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MARITAIN AND AQUINAS ON OUR DISCOVERY OF BEING

As regards the title of my paper, I might note that there is some ambiguity in the meaning of the English term “being” when it is applied to the metaphysical thought of Thomas Aquinas. It is all too often used to translate the Latin term *esse* and thus carries with it an ambiguity in that it may refer to the act of existing viewed as an intrinsic ontological principle in every existing entity, a principle that is distinct from its essence; or it may simply refer to being understood as “that which is” or “that which has *esse*.” When discussing Aquinas’s own position here, therefore, I will restrict my usage of the term “being” to signify the Latin *ens* (which, he writes, signifies “that which is” or “that which has *esse*”),¹ and I will use the expression “act of existing” or “act of being” to signify *esse* taken as the intrinsic principle that actualizes essence in every existing thing and hence is required to account for the fact that an individual entity or being actually exists. Regarding this latter usage some ambiguity may still remain, however, because Thomas at times uses the verb *esse* or *est* simply to signify the fact that something exists (“Socrates is”). At other times he uses it to signify the intrinsic *actus essendi* that he posits to account for that

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¹ See, for instance, Aquinas’s *In De Hebdomadibus*, 2, ed. Leonine 50, 271:57–59: “ens, sive id quod est;” *ST I–II*, q. 26, a. 4, ed. Leonine 6, 190: “ens simpliciter est quod habet esse;” *In duodecim libros metaphysicorum Aristotelis expositio* IV, n. 535, ed. M.-R. Cathala, R. M. Spiazzi (Turin 1950), 151: “Dicit ergo primo, quod ens sive quod est, dicitur multipliciter;” *Quaestiones disputatae De potentia*, q. 7, a. 7, ed. Paul Pession (Turin-Rome: Marietti, 1965), 204: “substantia est ens tamquam per se habens esse.”

fact. Although this crucial distinction is not clearly recognized by all Thomistic scholars, it should be, and Cornelio Fabro should be given credit for having emphasized its importance very effectively.²

For my purposes here I am interested in presenting and comparing both Maritain's and Aquinas's accounts of our discovery (1) of being (*ens*) as existing; and (2) of being as being (*ens inquantum ens* or *ens commune*)—the subject of metaphysics.

Our Discovery of Being as Existing

There are important texts in Aquinas where he refers to our discovery of *esse* as occurring not in the intellect's first operation—abstraction taken in the strict sense, whereby we know what something is, but at the level of the intellect's second operation—judgment, whereby we recognize intellectually a thing's *esse*.

Consider, for instance, *In I Sent.*, dist. 38, q. 1, a. 3, sol.:

Since in a thing there are two [factors], the quiddity of a thing and its *esse*, to these there correspond two operations on the part of the intellect. One which is called by the philosophers *formatio* whereby it apprehends the quiddities of things, which is also called by the Philosopher in *De anima* III the 'understanding of indivisibles.' The other grasps (*comprehendit*) the *esse* of a thing by composing an affirmation because also the *esse* of a thing composed of matter and form, from which it takes its knowledge, consists in a certain composition of form with matter or of an accident with a subject.³

² See his "Elementi per una dottrina tomistica della partecipazione," in his *Esegesi tomistica* (Rome 1969), 435: "Perciò l'autentica nozione tomistica di partecipazione esige di distinguere l'*esse* come atto non solo dall'essenza ch'è la sua potenza, ma anche dall'esistenza ch'è il *fatto* di essere e quindi un 'resultato' e non un principio metafisico . . ." For some texts where Thomas uses *esse* or *est* in judgments of existence expressing facticity, see his *Expositio libri peryermenias*, rev. ed. Leonine 1*1, II.2, 88:36–40: "hoc verbum 'est' quandoque in enuntiatione praedicatur secundum se, ut cum dicitur 'Sortes est,' per quod nichil aliud intendimus significare quam quod Sortes est in rerum natura;" *ST* II–II, 83.1, arg. 3: "secunda vero est compositio et divisio, per quam scilicet apprehenditur aliquid esse vel non esse" (ed. Leonine [Rome 1889], vol. 9, 192). In the latter text, see ad 3 for confirmation that Thomas himself accepts this usage.

³ "Cum in re duo sint, quidditas rei, et esse eius, his duobus respondet duplex operatio intellectus. Una quae dicitur a philosophis *formatio*, qua apprehendit quidditates rerum, quae etiam a Philosopho, in III *De anima*, dicitur *indivisibilium intelligentia*. Alia autem comprehendit esse rei, componendo affirmationem, quia etiam esse rei ex materia et forma compositi-

It is clear from this text that one discovers *esse* not by means of abstraction and the intellect's first operation whereby it understands a thing's quiddity, but by means of judgment, the intellect's second operation and thus one understands (*comprehendit*) it. And thus one can account for the complexity involved in our understanding of being (*ens*) or "that which is" with its quidditative side being grasped by the intellect's first operation, and the existential aspect grasped by its second operation—judgment. But one may still ask whether *esse* as it is used here refers to a thing's intrinsic *actus essendi* (act of existing), or only to the fact that it exists. At the very least it must refer to grasping a thing's existence in actuality (facticity), but it may well also refer to grasping its act of existing. For earlier on in this same work Thomas has already introduced his view that there is a composition (and hence distinction) of essence and *esse* in creatures (see dist. 8, q. 1, a. 1; q. 5, a. 1, sol.; and a. 2), and therefore at this point he can take that issue as now given.

In his *Commentary on the De Trinitate*, in q. 5, a. 3, Thomas recalls from Aristotle's *De anima* these same two operations of the intellect. He writes:

And these two operations correspond to two [factors] that are present in things. The first operation looks to (*respicit*) the very nature of a thing, according to which the thing understood holds a certain grade among beings, whether it be a complete thing, such as some whole, or an incomplete thing, such as a part or accident. The second operation looks to (*respicit*) the very *esse* of the thing, which results from the union of the principles of a thing in composites, or accompanies the simple nature of the thing, as in simple substances.⁴

Here Thomas uses the same Latin verb (*respicit*) to refer to the intellect's first operation in grasping a thing's essence or nature, and its second operation in grasping its *esse*. And he does the same in another text from

tae, a qua cognitionem accipit, consistit in quadam compositione formae ad materiam, vel accidentis ad subjectum." *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, I.38.1.3.sol., vol. 1, ed. Pierre Mandonnet (Paris 1929), 903. Translations into English are mine unless indicated otherwise. For Aristotle, see *De anima*, III, c. 5 (430a 26–28).

⁴ "Et hae quidem duae operationes duobus quae sunt in rebus respondent. Prima quidem operatio respicit ipsam naturam rei, secundum quam res intellecta aliquem gradum in entibus obtinet, sive sit res completa, ut totum aliquod, sive res incompleta, ut pars vel accidens. Secunda vero operatio respicit ipsum esse rei; quod quidem resultat ex congregatione prin-

his *Commentary on I Sent.*, dist.19, q. 5, a. 1, ad 7: “the first operation looks to (*respicit*) the quiddity of a thing; the second looks to (*respicit*) its *esse*.”⁵ In these two texts it seems more likely to me that he is using *esse* as explicitly signifying actual existence taken as facticity. And he is also assigning to judgment some apprehensive function—the ability to grasp *esse*. But if we follow the order of discovery, once Thomas has established the distinction and composition of essence and the act of existing in every finite being, when he uses the term *esse* he may then also have in mind the act of existing.

Another aspect of Aquinas’s theory of knowledge must also be taken into account, namely his view that all of our knowledge begins with sense experience.⁶ Any Thomistic account of our discovery of being as existing must, therefore, respect this aspect of his theory of knowledge, and presumably will also have to recognize a certain role for some of the internal senses as well, especially of the imagination and its production of phantasms or sense images in providing potentially intelligible data upon which the abstracting power of the intellect can operate by rendering it actually intelligible and submitting it to the possible intellect. The possible intellect then can understand what something is, and can also form judgments about it. These judgments may simply involve the attribution of a predicate, grasped by the intellect’s first operation, to a subject, apprehended by the same operation, or the denial of this. But for Aquinas there is also another kind of judgment in which the intellect affirms explicitly that the subject itself is or exists such as “Socrates is” or “Socrates exists.” And it will be incumbent on such a theory to explain how such judgments—existential judgments—can occur.⁷

Finally, I have found it necessary to distinguish within Aquinas’s account of our discovery of being as existing and, for that matter, our dis-

cipiorum rei in compositis, vel ipsam simplicem naturam rei concomitatur, ut in substantiis simplicibus.” *Super Boetium De Trinitate*, q. 5, a. 3, vol. 50, ed. Leonine, 147:96–105.

⁵ See *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, ed. Mandonnet, vol. 1, 489: “prima operatio respicit quidditatem rei; secunda respicit esse ipsius.”

