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## AKVINIETIS: NUO *ACTUS ESSENDI* IKI *DEUS*

Aquinas: From *Actus Essendi* to *Deus*\*

### SUMMARY

In my previous LOGOS article I explained how Aquinas' *actus* understanding of the existence, or being, of the thing is not a victim to Suarez's infinite regress objection to the "Thomistic" real distinction. As such Aquinas does not fall victim to Heidegger's reduction of Suarez to Heidegger himself. The current article continues my presentation of Aquinas' unique *actus* understanding of the existence, or being, of a thing. By focusing upon a passage from Aquinas' early *De Ente et Essentia*, I try to present how Aquinas philosophically elaborates casual implications in *actus essendi*. These implications lead to a first cause that Aquinas identifies with the God of his religious belief. Aquinas' identification sets the stage for a revisiting of Heidegger's ontotheology complaint. I will reconsider this complaint in a following article.

### SANTRAUKA

Ankstesniame LOGOS straipsnyje parodžiau, kad Akviniečio *actus* supratimas apie daikto egzistenciją, arba būtį, nėra Suarezo begalinio regreso prieštaravimo „tomistinei“ realiajai distinkcijai auka. Todėl Akvinietis netampa Heideggerio atliktos Suarezo redukcijos į Heideggerį auka. Šiame straipsnyje tęsiu svarstymą apie unikalų Akviniečio *actus*, kaip apie daikto egzistenciją, arba būtį. Sutelkdamas dėmesį į ištrauką iš ankstyvojo Akviniečio veikalo *De Ente et Essentia*, bandau parodyti, kaip Akvinietis filosofiškai plėtoja atsitiktines *actus essendi* implikacijas. Šios implikacijos veda prie pirmosios priežasties, kurią Akvinietis tapatina su savo tikėjimo Dievu. Toks tapatinimas teikia prielaidas peržiūrėti Heideggerio skundą dėl ontoteologijos. Šį skundą svarstysiu kitame straipsnyje.

\* In my previous article, "Aquinas and Heidegger's Phenomenological Reduction of Scholasticism," LOGOS 112 p. 23–28, I inadvertently omitted the bibliography. The omitted entries are included in the bibliography for the current article.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: atsitiktinumas, subjektas, *esse*, *actus essendi*, *esse tantum*, *Deus*.

KEY WORDS: accident, subject, *esse*, *actus essendi*, *esse tantum*, *Deus*.

In a previous LOGOS article I tried to present Aquinas' philosophical case for his *esse* interpretation of what we mean when we speak of the existence of a thing.<sup>1</sup> Normally we mean by the existence of the thing the fact of the thing, the thing as there, as in the world. Aquinas does not deny this understanding. He acknowledges it when he speaks of *ens*. "*Ens*" means a being, an existent; or you can say it means the fact of some thing. Aquinas insists, however, that this fact sense of being can be deepened. The further intellectual penetration into the fact of a thing consists in the grasp of the act of *esse*, *actus essendi*, in virtue of which the thing is a fact, or an existent. Hence, Aquinas gives the analogy: just as a man is called a runner (*currens*) by his act of running (*currere*), so too the man is called a being (*ens*) by his act of existing (*esse*). In other words, just as the fact of the runner is explained by the running, so too is the fact that is an existent explained by another act, the act of existing.

In the mentioned LOGOS article I tried to explain how this *actus* understanding of the thing's existence is impervious to Suarez's criticism of the "Thomistic" distinction between essence and existence and so likewise is impervious to Heidegger's deconstruction of Suarez to Heidegger himself. In this article I would like to provide some idea of how Aquinas grasps causal implications within *esse*, the act of existence, that leads to a cause that Aquinas identifies as the God of his Christian belief.

The classic text in which Aquinas explains how *esse* is caused by an agent is found in his early work, *De Ente et Essentia*. Aquinas writes as follows:

(1) Whatever belongs to a thing [*Omne autem quod convenit*] is (2) caused either (3 and 4) by the principles of its nature (as the capacity for laughter in man) or comes to it from an extrinsic principle (as light in the air from the influence of the sun). Now being itself [*ipsum esse*] cannot be (5) caused by the form or quiddity of a thing (by 'caused' I mean by an efficient cause), because that thing would then be its own cause and it would bring itself into being, which is impossible. (6) It follows that everything whose being is distinct from its nature [*aliud a natura sua*] must have being from another. And (7) because everything that exists through another is reduced to that which exists through itself as to its first cause, there must be a reality that is the cause of being for all other things, because it is pure being [*esse tantum*]. If this were not so, we would go on to infinity in causes, for everything that is not pure being has a cause of its being, as has been said. It is evident, then, that an intelligence is form and being, and that it holds its being from the first being, which is being in all its purity; and this is the first cause, or God.<sup>2</sup>

