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ÉTIENNE GILSON, DUNS SCOTUS, AND ACTUAL EXISTENCE:
WEIGHING THE CHARGE OF "ESSENTIALISM"

Étienne Gilson juxtaposes what he calls Aquinas's "existentialism" to what he calls Scotus's "essentialism."[1] For Gilson, "existentialism" is philosophical truth, the only view compatible with an authentically Christian metaphysic, while "essentialism" is a Hellenic mistake that seduces Christian philosophers by appealing to the idolatrous desire to reduce reality to what is intelligible. In this paper, I will describe the difference between "essentialism" and "existentialism" as defined by Gilson. Thus understood, they are contradictories. Then, I will assess the case for attributing "essentialism" to Scotus, based on an assessment of Scotus texts and secondary scholarship. I will argue that if we adhere to the most straightforward characterization of the dispute between "essentialism" and "existentialism," we see that Scotus actually endorsed the view that Gilson calls "existentialism"—consciously accepting it, as an implication of his views. Therefore, he also would have rejected the view that Gilson calls "essentialism." This shows that Scotus is closer to Aquinas, than Gilson thinks he is; and indeed, that

[1] Étienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1956, reprint 1994), 55, 370. *Idem*, *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1949), 94.

Gilson's misinterpretation obscures their fundamental agreement on this issue. In the final analysis, irenicism prevails: Thomists and Scotists can now recognize that their patrons agreed in rejecting "essentialism" and embracing "existentialism," as Gilson uses these terms.

I will also briefly explore some of the other issues that seem to be mixed in with Gilson's application of the "essentialist" label, since they factor heavily in Gilson's critique of Scotus. With respect to these other issues, I will sort through a brief list of important items. I will argue that some of the disagreements are merely apparent, insofar as Gilson has misinterpreted a philosopher who—it must be admitted—does not write with Aquinas's brilliant clarity. However, there are some real disagreements that remain between them, and I cannot help being a little partisan about these.

Defining Essentialism

Gilson associates the term "essentialism" with the Platonic view that existence belongs *primarily* to forms or essences, whereas the view he calls "existentialism" says that forms or essences in themselves must be further characterized by "actual existence," distinct from themselves, in order to be beings.[2] Thus characterized, the views are not obviously inconsistent: someone might say that forms or essences are the *primary bearers* of actual existence, but that it is still possible in principle to distinguish between a form or an essence, and the actual existence that it bears. But, given the passages I examine below, it seems more likely that Gilson is taking "essentialism" in such a way as to entail the denial of "existentialism," thus characterized. Thus, "essentialism" would say that existence is identical with essence in all cases, while "existentialism" would say that in at least *some* cases, there is a *real* (i.e. mind-independent) distinction between essence and existence. So described,

[2] Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 33. *Idem*, *God and Christian Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941), 61. *Idem*, *The Christian Philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas*, 368.

these views are mutually incompatible, and at least one of them has to be true. Given what Gilson consistently says in all his books that address the issue, in all the passages I will examine below, this interpretation is most likely. *According to Gilson's use of the terms, "essentialism" denies a true distinction between essence and existence, while "existentialism" affirms it*.

This way of contrasting "existentialism" and "essentialism," is reiterated throughout Gilson's philosophical writings. It also remains constant that Gilson portrays Aquinas as the founding discoverer and uniquely insightful champion of the existentialist view, and Scotus as one of the mistaken proponents of essentialism—and therefore as a Christian inheritor and propagator of Platonist errors.[3] Gilson adheres to these views and characterizations through a succession of major works, including Gilson's *God and Christian Philosophy* (1941), *Being and some Philosophers* (1949), and *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (1956), continuing all the way through his *Elements of Christian Philosophy* (1959). Gilson's monograph on Duns Scotus, *Jean Duns Scot: Introduction à ses positions fondamentales* (1952), has only recently been translated into English by James Colbert, and has yet to be released by Bloomsbury Academic, in the series "Illuminating Modernity" (2017). Gilson's monograph on Scotus falls in with the general trend of Gilson's other works, in its ascription of essentialism to Duns

[3] Étienne Gilson, *Jean Duns Scot: Introduction à ses positions fondamentales*, Études de philosophie médiévale XLII (Paris: J. Vrin, 1952), 628: "Duns Scot lui doit-il son identification de l'être à l'essentia? C'est peu probable, car cette position était commune et, pour ansi dire, allait de soi. En tout cas, ce n'était pas innover que de poser Dieu comme l'essentia par excellence, mais Duns Scot a dû innover pour construire sa théologie à l'aide d'une metaphysique de l'essence. En accord profound avec l'esprit du plantonisme, cest-à-dire, non pas avec les écrits de Platon mais avec les exigences auxquelles avait déféré la pensée de Platon lui-même, Duns Scot traduit les essences par des concepts et leurs relations par une dialectique des concepts. Assurément, le judgment et le raisonnement sont chez lui d'importance majeure, mais pour lier ou diviser les concepts selon la liaison ou la division réelle des essences. Contrairement à ce que pensait saint Thomas, c'est sur l'essence, plus que sur l'existence, que se fonde ultimement chez Duns Scot la vérité du jugement."

Scotus.[4] It is very significant, that the basic distinction between "essentialism" and "existentialism," with all its typical elements, and the contrasting ascriptions of essentialism to Scotus and existentialism to Aquinas, are repeated in the books *preceding* and *succeeding* Gilson's *ex professo* treatment of the philosophy of Duns Scotus, as well as in that book itself.[5] This is good evidence that Gilson never retracted his labelling of Scotus as an "essentialist," and never ceased using him as a foil to the "existentialist" view advocated by Gilson—despite Scotus's actual adherence to the tenets characteristic of "existentialism" as described by Gilson. Below, I will give representative samplings from these works, and a brief examination of the philosophy of "existentialism" as Gilson finds it in Aquinas; then I will show that Scotus is really an "existentialist," as Gilson defines the term.

In each of these works, Gilson treats "existentialism" as the authentically Christian view. For Gilson, "existentialism" uniquely preserves the distance between Creator and creatures and guards the mystery in created reality, by maintaining the distinction between essence and existence in created beings. Asserting that "existence" is something other than essence, is supposed to preserve mystery. For, if there is always *something* in created reality that goes beyond the merely essential or quidditative, then there will always be something other than the intelligible—and so there will always be something that transcends the human intellect.[6] This factor of "existence" also preserves the *immediacy* of contact between God and creature: God must continually and directly bestow it, so that secondary causes will be able to contribute

[4] *Ibid*., 468: "Or c'est précisément en ce point que Duns Scot oppose son *non possumus* à la distinction réelle de l'essence et de l'existence . . . Pourtant, et c'est en quoi le scotisme diffère du thomisme, l'essence ne diffère plus de son existence une fois que sa cause l'a réalisée." Cf. *ibid*., 628.

[5] Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 86. Gilson, *Jean Duns Scot*, 180–181, 468, 628. Étienne Gilson, *Elements of Christian Philosophy* (Doubleday and Company, 1960), 212.

