

IS THE THOMISTIC DOCTRINE OF GOD AS "IPSUM ESSE SUBSISTENS" CONSISTENT?

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Abstract. The doctrine of God as “Subsistent Being itself” (*Ipsum Esse Subsistens*) was for many years considered the heart of Aquinas’ thought. In this paper (i) I set out Aquinas’s arguments in favour of the thesis of God as Subsistent Being itself usually conceived in terms of “esse tantum”; (ii) I set out the arguments against it; and (iii) I propose a fresh reading of that thesis that takes into account both Thomistic doctrine and the criticisms of it. I show that there is in Aquinas’s writings an Aristotelian conception of being as “the actuality of every form”, as “actus secundus”, and consequently of God as his Being (*suum esse*), that is different from the Platonic one, that of God as “esse tantum”. It is a conception that can integrate the notion of event, which has been rightly called upon in contemporary philosophy, both analytic and continental.

I. IS THE THOMISTIC DOCTRINE OF GOD AS "IPSUM ESSE SUBSISTENS" CONSISTENT?

The doctrine of God as “Subsistent Being itself” (*Ipsum Esse Subsistens*) was for many years considered the heart of Aquinas’ thought and, in general, the distinguishing mark of every Catholic Theology and of every Christian Philosophy.

After Heidegger’s criticism of the so-called “onto-theo-logy”, metaphysical discourse within contemporary philosophy on God as Subsistent Being itself, with the exception of “existentialist Thomism” and some of its exponents such as E. Gilson or J.B. Lotz, has been put on the back burner, so much so that J. L. Marion could write a book on “God Without Being”¹.

In analytic philosophy, on the other hand, the doctrine of God as Subsistent Being itself has returned in recent times to enjoy a certain prominence, exciting both positive appraisals, for instance from Barry Miller², as well criticisms, especially by Peter Geach³ and Anthony Kenny⁴.

It is worth noting that all the most authoritative contemporary theology has set this doctrine to one side and conceived God as an event or occurrence (*Ereignis*) rather than as a subsistent Being. Such theo-

1 Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being: Hors-texte*, ed. Thomas A. Carlson, (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995).

2 Barry Miller, *From Existence to God: A Contemporary Philosophical Argument* (Routledge, 1992); Barry Miller, *The Fullness of Being: A New Paradigm for Existence* (Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2012); Barry Miller, “Existence”, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford Univ., 2002).

3 Peter T. Geach, “Form and Existence”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 55, no. 1 (1955); Elisabeth. Anscombe and Peter T. Geach, *Three Philosophers: Aristotle, Aquinas, Frege* (Blackwell, 1961), 65–125; Peter Geach, “What Actually Exists”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 42 (1968).

4 Anthony Kenny, *Aquinas* (OUP, 1980); Anthony Kenny, *Aquinas on Being* (OUP, 2002); Anthony Kenny, “Quidditas and anitas after Frege”, *Giornale di Metafisica* 38, no. 1 (2016). See also Christopher Hughes, *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God: An Investigation in Aquinas’ Philosophical Theology* (Cornell Univ. Press, 1989); Christopher Hughes, *Aquinas on Being, Goodness, and God* (Routledge, 2015).

logians as Hans Urs von Balthasar⁵, Klaus Hemmerle⁶, Gisbert Greshake⁷, Eberhard Jüngel⁸, and Piero Coda⁹ have converged on a rehabilitation of the category of event as most apt for expressing the essence of God.

The aims of my paper are (i) to set out Aquinas's arguments in favour of the thesis of God as Subsistent Being itself; (ii) set out the arguments against; and (iii) propose a fresh reading of that thesis that takes into account both Thomistic doctrine and the criticisms of it. In this way, I shall proceed as in a medieval *quaestio*, with arguments in favour, *sed contra* and *respondeo*.

II. QUAESTIO: UTRUM DEUS SIT ESSE SUBSISTENS

1. Arguments in favour

1.1. The argument from authority

In the *Summa contra Gentiles* we read:

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" (Ex. 3: 13,14). By this our Lord showed that His own proper name is He Who Is. Now, names have been devised to signify the nature or essence of things. It remains, then, that the divine being is God's essence or nature.¹⁰

There are at least two things to be noted about this passage, which so strongly attracted authors such as Gilson. The first is that modern exegetes agree that the passage of *Exodus* does not mean that the essence or name of God is subsistent Being¹¹. The second is that a range of studies after those of Gilson, including some of mine, have shown beyond doubt that the origin of the doctrine of God as subsistent Being itself does not lie with Aquinas, as Gilson held, but is typical of a neo-Platonic line going back originally to the author of the *De divinis nominibus*, which is to say to the pagan neo-Platonist philosopher Damascius, whose thought is in turn a development of the doctrine of the first principles that we find in Plato's unwritten doctrines¹². However that may be, it is a fact that, even if the doctrine of God as Subsistent Being itself (*esse ipsum sub-*

5 See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodramatik*, IV Band: *Das Endspiel*, (Johannes, 1983), esp. 57-71: *Sein — Ereignis — Werden*.

6 See Klaus Hemmerle, *Thesen zu einer trinitarischen Ontologie* (Johannes, 1976), esp. 39 ff.: *Das neue Hauptwort: das Verb*.

7 See Gisbert Greshake, *Der dreieine Gott: Eine trinitarische Theologie* (Herder, 1997), esp. 184 ff.

8 See Eberhard Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt. Zur Begründung der Theologie des Gekreuzigten im Streit zwischen Theismus und Atheismus*, (Mohr Siebeck 2001).

9 See Piero Coda, *Evento pasquale. Trinità e storia. Genesi, significato e interpretazione di una prospettiva emergente nella teologia contemporanea. Verso un progetto di ontologia trinitaria*, (Città Nuova, 1984); Piero Coda, *Il Logos e il nulla. Trinità, religioni, mistica*, (Città Nuova, 2003); Piero Coda, *Dalla Trinità. Lavvento di Dio tra storia e profezia*, (Città Nuova, 2011).

10 *Sum. c. Gent.*, I, 22. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles, Book one: God*, transl. by Anton C. Pegis, (Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 121.

11 Cornelius Houtman, *Exodus. Volume 1: Historical Commentary on the Old Testament* (Kok, 1993), 95-96, 367-369; Rainer Albertz, ed., *Exodus, 1-18: Zürcher Bibelkommentare, AT 2,1* (TVZ, 2012), 85; Helmut Utzschneider and Wolfgang Oswald, *Exodus 1-15* (Kohlhammer, 2013), 129; Christoph Dohmen, *Exodus 1-18* (Herder, 2015), 164; I am grateful to my colleague Martin Mark for these references.

