

Secunda Operatio Respicit Ipsum Esse Rei: An Evaluation of Jacques Maritain, Étienne Gilson, and Ralph McInerny on the Relation of *Esse* to the Intellect's Two Operations

ELLIOT POLSKY
University of St. Thomas
Houston, TX

Status Quaestionis

IN HIS *PREFACE TO METAPHYSICS* (1939), Jacques Maritain warns that “it is a radical error to restrict the object of the intellect to the object of the first operation of the mind.”¹ Thanks to texts such as q. 5, a. 3 of St. Thomas’s commentary on Boethius’s *De Trinitate*, the seventh reply in d. 19, q. 5, a. 1 of book I of the *Scriptum* on the *Sentences* (hereafter simply *Scriptum*), and the corpus of *Scriptum* I, d. 38, q. 1, a. 3, it is the common opinion of the twentieth century’s great existential Thomists that, whereas the object of the intellect’s first activity (or operation) is the essences of things, the object of the second operation of the intellect is the act of existence or to-be (*esse*).² In the texts just cited, Aquinas distinguishes two operations of the intellect, which correspond to two distinct aspects in things: their nature, quiddity, or essence, on the one hand, and their existence

¹ Jacques Maritain, *A A A Preface to Metaphysics: Seven Lectures on Being* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1948), 20.

² Citations from Aquinas, when not from the Leonine edition, *Opera Omnia* (Rome: Commissio Leonina, 1882–), are thus: *In I sent.* citations from *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, ed. R. P. Mandonnet, vol. 1 (Paris: Lethielleux, 1929); *In I–XII metaphys.* citations from *In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis expositio*, ed. M. R. Cathala and Raymundi Spiazzi, 3rd ed. (Italy: Marietti, 1977); *ST* citations from *Summa Theologiae*, ed. John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón, 8 vols. (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012). All translations from Latin are my own.

or to-be (*esse*), on the other. The first operation, says Thomas, “pertains to [*respicit*] the nature of a thing,” or put differently, “apprehends [*apprehendit*] the quiddities of things.” The second, however, “pertains to [*respicit*] the being [*esse*] of a thing,” or put differently, “comprehends [*comprehendit*] the being [*esse*] of a thing.” These two operations have traditionally been named “simple apprehension” and “judgment,” respectively.

The principal authors espousing this existentialist thesis are Maritain³ and Étienne Gilson,⁴ for whom the cognition of *esse* in judgment plays an essential role in both epistemology and metaphysics. This paper restricts itself to considering the metaphysical thesis itself that *esse* is cognized in judgment—that is, that the object of the second operation of the intellect is *esse*.

The standard response to existential Thomism in regard to the cognition of *esse* was given first by Father Louis-Marie Régis in his 1951 review of Gilson’s *Being and Some Philosophers*.⁵ It was subsequently developed at considerable length by Ralph McInerny in various places.⁶ The heart of the

³ Maritain, *Preface*; Maritain, *Existence and the Existent* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2015); Maritain, “Reflections on Wounded Nature,” in *Untrammelled Approaches*, trans. Bernard Doering, The Collected Works of Jacques Maritain 20 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997); Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself about the Present Time* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968).

⁴ Étienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1949); Gilson, *Elements of Christian Philosophy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959). Besides Maritain and Gilson, the thesis that *esse* is the object of judgment can also be found in the leading second- and third-generation existential Thomists such as Joseph Owens and John Knasas, whose opinions will not be discussed in detail in this paper. See, e.g.: John Knasas, “*Esse* as the Target of Judgment in Rahner and Aquinas,” *The Thomist* 51, no. 2 (1987): 222–45, at 231; Joseph Owens, “Aquinas on Knowing Existence,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 29, no. 4 (1976): 670–90, at 675 and 678–80; Owens, *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics* (Houston, TX: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1985), 47.

⁵ Louis-Marie Régis, “Gilson’s *Being and Some Philosophers*,” *The Modern Schoolman* 28, no. 2 (1951): 111–25. This article along with Gilson’s reply was reprinted in the appendix to Gilson’s own *Being and Some Philosophers*, 216–32.

⁶ Ralph McInerny, “Some Notes on Being and Predication,” *The Thomist* 22, no. 3 (1959): 315–35; McInerny, “Notes on Being and Predication,” *Laval théologique et philosophique* 15, no. 2 (1959): 236–74. These McInerny articles were combined and republished in a later collection: *Being and Predication* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 173–228. (These later-edited versions are those we cite here.) McInerny’s arguments were then abbreviated and restated as part of a historical study of Gilson’s impact on Catholic intellectual life in: *Preambula Fidei: Thomism and the God of the Philosophers* (Washington, DC:

argument made by these two authors against existential Thomism consists in pointing to a text in lecture 5 of Aquinas's commentary on Aristotle's *Peryermenias* (*De interpretatione*) in which Aquinas appears to say quite plainly that "is" signifies *esse*, that "is" is a verb, and that verbs signify concepts in the first operation of the intellect, not the second.

In response to this objection, existential Thomists could either, as Gilson does, call into question the value of Aquinas's Aristotelian commentaries for revealing Aquinas's own thoughts⁷ or, more plausibly, point out that none of the existential Thomists deny a concept of existence in the first operation.⁸ Rather, all they deny is that our understanding of existence *originates* in the first, rather than the second, operation. So, even if Father Régis and McInerney are right to see in *In peryermenias* a simple concept of *esse*, this need not contradict the existential Thomist thesis that *esse* is properly cognized only in judgment.

It is the contention of the present paper that both sides of this dispute are mistaken. For reasons that have not been previously explored, we must deny the existentialist thesis that the object of the second operation is *esse*. Moreover, we must reject the Régis-McInerney interpretation of *In peryermenias* in which that text is taken as describing a particular concept of existence cognized in the first operation of the intellect. To reach these two conclusions, we proceed as follows. First, we present a chronological sketch of Maritain's understanding of the relation of *esse* to judgment, using him as the chief representative of the existential school and only citing Gilson afterward to confirm our previous interpretation of Maritain and to suggest that his view is generally representative of the existential school. Second, using texts in which Aquinas distinguishes the two operations of the intellect, we consider whether it is correct to interpret Aquinas's phrase "*secunda operatio respicit ipsum esse rei*" ("the second operation pertains to the being of a thing") as indicating that *esse* is the object of the second operation of the intellect or even properly cognized in that operation. Our

The Catholic University of America Press, 2006).

⁷ Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 224: "In his commentaries on Aristotle does Saint Thomas always express his deepest personal thought on a given question?"

⁸ See, e.g.: Maritain, *Preface*, 20; Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, 19 and 36; Maritain, "Reflections," 220–21; Maritain, *Peasant*, 138; Owens, *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics*, 57–65. Gilson is somewhat less clear than the other two existential Thomists just cited, but he does seem to admit a concept of existence in the first operation (*Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, trans. Mark Wauck [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012], 198). In any case, Gilson certainly allows a concept of *ens* in simple apprehension, and this presumably includes a concept of existence (*Elements*, 135).

conclusion is negative. Having rejected the thesis of the existential Thomists, we consider whether the standard alternative—here represented by McInerny—is any better. Although both Father Régis and McInerny are somewhat unclear in their interpretation of *In peryermenias*, both seem to view existence as falling under the proper object of the intellect's first operation in a way co-equal with that in which the quiddities of things do so. They interpret Aquinas as describing "is" as signifying a particular concept in the first operation of the intellect—namely, the concept of existence. I argue, in contrast, that the text in question does not give us reason to think that there is a particular concept of existence signified by "is" falling in any direct way under the proper object of the intellect's first operation. Rather, the text only specifies the *mode* in which the copula "is" signifies when used without qualification. Although this paper interprets the *esse* of *In peryermenias* as merely an idiomatic Latin technique for referring to the copula in indirect speech rather than, as Father Régis and McInerny suppose, the predicate in so-called "existential propositions," we suggest (but do not develop the idea) that this text may yet be relevant to how we understand *esse* in Aquinas's metaphysics.

Esse and Judgment in Existential Thomism

Jacques Maritain

Although Maritain and Gilson differed on the epistemological role of *esse* and judgment in answering Cartesian doubt and idealism,⁹ the two authors

⁹ For the epistemological views of the existential Thomists, see Gilson, *Thomist Realism*; Jacques Maritain, "Critical Realism," in *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald Phelan (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995); Joseph Owens, *Cognition: An Epistemological Inquiry* (Houston, TX: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1992). The secondary literature on the epistemological debate among the existential Thomists is actually more developed than that on the metaphysical interpretation of the existential judgment. For a defense of Gilson and (especially) Owens, see John Knasas, *Being and Some Twentieth-Century Thomists* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), esp. 71–128. For a critical evaluation of Gilson's epistemological project, see Brian Kemple, "Evaluating the Metaphysical Realism of Étienne Gilson," *Studia Gilsoniana* 4, no. 4 (2015): 363–80. Gilson and Maritain's epistemological differences are suggested by Gerald McCool in *From Unity to Pluralism: The Internal Evolution of Thomism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989). For a critical evaluation of Maritain in favor of Gilson, see John Knasas, "Transcendental Thomist Methodology and Maritain's 'Critical Realism,'" in *Jacques Maritain and the Many Ways of Knowing*, ed. Douglass Ollivant (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2002). For a reply to Knasas in favor of Maritain, see Stephen Chamberlain, "The Dispute between Gilson and

were often mutually illuminating concerning the metaphysical relation of *esse* to judgment. Maritain's initial explanation of the two operations of the intellect in *A Preface to Metaphysics* is helpful for framing the nuances of how both authors understand the relation of *esse* to judgment.

Observe that being presents two aspects. One of these is its aspect as essence which corresponds particularly to the first operation of the mind. . . . The other is the aspect existence, the *esse* in the strict sense, which is the end in which things attain their achievement, their act, their "energy" par excellence, the supreme actuality of whatever is. Nor must we suppose that this second aspect, this aspect which crowns and perfects being, escapes the grasp of the intellect. . . . It is the second operation of the mind, in the judgment, by composition and division, that the speculative intellect grasps being, not only from the standpoint of essence but from that of existence itself, actual or possible. Existence is here apprehended *ut exercita*, that is as actualized by a subject: not merely as presented to the mind, as is the case with the simple concept of existence, but as possessed potentially or actually by a subject.¹⁰

Maritain does not cite from where, in Aquinas, he derives this distinction, but he seems to be following the mode of presentation of *Scriptum* I, d. 38, q. 1, a. 3, where Aquinas introduces the two operations of the intellect by noting that, "in a thing [*res*], there are two [aspects]: the quiddity of the thing and the to-be of it."¹¹ Simple apprehension "apprehends" (*apprehendit*) the quiddity of things, but judgment "comprehends" (*comprehendit*) the *esse rei*. From what I can tell, this is a unique case in which Aquinas connects the second operation to the grammatical direct object, *esse*, by means of a distinctly cognitive verb, like *comprehendit*. In q. 5, a. 3, of the commentary on Boethius and *Scriptum* I, d. 19, q. 5, a. 1, ad 7, Aquinas uses "respicit ipsum esse rei" and "respicit esse ipsius" instead. These formulas could still be interpreted in a cognitive way so that the object cognized in judgment is *esse*, but they are less determinately so. In any case, Maritain interprets Aquinas to mean that *esse* is the object cognized by judgment. After telling us that existence is posited in judgment by the verb, "which expresses judgment," and that it is judgment that "completes and perfects knowledge," Maritain declares:

Maritain over Thomist Realism," *Studia Gilsoniana* 6, no. 2 (2017): 177–95.