[6] Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas*, 368.

what is properly their own, in the manner natural to them.[7] On page after page, however, Scotus remains the negative example—the mistaken Christian proponent of "essentialism."[8]

The relatively straightforward contrast that Gilson offers in one passage, explains the way in which he uses the terms elsewhere:

> Let us agree to call "essential" every ontology, or doctrine of being, for which the notion of essence and the notion of being are equivalent. We will then say that in an "essential ontology" the form element, which achieves the completion of substance, is the very core of reality. But this can no longer hold for an "existential ontology" where the form is further actuated by existence.[9]

So, for "essentialist" ontologies, there is no real difference between essence and existence; rather, "form" or essence is identical to existence. Here it is plain that "form" refers to *forma totius*, rather than *forma partis*. For, as Aristotle shows, the "essence" of physical things includes both matter and form; and in general, it is this composite intelligible type—not the substantial form alone—which is capable of being exemplified in reality, and receiving actual existence.[10]

Elsewhere, Gilson gives Augustine's Christian Platonism as an example of "essentialism":

> Augustine understands creation as the divine gift of that sort of existence which consists in rhythm, numbers, forms, beauty, order, and unity . . . What still remains Greek in Augustine's thought is his very notion of what it is to be. His ontology, or science of being, is an "essential" rather than an "existential" one. In other words, it exhibits a marked tendency to reduce the exist-

[7] Gilson, *Elements of Christian Philosophy*, 180–181: "Nature itself *qua* nature is here at stake . . . But the universal presence of God in things is nothing superadded to their natures. Rather, it is that which constitutes their natures as natures by causing them to be; that is, to be 'beings'."
[8] Gilson, *Jean Duns Scot*, 180–181, 468, 628; Gilson, *Elements of Christian Philosophy*, 212; Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 86.
[9] Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 33.
[10] Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *De Ente et Essentia*, chapters 1–3.

> ence of a thing to its essence, and to answer the question "What is it for a thing to be?" by saying "it is to be that which it is."—A most sensible answer indeed, but perhaps not the deepest conceivable one in philosophy . . .[11]

Augustine's "ontology," according to Gilson, is absolutely exhausted by forms or essences; therefore, Augustine is an "essentialist."

By contrast, what Gilson means by calling a philosophical view "existential," is that this philosophical view holds that, over and above essence, there is some further factor, "*esse*" or "*actus essendi*," which God gives to a created essence, by which the creature actually exists and bears that essence. Aquinas is the founding father, or uniquely inspired discoverer, of this view:

> As philosophy of the act-of-being, Thomism is not *another* existential philosophy, it is the only one . . . What characterizes Thomism is the decision to locate actual existence in the heart of the real as an act of transcending any kind of quidditative concept and, at the same time, avoiding the double error of remaining dumb before its transcendence or of denaturing it in objectifying it. The only means of speaking about the act-of-being is to grasp it in a concept, and the concept which directly expresses it is the concept of being.[12]

In a later passage, he is especially clear about Aquinas's unique status among other Christian philosophers, in recognizing the distinct status of the act of existence:

> 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,

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[11] Gilson, *God and Christian Philosophy*, 61.

[12] Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas*, 368. In this connection, Gilson (ibid., 447, n. 25) quotes Aquinas: "esse autem est illud quod est magis intimum cuilibet, et quod profundius omnibus inest, cum sit formale respectu omnium quae in re sunt." *STh.*, I, 8, 1.

> and Suarez. In the 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.[13]

In calling Thomism "existentialist," Gilson emphasizes Aquinas's way of thinking about the "*actus essendi*" as an additional real factor of *actuality*, which must be *added to an essence* by God, in order to get a subsisting thing. This is because all things other than God are contingent, and must receive their reality from God as a gift. In God alone, essence and existence are identical. But in created beings, the "existence" goes beyond, or falls outside of, or transcends, the "essence." This is the basic difference between God and created entities. As Aquinas says,

> [W]hatever there is in anything which goes beyond its essence, must be caused either by the principles of the essence, as proper accidents following on the species . . . or by something exterior, as heat in water is caused by fire. If therefore the very being [*ipsum esse*] of a thing be other than its essence, it is necessary that the being of that thing either be caused by something exterior, or by the essential principles of the same thing. But it is impossible that the being be caused only from the essential principles of the thing; for nothing is adequate to be for itself the cause of its being, if it has caused being. Therefore it is necessary that that of which the being is other than its essence, has to be caused by another. This, however, cannot be said of God . . .[14]

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[13] Gilson, *Elements of Christian Philosophy*, 130–131.

[14] *STh*., I, 3, 4 (Leonine, IV, 42): "Primo quidem, quia quidquid est in aliquo quod est praeter essentiam eius, oportet esse causatum vel a principiis essentiae, sicut accidentia propria consequentia speciem . . . vel ab aliquot exterior, sicut calor in aqua causatur ab igne. Si igitur ipsum esse rei sit aliud ab eius essentia, necesse est quod esse illius rei vel sit causatum ab aliquot exteriori, vel a principiis essentialibus rei. Impossible est autem quod esse sit causatum tantum ex principiis essentialibus rei: quia nulla res sufficit quod sit sibi causa essendi, si habeat esse causatum. Oportet ergo quod illud cuius esse est aliud ab essentia sua, habeat esse causatum ab alio. Hoc autem non potest dici de deo . . ."

The basic idea is that nothing in the created world is self-explanatory; therefore, something else must bestow actuality as a gift upon the essences of created things, if they are to exist. Aquinas continues,

> Actual existence [*esse*] is the actuality of every form or nature: for neither 'goodness' nor 'humanity' are signified as being in actuality, except insofar as we signify that they actually exist. It is necessary therefore that the act of being [*ipsum esse*] be compared to the essence which is other than it, as act is to potency. Therefore since nothing is potential in God . . . it follows that essence is not other than existence, in him. Therefore his essence is his existence.[15]

I think Gilson is right that in these passages, one may translate "*esse*" as "act of existence," "actual existence," "being," or "act of being." It is true that Aquinas also has the more precise phrase "*actus essendi*." However, in Aquinas's philosophy, both these Latin expressions are basically synonymous and are referring to the same reality. The implication of Aquinas's words is that, in creatures, "*esse*" or "*actus essendi*" is not the same item as the nature or essence, but is a distinct non-quidditative item, related to the essence "as act to potency." That is to say that creaturely essences, in themselves, have a *capability* to exist, but not actuality itself; thus, they are *contingent*, and they are not self-explanatory. Therefore, they must derive actual existence, ultimately, from something that has it primarily. This act-of-existence is a distinct reality that they receive directly from God.

Aquinas implies that everything that is not identical with its own existence, must receive the existence from something else—ultimately from something that has it non-derivatively: "Because just as that

[15] *Ibid.*: "Secundo, quia esse est actualitas omnis formae vel naturae: non enim bonitas vel humanitas significatur in actu, nisi prout significamus eam esse. Oportet igitur quod ipsum esse comparetur ad essentiam quae est aliud ab ipso, sicut actus ad potentiam. Cum igitur in deo nihil sit potentiale, ut ostensum est supra, sequitur quod non sit aliud in eo essentia quam suum esse. Sua igitur essentia est suum esse."

which is on fire but is not fire, must be ignited by participation [in fire], so that which *has* existence but is not *itself* existence, must be a being by participation."[16] Thus, if the creature is to exist at all, the creaturely capability for existence must be actualized as a free gift from God, who is the only being that is "pure act." But as Gilson makes clear, the implication is not that the "*actus essendi*" is a further real element that falls under *its own* quidditative or essential kind; rather, it is the very *actuality* of the essence.[17] Neither does Thomist existentialism imply that there must be some real actual thing there, *first*, to receive actuality. Rather, Gilson supposes Aquinas to be the first philosophical pioneer to recognize that the nature of a created thing does not necessarily *include* actuality, of itself, but must receive it as a distinct factor from outside. After all, in this picture, every non-divine substance is a contingent being.

Perhaps a plausible way of interpreting "existentialism," is that the *actus essendi* is *logically simultaneous* with the real existence of a created essence: something bears its own *actus essendi*, if and only if its individual essence exists in reality. Certainly, the view as described by Gilson denies that essence is in any way more ontologically fundamental that existence. Indeed, Gilson sometimes suggests the converse of this, which is even a little stronger: i.e., that the act of existing is *more ontologically fundamental* than the *essence* of the particular individual that bears it. As Gilson says in one passage:

> But we have still to come to the chief justification of the expression "existential" as applied to Thomistic philosophy. It is not enough to say of all being that its concept connotes its *esse*, and that this *esse* must be taken as an act. It must also be said that this *esse* is the act of the same being whose concept connotes it. In every *esse habens* the *esse* is the act of the *habens* which pos-

[16] *Ibid*.: "Quia sicut illud quod habet ignem et non est ignis, est ignitum per participationem, ita illud quod habet esse et non est esse, est ens per participationem."
[17] Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas*, 368.

