

On the Natural Knowledge of the Real Distinction of Essence and Existence

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Introduction

IN THE FOURTH CHAPTER of his work *On Being and Essence* or *De Ente et Essentia*, St. Thomas Aquinas distinguishes essence and existence in physical things in an argument known as the *intellectus essentiae*, or knowledge of essence, argument. In recent literature this argument and the character of its conclusion often is depicted as merely conceptual in nature. Whereas earlier commentators¹ held that the argument demonstrates (at least indirectly) or intuitively manifests real distinction of essence and existence in physical things, from the 1960s onward medievalists and

¹ For example, earlier in the 20th century, R. Garrigou-LaGrange, in (among many other places) *God: His Existence and His Nature*, trans. Dom Bede Rose O.S.B. (New York: Herder, 1936), 555 in the Epilogue; also Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald Phelan, ed. Ralph McInerny (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 131, note 117. Many of the great commentators held this view, e.g., John of St. Thomas (cited to this effect by J. Maritain in his passage cited above), *Curs. Phil., Log.*, part 2, q. 3, a. 1; and there is more than a shade of this understanding in Domingo Báñez, who seems to interpret it even more widely, *Scholastica Commentaria in Primam Partem Summa Theologiae St. Thomae Aquinatis* (Valencia: Editorial F. C. V. A., 1934), 141, commentary on q. 3, a. 4: “Caeterum quidditas aliarum rerum praeter Deum, abstrahit ab esse actu,

Thomist scholars of note,² as well as non-Thomists,³ have insisted that the argument achieves only a conceptual distinction between essence and existence. This sea-change in the appreciation of the *intellectus essentiae* argument reflects deeper metaphysical and epistemic shifts. Accordingly, it merits further consideration.

Within the brief compass of one essay it is not possible to respond in detail to all the arguments brought by critics of the

ven non esse actu. Unde perfecte potest diffiniri secundum hanc abstractionem.”—“As to the rest, the quiddity of things other than God abstracts from existing or not existing. Thus the quiddity can be perfectly defined as an abstraction.” This point seems to be taken by Bañez as a necessary sign of the truth—for which he argues in the paragraphs preceding this passage—that *esse* is the first act of every form and being. The most renowned commentators on Aquinas—setting aside Suarez, who clearly differs with St. Thomas—seem to show a marked aversion to treating arguments for real distinction that are rooted in our knowledge of essence as merely conceptual. For a more recent assessment within this tradition, see Lawrence Dewan, OP, “St. Thomas, Joseph Owens, and the Real Distinction Between Being and Essence,” *The Modern Schoolman* 61 (1984): 145–56.

² Among several other authors, the following are conspicuous: Leo Sweeney in his *A Metaphysics of Authentic Existentialism* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1965); idem, “Existence/Essence in Thomas Aquinas’s Early Writings,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 37 (1963): 97–131; Joseph Owens, “Quiddity and Real Distinction in St. Thomas Aquinas,” *Medieval Studies* 28 (1965): 1–22; idem, “A Note on the Approach to Thomistic Metaphysics,” *The New Scholasticism* 28 (1954): 454–76; Armand Maurer’s introductory essay to St. Thomas Aquinas’s *On Being and Essence*, trans. and ed. by Armand Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Mediaeval Studies, 1968), 7–27; John Wippel, *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1984), chapter five.

³ Anthony Kenny, *Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980). Of course, unlike the Thomistically-inclined medievalist critics, Kenny considers the real distinction between essence and existence itself to constitute a conceptual confusion—largely because his nominalist presuppositions do not permit him to entertain the possibility that essence may—as St. Thomas affirms—exist in two radically distinct ways, in one way in the thing, and in another in the intellect. This appears similar to the Russellian insistence that the mind properly knows not being and essence, but propositions.

validity of the *intellectus essentiae* proof. Instead this essay attempts to do four things:

1. It urges considerations that militate against a merely conceptual or logical reading of St. Thomas's argument;
2. it responds to the most strategic criticisms of the validity of the argument;
3. it attempts to explain and properly emphasize the superior natural accessibility and intuitive force of the *intellectus essentiae* argument while also briefly suggesting the importance of its implications; and finally
4. it highlights the antirealist and fideist implications that ensue upon the denial of the validity of the *intellectus essentiae* argument.

Arguably these last implications are not unrelated to consequent distortions in theological and philosophic method that meld with postmodern themes.

As to the order of exposition: first I will analyze the *intellectus essentiae* argument and address what seem to be the most strategic objections to it; secondly, I will address the importance of this argument and the radical implications cast by its denial.

I. Summary and Analysis of Argument

As articulated in *De Ente* the argument is extremely succinct. It occurs in the context of attempting to explain why it is that separate substances are not—as beings lacking matter—effectually pure acts or so many gods. For were matter to be the only potential principle, then insofar as separate substances lack matter clearly such substances would not be limited by any potential principle. To make things more difficult, it is the consistent teaching of Aquinas that we have no quidditative knowledge whatsoever either of God or of separate substance.⁴

The first step in St. Thomas's argument addressing this issue begins by making a distinction between essence and existence in physical things. This distinction is based upon the truth that within

⁴ Cf. chapters 41–44 of *Summa contra Gentiles* Book 3.

the act whereby we know material quiddity we do not—in that selfsame act—know existence. It goes as follows:

For whatever is not in the concept of an essence or quiddity comes to it from outside and makes a composition with the essence, because no essence is able to be understood without its parts. But every essence or quiddity can be understood without knowing anything about its being: I can understand, for instance, what a man or a phoenix is and still not know whether it has being in actual nature. Therefore it is clear that being is other than essence or quiddity. Unless perhaps there is something whose quiddity is its very being, and this is not possible unless the thing be one and primary. . . .⁵

It is noteworthy that it is the essence of which Thomas speaks, and not merely the concept of the essence. That is, his language here is first-intentional language—his conclusion is that “being is other than essence or quiddity,” not simply that “being is other than the concept of essence or quiddity” although this too is true. Moreover, his choice of example is conspicuous, namely a real physical being (man) and an imaginary one (the phoenix). It is true that the phoenix example is distracting, inasmuch as essence as referring to a possible that God might create is distinct from essence as referring to a real principle of being in this given created order. But the character of the argument may be sustained quite apart from this element.

There is reason for Thomas to advert to the phoenix example. Because without *esse* no essence will be, and inasmuch as anything that God may possibly cause—which is to say, anything which is not intrinsically contradictory—is such that God knows what its

⁵ Translation of passages from *De Ente et Essentia* are from the Leonine Edition of St. Thomas's works, *Opera Omnia*, vol. 43 (Rome: Editori di San Tommaso, 1976), 376–77: “Quicquid enim non est de intellectu essentie uel quiditatis, hoc est adueniens extra et faciens compositionem cum essentia, quia nulla essentia sine hiis que sunt partes essentie intelligi potest. Omnis autem essentia uel quiditas potest intelligi sine hoc quod aliquid intelligatur de esse suo: possum enim intelligere quid est homo uel fenix et tamen ignorare an esse habeat in rerum natura; ergo patet quod esse est aliud ab essentia uel quiditate. Nisi forte sit aliqua res cuius quiditas sit ipsum suum esse, et hec res non potest esse nisi una et prima. . . .”

essential principle *would be*, there is some sense in speaking of substances that God could create and of their essences as possibles. Any non-selfcontradictory finite quiddity taken apart from *esse* is in relation to God a possible. The phoenix example highlights this truth that quiddity is not simply of itself actual, as it includes existence neither as an essential note of an essence nor as one of the formal parts of the essence, nor as identical with essence.

Nonetheless, clearly essence as a real principle of being in the actually existing universe is a better metaphysical and epistemic starting point for us than is an imaginary being. For while God can create anything that is not intrinsically contradictory, we only know what God causes or even might cause in relation either to real evidence of actual nature or to supernatural revelation. This is to say that even our knowledge of the possible presupposes prior contact with actual being, and that we abstract essences from actually existing things. Hence what is naturally possible on the supposition of a given order of nature is distinct from what is absolutely possible to the power of God, and our reasoning regarding the real must proceed on the basis of the first, i.e., our reasoning most fruitfully begins with what is naturally possible on the supposition of the given order of nature: on the basis of essence as a real principle of actual being, or actualized essence. For we do not know all the ways in which God is imitable, do not know all that is possible to God, and know whatever we do know in relation to the order of being and nature actually caused by God. For these epistemic reasons, the abstraction of essence from actual being must take methodological precedence over essence identified as a possible in relation to God, although the second is implied and required by the first. If we read the phoenix example aright, we read it as a reference to the datum that essence as such is not, save through existential act, such that there are determinate essences creatable by God that are not created. But we know this to be true only because, first, we abstractively cognize essence derived from real being in the actual created order established by God, and so realize that essence is a potential principle in relation to supervening existential act.