12 Cornelia de Vogel, "Ego sum qui sum et sa signification pour une philosophie chrétienne", *Revue des Sciences religieuses* 34/35 (1960-1961); Werner Beierwaltes, "Der Kommentar zum *Liber de Causis* als neuplatonisches Element in der Philosophie des Thomas von Aquin", *Philosophische Rundschau* 2 (1963); Klaus Kremer, *Die neuplatonische Seinsphilosophie und ihre Wirkung auf Thomas von Aquin* (Brill, 1966); Aimé Solignac, "La doctrine de l'esse chez saint Thomas est-elle d'origine néoplatonicienne?", *Archives de Philosophie* 30 (1967); Enrico Berti, "Aristotelismo e neoplatonismo nella dottrina tomista di Dio come *Ipsum esse*", in *Studi aristotelici*, ed. Enrico Berti (Japadre); Pierre Hadot, "Dieu comme acte d'être dans le néoplatonisme.", in *Dieu et l'être. Exégèses d'Exode 3,14 et de Coran 20, 11-24*, ed. Paul Vignaux (Études Augustiniennes, 1978); Wayne J. Hankey, "Aquinas' First Principle: Being or Unity?", *Dionysius* 7 (1980); Giovanni Ventimiglia, *Differenza e contraddizione: Il problema dell'essere in Tommaso d'Aquino esse, diversum, contradictio* (Vita e Pensiero, 1997), 22-45; David Bradshaw, "Neoplatonic Origins of the Act of Being", *The Review of Metaphysics* 53 (1998); Carlo M. Mazzucchi, "Damascio, autore del Corpus Dionysiacum, e il Dialogo ΠΕΡΙ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΚΗΣ ΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΗΣ", *Aevum* 80, no. 2 (2006); Pasquale Porro, *Thomas Aquinas: A historical and philosophical profile* (Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2017), esp. 198-202; Giovanni Ventimiglia, *To be o esse? La questione dell'essere nel tomismo analitico* (Carocci, 2012), 308-17; Carlo M. Mazzucchi, "Iterum de Damascio Areopagita", *Aevum* 87, no. 1 (2013); Giovanni Ventimiglia, "Tommaso d'Aquino e le dottrine non

sistens) is not authentic by Aquinas, he held it, so that it became the distinctive trait of his theology, as is witnessed also by recent studies¹³.

1.2. The rational argument

In addition to the argument from authority, Aquinas offers a range of rational arguments. The most important and, at least to all appearances, the most typical of his position seems to be the one that I have called the argument from “*plurificatio*”¹⁴.

- (1) “Being, as being, cannot be diverse; but it can be diversified by something beside itself.”¹⁵
- (2) When something different is added to being, we have a “*plurificatio*” (multiplication).¹⁶
- (3) But in God there can be no “*plurificatio*”, because He is simple and unique.¹⁷
- (4) Ergo: in God nothing different can be added to (His) being.

Corollarium 1: He is pure being, only being “*esse tantum*”, with nothing added. He is nothing but being. He is Being itself¹⁸.

Corollarium 2: In God, unlike His creatures, essence and being are identical: God is only being, while the creatures are being plus an essence; they are being and, in addition, an essence¹⁹.

The best metaphor to explain this doctrine is the following: “The name ‘He who is’ is particularly appropriated to God, because it does not determine any form for God, but signifies *esse* indeterminately. And this is what St. John of Damascus says, that ‘He who is’ signifies the infinite ocean of substance”²⁰

The doctrine of the “*esse tantum*”, that we have just looked at, which is certainly grounded on some texts (but not all) of the work of Thomas, has given rise to the so-called “existential Thomism”, whose first and greatest representative was Etienne Gilson²¹.

Specialists of Aquinas’ thought, however, have pointed out, also in controversy with Gilson, that alongside the “existential” conception of being deriving from neo-platonism and Avicenna, there is another in the same Aquinas’ works, of Aristotelian origin and more typical of his own position, in which

scritte di Platone”, *Medioevo* 38 (2013); Giovanni Ventimiglia, “Ist Gott das Sein selbst? Von Platon zu Anthony Kenny“, *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 63, no. 2 (2016).

13 Serge-Thomas Bonino, *Celui qui est: De Deo ut uno* (Parole et silence, 2016). See also Gaven Kerr, *Aquinas’s way to God: The proof in De ente et essentia* (OUP, 2015); Lorenz B. Puntel, *Sein und Gott: Ein systematischer Ansatz in Auseinandersetzung mit M. Heidegger, Levinas und J.-L. Marion* (Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 40–46 (esp. 44). (Engl. transl. Lorenz B. Puntel and Alan White, *Being and God: A systematic approach in confrontation with Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean-Luc Marion* (Northwestern Univ. Press, 2011), 34–45).

14 Giovanni Ventimiglia, *To be o esse? La questione dell’essere nel tomismo analitico* (Carocci, 2012) 323–338; Giovanni Ventimiglia, *Tommaso d’Aquino* (La Scuola, 2014), 30–39.

15 *Sum. c. Gent.* II, 52. Saint T. Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles: Book two* (Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 153.

16 *De ente et essentia*, cap. IV.

17 *Comp. Theol.*, I, cap. 15.

18 *De ente et essentia*, cap. V.

19 *Ibid.*

20 *De pot.* q. 7, a. 5. Thomas Aquinas, *On the Power of God*, excerpt transl. by Anthony Kenny in Anthony Kenny, *Aquinas on Being* (OUP, 2002), 123.

21 Some major texts of existential Thomism are: Jacques Maritain, *Sept leçons sur l’être et les premiers principes de la raison spéculative* (Pierre Téqui, 1934); Jacques Maritain, Jacques Maritain, *Court Traité de l’Existence et l’Existant* (Hartmann, 1947); Étienne Gilson, *L’Esprit de la philosophie médiévale* (Vrin, 1932); Étienne Gilson, *Le Thomisme. Introduction à la philosophie de Saint Thomas d’Aquin* (Vrin, 1942); Étienne Gilson, “Le Thomisme et les philosophies existentielles”, *La vie intellectuelle*, 13.6.1945, 144–145; Étienne Gilson, *L’Être et l’essence* (Vrin, 1948); Étienne Gilson, *Introduction à la philosophie chrétienne* (Vrin, 1960); Joseph Owens, *An Interpretation of Existence* (Center for Thomistic Studies, 1985); John Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (The Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2010); Kerr, *Aquinas’s way to God*.

being is considered as “fullness”, as an act of all forms and as “*actualitas omnium actum*”²². We will consider it again and develop it in this article, in the section dedicated to the *respondeo*.

2. *Sed contra*

2.1. *First argument: Parmenidean univocity*

We may begin from the last metaphor from Aquinas to introduce the first argument against, which has been developed independently by Anthony Kenny and Enrico Berti²³. Kenny makes the following observation:

The metaphor is significant. Many passages in Aquinas suggest that *esse* is thought of as a vast reservoir of liquid that is given particular shape and form by being captured in various receptacles. You and I, and the ants and the planets, are small buckets of this universal fluid; God is the vast, limitless ocean.²⁴

The philosophical error hiding in this metaphor, which in turn expresses the doctrine of God as subsistent Being itself, is that of Parmenidean univocity and immanentism, which are in conflict with the doctrine of divine transcendence that Aquinas holds: if God is like the liquid present in all things, then the difference between God and other things is merely quantitative and not qualitative. In the end it is always the same liquid! Enrico Berti clarifies the point:

One might wonder how far the transcendence (of Aquinas’s God) is from the vision of being as coming in degrees: where there are degrees, it seems that there must be a common essence that is shared different degrees, for a difference of degree, rather than being a difference in quality or of essence, seems to be a difference of quantity. But, if there is a single essence shared in different degrees, being has an essence and, so, is univocal and not analogous. And, if God is, by His essence, this being, He is no longer rigorously transcendent, but is present, in various degrees in His creatures.²⁵