> sesses it, and the effect of this act upon what receives it is precisely this—to make a being of it.
>
> If we accept this thesis in all its force and with all its ontological implications we come immediately to that well-known Thomistic position: *nomen ens imponitur ab ipso esse*. So we might as well say that the act-of-being is the very core of being since being draws everything, even its name, from the act-of-being. What characterizes Thomistic ontology thus understood is not so much the distinction between essence and existence as the primacy of the act-of-being, not over and above being, but within it. To say that Thomistic philosophy is "existential" is to stress more forcibly than usual that a philosophy of being thus conceived is first of all a philosophy of the act-of-being.[18]

This passage seems to affirm a sort of ontological fundamentality for actual existence, although it is difficult to see what that thesis amounts to. After all, it is paradigmatically distinctive of "existentialist" views to hold that "existence precedes essence;"[19] and Gilson's "existentialist" might urge: something must *actually exist*, somehow "first," in order to *be* anything at all—whatever one makes of this thought.

But Gilson thinks that Duns Scotus has no idea of a true distinction between essence and the "act-of-existence" for created beings. This is implied by his brushing Scotus with the "essentialist" label. Gilson writes: "In Duns Scotus, the ontology of *esse* is overshadowed by that of *ens* . . ."[20] His monograph on Scotus explicitly continues this trend, ascribing essentialism to Scotus and denying that Scotus has any idea of a real distinction between essence and existence:

> Or c'est précisément en ce point que Duns Scot oppose son *non possumus* à la distinction réelle de l'essence et de l'existence . . . Chez Duns Scot, il est également vrai, selon la doctrine d'Avi-

[18] *Ibid*., 369–370.
[19] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," lecture given in 1946.
[20] Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 460, n. 102.

> cenne, que l'essence, ou quiddité, n'implique pas l'existence. Elle ne peut recevoir celle-ci que de sa cause. Pourtant, et c'est en quoi le scotisme diffère du thomisme, l'essence ne diffère plus de son existence une fois que sa cause l'a réalisée. N'oublions pas qu'essentia comporte ici le sense de 'réalité. Admettre qu'une essence ainsi comprise soit effectivement produite à l'être par sa cause, et que pourtant elle ne soit pas, c'est admettre la possibilité d'une réalité irréelle, d'une essentia dénuée de l'esse qui en fait précisément une essentia, bref, répétons-le, c'est se contredire: *quod enim aliqua essentia sit extra causam suam, et quod non habeat aliquod esse quo sit essentia, est mihi contradictio.*[21]

The point of this passage is first affirm that Scotus is an essentialist, and then, by way of explanation, to ascribe to Scotus an Avicennian view of existence, as something that is really nothing over-and-above the essence. Gilson's idea is that in Avicenna's philosophy, existence is not a distinct item in reality, but a mere state in which the essence may sometimes be found.[22] On Gilson's reading, the Avicennian view entails that an "essence" has two "states"—one of not-existing, and one of existing. In either case, it has its own "proper" reality—which, in the latter case, is a kind of attenuated being.[23] In either case, Gilson says there is no room in Scotism for a distinct "act-of-existence," but only the essence itself, in one or the other of its two states. He clinches the whole passage by citing a quotation from Scotus which is supposed to show that Scotus thinks it is a contradiction to posit a real essence without its own act of being.[24] In Gilson's reading

[21] Gilson, *Jean Duns Scot*, 468–469.
[22] Gilson, *Elements of Christian Philosophy*, 130–131.
[23] Cf. Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 85–86. This is the point of the monograph's use of the phrase describing an essence that is "dénuée de l'esse." On this matter, see section "The Ontological Status of Possibles" in this article for further discussion.
[24] More on this quotation from Scotus, below.

of Scotus, any true distinction between essence and existence collapses—and the roots of this error come, through Avicenna, from Plato.

In another passage from Gilson's monograph on Scotus, Gilson basically says that the *actus essendi* is excluded from Scotus's metaphysic, because on Scotus's view it has no special work to do in terms of individuation.[25] Gilson thinks that we need Aquinas's "*actus essendi*" to explain how individuation occurs; but on Gilson's reading of Scotus, actual existence is really nothing "over and above" an essence—so we find that Scotus must posit something different to accomplish this task.

Gilson had written in the same vein elsewhere:

> There is no room in Scotism for any distinction of essence and existence, because, as Scotus himself says, being is univocal, that is, being is always said in the same sense and always means the same thing. It means exactly this, that being is always determined by the actual condition of its essence. Such as is the essence, such is its being.[26]

In this passage, it is particularly telling that Gilson overlooks the important distinction between "being" (*ens*) and "existence" (*esse*): Scotus's thesis of the univocity of "being" is a thesis of the univocity of the concept, "*ens*," and has no bearing on the issue of whether *esse* is

[25] Gilson, *Jean Duns Scot*, 470: "Pourtant, ces composants se déterminent mutuellement jusqu'au principe individuant du tout, que les réduit tous à la l'unité de la substance. L'actualité supérieure y saisit l'inférieure, jusqu'au determinant intrinsèque supreme qui les saisit tous dans son acte. Ce qui est vrai, c'est que nous sommes ici dans une métaphysique de l'essence réelle, et comme l'actus essendi s'en trouve exclus par une decision de principe, il ne saurait être question d'y faire appel pour fonder ou couler ensemble les éléments dans l'unité du compose. C'est dans l'essence même qu'il faut donc chercher un catalyseur des essences et l'on n'en voit pas d'autre que l'efficace hiérarchique des actes, celui de la forme actualisant celui de la matière, et celui du principe individuant intrinsèque actualisant à son tour celui de la forme. Le vrai problème est ici de choisir entre une métaphysique de l'essentia et une métaphysique de l'esse."

[26] Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 86.

distinct from *ens*.[27] Why not take Scotus's own use of the infinitive "*esse*" as evidence that he, too, believes in a distinct act-of-existence?[28] The likely explanation is that Gilson reads Scotus's use of this term as referring to the "being" that is proper to and indistinguishable from an essence.[29] In any case, the reference to univocity is a red herring, since Scotus's belief in univocity is a semantic thesis, rather than a metaphysical one.[30] That is to say, he thinks of the general abstract *concept* of "being," i.e., "*ens*," as the base-line generic concept that applies trivially to everything that exists—but not as a substantive "common nature" or real universal that is shared by everything.[31] So, it's not as if Scotus's doctrine of the univocity of "being," entails that Scotus must deny that there is a distinction between essence and existence. In any case, as we will see in a later section, Scotus does not deny that existence and essence for created things are distinct.

In a parallel and later passage in *Elements of Christian Philosophy*, written *after* his monograph on Scotus, Gilson re-affirms this assessment of Scotus in even stronger terms:

> [Scotus] never wasted any time refuting the Thomistic notion of *esse*. Scotus simply had no use for it. In fact, he could not find in it any meaning. To him, entity (*essentia*) was reality itself. If no cause has made it actually to exist, then it was only a possible; but after it had been made to exist by some efficient cause, no act

[27] I am grateful to Richard Cross for pointing this out, at the presentation of this paper at the conference "Duns Scotus, Étienne Gilson, and the Future Legacy of the Subtle Doctor," hosted by the theology department at the University of Notre Dame, April 2016.

[28] Cf. Scotus, *Ordinatio*, II, d. 12, q. 1, n. 16, ed. C. Balic et al. (Città del Vaticano: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1956): "quod enim aliqua essentia sit extra causam suam, et quod non habeat aliquod esse quo sit essentia, est mihi contradictio."

[29] For further discussion on this, see the above discussion of Avicenna, and also the section "The Ontological Status of Possibles" in this article.