¹⁰ Maritain, *Preface*, 19–20.

¹¹ Aquinas, *Scriptum*, 1:903–4.

It is a radical error to restrict the object of the intellect to the object of the first operation of the mind. Unfortunately a number of popular expositions of scholasticism seem to represent the matter in this false light. They speak as though the object of the first operation constitutes the object of intellection as such. This is quite untrue. It is merely a preparation for the second, which achieves knowledge.

When we affirm that the object of the intellect is being, an affirmation which displays the profound realism of Thomist philosophy, we do not stop short at essences. It is to existence itself that the intellect proceeds when it formulates within itself a judgment corresponding to what a thing is or is not outside the mind.¹²

To be precise, Maritain does not, here, explicitly affirm that *esse* is the object of the second operation. But that is clearly what he intends us to understand when he denies that the object of the intellect is reducible to the object of the first operation and affirms that judgment goes beyond essences to existence. Having presented *esse* as the object of the intellect's operation of judgment, Maritain shifts abruptly to the topic of how acts of will differs from judgment. Maritain does not cite any text or problem justifying this rather unexpected digression. But he presumably has passages in mind, like the corpus of *De veritate*, q. 21, a. 1. Texts such as these present a formidable obstacle to what Maritain has just concluded about judgment.

In every being, there are two [aspects] to consider—namely, the notion [*ratio*] of the species and the being itself [*esse ipsum*] by which something subsists in that species. And so any being [*ens*] can be perfective in two ways: In one way, according to the notion [*ratio*] of the species only, and thus by being [*ens*] the intellect, which perceives the notion of being [*ratio entis*], is perfected—nor indeed is being [*ens*] in [the intellect] according to natural being [*esse naturale*]. And for this reason, this mode of perfecting adds “truth” onto “being.” . . . For the truth is in the mind. . . . In another way, being [*ens*] is perfective of another not only according to the notion [*ratio*] of the species, but also according to the being [*esse*] which it has in the nature of things. And by this mode is the good perfective. For the good is in things.¹³

¹² Maritain, *Preface*, 20–21.

¹³ *De veritate*, q. 21, a. 1: “In quolibet autem ente est duo considerare, scilicet ipsam rationem speciei et esse ipsum quo aliquid subsistit in specie illa. Et sic aliquod

This passage has the same structure as Maritain's division of the two operations of the intellect except, rather than distinguishing two intellectual operations by the two aspects of being (*ens*), Aquinas uses these two aspects to distinguish the intellect from the will. The intellect, which "percipit rationem entis," is perfected by a being (*ens*) according to the *ratio* of its species *tantum*. In contrast, the will is perfected not only (*non solum*) by the *ratio speciei*, but also by the *esse* that a being has in the nature of things. This text seems to positively exclude Maritain's whole thesis—namely, that the object of the intellect is more than essences (species), but also existence (*esse*). If Maritain is to maintain that the object of the intellect is *esse* as well as essence, then how does the intellect differ from the will? Here we have the presumed motive underlying Maritain's decision to close a section on the two operations of the intellect by distinguishing the will from judgment. Immediately following our last quotation from Maritain, he writes:

From this point of view the intellect and the will are on the same footing, though there is also a fundamental difference between the two cases. The goal of the will is existence precisely as outside the mind, as actualised or *possessed* by reality external to the mind, outside the spiritual act of the will. But the intellect and its act are fulfilled by existence affirmed or denied by a judgment, by existence attained—as it is lived or *possessed* by a subject—within the mind, within the mind's intellectual act itself.¹⁴

To some extent, this parallels Aquinas's distinction between intellect and will in *De veritate*, q. 21, a. 1. What the intellect attains (truth) is in the mind, but what the will attains (good) is in things outside the mind. Like Aquinas, Maritain says that what the intellect attains is in the mind, but

ens potest esse perfectivum dupliciter: uno modo secundum rationem speciei tantum, et sic ab ente perficitur intellectus qui percipit rationem entis, nece tamen *ens* est in eo secundum esse naturale . . . verum enim est in mente. . . . Alio modo *ens* est perfectivum alterius non solum secundum rationem speciei sed etiam secundum esse quod habet in rerum natura, et per hunc modum est perfectivum bonum; bonum enim in rebus" (Leonine ed., 22:593 [lns. 179–97]). See also, *De veritate*, q. 21, a. 3, corp.: "Verum est prius bono secundum rationem cum verum sit perfectivum alicuius secundum rationem speciei, bonum autem non solum secundum rationem speciei sed etiam secundum esse quod habet in re" ("Truth is prior to good according to reason, since truth is perfective of something according to the nature [*ratio*] of the species, but good is [perfective of a thing] not merely according to the nature [*ratio*] of the species, but also according to the being [*esse*] that it has in the thing"; Leonine ed., 22:598 [lns. 47–51]).

¹⁴ Maritain, *Preface*, 21.

what the will attains is outside of it. Unlike Aquinas, however, Maritain is not talking about truth and goodness, but about *esse* as attained by the intellect and will, respectively. This has a rather shocking consequence. Although Maritain has just told us that the intellect's being perfected by existence as its object "displays the profound realism of Thomist philosophy," Maritain now says that the existence attained by the intellect is in the mind, not outside it. Does this mean that we cannot know existence outside the mind? How is this strategy for distinguishing will from intellect compatible with Maritain's own professed realism? Maritain's *A Preface to Metaphysics* does not provide answers to these troubling questions. But a somewhat plausible answer is implied by Maritain's later work *Existence and the Existent* (1947). Maritain's success as an epistemologist in answering these questions is irrelevant to the present paper. What is relevant is the metaphysical implication of this answer for how Maritain understands *esse* in relation to judgment.

In *Existence and the Existent*, Maritain still maintains that "essences are the object of the first operation of the intellect, or *simple apprehension*."¹⁵ Now, however, Maritain somewhat artificially restricts the words "object" and "intelligible" to essences, abstracted in the intellect's first operation.¹⁶ But, says Maritain, the function of judgment is to restore essence, abstracted from existence by the mind's first operation, back to existence.¹⁷

¹⁵ Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, 19 (see also 11–13).

¹⁶ Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, 13: "In abstractive perception, what the intellect lays hold of is the natures or essences which are in existent things or subjects (but not in the state of universality or intelligibility in act), which themselves are not things, and which the intellect strips of existence by immaterializing them. These are what, from the very beginning, we call intelligibles, or objects of thought." See also: "The object is the term of the first operation of the intellect (simple perception, or 'simple apprehension'); what is it therefore if not, under a given specific aspect determined and cut out by abstraction, the intelligible density of an existent subject, rendered transparent in act by the mind and identified with the mind's vital activity by and in a concept? Briefly, the object as present in the mind is the intelligible objectization of a trans-objective subject" (11).

¹⁷ Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, 10: "The intellect, laying hold of the intelligibles, disengaging them by its own strength from sense experience, reaches, at the heart of its own inner vitality, those natures or essences which, by abstracting them, it has detached from their material existence at a given point in space and time. But to what end? Merely in order to contemplate the picture of the essences in its ideas? Certainly not! Rather in order to restore them to existence by the act in which intellection is completed and consummated, I mean judgment pronounced in the words *ita est*, thus it is. When, for example, I say: 'In every Euclidean triangle the sum of the angles is equal to two right angles,' or, 'The earth revolves round the sun,' what I am really saying is that every Euclidean triangle *exists* in mathematical

For instance, when we say, “the earth revolves round the sun,” for Maritain, what we are really doing is restoring the abstract concept “earth” to existence, by judging that “the earth *exists* in physical existence as revolving round the sun.”¹⁸ That judgment has this existential restorative function, rather than an abstractive one, makes Maritain now call into question whether existence can be said to be the “object” of judgment.

And yet existence is not an essence. It belongs to another order, an order which is other than the whole order of essences. It is therefore not an intelligible nor an object of thought in the sense given these words (which is synonymous with essence). What are we to conclude if not that existence goes beyond the object strictly so called, beyond

existence as possessing the property described; that the earth *exists* in physical existence as characterized by the movement described. The function of judgment is an existential function.” See also 15.

- ¹⁸ Maritain does not say what motivates this attempt to reinterpret all attributive judgments into existential ones. It is likely that he has in mind *In V metaphys.*, lec. 9, no. 890, where Aquinas says: “Unde oportet, quod ens contrahatur ad diversa genera secundum diversum modum praedicandi, qui consequitur diversum modum essendi; quia ‘quoties ens dicitur,’ idest quot modis aliquid praedicatur, ‘toties esse significatur,’ idest tot modis significatur aliquid esse” (“Whence it is right that being [*ens*] is contracted into diverse genera according to a diverse mode of predicating, which follow upon a diverse mode of being [*modus essendi*]. [That is] because ‘in as many ways as *being* [*ens*] is said [*dicitur*],’—that is, in as many ways as something is predicated—‘in that many ways is to be [*esse*] signified’—that is, in that many ways is something signified to be”). Other authors, although differing from Maritain in detail, have also taken this to mean that every judgment is somehow existential: Gyula Klima, “Aquinas’ Theory of the Copula and the Analogy of Being,” *Logical Analysis and History of Philosophy* 5, no. 1 (2002): 159–76; Turner Nevitt, “Aquinas on Essence and Existence” (PhD diss., Fordham University, 2015), 152–55. Such an interpretation is undermined, by Aquinas, when, a few lines later, he reveals that, by *esse*, he just means us to understand whatever essence is signified by the predicate: “Oportet quod unicuique modo praedicandi, esse significet idem; ut cum dicitur homo est animal, esse significat substantiam.” See Elliot Polsky, “‘In as Many Ways as Something is Predicated . . . in that Many Ways is Something Signified to Be’: The Logic behind Thomas Aquinas’s Predication Thesis, *Esse Substantiale*, and *Esse in Rerum Natura*,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 95 (forthcoming, 2021). Alternatively, Maritain may not be attempting an interpretation of *In V Metaphysicorum*, lec. 9, but instead Aquinas’s frequent remark that *esse* results from the coming-together of the principles of things, such as matter and form. See, for instance: *In IV metaphys.*, lec. 2, no. 558; *In Boetium de Trinitate*, q. 5, a. 3, corp. Such texts inspire Owens, like Maritain, to reinterpret all attributive judgments as somehow existential (*Elementary Christian Metaphysics*, 49–50).

the intelligible strictly so called, because it is an act exercised by a subject, whose eminent intelligibility, we may say super-intelligibility, objectivizes itself in us in the very act of judgment? In this sense we could call it a trans-objective act.¹⁹

Superficially, this passage seems to contradict what Maritain said earlier in *Preface to Metaphysics*. Since Maritain now restricts the word “object” to abstracted essences, he now denies that existence is the object of the intellect. But only a few pages later, Maritain will clarify that we can still call existence the “object” of the intellect and that which judgment “confronts” so long as we keep in mind that existence is an object in a “higher and analogical sense” compared to essences as objects of simple apprehension.²⁰ Thus, just as in *A Preface to Metaphysics*, Maritain faces the unstated specter of *De veritate*, q. 21, a. 1. If existence is the object of not only the will, but also the intellect, how does the intellect differ from the will? In *A Preface to Metaphysics*, as we saw, Maritain’s solution to this unstated problem was to say that the existence attained by the intellect was in the mind whereas the existence attained by the will was outside the mind. In *Existence and the Existent*, Maritain does not seem to abandon his view that the existence attained in judgment is in the mind, not outside of it. Quoting his own earlier *Degrees of Knowledge* (1932), and commenting thereon, Maritain writes:

“Judgment is not content with the representation or apprehension of existence. It affirms existence, it projects into it, as effected or effectible outside the mind, the objects of concept apprehended by the mind. In other words, when the intellect judges, it lives intentionally, by an act proper to itself, this same act of existing which the thing exercises or is able to exercise outside the mind.” Existence thus affirmed and intentionally experienced by and in the mind is the consummation or completion, in the mind, of intelligibility in act. It corresponds to the act of existing exercised by things.²¹

Here, as in *A Preface to Metaphysics*, there are clearly two existences—one in things, one in the mind. The one experienced and affirmed in the mind “corresponds” to the one outside the mind. Unlike *A Preface to Metaphysics*, however, we now have some indication how this doctrine could

¹⁹ Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, 15.