⁶ See *Super Boetium De Trinitate*, q. 6, a. 2, ed. Leonine 50, 164:71–76: “Principium igitur cuiuslibet nostrae cognitionis est in sensu, quia ex apprehensione sensus oritur apprehensio phantasiae, quae est ‘motus sensu factus’ . . . a qua iterum oritur apprehensio intellectiva in nobis, cum phantasmata sint intellectivae animae ut obiecta.” Also *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, q. 12, a. 3, ad 2, ed. Leonine 22.2, 378:379–382: “Sed quia primum principium nostrae cognitionis est sensus, oportet ad sensum quodam modo resolvere omnia de quibus iudicamus.”

covery of the notion of being (*ens*) itself, between an understanding of being that is common to every thinking human being, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the metaphysical notion of being as being which, according to Thomas, is the subject of metaphysics. It is well known that, on a number of occasions, he refers to being (*ens*) as that which is first known to the intellect and, presumably, to every thinking human being.⁸ At times he indicates that this primacy of being applies to the order of resolution and hence by implication not necessarily to the chronological order.⁹ By saying this he means that whatever we may grasp with our intellects, if analyzed carefully, it may be reduced to being taken as “that which is.” Hence, whatever is required to account for our knowledge of “that which is” will also be required to account for our discovery of this prephilosophical notion of being, or with what Maritain himself refers to as the “vague being of common sense.”¹⁰

At the same time it is also important to recall how difficult Thomas thinks it was for philosophers to arrive at a consideration of being as being. Indeed, in *ST* I, q. 44, a. 2, he finds them passing through three stages. (1) The earliest philosophers, being cruder (*grossiores*) in their thinking, posited only sensible bodies as beings, and proposed only accidental motion and causes of the same. (2) Others reached a higher level and distinguished between form and matter and posited more universal causes such as Plato’s ideas or Aristotle’s ecliptic circle of the sun. But both groups still viewed being only as “this being” (*hoc ens*) or “such being” (*tale ens*).

⁷ For texts where Thomas refers to the use of *est* or *esse* in judgments of existence, see note 2 above.

⁸ For references to a number of such texts, see my *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 2000), 41, n. 56–59.

⁹ See *De veritate*, q. 1, a. 1 (ed. Leonine 22.1, 5:100–104): “illud autem quod primo intellectus concipit quasi notissimum et in quod conceptiones omnes resolvit est ens, ut Avicenna dicit in principio suae Metaphysicae.” Also see *ST* I–II, q. 94, a. 2 (ed. Leonine, vol. 7, 169–70); *In De Trin.*, q. 6, a. 1 (ed. Leonine, vol. 50, esp. 162:374–82). For discussion of these, see my *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 42–44, and the supporting notes.

¹⁰ My translation. For a slightly different English translation (“vague being known to common sense”), see Maritain, *Existence and the Existent* (New York, N.Y.: Pantheon, 1948), translation from the French *Court Traité de l’Existence et de l’Existant* of 1947, 26. For the French I am using Jacques et Raïssa Maritain: *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 9 (Fribourg Suisse: Editions Universitaires, 1990), 34: “Plus on médite sur ce sujet, plus il apparaît que c’est de cette façon que l’intelligence conceptualise l’existence, et qu’elle se forme idée de l’être,—de l’être vague du sens commun.” (Further on, the *Existence and the Existent* will be cited as “EE English,” and the *Court Traité de l’Existence et de l’Existant*—as “EE French.”)

(3) Finally, some arrived at a knowledge of being as being and hence investigated the causes of beings not only insofar as they are “these” or “such,” but insofar as they are beings.¹¹ This text is surprising in that here Thomas does not place Plato and Aristotle at the highest level—among those who grasped being as being, even though a year or so earlier in his *De potentia*, q. 3, a. 5, he had written: “Still later philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle came to a consideration of universal *esse* itself.”¹² If we may set aside that issue, however, the text from *ST I*, q. 44, a. 2, makes it clear that Thomas does not think that every human being reaches a knowledge of being as being, the subject of metaphysics. Hence, one should distinguish between his account of our discovery of being at what I will call the prephilosophical or premetaphysical level, and the discovery of being as being, the subject of metaphysics.

As for Maritain’s account, one can find most of the elements I have mentioned in Thomas’s own theory in the French philosopher’s *Existence and the Existent*, along with supporting references he himself gives from some of his earlier writings. Of course, he also says much about an intuition of *l’être*, especially in his *Existence and the Existent* and that will require additional attention. Finally, I will compare what he says there with his last treatment of all of this in his “Réflexions sur la nature blessée.”

In *Existence and the Existent*, Maritain observes that our knowledge is “immersed in existence” and that “existence—the existence of material things—is given us at first by sense.” Hence sense perception attains an object as existing by reason of the real and existing influence such an object exercises on our sense organs. But, he continues: “Sense attains existence in act without itself knowing that it is existence” and delivers it to the intellect without sense knowing that it is intelligible. And the intellect knows existence and “calls it by its name, which is *being*” (French: *l’être*).¹³

¹¹ See ed. Leonine, vol. 4, 457–58. Note page 458: “Et ulterius aliqui exererunt se ad considerandum ens in quantum est ens: et consideraverunt causam rerum non solum secundum quod sunt *haec* vel *talia*, sed secundum quod sunt *entia*. Hoc igitur quod est causa rerum in quantum sunt entia, oportet esse causam rerum, non solum secundum quod sunt *talia* per formas accidentales, nec secundum quod sunt *haec* per formas substantiales, sed etiam secundum omne illud quod pertinet ad esse illorum quocumque modo.”

¹² See *De potentia*, q. 3, a. 5, in *Quaestiones disputatae*, ed. Pession, vol. 2 (Turin-Rome: Marietti, 1965), 49: “Postiores vero philosophi, ut Plato, Aristoteles et eorum sequaces, pervenerunt ad considerationem ipsius esse universalis; et ideo ipsi soli posuerunt aliquam universalem causam rerum, a qua omnia alia in esse prodirent.”

¹³ See EE English, 11, and EE French, 22.

Maritain then notes that the intellect disengages intelligibles from sense experience and through the process of abstraction reaches natures or essences which it grasps apart from their material existence at a given space and time. It does this in order to restore them to existence through judgments asserting that “it is so” (*ita est*) such as “the earth revolves around the sun,” meaning thereby that “the earth *exists* in physical existence as characterised by the movement described.” Hence even such judgments have an existential function if they are expressing something that is true.¹⁴

Maritain then discusses the intellect’s first operation (simple apprehension) and describes its object as “the intelligible density of an existent subject, rendered transparent in act to the mind and identified with the mind’s vital activity by and in the concept.” Or, as he also writes, “what the intellect lays hold of is the natures or essences which are in existent things or subjects.”¹⁵

As he turns to judgment, he emphasizes the point that the function of judgment is existential, and that judgment restores essence—the objects of thought “to existence or to the world of subjects.”¹⁶ Maritain recalls that he had written in his *The Degrees of Knowledge* that when one forms a judgment, one accomplishes on one’s *noemata* (objects of thought) “an operation that has meaning only because it relates to the fashion in which they exist (at least possibly) outside my thought.”¹⁷ As he continues in *Existence and the Existent* to quote from *Les Degrés du Savoir*: “The function proper to judgment thus consists in transposing the mind from the plane of simple essence, of the simple *object* presented to thought, to the plane of the *thing*, of the subject possessing existence (actually or possibly) and of which the predicate-object of thought and the subject-object of thought are intelligible aspects.”¹⁸

Shortly thereafter Maritain again quotes in *Existence and the Existent* from his *Degrees of Knowledge* to this effect: “Judgment is not content with the representation or apprehension of existence. It affirms existence, it projects into it, as effected or effectible outside the mind, the objects of [the] concept apprehended by the mind.”¹⁹ And here in *Existence and the*

¹⁴ See EE English, 11–12, and EE French 22–23.

¹⁵ EE English, 13, 15; EE French, 24, 25.

¹⁶ EE English, 16; EE French, 26.

¹⁷ EE English, 16–17; EE French, 26–27, citing *Les Degrés du Savoir*, 7th ed. (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1963), 188.

¹⁸ EE English, 17; EE French, 27, quoting *Les Degrés*, 188–89.