[30] Cf. Stephen D. Dumont, "Transcendental Being: Scotus and Scotists," *Topoi* 11 (1992): 135–148; and "The Univocity of the Concept of Being in the Fourteenth Century: John Duns Scotus and William of Alnwick," *Medieval Studies* 49:1 (1987): 1–75.

[31] Richard Cross, "Where Angels Fear to Tread: Duns Scotus and Radical Orthodoxy," *Antonianum* 76:1 (2001): 7–41.

> of being could add anything more to it. In Scotus' own words: 'that an entity could be posited outside its cause without, by the same token, having the being whereby it is an entity: this, to me, is a contradiction.' In short, a thing cannot be made to be twice, even by adding to it a so-called act of being. There would be no point in arguing the case. This is a problem in the interpretation of the first principle. A Thomist feels inclined to think that Scotus is blind, but a Scotist wonders if Thomas is not seeing double.[32]

In this passage, Gilson is drawing on the previous quotation of Scotus on p. 468 of the monograph, which had cited Scotus's Ordinatio, II, d. 12, q. 1, n. 16: "*quod enim aliqua essentia sit extra causam suam, et quod non habeat aliquod esse quo sit essentia, est mihi contradictio.*"[33] We can see the setting for the monograph's use of the Latin sentence, in the passage previously given in French. In both books, *Jean Duns Scot* and *Elements*, Gilson is using this quotation, to justify ascribing a kind of slavish devotion to parsimony to Scotus—whom he interprets as denying a distinction between existence and essence, and holding that the essence of a thing is "reality itself." So, as in all the other passages, Gilson's book on Scotus contrasts Scotus with Aquinas in ascribing essentialism to one and existentialism to the other.[34]

However, note that Scotus's words in the Latin quotation above, do not entail that there is no distinction between essence and existence; they only stipulate that anything which actually has an essence, must also have existence *concurrently*, as a matter of metaphysical necessity. To hold that something can really be, without actually existing, is *of course* a contradiction. Furthermore, this stipulation is eminently compatible with Aquinas's "existentialism." For, even if two items—a thing

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[32] Gilson, *Elements of Christian Philosophy*, 212.

[33] Cf. Gilson, *Jean Duns Scot*, 468.

[34] *Ibid*., 468–469: "Or c'est précisément en ce point que Duns Scot oppose son *non possumus* à la distinction réelle de l'essence et de l'existence . . . Pourtant, et c'est en quoi le scotisme diffère du thomisme, l'essence ne diffère plus de son existence une fois que sa cause l'a réalisée . . ."

and its existence—are metaphysically inseparable in reality, they may still be formally or characteristically different. Thus, *this case is tailor-made for applying Scotus's famous "formal distinction"*—as I will argue in the next section.

There is a high probability that the reason Gilson comes to these conclusions about Scotus's "essentialism," is because he ascribes to Scotus the belief that actual existence is only an "intrinsic mode" of an essence; or, in different terms, he says that on Scotus's view it is the "intrinsic reality" of an essence. In a representative passage, Gilson seeks to explain Scotus's view:

> In other and perhaps better words, being (*esse*) is nothing else than the intrinsic reality of essence itself, in each one of the various conditions in which it is to be found. This is why, wherever there is essence there is being, and what we call existence is simply the definite mode of being which is that of an essence when it has received the complete series of its determinations.[35]

Thus, on Gilson's reading of Scotus, the distinction between essence and existence would be a "modal distinction." If this is correct, then for Scotus, actual existence would not be its own distinct item in reality, but it would indeed be a mere aspect of an essence.

To understand Gilson's error here, it is necessary to understand Scotus's doctrine of "intrinsic modes." For Scotus, the mind may cognize some single reality in two ways, namely, (1) with its intrinsic mode, or (2) without its intrinsic mode. However, on Scotus's picture, these are simply two ways of conceiving or representing some item which, in reality, is one. Consider, e.g., a particular accident of redness and its particular degree of intensity, as compared to other particular shades of redness. The particular degree of intensity is an "intrinsic mode" of the redness; and according to Scotus, this particular redness, together with its intrinsic mode, makes a single "formal object of cogni-

[35] Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 86. Cf. Gilson, *Jean Duns Scot*, 181, 470.

tion."[36] The conception of the redness without its intrinsic mode is a more abstract conception of the thing, whereas the conception of the redness along with its intrinsic mode is a complete, "perfect," and "adequate" conception of that same thing.[37] So, for Scotus, "intrinsic modes" are not in any way *truly*, i.e. mind-independently, distinct from the realities they characterize.

But does Scotus think that existence is merely an "intrinsic mode" of an essence? As Richard Cross points out, the belief that essence and existence are related as a reality and its intrinsic mode is more typical of later Scotists, than of the Subtle Doctor himself.[38] Indeed, Gilson does not cite any genuine passages from Scotus himself, asserting that actual existence is an intrinsic mode of essence. Rather, he simply appeals to the teaching of later Scotists, *plus* a logically tenu-

[36] Scotus, *Ordinatio*, I, d. 8, pt. 1, q. 3, n. 140 (Vatican, IV, 223): "[S]i ponamus aliquem intellectum perfecte moveri a colore ad intelligendum realitatem coloris et realitatem differentiae, quantumcumque habeat perfectum conceptum adaequatum conceptui primae realitatis, non habet in hoc conceptum realitatis a quo accipitur differentia, nec e converso – sed habet ibi duo objecta formalia, quae nata sunt terminare distinctos conceptus proprios. Si autem tantum esset distinctio in re sicut realitatis et sui modi intrinseci, non posset intellectus habere proprium conceptum illius realitatis et non habere conceptum illius modi intrinseci rei . . ."

[37] *Ibid*., I, d. 8, pt. 1, q. 3, nn. 138–140. Cf. Allan B. Wolter, *The Transcendentals and Their Function in the Metaphysics of Duns Scotus* (Franciscan Institute, 1946), 25–26: "[S]uch a mode is essentially a qualification. It includes both in thought and in definition the notion of the subject of which it is the mode, even though the subject enters the definition ek prostheseos, as Aristotle put it. The mode consequently is incapable of terminating a distinct and proper concept. With the perfection which it modifies the case is slightly different. It can be conceived without including the modality at all. But such a concept is imperfect. It does not give the full perfection of the formality in question. For instance, when we conceive God as a being, or as wise, we are using notions that are common to creatures. Yet these perfections as they actually exist in God are formally infinite . . . if we were gifted with the intuitive knowledge of the blessed in heaven, we should not perceive the perfection of wisdom, for instance, and the modality of infinity as two distinct formal objects but only as one."

[38] Richard Cross, "Duns Scotus on Essence and Existence," *Oxford Studies in Medieval Philosophy* 1 (2013): 172–173.

ous extrapolation from Scotus's stated beliefs, in order to establish his point that Scotus believed this.[39] In one place, Gilson writes:

> If we look more closely at such a notion of being, it appears that, according to Scotus, existence is but an intrinsic modality of essence or, as some of his disciples will be fond of saying, a "degree" (gradus) of essence. And it is truly so, if existence is but essence in its ultimate degree of determination. But, if it is so, we are still in the world of Avicenna, in which an existent was a possible in its state of ultimate actualization. Seen from the point of view of God, there is no necessity that such a being should be, but, if a being actually is, its actual existence is but an intrinsic mode of its essence.[40]

If Scotus *himself* believed that existence is an "intrinsic mode" of an essence, then Gilson would be absolutely right to apply the "essentialist" label, since in that case, Scotus would hold that actual existence is not *really* distinct from essence in any way. Whereas, for Scotus, the distinction between a reality and its "intrinsic mode" is a distinction between two different ways of conceiving the same "formal object" of cognition, it follows that if Scotus applied the modal distinction to characterize the essence-existence pair, the distinction between essence and existence in Scotus's system would certainly be *mind-dependent* and not real. Therefore, we can see that it is Gilson's reading of Scotus according to which the relation between essence and existence is a "modal distinction," i.e., a distinction between a reality and its intrinsic mode, that generates the implication of "essentialism."[41] In Scotus's system, a "modal distinction" is not a distinction *in re*.