²⁰ Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, 18–9.

²¹ Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, 15.

be reconciled with Maritain's professed realism. If truth is, as classically understood, the correspondence of the mind to things, and moreover the existence in the mind attained in judgment corresponds to existence in things, then, plausibly, we can know existence outside the mind by experiencing existence within the mind. But as Maritain warns here, existence in the mind should not be seen as a mere abstract representation. So, how *should* we understand the existence obtained in the mind? As Maritain says a few lines later, quoting *Degrees of Knowledge*: "The intelligibility with which judgment deals is more mysterious than that which notions or ideas convey to us; it is not expressed in a concept but in the very act of affirming or denying."²² What Maritain seems to mean is that, whereas what is cognized in simple apprehension is a concept—that is, the abstract or static term of an intellectual operation—what is cognized in judgment is the very act of affirming or denying, the intellectual operation itself. The object of judgment is not an abstracted form, but the concrete vital operation of an immaterial form—the intellectual knower himself. The object known in judgment is itself the vital operation of judgment by which, with the abstracted essences in the mind, the knower performatively imitates (or "lives intentionally") through judgment the act of existing exercised by unabstracted essences outside the mind.

Admittedly, in explaining how Maritain understands judgment in relation to *esse*, we have had to interpret Maritain rather than merely quote his own plainly formulated opinions. Still, as we turn from Maritain to Gilson, we find further evidence that our interpretation of Maritain has been faithful. Gilson's understanding of judgment in relation to *esse*, as expressed in *Being and Some Philosophers* (1949), is strikingly similar to Maritain's understanding. For the purposes of this paper, we need not review Gilson's views in the same detail we gave to Maritain. Rather, we will merely highlight some points of similarity to confirm the faithfulness of our interpretation of Maritain to that author and his school.

Étienne Gilson

Like Maritain, before distinguishing the two operations of the intellect, Gilson distinguishes two aspects in being: essence and existence.²³ After a lengthy discussion of how these relate to one another, Gilson turns to the two operations of the intellect: "The first operation of the mind is to form such concepts as express what things are."²⁴ Gilson, then, goes on to distinguish

²² Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, 15.

²³ Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 179.

²⁴ Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 187.

two kinds of judgment.²⁵ One applies abstract concepts to their objects. The truth of such judgments depends only on essences, which in themselves are merely possible. Thus, such judgments do not give us knowledge of actually existing things. In contrast, there is a second kind of judgment.

In order to go further, another class of judgments is required, namely, those by which we state that what the thing is, actually is, or exists. Such is the composite operation which we call a judgment of existence. By saying that *x is*, we mean to say that *x* is a certain *esse* (to be), and our judgment must needs be a composite operation precisely because, in such cases, reality itself is composite. Existence is synthetically united with essence in reality, owing to the efficient causality of its cause, and the synthetic nature of their actual relation entails the synthetic nature of the mental act whereby we express it. If our existential judgment is true, however, it is so because that to which we ascribe existence actually is, or exists. In short, it is true when the data of abstract, intellectual knowledge and those of sensible intuition fully agree.²⁶

After using the phrase “first operation of the mind” to describe our knowledge of essences, Gilson only re-introduces the word “operation” when speaking of existential judgments. This suggests that he is uncomfortable including the first class of judgments (so-called “attributive judgments”) within the second operation of the intellect. If so, this would be a slight departure from Maritain, who, as we saw, reduced attributive judgments (e.g., “the earth revolves round the sun”) to existential judgments (e.g., “the earth *exists* in physical existence as revolving round the sun”). In any case, Gilson—even more clearly than Maritain—takes existence to be the object of the intellect’s second operation. He says:

That the human mind is naturally able to grasp it [the existential act] is a fact, and, if so many philosophers doubt it, it is because they fail to grasp the cognitive power of judgment. Because it lies beyond essence, existence lies beyond abstract representation, but not beyond the scope of intellectual knowledge; for judgment itself is the most perfect form of intellectual knowledge, and existence is its proper object.²⁷

²⁵ Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 187.

²⁶ Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 187–88.

²⁷ Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 202.

Like Maritain, Gilson sees essences in the first operation of the intellect as abstracted from existence and in need of being “restored” thereto for the knower to obtain perfect knowledge.

Essences should never be conceived as final objects of intellectual knowledge, because their very nature is engaged in the concreteness of actual being. Abstracted from being, they claim to be reintegrated being. In other words, the proper end of intellectual abstraction is not to posit essences in the mind as pure and self-sufficient presentations. Even when we abstract essences, we do not do so with a view to knowing essences, but with a view to knowing the very beings to which they belong, and this is why, if philosophical knowledge is not to remain abstract speculation, but to be real knowledge, it must use judgment to restore essences to actual being.²⁸

Gilson goes on to explain how this restoring occurs. As we saw, for Maritain, the restoration of abstract essences to existence consisted in the intellect, by judgment, making the essences in the mind exercise an act corresponding to the act of existence those same essences exercised outside the mind. In our own words, Maritain saw judgment as a self-conscious performative imitation of existence outside the mind. In Gilson, we find an almost identical account of how judgment restores essences to existence.

Judgments always affirm that certain conceived essences are in a state of union with, or of separation from, existence. Judgments unite in the mind what is united in reality, or they separate in the mind what is separated in reality. And what is thus united or separated is always existence, either *how* it is, or *that* it is. In this last case, which is that of the judgment of existence, my mental act exactly answers the existential act of the known thing. Let us, rather, say that such a judgment intellectually reiterates an actual act of existing. If I say that *x is*, the essence of *x* exercises through my judgment the same act of existing which it exercises in *x*.²⁹

To perceive is to experience existence, and to say through judgment that such an experience is true is to know existence. An intellectual knowledge of existence is therefore possible for an intellect whose operations presuppose its vital experience, as an existent, of

²⁸ Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 202–3 (cf. Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, 10 [quoted in note 17 above]).

²⁹ Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 203.

another existent. In other words, intellectual knowledge conceives existence, but the fruit of its conception then is not the representation of some essence; it is an act which answers an act. Exactly, it is the act of an operation which answers an act of existing, and such an operation is itself an act because it directly flows from an act of existing. An epistemology in which judgment, not abstraction, reigns supreme, is necessarily required by a metaphysics in which “to be” reigns supreme in the order of actuality.³⁰

Some aspects of these quotations are unclear. For instance, whereas Gilson earlier seemed to exclude attributive judgments from the second operation of the intellect inasmuch as they had nothing to do with existence, now he seems to say—more in line with Maritain—that all judgments, attributive or existential, have to do with existence. This ambiguity is irrelevant to the present paper. What *is* relevant is that, like Maritain, Gilson sees the act of judgment itself as what corresponds to existence outside the mind, grounding the truth of that existential judgment. Maritain distinguished between existence exercised by essences outside the mind and existence in the mind exercised by abstracted essences in the act of judgment, and he said the latter corresponded to the former. Gilson, in a similar way, says that there are two acts—the act of existing outside the mind and the act of judgment. The latter “exactly answers” to the former. For both authors, it would seem, that which is cognized in the intellect’s second operation is nothing other than the operation itself, which operation is a similitude of the act of existing outside the mind. Gilson closes his paragraph concerning the existential judgment by quoting Aquinas on Boethius’s *De Trinitate* (q. 5, a. 3): “The first operation pertains to the nature of a thing. . . . The second operation pertains to the being of a thing.”³¹

In sum, both Maritain and Gilson interpret Aquinas’s division of the two operations of the intellect as meaning that the first operation has a distinct (proper) object from the second operation. Whereas the first operation cognizes essences, the second cognizes existence. Both authors, however, seem to say the way the second operation cognizes existence outside the mind is by cognizing itself as a vital activity corresponding to (i.e., exactly answering) the existential activity of the existent outside the mind. Having reviewed the opinions of the two most prominent existen-

³⁰ Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 207–208. The beginning of this quotation closely parallels what Gilson says in *Thomist Realism*, esp. 186–87.

³¹ “Prima quidem operatio respicit ipsam naturam rei . . . secunda operatio respicit ipsum esse rei” (Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 203).

tial Thomists concerning how to interpret Aquinas on the relation of judgment to *esse*, two things remain for this paper. First, we must evaluate the faithfulness of the existential Thomist interpretation of Aquinas's saying, "*secunda operatio respicit ipsum esse rei*." Second, we must decide whether the Régis-McInerny alternative account of *esse* as cognized in the intellect's first operation fares any better than the existentialist theory in which *esse* is cognized in the second operation.

"Secunda Operatio Respicit Ipsum Esse Rei"

Minimally, there is a difference in emphasis between Saint Thomas's way of distinguishing the two operations of the intellect and Maritain and Gilson's way of doing so. Maritain and Gilson focus almost exclusively on the relation between *esse* and the second operation of the intellect.³² For Aquinas, this relation often goes unmentioned. In contrast, Aquinas almost always mentions a relation between the second operation and the vocal sound, enunciation (*enuntiatio*), which signifies the mind's second operation.³³ But Maritain seems to have almost entirely omitted mention of *enuntiatio*. Perhaps, in some cases, Maritain's "judgment" can be taken as a translation of Aquinas's *enuntiatio*. But certainly, the primary meaning of Maritain's word seems to be the second operation of the intellect itself, not the vocal sound signifying that operation. Gilson seems to deny that the logic of propositions (*enunciatio*) is helpful at all for showing how we know *esse*.³⁴ It is conceivable that Maritain and Gilson's different emphasis stems from a substantive misinterpretation of Aquinas. To see whether this is so, let us consider a few passages in which Aquinas distinguishes the second operation of the intellect from the first.