Behind Berti’s criticism lies the criticism that Aristotle had already levelled at Plato’s doctrine of principles, which was part of the unwritten doctrines, namely that, of the two supreme principles of all things. As it is well known, one of them was identified with the Being itself and the One itself. Aristotle carries this doctrine in book Beta of the *Metaphysics*, along with his sharp criticism of it.²⁶

Aristotle’s argument is clear: the error in the theory that, the primary principle of everything, (which in medieval theology has been identified with God) is Being itself, can be broken down into three moments:

22 The first author representative of the interpretation of Aquinas’ *esse* in terms of “fullness” and “*perfectio*” was Cornelio Fabro, *La nozione metafisica di partecipazione secondo s. Tommaso d’Aquino* (Vita e Pensiero, 1939); Cornelio Fabro, *Partecipazione e causalità secondo san Tommaso d’Aquino* (SEI, 1961). Among the critics of the existentialist interpretation of “*esse*” in Aquinas, in addition to the historical-philosophical studies mentioned in footnote 12, I just mention, first of all, Jacques Maritain himself, Jacques Maritain, “Sur la Doctrine de l’Aséité divine”, *Mediaeval Studies* 5 (1943); and then: Aldo Bonetti, “L’essere e l’essenza secondo Gilson”, *Rivista di Filosofia neo-scolastica* 41 (1949); Bernard Montagnes, *La doctrine de l’analogie de l’être d’après saint Thomas d’Aquin* (Publications universitaires Nauwelaerts, 1963) esp. 159-168; Albert Keller, *Sein oder Existenz? Die Auslegung des Seins bei Thomas von Aquin in der heutigen Scholastik* (Max Hueber, 1968); Joseph Seifert, “Esse, essence and Infinity: a Dialogue with Existentialist Thomism”, *The New Scholasticism* 58 (1984); Joseph Seifert, “Essence and existence: a new Foundation of Classical Metaphysics on the Basis of «Phenomenological Realism» and a critical Investigation of Existentialist Thomism”, *Aletheia* 1, no. 1-2 (1977); Lawrence Dewan, “Etienne Gilson and the Actus Essendi”, *Maritain-Studies* 15 (1999); Ralph McInerny, *Praeambula fidei: Thomism and the God of the philosophers* (Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2006), 134-144.

23 Enrico Berti, “Argomenti aristotelici contro l’esistenza di un Essere per essenza”, *Giornale di Metafisica* 38 (2016).

24 Kenny, *Aquinas on Being*, 123.

25 Enrico Berti, “L’analogia dell’essere nella tradizione aristotelico-tomista”, in *Metafore dell’Invisibile. Ricerche sull’analogia*, ed. Vv.Aa (Morcelliana, 1984), 21. Likewise, by Enrico Berti, “L’analogia in Aristotele. Interpretazioni recenti e possibili sviluppi”, in *Origini e sviluppi dell’analogia. Da Parmenide a S. Tommaso*, ed. Giuseppe Casetta (Edizioni Vallombrosa, 1987), 108. See also on the point, Pierre Aubenque, “Les origines néoplatoniciennes de la doctrine de l’analogie de l’être”, in *Néoplatonisme. Melanges offerts a Jean Trouillard*, ed. Vv.Aa (Fontenay Aux Roses, 1981).

26 Aristotle, *Metaphysics: The Works of Aristotle*, ed. W. D. Ross (Clarendon Press, 1930), Met. III, 998 b (VII aporia) and 999 a (XI aporia).

- (i) If being were a genus (seventh aporia), there could not be the specific differences that should differentiate it. Indeed, such differences would have to be, again, “being”. Hence, if being were a genus, there would be nothing other than being, as Parmenides insisted.
- (ii) If this most general genus of being were the first principle itself (eleventh aporia), God, then nothing could exist outside Him, because, by its essence, nothing can be outside of being itself.
- (iii) Lastly, if this Being itself were by its essence identical to the One itself by its essence, then no plurality could exist outside Him, because a plurality is made up of many “ones”.

Hence, being is not a genus, nor could such a supposed genus of being be identical with the first principle of things, nor yet could Being, as such, as the first principle, be identical with the One itself. If it were so, there could not exist anything other than Being itself, than the same identical and singular being, while the differentiation and plurality of things could not exist: this is a Parmenidean upshot that contradicts from within the whole of Aquinas’s metaphysics.

It is interesting to note that one of the most significant defenders of contemporary panentheism refers precisely to “existential Thomism” and to Aquinas’ idea of being as an existence shared in varying degrees with creatures, in order to find authoritative witnesses in favour of his view.²⁷

2.2. Second argument: the identity of Concept and Object

The second argument against the theory of God as subsistent Being itself was raised by Peter Geach and critically developed by Anthony Kenny.²⁸ While the foregoing argument applies to the theory of God as Being itself and the One itself, this second argument applies to the conception of God, which is in any case implicit in the doctrine of God as *Ipsum esse subsistens*, as a Platonic Form and hence, as common to many things and subsistent in and of itself.

Aquinas himself, after all, makes no mystery of his Platonism as regards the subsistent Being in itself:

Although, as Aristotle repeatedly proved, this [Platonic] opinion is unreasonable in admitting the species of physical beings in a state of separation and subsistent of themselves, it is from an absolute point of view, true that there is a first reality that is by its essence an entity and good, and that we call God.²⁹

Now, both Geach and Kenny appeal in this connection to Frege’s sharp and clear distinction between concept and object:

An object is not found more than once (...). With a concept the question is always whether anything, and if so what, falls under it. With a proper name such questions make no sense.³⁰

The concept (as I understand the word) is predicative. On the other hand, a name of an object, a proper name, is quite incapable of being used as a grammatical predicate.³¹

As we can see, Frege distinguishes clearly between a “concept”, which can be predicated of many things, and an “object”, which is not repeatable: “kommt nicht wiederholt vor”. In other words, this is a difference between what can be predicated of many individuals (a concept) and what cannot be predicated of many individuals (an object). This is a difference that Aristotle had already clearly picked out in book Zeta of the *Metaphysics*:

The universal also is thought by some to be in the fullest sense a cause, and a principle; therefore let us attack the discussion of this point also. For it seems impossible that any universal term should be the name of a substance. For firstly the substance of each thing is that which is peculiar to it, which does not belong

27 Mark Johnston, *Saving God: Religion after idolatry* (Princeton Univ. Press, 2011), 96–98. I owe this information to David Anzalone, to whom goes my gratitude.

28 P. T. Geach, “Form and Existence”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 55, no. 1 (1955): 254–62; Kenny, *Aquinas on Being*, 144–47.

29 *Sum. Theol.*, I, q. 6, a. 4. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae: vol II.: Latin text and English translation, introductions, notes, appendices and glossaries* (CUP, 2006), 90.

