substances endowed with individual acts of existing. And this does not seem philosophically demonstrable from the notion of substance alone. It can be demonstrated that no essence is the cause of its own existence, from which it follows that whatever has an essence, and exists, must exist in virtue of an external cause; but *no one has ever been able to demonstrate the conclusion that, in a caused substance, existence is a distinct element, other than essence, and its act.* (128, my italics)

As I see it, Gilson’s problem here is that he does not have *esse* as a proper target to start with. He starts with substance or essence, and is willing to look on as these are caused by something external. However, their “existence” is not thus seen as a distinct target of metaphysical attention. I think he should start with *esse*, as Thomas does, for example, in his *In DE HEBDOMADIBUS*. *Esse* is a target of metaphysical attention, no matter what else is, and it is seen as intrinsically involving simplicity. As soon as a thing is recognized as *composite*, one has *esse* as really distinct from the composite as a whole.<sup>38</sup> It need not, at first, be distinguished from essence. Both terms, “essence” and “act of being,” seem to refer to principles or elements of a being. It is only when the thing is seen as caused, and thus as dependent on a *higher and more noble* essence, that one must conceive of a distinction, within the caused thing, between its essence and its act of being. The act of being is a perfection, pertaining to the being as a being, which surpasses the causal power of the essence of the caused thing.<sup>39</sup> - It is true that if one does not recognize *esse* as a target of metaphysical attention right from the start, one will never propose the Thomistic doctrine. Still, that does not mean one must fully know the *nature* of *esse* right from the start.

There is another feature of Gilson’s above remarks which does not seem right. He says, concerning the real distinction:

... this does not seem philosophically demonstrable from the notion of substance alone. It can be demonstrated that no essence is the cause of its own existence, from which it follows that whatever has an essence, and exists, must exist in virtue of an external cause ...

It is quite true that the real distinction between a substance or essence and its act of being cannot be demonstrated from the notion of substance alone. If it could, “substance” could never be properly predicated of God.<sup>40</sup> If one is speaking of

<sup>38</sup> *Expositio libri Boetii DE HEBDOMADIBUS*, Leonine ed., t. 50, Rome\Paris: Commissio Leonina\Cerf, 1992 [henceforth “DH”], lectio 2 [lines 204-214][Calcaterra #32].

<sup>39</sup> *Quaestiones de quolibet* 12.4.1 [6], in Leonine ed., t. 25-2, Rome\Paris: Commissio Leonina\Cerf, 1996, pp. 403-404. This late text of Thomas brings out best the role of hierarchy of causal natures in the distinction between a caused nature and its *esse*.

<sup>40</sup> For the use of “*substantia*” (meaning “essence”) concerning God, cf. *ST* 1.11.4.*ad* 3.

efficient causality, it is of course true that nothing is the cause of itself;<sup>41</sup> in that sense “no essence is the cause of its own existence.” However, from that it does not follow that whatever has an essence and exists must exist by virtue of an external cause. The real distinction certainly does not follow from “no essence is the cause of its own existence.” The truth is that to prove the real distinction, one begins with a thing’s being *caused* (as by an *efficient* cause). The distinction can be proved from *caused substance*, but not from substance as substance or essence as essence.

Well, then, what are we to make of this statement:

... but *no one has ever been able to demonstrate the conclusion that, in a CAUSED SUBSTANCE, existence is a distinct element, other than essence, and its act... ?*

The italics and caps, of course, are mine. Let us note, first, that Gilson is at odds with Thomas on the point.

Here, for an understanding of Gilson’s difficulty, I interject some considerations of Gilson’s criticism of Cajetan concerning essence and existence (published in 1953). They help to see why Gilson has so much trouble with demonstrations of the distinction. The reason is that he thinks of *esse* as something *other than the actual existence* of the essence (which actual existence he *identifies* with the essence). The true doctrine, I maintain, is that the actually existent essence is other than its own actual existence: and that can be demonstrated.

Let me begin with a teaching presented by Capreolus, Thomas’s 15<sup>th</sup> century expositor, “the Prince of Thomists” (d. 1444):

... *esse* ought not to be conceived in the role of [*per modum*] something *HAVING* reality or *esse*, nor in the role of a *PRINCIPLE* of *esse* or of a being [*entis*], but in the role of *THE DISPOSITION AND THE ACT* of a being inasmuch as it is a being.<sup>42</sup>

Gilson, in a paper criticizing Cajetan for having neglected, or even replaced with something else, Thomas’s doctrine of *esse*,<sup>43</sup> held that if by “*esse*” one means the actual existence of the essence, that can only be identical with the essence. Gilson saw in the *esse* of St. Thomas something other than actual existence, it would seem. We read:

Saint Thomas, as far as we know, has never introduced a distinction or a real composition between the essence, and, when it exists, its “being of actual existence.”