Existent he also indicates that existence as affirmed by and in the mind corresponds to the act of existing exercised by things outside the mind, and he refers to this act of existing as act or energy par excellence.²⁰

But, as Maritain also rightly insists, existence itself is not an essence but belongs to an entirely different order. It is not an object of thought (or of the mind's first operation) in the way essences are. Maritain refers to it as a trans-objective act. And here he quotes from his earlier *De Bergson à Thomas Aquin*: "The intelligibility with which judgment deals is more mysterious than that which notions or ideas convey to us; it is not expressed in a concept but in the very act of affirming or denying. It is the super-intelligibility, if I may put it so, of the act of existing itself, either possible or actually given."²¹

From this description of judgment's relationship to the act of existing of extra-mental things, Maritain moves on to a section entitled "The Intuition of Being" ("L'intuition de l'être").²² And so here *l'être* is translated as "being." This is interesting because Maritain has just been speaking of existence taken as the act of existing. As one follows his discussion of the intuition of *l'être*, one wonders whether he has in mind an intuition of *ens* or an intuition of *esse*. He begins by noting that Thomas places at the roots of metaphysical knowledge:

the intellectual intuition of that mysterious reality disguised under the most commonplace and commonly used word in the language, the word *to be* (*être* in the French text), a reality revealed to us as the uncircumscribable subject of a science which the gods begrudge us when we release in the values that appertain to it, the act of existing which is exercised by the humblest thing.²³

Granted that Maritain is speaking almost poetically here, he also knows that for Thomas *esse* (the act of existing) is not the subject of metaphysics, but that *ens inquantum ens* is. And then in an oft-quoted remark he writes: "A philosopher is not a philosopher if he is not a metaphysician. And it is the intuition of being (*l'intuition de l'être*) [...] that makes the

¹⁹ EE English, 17; EE French, 27, citing *Les Degrés*, 191, n. 1.

²⁰ EE English, 18; EE French, 27–28.

²¹ See EE English, 18–19; EE French, 28, citing *De Bergson à Thomas d'Aquin, Jacques et Raïssa Maritain. Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 8 (Fribourg-Suisse: Editions Universitaires, 1989), 157.

²² EE English, 19; EE French, 28.

²³ EE English, 19; EE French, 28–29.

metaphysician.” But almost immediately after this he writes that by this he means the intuition of being *secundum quod est ens* (*l’intuition de l’être secundum quod est ens*). And the reader wonders again whether this is an intuition of *esse* or an intuition of *ens*. He continues with the important observation that being (*l’être*) as used here is not the vague being (*l’être*) of common sense and which, I would add, therefore seems to be very close to what I understand as a prephilosophical notion of being.²⁴ Rather, Maritain continues:

It is being (*l’être*), attained or perceived at the summit of an abstractive intellection, of an eidetic or intensive visualisation which owes its purity and power of illumination only to the fact that the intellect, one day, was stirred to its depths and trans-illuminated by the impact of the act of existing (*par le choc de l’acte d’exister*) apprehended in things.²⁵

Maritain goes on to list a number of different paths that may lead to this intuition, no one of which is more legitimate than any other, because here we are dealing with what he calls a primary fact. And he refers to what Aquinas calls the “judgment of sense” and notes that this “blind existential perception” plays a primordial and indispensable role, but one that is only preliminary. Among the avenues or paths leading to this intuition on the part of the intellect Maritain mentions that it might be owing to “the innate gift of an imperial intelligence” combined with a “pure and delicate flesh” and a “perfectly balanced sensibility,” as seems to have been true of Aquinas himself; or it might spring up unexpectedly like a species of natural grace prompted by the sight of a blade of grass, or perhaps at one’s perception of oneself, or perhaps from the implacability with which the being (*l’être*) of things independent from ourselves suddenly becomes evident to us; or one may move toward it by an inner experience of duration (here the implicit reference is to Bergson), or in still other ways. But whatever the path, what is important is that one takes the “leap, to release, in one authentic intellectual intuition, the sense of being (*l’être*), the sense of the value of the implications that lie in the act of existing (*l’acte d’exister*).”²⁶ And, as will be noted below, he thinks that very few, even

²⁴ Id. In note 8 he refers to Aquinas’s *Commentary on the Metaphysics* IV, c. 1 (ed. Cathala, nn. 530–535, mistakenly listed as pages in EE) where Thomas identifies *ens secundum quod est ens* as the subject of metaphysics.

²⁵ EE English, 20; EE French, 29–30.

²⁶ EE English, 21; EE French, 30.

among the greatest philosophers, have managed to do so in the formal sense.

But then a new section in his book begins with this title in English “The Concept of To-exist (*esse*) and that of Being or of That-which is (Ens)” or in French: “Le concept de l’existence ou de l’exister (*esse*) et celui de l’être ou de ‘ce qui est’ (*ens*).” Here, then, we have an important clarification: Maritain is using two terms in French to render the Latin *esse*, namely *l’existence* and *l’exister*, and two other words or expressions to translate the Latin *ens*, namely *l’être* or *ce qui est*.²⁷ He begins by noting a paradox: he has said that the intelligible apprehended in our ideas is essence, and that existence is not an essence. And so one may ask: How can existence be the object of the intellect, or be expressed by a concept?

In responding to this Maritain steps back for the moment from his discussion of the metaphysical intuition required to make the metaphysician to a consideration of how one arrives at what he will call the vague being known to common sense. As a premonition of his answer he recalls that he had said that essences are the objects of the intellect’s first operation, and that it is the act of existing (*acte de exister*) that judgment confronts. He continues: because the intellect is present in each of its operations, in the initial upsurge of its activity arising from the world of sense experience, it apprehends and judges in one and the same instant. And so it “forms its first idea (that of being [*de l’être*]) while uttering its first judgment (of existence [*de l’existence*]), and utters its first judgment while forming its first idea . . . [I]t thus lays hold of the treasure which properly belongs to judgment in order to envelop it in simple apprehension itself.” And thus it expresses this in an original idea that does not result from simple apprehension alone but also from that which the intellect grasps through judgment—the act of existing—and makes this an object of thought.²⁸

Here, then, Maritain speaks of a “concept of existence” (*l’existence ou l’exister*) and warns that it “cannot be *cut off* from the absolutely primary concept of being (*l’être = ens, ce-qui est, ce-qui existe, ce-qui a pour acte d’exister*)” because the judgment and affirmation of existence which provides content for this concept itself involves the composition of a subject with existence. It affirms that “something exists” (actually or possibly, simply or with some added predicate). Hence Maritain writes that this con-

²⁷ EE English, 22; EE French, 31.

²⁸ EE English, 23; EE French, 32.

cept of being (that which exists or can exist) in the order of “ideative perception” corresponds to this affirmation of existence in the order of judgment. Maritain also emphasizes that the concept of existence cannot be visualized completely apart from the concept of essence, for the two of them make up one and the same analogous concept, that of being.²⁹

Maritain observes that being is the first of all concepts, although not explicitly formulated as such, because it “springs into the mind at the first awakening of thought, at the first intelligible coming to grips with the experience of sense” and transcends sense perception. Thus, when one points one’s finger at an object and the eye sees and the sense power perceives in its blind fashion that “this exists,” at this same instant the intellect judges that “this being is or exists” and expresses “being” in a concept.³⁰

Maritain also brings out the reciprocal priority between this concept of being and the judgment “this being exists” in the sense that the idea of being (“this being”) is prior to the judgment of existence in the order of material or subjective causality, whereas the judgment of existence is prior in the order of formal causality. This, he concludes, is the way one arrives at the idea of the “*vague* being known to common sense.”³¹ In an important footnote he explains that here he is not speaking of “verbally formulated operations, or even of operations explicitly thought. The essential thing is that they be there implicitly.” He adds that some primitive languages lack the word “being” but comments that the idea of being is implicitly present in the minds of those using such languages, and also that the first idea formed by a child is not the idea of being but that the idea of being is implicit in the first idea the child has. Here one may recall my earlier remark above about Aquinas’s references to being as that which is first in the order of resolution rather than in the chronological order.³²

In another lengthy footnote, Maritain proposes in outline fashion the steps involved in arriving at this vague common sense notion of being. In the text which this note annotates, he is now ready to move on to what he calls “the higher intuition” which he will require for one to reach the subject of metaphysics. Hence this implies that formulation of the vague common sense notion of being also involves an intuition of being, although not the metaphysical and higher intuition which is restricted to only a few

²⁹ EE English, 24–25; EE French, 32–33.

³⁰ EE English, 25; EE French, 33–34.

³¹ EE English, 25–26; EE French, 34.

³² EE English, 25, n. 12; EE French, 34, n. 12. See note 9 above and my corresponding text.

human beings.³³ In the note itself he remarks that the extramental existence of a thing was given to the intellect from the very start in the intuition and concept of being, which I again take to refer to the common sense notion of being.³⁴ He distinguishes the following steps:

1. “Judgment” improperly so-named of the external senses and the aestimative power (French: *cogitative tel qu’il se trouve chez l’animal*, 35, n. 13), bearing upon a sensible existent that is perceived. This, he says, is “in the sphere of sense (with its treasury of intelligibility in potency, but in no wise in act) the ‘blind equivalent’ of what we express in saying, ‘this exists.’”