30 Gottlob Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic* (Harper and Brothers, 1953), § 51, 63/64.

31 Gottlob Frege, “Concept and Object”, in *Translations from the philosophical writings of Gottlob Frege, 3rd Edition*, ed. P. T. Geach and M. Black (Rowman and Littlefield, 1980), 43.

to anything else; but the universal is common, since that is called universal which is such as to belong to more than one thing.³²

Now, since being is the most universal predicate of all, and Being is the very name of God and identical with His essence, it follows that what is universal is identical to an individual substance and vice-versa; which, in Aristotle's word, is "impossible", specifically, because of a contradiction.

Gaven Kerr pointed out that the criticisms of the conception of being such as those just quoted ignore all the passages of Aquinas in which he explicitly clarifies the difference between the *esse commune* and the *ipsum esse subsistens*.³³ This shows, however, that he ignores the study of Klaus Kremer, in which the latter has clearly showed, with the texts at hand, that in Aquinas, next to the pages of Aristotelian inspiration in which the *esse subsistens* is distinguished from the *esse commune*, there are others no less numerous pages of Platonic inspiration, in which (i) the *ipsum esse subsistens*, God, is conceived as "esse abstractum", "esse separatum", "separate form",³⁴ (ii) the *ipsum esse subsistens*, God, is compared to the "whiteness" in itself,³⁵ (iii) the position of the Platonists who placed the species and the "maxima communia" (*bonum, unum et ens*) as separate is declared, if referred to God, "absolute" true and "verissima opinio et fidei Christianae consona".³⁶ Kerr seems to ignore, finally, that Aquinas himself, in this regard, perceived the tension between Platonic and Aristotelian ontology. He then changed his mind and finally found a solution to the problem, in an important work of his late phase, distinguishing between "communitas universale and communitas causae"³⁷.

2.3. Third argument: a nonsensical or useless thesis

Like the second argument, also the third was first put forward by Peter Geach and later developed by Anthony Kenny. In this case too the point of departure is a Fregean intuition about the notion of being or existence. So, to understand the criticism of Geach and Kenny, it is first of all important to clarify Frege's conception of existence.

One of the German logician's leading insights was to grasp that numbers do not refer to objects, as might seem at first glance, but to concepts. This is clear with regard to the number "zero". When we say that the planet Venus has zero moons ("Die Venus hat 0 Monde"), in that case, there is no moon or aggregate of moons of which anything can be said ("so ist gar kein Mond oder Aggregat von Monden da, von dem etwas ausgesagt werden könnte").³⁸ All we can say is:

what happens is that a property is assigned to the concept "Moon of Venus", namely that of including nothing under it.³⁹

Now, what Frege saw was that existence claims are very similar to claims about numbers, in that these too do not refer to objects, as it might seem, but to concepts. As is well known, this is conception that has been very influential in the history of analytic philosophy, and Frege's conception can be summed up in the slogan, referring to concepts: "Affirmation of existence is in fact nothing but denial of the number nought"⁴⁰.

In other words, existence is not a first-level predication referred to individuals, but is a second-level predication referred to concepts. Thus, the proposition "Black swans exist, but extra-terrestrial intelligence do not" is not about black swans and extra-terrestrial intelligence as individuals, but about the

32 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Met. VII, 1038 b.

33 *De ente et essentia*, cap. 5; *Sum. Theol.*, I, q. 3, a. 4, ad 1; *Sum. C. Gent.*, I, 26.; *De pot.* q. 7, a. 2, ad 4 et ad 6; *De div. Nom.* 5, l. 2. Gaven Kerr, "Aquinas, Stump, and the Nature of a Simple God", *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 90, no. 3 (2016).

34 *In De causis*, lectio 2 et lectio 10; *De subst. separ.* cap. 8 et 14; *Expositio De ebdomadibus*, lectio 2.

35 *Sum. Theol.*, I, q. 44, a. 1; *Sum. C. Gent.* I, 28.

36 *Sum. Theol.*, I, q. 6, a. 4, co; *In De div. nom.*, Proemium.

37 *In Metaph.*, X, l. 3, n. 3 et 4, that will be quoted later. Jean-François Courtine, *Inventio analogiae: Métaphysique et ontothéologie* (Vrin, 2005).

38 Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, § 46, 59.

39 *Ibid.*

40 Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, § 53.

concept “black swan” or the property of “being a black swan” and the concept “extra-terrestrial intelligence” or the property of “being an extra-terrestrial intelligence”. On these grounds, the proposition may be better reformulated as “the property ‘being a black swan’ is greater than zero, while the property of ‘being an extra-terrestrial intelligence’ is equal to zero”. Or again: “the concept or set ‘black swan’ is not empty, while the concept or set ‘extra-terrestrial intelligence’ is empty”. In the jargon of contemporary ontology: “there is at least one x such that x is a black swan, while there is no x such that x is an extra-terrestrial intelligence”.

Now, Geach and Kenny accept this sense of “being”, or rather of the expression “exists” taken in the sense of “there is”. Geach calls it the “there is sense” on the lines of Frege’s “es-gibt-Existenz”, while Kenny prefers to call it “*anitas*” to recall that this kind of existence is just a reply to the question “*an sit?*” (“is there?”).⁴¹

Nevertheless, unlike Russell and Quine, both Geach and Kenny believe that there is another sense of “existence”: following Frege’s notion of “*Wirklichkeit*”, Geach called this the “present actuality sense”, while Kenny calls it “individual existence”⁴².

To understand the distinction between these two types of existence, we may consider two examples put forward by Kenny:

- (a) “Black swans exist, but extra-terrestrial intelligence do not.”
- (b) “The Great Pyramid still exists, but the Library of Alexandria does not.”⁴³

As we have just seen, it is clear that in (a), the reference is to a concept or property “being a black swan” and “being an extra-terrestrial intelligence”, and in the case of the black swans it means that the concept is not empty, or has a number of exemplifications greater than zero, while in the case of the extra-terrestrial intelligence it means that the concept is empty, or has zero exemplifications.

This is not how things stand with (b): here we refer to an individual object that *still exists*, while the Library of Alexandria *no longer exists*.

In other words, the first (a) is specific existence, expressed by the quantifier, but with a temporal prefix. The Great Pyramid (b) is individual existence, an item being identified as an individual, and with a temporal predicate attached. Something similar can be said about Julius Caesar, as Kenny pointed out:

when we say ‘Julius Caesar is no more’ or ‘Julius Caesar no longer exists’, we are not talking about a species: we are talking about a historic individual, and saying that he is no longer alive, no longer among the inhabitants of the universe.⁴⁴

Geach has explained well what happens in cases like this: “Existence in the sense of actuality (*Wirklichkeit*) is several times over emphatically distinguished in Frege’s works from the existence expressed by ‘there is a so-and-so’ (es gibt ein -). Indeed, he says that neglect of this distinction is about the grossest fallacy possible — a confusion between concepts of different level. Actuality is attributable to individual objects; the existence expressed by ‘there is a -’ is not. When we ask whether there is a so-and-so, we are asking concerning some *kind* of objects whether anything at all *is* that sort of thing; and we cannot ever sensibly affirm or deny existence, in this sense, of an individual object, any more than we can sensibly ask whether a *thing* [in the example above: “the Great Pyramid” or “Julius Caesar”] rather than a kind of things [in the example above: “black swans”], is frequent or infrequent”.⁴⁵

With this much clear, we are now in a position to understand the criticisms that Geach and Kenny level at the doctrine of God as subsistent Being itself. For when we say that God is Being itself, in which

41 Geach, “XI.—Form and Existence”, 262–68; Geach, “Aquinas” in Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter T. Geach, *Three philosophers* (Blackwell, 1961), 88–91; Anthony Kenny, “*Quidditas* and *anitas* after Frege”, *Giornale di Metafisica* 38, no. 1 (2016): 111–12.