In my reading, the text is comprised of two main stages. The first stage runs through points 1 to 4; the second stage from points 5–7. The first stage reiterates an Aristotelian framework for concluding to an efficient cause of "what belongs to a thing." The second stage inserts Aquinas' principle of *actus essendi* into this framework. What is the logic of the first stage?

By "what belongs to a thing," Aquinas means what Aristotle called an accident of the thing. This is clear from the examples mentioned – risibility, or the ability to laugh, in a human and light in the air. Accidents are also referred to as

acts (*actus*). Hence, in Aquinas' vocabulary an *actus* need not mean an action (*actio*) or motion (*motus*), though, as I will note, these are acts also. Hence, what belongs to a thing can be the stable ability to laugh or the persistent temperature or complexion of which I spoke in the mentioned preceding article.

We naturally believe that many of these accidents require an efficient cause, or agent, to be in their subjects. For example, the sun is the cause of light in the air, the fire is the agent for the heat in the water, some sickness is the cause of a jaundice complexion. But in stage one Aquinas gives a philosophical validation of that belief.

Accidents are essentially dependent items. This dependency consists in the accident's need to be in and of a subject. This dependency can be noted in the methodology that I described in the previous LOGOS article. The man can exist without the tan, but that tan is nowhere apart from the man; the coffee can exist apart from the hot temperature but that hot temperature cannot survive apart from the coffee. Evidently, an *actus* is in some measure dependent upon its subject.

This is not yet the agent causality to which Aquinas will conclude in the first stage. Here the dependency is for what Aristotle called a material cause. For example, it is the air that the sun light requires to be in and of, it is the lumber that the structure requires if the house is to be built, the coffee that the heat requires, or the living flesh required by the tan.

But that insight into a required material cause cannot be the end of the analysis. No accident, or attribute, can be

completely, or totally dependent, upon its subject precisely as subject. The reason for this claim lies in the attribute neutrality of the subject precisely as subject. I explained this claim in my just previous LOGOS article. For example, if the subject precisely as subject was hot, then the subject's assumed intrinsic temperature would render the subject impervious to any other temperature, for instance cold. To be both hot and cold the subject precisely as subject must be temperature neutral, that is, must not of itself have any temperature at all. In that respect, the subject is simply a potency for temperature. Likewise, as able to be both tanned and pale, the face must be complexion neutral. This neutrality of a subject precisely as subject is what prevents the subject in that respect from being the total explainer of the attribute or *actus* that belongs to it. In sum, there is an undeniable incongruity in making a dependent act completely dependent upon its act-neutral subject.

It is this further explainer that is the efficient cause that the act also requires to be in its subject. This efficient cause is either the original subject in some other respect than subject or another subject.

The above thinking is what is behind points 1-4 as they are embedded in the claim that what belongs to a thing is caused either by the principles of its nature or by an extrinsic principle. (1) designates an accident in essential material dependency upon its subject; (2) designates the efficient causality concluded to from the insufficiency of the attribute neutral subject; (3) and (4) designate the

two possible alternatives for the identity of this concluded to efficient cause.

As is clear from the categories of subject and accident, the logic of the framework is from Aristotle. At *Physics* VIII, 5, Aristotle used the framework to argue that what is moved is moved by another. In this case the motion is what belongs to a thing. For Aristotle a motion, like the heating of a kettle of water, is not an act completely in act as the complexions or the temperatures are. Aristotle defines motion as the act of the potential insofar as the act is still potential. Nevertheless, as incomplete as it is, motion is still an act and that requires a subject for the motion to be in and of. That subject precisely as subject of the motion, however, cannot be the complete explainer of the motion that belongs to it. Aristotle's reason, which Aquinas repeats in his *prima via* for God in the *Summa Theologiae* I, 2, 3, is that the subject would be in an impossible contradictory state. The subject would both lack what the motion is actualizing and possess what the motion is actualizing.