However, as Richard Cross points out, it is highly doubtful that Scotus himself applied the modal distinction in this case. Indeed, Cross argues, the evidence is strong that Scotus intends to give a different

[39] On page 94 of *Being and Some Philosophers*, Gilson quotes Francis of Meyronnes; on p. 95, Antonio Trombetta; on pp. 86–87, Gilson quotes Lychetus.
[40] Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 91.
[41] Cf. Cross, "Duns Scotus on Essence and Existence," 172–173.

treatment here.[42] In the next section, I will present the evidence indicating that Scotus posits a *formal distinction*, rather than a modal distinction, between essence and existence.

Scotus the Existentialist

Scotists have often defended against Gilson's accusations concerning their patron's alleged "essentialism." One Scotist response to Gilson's charges has been to affirm that Scotus's notion of "essence" has "existential import." Wolter quotes Scotus:

> [N]othing is conceived distinctly unless everything in its essential notion is conceived; "being" (*ens*) is included in all quidditative notions less general [than 'being']; therefore no concept less general than being is conceived, unless "being" is also conceived.[43]

In Scotus's philosophy, the term "being" (*ens*) has multiple applications; but in the most basic sense, to call something a "being" is to call it a *possible subject of actual existence*. As the passage says, the general abstract term "being" (*ens*) applies to any and every quidditative subject—no matter how essentially diverse. In a discussion about the different real items involved in the Eucharist, Scotus gives a logical definition of "being:" "[*E*]*ns hoc est cui non repugnat esse*."[44] Thus, as

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[42] *Ibid*., 173: "As far as I know, there is no evidence that Scotus himself explicitly thought of the matter in this way. Scotus's discussion of intrinsic modes applies in cases where an essence is modified not by any added reality (as, e.g., in the case of a specific difference added to a genus) but in some other way, and (as Gilson points out) paradigmatically by some kind of degree or amount of the essence (as, e.g., in the case of degrees of heat, or of intensity of color). And it is not clear that something's existence could be some kind of intensification of the thing."

[43] Scotus, *Ordinatio*, I, d. 3, pt. 1, qq. 1–2, n. 80 (Vatican, III, 53): "[N]ihil concipitur distincte nisi quando concipiuntur omnia quae sunt in ratione eius essentiali; ens includitur in omnibus conceptibus inferioribus quiditativis; igitur nullus conceptus inferior distincte concipitur nisi concepto ente."

[44] Scotus, *Ordinatio*, IV, d. 8, q. 1, n. 2; XVII, 7b, quoted in Wolter, *The Transcendentals and Their Function in the Metaphysics of Duns Scotus*, 69: "[E]ns, hoc est cui non repugnat esse."

for the Thomist existentialist, so for Scotus: a "being," i.e. a "*quid*," can be defined in relation to actual existence or *esse*—notwithstanding that *esse* is somehow distinct from the essence that bears it![45] A "being" in the broadest sense, is something that may actually exist.

I concede that to say "being is defined in relation to *esse*" is not the proper Scotist way of putting it, since on Scotus's telling, the quidditative definition of a created being does not "formally include" actual existence.[46] But I do not believe that Aquinas much differs from Scotus, with respect to this issue. Both of them interpret "necessary existence" in terms of the *formal* inclusion of existence within a nature, and both of them hold that God is the only being whose essence thus "includes" existence.[47]

In one passage particularly noted by Cross, Scotus even uses the distinction, derived from Henry of Ghent, between "*esse essentiae*" and "*esse exsistentiae*:"

> The being of existence (*esse exsistentiae*), in the sense in which it is distinguished from the being of essence (*esse essentiae*), is not of itself distinct or determinate. For the being of existence does not have its own differences other than the differences of the being of essence, because in that case one would have to posit a proper hierarchy of existences other than the hierarchy of essences. Rather the being of existence is precisely determined from something else's determination.[48]

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[45] Wolter, *The Transcendentals and Their Function in the Metaphysics of Duns Scotus*, 69–70: "For we cannot conceive existence save in reference to a subject. But when we attempt to determine the precise whatness or quiddity of this subject, we include a reference to actual existence. It is that which is compatible with actual existence."

[46] Scotus, *Ordinatio*, II, d. 3, pt. 1, q. 3, n. 63, in *Five Texts on the Medieval Problem of Universals: Porphyry, Boethius, Abelard, Duns Scotus, Ockham*, trans. & ed. Paul Spade (Hackett: Indianapolis, 1994), 73.

[47] Aquinas, *STh*., I, 3, 4; Scotus, *Reportatio* II, d. 12, q. 7, n. 1 (Wadding, XI, 330b), noted in Cross, "Duns Scotus on Essence and Existence," 180.

[48] Scotus, *Ordinatio*, II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 3, n. 61 (Vatican VII, 418–419), in *Five Texts on the Medieval Problem of Universals*, 72–73, quoted in Cross, "Duns Scotus on Essence and Existence," 184.

The idea of this passage is that actually existing things are grouped into the Aristotelian "ten categories" by their natures or essences, and that for any subject, its "actual existence" always belongs to the same Aristotelian category as that of its subject, *even though it is somehow distinct from it*.

How could something be distinct from its own actual existence? In a particularly Scotist way. The evidence specifically indicates that Scotus posits a *formal distinction* between any being and its actual existence. On his account, as we will see, it is possible to have a complete and proper conception of a finite being, without simultaneously thinking of it as actually existing. But then, one may also think of it as actually existing. In this case, two concepts imply two "formal realities," precisely because the concepts are formally different and are not simply two conceptions of the same reality with and without its intrinsic mode. The case is different, of course, for the First Being—one cannot have a proper concept of the divine essence without attributing actual existence to it.

Here then, Scotus shows himself to be a stout Thomist in the way he thinks of created realities:

> In a categorial hierarchy, there are contained all the things that pertain by themselves to that hierarchy, disregarding whatever is irrelevant to that hierarchy . . . Therefore, just as there is found a highest in a genus, considering it precisely under the aspect of essence, so there are found intermediate genera, and species and differences. There is also found there a lowest, namely, the singular—actual existence being disregarded altogether. *This is plainly evident because "this man" does not formally include actual existence any more than "man" in general does*.[49]

What shines through in the italicized part of this text is that we may think of any individual human, *qua* individual, without ascribing

[49] Scotus, *Ordinatio*, II, d. 3, pt. 1, q. 3, n. 63, in *Five Texts on the Medieval Problem of Universals*, 73. Cf. Cross, "Duns Scotus on Essence and Existence," 179–180.

actual existence to him or her. We will then have a concept of the "individual as such," and a further concept of what we might call the "individual-as-actually-existing," where the latter concept semantically includes a further concept—i.e., the concept of "actual existence"—which does not overlap in its semantic content with the first concept. In Scotus's generous ontology, such pairs of distinct concepts always imply distinct real items or "truth-makers" in the thing.[50] And this is an instance of Scotus's famous formal distinction—a distinction between items which are equally real, but are metaphysically inseparable.[51]

As an example, take Julius Caesar: according to Scotus's explicit doctrine in the above passages, Julius's actual existence will be "formally distinct" from the finite individual which is identical to Julius. This result seems appropriate; for, although it is presently true that Julius does not actually exist any longer, it obviously remains true in this case that the *pairing* of Julius's haecceity with human nature must still be an object of intellective contemplation—for the divine mind, at least.[52] And it is clear that Julius Caesar couldn't exist without bearing

[50] Cf. Scotus, *Ordinatio*, I, d. 2, pt. 2, qq. 1–4, nn. 401–402 (Vatican, II, 355): "Potest autem vocari differentia rationis, sicut dicit Doctor quidam, non quod 'ratio' accipiatur pro differentia formata ab intellectu, sed ut ratio accipitur pro quidditate rei secundum quod quidditas est objectum intellectus; vel alio modo potest vocari differentia virtualis, quia illud quod habet talem distinctionem, in se non habet rem et rem, sed est una res habens virtualiter sive praeeminenter quasi duas realitates, quia utrique realitati ut est in illa re, competit illud quod est proprium principium tali realitati, ac si ipsa esset res distincta: ita enim haec realitas distinguit, et illa non distinguit, sicut si ista esset una res et illa alia."