42 Geach, “XI.—Form and Existence”, 262–268; Geach, “Aquinas”, 88–91; Anthony Kenny, *Aquinas* (OUP, 1980), 50; Kenny, *Aquinas on Being*, 42.

43 Kenny, *Aquinas on Being*, 42. See also Alejandro Llano, *Metaphysics and language* (G. Olms, 2005), 218 ff.

44 Kenny, *Aquinas on Being*, 42.

45 Peter Geach, “What Actually Exists”, *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 42, no. 1 (1968): 65.

of the two senses distinguished are we to take his “being”? As “*anitas*” or as “individual existence”? Kenny has convincingly shown that Aquinas continually confuses these two senses of existence, using these two senses of being indifferently. In any case, whichever sense of being is in play, the doctrine of God as subsistent Being itself is unworkable.

Let us take the first hypothesis: the being in question is precisely the “*anitas*”, which is to say a reply to the question “*an sit?*” (is there?). In that case, the identity in God between His essence and His existence leads to a clear nonsense, as we can see from a mini-dialogue proposed by Geach:

Theist: There is a God.

Atheist: So you say: but what sort of being is this God of yours?

Theist: Why I’ve just told you: There is a God, that’s what God is.⁴⁶

The example clearly shows the nonsense of the situation, because the reply to the “*an sit?*” (“is there?”) question is either “yes” or “no”, while the reply to the “what is?” question is a definition; and, for all their concision, “yes” and “no”, do not count as definitions.

Turning then to the second hypothesis, that God is identical to His being taken in the actuality sense, as life; in this case, Kenny observes, the theory would not be absurd, but would be useless to explain something that is typical of God, His essence. He writes:

If we take essence and existence in this way, there is no longer anything clearly absurd about the doctrine that in God essence and existence are not distinct. But what are we to make of the distinction between existence and essence in creatures? Can we say that Fido’s essence and Fido’s existence are distinct? Clearly we cannot do so if we mean that one could have the one without the other. For a dog to exist is simply for it to go on being a dog, and for a human being to continue to exist is for it to go on possessing its human nature or essence. Peter’s continuing to exist is the very same thing a Peter’s continuing to possess his essence; if he ceases to exist he ceases to be a human being, and vice versa.⁴⁷

If this is so, then the thesis of God as subsistent Being itself is of no use to pick out what differentiates Him from any other creature, given that both in God and in the creatures, essence and existence cannot be distinguished. Indeed, for Aquinas, an identity without entity is impossible, as well as an essence that exists before being actual.

In short, the third argument proposed by Kenny against the thesis of God as subsistent Being itself is that this thesis either is a nonsense or it tells us nothing about the specificity of God in comparison to His creatures.

It is interesting to note in conclusion that the two senses of being mentioned, as “*anitas*” and as “act of being” or “actuality”, are incompatible, and lead to a nonsense when applied to the thesis of God as “*esse tantum*”, as nothing other than being.

If, indeed, God is nothing other than the reply to the question “is there?”, then He is only existence, which is what Aquinas himself says. If, however, this is understood in the sense of actuality, then He is “still being”, being in act, being alive, which too Aquinas defends in the light of book Lambda of the *Metaphysics*. Yet, whatever could the notion of “pure life” mean? As Kenny points out with his customary vigour:

When Aquinas says that God is pure being, or subsistent being, he means that nothing more can be said about God’s essence other than God is (...). But if we take ‘esse’ in the sense of ‘life’ or ‘history’, then the notion of pure being is as empty as the notion of pure life or pure history. There could not be a life which consisted of nothing but just living, or a history uncontaminated by anything actually happening.⁴⁸

The notion of subsistent Being itself thus seems as far as could be from the contemporary idea of God as *Ereignis*, as event.

46 Geach, “Aquinas”, 89.

47 Kenny, *Aquinas*, 54.

48 Kenny, *Aquinas*, 59.

III. AQUINAS CONTRA AQUINAS: AN EXEGETICAL PARENTHESIS

Before proceeding to the *respondeo*, it is useful to open an exegetical parenthesis. For it is surprising to find that, for each of the objections raised against Aquinas's doctrine of God as subsistent Being itself, there are just as many texts by Aquinas himself that go in just the same direction as the criticisms. All in all, Aquinas seems to be unwittingly his own best critic. This is not surprising: if Aristotle was Plato's most acute critic, one understands why the "Aristotelian" Aquinas was the best critic of the "Platonist" Aquinas. On the other hand, if one thinks of the two different conceptions of being, one Platonist and the other Aristotelian, present in his work mentioned above, the situation will appear less paradoxical.

Let us take for instance the argument from univocity in the conception of a first principle that is Being itself. In his Commentary on the passage of *Metaphysics* Beta cited above, Aquinas shows himself in full agreement with Aristotle's criticism of Plato:

If there is something which is itself being and unity as something existing separately, it will be necessary to say that unity is the very same thing as being. But that which differs from being is non-being. Therefore it follows, according to the argument of Parmenides, that besides the one there is only non-being. Thus all things will have to be one, because it could not be held that that which differs from the one, which is essentially separate, is a being.⁴⁹

One could not be more explicit in rejecting Parmenidism.

Let us now consider the argument from the distinction between concept and object. In his commentary on the corresponding passages of Aristotle in which is made the clear distinction between universal form and individual substance, Aquinas shows that he understands the problem with rare clarity:

He says, then, that it was proved above in Book VII, where he treats of being, and especially of substance, that no universal can be a substance which subsists of itself because every universal is common to many. A universal also cannot be a subsisting substance because otherwise it would have to be one thing apart from the many, and then it could not be common but would be in itself a singular thing. (A singular thing) might be said to be common as a cause is. But the common aspect of a universal differs from that of a cause; for a cause is not predicated of its effects, since the same thing is not the cause of itself. But a universal is common in the sense of something predicated of many things; and thus it must be in some way a one-in-many, and not something subsisting apart from them. But being and unity must be predicated of all things in the most universal and common way. Hence those things which are called being and unity are not themselves subsisting substances, as Plato maintained.⁵⁰

One could not be more Aristotelian than this. Aquinas even makes a lapidary statement in this direction that should put paid to any doubts about his recognition of the difference between "name" and "predicate" or, to speak Fregeanly, between "individual object" and "universal concept": "It is impossible to think that there could be many of this individual."⁵¹

Lastly, as regards the third argument, to do with the distinction between two senses of being, Aquinas has many passages in which he clearly distinguishes between existence as "*anitas*" and existence as "act of being" or "actuality", as many authors in addition to Geach and Kenny have shown. The sore point of the question, as in the foregoing cases, is that Aquinas seems not to have made coherent use of all the notions and distinctions that he himself was aware of, using distinct notions indifferently according to the case in hand.