<sup>41</sup> Cf. *ST* 1.39.2.ad 5: a thing can be formal cause of itself, as happens with immaterial beings, but nothing can be efficient cause of itself.

<sup>42</sup> He says:

... *Esse enim non debet concipi per modum alicujus habentis realitatem vel esse, nec per modum principii essendi vel entis, sed per modum dispositionis et actus entis in quantum ens. (Defensiones t. I, 328a)*

<sup>43</sup> Étienne Gilson, “Cajétan et l’existence,” *Tijdschrift voor Philosophie*, 15e jaargang, 1953, pp. 267-286.

The being of actual existence results from the composition of an essence with its act of being, it is not a third element that one can consider separately.<sup>44</sup> Certainly, it is not a third element. *Esse* is not other than the actual existence of the essence. The created essence has it as its proper act. The created essence, as long as it exists, is really distinct from its existence.<sup>45</sup> What Gilson says in criticizing Cajetan, on the other hand, seems to mean that for Gilson *esse*, which he calls “an act” rather than “a state,” by its influence on the essence, constitutes or establishes the essence in a *state* of actual existence, a state which cannot be really distinguished from the essence itself. Thus he says:

... Thomas is not a disciple of Giles of Rome; he does not take *esse* for a thing; it is an act, but still it is for him an *aliud* about which it is literally true that the actual being [*l'être actuel*] is composed [out of it]. *If, on the contrary, one has to do merely with EXISTENCE*, that is, the being of actual existence, one sees very well in what sense it is the actuality of the possible substance, but one no longer sees well how the actual substance is composed of it. ... It still remains permissible to ask oneself whether, for Cajetan, the Thomist *esse* is not reduced to the substance placed in the state of real existence [*état d'existence réelle*] by the efficacy of its cause? (my italics and caps)<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Gilson, “Cajétan,” p. 272:

... Saint Thomas, que nous sachions, n'a jamais introduit de distinction ni de composition réelle entre l'essence et, quand elle existe, son “être d'existence actuelle.” L'être d'existence actuelle résulte de la composition d'une essence avec son acte d'être, il n'est pas un troisième élément que l'on puisse considérer à part. It is clear that Gilson is not speaking merely at the level of vocabulary. He continues: ... Sauf erreur, et nous formulons expressément la proposition pour qu'on voit de suite où est l'erreur au cas où nous en commettrions une, *une fois composés l'esse et l'essence thomistes, il n'y a pas d'être d'existence actuelle à expliquer*. En acceptant la position scotiste du problème, Cajétan donnait à son adversaire cause gagnée. (272-273, Gilson's italics)

I do not understand why Gilson underlines what he underlines. Cajetan does not seem, either, to think that, given the *esse* and the essence, there remains a “being of actual existence” to explain. I do not see that Cajetan is guilty of having accepted the Scotist position.

Concerning the Scotist position, Gilson speaks of it both in his *Jean Duns Scot*, Paris, 1952: Vrin, p. 204, and in his *L'Être et l'essence*, (2me éd.) Paris: Vrin, 1962, p. 132.

If one thinks that I have not grasped Gilson's position (and I admit that I do not find it all that clear), I note, in the Cajetan paper, p. 280, where again the option he proposes is between “the act of being” (Thomas, for Gilson) and “the actual existence of the substance” (Cajetan, for Gilson).

<sup>45</sup> In his note #4, Gilson, “Cajétan,” admits the possibility of a Thomistic meaning for the expression: “being of actual existence,” precisely if one identifies it with *esse*; but in so saying, he seems to invent a special meaning for “being of actual existence” (just as, as it seems to me, he is inventing a special meaning for the Thomistic *esse*). I.e. it would be something other than the existence of the essence.

<sup>46</sup> Gilson, “Cajétan,” p. 277.

What Gilson himself proposes does not seem very different from the model shown to be impossible by Peter Auriol early in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>47</sup> Auriol, understanding *esse* as the very existence of the existing thing, attempts to maintain its identity with the essence or with the thing itself. He argues: if the *esse* were other, either one would envisage it as what imprints on the essence “reality” (and thus it would be after the manner of an *agent* rather than after the manner of a form;<sup>48</sup> and then it would be necessary to ask whether the essence is or is not identical with the “reality” communicated to it, and so on *ad infinitum*; or else one would envisage it as communicating its own reality to the essence: with the consequence that *esse* alone would be posited in the real. At bottom, he denies that the two could be two beings or two things.