Yet for the purpose of the *intellectus essentiae* argument any instance of essence as a real principle of being—man, for example—is sufficient. Even the essence of a once-but-no-longer real being,

such as the T-Rex, will suffice for the adequacy of the argument as pertaining to essence as a real principle. For in the selfsame act wherein we know such essence we do not formally regard existence, although it is doubtless true that the starting point for such abstraction is an actual being and hence an actualized essence.

Ergo, the seemingly anomalous aspect of the consideration of the phoenix or of an imaginary being—"seeming" because this consideration is imposed upon Thomas by the need to indicate the ontological status of finite quiddity in itself *vis-à-vis* God as a mere possible—does not imply that for St. Thomas the original foundation of our knowledge of essence is other than our abstractive cognition of it from *ens in rerum naturam*. For if nothing is, there is nothing to abstract. Rather, because there is an actual order of nature, essence as a real principle can be abstractively cognized, and when it is, it is realized that the object of this cognition does not include nor is it equivalent with existence. As we have seen, however, "Everything that does not belong to the concept of an essence or quiddity comes to it from outside and enters into composition with the essence, because no essence can be understood without its parts." Since we know essence without thereby in the same act knowing existence, in physical things essence must really be distinct from existence.

This raises the question what St. Thomas means by the "parts" of essence. It is quite clear throughout Thomas's work that he does not think that we easily or often gain comprehensive knowledge of the essences of material things. Because we do not possess such comprehensive knowledge, one might wonder what is to prevent existence itself from being an occult or hidden note of some physical being? If by "parts of essence" St. Thomas were to mean the "notes of the definition of an essence," then—because we do not know material quiddities sufficiently even to know their essential differences—the *intellectus essentiae* argument would appear unfounded because it would be predicated upon *ignorance*.

The critic might put it this way: "No essence can be understood without its parts"—but if "parts of essence" means the notes of a thing's definition we do not according to St. Thomas himself know all the "parts" of essence in most physical beings. Therefore, we cannot determine whether existence is really distinct from essence or quiddity in material things.

If “parts of essence” meant “notes of the definition” then this argument might hold. But this does not appear to be what St. Thomas means by the “parts” of essence. This is clear from the fifth chapter of *De Ente et Essentia* in which Thomas acknowledges that we do not know the essential differences of material natures. As he puts it:

For in sensible things their very essential differences are unknown to us; and thus they are signified through accidental differences that arise from essential differences, just as a cause is signified through its effect: thus ‘biped’ is posited as the difference of man.⁶

Now clearly he cannot have intended in the immediately preceeding chapter to claim that we possess sufficient knowledge of the “parts” of essence to conclude to a distinction of existence and essence in physical things, and *then* continued to argue *in the very next chapter* that *we do not know the parts of most physical things taken in exactly that meaning*. It is not impossible for an author unwittingly to contradict himself. But to say that Thomas does so within the compass of two brief chapters when another plausible reading is available seems unreasonable. Accordingly, since in the *intellectus essentiae* proof Thomas does not use second-intentional language—he speaks of essence and not merely of the concept of essence as being really distinct from existence (“being is other than essence or quiddity”)—we ought not to interpret “parts” in a manner that clearly will require us to hold a conclusion that contradicts that of St. Thomas *unless* either (a) no other meaning is reasonably available, or (b) we have some other pressing reason to suppose that Thomas has fallen into self-contradiction.

For this reason Joseph Bobik seems to be correct that the “parts” of the essences of physical things in question are not the *notes* of the definition of an essence, but the generic or most formal parts of essence in physical being: namely form and matter.⁷ After all,

⁶ Leonine: “In rebus enim sensibilibus etiam ipse differentie essentialis ignote sunt; unde significantur per differentias accidentales quae ex essentialibus oriuntur, sicut causa significatur per suum effectum; sicut bipes ponitur differentia hominis.”

⁷ See Joseph Bobik, *Aquinas on Being and Essence, A Translation and Interpretation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965), 163–70.

where else *can* we begin in considering separate substances than with our knowledge of physical things? We have no quidditative knowledge of separate substances whatsoever, a position that Thomas holds throughout his life. If we are then to reach essence and existence as real principles we can only garner them from physical things, because we have no direct access to them in either separate substances or God. For precisely the same reason that the phoenix example, while necessary, is nonetheless not reflective of the necessary starting point of human cognition of essence, the knowledge of the real distinction of essence and existence must be founded upon the knowledge of physical beings. This reason is that actuality is absolutely prior to possibility. Hence we must ground our knowledge of the real distinction of essence and existence in the only actual evidence available to us, which is the knowledge of essence and existence in physical beings. Human beings by nature lack quidditative knowledge of God and of separate substances, whereas we do have natural knowledge of essence in physical things.

Once we have established real distinction of essence and existence in physical things, it will then be reasonable to inquire further—as does St. Thomas when at the end of the *intellectus essentiae* argument he raises the *hypothesis* of the reality of a being in which essence and existence are identical. *If* we know essence and existence as real principles, *then* it will be meaningful to ask whether these principles may in any other case whatsoever be identical. But in order for this question to refer to *real principles* it is necessary that these principles be grasped as such at the initial stage of inquiry.

No argument can transmit to its conclusion what is not antecedently present in the premises. If there is knowledge of essence and existence as real and distinct principles in physical things, then we can meaningfully inquire as to the hypothetical case wherein they might be really identified, and conclude as does St. Thomas. That is, *if* there were indeed such a being in which essence and existence were identical, *then* there *could only be one* such being, because all the ways in which manyness accrue to being require potency and such a being *ex hypothesi* would lack any potential principle. But if we fail to know essence and existence as real principles in physical beings at the start, *then we will have no warrant for concluding anything about these as real principles at the end.*

To put the matter differently, *if we do not know these principles as real principles in the beings that are proportionate to our knowing powers, any conclusion we draw about them may be merely logical, and these principles themselves may then be chimeric rather than real.* Only if we are content with a purely conceptual conclusion does it make sense to begin with a purely conceptual distinction. But St. Thomas's conclusion is real—he does not use second-intentional language. Accordingly, to read the distinction at this phase as conceptual is either to distort the argument or to claim that Thomas unwittingly and confusedly drew real conclusions from purely conceptual premises.

But even if it be ceded that the argument must begin with our knowledge of material being, and that the parts of essence referred to by the argument are those of form and matter, it may be asked how we certainly know that form and matter *are* the generic parts of essence. And there may nonetheless still be lingering doubts as to whether existence may somehow be an occult or hidden note of essence. To address these concerns, it is helpful to remember that according to St. Thomas the proper object of the intellect is *quiddity in corporeal matter*. In *Summa Theologiae* 1, q. 84, a. 7, St. Thomas writes that “the proper object of the human intellect, which is united to a body, is a quiddity or nature existing in corporeal matter; and through such natures of visible things it rises to a certain knowledge of things invisible.”⁸ The latter point is as conspicuous as the former—we rise to a certain knowledge of separate substances—the subject matter of the fourth chapter of *De Ente et Essentia*—from the knowledge of material quiddity.

In q. 85, a. 6 of the *prima pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas argues that:

... every faculty, as such, is per se directed to its proper object; and things of this kind are always the same. Hence, as long as the faculty exists, its judgment concerning its own proper object does not fail.—But the proper object of the intellect is the “quiddity” of a thing; and hence, properly speaking, the intellect is not at fault concerning this quiddity; whereas it may go astray

⁸ “Intellectus autem humani, qui est coniunctus corpori, proprium obiectum est quidditas sive natura in materia corporali existens; et per huiusmodi naturas visibilibus rerum etiam in invisibilibus rerum aliqualem cognitionem ascendit.”

as regards the surroundings of the thing in its essence or quiddity, in referring one thing to another, as regards composition or division, or also in the process of reasoning.⁹

He goes on to write in his response to the first objection that “in the absolute consideration of the quiddity of a thing, and of those things which are known thereby, the intellect is never deceived.”¹⁰ But clearly if existence were part of material essence, and yet when we knew material essence we did not know existence, we would be deceived.