³² See Owens, *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics*, 47: "It has to be a different act from conceptualization [that is the means of perceiving that sensible things exist]. It can be described and defined only in terms of its object, existence. Things are known to exist. The intellectual act by which existence is directly known is the proper way to define this cognition. Technically it may be called judgment."

³³ For instance, Aquinas mentions composition and division, as well as enunciation, in his division of the intellectual operations in *In I peryermenias*, lec. 1 (Leonine ed., 1*/1: 6 [lns. 1–32]); *Quodlibet* V, q. 5, a. 2, corp. (Leonine ed. 25/1:375 [lns. 15–30]); *ST* I, q. 85, a. 5, corp. In none of these passages does he mention a relation of judgment to *esse*. In *De veritate*, q. 1, a. 3 (Leonine ed. 22: 11 [lns. 44–6]), Thomas mentions that judgment joins and divides and that it "*dicit aliquid esse vel non esse*," but does not mention *enunciatio* by that name.

³⁴ Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 190–92. See also "Attributive propositions are everywhere related to existence, except, precisely, in logic. . . . Existential propositions, which deal with nothing else than actual existence, are no fitting objects of consideration for the logician" (201).

First, we will consider q. 5, a. 3 in the *De Trinitate* commentary. Here, Aquinas distinguishes the two operations in order to explain the different ways in which the objects of the three most general speculative sciences are abstracted or separated from matter. This text is a paradigmatic instance of Aquinas's distinction between the two operations of the intellect because it gives, in one place, most of the details to be found in other texts.

It should be known therefore that, according to the Philosopher in *De anima* III, there is a twofold operation of the intellect: one, which is called "the understanding of indivisibles," in which it cognizes about anything, what it is [*quid est*]; the other, however, in which it composes and divides—forming an affirmative or negative enunciation [*enunciatio*]. And these two operations correspond to two [aspects], which are in things. On the one hand, the first operation pertains to [*respicit*] the nature itself of a thing, according to which the understood thing obtains some grade among beings—whether it is a complete thing, as a certain whole, or an incomplete thing, like a part or accident. The second operation, on the other hand, pertains to [*respicit*] the being [*esse*] itself of a thing, which either results from the coming-together of the principles of the thing in a composite or which is concomitant upon the simple nature of the thing, as in simple substances.³⁵

The first operation is described here as cognizing something—namely, the *quid est* (i.e., the nature, quiddity, or essence) of a thing. The second operation is not described as cognizing anything (although that it cognizes something is not denied either). Rather, the second operation is described as doing something—composing or dividing. It is also described by its effect: the second operation of the intellect forms an affirmative or negative enunciation. Aquinas goes on to explain that something can be mentally

³⁵ *In Boet. de Trin.*, q. 5, a. 3, corp.: "Sciendum est igitur quod secundum Philosophum in III De anima duplex est operatio intellectus: una que dicitur intelligentia indiuisibilium, qua cognoscit de unoquoque quid est, alia uero qua componit et diuidit, scilicet enuntiationem affirmatiuam uel negatiuam formando. Et hec quidem due operationes duobus que sunt in rebus respondent. Prima quidem operatio respicit ipsam naturam rei, secundum quam res intellecta aliquem gradum in entibus obtinet, siue sit res completa, ut totum aliquod, siue res incompleta, ut pars uel accidens. Secunda uero operatio respicit ipsum esse rei; quod quidem resultat ex congregatione principiorum rei in compositis, uel ipsam simplicem naturam rei concomitatur, ut in substantiis simplicibus" (Leonine ed., 50:147 [lns. 89–105]).

abstracted or separated from something to which it is joined outside the mind either in the first operation or in the second. Doing so in the first operation need not involve falsehood, since by abstracting in this way we merely ignore something about a thing. Doing so in the second operation, in contrast, would involve falsely understanding a thing not to be in another when, outside the mind, it is.

The second operation, which composes and divides, distinguishes one from another by this—that it understands [*intelligit*] one not to be in [*non inesse*] the other. But in the operation that understands [*intelligit*] the *quid est* of anything, [the intellect] distinguishes one from another when it understands what one thing is, while understanding [*intelligendo*] nothing about the other—neither that it is with the other nor that it is separated from it.³⁶

Here, if *intelligit* is taken as synonymous with *cognoscit*, we have an indication that something is in fact cognized in the second operation after all. But what is cognized does not seem to be something distinct from what is cognized in the first operation. Rather, it seems to be nothing else than what is signified by the predicate of an enunciation. And what is signified by the predicate of an enunciation is a something (a whole, an accident, or a part). For instance, in the judgment that gives us the subject of metaphysics, we either separate substance (being, act, potency, etc.) from matter, or, conversely, separate matter from substance (being, act, potency, etc.). Either way, it seems the thing signified by the predicate of this separative enunciation is something understood in the first operation of the intellect. So q. 5, a. 3 gives no indication that the second operation of the intellect cognizes anything apart from what is cognized in the first operation of the intellect.

Aquinas's *In peryermenias* division of simple enunciation supports this conclusion. There, he defines affirmative enunciation as *enunciatio alicuius de aliquo* (an enunciation of something *about* something) and negative enunciation as *enunciatio alicuius ab aliquo* (an enunciation of something *from* something).³⁷ What is understood or cognized in judgment—that is,

³⁶ *In Boet. de Trin.*, q. 5, a. 3, corp.: “Secundum operationem qua componit et diuidit distinguit unum ab alio per hoc quod intelligit unum alii non inesse, in operatione uero qua intelligit quid est unumquodque, distinguit unum ab alio dum intelligit quid est hoc, nichil intelligendo de alio, neque quod sit cum eo, neque quod sit ab eo separatum.” (Leonine ed., 50:148 [lns. 161–67]).

³⁷ *In I peryermenias*, lec. 8: “Set contrarium apparet ex hoc quod Philosophus consequenter utitur nomine enunciationis ut genere: diffiniens affirmationem et negationem subdit quod ‘affirmatio est enunciatio alicuius de aliquod,’ scilicet per

what is signified by an enunciation—is principally that which is signified by the predicate, an *aliquid*, cognized in the intellect's first operation. Judgment differs from simple apprehension not in what is cognized but in the way in which it cognizes. Whereas simple apprehension considers whiteness in isolation, for instance, judgment considers whiteness as in or not in Socrates. Aquinas, here, gives no indication that the object cognized by judgment is either *esse* or the operation of judgment itself.

But if *esse* is not what judgment cognizes, then what are we to make of the word *respicit*? Each of the two operations is said to *respicit* a distinct aspect in things. This language is not unique to the *De Trinitate* commentary, but is also found in *Scriptum* I, d. 19.³⁸ From what I can tell, this formulation does seem to be confined to Aquinas's early works. We have translated *respicit* as “pertains to,” but it could be more literally translated as “sees” or “considers.” Translated in this way, it would be easy to conclude that the two aspects in things that the two operations severally *respicit* are the respective objects of those two operations. As color is to the eye, so quiddities are to the first operation and *esse* is to the second operation. This conclusion seemingly finds further support from the fact that Aquinas, in multiple places, explicitly draws an analogy between quiddities and color. Concerning the text in *De anima* III from which Aquinas originates the distinction between the two intellectual operations, he notes that the intellect is always true insofar as it understands the *quid est* of a thing but is not always true insofar as it understands *aliquid de aliquo*. Explaining this distinction, Aquinas says:

Aristotle assigns to this the following reason: Because that which it is [*quod quid est*] is the proper object of the intellect. Whence as vision is never deceived in its proper object, so neither is intellect [deceived] in cognizing *quod quid est*. Whence the intellect is never deceived in knowing that which man is. But as vision is not always true in judging of those which are adjoined to its proper object (e.g.,

modum compositionis, ‘negatio uero est enunciatio alicuius ab aliquo,’ per modum scilicet diuisionis” (“But the contrary appears to be the case from the fact that the Philosopher subsequently uses the name of ‘enunciation’ as a genus: defining affirmation and negation, he adds that ‘affirmation is an enunciation of something about something,’ namely, in the mode of composition, ‘but negation is an enunciation of something from something,’ namely, in the mode of division”; Leonine ed., 1*/1: 44 [lns. 388–96]).

³⁸ *In I sent.*, d. 19, q. 5, a. 1, ad 7: “Prima operatio respicit quidditatem rei; secunda respicit esse ipsius” (“The first operation pertains to the quiddity of a thing; the second pertains to its being.”).

if “the white” is “man” or “not”), so neither is the intellect always true in composing something of something [*aliquid alicui*].³⁹

Aquinas makes essentially the same point in *Scriptum* I, d. 19, q. 5, but instead of saying *quod quid est*, he substitutes the synonym *quidditas rei*; and instead of using the particular color “white” as a stand-in for the proper object of vision, he simply says “color.”⁴⁰ Likewise, he replaces the unwieldy phrase *aliquid de aliquo* with the more manageable concepts of “composition,” “enunciation,” “affirmation or negation,” and *esse*. Aquinas again makes the same argument in *Summa theologiae* [*ST*] I, q. 85, a. 6. As color is the proper object of vision, so the proper object of the intellect is *quidditas rei*. Accordingly, as the sight cannot err with respect to color (unless the eye is damaged), so the intellect does not err in perceiving simple quiddities. Rather, falsehood only enters the intellect when it begins to compose or divide things with the quiddities it perceives. From these three texts—the commentary on *De anima* III; *Scriptum* I, d. 19; *ST* I, q. 85—there is perhaps good reason to think that, when Aquinas says the first operation *respicit* the quiddity of a thing, whereas the second *respicit* the *esse* of a thing, he has in mind the respective objects of the two operations. As color is to sight, so the quiddity is to the first operation and *esse* is to the second.

This conclusion—although a plausible interpretation of q. 5, a. 3, of the *De Trinitate* commentary read in isolation—should not be accepted too hastily. First of all, the grammatical direct object of the verb *respicit* is not always the object of either a power or an operation. Sometimes it is merely that to which a thing (even an abstract thing) is related. For instance, when Aquinas elsewhere says, “For truth pertains to being [*esse*] simply and immediately,”⁴¹ he obviously does not intend *esse* to be the object of

³⁹ In III *de anima*, ch. 5: “Et huius rationem assignat quia quod quid est huius proprium obiectum intellectus, unde, sicut uisus nunquam decipitur in proprio obiecto, ita nec intellectus in cognoscendo quod quid est, unde intellectus nunquam decipitur in cognoscendo quod quid est homo set, sicut uisus non semper uerus est in iudicando de hiis que sunt adiuncta proprio obiecto, puta *si album est homo uel non*, sic nec intellectus semper est uerus in componendo aliquid alicui” (Leonine ed., 45:227 [Ins. 233–42]).

⁴⁰ In I *sent.*, d. 19, q. 5, a. 1, ad 7 (Aquinas, *Scriptum*, 489–50).