Capreolus, in this regard, replies to Auriol:

... *esse* is the “reality,” that is to say the *actuality*, of the essence, if by “reality” one means the solidity [*ratitudinem*] of actually existing... [And] *esse* does not imprint on essence any reality, nor does it communicate to essence its [*esse*’s] own [reality]; but rather *esse* is the act and the reality of the essence.<sup>49</sup>

And it is at this moment that he says, as we have seen, that one ought not to conceive of *esse* as what *HAS esse*, nor as the *PRINCIPLE* of *esse*, but as the disposition and the act of a being. The idea is that if one envisages *esse* as *POSSESSING esse* in order to communicate it to the essence, then one makes of *esse* a possessor of *esse*, i.e. a subsisting thing. *Esse*, rather, is quite simply and immediately actual existence.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Auriol’s (d. 1322) argument is to be found in Capreolus, I, 318a, and Capreolus’s reply at 328a-b. Cf. Peter Aureoli, *Scriptum Super Primum Sententiarum*, ed. Eligius M. Buytaert, O.F.M., St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: The Franciscan Institute, 1952-1956; vol 2, p. 898, #56.

<sup>48</sup> See below, our reference to Gilson’s position in *Being and Some Philosophers: esse* as the efficient cause of the essence.

<sup>49</sup> We read:

... dico quod esse est realitas, id est actualitas essentiae, si realitas dicit ratitudinem actualiter existendi... Nec enim esse imprimit ipsi essentiae aliquam realitatem, nec communicat ei suam; sed est actus et realitas essentiae. (I, 328a)

<sup>50</sup> Capreolus continues the reply by saying that it is possible, according to what has just been said, to admit the expression: “*esse* communicates reality to the essence.” But one must understand that essence and *esse* are not two, each being properly “that which is” or “that which exists”; but they are two, one of which is “that which is” [*quod est*] and the other is “by which that is” [*quo est*]; and it does not follow that *esse* alone is posited in the real, because one of them is *that which is posited* and the other is *its very being posited* [*positio*]. We read:

... Concesso tamen, ad bonum intellectum, quod esse communicat essentiae realitatem, cum ulterius inferatur quod tunc, si esse communicat essentiae suam propriam realitatem, tunc non ponitur in rerum natura nisi unum, etc., dico, ut prius, quod esse et essentia non sic ponuntur in rerum natura quasi duo, quorum quodlibet sit proprie quod est, vel quod existit; sed tamquam duo, quorum unum est quod est,

Furthermore, Capreolus is working to bring out the idea that we are speaking of existence itself. Thus, he wishes to cleanse the conception of *esse* of its being, in things other than God, a subsistent thing, but moreover to eliminate the idea of it as *principle* of being. The word “principle” suggests a factor or element having the role of “whence comes” existence. We see this idea of a principle in Thomas’s own teaching. The word “principle” is linked to the beginning of movement, and thus all the causes are called “principles”:

... because from the cause begins the movement towards *esse* of the thing...<sup>51</sup>  
and later:

... And again, as an intrinsic [item], one calls “principle” the substance of the thing, that is to say the form, which is the principle as regards *esse* [*principium in essendo*], because it is in function of it [*secundum eam*] that the thing is in *esse*.

In this text, the word “substance” comes from Aristotle, and St. Thomas interprets it as the form upon which *esse* follows.<sup>52</sup>

Of course, an attentive reader of St. Thomas will not be surprised to see the form being called “principle” with respect to *esse*. That is the constant doctrine in the texts.<sup>53</sup> However, one might be less ready to accept the assurance with which Capreolus asserts that *esse* ought not to be conceived as a principle but rather as the “disposition and the act” of a being. And yet it is a teaching that directs our minds towards a vision of the authentic nobility of the act of being. Forms can participate in something: *esse* participates in nothing at all. It is what is most simple.<sup>54</sup> It appears to me that Capreolus keeps in mind the fact that something has the nature of a cause just to the extent that it is in actuality, i.e. *HAS*

aliud quo est... nec sequitur: ergo nihil ponitur nisi esse; ista enim duo sic ponuntur non ut quodlibet eorum sit quod, sed quia unum est quod ponitur et aliud est illius positio. (I, 328a-b)

<sup>51</sup> *CM* 5.1 (#760):

... “Nam omnes causae sunt quaedam principia.” Ex causa enim incipit motus ad esse rei...

The quotation-marks indicate the words of Aristotle at 5.1 (1013a17).

<sup>52</sup> *CM* 5.1 (#762):

... Et iterum quasi intrinsecum dicitur principium “substantia” rei, idest forma quae est principium in essendo, cum secundum eam res sit in esse.

He is commenting on 5.1 (1013a21).