2. Formation in a simultaneous awakening of the intellect and judgment of an idea (“this being” or simply “this thing” in which the idea of being is implicitly present) and a judgment that composes the object of thought with the *act* of existing itself (by asserting that “this thing exists” or “this being exists”). Maritain also explains that the intellect knows the subject as individual indirectly by “reflection on phantasms” but does not thereby affirm that it exercises the act of existing. It affirms this only “by and in this ‘judgment’ itself” and in this intuition of sense which it grasps by immaterialising it. And thus the intellect reaches the *actus essendi* (in judging)—as it reaches essence (in conceiving)—*by the mediation of sensorial perception.*”

3. Formation of the idea of existence. From the moment when, conjointly with the first judgment of existence the idea of being emerges (“that which exists or can exist”), the intellect “grasps the *act* of existing affirmed in the first judgment of existence and makes of the act of existence an ob-

³³ Already in his earlier *A Preface to Metaphysics* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1948, but first published in 1939), Maritain had distinguished sharply between the notion of being first attained by the intellect (the being of common sense) and *ens secundum quod est ens* (the subject of metaphysics). See id., 18–19; and especially 27–33. See id., 29–31 for his reference to the vague being of common sense as “pre-scientific knowledge” and as “infra-scientific knowledge” and, following Cajetan and John of St. Thomas, as being the object of *abstractio totalis* or of what one may call “extensive abstraction.” Also, while in this book he does not spell out in detail the steps involved in the intellect’s discovery of either the common sense notion of being or the metaphysical notion of being, he does refer to both as gained by intuition. There, in response to Gabriel Marcel’s rejection of an intuition of being, Maritain refers to “the obscure intuition of being possessed by common sense, the perception of which I have termed vague being. It is only when the metaphysical intuition of being has occurred that this assurance refers to it also” (id., 60, end of the long note 1 beginning on id., 59).

³⁴ EE English, 27, n. 13; EE French, 35–36, n. 13.

ject of thought by formulating a concept or notion of existence (*existentia ut significata*).³⁵

Here I pause to compare this account with that of Aquinas as best as one can reconstruct his own position on the basis of his rather scattered references. I would first note that, at least on my reading of Thomas, both he and Maritain distinguish between a pre-metaphysical or prephilosophical notion of being and the metaphysical notion of being as being. As regards Maritain's three steps:

1. Both Thomas and Maritain argue that all of our knowledge begins in some way from sense experience. Maritain has referred in passing to the role played by the aestimative/cogitative power in our moving on to judgments of existence. Without rejecting some possible role for the cogitative power, here I would emphasize the role of the first internal sense power, the *sensus communis*. For Aquinas this internal sense has two functions: (a) it distinguishes objects reported by different external senses appropriately such as this sound, as different from this color, this odor, etc.; (b) it enables a higher animal or a human being to be aware when such an agent is actually perceiving something with one or more external sense.³⁶

2. Both Thomas and Maritain distinguish between the intellect's first operation which apprehends the essences or natures of things, and its second operation—judgment—which looks to a thing's *esse*; and I also think that Maritain's reference to this as a simultaneous awakening of both of these operations is a defensible presentation of Thomas's position.

3. While Maritain recognizes with Aquinas that the intellect knows the subject as individual by reflecting back on the phantasms preserved at

³⁵ Id. Note that Maritain lists as step 4 the thinking subject's discovery of first principles and only as step 5 the subject's explicit awareness or consciousness of its own existence. I pass over additional consideration of these steps here in the interests of space, but would call the reader's attention to Therese Scarpelli Cory's recently published very thorough and helpful examination of Aquinas's own understanding of self-awareness: *Aquinas on Human Self-Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

³⁶ See *Sententia libri De anima*, II.24, ed. Leonine, 45.1, c. 13, 120, lines 99–105 (note especially: “sensu enim communi percipimus nos videre et discernimus inter album et dulce”); c. 26, 178, lines 8–14: “huiusmodi actiones sunt duae: una est secundum quod nos percipimus actiones sensuum propriorum, puta quod sentimus nos videre et audire; alia est secundum quod discernimus inter sensibilia diversorum sensuum, puta quod aliud sit dulce et aliud album.” Also see. c. 27 where Thomas finds Aristotle beginning to investigate the common sense by basing himself on the fact that we perceive that we see and hear (“ex hac operatione qua sentimus nos videre et audire” [182:1–5]) and then throughout this chapter by appealing to the fact that the common sense distinguishes sensible objects from one another in order to show that there is one common sense.

the level of the imagination, I do not think that, according to Aquinas, in the order of discovery one should hold that in its first judgment or judgments of existence the intellect explicitly grasps *esse* in the sense of the *actus essendi*. To recognize that there is such an act of existing requires some sophisticated metaphysical analysis, for instance, showing that one can reason from the fact that something exists to the presence of some ontological principle within that thing to account for that fact.³⁷

But when an individual subject is explicitly recognized as existing in actuality, I see no textual warrant in Aquinas for saying that either its act of existing, or the notion of being itself is grasped by an intellectual intuition such as that described by Maritain. In accord with Aquinas's theory of knowledge, it is by turning back (*per quamdam reflexionem*) to its own act, and then to the species which is the principle of its act of understanding, and then to the phantasms at the level of the imagination from which the species was abstracted and by reuniting the abstracted universal nature or essence with its individuating characteristics, that the intellect itself becomes aware of the object as individual and here I would add, going beyond Maritain, by adverting to the common sense's awareness that one or

³⁷ Interestingly, in his later *The Peasant of the Garonne* (Eng. Paperaback ed., Toronto: McMillan, 1969; originally published in French in 1966), Maritain seems to recognize this: "It is in a judgment (or in a preconscious act equivalent to an unformulated judgment), and in a judgment of existence, that the intellectual intuition of being occurs. The philosophical concept of the *actus essendi*, of the act of existence, will only come later" (id., 163). There again he insists that this intellectual intuition of being has nothing to do with Bergsonian intuition which he thinks was spoiled by a quite accidental anti-intellectualism. Moreover, it did not focus directly on being, but on duration, which is only one of the aspects of being "which served him as a kind of substitute for being." But, adds Maritain, through the experience of duration it was actually being (*esse*) which Bergson attained without realizing it. For more on his earlier critique of Bergsonian intuition and Bergsonian philosophy more generally, see his *Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism*, in *The Collected Works of Jacques Maritain*, (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), vol. 1, 29–30 (from the Preface to the second edition of the French original *La Philosophie Bergsonienne* published in 1913) and id., 150–171, from the main text itself including helpful remarks concerning Maritain's own view on intuition. For more on intuition in Maritain's account, see below. On the difference between the intuition of being and the discovery of the *actus essendi*, also see B. Rioux, "L'intuition de l'être chez Maritain," in *Jacques Maritain: The Man and His Metaphysics*, ed. John Knasas (Mishawaka, Indiana: The American Maritain Association, 1988), 96: "Par ailleurs, si le jugement situe la saisie de l'être au plan de l'exister, cela ne signifie pas que nous avons accès d'emblée à l'exister comme l'acte des actes et perfection des perfections, antérieur et supérieur à tout l'ordre des essences qui deviennent alors des puissances d'exister et qui sont comprises comme une *proportio ad esse* d'où dérivent leur être même et leur intelligibilité."

more external sense is perceiving the object, that the intellect judges that such an object exists.³⁸ On the basis of one or more such existential judgments, the intellect then forms the general notion of being as “that which is.”

For Aquinas our knowledge of an individual and hence of the subject of an individual judgment of existence is not direct, but indirect, and not unmediated but mediated through sense experience and so, too, it seems to me is its ensuing judgment (or judgments) of existence leading to a prephilosophical notion of being, disputed though this indeed is by certain interpreters of Aquinas.³⁹ Maritain himself, followed on this by a number of those who would find his intuition in Aquinas, cites in support our understanding of first principles such as non-contradiction and identity.⁴⁰ For Aquinas, however, one’s recognition of a principle such as non-contradiction as self-evident presupposes, at least in the order of nature, that one has already discovered the premetaphysical notion of being on which that principle is based. Such texts do not indicate that the discovery of being itself is based on an intuition. To put this another way, for me to recognize that being is not nonbeing presupposes that I have already reached a notion of being.

Our Discovery of the Subject of Metaphysics (ens in quantum est ens)

In *Existent and the Existent*, after having described the process whereby the intellect forms an idea of the “vague being known to common sense,” Maritain distinguishes from this the higher intuition whereby:

³⁸ See, for instance, *De veritate*, q. 10, a. 5: “Et sic mens singulare cognoscit per quandam reflexionem, prout scilicet mens cognoscendo obiectum suum, quod est aliqua natura universalis, redit in cognitionem sui actus, et ulterius in speciem quae est sui actus principium, et ulterius in phantasma a quo species est extracta; et sic aliquam cognitionem de singulari accipit” (ed. Leonine 22.2, 309, lines 73–81). Also see *In IV Sent.*, 50.1.3 (ed. Busa, 1.3, 704). There Thomas explicitly refers to this knowledge of individuals on the part of the intellect as indirect. On this, see George Klubertanz, “St. Thomas and the Knowledge of the Singular,” *New Scholasticism* 26 (1952):135–166, esp. 149–151. Cf. Robert Schmidt, “The Evidence Grounding Judgments of Existence,” in *An Etienne Gilson Tribute*, ed. C. J. O’Neil (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1959), 228–244.