3. *Respondeo*

What then is to be done at this juncture? Should we abandon Thomas Aquinas and his onto-theology in the philosophy of religion and in contemporary theology? Do we need to take leave of the religious discourse that speaks of God as *Esse ipsum subsistens*? I do not think so, but think rather that, we can find

49 In *III Metaph.*, l. 12. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics* (Henry Regnery Co, 1961), html-edited by J. Kenny, O.P., 493.

50 In *X Metaph.*, l. 3. Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, 1963-1965 (translation slightly modified by me).

51 *Sum. Theol.*, I, q. 13, a. 9. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae: Latin text and English translation, introductions, notes, appendices and glossaries* (CUP, 2006), 83.

in Aquinas's writings an Aristotelian conception of God as Being, that is different from the Platonic one, that of God as "*esse tantum*". It is a conception in which the Being of God is a personal event.⁵²

In the coming pages I shall try to pull off a rather unusual operation: to show that, at the heart of the Thomistic metaphysics of being, there are the basic elements — deriving not so much from the neo-Platonic tradition as from the properly Aristotelian-Thomistic line — that make for a conception of being and of God that can integrate the notion of Event, which has been rightly called on in contemporary philosophy, both "analytic" and "continental". These elements came to light in my researches into the notion of being as "act of being of an essence" and of God as His being (leaving to one side the notion of being as *anitas* and as *esse tantum*, for all that these are present in Aquinas's writings).⁵³

3.1. "*Per modum verbi*": being as "second actuality"

The starting point for setting out the discovery I have recently made may be a passage in Aquinas's commentary on Aristotle's *De Interpretatione*:

Therefore, he says that the verb 'is' consignifies composition, because it does not principally signify it but as a consequence, for it first signifies that which comes into the intellect in the mode of actuality absolutely: for 'is,' stated just as such, signifies to be actual, and therefore signifies in the manner of a verb. Because actuality, which this verb 'is' chiefly signifies, is commonly the actuality of every form, either substantial or accidental act, and that is why when we want to signify some forms or act actually to be in some subject, we signify it by this verb 'is,' either simply or in a certain respect, in the other tenses. Therefore, this verb 'is' signifies composition as a consequence.⁵⁴

Three important points emerge from this very rich passage. The first is that "esse" is not "just existence", but "the actuality of every form, either substantial or accidental". It is in other words, something, beyond which there is nothing of that substance, whereas the "esse" as nothing but existing (of some existential Thomists) is something beyond which there is every form either substantial or accidental of that substance. The second is that there is a very close relation between being as "act" or as "actuality of each form" and its being expressed through the verbal form. The third is that, precisely because it is expressed by a verb, being can be conjugated, and so is intimately bound up with time and tense⁵⁵.

The text just cited is but an island, the tip of a submerged mountain within the thought of Aquinas, which has hitherto not been explored. To dive down into the crystal waters and explore this submerged

52 In a recent book Eleonore Stump, *The God of the Bible and the God of the philosophers* (Marquette Univ. Press, 2016) has proposed a conciliation, based on some texts by Aquinas, between the doctrine of God as "*esse tantum*" and that of God as "*id quod est*", that is between God as *being* and as *a being*. It is a very interesting proposal. However, if the being identical to the *id quod est* is the Platonic and neo-Platonic *esse tantum*, namely the being in itself, like "redness" or "whiteness" itself, then Stump's proposal seems to me to raise more problems than it solves. For *id quod est, a being*, is particular, and therefore it cannot be predicated of many things, whereas *esse, being*, "must be predicated of all things in the most universal and common way" (*In X Metaph.*, l. 3). To assert their identity, without further explanation — "somehow, in some way we do not understand" (Stump: 86) — in order to resolve the contrast between the God of the Bible and the God of the philosophers, means trying to resolve that contrast by introducing a contradiction: that between what must be predicated of all things (being) and what cannot be predicated of many things (a being). As we have seen, this is precisely the contradiction already identified by Aristotle against Plato, and later completely shared by Aquinas himself. "But being and unity must be predicated of all things in the most universal and common way. Hence those things which are called being and unity are not themselves subsisting substances, as Plato maintained" (*In X Metaph.*, l. 3. See footnote 40 and the Second Argument: the identity of Concept and Object). In the following pages I will try, by jettisoning the Platonic and neo-Platonic notion of God as *esse tantum*, which was not original to Aquinas, to identify the "missing link" between the conception of God as "being" and that of God as "person", namely the Aristotelian-Thomistic notion of being as "second act", as activity.

53 See also: Giovanni Ventimiglia, "Dio non "esiste" ma "avviene". Un punto d'incontro (medievale) fra filosofia analitica e teologia continentale", *Teoria* 37, no. 1 (Terza serie 12/1) (2017); Ventimiglia, "Ist Gott das Sein selbst?"; Giovanni Ventimiglia, "Dio come Essere ed Essere come Evento", *Giornale di Metafisica*, 1 (2016), 188-205; Giovanni Ventimiglia, "*Per modum verbi*: l'Essere come Evento secondo Tommaso d'Aquino", in *Un pensiero per abitare la frontiera: Sulle tracce dell'ontologia trinitaria di Klaus Hemmerle*, ed. Piero Coda, Alessandro Clemenzia and Julie A. Tremblay (Città Nuova, 2016).

54 *In I Peri herm.*, lect. 5. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's On Interpretation 1-5*, transl. by R. McNerny, Thomas Aquinas, *Selected writings* (Penguin Books, 1998), 480–81.

55 Especially on the first point see the very important articles by Gyula Klima, "The Semantic Principles Underlying St. Thomas Aquinas's Metaphysics of Being", *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 5 (1996); Gyula Klima, "Aquinas' Theory of the Copula and the Analogy of Being", *Logical Analysis and History of Philosophy* 5 (2002).

mountain, we have need of Aristotle's help, and in particular of the second book of the *De Anima*, where he distinguishes between "first actuality" and "second actuality". To understand this move, we appeal to the words of Aquinas's commentary on this text:

The word actuality has two senses, corresponding respectively to the possession of knowledge (*scientia*) and the actual exercise of knowledge (*considerare*). It is obvious that the soul is actuality in the first sense, viz. that of knowledge as possessed, for both sleeping and waking presuppose the existence of soul, and of these waking corresponds to actual knowing, sleeping to knowledge possessed but not employed, and in the history of the individual, knowledge comes before its employment or exercise.⁵⁶

The distinction between "first actuality" and "second actuality" is clear: the first picks out the possession of the capacities or habits, that are typical of an entity, while the second refers to their "active use", to their "exercise", to their "actuality". It should be noted here that the term "second actuality" is not found in Aristotle. It is an "invention" of the translators of his works. In *De anima*, the term corresponding to "second actuality" is simply "energheia".