In the *De Ente* framework it was sufficient to note the attribute neutrality of the subject precisely as subject as the reason for the subject's inability to be the complete explainer of the accident, or attribute. If the motion is, for example, the motion of being heated, then the subject's heat neutrality is indicated by the subject having various degrees of heat at various moments. This heat neutrality is enough to see that the subject cannot be the total explainer of the incomplete act of motion. Aristotle's contradiction accusation just underlines the point.

As mentioned, in the second stage of the *De Ente* text, Aquinas applies this causal framework to *actus essendi*. *Esse*, too, is not totally dependent upon its subject precisely as subject. Just as the complexion neutrality, temperature neutrality, place neutrality of subjects precisely as subjects prevents them from being full explainers of the attribute that they possess, so too the existence neutrality of the subject precisely as subject prevents a total dependency and so prevents a full explanation of the *esse* attribute.. *Esse* must also be dependent upon something other than the subject precisely as subject. What is the identity of this *aliud*?

In points 3 and 4 the general framework had mentioned two possibilities for this identity – (1) the subject in some other respect than subject (hence, human nature as cause of risibility) or (2) some other subject (the sun as cause of light in the air). In point 5 of the *De Ente* text, Aquinas claims that *esse* is not caused by its subject in some other respect than subject. Aquinas' reason is a unique, or *sui generis*, relation of *esse* to its subject. Unlike other attributes which are subsequent and posterior to their subjects, *esse* is prior and basic to its subject, I did not mention this relation when I defended Aquinas' distinction between essence and existence from Suarez's criticism. The relation, however, was observable in the evidence for the distinction. As noted in my last LOGOS article, it is the *existing* coffee that is both hot and cold. The coffee as existing is the subject for the two temperatures and so is more basic than the temperatures. As common both to really and cognitively existing, how-

ever, the thing is existence neutral. In this context of this multiplicity, the thing is not existing at all.<sup>3</sup> This situation makes us understand the *esse* to be basic and the subject to be subsequent. Aquinas says that in the being (*ens*) it is *profundius, magis intimum* and *prius* and *primus*.<sup>4</sup>

To understand one of the thing's attributes as more basic than the thing itself goes against ingrained ways of thinking. Joseph Owens, one of the eminent commentators on Aquinas in a list of eminent commentators, expresses the challenge well:

The notion that there is an accident prior to substance in sensible things is repellent to the ingrained human way of thinking. Yet the effort has to be made for the metaphysical understanding of existence. Not substance, but an accident, being, is absolutely basic in sensible things. This has to be understood, however, in a way that does not make being function as the substance. Strictly, it is not the being that is there, but the substance that has the being. The nature cannot take on an adverbial relation to its being. Man cannot be regarded as basically a certain portion of being that exists humanly, or a horse as another portion of being that exists equinely. The man and the horse are not portions of being, but substances that have being. They, and not their being, have to be expressed substantively, even though their being is prior to their natures. Not the subject, but the predicate, is absolutely basic.<sup>5</sup>

We would give up the effort for which Owens asks if the existential multiplicity of the thing really and cognitively existing were not driving us to make the effort. The crucial role of the existential multiplicity again indicates the need

to acknowledge and to defend immediate sense realism.

The prior status of the *esse* means that the thing is never actual in another respect and so cannot be the identity of the something else that the total dependency of the *esse* requires. In contrast, subjects of garden variety, or common, accidents already exist. They then possess at least the possibility of accounting for the accident by themselves in some other respect than subjects of the accident.

This thinking about the necessary dependency of *actus essendi* upon some other subject is point 6 – the assertion of efficient causality for *esse*. This efficient causality is not immediately experienced as color and temperature are immediately experienced. Nor is the causality concluded to on the basis of constant temporal conjunction. Efficient causality is the conclusion. The basis of the conclusion, however, is implications between a subject and its sui generis accident of *actus essendi*.

What is the identity of this other subject? In point 7 Aquinas says that this other subject is a cause that is pure *esse* (*esse tantum*). In the present context *esse tantum* should mean a subject whose *esse* is not an act, or attribute of the subject. In other words, *esse* intelligibly merges with the subject. This makes sense. A second subject like our first would be only waiting for a cause in order to cause the first. Also, a subject in which *esse* is posterior has already been excluded by the existence neutrality of the subject of *esse*. The only way left to relate *esse* to its subject is to identify it with its subject.