<sup>53</sup> See our paper “St. Thomas Aquinas against Metaphysical Materialism,” in *Atti del’VIII Congresso Tomistico Internazionale*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana 1982, t. V, pp. 412-434.

<sup>54</sup> *SCG* 1.23 (ed. Pera, #214; Pegis, #2):

... Nothing is more formal or more simple than *esse*...

and *De Potentia* 1.1. Cf. also *DH* 2, lines 140-145, on *esse* as abstract and thus pure as to its “essence”; lines 204-215, where all is based on the simplicity, i.e. non-composite character, of *esse*.

*esse*.<sup>55</sup> Thus, it is inasmuch as the form is found more on the side of the subsistent thing, the thing to which it belongs to be, that it can be viewed as a principle or cause of *esse*. The form, as to its own nature, is closer to the subsistent thing; created *esse* is that which is furthest from it; as Capreolus says:

... Since the *esse* of the creature *least of all* subsists, it is not properly created or annihilated, neither is nor is not, neither begins to be nor cease to be; but all such things are said about that which is through that *esse*, and not about *esse* itself.<sup>56</sup>

He says it “least of all subsists” because he wants us to contrast it with other non-subsistent items in the metaphysical analysis of a material being. The form which is the principle of *esse* does not subsist either, but it is not at as great a remove from the subsisting thing as is the *esse*. *Esse* is of such a nature that it can subsist *only* in God. Form is of such a nature that it can subsist in the higher creatures.<sup>57</sup>

Thus, my suggestion is: if Gilson is attempting to look *beyond* the actual existence of the substance or essence, to something *else* called “*esse*,” might that not have something to do with his judgment that no one has ever proved the distinction between a caused substance and its *esse*?

One stands in danger, under the Gilsonian approach, of losing sight of the ineluctable contribution of essence. Without the essence, the act would not be an act of being. *Esse* is the act of the essence. *Esse* and essence are given together by the higher cause, with essence having the role of receiver, and *esse* the role of the formal and received. This is so true that form or essence is presented by Thomas as a divine instrument in the causing of *esse*.<sup>58</sup>

Gilson’s general argument, as to the theme we are presently following, is that all the arguments in St. Thomas’s works for the distinction between being and essence *presuppose* the Thomistic notion of *esse*. This is ambiguous. One can have no quarrel with this, if by “the Thomistic notion of *esse*” one is referring to

<sup>55</sup> *De Potentia* 2.1:

... natura cuiuslibet actus est quod seipsum communicet quantum possibile est. Unde unumquodque agens agit secundum quod in actu est. Agere vero [*lege*: enim] nihil aliud est quam communicare illud per quod agens est actu, secundum quod est possibile.

<sup>56</sup> Capreolus says:

... Cum ergo esse creaturae minime subsistat, non proprie creatur, aut annihilatur, aut est, aut non est, aut incipit aut desinit; sed omnia talia dicuntur de illo quod est per illud esse, et non de ipso esse. [I, 327a]

<sup>57</sup> Cf. e.g. *ST* 1.12.4 (64b17-22):

... But some things *are*, whose natures are subsisting by themselves, not in any matter, which nevertheless are not their own *esse*, but are possessors of *esse* [*esse habentes*]; and at this level are incorporeal substances, which we call “angels.”

The subsisting nature of the angel is called “form” at *ST* 1.50.2.ad 3 (317b12-23), and at *ST* 1.50.5 (321a14-16). - The human soul is subsisting form: *ST* 1.75.2, 5 and 6.

<sup>58</sup> *De Potentia* 7.2.ad 10.

*esse* as known to all inasmuch as it is a *per accidens* sensible.<sup>59</sup> But if it refers to *esse* as known to be distinct from the essence of the thing, then Gilson is saying that there must be a circle in any argument for the real distinction between essence and *esse*.

He goes on to say:

... all the arguments ... presuppose the prior recognition of the notion of the “act of being” (*esse*). This cannot possibly be an intellectual intuition, because there is no such thing in Thomism.<sup>60</sup> It can only be the extreme summit accessible to abstract

<sup>59</sup> Thomas presents *esse* or its equivalent as the very type of a *per accidens* sensible, i.e. what leaps to the eye of the mind on the occasion of sense knowledge. These “sensibles by association” (Latin: *per accidens*) occur to the *intellect* as the immediate fruit of our orchestrated sense-experience. Thus, Thomas says that when I see someone speaking and setting himself in motion, I apprehend that person’s *life* (considered *universally*), and I can say that I “see” that he is alive (thus speaking of the intelligible object as a “visible.”) Cf. Thomas, *Sententia libri De anima* (in *Opera omnia*, t. 45/1, Rome/Paris: Commissio Leonina/Vrin, 1984, 2.13 (lines 182-190). Cf. Aristotle, *De anima* 2.6 (418a7-26).