⁴¹ See *ST* I, q. 16, a. 4, corp.: “Nam verum respicit ipsum esse simpliciter et immediate.” See also *ST* I, q. 26, a. 2, obj. 1 (“Sed bonum dicitur in Deo secundum essentiam, quia bonum respicit esse” [“But good is predicated of God according to essence because good pertains to being”]); q. 10, a. 1, obj. 2 (“Duratio autem magis respicit esse quam vitam” [“But duration pertains more to being than to life”]).

truth. Surely, truth is neither a power nor an operation to which *esse* can be related as object. Likewise, Aquinas may not want us to think that quiddities and *esse* are the respective objects of the two intellectual operations or powers.

Secondly, these texts—*In III de anima*; *Scriptum* I, d. 19; *ST* I, q. 85—each call quiddity (or *quod quid est*) the proper object of the intellect and color (or white) the proper object of vision. But these are two powers. In contrast, the subjects of the verb *respicit* in q. 5, a. 3 of the *De Trinitate* commentary are two operations, not two powers. Of course, the object of a power will also be the object of its operation.⁴² For instance, as the object of vision is color, so too, *this* act of seeing has for its object *this* color (e.g., red or blue). So conceivably, although *respicit* is predicated of two operations, not two powers, it may yet relate the two subjects to the proper objects of two separate powers—the power of cognizing quiddity and the power of cognizing *esse*. Perhaps, when Aquinas speaks of the power called “intellect” in these three passages, he is imprecisely designating the power from which the first operation of the intellect results, but not the power from which the second results.

The problem with such a reading is that the reasoning in the *In de anima*, *Scriptum*, and *ST* passages prevents us from understanding the two intellectual operations from the *De Trinitate* commentary as stemming from two separate powers with distinct proper objects. If the second operation stemmed from a separate power with its own distinctive object, then—per the logic of the three texts—not only would the intellect never be deceived in apprehending the quiddity of a thing, it would also never be deceived in the second operation. It is precisely in virtue of the fact that the second operation somehow goes beyond the intellect’s proper object (i.e., *quod quid est*) that this second operation can err. Thus, the two operations to which *respicit* is attributed cannot stem from distinct powers with distinct proper objects.

But if simple apprehension and judgment cannot arise from distinct powers, can they have distinct objects? After all, charity and hatred come from the same power of will but have different objects, right? It depends what is meant by “object,” *obiectum*. This word comes from the Latin preposition *ob* and verb *iacio*.⁴³ Thus, its etymology suggests something

⁴² See *ST* I-II, q. 18, a. 5, corp. See also *ST* I, q. 77, a. 3; *De malo*, q. 2, a. 4; and Steven Jensen, “When Evil Actions Become Good,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 5, no. 4 (2007): 747–64, who both cites and comments on these texts from St. Thomas (755–56).

⁴³ Joseph Pilsner, *The Specification of Human Actions in St. Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford:

thrown in front of something else so as to block it.⁴⁴ In general, “object” designates nothing else than the term of a relation. Obviously, there is no problem saying that simple apprehension and judgment have distinct “objects” in this vague and general sense. But what does this difference in objects amount to?

To explain how the intellect relates to quiddities and *esse* respectively, we must take a brief digression into Aquinas’s distinction among the objects of sense, since Aquinas uses this distinction in sense to explain the characteristics of the operations of the intellect. Concerning the sense-apprehensive powers, Aquinas identifies three kinds of object: the proper object, the common object, and the accidental object.⁴⁵ Sensation is a kind of being-altered, so anything that of itself causes a difference in the alteration of a sense power is called a “sensible” *per se*.⁴⁶ In contrast, what makes no difference in the alteration of a sense power is only called “sensible” accidentally. But there are two ways in which something can differentiate the way a sense power is altered. Proper objects (e.g., color, sound, odor) determine which sense power is altered. For instance, color only affects sight, and sound only affects hearing. Common objects (e.g., quantity, motion, etc.) also, of themselves, alter the sense powers, but in a different way. These affect the mode in which the proper objects affect the sense power. For instance, they determine that the color being seen is great or small. Such objects are called “common” because they affect multiple senses, not just one. In contrast to *per se* sensibles, both common and proper, what is sensible accidentally does not in any way alter the sense to which it is accidental. Aquinas gives two conditions for something being called “sensible” accidentally (*per accidens*).⁴⁷ First, it must be accidental to

Oxford University Press, 2006), 73.

⁴⁴ Pilsner, *Specification*, 73.

⁴⁵ *ST* I, q. 78, a. 2, ad 2: “Magnitudo et figura et huiusmodi, quae dicuntur communia sensibilia, sunt media inter sensibilia per accidens et sensibilia propria, quae sunt obiecta sensuum. Nam sensibilia propria primo et per se immutant sensum” (“Magnitude, figure, and suchlike, which are called *common sensibles*, are a middle between *accidental sensibles* and *proper sensibles*, which are objects of sense. For the proper sensibles move the sense primarily and *per se*”).

⁴⁶ For the mode of division of proper, common, and *per accidens* sensibles, I follow *In II de anima*, ch. 13 (Leonine ed. 45:120–22). Cf. *ST* I, q. 78, a. 2, ad 2.

⁴⁷ See *In II de anima*, ch. 13: “Viso igitur quomodo dicantur per se sensibilia et communia et propria, restat uidendum qua ratione dicatur aliquid sensibilia per accidens. Sciendum est igitur quod ad hoc quod aliquid sit sensibile per accidens primo requiritur quod accidat ei quod est per se sensibile, sicut accidit albo esse hominem et accidit ei esse dulce, secundo requiritur quod sit apprehensum a senciente: si enim aliquid accideret sensibili quod lateret sencientem, non diceretur per

the thing sensed *per se*, as sweetness is accidental to the whiteness seen in the apple. Second, if a thing is to be called “sensible” at all, even accidentally, *something* must perceive it. Although sweetness is not sensed by the eye, except accidentally, if we are to say it is sensed at all, it must at least be perceived by something—such as taste, the intellect, or the inner sense powers. Thus, nothing is, universally speaking, a *per accidens* sensible. Rather, things are only *per accidens* sensibles with respect to some particular cognitive power. With respect to some other power, they must be *per se* sensibles.

In *ST* I, q. 85, a. 6, Aquinas uses this division of sensible objects to explain how error is found in the intellect. Except for a defect in the sense organ, the senses never err with respect to their proper object. Sometimes they err with respect to the common sensibles. For instance, we might mistakenly think that the sun is only the width of our extended thumb when, in fact, it is larger than the whole Earth. Even more so, we may err by a comparison of the proper object of sense with some *per accidens* object. For instance, someone could see a dark shape (cognized by the eyes) and judge that it was a dog (cognized by the intellect), or dangerous (cognized by instinct),⁴⁸ or making the noise being heard (cognized by the ears). Any of these three judgments could be true or false, unlike the simple apprehension of a dark shape or a dog or danger or barking in isolation. When we err in judging about common or *per accidens* sensibles, the possibility

accidens sentiri. Oportet igitur quod per se cognoscatur ab aliqua alia potencia cognoscitiua scietis, et hec quidem uel est alius sensus, uel est intellectus, uel uis cogitatiua aut uis estimatiua. Dico autem quod est alius sensus, sicut si dicamus quod dulce est uisibile per accidens in quantum dulce <accidit albo quod apprehenditur uisu, per se autem dulce> apprehenditur gustu. Set, ut proprie loquamur, hoc non est universaliter sensible per accidens, set per accidens uisibile, sensibile autem per se” (“I see therefore how they talk about *per se* sensibles, whether common or proper, but it must be seen for what reason something is called an accidental sensible. It should be known, then, that for something to be sensible by accident, first, it must belong accidentally to what is a *per se* sensible. For example, it befalls the white to be a human and it befalls it [also] to be sweet. Second, it must be apprehended by some sense. For if something occurs to a sensible without being sensed [at all], it is not said to be sensed accidentally. It is necessary therefore that it is cognized *per se* by some other cognitive potency of the sensing one—be that another sense, the intellect, the cogitative power, or the estimative [power]. But I say that it is another sense, as [for example] if we say that the sweet is visible by accident insofar as the sweet befalls white, which is apprehended by sight, whereas sweet is apprehended *per se* by taste. Properly speaking, however, this is not universally an accidental sensible, but a *per se* sensible and an accidental visible”; Leonine ed. 45:120–21 [Ins. 162–81]).

⁴⁸ See *ST* I, q. 78, a. 4, corp.

for error is evidently occasioned by the plurality of things perceived, one of which is accidental to the other. Turning from the objects of sense to those of intellect, Aquinas says, as we have already seen, that the intellect cannot err concerning its proper object, which is the quiddity of things.⁴⁹ On the other hand, the intellect *can* err concerning things that surround (*circumstant*) the essence of a thing. Error only occurs when one thing is ordered to another by the intellect composing or dividing or reasoning. Aquinas's examples of this are when the intellect applies the definition of a circle to a triangle and when the intellect composes from simple quiddities a definition that is impossible to instantiate (e.g., a rational winged animal).⁵⁰

From this discussion, it is evident that quiddities are the proper object not only of one operation of the intellect, but of the whole intellectual power.⁵¹ They compare to the intellect as color compares to vision. Noth-

⁴⁹ See *ST I*, q. 85, a. 6, corp.: "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" ("The proper object of the intellect is the quiddity of a thing. Whence concerning the quiddity of a thing, speaking *per se*, the intellect does not fail. But concerning those which stand around the essence or quiddity of a thing, the intellect can fail while it orders one to another: composing, dividing, or reasoning").

⁵⁰ See *ST I*, q. 85, a. 6, corp.: "Per accidens tamen contingit intellectum decipi circa quod quid est in rebus compositis; non ex parte organi, quia intellectus non est virtus utens organo; sed ex parte compositionis intervenientis circa definitionem, dum vel definitio unius rei est falsa de alia, sicut definitio circuli de triangulo, vel dum aliqua definitio in seipsa est falsa, implicans compositionem impossibilium, ut si accipiat hoc ut definitio alicuius rei, animal rationale alatum. Unde in rebus simplicibus, in quarum definitionibus compositio intervenire non potest, non possumus decipi" ("By accident, it occurs to the intellect to be deceived concerning that which is in composite things, not on account of the organ, because the intellect is not a power using an organ, but on account of a composition occurring to the definition either [1] when the definition of one thing is falsely [said] of another, e.g., the definition of a circle [said] of a triangle, or [2] when some definition in itself is false, as implying an impossible composition, e.g., winged rational animal. Whence in simple things, in which no composition comes to the definitions, it is not possible to be deceived").