⁹ “Quia ad proprium obiectum unaquaeque potentia per se ordinatur, secundum quod ipsa. Quae autem sunt huiusmodi, semper eodem modo se habent. Unde manente potentia, non deficit eius iudicium circa proprium obiectum.—Obiectum autem proprium intellectus est quidditas rei. Unde circa quidditatem rei, per se loquendo, intellectus non fallitur. Sed circa ea quae circumstant rei essentiam vel quidditatem, intellectus potest falli, dum unum ordinat ad aliud, vel componendo vel dividendo vel etiam ratiocinando.”

¹⁰ See also *ScG* 3, ch. 108: “Nulla virtus cognoscitivacirca proprium obiectum decipitur, sed solum circa extraneum: visus enim non decipitur in iudicio colorum; sed, dum homo per visum iudicat de sapore vel de specie rei, in hoc deceptio accidit. Proprium autem obiectum intellectus est quidditas rei. In cognitione igitur intellectus deceptio accidere non potest, si puras rerum quidditates apprehendat, sed omnis deceptio intellectus accidere videtur ex hoc quod apprehendit formas rerum permixtas phantasmatis, ut in nobis accidit.”—“No cognitive faculty is deceived about its proper object, but only about one that is outside its purview: thus the sight is not deceived in its judgement about colours; whereas deception may occur if a man judge by sight of taste, or of the species of a thing. Now, the proper object of the intellect is the quiddity of a thing. Consequently there can be no deception in the knowledge of the intellect, if it were to apprehend the mere quiddities of things, and all deception of the intellect would seem to occur through its apprehending forms mingled with phantasms, as is the case with us.” The whole of this article continues to the same effect, making the point that falsity enters into our judgement through composition and division but only by accident pertains to our apprehension of quiddity—“In operatione autem intellectus qua apprehendit *quod quid est*, non accidit falsum nisi per accidens, secundum quod in hac etiam operatione permiscetur aliquid de operatione intellectus componentis et dividensis.” See also the *Disputed Questions on Truth*, q.1 a. 12: “Quiditas autem rei est proprium obiectum intellectus: unde sicut

Thomas's teaching about the proper object of the intellect clarifies the conditions for meaningful error about material quiddity. We have noted his remark in the fifth chapter of *De Ente* that we are ignorant of the essential differences of physical things. According to Thomas we can also be mistaken about the essential natures of things. St. Thomas does not suppose that we see into and intuit whole and entire the essential nature of every being in a quasi-angelic *ecstasis* of objectivity. Rather he holds that error about essential nature may occur either because there is error in the composition affecting the definition—whereby we predicate of a nature what does not properly belong to it—or by virtue of simple ignorance. He repeats this account elsewhere, for example in his *Disputed Questions on Truth*. While this teaching identifies the preconditions for meaningful error about essence in physical things it also affirms the generic inerrancy of our knowledge of material quiddity.

To illustrate the latter point: The first man ever to see a whale in all likelihood did not know what it was. I once heard it said that Aristotle had three rather than two questions: not only “is it?” and “what is it?” but “what the hell is it?” Probably the first person to see it thought that the whale was a big fish. That isn't true. More-

sensus sensibilium proprium semper verus est ita et intellectus in cognoscendo quod quid est, ut dicitur in III *De anima*. Sed tamen per accidens potest ibi falsitas accidere, in quantum videlicet intellectus falso componit et dividit, quod dupliciter contingit, vel in quantum diffinitionem unius attribuit alteri, ut si animal rationale mortale conciperet quasi diffinitionem asini, vel in quantum coniungit partes diffinitionis ad invicem quae coniungi non possunt, ut si conciperet quasi diffinitionem asini animal irrationale immortale: haec enim est falsa ‘aliquod animal irrationale est immortale’.”—“The proper object of the intellect, however, is the quiddity of a thing. Hence, just as the sensing of proper sensibles is always true, so the intellect is always true in knowing what a thing is, as is said in *On the Soul*, Book III. By accident, however, falsity can occur in this knowing of quiddities, if the intellect falsely joins and separates. This happens in two ways: when it attributes the definition of one thing to another, as would happen were it to conceive that ‘mortal rational animal’ were the definition of an ass; or when it joins together parts of definitions that cannot be joined, as would happen were it to conceive that ‘irrational, immortal animal’ were the definition of an ass.”

over, with Thomas we may doubt that even now we know what the essential difference of the whale is. But we do know that there is a nature to be known, and we know that it is a material nature. We know that the whale is not merely an accident of the sea, nor an angel, nor God. While this is embarrassingly little to know about whales, it is a great deal to know about material quiddity—and the condition of possibility for our knowing this is the general adequation of the human mind to essence or quiddity in material things. The tripartite variant of the Aristotelian questions is more than merely facetious. The second question reflects the reality of the mind's general adequation to material essence poised at the beginning of its trajectory of discovery regarding some particular essence; while the third reflects the truth that this adequation—far from being a comprehensive immediate intuition of all the notes of any particular essence—is the condition not only for partial success but for intermittent and more or less constant frustration and failure as well. If the proper object of the human intellect is quiddity in corporeal matter, this generic *adequatio* is both the precondition for particular success and for the intelligibility of failure.

To use a phrase I am happy to steal from the currency of Fr. Lawrence Dewan, this means that we know the “quiddity of quiddities.”¹¹ If it means anything to say that the proper object of the intellect is quiddity in corporeal matter, then we *must minimally know what it means in general to be a quiddity in corporeal matter*—elsewise this proposition is *meaningless*. Absent generic knowledge of material quiddity, St. Thomas's teaching that material quiddity is the proper object of the intellect becomes tantamount to “we

¹¹ Given the immense scope of his publishing, I confess that I cannot recall precisely where I heard this phrase pass his lips. But I refuse to deny the world the use of a fine phrase merely because of the limits of my memory. See also Fr. Dewan's “St. Thomas, Joseph Owens, and the Real Distinction between Being and Essence,” especially 149: “I suggest that this argument should be read as ‘quidditatively’ as possible, that is, as a universal demonstration based on the ‘natures’ of essence and *esse*. Saint Thomas means quite formally the ‘every essence.’ He is speaking in the light of *what essence is*. Sensible experience yields a knowledge of essence, both that there is such a thing as essence, and what essence is. It is something that cannot be understood without all its parts, that is, every essence is recognized as

know not what” is the proper object of the intellect. While this may be a common postmodern motif, there seems no reason to attribute it to St. Thomas Aquinas.

It is the general knowledge of material quiddity that makes possible our discovery both of matter as a potential principle and of form in physical things. For if the human intellect is not generically adequated to material essence, clearly our knowledge of the generic *parts* of essence becomes impossible. It is this native contact of the human intellect with the evidence of material nature which founds our perception that what makes a thing liable to undergo *substantial change*—what makes a thing susceptible to *become what it is not*—cannot be identically the same principle which makes a thing *actually to be what it is*. That which is the principle of determinacy is not simultaneously that which is the principle of indeterminacy within physical things: a principle is not and cannot be simultaneously and in the same respect a principle of act and of potency.

The evidence for hylemorphism is strongly related to the distinct question of the proper locus of determinacy (that is, the issue whether there are substantially unified “higher” natures or whether to the contrary pluriformism provides a correct account). But the issue of the proper locus of determinacy in physical things already presupposes the discovery of form. It also presupposes the discovery of the distinction of form from matter as from:

1. the capacity of a formed thing *for* such form;
2. the capacity for the accidental form of quantity whereby individuals may be plurified within a species; and
3. the capacity to receive a substantially different form.

some sort of *complete* reality: to grasp essence is to grasp a completeness. In that sense, it is *indivisible*. Moreover, every essence can be grasped without considering actual existence. That is why abstractive knowledge is genuine knowledge of the real, though it is imperfect knowledge.” I am wholly in concurrence with this insistence that the argument be read as “‘quidditatively’ as possible” and that St. Thomas “is speaking in the light of *what essence is*” and means quite formally the “every essence”. I should add only that this first and proportionately concerns “every material quiddity” and is founded upon the general adequation of the mind to its proper object, quiddity in corporeal matter.