Now, we know that life is the being, i.e. the *esse*, of the living thing. Cf. *ST* 1.18.2 (127a32-37), following up on the *Sed contra* reference to Aristotle, *De anima* 2.4 (415a13). There, Aristotle is arguing that the soul is the cause of the living body, as its form. The passage in the Latin which Thomas comments upon is:

... Quod quidem igitur sit sicut substantia, manifestum est. Causa enim ipsius esse omnibus substantia est, uiuere autem uiuentibus est esse, causa autem et principium horum anima.

In the Leonine ed., t. 45\1, Rome\Paris: Commissio Leonina\Vrin, 1984, this is at 2.7 (p. 93). Thomas paraphrases, 2.7 (lines 176-181):

... that is the cause of something in the role of substance, i.e. in the role of form, which is the cause of being [*causa essendi*], for through the form each thing is actually [*est actu*]; but the soul is the cause of being for living things, for through the soul they live; and living itself [*ipsum uiuere*] is their being [*esse*]; therefore, the soul is the cause of living things in the role of form.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. *Unity of Philosophical Experience*, New York: Scribners, 1937, p. 314:

... The twofold character of *the intellectual intuition of being*, to be given in any sensible experience, and yet to transcend all particular experience, is both the origin of metaphysics and the permanent occasion of its failures. [my italics]

Obviously, there has been, at the very least, a change in vocabulary. For Gilson’s rejection, at least for himself, of Jacques Maritain’s doctrine in this respect, see *Le thomisme* (6th edition), Paris: Vrin, 1965, p. 187. Maritain’s view of “abstractive intuition” in Thomism is well expressed in the essay “On Human Knowledge,” in *The Range of Reason*, New York: Scribners, 1952, pp. 8-9. Maritain speaks of an “intuition” which is “at the peak of abstraction” (p. 9).

knowledge.<sup>61</sup> Actual existence is given in sense intuition.<sup>62</sup> From the objects of sense intuition the intellect abstracts, among other notions, those of *being* (*ens*, *Seiendes*, *étant*), *thing* (*res*, *Ding*, *chose*), *matter* and *form* conceived as two distinct constituents of corporal [*sic*, read “corporeal”] substance. Moreover, conceiving apart that which the thing is and the fact that it actually is, we can form the two abstract notions of *essence* (question, *quid sit*) and of *existence* (question, *an sit*), but this is the point where most of the philosophers will stop while Thomas Aquinas insists on going on. (130)

In view of what one reads in many texts of Thomas, one would have every right to assume that with the “existence” related to the question “*an sit*,” one had come to Thomas’s *esse*.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, once one has distinguished the two notions referred to by Gilson, of essence and existence, one is in an excellent position to ask whether the realities to which they refer are identical or not. However Gilson will have none of that. He continues:

... Existence may mean either a state or an act. In the first sense, it means the state in which a thing is posited by the efficacy of an efficient or of a creative cause, and this is the meaning the word receives in practically all the Christian theologies outside Thomism, particularly those of Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, Scotus, and Suarez.<sup>64</sup> In a second sense, existence (*esse*, to be) points out the interior act, included in the composition of substance, in virtue of which the essence is a “being,” and this is the properly Thomistic meaning of the word. (130-131)

<sup>61</sup> This seems to me a sound description of the understanding of the distinction; it accords with the way Thomas expresses the matter in *ST* 1.12.4.*ad* 3, where even the angel is said to “abstract” *esse* from its concrete subject, when it discerns that it itself (the angel) is other than its own *esse*.

<sup>62</sup> Notice that this is not *esse* as a *per accidens* sensible. This sense knowledge to which Gilson refers would be of individual *esse* as individual; cf. *ST* 1.75.6 (445b31-34):

... Sense does not know *esse* save as here and now, but the intellect apprehends *esse* absolutely, and as regards all time.

The object which is a *per accidens* sensible for the intellect, e.g. *life*, is a universal. *Sententia libri De anima* 2.13 (Leonine ed., lines 182-190). Cf. Aristotle, *De anima* 2.6 (418a7-26).

<sup>63</sup> Cf. e.g. *Expositio libri POSTERIORUM* 2.6 (ed. Leonine, t. 1\*2, Rome\Paris, 1989: Commissio Leonina\Vrin, lines 35-50; ed. Spiazzi, #463); also 2.7 (ed. Leonine, lines 27-41; ed. Spiazzi, #471).