⁵¹ See *ST I*, q. 85, a. 5, corp. ("And similarly the human intellect does not at once in the first apprehension attain perfect cognition of a thing, but first apprehends something about it, as the quiddity of the thing, which is the first and proper object of the intellect" [Et similiter intellectus humanus non statim in prima apprehensione capit perfectam rei cognitionem; sed primo apprehendit aliquid de ipsa, puta quidditatem ipsius rei, quae est primum et proprium obiectum intellectus]); a. 6, corp. ("But the proper object of the intellect is the quiddity of a thing" [Obiectum autem proprium intellectus est quidditas rei]); *In III de anima*, ch. 5

ing in Aquinas's discussion of the intellect seems to correspond to the common sensible objects.⁵² On the other hand, the intellect does have

("That which it is [*quod quid est*] is the proper object of the intellect" [Quod quid est est proprium obiectum intellectus]; Leonine ed. 45:227 [Ins. 233–42]); *In I sent.*, d. 19, q. 5, a. 1, ad 7 ("The intellect has true judgment of its proper object into which it naturally tends, which is the quiddity of a thing, even as sight is of color" [Intellectus habet verum iudicium de proprio objecto, in quod naturaliter tendit, quod est quidditas rei, sicut et visus de colore]); *In peryermenias*, lec. 10 ("But note that the intellect apprehends a thing according to the proper notion [*ratio*] or definition; whence in *De anima* III it is said that the proper object of the intellect is that which it is" [Est autem considerandum quod intellectus apprehendit rem intellectam secundum propriam rationem seu diffinitionem; unde et in III *De anima* dicitur quod obiectum proprium intellectus est quod quid est]; Leonine ed. 1*/1.50 [Ins. 71–75]). Cf. *De ente et essentia*: "Being and essence are what is first conceived by the intellect" [Ens autem et essentia sunt que primo intellectu concipiuntur] (Leonine ed., 43:369 [Ins. 3–4]). It is beyond the scope of this paper to explain how this oft-repeated formula is compatible with the other oft-repeated formula that the intellect's first and proper object is universal *ens*. See, e.g.: *ST I*, q. 78, a. 1, corp.; q. 79, a. 2, corp.; q. 87, a. 3, ad 1; *De veritate*, q. 1, a. 1, corp. Given the comparative frequency, context, and clarity in which these two formulations of the intellect's object are given, particularly in the mature *ST* treatise on man, it seems that to call *ens* the proper object of the intellect is less proper than to call quiddity that object. Nevertheless, it would be surprising if these formulations were incompatible since they often occur side by side. A standard, but not unproblematic, attempt to maintain that both quiddity and *ens* are what the intellect first and properly knows was given by John of St. Thomas (Poinso): *Cursus philosophicus Thomisticus*, q. 1, a. 3, ed. Beatus Reiser, vol. 2 (New York: Georg Olms, 2008). In order to resolve the tension between *ens* and quiddity as the intellect's proper object, it may be relevant that, as Aquinas says, what *ens* primarily signifies is the essence or nature of things, which is divided into ten categories: *De malo*, q. 1, a. 1, ad 19; *In II sent.*, d. 37, q. 1, a. 2, ad 3; *In V metaphys.*, lec. 9. Cf. *De ente et essentia*, ch. 1 (Leonine ed., 45:369 [Ins. 2–18]); *ST I*, q. 48, a. 2, ad 2. Or even more precisely it could be said that "being" first signifies substance (*In VII metaphys.*, lec. 1, no. 1246). But "substance" means either an individual or its quiddity (no. 1247), and the reason an individual is a being is because it has a quiddity (no. 1251). Thus, if our intellect is naturally constituted to apprehend things under the aspect of being, what this amounts to is a natural aptitude to apprehend things in the manner of the quiddity of substance. For an overview of Thomistic opinions (Cajetan, Poinso, Gilson, and Maritain) on being as first known in Aquinas's thought, see Brian Kemple, *Ens Primum Cognitum in Thomas Aquinas and the Tradition: The Philosophy of Being as First Known* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

⁵² Arguably, it is the syncategoremata, which signify the relation between concepts or the mode of signifying concepts, that are analogous to the common sensibles for the intellect. But Aquinas does not discuss this. If "*esse*" is taken as a syncategorematic term, then perhaps "*esse*" is among the objects of the intellect analogous to the common sensibles. William of Sherwood, whose writings St. Thomas could

something analogous to *per accidens* objects. But there is a difference between the sense and the intellect in this regard. Error can occur in the senses when a sense (presumably the common sense) compares the proper objects of two different senses, which are with respect to each other accidental sense objects. For instance, the common sense judges that the white thing is also sweet. In contrast, error occurs in the intellect through a comparison of two things, both *properly* apprehended in the intellect, such as the definition of a circle and the concept of a triangle.⁵³ Unlike with error in the senses, there are not two (or three) apprehensive powers involved, but only one.⁵⁴ In the sense, both objects compared in judgment are *per accidens* objects with respect to different senses. So, what should we call the *per accidens* object of the intellect? Should we identify the *per accidens* object of the intellect with the composite that results from its activity of composing and dividing (e.g., “the rational winged animal” or “the triangle with a term everywhere equidistant from the center”), or, alternatively, should we identify the *per accidens* object with one or both of the simple quiddities entering into this composite? Aquinas is not clear about this. It is safe to say that, if there is any possibility of error in the intellect’s composing or dividing, the objects compared must be accidental with respect to each other. On the other hand, we can also safely conclude that the objects compared *must* be (1) *per se* with respect to the intellect itself, or (2) composed of objects ultimately proper to the intellect itself, or

have accessed, says that “*est*” is not a syncategorematic term because it consignifies composition with a subject and consignification is not the same as signification (Reginald O’Donnell ed., “The Syncategoremata of William of Sherwood,” *Medieval Studies* 3 [1941], 70–71). But this very reasoning implies that “*esse*” (unlike “*est*”) is a syncategorematic term since, as Aquinas says, infinitives signify directly the inherence in a subject consignified by (indicative) verbs (Leonine ed., 1*/1:26 [Ins. 49–72]).

⁵³ This statement is true so long as we add the qualification (not relevant to the present paper) that the comparison itself of two intellectual objects does not seem to be possible without importing, via the copula, the notion of time, which notion is proper to the inner senses but accidental to the intellect. See: *ST* I, q. 85, a. 5, ad 2; *In X metaphys.*, lec. 3, no. 1982. Such a reflection on the inner senses seems to be what accounts for the evident difference between “a winged rational animal” (which is an atemporal and accidental compound of *per se* intellectual objects) and “a rational animal is winged” (which is a present-tense enunciation).

⁵⁴ Aquinas does hint that the inner senses may be involved in judgment and that the necessity of introducing reference to time in judgment is the effect of this reliance on phantasms (*ST* I, q. 85, a. 5, ad 2). We should not underestimate the role that this might play in the possibility of erroneous judgments. Nevertheless, to avoid unneeded complication, we will overlook it here.

(3) reducible to objects *per se* with respect to some lower cognitive power. For instance, (1) is exemplified when I say, “man is risible.” But (2) is exemplified when I say, “the rational winged animal has three sides.” And (3) is exemplified by “Socrates is white,” inasmuch as “Socrates” brings in not only the intellectual notion of humanity, but also the inner sense cognition of individual matter.⁵⁵ Thus, if we are to speak of the second operation of the intellect having any object, it will be nothing else than the *per accidens* object of the intellect, which itself is either cognized *per se* by some power or reducible to such *per se* objects. If *esse*, then, were the object of the second operation of the intellect, it would be the *per accidens* object of the intellectual power. But if that were the case, it would have to be a composite of the intellect’s proper objects or it would have to be cognized *per se* by some other power. Neither of these consequences is true, however. The *ratio* of *esse* is supremely simple⁵⁶ and *esse* is certainly not the object of any bodily sense. It is not a color, a sound, or a past time, for instance. So, although the intellect, in its second operation, *respicit ipsum esse rei*, nevertheless, *esse* is not the object of the intellect—either *per se* or *per accidens*. Nor indeed is *esse* the object of any other cognitive power in man. Evidently, we must interpret *respicit* in the *De Trinitate* commentary as indicating something other than the relation of a power or operation to its object.

We may think that the conclusion just drawn goes too far. Surely, “*esse*” must be cognized somehow; otherwise, we cannot use *esse* in sentences or know it at all. But if it is cognized at all, it must be the object of some knowing power. Obviously, we do not deny that *esse* is cognized *somehow*, just as we would not deny that nothingness, blindness, and logical genera are also cognized *somehow*. All that our conclusion above proves is that it is not the proper object of the intellect (or any other cognitive power). Rather, when the intellect knows it at all, it knows it by reduction to its proper object—just as it knows non-beings by reduction to being and in the manner of being.⁵⁷ Aquinas’s psychology requires that we know *esse* only in the manner of quiddity and by reference to quiddity. *Esse* is not a distinct proper object of any human cognitive power.

So, how should we interpret the thesis that judgment “*respicit ipsum*

⁵⁵ *In I peryhermeneias*, lec. 10: “Nomen Sortis uel Platonis significat naturam humanam secundum quod est in hac materia” (Leonine ed., 1*/1: 51 [lns. 115–17]).

⁵⁶ Since *esse* is supremely common, it cannot participate anything in the manner of a genus; and since it is abstract, it cannot participate anything in the manner of an accident. See *In de ebdomadibus*, ch. 2 (Leonine ed., 50: 271 [lns. 68–13]). Thus, *esse* is supremely simple (Leonine ed., 50:272–73 [lns. 196–258]).

⁵⁷ *In IV metaphys.*, lec. 1, no. 539–40.

esse rei”? Evidently, this uses *respicit* in the very broad sense in which even abstract objects, like *verum*, can be said to *respicit esse*. Judgment has some special relation to *esse* missing in the first operation of the intellect. What this relation is has already been suggested. As we saw earlier, what is cognized in the second operation of the intellect is the signification of the predicate in enunciation. But this is cognized in a new way. Whereas the first operation cognizes this signification absolutely, the second operation cognizes it in relation to a subject. For instance, we no longer cognize whiteness alone, but now cognize that whiteness is in Socrates. This comparison of the objects of the first operation is signified in the complex pronunciation “Socrates is white.” What consignifies the composition of any form (accidental or substantial) to a subject is the verb “is.”⁵⁸ Thus, when Aquinas employs a shorthand similar to indirect speech and uses *esse* to refer to the signification of *est*, he says judgment “*respicit ipsum esse rei*.” This means nothing more esoteric than that, whereas simple apprehension cognizes quiddities simply, judgment cognizes them precisely *as* compared with one another via the word “is” (*est*). This comparison of the intellect’s proper objects through the verb “is,” moreover, is why the second operation (unlike the first) can be true or err. It is also why not only judgment but also truth itself is said to “*respicit esse*.” *Esse* is nothing else than an abstract word for the relation of predicate to subject, which it is the distinctive role of the verb *est* to consignify. This much suffices to show that the second operation of the intellect does not cognize *esse* and that no cognitive power has *esse* for its proper object. Moreover, the existential Thomists seemed to think that we know *esse* by performing the activity of judgment, which somehow corresponds to (or exactly answers) the act of existing exercised by essences outside the mind. Aquinas, in dividing the two operations, has not only given us no indication that *esse* is what is properly cognized in judgment, but has also not given us any sense that, in judgment itself, our intellect is somehow reflexively aware of its own operation and correspondence with extramental activity. What judgment knows is principally a quiddity signified by a predicate, but it knows it *as* joined to or separated from a subject via the verb “is.” This is the only sense in which judgment “*respicit esse*.”