Even the elements, anything whatsoever that has determinate structure, must just so far be affirmed to possess form. Insofar as some determinate structure follows upon or ceases after causal action, clearly the reality of a principle of indeterminacy or matter is inseparable but nonetheless distinct from form. In passing it is worthwhile to note that the tendency to conceive matter as a real subject like an ocean which takes various shapes is not adequate to the evidence. For matter is a principle of being, but what exists is the physical subject itself which has these principles. Apart from some being characterizable by these principles, there is no physical being. In any case, the very discovery of form and matter as principles is rooted in the generic adequation of the intellect to quiddity in material things.

From a philosophic point of view, supervening on both the knowledge of common sense and knowledge in positive science is an actually *affirmative* basis for all the falsifications which enable us to weed out bad accounts of physical things. As St. Thomas suggests in *De Potentia* V, 7, “the understanding of negatives is always based on affirmatives” or, as I like to put it, *every negation presupposes a prior affirmation*. The affirmative basis presupposed to meaningful error about essence in material things is the generic adequation of intellect to material quiddity. The very existence of essence in material things as a *target for inquiry* that so often eludes and frustrates our efforts to know the natures of particular beings is evidence of this generic adequacy of mind to material quiddity. One may consider the same point more fundamentally: when St. Thomas states that we lack knowledge of the differences of physical things, how is it possible for him to know that we lack such knowledge? Consider what must be known for this to be a pertinent utterance: it must be known that difference is *pertinent* to material essence; that essence is found in physical things; and that we know enough about such essence to be aware of that which we lack in our knowledge.

This suggests that the argument for real distinction of essence and existence that is founded upon our knowledge of material quiddity is built upon the firmest possible foundation we might provide, for this foundation is the very proper object of the intellect itself. No superior place to repose one’s metaphysical structure might be found in all the varied domains of knowledge. But if,

counterfactually, we were habitually and continually to mutate essence by considering it to be complete without one of its essential parts—namely, existence—then material essence could not be the proper object of the intellect, because the intellect would not be generically adequated to it. Accordingly it could neither make sense to be aware of failing to understand some particular physical essence, nor make sense to be aware that we lack knowledge of difference in physical essence generally. But both of these propositions are contrary to fact.

The “parts” of essence spoken of in *De Ente et Essentia* are form and matter. Now it is very clear that existence is not matter, as matter is potency and existence is clearly act, the actual being of a thing. Likewise it is clear that in material things existence is not form, because in material things form is known as really distinct from being. It is affirmed to be or not to be—form is not, simply as form, sufficient to constitute a being in the absence of the *actus essendi*. Moreover, were a form identical with existence, then Parmenidean implications would beset us, for such a form would be self-existent (unlike the forms of physical things) and infinite.

Yet what of the claim that existence might after all be a hidden or occult note of essence? This is a claim which is so clearly contrary to the evidence that St. Thomas does not permit it to delay his approach to the central question of the fourth chapter of *De Ente* regarding separate substances. Yet the answer is clear. *If* existence is an occult or hidden note of a material essence, *then* we shall need to argue that one and the same essence contains *both* a principle whereby it may be *substantially transmuted* so that *the same being* will no longer *be*—namely, a principle of *matter*—while simultaneously containing a principle whereby matter *can never be substantially transmuted but must ever be within the same essence*—namely *esse* or *actual existence*. This is to posit an intrinsic impossibility, namely an internally self-contradictory essence that at one and the same time potentially may be essentially altered while nonetheless *it also must immutably and actually be* just as it is. Such an internal self-contradiction is simply impossible. It is not to be confused with a substance possessing an intrinsic potential for corruption which is emended through an *extrinsic* principle, for clearly the latter would not involve a self-contradictory

essence. But for actual existence to pertain to a given essence as such—which means that this essence immutably and essentially *is*—while at the same time this given essence as such is potentially transmutable and so is essentially changeable, is a simple self-contradiction no more possible than is a round square or a conclusion that is simultaneously and in the same respect true and false.

Further, essence in material things is not a principle that necessitates the actual being of a thing—physical things are not self-existent. But if existence is an essential note of some physical nature, then this physical nature will necessarily exist, just as the triangle is by its essence necessarily three-sided. This does not correspond to the physical evidence. Moreover, if essence is held to be identical with existence in a creature, then the creature is alleged to lack any principle of potency whatsoever, to be *a se*, and must then be held to have only conceptual relations with other creatures—but this is manifestly contrary to the evidence. It also seems that if existence were to be construed as “part” of the essence then the other parts would (to be distinguishable therefrom) need to be characterized formally as non-existence: but how can “nonexistence” be part of an essence?¹²

There remains to oppose the *intellectus essentiae* argument only the radical philosophic counterargument that *existence or act is itself self-limiting* rather than limited only by a distinct potential principle. If this were true it would permit existence to comprise either part or all of an essence without the implication that the essence were self-existent and immutable in being; for then act would not be limited by the capacity for act but by itself. But this is contrary to what is intended by *act* as such, for insofar as we say a thing is we do not by that fact simultaneously denote or imply *that it is not*. When we trace the intention of the judgment of act, we see that act is limited by something distinguishable therefrom, which is a potential principle—not a subsistent *thing* but a *principle of being*. And with this realization we return once more to the intuitive

¹² Cf. Bobik, *Aquinas on Being and Essence*, 167. That the essence of every actual thing has “part” which is existence, and another “part” that is nonexistence, is unintelligible; whereas, to say that essence as such only *is* through the supervening of an act of a higher order, namely *esse*, is quite intelligible.

foundations of the real distinction in our native knowledge of material quiddity.

Of course, it is also true that *if* we argue that act as such is self-limiting, *then* we must hold either that God is not actual or that God is finite—a wake-up call for Suarezian theists about the probity of such an account. If act is held to be self-limiting on an *ad hoc* basis—that is, if the argument is that some acts (creaturely ones) are self-limiting whereas at least one act (the divine act of being) is not self-limiting but infinite and transcendent—*then it follows that whatever the ratio is for limitation of act is distinct from act*. If there is affirmed a case in which act is not self-limiting then it must be affirmed in principle that act qua act is not self-limiting (for if act *as* act were self-limiting there could be no such case in which act were not self-limiting). And this both requires of the mind and lures it to the discovery and identification of that principle whereby the actuality of being is limited. It is simply ineluctable that the given datum of being speaks itself to the mind as implying principles rather than merely *ad hoc* and unrelated and unrelatable judgments. These principles are not beings, but rather co-principles of being explicative of it as an intrinsically analogous object.¹³ It is in relation to our generically

¹³ This is a conspicuous point regarding *esse*: it is not a being, but a superformal or superessential principle of being. The creature's *esse* does not in its own right exist, but rather what exists is a subject having an essential nature. *Esse* is in a sense both most formal/superformal and final. The initial full perfection of a thing's being is the termination of its causation and hence the full perfection of a thing's act of being is in this sense final *vis à vis* an extrinsic secondary cause. But it seems even more the case that *esse* is superformal or in other words most formal and actual, since the act of being is that whereby the subject of being and its essence *is*, and in cases of temporal coming-to-be each stage of a thing's genesis is *pari passu* with its coming into being. And in this sense *esse* is the first act of every form or nature. The lines of St. Thomas from the *ST* 1, q. 4, a. 1, ad 3 seem to affirm that for him *esse* "consideratur ut formale et receptum," that is, is considered as formal and received. To quote the whole: "Dicendum quod ipsum esse est perfectissimum omnium; comparatur enim ad omnia ut actus. Nihil enim habet actualitatem, nisi in quantum est; unde ipsum esse est actualitas omnium rerum, et etiam ipsarum formarum. Unde non comparatur ad alia sicut recipiens ad receptum, sed magis sicut receptum ad recipiens. Cum enim dico esse hominis, vel equi, vel cuiuscumque altereius, ipsum

adequated knowledge of essence that it is discovered that there is that (*esse*) whose relation to essence is as form is related to matter, and that what is most formal in the intrinsically analogous *ratio* of being is *esse*.