Fr. R.-A. Gauthier, in his Introduction to the Leonine edition (pp. 76\*-77\*), locates and dates this part of the work as at Naples at the end of 1272, i.e. Thomas at his most mature; he is using (in this latter part of the work) the Moerbeke translation. - However, the relation between Thomas’s doctrine of the act of being and the question “whether it is” is a subtle one. At *ST* 1.3.4.*ad* 2, Thomas distinguishes between the act of being and the “being” which signifies the true; so also in *ST* 1.48.2.*ad* 2. On the other hand, *Quodl.* 2.2.1 [3], which is generally placed later in Thomas’s career, takes together “being” [*esse*] as signifying truth and as signifying entity, and relates *both* to the question: “whether it is.”

<sup>64</sup> As we saw, he would likely add Cajetan to this list.

This is crucial for Gilson's conception. A state or an act? An "interior act, included in the composition of a substance"?<sup>65</sup>

My own position is that, yes, this is true, but that Thomas has constantly been finding it in his reading even of Aristotle. As he understands Aristotle, we are constantly being confronted by modes of *esse*.<sup>66</sup> Gilson is convinced that it just is not there to be extracted, but he might have to bow to Thomas as to a more perceptive historian of philosophy.

Anyway, the distinction between the "state" and the "act" is not all that clear. I take it that Gilson sees "state" as something that leaves the primary focus on the posited thing itself, whereas "act" would suggest something entering into the very composition of the thing or substance. I would only insist that, whether any other philosopher or theologian has ever recognized the distinction between the thing and its existence (what Gilson calls the "state" of the thing), Thomas sees the truth that there is a real distinction between the essence and its actual existence. This "state" is the *actuality* of being.

Indeed, perhaps Gilson's word "act" is deceptive, as suggesting a contrast with "state." Perhaps we should be using in its stead the word "actuality." As Thomas says:

... this verb "is" ... signifies that which occurs first to the intellect as having the status: absolute actuality [*per modum actualitatis absolute*]; for "is," said unqualifiedly, signifies being actually [*esse actu*], and so it signifies in the manner of a verb [*per modum uerbi*]. But because the actuality [*actualitas*] which this verb "is" principally signifies is universally the actuality of every form or act, substantial or accidental, thus it is that when we wish to signify that any form or act is actually present in [*actualiter inesse*] some subject, we signify that by this word "is," unqualifiedly according to present time, in a qualified sense as regards the other times; and so, as a consequence, this verb "is" *consignifies* composition.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>65</sup> It is, of course, "included in the composition of the substance" in a very special sense. At *Quodl.* 2.2.1 [3].*ad* 1, in reply to an objector who notes that the angel and its essence are identical, and thus, if one says that the angel is "substantially composed" out of essence and *esse*, then one has a composition "out of itself and something else," which seems unacceptable, Thomas replies:

... sometimes out of those things which are conjoined together some third thing results, as from soul and body humanity is constituted, which is man, hence man is composed out of soul and body; but sometimes out of those things which are conjoined together a third thing does not result, but there results a composite intelligibility [*ratio composita*], as for example the intelligibility: white man is resolved into the intelligibility: man, and the intelligibility: the white, and in such cases something is composed out of itself and something else, as the white thing is composed out of that which is white and whiteness.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. e.g. *CM* 2.2 (Cathala #295-298), concerning *Metaph.* 2.1 (993b26-31).

<sup>67</sup> *Expositio libri PERYERMENIAS*, 1.5 (ed. Leonine, lines 391-407)(Spiazzi #73). My italics. Thomas is explaining why the word "is" merely *consignifies*, and does not *simply* signify, composition. - Gilson, in *BSP*, p. 171, uses "actuality" of both the *esse* and the form just

My sense is that Thomas, in speaking of “*esse*,” is talking about what everyone talks about, but sees truths about it that others do not see.

Gilson goes on:

... How did Thomas come by this new notion? It is not a notion universally evident to all human minds. Far from it. The majority of philosophers will concede that it is a far cry from a possible thing to an actual thing. ... but if an actually existing being has been produced by its cause, why should one attribute to it an “existence” distinct from *the fact that it exists*? ... No such disagreement would take place if the presence, in things themselves, of an act in virtue of which they can be called “beings” were a *conclusion susceptible of demonstration*. (131, my italics)

Again, I stress Gilson’s scepticism as regards the demonstrability of *esse* as really distinct from the essence of a caused thing.

Here, I would suggest that we might distinguish between knowledge of the act of being, in the mode of knowing called “that it is,” and knowledge of it in the mode of “what it is.” I think a text like the *Quodl.* 12 item on angelic *esse*<sup>68</sup> is meant to answer the question of the “what?” regarding the act of being of caused things. Sometimes the people who speak of the “*fact of existence*” mean *only* “being” in the sense of the true.<sup>69</sup> If they mean the very actuality of the substance,<sup>70</sup> then they are talking about *esse*, and perceiving it, but not necessarily as to what it is.