***In I Peryermenias*, Lecture 5.**

To confirm this reading of Aquinas, let us comment on a passage in Aquinas’s *In peryermenias* much invoked in the twentieth-century debate concerning whether *esse* is grasped in the first or the second operation of

⁵⁸ *In I peryermenias*, lec. 5 (Leonine ed., 1*/1: 31 [Ins. 391–407]).

the intellect. In commenting on this passage, it is my contention that both parties to the dispute are guilty of misreading the text. Because McInerny faithfully develops the argument of Father Régis against Gilson but also says far more, we will only refer to McInerny when our interpretation differs from his.

The context of the passage is a lecture designed to explain Aristotle's definition of "verb" (*uerbum*). Amid defining the verb, Aristotle remarks: "Set si est aut non est, nondum significat. Neque enim esse signum est rei uel non esse. Nec si hoc ipsum 'est' purum dixeris: ipsum quidem nichil est. Consignificat autem quandam compositionem quam sine compositis non est intelligere."⁵⁹ Any English translation that attempts to make this terse and obscure passage easily readable will impose an interpretation upon it, but the passage can be literally (if awkwardly) translated as follows: "But if 'is' or 'is not,' it does not yet signify. For it is a sign neither of a thing 'to be' nor 'not to be.' Nor if you purely say 'is' itself; this indeed is nothing. It consignifies, however, a certain composition, which, without the components, is not understood." Before presenting his own interpretation of this text, Aquinas first rejects a few false or inadequate interpretations. Due to an imprecise translation of which Aquinas was aware, the past interpreters evaluated by Aquinas explain why "being" (*ens*) signifies nothing, whereas the Latin of Aristotle says that "is" (*est*) signifies nothing.⁶⁰ This discrepancy has little substantive import.

Alexander said that "being" (*ens*) signifies nothing because "being" is equivocal and divided into ten categories.⁶¹ Aquinas objects that "being" is not equivocal but analogical, and even if it were equivocal, it would signify many things, not nothing. Porphyry's interpretation is given next.⁶² He said that "being" signifies nothing because it does not signify the nature of anything (*natura alicuius rei*), but only a certain conjunction. Here, Porphyry evidently has in mind the etymological relation between τὸ ὄν and the copula "is" by which subject and predicate are conjoined. Gilson makes a similar point, not about "being" (*ens*), but the copula "is": "As to the 'copula,' it is not really a term, because it designates, not a concept, but the determinate relation which obtains between two terms. For this

⁵⁹ *In I peryermenias*, lec. 5 (Leonine ed., 1*/1:25 [Ins. 16b21–25]). For Gilson's interpretation of this, see *Being and Some Philosophers*, 229. For McInerny's, see McInerny, *Being and Predication*, 185–87.

⁶⁰ See McInerny, *Being and Predication*, 185: "The Latin translation St. Thomas had did not translate τὸ ὄν as *being*, but as *is*. St. Thomas is aware of this and comments on both readings, i.e. *ipsum est* and *ipsum ens*."

⁶¹ *In I peryermenias*, lec. 5 (Leonine ed., 1*/1:30 [Ins. 314–30]).

⁶² *In I peryermenias*, lec. 5 (Leonine ed., 1*/1:30 [Ins. 331–40]).

reason the copula cannot be a noun; it is a verb. In point of fact, it is the verb *is*.⁶³ The only difference between Gilson and Porphyry is that Gilson speaks of the copula but Porphyry speaks of “being.” Nevertheless, their contentions amount to the same thing, since Porphyry’s statement only makes sense in light of the close association between “being” and the copula. Aquinas rejects this interpretation because *ens* is a name and *est* a verb. But what signifies nothing can be classed as neither a name nor verb.⁶⁴ As Aquinas said earlier in the lecture—although there is a special sense of “name” (*nomen*) in which names and verbs are distinguished by their mode of signifying—both names and verbs can be called “names” broadly inasmuch as what both signify is *aliquam rem*⁶⁵ and inasmuch as they both set the intellect at rest in its first operation.⁶⁶ Gilson interprets

⁶³ Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 190.

⁶⁴ What merely signifies the relation of two other words is neither a verb nor a name (*In I peryermenias*, lec. 5, in Leonine ed., 1*/1:32: [lns. 32–34]; 1*/1:6 [lns. 35–40]).

⁶⁵ *In I peryermenias*, lec. 5: “Et ideo aliter dicendum est quod nomen hic sumitur prout communiter significat quamlibet dictionem impositam ad significandum aliquam rem; et, quia etiam agere uel pati est quedam res, inde est quod ipsa uerba in quantum nominant, id est significant, agere et pati, sub nominibus comprehenduntur communiter acceptis. Nomen autem, prout a uerbo distinguitur, significat rem sub determinato modo, prout scilicet potest intelligi ut in se existens; unde nomina possunt subici et predicari” (“Thus, it should instead be said that *name* here is taken as it commonly signifies any word that is imposed to signify some *thing*; and because even *to do* or *to suffer* is a certain *thing*, it follows that verbs themselves insofar as they name, i.e., signify, to do and to suffer, are comprehended under ‘name’ taken commonly. ‘Name,’ however, as distinguished from ‘verb,’ signifies a thing under a determinate mode—namely, as it can be understood in itself existing. Whence a name can be subjected or predicated”; Leonine ed., 1*/1:29 [lns. 244–54]).

⁶⁶ *In I peryermenias*, lec. 5: “Dicit ergo primo quod in tantum dictum est quod uerba sint nomina in quantum significant aliquid. Et hoc probat, quia supra dictum est quod uoces significantiue significant intellectus, unde proprium uocis significantiue est quod generet aliquem intellectum in animo audientis; et ideo, ad ostendendum quod uerbum sit uox significantiua, assumit quod ille *qui dicit* uerbum *constituit intellectum* in animo audientis, et ad hoc manifestandum inducit quod ille *qui audit quiescit*” (“He first says therefore that it was said that verbs are names only inasmuch as they signify something. And this is proved because above it was said that significant vocal sounds signify the intellect. Whence it is proper to significant vocal sound that it generate some intellection in the soul of the hearer. And for this reason to show that a verb is a significant vocal sound, he assumes that ‘that which he says’ [the verb] ‘constitutes the intellection’ in the soul of the hearer. To manifest this fact, he points out that ‘those who hear rest’”; Leonine ed., 1*/1:29 [lns. 261–70]); “Set dicendum est quod duplex est operatio intellectus . . . ille qui

Aristotle's remark that verbs, by themselves, are names very differently from Aquinas. For Gilson, this seems to mean that verbs are names in the special sense and that verbs signify the abstract nature of action—that “to depart” means “departure.”⁶⁷ For Aquinas, in contrast, the fact that verbs, like names, signify *aliquam rem* and set the first operation at rest, need not entail that verbs signify an *abstract* nature. Whereas names (e.g., “departure”) signify the nature of an action as if existing in itself, verbs (e.g., “departs”) signify the same nature, but as issuing from an agent or inhering in a subject.⁶⁸ Verbs (*pace* Gilson) signify a thing and set the intellect at rest in its first operation. So, when Aristotle says that “being” or “is” signifies nothing, he (as interpreted by Aquinas) cannot mean to deny that these words (a name and a verb, respectively) fail to signify *aliquid* or *aliquam rem* in the first operation of the intellect. He must mean something else. Aquinas finds Ammonius's interpretation more promising than Porphyry's and Alexander's.⁶⁹ Ammonius says that *ens* signifies nothing because it does not signify truth or falsehood unless something else is added, thereby, constituting a true or false composition. Aquinas thinks that this too, however, strays from the obvious sense of Aristotle's text since the same interpretation could be given had Aristotle chosen any random name or verb, but Aristotle seems to have picked “being” or “is” as a special case. There is a special reason why Aristotle chooses to say that “being” or “is” signifies nothing rather than that “running” or “runs” signifies nothing.

So Aquinas gives an alternative interpretation—explaining in what sense both *ens* and *est* signify nothing.⁷⁰ According to this new interpretation, *ens* signifies nothing in the sense that it does not signify a thing to be or not to be (“non significat rem esse uel non esse”). We could mistakenly

dicat nomen uel uerbum secundum se, constituit intellectum quantum ad primam operationem, que est conceptio alicuius, et secundum hoc quiescit animus audientis, qui suspensus erat ante quam nomen uel uerbum proferretur et eius prolatio terminaretur; non autem constituit intellectum quantum ad secundam operationem, que est intellectus componentis et diidentis” (“But it must be said that the operation of the intellect is twofold. . . . He who says a name or verb by itself establishes the intellect with regard to the first operation, which is the conception of something; and according to this, the soul of the hearer rests, which previously was in suspense before the name or verb was given and its expression terminated. But it [i.e., the name or verb] does not constitute the intellect with regard to the second operation, which is the intellect composing and dividing”; Leonine ed., 1*/1:29 [Ins. 277–86]).

⁶⁷ Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 199.

⁶⁸ *In I peryermenias*, lec. 5 (Leonine ed., 1*/1:26 [Ins. 49–72]).

⁶⁹ *In I peryermenias*, lec. 5 (Leonine ed., 1*/1:30 [Ins. 341–64]).

⁷⁰ *In I peryermenias*, lec. 5 (Leonine ed., 1*/1:30 [Ins. 355–76]).

think that *ens* did signify something to be, since *ens* means *quod est*, and we may take *quod* as referring to some thing (*res*) while *est* refers to *esse*. Aquinas does not cite any particular philosophers who have made this mistake, but Maritain has since offered himself for citation. It is Maritain's view in *Existence and the Existent* that, although concepts of simple apprehension usually precede judgment, the first activity of the intellect finds concept and judgment arising simultaneously.⁷¹ This is because, according to Maritain, the judgment "something exists" provides the very content for the concept "being" or "that-which is."⁷² As a result, the concept of being and essence and the judgment of existence are inseparable.⁷³

As McInerny has already recited in detail (without citing Maritain), Aquinas unequivocally rejects such highly unintuitive, existentialist readings of the word *ens*.⁷⁴ Against such views, Aquinas argues that if *ens* principally signified *esse*, then it would signify something to be (*aliquid esse*). But, says Aquinas, *ens* does not principally signify the composition imported by the word *est*; it only consignifies this composition inasmuch as it signifies a thing (*res*) having *esse*. Here, we may take Aquinas to mean something profound and metaphysical by *esse*, but a closer consideration will reveal that he is merely using *esse* in indirect speech to refer to the signification of the verb "is," the proper function of which, as we will see, is to consignify a predicate's composition with a subject. By denying that *ens* signifies *aliquid esse*, Aquinas is just denying that the word "being," said alone, actually unites *aliquid* (or *quod*) to any other concept via the verb "is." In other words, *ens* does not signify a judgment.

Aquinas's reason for agreeing with Aristotle's aphorism that *esse* and *est* signify nothing is similar to his reason concerning *ens*. We will quote Aquinas at length here because his argument is pregnant with detail.

⁷¹ Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, 21.

⁷² Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, 19–20: "But this concept of existence, of *to-exist* (*esse*) is not and cannot be cut off from the absolutely primary concept of being (*ens*, that-which is, that-which exists, that whose act is to exist). This is so because the affirmation of existence, or the judgment, which provides the content of such a concept, is itself the 'composition' of a subject with existence, i.e., the affirmation that *something exists* (actually or possibly, simply or with such-and-such a predicate). It is the concept of being (that-which exists or is able to exist) which, in the order of ideative perception, corresponds adequately to this affirmation in the order of judgment."