Another text by Aquinas from the same Commentary explains the same difference using the example of a "grammarian":

The third division is of act into two kinds, one way as knowledge is in act, in another as the exercise of knowledge is in act. The difference between these two acts can be investigated from their corresponding potentialities. For someone is called a grammarian potentially before he acquired the habit of grammar by learning and discovering, and this potentiality is actualized when he acquires the habit of science. But there is also a potentiality with respect to the exercise of the knowledge, before one is actually considering it, and this potentiality is realized when one actually considers. So both knowledge and the use of it are acts.⁵⁷

We note that the difference between first and second actualities comes out in the difference between the noun "*scientia*" (though the Latin could also be rendered as "knowledge") and the verb "*considerare*" ("knowing"), since the last one is an activity.

What has this to do with being? Rather: when we say that, for Aquinas, being is the "act of being", which is the actuality in play: the first or the second? In this connection, I have discovered — discovery within the discovery — an evolution in Aquinas's thought. Early on, he identified being with the first actuality but, in a later phase, without rethinking, he unhesitatingly identified it with the second. In his commentary on the third book of the *Sentences*, Aquinas writes:

Being (...) is the actuality of an entity resulting from its fundamental elements, in the way that illuminating (*lucere*) is the actuality of what is luminous (*actus lucentis*).⁵⁸

The sense of being as *actus entis* is here precisely the activity typical of the essence, which is to say, being as act, as illuminating is the activity, the actuality, of what is luminous. The example clearly move "esse" from the level of the first actuality — the level attributed by Aquinas himself to it in his early works (In I Sent.) — to that of the second, to that of the actual exercise of the activity of being by an essence.

The slide in the sense of "esse" from the first actuality of the essence to the second is clearly visible in later passages in Aquinas's works. Indeed, in the *De potentia* and the *Summa Theologiae*, the "*actus entis*" is clearly transformed into "*actus essendi*" because it is taken not in the manner of the first actuality but in that of the second, which is to say as the activity of existing on the part of the essence, and this is marked by the move from the noun "*ens*" to the verb "*essendi*".⁵⁹ Likewise, we should not forget what Aquinas says in the commentary on the *De interpretatione* cited earlier, namely that "being" is a verb rather than a noun and that the "*actus essendi*" is the actuality — or indeed, the activity — of being of an essence. In the

56 In II *De anima*, l. 1. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's On the Soul*, transl. by R. McInerny, Aquinas, *Selected writings*, 411.

57 In II *De anima*, l. 1. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's On the Soul*, transl. by R. McInerny, Aquinas, *Selected writings*, 414.

58 In III *Sent.*, d. 6, q. 2, a. 2. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences of Petrus Lombardus*, transl. by Anthony Kenny in *Aquinas on Being*, 59 (revisited by me).

59 *De pot.*, q. 7 a. 2 ad 1; *Sum. Theol.*, I, q. 3, a. 4, ad 2.

commentary on the *Sentences*, Aquinas is lapidary on the point: “That by which one is is the actuality of being, that is to say *esse*, just as that by which one runs is the activity of running”.⁶⁰

3.2. *Actus secundus est perfectior quam actus primus: God’s being*

What consequences does the notion of being as “second actuality” have for the conception of God as being? In a fine passage of the *Summa contra Gentiles*, we find:

The act of understanding (*intelligere*) is to the intellect (*intellectus*) as being (*esse*) is to essence (*essentia*). But, as we have proved, God’s being is His essence. Therefore, God’s understanding is His intellect. But the divine intellect is God’s essence; otherwise, it would be an accident in God. Therefore, the divine understanding is His essence.

Again, the second act is more perfect than first act, as consideration is more perfect than knowledge. But the knowledge or intellect of God is His essence, if, as we have proved, He is intelligent; for, as is clear from the above, no perfection belongs to Him by participation but rather by essence. If therefore, His consideration is not His essence, something will be nobler and more perfect than His essence. Thus, God will not be at the summit of perfection and goodness and hence will not be first.⁶¹

Two important points can be clearly gathered from this passage. First, as regards being, it emerges clearly that being, which is a matter of second actuality, is not in the least a sort of “secondary” actuality, since the “second actuality is more perfect than first actuality, as knowing is more perfect than knowledge”. Moreover, this very special sort of “second actuality” is not a mere addition, since it is a necessary condition for the existence of the first actuality: a sort of second actuality that is prior to the first.

Second, as regards Being, the passage makes evident how the famous doctrine of the identity in God between essence and existence, which had for centuries occupied the thought of the “onto-theologians” so scorned by Heidegger, should rather have been understood as the identity of the first actuality with the second, or as the identity of God’s essence with His typical activity as expressed by verbs. In the *Compendium Theologiae*, we read:

God must be His own understanding (*intelligere*). Since “to understand” (*intelligere*) is second act (*actus secundus*), for example, to consider (*considerare*), whereas the corresponding first act (*actus primus*) is the intellect (*intellectus*) or knowledge (*scientia*), any intellect that is not its own understanding (*intelligere*) is related to its understanding (*intelligere*) as potency to act (...). In God, however, who is pure act, there is nothing that is related to anything else as potency to act. Accordingly God must be His own understanding (*intelligere*). Furthermore, the intellect (*intellectus*) is related to its act of understanding (*intelligere*) as essence (*essentia*) is related to existence (*esse*). But God understands through His essence, and His essence is His existence (*essentia autem sua est suum esse*). Therefore His intellect is His act of understanding.⁶²

The very same thing as holds for God’s understanding holds for His willing:

Again, God’s will is the same as His intellect and His essence. But God’s intellect is His act of understanding, and His essence is His existing (*et essentia est suum esse*). Therefore His will must be His act of willing. And so we see clearly that God’s will is not opposed to His simplicity.⁶³

Here too, the texts bring out two features of the situation: one ontological and the other theological.

In the first direction, there are two things that emerge: (i) being is not like breathing only quieter, as Ryle put it. That is, it is not a sort of basic activity of all things, the last that will be lost when the entity ceases to exist, letting out its last breath of existence. It is not an activity that is “too thin to be possible” as Hughes has expressed it⁶⁴. In the contrary, being is a full activity that includes everything a being is and does. (ii) Being is not an activity different from all the other activities and actualities of a given entity.

60 *In I Sent.*, d. 8, q. 5, a. 2. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences of Petrus Lombardus*, transl. by Anthony Kenny in *Aquinas on Being*, 59.

61 *Sum. c. Gent.*, I, c. 45.

62 *Comp. Theol.*, I, c. 31, emphasis added.

63 *Comp. Theol.*, I, c. 34, emphasis added.

64 Christopher Hughes, *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God: An Investigation in Aquinas’ Philosophical Theology* (Cornell Univ. Press, 1989), 21. See also the reply by Barry Miller, *The Fullness of Being: A New Paradigm for Existence* (Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 82–169.

Rather it is the sum and totality of all the entity's actualities⁶⁵. On this view, being in an intelligent being is not "like" his understanding, but rather "is" his understanding, namely the actuality of his understanding, just as it "is" his willing in its actuality; in short his being is "the actuality of all his acts". Rather than a "thing" or a mere "element" or "part" of the entity, whose other part or element would be the essence, for Aquinas, being is actuality in the Aristotelian sense of "active use", exercise and activity of the essence. The "*essentia*" is thus nothing but the substantivisation of the verb "*esse*", which is what it is after all; and, in its turn, this "*esse*" expresses the inclusive act of all the entity's second actualities.