Often the textual argument is made that if St. Thomas held the *intellectus essentiae* argument to be valid in *De Ente et Essentia*, he could after all stop the progress of the fourth chapter at this point. Such criticism implies that since he does not stop at this point the

esse consideratur ut formale et receptum, non autem ut illud cui competit esse.”—“It should be said that existence is the most perfect of all things, for it is compared to all things as act. For nothing has actuality save insofar as it exists; wherefore existence is the actuality of all things, even of forms themselves. Thus it is not compared to other things as the receiver is to the received, but rather as the received to the receiver. When therefore I speak of the existence of man, or horse, or anything else, existence is considered as a formal principle and received, but not as that which exists.” One notes that the use of “things” in this translation clearly is a figure of speech (“Dicendum quod ipsum esse est perfectissimum omnium”), and obviously not the teaching of Giles of Rome. Likewise, Bañez persistently speaks of essence and existence as of two different things, but contrary to the claims of some medievalists this may merely be a figure of speech intended to emphasize their real distinction. For there is no reason to suppose that Bañez thought essence and existence to be distinct *subsistents*, while there is pronounced reason to think the contrary. Bañez speaks of *esse* as the act of essence, such that there is no essence apart from *esse* (and clearly a *nonexistent* essence is not a subsistent), and held that essence is only intelligible in its ordering to *esse* either potentially or actually. Bañez also considers that *esse* is not only the last but the first act, since it perfects every other act and forms are to *esse* as potency to act. So, quite apart from possible errors of Bañez with respect to the authenticity of texts, and even given his use of this misleading expression of existence and essence as two different “things”, his doctrine of the real distinction appears to indicate that *esse* and essence are not in themselves subsistents. That is, with or without reference to error on the part of Bañez in judging the authenticity of manuscripts, one can quite otherwise account for his use of this linguistically seductive but misleading phraseology without implying the error that essence and existence are literally “things” or subsistents—especially given the author’s clarity in teaching that *esse* is the act of every form or nature. See his Commentary on *ST* 1, q. 3, a. 4, in his sixth conclusion about existence, *Scholastica Commentaria in Primam Partem Summae Theologiae St. Thomae Aquinatis* (Valencia: Editorial F. C. V. A., 1934).

real distinction has yet to be established. But this analysis founders on one critical point. Establishing the real distinction in physical things is a *necessary* but *not a sufficient* condition for arguing that if there were a being in which essence and existence were identical there could only be one, so that *a fortiori* in all other cases essence and existence are really distinct. But because the distinction of essence and existence in physical things is not yet a universal distinction throughout all finite being, this further argument is required if Thomas is to address the very subject of the fourth chapter—which is not essence in physical things, but rather the difficult case of separate substance. Thomas is aiming to address how it is that one may know in the absence of quidditative knowledge of such substances that they possess a potential principle, and he attends to this question by an argument that universalizes the real distinction of essence and existence throughout finite being. In other words, since the fourth chapter expressly and specifically concerns separate substance and not merely physical being, the *intellectus essentiae* proof regarding essence and existence in physical beings is but a starting and not an ending point in this consideration. So the suggestion that were the *intellectus essentiae* proof sufficient to establish real distinction of essence and existence in physical things that the chapter could end forthwith, is nullified by the very nature of the remote purpose for which Thomas deploys the *intellectus essentiae* argument.

The *intellectus essentiae* argument cannot terminate Thomas's consideration in this chapter because its role is to provide the initial foundation for the ensuing argument that there is only one even *hypothetical* case in which essence and existence *could be* identical (because all the ways in which being may be plurified imply potency, but the nature of the hypothesis of identity of essence and existential act excludes all such potency).¹⁴ This conclusion

¹⁴ Wippel argues that after St. Thomas poses the *intellectus essentiae* argument, if he thought it established real distinction, "it would seem that he could immediately conclude that existence comes to essence from without and enters into composition with it. Interestingly enough, however, he will appeal to the point that existence comes from without only when introducing what I shall regard as the third phase of his argumentation . . ." See 112–13 in his *Metaphysical Themes in St. Thomas Aquinas*, cited above. The

achieved, Thomas can then conclude *a fortiori* that *in all other cases* (apart from one, only hypothetically possible instance) existence and essence are necessarily really distinct. This at one stroke addresses the case of separate substances, for if there is only one even plausible and hypothetical case in which essence and existence might be one, it follows in every other case—including that of separate substances—that they are distinct. Only after having universalized the real distinction between essence and existence

first point to note about this is that it while it is true that he appeals to this point only later, it is logically derivable from his given conclusion. For if *esse* is not essence, and if essence cannot be without *esse*, then *esse* must derive from an extrinsic source. But of course, until it has been shown that the separate substances are not so many absolutely pure acts lacking any potential principle or limit—until we are in possession of the argument why it is that there cannot be multiple absolutely perfect beings—we are not yet philosophically escaped from polytheism. So while at this stage in the argument it *is* clear that the real distinction in physical things indicates that *esse* comes to the finite physical thing from outside, this does not yet establish that the extrinsic source is one unique Creator who is *ipsum esse*. First it must be shown that the separate substances are not unbounded pure acts each of which might create. Thomas cannot yet conclude that both physical beings and separate substances depend for their being upon one Supreme Being Who is the Creator. So, while St. Thomas clearly *could* draw the conclusion that existence comes to physical things from without at this stage—a conclusion which appears obvious—his strategic purposes are not served by doing so at this point. For this in itself will not yet lead to an answer either to the problem of separate substances or to an existential proof for one unique Creator unless *first* St. Thomas demonstrates the universality of the real distinction of essence and existence throughout finite being, showing that it pertains to all being with *but one possible unique exception*. And this is precisely what St. Thomas does. As he is developing a coherent argument about the separate substances, he draws the implications he needs much as a general moves forward troops to the line—when and as they forward the strategic purpose of the endeavour. For the point is not to draw every implication that may be drawn as soon as it may be drawn, but to advance the argument by drawing inferences in an ordered way from the evidence. This is simply to note that St. Thomas's strategic purpose regards the separate substances and their relation to God, in relation to which real distinction of essence and existence in physical things is but a preamble.

does Thomas offer his properly existential proof for the existence of God:

Everything that pertains to a thing is either caused by the principles of its nature, as risibility in man, or comes to it from an extrinsic principle, as light in the air from the influence of the sun. Now it cannot be that being itself is caused by the form or quiddity of a thing—I mean as by an efficient cause—because that thing would then be its own cause and it would bring itself into being, which is impossible. Therefore it follows that everything whose being is other than its nature has its being from another. And because everything that exists through another is reduced to that which exists through itself as to its first cause, there must be something that is the cause of being for all other things, inasmuch as it is pure being. Otherwise we would go on to infinity in causes, for everything that is not pure being has a cause of its being, as has been said. It is evident, then, that an intelligence is form and being, and that it holds its being from the first being, which is pure being; and this is the first cause, or God.¹⁵

Of course, it might be argued that because this proof for the existence of God is not elsewhere clearly set forth in Thomas's work, that the quoted passage lacks the form of a proof. But this is clearly vain. With similar reason one might say that because New York does not exist elsewhere (say, in Idaho) it lacks the form of a city, or because the mayor of New York does not exist elsewhere (say, on Mars) he lacks the form of man. The passage cited is clearly

¹⁵ "Omne autem quod conuenit alicui uel est causatum ex principiis nature sue, sicut risibile in homine; uel aduenit ab aliquo principio extrinseco, sicut lumen in aere ex influentia solis. Non autem potest esse quod ipsum esse sit causatum ab ipsa forma uel quidditate rei, dico sicut a causa efficiente, quia sic aliqua res esset sui ipsius causa et aliqua res se ipsam in esse produceret: quod est impossibile. Ergo oportet quod omnis talis res cuius esse est aliud quam natura sua habeat esse ab alio. Et quia omne quod est per aliud reducitur ad id quod est per se sicut ad causam primam, oportet quod sit aliqua res que sit causa essendi omnibus rebus eo quod ipsa esse tantum; alias iretur in infinitum in causis, cum omnis res que non est esse tantum habeat causam sui esse, ut dictum est. Patet ergo quod intelligentia est forma et esse, et quod esse habet a primo ente quod est esse tantum, et hoc est causa prima que Deus est."

an argument. As the premises yield a valid conclusion, and Thomas nowhere renounces this argument but seems everywhere to reason in ways consistent with it, we are better advised seriously to appropriate it than to avert our gaze as though the significance of a text were merely an index of the number of times it appears.¹⁶

If critics could find an express renunciation of this reasoning, the case might be different. But there is nothing in the further elaboration of the metaphysics of *esse* which suggests that Thomas rejects the validity of this proof for God as unique cause of being for all finite things. One might also point out that whereas this theistic proof is well and intuitively buttressed by the evidence that supports the *intellectus essentiae* argument, nonetheless developing this proof for the existence of God philosophically requires a metaphysical and epistemic sophistication that is less requisite to proofs that begin straightforwardly simply from sensible data. By contrast with a sensible starting point, to begin with the analogically common metaphysical objects of being and essence—and specifically to start with quiddity in corporeal matter—is to reason from a starting point simultaneously intuitive and omni-accessible while also comparatively more rarified because more removed from sensation. This latter datum alone can help to explain why this version of the existential proof for God as unique cause of the being of all finite things is not more frequently and expressly employed in Thomas's writings.