[51] Scotus, *Ordinatio*, I, d. 8, pt. 1, q. 4 n. 190 (Vatican, IV, 258): "[Q]uia quantumcumque aliqua per impossibile separentur, si eis separatis aliquid competat uni et non alteri, hoc non potest esse nisi propter aliquam distinctionem formalem rationis istius a ratione illius . . . unde numquam esset hic fallacia accidentis 'intellectione distinguuntur ista, intellectio est natura, ergo natura distinguuntur', nisi ratio intellectionis extranearetur rationi naturae, in quantum comparantur ad tertium; ergo illa extraneatio praevenit 'aliquam distinctionem' rationis ab illa, in quantum comparantur ad tertium, et illa praevenit distinctionem rationum inter se."

[52] Note that Scotus has reworked Aquinas's doctrine of divine ideas to say that God has distinct ideas of individuals, just as much as of species. See Timothy Noone, "Scotus on

his own act-of-existence; nor could that same act-of-existence, be borne by anything that is not Julius Caesar. Here, I want to leave aside Aquinas's view that Julius's act of existence can be borne by his soul alone, since the point that I am trying to make is that Scotus's doctrine, just as much as Aquinas's, implies a distinction between essence and existence.

Thus, Scotus follows Aquinas in making the "actual existence" of created things, distinct from them. Scotus wields his own favorite philosophical instrument, the "formal distinction," to explain how this could be so.

Other Issues Associated with the "Essentialism vs. Existentialism" Debate

Here I will explore some of the other issues that are mixed in with Gilson's "essentialist" labeling of Scotus. I will show that Gilson sometimes misinterprets Scotus on these other counts, and in other cases he interprets Scotus correctly but offers controversial or tendentious criticisms of Scotus.

Free Will

In his description of Avicenna, the precursor of Scotus's views on common natures, Gilson writes:

> Modern essences are pure possibles, of which it can truly be said that, metaphysically speaking, "they do not deserve to be" . . . in such a world, essences always remain, in themselves, pure possibles, and no wonder, since the very essence of essence is possibility.
>
> Clearly enough, Christian theology could not tolerate such a philosophy, by which I simply mean that Avicenna's metaphysics of being could not appear, to any Christian, as a philosophically acceptable interpretation of reality . . . [here, Gilson mentions the

the Divine Ideas: *Rep. Paris. I-A*, d. 36," *Medioevo* 24 (1998): 377–378; Scotus, *In Sent*. I, d. 36, q. 3, nn. 30–31, n. 47, in Noone, "Scotus on the Divine Ideas," 441.

> condemnations of 1277] . . . But, where there is no existence, how could there still be liberty? The radical newness of truly free acts, that fundamental character which Bergson has so remarkably brought to light in his analysis of free will, has its original source much less in duration itself than in the very act of existing, by which enduring things themselves endure. Things are not because they last; they last because they are, and, because they are, they act. Everything is free in a Christian universe, since even what is binding law to matter is freedom to God. But there is nothing in this world of sense to compare with man in this respect. From the point of view of his body, man's freedom is but God's own freedom, while, as a mind, man has access within the limits of his essence to a freedom which is truly *his.* Each and every man, then, in order both to be and freely to act, must needs be a being which *is.* And how could he be that if he were but an existentially neutral essence, indifferent in itself to the very fact that it is?[53]

Gilson has a variety of concerns in promoting "existentialism," but in this passage, the main concern has to do with the metaphysics of free action: Gilson thinks "existentialism" is the only view compatible with a non-determinist or libertarian view of free will. Gilson goes so far as to assert that everything is "free" in a Christian universe, since God's universal providence over all creation is not deterministically bound by the natures of things. Gilson's reason for making the connection between freedom and "existentialism" is that he thinks that free acts must be somehow grounded in actual existence, *rather than* in essence.

But this raises the question, why could it not be "grounded in" both? On both Aquinas's and Scotus's mature accounts of free will—both of which reject physical determinism—a significant factor in the kind of freedom that human beings have, is their *rational nature*.[54] For

[53] Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 82–83.

[54] For Aquinas, cf. *STh*., I, 83, 1. Scotus's mature position is that the will and the intellect "concur" in producing free actions. Cf. Patrick Lee, "The Relationship Between

Scotus, it is a function of their *essences* that both God and humans have real freedom, such that they are not determined or necessitated to act.[55] In further support of this, notice that *rocks are not free—even when they are actually existent.* I recognize that Gilson may have disagreed on this latter point, given what he says in the above passage about the "freedom" of all things in a Christian universe. But if so, he holds views about "freedom" that would sound highly paradoxical in an Aristotelian context which presupposes a strong contrast—in terms of freedom—between acting rationally *versus* acting by instinct or by external compulsion. Gilson's tenet that everything that actually exists is free, would also be out of step with both Aquinas and Scotus, since both their accounts tie "freedom" so explicitly to intellect or rationality, in one way or another.[56] But of course, actual existence could still be a necessary condition for actual freedom; and indeed, this seems actually to be the case.

Scotus would still have agreed with Gilson that the created universe is absolutely open to God's activity, since on Scotus's view, God's actions *ad extra* are not necessarily constrained by the natures of created things.[57] According to Scotus, neither are free human decisions determined by natural factors.[58] The upshot is the same in both cases: a free agent, whether divine or human, has a special and real "synchronic

Intellect and Will in Free Choice According to Aquinas and Scotus," *Thomist: a Speculative Quarterly Review* 49:3 (1985): 322, 324.

[55] Scotus, *Lect.* I, d. 39, qq. 1–5, n. 40 (Vatican, XVII, 491): "Propter quod accipiendum est tamquam per se notum quod sit contingentia in entibus—et qui hoc negat, indiget sensu et poena . . . Unde philosophus, arguens contra eos qui dicunt omnia evenire necessario, ducit eos ad impossibiliora, sed ad aliqua notiora nobis in actibus nostris: quod tunc 'neque oporteret negotiari neque consiliari'."

[56] See John Boler, "Transcending the Natural: Duns Scotus on Two Affections of the Will," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* LXVII:1 (1993): 109–126.

[57] Henri Veldhuis, "Ordained and Absolute Power in Scotus' Ordinatio I 44," *Vivarium* 38:2 (2000): 226: "Scotus operationalizes *potentia absoluta* by posing that there is a real possibility for the opposite of any contingent state of affairs. Reality is an *open* reality, and God has access to this open universe of possibilities by his absolute (*and* ordained) power."

[58] Scotus, *Lect.* I, d. 39, qq. 1–5, n. 40 (Vatican, XVII, 491).

power" for willing the opposite, even at the very moment of choice.[59] Thus, a divine creator would have the power to shape the course of the created universe from moment to moment in any way he desired, not being determined by any factors save the divine will itself.[60] Similarly, having theoretical and practical intellect allows humans to evaluate the rational desirability of different options, and even to choose against the strongest animal instinct. Obviously, whether a rational nature could issue in any free acts without *actually existing*, is a moot point. If we are going to say that "freedom must be grounded in actual existence," this can only be a way of saying that something must actually exist in order to be free. But no-one who disagrees with that, can reasonably be said to represent a Scotist metaphysic in doing so: Scotus would have seen the obvious, that something must first actually exist in order to be free.