As a matter of theology, several important points emerge for the conception of God as Being. In the first place, the being of God is clearly a matter of second actuality, while His essence is a matter of first actuality. Since He is pure act, nothing in His essence remains unactualised in second actuality. Secondly, God is not to be understood as subsistent Being itself (*ipsum esse subsistens*) but as His being (*suum esse*).⁶⁶ From this three points follow.

- (i) The being of God should not be expressed with the article: "the" Being. After all, Latin has no articles and the context indicates that translating with the article is a mistake. God is not here understood as "the" being, but simply as being. He is not the hypostatisation of a Platonic idea, He is not a genus (see above: first objection).
- (ii) The being of God or, rather being God, is accompanied in all these texts and others in Aquinas by the possessive pronoun: hence "*suum esse*". God is not "Being itself" but "His being". This means that, considered as being, God is not the colour common to all things nor the great ocean of which all things are made. God is His being and we, in our way, are our being. Therefore there cannot be any risk of univocity (see above: first objection) and any confusion in this case between an individual object and a common concept (see above: second objection).
- (iii) The word "being" should be written in lower case and never in upper. For it is a verb, not a name. It is the verb that expresses all God's activities, the second actualities, which are, after all, the activities of a living person. And a verb is written with a lower-case initial. To substantivize it with the capital letter is to transform God's being (*esse Dei*), conceived as the act of all activities of a living being, into a being in the neutral, syntactic, sense of "there is" a God (*quod Deum esse*), that is to say to confuse a first order predicate with a second order one (see above: third objection).

Please note that the notion of being in the — Platonic — sense of pure existence or pure "there is-ness", is not original to Aquinas, whereas the notion of being in the sense of "second actuality", according to my own research, is a correct interpretation by Aquinas of Aristotle's notion of being and an original approach of Aquinas in the history of medieval philosophy to the problem of being.⁶⁷

In general and to sum up, we can see that, unlike some scholastic interpretations, the authentic Aquinas's doctrine of God as "*suum esse*" has little to do with a general, static, inert, impersonal genus, nor with an eventless life, where nothing happens.

IV. CONCLUSIONS, ISSUES AND RESEARCH PROSPECTS

Is, then, the doctrine of God as *ipsum esse subsistens* coherent? If we take this doctrine in the sense that God is *the* Being itself, then it is indeed incoherent. But if we take it instead in the sense that God is "*suum esse*", *His* being, where this being is a second actuality, a word that sums up all God's activities, then the

⁶⁵ This is a point that Kenny has explained well in Kenny, *Aquinas*, 59 and Keller in Keller, *Sein oder Existenz? Die Auslegung des Seins bei Thomas von Aquin in der heutigen Scholastik*.

⁶⁶ Stephen Brock, "L'*ipsum esse* è platonismo?", in *Tommaso d'Aquino e l'oggetto della metafisica*, ed. Stephen Brock (Armando, 2004); Enrico Berti, "La critica dei filosofi analitici alla concezione tomistica dell'essere", *Rivista di estetica* 49, no. 7-22 (2012).

⁶⁷ Ventimiglia, "Ist Gott das Sein selbst?"; See also Ventimiglia, "Tommaso d'Aquino e le dottrine non scritte di Platone"; Regarding Aristotle see: Aryeh Kosman, *The activity of being: An essay on Aristotle's ontology* (Harvard Univ. Press, 2013).

doctrine takes on philosophical plausibility as such, as well as interest also for contemporary philosophy and theology.

As is well known, both in contemporary “continental” philosophy (from Bergson to Levinas by way of Heidegger) and in the “analytical” tradition (from Russell to Sider by way of Whitehead and Quine: the four-dimensionalists) there has grown up a philosophy of the event or of events. Albeit with different emphases and various approaches, the majority of philosophers who have revived the notion of event agree that events are expressed by “verbs” and have to do with activities that happen rather than simply exist or subsist. Although he does not use the term “event”, in the texts we have been revealing, reading and commenting, Aquinas seems to have clearly developed a conception of being and of Being as event, applying the Aristotelian distinction between “first” and “second” actuality to apply respectively to essence and being.⁶⁸

There remains a not inconsiderable problem, which I have deliberately left to last: if being is intimately connected to the verb and, so, to the tenses that characterise its conjugation, it is connected also to time; how, then, are we to conceive the Being of God, given that He is eternal?

Must we conceive of the “verbs” applicable to God as having only a present tense? In that case, would we not lose all the richness of the tensed conjugation of the verbs that express His activities⁶⁹? What are we to make of the divine perfection, if it lacks all the marvellous nuances of the past, the future, the subjunctive and the conditional? And, after all, what are we to make of divine simplicity, as Hughes has shown, if we admitted the possibility of a certain temporality in God?⁷⁰

But perhaps all these questions, which do indeed seem to undermine the very notion of God as Being, not only pose problems but also open up new opportunities and lines of research, both in philosophy and in theology, to re-examine in depth the notions of eternity, simplicity and divine perfection. In other words, the questions hide the need to re-think the relation between Being and time and, perhaps to re-configure the notion of God’s eternity not in terms of the absence of time, but in terms of “God’s time”.⁷¹

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— *Summa Theologiae*, t. IV-XII, 1888-1906;

⁶⁸ Usually the Aristotelianism of Aquinas was considered as an argument in support of the onto-theological character of his metaphysics (see for example Puntel, *Sein und Gott*), and, instead, his Platonism an argument against the accusation of onto-theology. We have shown that things are richer and more complex than they seem. The Aristotelian distinction between first act and second act, applied to the understanding of the notion of being, supports instead the redemption of Aquinas’ metaphysics from the Heideggerian accusation of being onto-theological. To be precise, Heidegger himself was not always critical of the Aristotelian notion of being. Indeed, in his last years he had been rehabilitating precisely the Aristotelian notion of being as “dynamis” and “energheia”, which Aquinas himself considered as central in his own ontology, as we have seen. See: Franco Volpi, “La “riabilitazione” della dynamis e dell’energheia in Heidegger”, *Aquinas* 33, no. 3-27 (1990).

⁶⁹ This matter should not be at all taken for granted in Aquinas’ work. See: In I. Sent, d.8, q. 2, a. 3; d. 9, q.2, a.2.

⁷⁰ See e.g. Christopher Hughes, “Aquinas on the Nature and Implications of Divine Simplicity”, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 10, no. 2 (2018).

⁷¹ See: Ryan T. Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God* (OUP, 2016); Taneli Kukkonen, “Eternity”, in *The Oxford handbook of medieval philosophy*, ed. John Marenbon (OUP, 2012); Robert Pasnau, “On Existing All at Once”, in *God, eternity, and time*, ed. Christian Tapp and Edmund Runggaldier (Ashgate, 2011); William L. Craig, *Time and eternity: Exploring God’s relationship to time* (Crossway Books, 2001); Brian Leftow, *Time and eternity* (Cornell Univ. Press, 1991); Paul Helm, *Eternal God. A Study of God without Time* (OUP, 1988); Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, “Atemporal Duration: A Reply to Fitzgerald”, *The Journal of Philosophy* 84, no. 4 (1987); Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, “Eternity”, *The Journal of Philosophy* 78, no. 8 (1981).

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