The intuitivity and incisiveness of this account is matched by a greater remotion or distance from sensation which renders it simultaneously excellent for an introduction to metaphysics, and less excellent for the instruction of those whose minds do not rise to the metaphysical level. Accordingly its implicit presence in the metaphysical background of many of St. Thomas's more general works, and its express presence in the only introduction to metaphysics ever written in his own name rather than veiled in the object of commentary on the work of another (albeit a diaphanous veil in

¹⁶ It is true that the passage is not preceded by the title: "Existential demonstration of God as Creator." But given that the premises are sound and lead to this conclusion by valid inference, it appears to be a demonstration. Likewise, " $2 + 2 = 4$ " should in the absence of any pressing reasons to think otherwise be taken as an arithmetic expression, even if not so labelled.

cases such as the *Scriptum on the Sentences*) more than justify refusal to ignore it merely because it is where it is and is not where it is not.¹⁷

It is conspicuous that Etienne Gilson's renowned refusal to acknowledge the formal character of this existential proof of God as unique cause of all finite being, proceeds *pari passu* with his denial of any even indirect philosophic demonstration for the real distinction as such.¹⁸ This move, much embraced by some contemporary theorists in the *Communio* circle,¹⁹ plunges the metaphysical foundations

¹⁷ The argument here and of the prior two paragraphs is of course directed to the objection of Etienne Gilson ("La preuve du De ente et essentia," *Acta III Congressus Thomistici Internationalis: Doctor Communis* 3 [1950], 257–60). Or, as he puts it in his "Trois leçons sur le probleme de l'existence de Dieu," *Divinitas* 1 (1961): 27, "Bien plus, la ou saint Thomas propose explicitement des preuves de l'existence de Dieu, il ne fait pas usage de ce raisonnement. Ce n'est pas l'une des *quinque viae*, et il n'est pas inclus dans la synthese si complete du *Contra gentiles*. D'ou cette simple question: est-ce ou n'est-ce pas une preuve de l'existence de Dieu?" But perhaps the Angelic Doctor did not suppose that introductory theological works and apologetic works necessarily needed to articulate the summit of metaphysical insight when articulating arguments for the existence of God. More to the point than Thomas's decision not to bring this forth in his listing of proofs elsewhere is the question: are not the proofs he does bring forth such as to be consistent with, and to receive their ultimate rationale in relation to, this proof? The answer is: yes, and most especially with reference to the fourth and third ways from the *Summa Theologiae*.

¹⁸ Cf. Gilson's *Elements of Christian Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1960), 128: "No one has ever been able to demonstrate the conclusion that, in a caused substance, existence is a distinct element, other than essence, and its act." This raises questions whether Gilson identifies *esse* properly at the start. This point is made with exquisite clarity and force by Lawrence Dewan, OP, "Étienne Gilson and the Actus essendi," *Maritain Studies/Études Maritainniennes* 15 (1999): 70–96. Gilson's comment also leaves the mind puzzled by its blithe dismissal of the demonstrative force of arguments that Thomas clearly holds demonstrate real distinction of essence and existence in physical things such as the *intellectus essentiae* argument, where Thomas's conclusion is that "from this it is clear that being is other than essence or quiddity."

¹⁹ One notes the work of David Schindler, for whom a being is not even definable in precision from grace—a view which clearly denies the intelligibility of essence. See "Christology, Public Theology, and Thomism: de Lubac, Balthasar, and Murray," in *The Future of Thomism*, ed. Deal W. Hudson

of St. Thomas's thought into a fideist abyss. Surely it is worthy of note that in *De Ente et Essentia* St. Thomas provides us with philosophic analysis, and not merely with a scriptural gloss (howsoever profound) upon Exodus—and this is without prejudice to the judgment that the metaphysics of Exodus is the metaphysics of *esse*. Rather, what is naturally conspicuous to the philosopher is that the argument is set forth as knowably true even in precision from its theological fruitfulness. This of course implies the oft-controverted thesis that philosophic truth has implications for theology which ought not to be ignored.

Thomas's teaching in *De Ente et Essentia* is cognate with his work from the *Scriptum on the Sentences* written in roughly the same time period as was *De Ente et Essentia*. In this commentary the decisive points appear in language that is unmistakable:

The nature of being is found in all things, in some more nobly, in others less nobly, such that the natures of the things themselves are not the very being which they have. Otherwise, being would belong to the concept of the quiddity of any thing, which is false, since the quiddity of any thing can be understood without understanding whether the thing exists.²⁰

and Dennis W. Moran (Notre Dame: American Maritain Association, 1992), 253–54, note 9. Of course, not all members of this school adopt this stance.

²⁰ *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum* II, d. 1, q. 1, a. 1, resp., taken from *Aquinas on Creation*, trans. Steven Baldner and William E. Carroll (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1997). The English translation of one critical section of Thomas's commentary here cited should be used by every philosophic program and seminary in the country. The Latin text reads: "Invenitur enim in omnibus rebus natura entitatis, in quibusdam magis nobilis, et in quibusdam minus; ita tamen quod ipsarum rerum naturae non sunt hoc ipsum esse quod habent: alias esse esset de intellectu cujuslibet quidditatis, quod falsum est, cum quidditas cujuslibet rei possit intelligi etiam non intelligendo de ea an sit." This is of course precisely the same argument as is given in *De Ente et Essentia*. Armand Maurer and Joseph Owens argue that elsewhere in St. Thomas's commentary (I *Sent.* d. 8) he develops the *intellectus essentiae* argument in a way that cannot reasonably be thought to imply a real distinction of essence and existence. Their argument focuses upon Thomas's comparison of the "accidentality" of existence in relation to essence, *vis à vis* the accidentality of the relation of rational to animal. They argue that inasmuch as species and genus are not

Or, as Thomas states even more clearly, "I answer that not only does faith hold that there is creation but reason also demonstrates it."²¹ This is rather a large proposition to overlook. Inasmuch as for Thomas the philosophic conception of creation entails (1) no antecedent matter whatsoever, and (2) that nonbeing precedes being in finite things not temporally but by nature (such that apart from real dependence upon the extrinsic causality of God a finite thing will not be),²² it is clear that there is an existential proof for the reality of God. For the demonstration of creation of which

really but only conceptually distinct, the point of Thomas's intellectus essentiae argument must likewise be to conclude only to a conceptual distinction. But there is an answer to this criticism: Thomas is 1) comparing species to genus as act to potency, just as existence is to essence as act to potency, while 2) simultaneously illustrating one type of accidentality—the "accidentality" of being to essence—with the quite different accidentality of species to genus. Why do we say this? Firstly, because if he wanted to draw a second-intentional or merely conceptual conclusion, then he would not use terms of first intention but instead use second intentional or purely conceptual terms. To the contrary, his conclusion clearly pertains to essence and not merely to the concept of essence. Secondly, any comparison will fail in some respect, and this is all the more true given the uniqueness of the real distinction between essence and existence in finite things. If the point is to use comparison in order to highlight accidentality, then—especially since any other case will necessarily be quite different from that of the unique essence/existence relation in finite things—the type of "accidentality" involved is beside the point. Seen in this way, the available frame of comparison between the species/genus relation and the existence/essence relation is both that of act and potency, and of one type of accidentality in comparison with another. This interpretation of the text does not contradict St. Thomas's conclusions. It is unclear whether the scholars who prefer a merely conceptual reading are wary of defending St. Thomas's actual realism about the knowledge of essence from sceptical criticism, or whether, contrastingly, preoccupation with historical considerations suffice to divert them from this aspect of Thomas's teaching. See Joseph Owens, "Quiddity and Real Distinction in St. Thomas Aquinas," *Medieval Studies* 28 (1965): 1–22, as well as his fascinating work, *An Interpretation of Existence* (Houston: Bruce Publishing, 1968). See also Armand Maurer's translator's introduction to *On Being and Essence*, 2nd Ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1968), 7–27.