However, Gilson says:

... it is one and the same thing to conceive of God as pure *Esse* and to conceive things, so far as they *are*, as including in their metaphysical structure a participated image of the pure Act of Being. (133)

in itself. Capreolus holds that one should reserve the word “*actualitas*” for *esse*: *Defensiones* 1.330a.

<sup>68</sup> *Quodl.* 12.5.1 [5]. - Concerning the two modes of knowing, i.e. that it is, and what it is, see *ST* 1.87.1 (540b34-541a22), where Thomas is discussing our knowledge of our own mind.

<sup>69</sup> See *ST* 1.3.4.*ad* 2. Thus, since it is *per accidens* that natural things fall under the consideration of our intellect (cf. *ST* 1.16.1 (114a16-21) and *ad* 1), there is a kind of levelling or uniformity or homogenization of “being” so taken. “Being, as the true,” so taken, is like “the night in which all cows are black.”

<sup>70</sup> To see that one is confronted by a *substance* is to see a certain *real unity* of the manifold of sensible reality; and in seeing this unity, one is seeing an *esse*. Thus, as Aristotle says in *De anima* 2.1 (412b8-9):

... for admitting that the terms unity [*to hen*] and being [*to einai*] are used in many senses, the paramount sense is that of actuality [*he entelecheia*].

And Thomas assures us (*ST* 1.11.1 [56a45-47])

... each thing, just as it guards its being [*suum esse*], so also it guards its unity [*suam unitatem*].

The substance or essence of the thing causes its unity, as we see in *ST* 1.11.4.obj. 3 and *ad* 3.

Now, this is true in the case of Thomas. However, I do not think that one comes to the metaphysical conception of God as the subsistent act of being *until* one sees that the hierarchy of efficient causes cannot go to infinity. I say this because it seems to me that the distinction between a thing and its act of being is seen as soon as one sees the contribution of the efficient cause as cause. There must be, in the effect, both a nature of its own and a participation in what is proper to the nature of the cause as cause. These cannot be identical. But that there is some one being whose nature is *esse* is seen in seeing that there is a *first* cause, first by nature.<sup>71</sup>

### ESSE as Cause

My third point concerns the causality which one can attribute to the *esse* of the creature. When he comes to q. 4, on the divine perfection, Gilson says:

... To posit God as the pure and simple act of being is, by the same token, to posit him as absolutely perfect. The reason is that being (*esse*) is the most perfect of all things. As has already been said, “nothing has actuality except so far as it is.” *There is no point in imagining essences endowed with various degrees of perfection*; no essence has reality except so far as some act of being (*esse*) causes it to be an actually existing thing.<sup>72</sup>

Though in great part this is a paraphrase of Thomas himself, nevertheless the Gilson additions are misleading. Is *esse* the “cause” of actual existence of the essence? In *Being and Some Philosophers*, p. 172, Gilson wrote:

... Actual existence, then, is the *efficient cause* by which essence in its turn is the formal cause which makes an actual existence to be “such an existence.” [my italics]<sup>73</sup>

Now, for Thomas, no act of being is present save as *caused* by the *PRINCIPLES OF THE ESSENCE*. Thus, towards the end of the *De veritate*, we read:

... God causes in us natural *esse* by creation, *WITHOUT THE MEDIATION OF ANY EFFICIENT CAUSE*, but nevertheless through the mediation of a formal cause: because natural form is the principle of natural *esse*...<sup>74</sup>

<sup>71</sup> See the previously mentioned *Gregorianum* paper. - I do ask myself, however, if we could not use a Fourth Way approach (i.e. *ST* 1.2.3: The Fourth Way), and see a composition of *esse* and essence because of the more and the less in beings: cf. *SCG* 2.15 (ed. Pera, #923 and #924). - Still, this merely raises the question: how different, one from another, are the Five Ways?

<sup>72</sup> *ECP*, pp. 122-123. My italics.

<sup>73</sup> In affirming what he does in *Being and Some Philosophers*, Gilson refers (p. 172, n. 23; and cf. p. 169) to the doctrine that causes are causes of each other, but in diverse genera of causality: *CM* 5.2 (#755). However, in that text, Thomas carefully explains that doctrine in terms of (1) the relation between efficient and final causality, and (2) the relation between form and matter. Nowhere does he say anything about efficient and formal causality as reciprocal.