³⁹ For some who defend the presence of an intuition of being in Aquinas, see in *Jacques Maritain: The Man and his Metaphysics*: John Hittinger, “The Intuition of Being: Metaphysics or Poetry?” 71–81; John Knasas, “How Thomistic is the Intuition of Being?” 83–91; Bertrand Rioux, “L’intuition,” 93–102; also, James Hanink, “In Defence of the Intuition of Being,” in *Distinctions of Being*, ed. Nikolaj Zunic (American Maritain Association [Wash-

the intellect disengages being (*l'être*) from the knowledge of the sensible in which it is immersed, in order to make it the object or rather the subject of metaphysics; when, in a word it conceptualises the metaphysical intuition of being . . . what the intellect releases into that same light is, here again, first and foremost, the act of existing.⁴¹

Here again Maritain seems to put the cart before the horse because on my reading of Aquinas, it is within the science of metaphysics itself that one becomes explicitly aware of *esse* understood as the *actus essendi*. Maritain notes that according to “classical Thomism,” it has now reached the third degree of abstraction.⁴²

Here in another long footnote in *Existence and the Existent*, Maritain quotes from a note in L. B. Geiger’s *La Participation dans la philosophie de saint Thomas d’Aquin* first published in 1942.⁴³ There Geiger cites excerpts from Thomas’s extremely important *Commentary on the De Trinitate of Boethius*, q. 5, a. 3, taken from a transcription of the autograph, that is to say, of the manuscript in the extremely difficult handwriting of Thomas himself, which was made available to Geiger by Fr. A. Dondaine.⁴⁴ There Thomas distinguishes between abstraction when it is taken broadly so as to signify any way in which the intellect can distinguish, and when it is applied strictly so as to signify distinguishing by the intellect in its first operation.⁴⁵ And so, Thomas writes, the intellect distinguishes one

ington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 167–179; Joseph Owens, “Maritain’s Three Concepts of Existence,” *The New Scholasticism* 49 (1975): 295–309. Knasas is more critical of Maritain’s intuition account in his *Being and Some Twentieth-Century Thomists* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), 61–65.

⁴⁰ See *Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism*, 152–154.

⁴¹ EE English, 26; EE French, 34–35.

⁴² EE English, 27–28; EE French, 35–36. For another brief reference to the distinction between the “obscure being possessed by common sense” and the metaphysical intuition of being, see *A Preface to Metaphysics*, 60, n. 1.

⁴³ Paris: J. Vrin, 1942; 2nd ed., 1953.

⁴⁴ For these excerpted texts, see Geiger, 318–319, n. 1.

⁴⁵ See *Super Boetium De Trinitate*, q. 5, a. 3 (ed. Leonine, vol. 50, 146:86–147:95). “Responsio. Dicendum, quod ad evidentiam huius quaestionem oportet «videre» qua «liter» intellectus secundum operationem abstrahere possit. Sciendum est igitur quod secundum Philosophum in III De anima duplex est operatio intellectus: una quae dicitur intelligentia indivisibilem, qua cognoscit de unoquoque quid est, alia vero qua componit et dividit, scilicet enuntiationem affirmativam vel negativam formando.” Note that this particular text is not cited by Geiger and hence apparently was not available to Maritain in the corrected version taken from the autograph.

guishes one thing from another in different fashion in accord with its different operations. According to the operation whereby the intellect composes and divides (judges), it distinguishes one thing from another by understanding that one is not present in the other. But in the operation by which it understands what things are, it distinguishes one thing from another by understanding what that thing is without understanding anything about the other, neither that it is united with it or separated from it in reality. Because of this Thomas observes that this way of distinguishing on the part of the intellect should not be described as “separation” (*separatio*). That name should be reserved for the operation whereby the intellect distinguishes through judgment. It should rather be described as “abstraction,” but only when one of those things that is distinguished by the intellect is in reality united with the other. Here, therefore, he is taking the name “abstraction” strictly rather than in the broad sense in which he had used it earlier in this article.⁴⁶

Thomas then goes on to subdivide abstraction taken in the strict sense into abstraction of a whole from a part (abstraction of a universal from an individual) and abstraction of a form (abstraction of the accidental form of quantity from sensible matter). He associates the first of these especially with natural philosophy and the second with mathematics, meaning thereby that by means of the first one reaches the subject of natural philosophy (*ens mobile*) and by means of the second one reaches the subject of mathematics (*ens quantum*).⁴⁷ Thomas contrasts these with another way in which the intellect distinguishes, this time only at the level of judgment by a negative judgment—*separatio*, and connects this with our discovery of the subject of metaphysics. In other texts within this same article Thomas writes: “In those things which can be divided in the order of

⁴⁶ See *id.*, 148:159–171: “Sic ergo intellectus distinguit unum ab altero aliter et aliter secundum diversas operationes: quia secundum operationem qua componit et dividit distinguit unum ab alio per hoc quod intelligit unum alii non inesse, in operatione vero qua intelligit quid est unumquodque, distinguit unum ab alio dum intelligit quid est hoc, nihil intelligendo de alio, neque quod sit cum eo, neque quod sit ab eo separatum; unde ista distinctio non proprie habet nomen separationis, sed prima tantum. Haec autem distinctio recte dicitur abstractio, sed tantum quando ea quorum unum sine altero intelligitur sunt simul secundum rem.”

⁴⁷ For his presentation of these, see *id.*, 148:180–149:238. Note his summarizing remark (149:239–244): “Et ita sunt duae abstractiones intellectus: una quae respondet unioni formae et materiae vel accidentis et subiecti, et haec est abstractio formae a materia sensibili; alia quae respondet unioni totius et partis quae est abstractio universalis a particulari, quae est abstractio totius . . .” Also see the text quoted in note 49 below.

existence, separation obtains rather than abstraction,” and also states: “Substance, however, which is the intelligible matter of quantity, can exist without quantity. Therefore to consider substance without quantity pertains to the genus of separation rather than that of abstraction.”⁴⁸ As Maritain describes this: “It is in a judgment declaring that being is *not* necessarily linked to matter nor to any of its conditions that the intellect abstracts [here since he is commenting on q. 5, a. 3, he should have written ‘distinguishes’] being from all matter and makes for itself the metaphysical concept of being as being.”⁴⁹

One should recall here that in q. 5, a. 1, of this same treatise Thomas had distinguished the three theoretical sciences in accord with the differing degrees to which the objects they study (*speculabilia*) depend on matter and motion. In the case of metaphysics he writes that metaphysics studies the kind of *speculabilia* that do not depend on matter *secundum esse* either in the sense that they are never present in matter (God and angels), or in the sense that they may or may not be present in matter. As examples of the latter he lists substance, quality, *ens*, potency, act, the one and the many, etc.⁵⁰

In my fuller discussions of *separatio* elsewhere I have referred to the first kind as positively immaterial, meaning thereby that they are never

⁴⁸ See *id.*, 149:256–258: “In his autem quae secundum esse possunt esse divisa magis habet locum separatio quam abstractio;” *id.*, 149:270–274: “Substantia autem, quae est materia intelligibilis quantitatis, potest esse sine quantitate; unde considerare substantiam sine quantitate magis pertinet ad genus separationis quam abstractionis.”