²¹ II *Sent.*, d. 1, q. 1, a. 2, resp.

²² Cf. II *Sent.* d. 1, q. 1, a. 2.

Thomas speaks is nothing other than the causal inference from existential act limited by potency in finite things, to God as *Ipsum Esse subsistens per se*.

II. The Import of the *Intellectus Essentiae* Argument

In the context of *De Ente et Essentia*, the *intellectus essentiae* proof of real distinction of essence and existence in material things is the starting point for three sets of important conclusions. First, the real distinction of these principles in physical things (the conclusion of the *intellectus essentiae* argument) is the basis of further argument to the effect that this distinction is universal throughout finite being. Secondly, since the conclusion that even separate substances are not their own being follows upon the universalization of the real distinction, the *intellectus essentiae* argument is the remote foundation for this conclusion too. Thirdly, as the existential proof for the reality of God depends upon the universalization of the real distinction throughout finite being—and inasmuch as this universalization itself presupposes the discovery of essence and existence as really distinct principles in physical things—the *intellectus essentiae* argument stands at the font of this existential proof.

Its brevity belies its import. The *intellectus essentiae* argument is briefly stated because the point in any journey is not to tarry at the starting point, but to move to the appointed destination. Further, given what Thomas earlier argued in *De Ente et Essentia*, he might rightly have thought that the *intellectus essentiae* argument should already be sufficiently clear from his prior argumentation. In the third chapter of *De Ente et Essentia*, St. Thomas argues that essence exists in two distinct ways—in one way in the physical thing with all the accidents that ensue upon this mode of its being, and in another way in the soul, with the accidents that follow thereupon (such as species and genus). But this point is of itself sufficient to indicate that material essence is distinct from *existence*, for the same essence *is* in two radically distinct ways and hence it follows that essence is as such identical with neither. Material essence is identical neither with existence in quantified, signate matter nor with its existence in the mind, although it may be in (and hence *be identified* with) each. Of course, if essence in no way whatsoever is in intellectual intention, then objectivity in knowledge of essential

nature becomes impossible. Hence if one affirms objectivity regarding essential nature in physical things, one already implicitly affirms that essence and existence are really distinct. This epistemic grounding of the *intellectus essentiae* demonstration in the objectivity of human knowledge is extremely critical.²³

The datum that the selfsame essence that is in the thing is in the mind is the foundation for intellectual objectivity concerning essence in physical things. Were essence as a whole and in its proper meaning to be identical with existence or to include existence as a part, and were we to fail to know this in knowing essence, this would imply that material essence is generically unknowable. For on this supposition, the knowledge of essence would be mutative, that is, such knowledge would necessarily alter and distort essence by considering it without something necessary to the essence as such. It would then follow that the very affirmation of *De Ente et Essentia*—that the mind is generically adequated to essence as a whole—would be false, and conclusion to the unknowability of essence would be ratified.

Yet this claim that we generically deform essence in knowing it—a claim that calls to mind the claims of postmoderns such as Derrida to the effect that the word, and the word definitorily considered, is never the same²⁴—is or is not a real negation. If it is

²³ It is the loss of this epistemic grounding that on the one hand foreshadows the loss of the proportionate evidence that grounds the real distinction, and the swallowing up of this doctrine within theology as though it were merely a scriptural gloss or intra-theological *gestalt* rather than a naturally accessible truth; and, on the other hand, presages the failure to identify the anthropological import of the rational constitution of the human person. Many speculative paths cross here.

²⁴ Of course, the word definitorily considered is always in one sense different and even less than the word spoken. For the word spoken is in a different way than the word as *conceived*. The existential singularity of what we do always goes beyond the conceived universal “whatness” of our conception, just as the *actus essendi* goes beyond the essence actualized. This is a function of the ontological imperfection of creaturely intention and applies even to our thoughts (suppose we intend to think: but then we must wait to see *what* we actually will think). This manifests again that *the same* essence of the intention is in two ways, in one way conceived universally in the mind, and in another way in the very existential singularity of the act intended (even when this is a conceptual act—for the accidental being of

a real negation, then we must know upon what real evidence it is based. That is, we must know *how it is or can be known* that the mind generically deforms essence as a condition of knowing it. The affirmative precondition of the putative truth that our knowledge of essence is deformative and mutative seems to be a prior adequate knowledge of essence, but the very point of the negation under consideration is to deny the existence of such knowledge.

It is a commonplace of logic that proving the negative is the most difficult proof, and it is incumbent upon the one who claims that essence in physical things is as such not knowable to show that just as by the nature of “square” and “circle” a “square circle” is impossible, so by the nature of “essential nature” and “human knowledge” the “human knowledge of essential nature” is impossible. Further, any real reference to actual evidence by the one who denies all general knowledge of essence can be shown to entail affirmation of essence (formal defining features of *what* is actually being affirmed). In addition, such denial simply lacks any proportionate reason. For, were there no essential nature, then nothing could be known of anything (even accidents presuppose and are defined in relation to essence). Thus the claim that there is no essence amounts to a bad cognitive check which cannot be cashed or resolved into any appropriate evidentiary account.

The generic intelligibility of material essence is the precondition for particular real negations about essence. But the claim that the entire ontological category of essence is empty is equivalent to the claim that no real principle exists to correspond to our abstractive apprehension. This is for the denier to affirm his own actual ignorance of the nature of anything whatsoever, but from ignorance no real conclusion is implied save perhaps that to equate wisdom with ignorance is vain. At best, if one truly knows nothing, one cannot rationally draw any warranted conclusion—and this does not license the inference that knowledge is impossible. In point of fact, and notwithstanding the persistence of voluble

a thought or act of knowledge is *existentially* singular even though its nature qua abstracted object is universal rather than naturally limited and immersed in quantified matter). I am indebted for this profound and fecund insight to Dr. Thomas Sullivan of the University of St. Thomas, although the formulation in terms of the real distinction is my own.

deniers of essence, skeptics about the knowledge of essence do not fail to know that trees are not automobiles and that supernovas are not alligators. The cultivators of doubt about the generic knowability of essential nature do not lack all knowledge of the natures of things. Rather they merely indulge in an unwarranted negation which their own determinate affirmations suffice to contradict.

Abandoning the notion of essence as a real principle might make sense if real evidence could be brought that things lack a principle of intelligible structure which is also a principle of being. But the real evidence is that we natively seek—and persistently find—beings whose existence is specified and whose intelligibility is defined by essence. The generic intelligibility of material essence is presupposed to our detailed and oft-frustrated efforts to understand particular essential natures. Clearly essence determines and limits both the being of things and our inquiries concerning them.

The denial of essential nature is convertible with the claim that determinations pertain to nothing (for accidental determinations are defined in relation to essential ones). Thus the one who denies essential nature will have no reason to affirm either causal entailments or scientific explanations of any type.²⁵ It is the clearest indication of bad faith that those who deny the generic knowledge of essence exhibit by their actions a disbelief in their own denials: for clearly they act as though some judgments regarding essential nature are true, and some false (e.g., few such skeptics will act on the supposition that there is no essential distinction between mice and lions).

²⁵ Inasmuch as scientific reasoning implies inferences, the foundation of these inferences must be either intrinsic or extrinsic to what the inferences concern. But, if extrinsic, then the reason is found in relation to something else, and if this too is intrinsically indeterminate, and so on indefinitely, then no determinate ground of judgment can be founded. It will not help to claim that such determination is only accidental since this type of relation is defined by reference to the essential and the term is otherwise bereft of meaning. Hence the idea that all things might be “accidental” amounts to a denial of causal entailment as such, and by a short and swift route leads to the denial of scientific explanation. Just as efficient causality presupposes final causality—because if one thing is not ordered to a determinate end then what reason could there be either for the initiation or cessation of action?—similarly, efficient causality manifestly presupposes formal causality, for else there is nothing determinate to cause or to be caused.