In summation, the issue of "essentialism vs. existentialism" seems to be orthogonal to the question of what it takes for an action to be free, and to the further question of whether those conditions are ever met. What is really important for deciding whether something is free, has little to do with deciding whether its existence is distinct from its essence—and little to do with deciding whether it actually exists. The whole question of freedom is a moot point for things that do not exist, since indeed there *are* no such things. Instead, the question of freedom has everything to do with *what kind of essence* the thing has.

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[59] *Ibid*., n. 54 (Vatican, XVII, 497): "Ex hoc apparet quomodo est contingentia in effectu: nam sicut voluntas nostra potest considerari in quantum est prior volitione sua, prout est in actu primo, et habet sic libertatem in actu primo ad actum secundum, ita quod in illo instanti et pro illo instanti quo habet unam volitionem respectu alicuius, potest nolle illud et potest habere actum oppositum—ita voluntas divina . . . unica volitione vult in aeternitate lapidem esse et potest in aeternitate velle lapidem non esse . . ."

[60] Veldhuis, "Ordained and Absolute Power in Scotus' Ordinatio I 44," 226: "Scotus operationalizes *potentia absoluta* by posing that there is a real possibility for the opposite of any contingent state of affairs. Reality is an *open* reality, and God has access to this open universe of possibilities by his absolute (*and* ordained) power."

The Ontological Status of Possibles

One Scotist view that Gilson associates with "essentialism" is the Avicennian idea that essences have their own reality according to which they are, in themselves, "indifferent to actual existence." This is a hard saying, because it sounds as if it implies that there are things that do not exist. The idea of a Platonic heaven of abstract essences, or a Meinongian palace of merely subsistent *possibilia*, is in the offing. On this picture, creatable essences would have two modes—one of being, but not actually existing, and another mode of actually existing. Remember the passage from *Jean Duns Scot* cited above, which mentions an essence that is "dénuée de l'esse." In a parallel passage, Gilson attempts to give Scotus's doctrine on this point:

> Presented by the will of God to His mind as "creable things," those intelligible natures have a being of their own, an *esse* which is their being *qua* possibles. Let us take an example: man as conceived by the divine mind. It is an object of divine knowledge which may, if God so wills, be endowed with actual existence. It is not yet *a* man, but it is not nothing. It cannot be nothing, since it is a possible. Let us say then that it has a sort of "abridged being," an *ens diminutum*, that is, such a being as is required for it to be at least a possibility . . . That is why, whenever there is essence there is being, and what we call existence is simply the definite mode of being which is that of an essence when it has received the complete series of its determinations. It is nothing new for it to be. Essence always is.[61]

Here Gilson is attempting to make sense of Scotus's use of the concept of "*ens diminutum*," which Scotus ascribes to concepts in the mind. Gilson takes "*ens diminutum*" to be roughly equivalent to possible being—conceived of as a type of real being that is somewhat less than the being of actuality; and so, he ascribes belief in a Meinongian or Platonic palace of "possibles" to Scotus. Gilson justifies this inter-

[61] Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 85–86.

pretation, based on Scotus's Avicennian affirmation that a common nature has a "unity of its own" that is logically prior to the actual existence of any particular individual.[62] In the above passage, Gilson associates this Avicennian idea of the proper being of an essence, with the "intelligible being" that Scotus ascribes to things insofar as they are cognized by God's intellect. (Scotus uses "*esse diminutum*" as a synonym for "*esse intelligibile*.") Since all things are cognized by God eternally, the consequence is that all essences have "abridged being" eternally.

It is true that Scotus follows Avicenna, in ascribing a "proper being" or a "real unity less than numerical" to essences, which is on his account distinct from their individual being.[63] As Avicenna had said, "equinity in itself is only equinity"—that is, equine essence does not include anything other than the features that are naturally characteristic of horses. The implication is that it does not include particularity, individuality, or universality. Taking this cue from Avicenna, Scotus concludes that the essence must receive individuality derivatively, by association with an individuating principle that is "formally distinct" from it.[64] But if that is so, it follows that the common nature or essence must be a distinct real factor in the individual concrete thing, possessing its own reality and unity, over and above the individual unity. This is just what causes Scotus to be commonly labeled a "realist" with regard to "common natures." And it is equally true that Aquinas denies this, that the common nature has any such "unity" of its own. On this matter, see Joseph Owens's seminal article, "Common Nature: A Point of Comparison Between Thomistic and Scotistic Metaphysics."[65] Owens shows

[62] Scotus, *Ordinatio*, II, d. 3, pt. 1, qq. 1, 6. Cf. Joseph Owens, "Common Nature: a Point of Comparison Between Thomistic and Scotistic Metaphysics," *Mediaeval Studies* 19 (1957): 1–14.
[63] Scotus, *Ordinatio*, II, d. 3, pt. 1, q. 1.
[64] *Ibid*., q. 1, q. 6.
[65] *Mediaeval Studies* 19 (1957): 1–14.

that Scotus's doctrine is frankly incompatible with Aquinas, on this matter:

> In St Thomas the denial of unity [to the essence as such] is accepted without qualification. Accordingly, the common nature cannot have any proper being of its own . . . For Duns Scotus, on the contrary, the Avicennian denial of unity to the common nature is qualified. Only numerical unity is denied to it as such. A unity lesser than numerical, minor unity, is found in the common nature as the necessary basis for universality and for specific resemblance and diversity.[66]

It is likely that this Avicennian ascription of "real unity" to the common nature on Scotus's part, provides the impetus for some of Gilson's criticisms and unfavorable comparisons with Aquinas.

But it does not justify these criticisms. Despite the "real unity" he ascribes to an essence as such, it does not follow on Scotus's view that essences exist in some sort of Platonic heaven before being instantiated. In fact, Scotus explicitly rejects this Platonic or Meinongian picture, which he associates with Henry of Ghent.[67] For Scotus, the "pre-existence" of creatable essences in God's mind is merely ideal and is no way real.[68] Scotus deliberately emphasizes that when God chooses to actualize some created essence for the first time, God is bringing something entirely new (*novum*) into existence.[69] This implies that the es-

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[66] *Ibid.*, 13.

[67] Scotus, *Ordinatio*, I, d. 36, q. un., n. 27 (Vatican VI, 280): "Ad quod specialiter videtur esse hoc, quod non tantum esse essentiae fundat ad Deum relationem talem, sed etiam esse exsistentiae, quia secundum Augustinum V Super Genesim 7 'non aliter novit facta quam fienda'; praecognovit ergo esse exsistentiae sicut esse essentiae, et tamen propter istam relationem fundatam non concedit aliquis 'esse exsistentiae' fuisse verum esse tale, scilicet verum esse exsistentiae ab aeterno; ergo pari ratione nec concedendum est de esse essentiae."

[68] *Ibid*. Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus's Theory of Cognition* (Oxford University Press, 2014), chapter 10.

[69] Scotus, *Ordinatio*, II, d. 1, q. 2, nn. 85–86 (Vatican, VII, 44–45): "[D]ico quod causa prima potest immediate producere aliquem effectum novum, absque omni novitate in ipsa causa . . . Agens autem liberum potest eadem volitione antiqua effectum novum

sence that God creates at a moment in time, does not really exist in any way, prior to being created. So Gilson's reading of Scotus is contradicted by Scotus's clear statements.

Then why does Scotus ascribe "*esse deminutum*" to possible essences in the divine intellect? As Scotus explains, the use of the term "*deminutum*" in his phrase "*esse deminutum*" functions semantically as a "*distrahens*," otherwise known as an adjective "*alienans*," as e.g. the word "fake" in "fake money," or "dead" in "dead person."[70] So, "*ens deminutum*" is not a kind of real being, however "lessened." Scotus acutely points out that, if this picture of possible essences which Gilson ascribes to him is true, then it would follow, absurdly, that creation is eternal(!) and that nothing could ever be destroyed or annihilated.[71] Instead of being destroyed, something could only ever return to its eternal state of having "*esse essentiae*," i.e., the degree of being that the target view ascribes to essences in themselves.[72] On Scotus's view, then, the saying that "essence is prior to existence" can only be a way of saying that created essences have no necessity of existence in themselves. Here, Scotus is vindicated as a good Thomist, in that he denies that created things have any necessity of *any kind* of existence, in themselves. That is, Scotus denies that created things have an eternal quasi-existence of their own.