⁴⁹ Also see near the end of the corpus: “Sic ergo in operatione intellectus triplex distinctio invenitur: una secundum operationem intellectus componentis et dividensis, quae separatio dicitur proprie, et haec competit scientiae divinae sive metaphysicae; alia secundum operationem qua formantur quidditates rerum, quae est abstractio formae a materia sensibili, et haec competit *mathematicae*; tertia secundum eandem operationem, universalis a particulari, et haec competit etiam physicae et est communis omnibus scientiis, quia in omni scientia praetermittitur quod per accidens est et accipitur quod per se est” (*id.*, 149:275–286). For Maritain’s comment, see EE English, 29, n. 14; EE French, 37, n. 14. [I have italicized the term *mathematicae* in Thomas’s text because in the 2nd printed edition of this work (in 1488 in Milan), which served as the prototype for the subsequent non-critical editions (see ed. Leonine, *Introduction*, 51, n. 3), the term *metaphysicae* was mistakenly introduced into the printed textual tradition instead of *mathematicae*. See Thomas Aquinas, *Opuscula*, ed. Paulus Soncinas (Milan: Benignus and Joannes-Antonius Fratres de Honate, 1488), f. 239va. This misleading error is still present in the 1954 Marietti ed. (*Opuscula theologica*, v. 2, 373)]. Although Maritain apparently in the original EE French version dating from 1947 did not have access to a much longer discussion of the role of *separatio* and the subject of metaphysics by Geiger in an article which also appeared in that year, he was able to formulate a fundamentally accurate understanding of Thomas’s discussion from the limited corrected

present in matter, and to the second kind as negatively or neutrally immaterial, meaning thereby that they may or may not be present in matter, but need not be.⁵¹ Thomas includes being (*ens*) in this class, and in replying to obj. 6 in this same q. 5, a.1, he identifies being (*ens*) as the subject of metaphysics. Hence in noting that metaphysics is based on *separatio*, he is also speaking of one's discovery of its subject. As he again states explicitly in q. 5, a. 4, its subject is being insofar as it is being (*quae habet subiectum ens in quantum est ens*). Or as he also explains there, being and substance are separate from matter and motion in the sense that it is not necessary for them to exist in matter and motion although they may be present there.⁵² It is this negative or neutral characteristic of being that is recognized and expressed by the negative judgment (*separatio*). Through this judgment one recognizes that that by reason of which something enjoys being need not be restricted to that by which it enjoys any particular or restricted kind of being, such as material being or quantified being or living being or dead being. And thus, by negating any such limitation or restriction of being, by

text which he took from Geiger's book. For Geiger's fuller treatment, see "Abstraction et séparation d'après s. Thomas *In de Trinitate*, q. 5, a. 3," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 31 (1947): 3–40.

⁵⁰ See ed. Leonine, vol. 50, 138:141–167. Note especially: "Quaedam vero speculabilia sunt quae non dependent a materia secundum esse, quia sine materia esse possunt, sive numquam sint in materia, sicut Deus et angelus, sive in quibusdam sint in materia et in quibusdam non, ut substantia, qualitas, ens, potentia, actus, unum et multa et huiusmodi . . ." (lines 154–160).

⁵¹ See my *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1984), 69–82; *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 44–51. Dispute continues on the part of Thomistic scholars concerning whether in order to justify this negative judgment (*separatio*) and thereby discover the subject of metaphysics one must first have demonstrated the existence of some positively immaterial being such as a First Mover or God or a spiritual soul. For my own detailed discussion and rejection of any such claim both on historical and philosophical grounds, see *Metaphysical Themes*, 82–104; *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 51–62.

⁵² For his reply to obj. 6 in q. 5, a. 1, see ed. Leonine, 141:322–333. For the text from q. 5, a. 4, see id., 154:182–197: "Utraque [metaphysics and the theology based on Sacred Scripture] autem est de his quae sunt separata a materia et motu secundum esse, sed diversimode, secundum quod dupliciter potest esse aliquid a materia et motu separatum secundum esse: uno modo sic quod de ratione ipsius rei quae separata dicitur sit quod nullo modo in materia et motu esse possit, sicut Deus et angeli dicuntur a materia et motu separati; alio modo sic quod non sit de ratione eius quod sit in materia et motu, sed possit esse sine materia et motu quamvis quandoque inveniatur in materia et motu, et sic ens et substantia et potentia et actus sunt separata a materia et motu, quia secundum esse a materia et motu non dependent sicut mathematica dependebant . . ."

negating any such negation, one may say, one discovers the notion of being as being, the subject of metaphysics.

Credit should be given to Maritain for having recognized the role of *separatio* in the improved text of Aquinas's account. At the same time, he was so attached to the theory of three degrees of abstraction in the classical Thomism of Cajetan and John of St. Thomas that he mistakenly claimed that the difference between their approach and that of Aquinas himself in the text from q. 5, a. 3, of the *Commentary on the De Trinitate* was only verbal.⁵³ And so even in *Existence and the Existent* he unfortunately continues to refer to the third degree of abstraction rather than to *separatio* in presenting his understanding of Thomas's position. Thus he writes:

If metaphysics is established at the highest degree of *abstraction*, the reason is precisely that, unlike all the other sciences, in concerning itself with being as being, as a proper object of analysis and scientific disquisition, it concerns itself with the very act of existing . . . In virtue of the type of *abstraction* which characterises it, metaphysics considers realities which exist, or are able to exist, without matter. It *abstracts* from the material conditions of empirical existence, but it does not abstract from existence! (Italics mine)⁵⁴

Hence, after having referred to Aquinas's introduction of *separatio*, and its distinction from abstraction taken strictly, he seems to have set it aside for all practical purposes.

This becomes much more evident in Maritain's final treatment of all of this in his *Refléxions sur la nature blessée et sur l'intuition de l'être*, which was prepared for a seminar he held with the *Petits Frères de Jésus* at Kolbsheim on July 21, 1967, and was first published in the *Revue Thomiste* in 1968.⁵⁵

⁵³ See *Existence and the Existent*, 30, continuation of the long note 14. There he notes that this *separatio*, since it ends in an idea, can be called an abstraction "in the general or rather proportional meaning of the word (but which is not produced in the line of simple apprehension of essences!)." The danger of referring to *separatio* as an abstraction without some such qualification consists in this that readers may conclude that the resulting notion of being has been abstracted from the differences that obtain between beings and thereby treat it as univocal.

⁵⁴ EE English, 31; EE French, 39.

⁵⁵ See *Revue thomiste* 68 (1968): 5–40; reprinted in Maritain's *Approches sans entraves* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1973). Here for the French version I follow the *Revue thomiste* text and for the English translation "Reflections on Wounded Nature," in *The Collected Works of Jacques Maritain*, vol. 20: *Untrammelled Approaches* (Notre Dame, Ind.:

There in a section entitled “A Digression on the Intuition of Being (*L’être*): The Concept of Existence,” Maritain speaks first of two concepts of existence, and then of three. He had anticipated this in the preceding section by referring to an intellectual intuition of being which, he writes, is not the “peak of philosophical wisdom” but the “indispensable condition for attaining it.”⁵⁶ He had singled out a number of philosophers who failed to reach this intuition of being such as Descartes, Hegel, and even Aristotle who, he says, did so only virtually and in implicit fashion.⁵⁷

In this “Digression” Maritain insists that with the intuition of being one leaves the world of simple apprehension and enters that of judgment because this intuition is produced by a positive judgment of existence such as “I am” or “Things exist.” Again Maritain distinguishes this kind of judgment from those in which the verb “is” functions simply as a copula by which an attribute or predicate, grasped in the manner of an essence understood by abstraction, is connected to a subject. But in the case of the intellectual intuition of being (*l’être*), the idea or concept of existence is not prior to the judgment of existence but comes after it and arises from it.⁵⁸ In this case it is the subject itself which is posited or affirmed in the mind just as it exists outside the mind and “to produce this judicative act, by really *thinking* it, is, for the intelligence, in the very heart of the spiritual intimacy of its own operation, to grasp intuitively, or to *see* the being (*l’être*), the existence (*l’exister*), the extra-mental *esse* of that subject.” And this, writes Maritain, is the intuition of being (*l’être*).⁵⁹

And, Maritain continues, after the intelligence has reached this intuition through judgment, it can by “a reflexive return” (*une reprise réflexive*) of the intellect’s first operation (simple apprehension) whereby it

University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 207–242. (Further on cited as “Ref. French” for the French version and “Ref. English” for the English version.)

⁵⁶ Ref. French, 14; Ref. English, 216. In terms of context, here Maritain wants to trace the failure of most philosophers to reach this intuition back to a wound of the intellect following from original sin.

⁵⁷ Ref. French, 16–17; Ref. English, 218–219.

⁵⁸ Ref. French, 17–18. There is an unfortunate mistake in the English translation, which I here present in corrected form: “but this judgment [read “*is not like*” rather than “*like*”] *those others* in which a subject endowed with a certain essence is linked, by the copulative *is*, to some attribute or predicate *by mode of essence*, that is, by means of an idea born of the abstractive operation” (Ref. English, 220).

⁵⁹ Ref. English, 220; Ref. French, 18. Maritain immediately adds this comment which I quote in French: “Par elle je plonge dans le monde de l’exister, en m’évadant du monde des essences et de leurs relations.”

reflects on this intuition, produce an idea or concept of the *esse* that has originally been grasped through judgment and form what he will now call the “second concept of existence.” This is what one means, he explains, when one says, for instance, “The soul communicates to the body its own *existence* or its own *esse*.” Here, therefore, Maritain is holding that one grasps the act of existing itself through such a judgment of existence and intuition of being, and not merely the simple fact that something exists.⁶⁰

Maritain stresses that this concept of existence is entirely different in origin from another concept, also called existence, that is produced from the intellect’s first and abstractive operation in the way all other ideas are drawn from phantasms through abstraction. He now refers to that as his “first concept of existence” and laments having to use the same word “existence” to signify both. More important for our purposes, though, is the fact that he now seems to allow no place for judgment in the intellect’s formation of this first concept of existence. He also says that it is formed before the intuition of being whereas the second concept is formed after that intuition. This first concept of existence seems to have replaced his earlier account of the formation of the vague and common-sense notion of existence which he had presented in *Existence and the Existent* and in which judgment would play an essential role. In this respect, therefore, this account now departs much more significantly from Aquinas’s own position than that offered by Maritain in that earlier writing. To illustrate the difference between the first concept of existence and the second Maritain notes the difference between one’s saying that “the existence of a spy in our services *is* beyond doubt” (*italics mine*) and that “the soul communicates to the body its own *existence* or its own *esse*.”⁶¹

Maritain also writes that Gilson seems to have been so fascinated by the intuition of being that, if Maritain recalls correctly, he wrote that there is no concept of existence,⁶² a remark to which Gilson would respond

⁶⁰ Id.