Perhaps the most significant disputes regard *the manner in which* determinations are found in nature—what above is described as the question of the locus of determination—but such disputes presuppose that essential determinations do indeed exist in nature. One of the largest of such disputes lies between atomists—who limit essential nature to lowest common denominator objects—and more classical realists. In particular, Aristotelian and Thomistic realists refuse to reject the evidence of higher-level unities that comprise a greater synthesis in being and act, and which give evidence of a greater actual unity—evidence that more comprehensive forms by their nature possess the powers of lower forms in a more eminent manner.

But even reductionist, atomist, or pluriformist arguments presuppose that at some level the affirmation of essential determination is intelligible. Even should essence wrongly be thought only to pertain to lowest common denominator unities or micro-entities such as particles; or should the reality of higher and more comprehensive forms possessing the powers of lower forms in a higher manner be denied; even so, there is retained some (truncated) affirmation of essential nature. I make this point not to aver sympathy for either atomism or pluriformism, but rather to intimate the ineluctability of essence.

Anyone who is willing to affirm that there are determinations in nature and that not all of these are accidents has affirmed some real principle of essence. From this point forward, it remains only to determine how realistic the account of essence shall be. While it is on this point that atomists and pluriformists founder in comparison with the realism of St. Thomas's analysis, all must concur in rejecting the chimeric thesis of the generic unknowability of essence.²⁶

²⁶ Even the periodic table of the elements presupposes form, since one element is distinguished from another. Thus even were one to suffer the sad fate of being a reductionist it is not at all clear that one would win free of the implications of the *intellectus essentiae* argument, since one is still confronting the generic parts of essence—form and matter—and just as obviously these parts are not identical with existence. As for pluriformism, it fails not in failing to affirm form or essence, but in denying the real evidence that there are comprehensive essences that contain certain powers of lower beings in a higher and formally unified way.

If we do not embrace a pathologically unintelligible negation of the knowability of material essence as such but still wish to deny Thomas's teaching that the proper object of the intellect is quiddity in corporeal matter, we are left with some species of Platonism. That is, the remaining option would appear to be the simple denial that the proper object of the intellect is material essence as opposed to subsistent Forms or separated universals. While Thomas's analysis of the doctrine of Forms lies beyond the reach of this essay, it must be noted that those who seek knowledge of what some physical thing is are aware that they are seeking not a separate substance but rather to understand the essence or nature of the physical thing in question. And this already contains, in germinus, the arguments with which Aristotle and St. Thomas vindicate the possibility of genuinely terrestrial knowledge.

Thomas's doctrine does not suggest that we are comprehensors who intuitively read off the essences of things whole and entire with instantaneous knowledge of all essential notes. Rather, for Thomas, the generic adequation of mind to material quiddity enables us to grasp the formal parts of essence, the ontological limits of material being, and to inquire about particular material natures. But this last inquiry is prosecuted with only gradual success, and with many limitations and imperfections. The history of science appears to substantiate this realization of the limits and imperfections of our knowledge of physical things.

The very condition for the effort to know some particular nature thus is precisely the generic intelligibility of material quiddity. It is this generic intelligibility that delineates the target zone in relation to which the ebb and flow of hypothesis, falsification, and diverse types of confirmation may occur. This is a judgment of importance for natural philosophy and for philosophy of science. For the ontological categories which positive science empirically instantiates *illuminate* the instantiations, in a way similar to the manner in which substance is the principle of accidents. This is another way of saying that the four causes—including the final cause—are illustrated in the actual achievements and conduct of positive science, often even contrary to the intentions of the scientists themselves.²⁷ In any case,

²⁷ See here Etienne Gilson's fine work, *From Aristotle to Darwin and Back Again*, trans. John Lyon (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press,

if we do not know what a target is, or deny the general intelligibility of there being a target, then neither the idea of hitting nor the idea of missing the target can make sense. This is the postmodern delusive muddle in which many thinkers—and perhaps even some medievalists—seem to be trapped, but for which no excuse is to be found in St. Thomas's analysis.

St. Thomas's argument that essence exists in two ways—in one way in the thing, and in another, in the mind—is not only the epistemic foundation for the *intellectus essentiae* argument, but a critical account of the nature of rational objectivity. This in turn implies an anthropological judgment that the human person has a power whose exercise is only extrinsically conditioned by any physical nature. For the power of objective cognition is one whereby an essential nature may be received in its totality in the *intentional* and not physical order. One does not become an elephant by knowing elephant nature: the power to know a nature universally is not a particular physical power.

The power to conform one's mind to whatsoever the evidence of nature is—which is required for objectivity—is defined in a way that excludes merely subjective material or physical determination. For physical or subjective material determination would preclude the possibility of measuring one's judgment by the evidence. If what determines my judgment of "X" is some particular subjective function or physical determination that serves as or causes a subtle cognitive material "copy" of "X"—and if "X" cannot otherwise be known—then there is no way to go to the object to check our judgments and objectivity disappears. Objectivity requires that the essence in the thing be the same essence which is known, and this formulation of essence existing in two ways demarcates an important theme for epistemology and philosophic anthropology.²⁸

1984), wherein he shows that the more systematically biological scientists have striven to abandon the teleological ordering of nature, the more thoroughly they end by presupposing and implicitly affirming this very notion.

²⁸ It might be thought that *ST* 1, q. 50, a. 2 somehow contradicts this emphasis. In this article St. Thomas argues that the intellect apprehends things in their own mode rather than in the mode of the things themselves, such that material things exist more simply in intellectual intention. But this is simply an inference from the principle that whatever is received is received

Of course, the importance of the *intellectus essentia* argument for the existential proof for God as *tantum esse* is manifest. The proposition that essence is in two ways (in the physical thing and in the mind), together with the *intellectus essentiae* argument for the real distinction to which it leads, engages the most central epistemic, anthropological and metaphysical issues of philosophy.

III. Conclusion

Karl Popper is famed for his view that the best theories are the most comprehensive in implications and hence both the most protean and the most easily “falsifiable.” Although he initially considered this to pertain only to positive science, he later came to admit that theoretical falsification could pertain to metaphysical theses (although he never wholly escaped the positivist legacy of placing certain unwarranted limits on the nature of metaphysics²⁹). Placing this Popperian consideration in its richest theoretical context, by its light St. Thomas Aquinas’s *intellectus essentiae* argument may be seen as an exceedingly rich theoretic analysis. Its myriad epistemic and ontological implications—

according to the mode of the receiver. As the receiver here is an immaterial principle, it receives its objects immaterially. The argument made by St. Thomas in *De Ente et Essentia* that essence is in two ways—in one way in the mind and in another in the thing—is entirely consistent with this point. One does not physically become an elephant in knowing elephant nature, and yet the elephant nature does exist in intellectual intention with all the accidents ensuing therefrom (such as species and genus) in a diverse mode from the way this *same nature* exists in individual elephants with all the accidents (quantification of matter, qualities, relations) ensuing from this mode of being.

²⁹ See Karl Popper, *Unended Quest: An Intellectual Autobiography* (London: Fontana, 1976). He seems to have restricted the realm of metaphysical knowledge to regulative theories governing the trajectory of research in, and conclusions from, positive science. Thus on this point he arguably was a casualty of the positivist temptation he otherwise so steadfastly avoided as there is no reason to concur in this unfounded restriction of the scope or adequacy of metaphysical knowledge. The intelligibility of being is implicitly presupposed by the intelligibility of being *propter quid* or in a certain respect, the intelligibility of *ens mobile* implicitly but really presupposes the intelligibility of *ens commune*.

which reach from philosophy of nature, philosophic anthropology, theory of knowledge, and philosophy of science to metaphysics and theology—merit great attention, detailed analysis, and high regard.

Thus, in conclusion, whereas the intuitivity of the *intellectus essentiae* argument often is frowned upon as demonstratively weak and inferior in profundity and rigor by comparison with other routes to the real distinction, *sed contra*: this argument clearly is presupposed by all the rest. Accordingly it befits it that it is of all such arguments for the real distinction the most intuitively accessible; that it occurs with prominence in the only introduction to metaphysics Thomas ever wrote in his own name; and finally that it provides the foundation for the demonstration of the universality of the real distinction of essence and existence throughout finite being, and thus provides the remote foundation for the demonstration of the dependence of all finite reality upon the unique and primary cause of being, the Creator God Who is *tantum esse, ipsum esse subsistens per se*. N V