On the subject of "*ens diminutum*" in Scotus, see Armand Maurer's seminal article, "*Ens Diminutum*: A Note on its Origin and

producere, pro tunc quando vult illum effectum novum esse." Cf. *Ibid*., I, d. 36, q. un., nn. 13–14 (Vatican, VI, 275): "[C]reatio est productio de nihilo; sed si lapis ab aeterno praehabuit verum esse reale, ergo quando producitur ab efficiente, non producitur de nihilo simpliciter."

[70] *Ibid*., I, d. 36, q. un., nn. 32–34 (Vatican, VI, 282–283). I am indebted to Richard Cross for insight into the implications of this passage.

[71] *Ibid*., nn. 17–18 (Vatican, VI, 277).

[72] *Ibid*., n. 18 (Vatican, VI, 277): "sexto . . . sequitur quod non possit aliquid annihilari: sicut enim producitur de ente secundum essentiam, ita videtur redire in ens secundum essentiam, non in nihil."

Meaning."[73] This article is a good introduction to the origin of the concept in medieval philosophy, as stemming from an Arabic mistranslation of "*loipon*" in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* VI, ch. 4, 1027b33. Aristotle had originally said that the ten categories represent being in the true sense, while "being in the mind" and "accidental being" belong to the "remaining" (*loipon*) category of being. The correct reading of this, would probably imply that "being in the mind" is not a distinct type or genus of being. However, the Arabic translation rendered "*loipon*" as "*nāquis*," i.e. "diminished"—with the connotation that "being in the mind" was a real type of being, only somehow lessened. Scotus continued using the Latin translation of the Arabic word, but in his mature works he is careful to avoid the implication that "*ens diminutum*" is a distinct type of being.[74]

Philosophy of Creation and Divine Simplicity

As is well known, Scotus holds that God's essence and will are "formally distinct," since the content of the divine essence is necessary, while the content of God's creative will is contingent. Gilson charges that Scotus's doctrine of creation introduces composition between God's essence and God's actual existence:

> For Duns Scotus . . . to attach creation to the divine essence would be to think of it as the operation of a nature, not as a free

[73] *Mediaeval Studies* 12 (1950): 216–222.

[74] As Peter King points out, Scotus's mature account has it that "diminished" and "objective" being is not really a form of being at all—it has "no independent ontological standing." *Idem*, "Duns Scotus on Mental Content," in *Duns Scot a Paris: 1302-2002*, ed. Boulnois, Karger, Solere, and Sondag (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2004), 85. King discusses an analogy from Scotus, which eventually proved problematic in its implications: "Scotus explains the relation between diminished being and ordinary being as a version of the relationship of being *secundum quid* to being *simpliciter*, likening it to Aristotle's case of the Ethiopian who is white in respect of his teeth but black overall . . ." (*ibid*., 83). However, King continues: "A salient feature of the analogy—the feature with which I believe Scotus became dissatisfied—is that it makes diminished being a kind of *being* in the first place . . . [W]hen Scotus returns to the subject in his Paris lectures, he gets rid of anything that suggests the ontological reading of diminished being" (*ibid*., 84).

> act. This is a necessary consequence in a philosophy in which the essence of God is not his pure act of *esse*. In order to assure the free character of the act of creating, Duns Scotus must locate its root, not in God's essence but in his will.[75]

Gilson is saying that Scotus associates creation with the will, rather than the divine essence as such; but he ascribes this to Scotus's refusal to identify the divine essence with the divine act of existing. Gilson is asserting that Scotus's formal distinction between the divine essence and the divine will, introduces composition into God: in Scotus's philosophy, "the essence of God is not his pure act of *esse*."

It is true that Scotus posits the actual content of creation to pertain to the divine will, rather than to the divine essence as such. Scotus clearly states that the content of God's knowledge and will with respect to actual creaturely essences is contingent.[76] By contrast, the content of the divine essence is not contingent, but necessary. Scotus thinks that although every act that is really intrinsic to God is also metaphysically necessary, the actual *content* of God's act of knowing and willing, could really have been otherwise.[77] Otherwise, he thinks, it would be impossible for there to be any contingency in created reality.

But of course, for Scotus, the divine will as a power or capacity, is precisely a power *of the divine essence*—notwithstanding that they are "formally distinct."[78] In Scotus's philosophy, as we have already seen, "formal distinction" obtains between items that are "really the same" but have differing proper concepts. That is to say, items that are "formally distinct" are metaphysically inseparable aspects of a single substance. As is well known, Scotus also sets a formal distinction between God's various attributes, and between God's attributes and God's

[75] Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 460, n. 102. (Gilson cites Scotus, *Quodlibet* 8, 7, and says that Scotus here has *STh*., I, 45, 6 in mind.)
[76] Scotus, *Ordinatio*, II, d. 1, q. 2.
[77] *Ibid.* Scotus, *Lect.* I, d. 39.
[78] Scotus, *Ordinatio*, I, d. 8, pt. 1, q. 4.

essence.[79] To this extent, Scotus has a notably weaker doctrine of divine simplicity that Aquinas does. But perhaps the weaker statement of the doctrine is more metaphysically plausible, and does not really detract from the doctrine of God as "*actus purus*." After all, Scotus's ascription of infinite perfection to God still excludes the possibility of any composition.[80]

Gilson seems to be thinking that Aquinas "attaches" the act of creation more closely with God's essence than Scotus does, on the grounds that Aquinas's account of simplicity is so strong: in the Thomist picture, bracketing the distinctions between the persons, there are *absolutely no true distinctions in the divine essence*.[81] Whereas, by contrast, Scotus associates the act of creation with the will, which chooses from among the possibilities which were represented to it, by the divine intellect; and he sets formal distinctions between the divine will, the divine intellect, and the divine essence.

Conclusion

Gilson ascribes "essentialism" to Scotus, viewing Scotus as a Christian thinker who was seduced by the Greeks and their worship of essences and forms. In Gilson's telling, Plato, Aristotle, and the Arabic commentators, "reduced" true being to the being of an essence. It was reserved for Thomas Aquinas to discern the "*actus essendi*" as a unique item in reality—i.e., the actuality of an essence, freely granted by God.

But we can see that Scotus, too, has benefited from Aquinas's insight—as critical of Aquinas as he sometimes is. Although we may leave the credit for discovering the *actus essendi* with Aquinas, we can see that Scotus's own doctrine is consistent with a true distinction between essence and existence—and indeed, Scotus's doctrine explicitly

[79] *Ibid.*
[80] *Ibid.*, qq. 1–4.
[81] *STh.*, I, 3.

requires it. Although Aquinas and Scotus disagree on many important issues, this is not one of them.

ÉTIENNE GILSON, DUNS SCOTUS, AND ACTUAL EXISTENCE: WEIGHING THE CHARGE OF "ESSENTIALISM"

SUMMARY

Étienne Gilson juxtaposes what he calls Aquinas's "existentialism" to what he calls Scotus's "essentialism." For Gilson, "existentialism" is philosophical truth, the only view compatible with an authentically Christian metaphysic, while "essentialism" is a Hellenic mistake that seduces Christian philosophers by appealing to the idolatrous desire to reduce reality to what is intelligible. In this paper, the author attempts to describe the difference between "essentialism" and "existentialism" as understood by Gilson. Then, he assesses the case for attributing "essentialism" to Scotus, based on an assessment of Scotus texts and secondary scholarship.

KEYWORDS

existentialism, essentialism, actus essendi, Duns Scotus, essences.

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