In the point 7 Aquinas denominates *esse tantum* as God (*Deus*). Aquinas is speaking of the God of his religious belief. To some readers Aquinas' naming is a stretch. Just as people would think it strange for a physicist who discovers a new particle to exclaim *Deus*, some readers of Aquinas have difficulty discerning the Christian God in the metaphysical principle of *esse tantum*. Aquinas provides the reason for his claim in his *Summa Contra Gentiles*:

This sublime truth Moses was taught by our Lord. When Moses asked our Lord: "If the children of Israel say to me: what is His Name: What shall I say to them? The Lord replied: 'I AM WHO AM . . . Thou shalt say to the children of Israel: HE WHO IS hath sent me to you' (Exod. 3:13, 14) Now, names have been devised to signify the natures or essence of things. It remains, then, that the divine being is God's essence or nature.<sup>6</sup>

If one is not inclined to an appeal to Scripture, there are other immediate conclusions from Aquinas' *De Ente* reasoning that enable one to catch the identity between the metaphysical conclusion and the object of his religious belief. Though unmentioned in the *De Ente* text, two other characterizations of *esse tantum* appear to be logically proximate. First, subsistent being would be a presently active cause. Attributes that only initially depend upon their cause are attributes in a posterior and subsequent relation to their subjects. Because of the priority of the subject as material cause, there is the chance that the attribute caused in the subject by something else continue at least for a time apart from

its initiator. Because of the priority of the *esse* to its subject, however, there is no chance to explain the continuance of the *esse* on the subject. Rather, the something else that initiates it must also maintain it. Second, *esse tantum* must also be a creator. A creator produces its effect without presupposing a material to work upon. Because *esse tantum* produces the thing by causing thing's *esse* which is *profundius*, then it can be said to create the thing.

So, Aquinas' thinking from his actus understanding of the existence of any sensible thing would leave the philosopher who is not yet a Christian wondering if Christians like Aquinas are correct to claim that the philosophically reached creator has made a revelation in human history in the person of Christ. It is possible.

Would Heidegger be convinced of this possibility? Would his ontotheology complaint exclude this possibility? For Heidegger the philosophical God is too anthropomorphic. Before such a God we cannot kneel in awe not rise and dance. I briefly addressed this ontotheology complaint in the first of my series of LOGOS articles on Aquinas and Heidegger. I pointed out that the brute facticity of things resists Heidegger's reduction to *Dasein's* productive comportment but is open to Aquinas' metaphysical analysis that discovers *esse*. Hence, Aquinas' *De Ente* conclusion of *esse tantum* seems to be a strict implication of real things with no intrusions of *Dasein*. Aquinas cannot be charged with anthropocentrism.

Nevertheless, simply from a philosophical viewpoint, *esse tantum* does appear to be an uninspiring and joyless

conclusion. Is something that is just existing interesting? Is it not the most uninteresting of things? Like other things that we depend upon, for example, food, clothing and shelter, *esse tantum* is important. Granted. Is it, however, interesting and provocative of awe and joy? So,

even in the context of his own metaphysics, Aquinas seems to have an ontotheology that is susceptible to Heidegger's complaint. In that earlier article, I briefly considered an answer from Aquinas' doctrine of analogy. In a following article I would like to expand this answer.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Knasas, (2022a).
- <sup>2</sup> Aquinas, (1965): 56–7. For a look at the extensive Thomist discussion of this passage and its relation to cosmological reasoning and to Aquinas' other proofs for God, see Knasas (2019).
- <sup>3</sup> Just earlier in the *De Ente*, Aquinas mentions how I can know what a man or phoenix are and not know whether they exist. Still earlier, [Maurer trans, pp. 46–7] Aquinas glosses this knowledge as "*absoluta consideratio*" which abstracts for all being (*esse*).
- <sup>4</sup> On *profundius* and *magis intimum*, see Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, 8, 1c; on *prius*, see Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* I, 22; on *primus* see Aquinas, *De Potentia Dei* 3, 4c.
- <sup>5</sup> Owens. (1985): 75. Cf., "Given what I have been saying, Aquinas's teaching on *esse* is decidedly matter of fact and even pedestrian." Brian Davies, "Aquinas, God, and Being," *The Monist* 80, no. 4 (1997): 514. For references to Neo-Thomists who appear to regard the nature as taking on an adverbial relation to its *esse*, see Knasas (2003): ch. 9, n. 20.
- <sup>6</sup> Aquinas. (1975): 121.