⁶¹ Ref. English, 220–221; Ref. French, 18.

⁶² For Maritain, see Ref. English, 221; Ref. French, 18. In the second edition of his *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952), Gilson published as an Appendix a critique of certain aspects of his position by L.-M. Régis that had originally appeared in *The Modern Schoolman* 28 (1951): 121–127. The first (id., 217–218) critique responds to Gilson’s denial that existence or “to be” can possibly be conceived and his rejection of a concept of existence (see id., 3, 202, 213–214). In light of certain texts taken from Aquinas himself and offered by Régis against this reading, in his response to Régis Gilson granted that in making this claim he was not using the language of Thomas himself and that for him every intellectual cognition is a “conception” (id., 222) and might

rather sharply in 1974 as will be noted below. Against this claim Maritain comments that there are two concepts of existence, as he has just distinguished them and in a note he indicates that there is even a third as he will explain below and which like the first is of abstractive origin, but at the third degree of abstraction.⁶³ Neither the first concept nor the third plays any role in the intuition of being. He also points out that even those who have reached the intuition of being will use the first concept of existence in their ordinary speech, for instance when they say: “A visitor is *here*.” For this, according to Maritain, is to use “is” as a copula that joins “here” to a subject and indicates that this subject is present to what Maritain refers to as “my world.”⁶⁴

Maritain points out that some true metaphysicians who have experienced the intuition of being will use the concept of existence arising from judgment and following upon the intuition as designating “an intelligible—*esse* or ‘the act of existing’—*which was not drawn from phantasms by the abstractive operation, like all the other objects of concepts.*”⁶⁵ But if this is true, Maritain asks rhetorically, how can the act of existing, which is material in the things our eye, for instance, sees, “become proportioned to the intelligence, and spiritualized, in such a way that the intelligence might come to *see* it, and *see it within itself*” by an act of judgment? Here Maritain indicates that he will proceed carefully in what he calls these “rather hasty notes.”⁶⁶ He proposes three stages.

In the first stage there is perception on the part of the external senses. For example, an act of the external sense of sight brings within my sense of sight the color of a rose by means of a sensible species received from without. Maritain explains that this “enters the mind by means of an intentional form which transfers into the sense the particular way in which the surface of the petals reflects the light acting on the organ (retina and cerebral center).” But at the same time it brings into the sense of sight the act of existence (*exister*) on the part of the rose without that sense “know-

even be called a *conceptus* when that term is taken broadly. Also see Gilson’s *L’Être et l’essence*, 2nd ed. (Paris: J. Vrin, 1962), 351, where he again addresses this issue, but warns that this should not be taken as meaning that one can have a “concept quidditatif de l’*esse*.” Maritain himself was apparently referring to the position taken by Gilson in texts such as these, but without identifying what particular text or texts he had in mind.

⁶³ Ref. English, 221, n. 29; Ref. French, 18, n. 1.

⁶⁴ Ref. English, 221; Ref. French, 19.

⁶⁵ Ref. English, 222; Ref. French, 19–20.

⁶⁶ Ref. English, 222; Ref. French, 20.

ing what is going on.” It does this not by means of a sensible species [presumably because there is no sensible species of the act of existing itself], but by an “intentional action exercised on the sense when it receives the *species* of the color of the rose.”⁶⁷ Here I would again note Maritain’s failure to distinguish between one’s discovery of the fact that something exists, and the act of existing itself (*exister*), and also that unfortunately, in the interests of simplicity here he now bypasses the role of the internal senses. As I have pointed out above, both the role of phantasms produced by the imagination and the role of the common sense are essential to Aquinas’s account.

In presenting stage two Maritain writes that my intelligence does not need the imagination and its phantasms in order for it to be aware that *I am seeing* when my eye sees something. (But for Aquinas it does need awareness of the action of the common sense, as I have already noted.) For, Maritain continues, intelligence is present to the external sense and “penetrates with its own life” the life of the external sense. And it becomes conscious not only of the color of the rose that is perceived, but also of its own “seeing of that rose.” The act of existing is made present in the sense of sight (though not perceived by that sense), owing to the intentional action the sense undergoes in receiving the sensible species, and is “made present to the intelligence (in a *totally implicit* way and without being grasped by it as of yet), as implied in *the rose*, [...] which it knows that *I see*.” This occurs at the level of the first degree of abstraction where the intelligence says in its interior word: “That rose is there,” which, says Maritain, is the *Dasein*, as he adopts a Heideggerian term, but only in the way a Thomist must understand this expression—meaning that the rose is present to me.⁶⁸ Maritain denies that at this point the intelligence says: “The rose is” and so he continues to deny that a judgment of existence is involved in this stage. And so at this moment the rose’s act of existing or *Sein* (another Heideggerian term, but again as understood by a Thomist) is not yet explicitly perceived but only potentially and implicitly. To repeat, it is only declared to be “present to me.”⁶⁹

As for the third stage, once the eye sees the rose and intelligence says “The rose is there,” the intelligence may pass, as if by a miracle which, Maritain writes, is really not a miracle but rather a “stroke of good

⁶⁷ Ref. English, 223; Ref. French, 20–21.

⁶⁸ Ref. English, 223–224; Ref. French, 21.

⁶⁹ Ref. English, 224; Ref. French, 21–22.

fortune” and a gift of nature, to a higher level. This level is not merely at the third degree of abstraction, but at “a moment of natural contemplation in which thought is freed from abstraction.” This is the intuition of being, which may happen supra-consciously in a child, or more or less supra-consciously in a poet, or consciously in a philosopher. Maritain describes this as follows:

At this moment the intuition of being suddenly flashes in the mind like a bolt of lightning, and the rose’s *act of existing* already intentionally present in the intelligence but only as spiritualized in proximate potency, or as implicitly and blindly contained in ‘the rose is there’ which the intelligence utters at the first degree of abstraction, is unveiled explicitly now as an object grasped, *spiritualized in act*, and made proportioned in act to the intelligence.⁷⁰

And this privileged insight, this intuition, Maritain reminds us, is brought about by a true judgment of existence, asserting that “this rose, or this thing, exists” which Maritain also views as an affirmation of *Sein*.⁷¹ The result from this intuition and the intellect’s return of simple apprehension to reflect on it and on the judgment of existence that produces it is Maritain’s “second concept of existence.”⁷² But missing from this account is any explicit mention of the role of *separatio*, which Maritain had at least recognized in *Existence and the Existent* as present in Aquinas’s *De Trinitate*, q. 5, a. 3, and which, as we have indicated above, according to Aquinas is required for us to discover being insofar as it is being—the subject of metaphysics.⁷³

⁷⁰ Ref. English, 224–225; Ref. French, 22.

⁷¹ Ref. English, 225; Ref. French, 23.

⁷² See Ref. English, 226; Ref. French, 24. On id., 227, there is another very misleading mistake in the English translation. One should read: “On the contrary, when we come to the second concept of existence, the one which [read: *proceeds from* instead of *precedes*] the intuition of being, we are in the register of [delete: “the”] *Sein*.” See id., 25, for the French version of the mistranslated text: “celui qui procède de l’intuition de l’être.”

⁷³ In the immediately following context, the need for some reference to *separatio* becomes very evident. Still referring to his second concept of existence which proceeds from the intuition of being and a real judgment of existence, Maritain writes: “Here being is grasped as such . . . It is no longer taken in its relation to the sensible world; it is taken absolutely, in its limitless and intrinsically differentiated universality which embraces everything that *is* (and *is* in irreducibly varied ways).” Ref. English, 227–228; Ref. French, 25. Perhaps Maritain had now concluded that his proposed intuition of being could accomplish all that Aquinas had attributed to *separatio*.