<sup>74</sup> St. Thomas, *De veritate* 27.1.ad 3 (ed. Leonine, t. 22\3, lines 182-186). An important remark is to be found at *DP* 3.1.ad 17. The question is posed: can God make something out

It is God who is the efficient cause. It is the form which is the formal cause of *esse*.<sup>75</sup> And this doctrine will be found in later key texts.<sup>76</sup>

Indeed, Thomas regards *esse* more as a *final* cause, and the effect of all the other sorts of causality. A text of Thomas which helps to understand the situation is to be found in the celebrated *De Potentia* 7.2. There Thomas teaches that in God the substance or essence is identical with the *esse*. An objector argues that that which is signified as an *effect* ought not to belong to the first substance, which has no principle. But *esse* is such: because every being *through the principles of its essence* has *esse*. Thus, it is not appropriate to say that the divine substance is *esse*.

Thomas's reply shows why *esse*, in creatures, has to such a degree the role of an *effect*. He says that the order of ends corresponds to the order of agents, in such fashion that to the first agent corresponds the ultimate end, and the other ends are proportionate to the other agents. *Esse*, which is the proper effect and the end corresponding to the operation of the first agent must, then, have the role of *ultimate end*. But the end, though first in intention, is last in the operation, and is *the effect of the other causes*. Therefore, created *esse*, which is the proper

of nothing? The objector reasons that the maker gives *esse* to the thing made. If what receives the *esse* is *nothing*, then it is nothing which is constituted in existence [*esse*]: and thus nothing is made. If, on the other hand, it is *something* which receives the *esse*, then this is not making something out of nothing. Thomas replies:

... God, simultaneously giving *esse*, produces that which receives *esse*: and thus it is not necessary that he work on something already existing.

This allows us to see that, *God* being posited on high *as agent*, we analyse his product, a being, i.e. *ens*, in which are found together a multiplicity of intelligible ontological factors, such as *esse*, form, matter, etc. I.e., *only* by what I would call "formal analysis" does metaphysics make sense. To see the *esse* of the thing as something that itself *has esse* and *gives* it to essence is to view it as an AGENT.

<sup>75</sup> In the earlier *In SENT.* 1.8.1.2.*ad* 2 (ed. P. Mandonnet, Paris, 1929: Letheilleux, p. 198), St. Thomas himself seems to affirm that *esse* is the formal cause of the being. At least, to an objector who says that the *esse* of creatures must be "through itself" and thus not caused (and consequently the *esse* of creatures is God himself), Thomas replies:

... created *esse* is not *through* something else, if the word "through" expresses the intrinsic formal cause; on the contrary [*immo*], through it [*ipso*], formally, the creature is ...

If, in this passage, *esse* is not explicitly called a "cause," still it is strongly implied that it is the intrinsic formal cause.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. e.g. *CM* 4.2 (Cathala #558). See my papers "St. Thomas, Metaphysical Procedure, and the Formal Cause," in *The New Scholasticism* 63 (1989), pp. 173-182, and "Saint Thomas, Form, and Incorruptibility," in Jean-Louis Allard (ed.), *Etre et Savoir* (Philosophica 37), Ottawa, 1989: Les Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa, pp. 77-90.

effect corresponding to the first agent, is *caused* by the other principles, though the first principle, i.e. God, is the first cause of *esse*.<sup>77</sup>

Thus, Thomas provides us with a vision of the essence and of the form of the thing as causal relative to the *esse* of the thing. They should be considered as instruments of the first principle, i.e. God himself. The created *esse* does have the role of *final* cause. What is clear is that Thomas is not using the sort of conception Gilson provides, a conception which tends to attribute *esse* to *esse*: *efficient* causes are subsisting things, i.e. *things which HAVE esse*.<sup>78</sup>

This concludes my present exploration of Gilson on *esse*. He was certainly right in focusing on the doctrine of the act of being in St. Thomas's metaphysics. However, in his meditations on this theme, he leads us astray in a variety of ways. Here I have noted three: for Thomas, rather than God's being beyond essence, essence is most truly essence in God; for Thomas, the act of being is identical with the existence of the existing thing; for Thomas, *esse* does not have *esse* and so is not an efficient cause of the essence (*esse's* causality is final).

Dominican College of Philosophy and Theology  
Ottawa

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<sup>77</sup> *De Potentia* 7.2.ad 10.

<sup>78</sup> *ST* 1.75.2 (440b46-51);

... Nothing can operate by itself unless it subsists by itself. For operation belongs to that which is in act [*entis in actu*]; hence, something operates just to the extent that it is. For which reason we do not say that heat heats, but that the hot [heats].

Cf. also 1.45.4, both the body of the article and obj. 1 and *ad* 1. Created *esse* does not subsist, i.e. does not itself "have" *esse*.