Maritain subsequently goes on to argue that many “great” philosophers have failed to reach this intuition, and that other truly great ones have reached it only in virtual fashion even though they were true or real metaphysicians, but seemed to be lacking something. He mentions Bergson here and writes that he did experience the intuition of being, but did not reach “the formal intuition of being in its full light” but only in a “disguised fashion, or by means of a substitute—*duration*,” and that following from this his metaphysical thought suffered from a “doctrinal deviation.”⁷⁴

He then considers Aristotle who, he says, did have an admirable sense of the analogy of being but one still incomplete and deficient because even though he had a real experience of the intuition of being, this was only virtually and “not formally and in full light.” And in the course of developing the point that Aristotle never got “beyond the wall of essences,” Maritain finds Aristotle reaching a third concept of existence, in addition to the two Maritain had already proposed. This third concept, he says, is of abstractive origin, like the first one and not based on a true judgment of existence, but now at a higher level, the third degree of abstraction, but which continues to treat *esse* in the manner of a “*quid* or of an essence or in the manner of essence or of quality,” and so his metaphysics suffers from a grave deficiency.⁷⁵ But since Maritain does not attribute this third concept of existence to Aquinas, and since here I am interested in comparing Maritain and Aquinas, I will pass over any additional remarks about it.

Conclusion

I have already remarked that Maritain’s final presentation of how one discovers the subject of metaphysics—being as being—suffers greatly from the absence of any appeal to Thomas’s negative judgment of separation. Moreover, in his consideration in this writing of what he calls the first concept of existence, Maritain is less Thomistic than was his presentation in *Existence and the Existent*. He omits and even explicitly rejects any role for judgments of existence in one’s discovery of a prephilosophical and premetaphysical notion of being (or the “vague being of common sense,” to use Maritain’s earlier terminology).

⁷⁴ Ref. English, 232; Ref. French, 30.

⁷⁵ Ref. English, 234–236; Ref. French, 30–34.

But is there a doctrine of an intellectual intuition of being in the texts of Aquinas? Earlier on I have already expressed my reservations about finding such a doctrine in Aquinas himself. In connection with this I now turn to Gilson's response to the following remark by Maritain, mentioned above in passing: "Etienne Gilson seems to have been so fascinated by the intuition of being that he wrote, if I recall correctly, that there is no such thing as a *concept* of existence."⁷⁶ As will be recalled, to this Maritain had immediately replied that there two such concepts and even three.

In his "Propos sur l'être et sa notion," Gilson quotes this text and responds that he also believes that he had written such a statement and affirms that he still holds such a view. He comments that he finds it somewhat scandalous that two followers of Thomas Aquinas, that is, Maritain and Gilson himself, after having spent so many years as members of his school, should disagree on such a fundamental point as the notion of being (*l'être*). But to say that there is no concept of existence and to hold that there are two or even three such concepts are incompatible propositions. Gilson points out that to ask whether there is a concept of existence may be taken in two ways—whether there is a concept of being (*conceptus entis*) or whether there is a concept of *esse*—and points out that he has not found Aquinas raising either of these questions in these words in his texts. And by speaking of a concept of existence, Gilson warns that one introduces a *conceptus existentiae* that is foreign to the language of Aquinas himself.⁷⁷

As regards a concept of existence, Gilson responds along the lines of his earlier concession to Régis that in general there is a conception (*conceptio*) for every object of thought since to think is to conceive, and to conceive is to engender objects of thought. If therefore one wishes to name every object of this kind a "concept" then, if we grasp the meaning of the words "existence," "to be" (*être*), or "being" (*étant*), and understand the term concept in this broad sense, we may apply it to them.⁷⁸

As regards intuitions of beings, Gilson acknowledges that we have sensible intuitions, but emphasizes very strongly that a sensible intuition of a being is not an intellectual intuition of its *esse* (*être*). He writes that for someone to see a being is to perceive something of which one knows that it has an *esse*, but that we do not have a distinct concept of that which makes

⁷⁶ Ref. English, 221; Ref. French, 18.

⁷⁷ In *San Tommaso e il pensiero moderno*, ed. Antonio Piolanti (Citta Nuova: Pontificia Accademia Romana de S. Tommaso d'Aquino, 1974), 7–17. See id., 8.

⁷⁸ See id., 9. See note 62 above for Gilson's reply to Régis.

it exist. While the most extensive quidditative concept is that of being (*ens*), or “that which has *esse*,” Gilson comments that from the *esse* of a being one can only abstract the notion of *esse commune*. And the object of the notion of *esse commune* exists only in thought as a being of reason, not in reality as the act of a being. As he also expresses it, *esse* is that which makes of an essence a being. Here he is speaking of the *actus essendi*. And this, he points out, has no proper existence in itself apart from that of the substance which it makes a being. This is why, he continues, “one cannot have an intuitive understanding of the *esse* of a being (*de l'être d'un étant*) because it is only perceptible to us in the sensible perception of the substance which it actualizes.”⁷⁹ And as regards *esse commune*, he repeats his point that it exists only in the intellect and cites *Summa contra gentiles* I, c. 26: “Much less, therefore is *esse commune* itself something outside of all existing things except in the intellect alone.”⁸⁰

To reinforce his rejection of any intellectual intuition of *esse*, Gilson recalls that if one wants to speak of degrees of abstraction, our apprehension of being will still be an abstraction based on sense experience. According to Aquinas the human intellect cannot think without images (phantasms). Since there is no image of being insofar as it is being, which is a pure intelligible, intellectual intuition of this is not possible in the present life even for the most experienced metaphysicians. Gilson also recalls that for Thomas it is the “that which,” the quiddity of a being, that is the proper object of the human intellect in the present life.⁸¹

⁷⁹ See “Propos,” 10: “C’est même pourquoi on ne saurait avoir d’intellection intuitive de l’être d’un étant, parce qu’il ne nous est perceptible que dans la perception sensible de la substance qu’il actualise.” He continues: “De l’acte de percevoir tel ou tel étant, nous pouvons abstraire la notion abstraite d’être, cet être commun et universel attribuable à tout ce qui est, mais l’être propre à chaque étant ne nous est connu que comme cause immanente à ce qu’il fait être.”

⁸⁰ See *id.*, 10. For Thomas, see: “Multo igitur minus et ipsum esse commune est aliquid praeter omnes res existentes nisi in intellectu solum” (ed. Leonine man., 27). Trans. mine.

⁸¹ See “Propos,” 11–12. On page 12 Gilson cites *ST* I, q. 17, a. 3, ad 1, for support and then quotes from Thomas’s Commentary on the *Liber de causis* in a French translation apparently based on a faulty Latin edition rather than on the critical edition by H. D. Saffrey, which I quote here: “Sed secundum rei veritatem causa prima est supra ens in quantum est ipsum esse infinitum, ens autem dicitur id quod finite participat esse, et hoc est proportionatum intellectui nostro cuius obiectum est quod quid est ut dicitur in *III^o De anima*, unde illud solum est capabile ab intellectu nostro quod habet quidditatem participantem esse . . .” See *Sancti Thomae de Aquino Super librum de causis expositio* (Fribourg: Société Philosophique, 1954), 47:11–17.

Near the end of his article Gilson returns to Thomas's view that it is impossible for the human intellect, in the state of the present life whereby we are joined to a body, to understand something in actuality except by turning itself back to phantasms (*ST I*, q. 84, a. 7). Gilson concludes that because this rule is based on (human) nature, it admits of no exception.⁸²

I myself regret the fact that, to the best of my knowledge, Gilson himself did not incorporate into his discussion of this issue and his account of how one discovers being as being the role of *separatio* in Aquinas's thought. And I have already criticized Maritain for omitting this from his final account of all of this. But concerning the presence of an intuition of being or of existence in the texts of Aquinas, I agree with Gilson in noting that I myself have not found it there, and that it is not compatible with Thomas's theory of knowledge.

MARITAIN AND AQUINAS ON OUR DISCOVERY OF BEING

SUMMARY

The author presents and compares Maritain's and Aquinas's accounts of our discovery (1) of being as existing; and (2) of being as being (*ens inquantum ens* or the subject of metaphysics). He finds that especially in his final discussion of how one discovers being as being, Maritain's account suffers greatly from the absence of any appeal to Aquinas's negative judgment of separation and also from the omission of reference to the role of judgments of existence in one's discovery of a premetaphysical notion of being. Wippel finds no evidence in Aquinas's texts for Maritain's defense of an intuition of being or of existence.

KEYWORDS: Maritain, Aquinas, Gilson, essence, *esse*, *ens*, metaphysics, abstraction, judgment, separation.

⁸² See "Propos," 16. For Thomas, see: "Impossibile est intellectum nostrum, secundum praesentis vitae statum quo passibili corpori conjunimur, aliquid intelligere in actu, nisi convertendo se ad phantasmata" (ed. Leonine, vol. 5, 325). On page 17 Gilson notes that Maritain himself acknowledged that while the intuition of being had been lived *in actu exercito* by Thomas (and by the good Thomists), Maritain had not found any treatise or disquisition where Thomas had studied it *in actu signato*. Gilson comments rather wryly that another reason to account for the absence of any explicit discussion of this in Aquinas's texts may rather be that he held no such doctrine.