⁷³ Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, 20–21. Cf. Maritain, *Preface*, 64–65.

⁷⁴ See *In I peryermenias*, lec. 5 (Leonine ed., 1*/1:30–31 [lns. 355–76]). See McInerny, *Being and Predication*, esp. 186.

No verb signifies a thing to be or not to be. This is proved through the verb “is,” which according to itself does not signify something to be, although it signifies to-be. And—because this “to be” itself seems [to be] a certain composition, and so this verb “is,” which signifies to-be, can seem to signify the composition in which is truth or falsehood—to exclude this, it is added that such composition, which the verb “is” signifies, cannot be understood without the components. Since the understanding of it [i.e., composition] depends on the extremes, if they are not put forth, understanding of the composition is not perfect such that in it could be truth or falsehood. For this reason, [Aristotle] says that this verb “is” consignifies composition because it does not principally signify this, but by implication [*ex consequenti*]. For it signifies that which first falls in the intellect by mode [*per modum*] of actuality absolutely. For “is” said simply signifies to be in act, and to this extent, it signifies by the mode of a verb [*per modum uerbi*]. Because the actuality, which the verb “is” principally signifies, is commonly the actuality of every form or act (whether substantial or accidental), it follows that, when we wish to signify that any form or act actually is in [*in esse*] any subject, we signify that by this verb “is”—simply according to present time or qualifiedly according to some other time. And for this reason, this verb “is” signifies composition by implication [*ex consequenti*].⁷⁵

McInerny’s interpretation of this passage is the most famous, and thus must

⁷⁵ *In I peryermenias*, lec. 5: “Quod enim nullum uerbum significet rem esse uel non esse, probat per hoc uerbum ‘est,’ quod secundum se dictum non significat aliquid esse, licet significet esse. Et, quia hoc ipsum ‘esse’ uidetur compositio quedam, et ita hoc uerbum ‘est,’ quod significat esse, potest uideri significare compositionem in qua sit uerum uel falsum, ad hoc excludendum subdit quod ista compositio, quam significat hoc uerbum ‘est,’ non potest intelligi sine componentibus, quia dependet dus intellectus ex extremis, que si non apponantur, non est perfectus intellectus compositionis, ut possit in ea esse uerum uel falsum. Ideo autem dicit quod hoc uerbum ‘est’ consignificat compositionem, quia non principaliter earn significat, set ex consequenti: significat enim id quod primo cadit in intellectu per modum actualitatis absolute; nam ‘est’ simpliciter dictum significat esse actu, et ideo significat per modum uerbi. Quia uero actualitas, quam principaliter significat hoc uerbum ‘est,’ est communiter actualitas omnis forme uel actus, substantialis uel accidentalis, inde est quod, cum uolumus significare quamcunque formam uel actum actualiter inesse alicui subiecto, significamus illud per hoc uerbum ‘est,’ simpliciter quidem secundum presens tempus, secundum quid autem secundum alia tempora; et ideo ex consequenti hoc uerbum ‘est’ significat compositionem” (Leonine ed., 1*/1:31 [lns. 378–407]).

be presented first before attempting to offer corrections. McNerny seems to take this passage as showing that the verb “is” in existential propositions—that is, propositions of the form “Socrates is”—signifies the concept of existence in the first operation of the intellect. He writes:

In the case of the existential judgment, if existence were not first conceived, grasped as the term of the first operation of the mind as to what it is, no existential judgment would be possible. What is composed in the affirmative enunciation which signifies the existential judgment “Socrates is,” is precisely Socrates and existence.⁷⁶

A few important qualifications must be made. McNerny interprets “quod primo cadit in intellectu,” here referred to by Aquinas, as something under the aspect of existence—where “existence” is understood not as the act really composed with essence late in the science of metaphysics, but merely a nominal concept of existence equivalent to “presence to sense.”⁷⁷ Thus, we are given to understand that the proposition “Socrates is” means nothing else than that Socrates is present to my senses. When Aquinas

⁷⁶ McNerny, *Being and Predication*, 188. See also 189: “Against this [position of Gilson] we argued that existence can be conceived, that it can be the predicate and that the concept of being does not include a judgment. When it is recognized that existence is the predicate in such propositions as ‘Socrates is,’ difficulties still remain for the student of the texts of St. Thomas.”

⁷⁷ See McNerny, *Being and Predication*, 181–84 (esp. 184). For McNerny’s criticism of the view that the distinction between essence and existence at the start of metaphysics is a “real distinction,” involving anything more than a nominal concept of existence and essence, see 169–71. As McNerny interprets our first concept of existence as “presence to sense,” so Fr. Brian Davies similarly interprets existence (*esse*) as the capacity of a thing to receive a real rather than nominal definition (“The Action of God,” In *Mind, Method, and Morality: Essays in Honour of Anthony Kenny*, ed. John Cottingham and Peter Hacker [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014], 165–84, at 171–72). Unlike McNerny, Davies does not distinguish a first (logical) and subsequent (metaphysical) concept of existence. A common problem besets the views of both Davies and McNerny. They have in effect collapsed Aquinas’s *ratio entis* into his *ratio veritatis*. As is well known, Aquinas considers the relation from sensible to sense and the relation of known (or defined) to knower as a relation of reason, not a real relation (see *In V metaphys.*, lec. 17). It is just this relation of reason from thing to apprehensive power that constitutes the transcendental concept of truth (*De veritate*, q. 1, a. 1, corp.; q. 21, a. 1, corp.). So, it is unclear how McNerny’s account of our first concept of being and Davies’s account of real being (rather than imaginary being) do not fall under Aquinas’s account of transcendental truth, which Aquinas says is logically posterior to the first concept of being.

says “is” principally signifies commonly the actuality of every form or act, McNerny glosses this as follows: “The actuality principally signified by this verb *is* or *exists* is generally the act of any form, whether it be substantial or accidental act.”⁷⁸ Thus, McNerny takes the “is” being described by Aquinas as equivalent to the verb “exists,” and he thinks that it signifies an “act” or “actuality” over and above form. Such an actuality, called “existence,” is what “is” principally signifies.

There are several problems with McNerny’s interpretation of this text. The first thing to note is that, if Aquinas’s account of “is” has any relevance for a hypothesized existential sense of that word, it certainly does not exclude the copulative sense of “is.” Indeed, Aquinas seems to have the copulative sense foremost in his mind. This is why he can reason from the fact, on the one hand, that “is” signifies the actuality of every form to, on the other hand, the conclusion that whenever we want to signify the inherence of any form in a subject, we do so through the verb “is.” Aquinas links these two propositions by the logical connector *inde*.

Another problem with McNerny’s interpretation is how he reads Aquinas’s statement that what “is” signifies is *esse*. This statement is ambiguous and can be taken in two ways. On the one hand, we could take it to mean that “is” relates to *esse* as the word “man” relates to human nature. According to this reading, the concept signified by “is” is a particular concept—the concept of existence (*esse*)—predicated of a subject either directly or denominatively. Thus, a judgment of the form “Socrates is” would function to conjoin what is understood by “Socrates” with existence itself, which is what is signified by “is.” This seems to be McNerny’s reading of this passage. But cautioning against such a reading is the fact that Aquinas has been using *esse* in indirect speech to refer to the judgment (or part of the judgment) *that something is*. Moreover, we know that “is,” here, includes the copulative sense of that word—regardless of whether or not it excludes any hypothesized existential sense. Thus, when Aquinas says that “is” signifies *esse*, he is not picking out some particular concept signified by “is.” Rather, he is saying that “is” does not signify the whole enunciation *aliquid esse aliquid* (or *aliquid esse*), but only whatever the *esse* part of that enunciation signifies.⁷⁹ We have yet to be told *what* particular concept is signified

⁷⁸ McNerny, *Being and Predication*, 187.

⁷⁹ This is also why Aquinas can jump from saying that “is” signifies *esse* to the theory that “is” signifies composition. After all, the role of *esse* in the judgment *aliquid esse* is nothing else but to relate *aliquid* to some unspecified predicate. We should add that it is hardly a stretch to see an implied predicate, such as *aliquid*, in Aquinas’s sentence “*aliquid esse*,” when Aquinas himself does much the same thing while

by “is” or “to be.” All we know from the assertion that “is” signifies *esse* is that “is” does not signify a whole enunciation.⁸⁰

A similar confusion could occur concerning Aquinas's use of the words, “actuality” and “in act.” In the passage under discussion, Aquinas asserts that “is” principally signifies: (1) *quod primo cadit in intellectu per modum actualitatis absolute*; (2) *esse actu*; and (3) *communiter actualitas omnis forme uel actus, substancialis uel accidentalis*. These seem to be different formulations of the same contention. In each case, we must ask whether the notion of *actualitas* or *actu* enters into the very content of what is signified by “is” in an enunciation. Once again McInerny—who seems to answer this question affirmatively—must serve as a foil to our own interpretation. As we saw, McInerny says: “The actuality principally signified by this verb *is* or *exists* is generally the act of any form, whether it be substantial or accidental act.”⁸¹ Superficially, this seems to be a close paraphrase of what Aquinas himself said in the quotation under discussion. But McInerny, here, makes several important changes to what Aquinas has said. First, he adds the verb “exists” to “is” as if these are the same. This implies that, in this passage, Aquinas is not talking about “is” as the copula, but as the primary predicate of an existential proposition. We have already suggested why this assumption should be rejected. Second, whereas Aquinas said “is” signifies the actuality of every form or act, McInerny says that the actuality signified by “is” is itself the act of any form. This interpretive move implies

interpreting Aristotle in another place. In *I peryermenias*, lec. 5: “Non est autem intelligendum quod per hoc quod dixit: ‘quod est’ et ‘quod non est’ sit referendum ad solam existenciam uel non existentiam subiecti, set ad hoc quod res significata per predicatum insit uel non insit rei significate per subiectum; nam, cum dico: ‘Coruus est albus,’ significatur ‘quod non est esse,’ quamuis ipse coruus sit res existens” (“It should not be understood that, when he says ‘what is’ and ‘what is not,’ he is referring only to the existence or non-existence of the subject, but to the fact that the thing signified by the predicate ‘is in’ or ‘is not in’ the thing signified by the subject; for when I say, ‘the raven is white,’ this signifies ‘what-is-not to be’ although the raven itself is an existing thing”; Leonine ed., 1*/1:47 [Ins. 63–70]).

⁸⁰ If this passage has relevance not only for the copulative sense of “is” but also for “is” as a principal predicate, then our interpretation of how Aquinas uses *esse* excludes not only McInerny's interpretation of *esse*, but Patrick Lee's as well. For Lee, sentences with “is” as the principal predicate, use “is” as a second-order way of referring to a complete sentence, such as “Socrates is a man” (Lee, “Existential Propositions in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas,” *The Thomist* 52, no. 4 [1988]: 605–26, at 613–14). For Aquinas, however, as we have just seen, neither “is” nor *esse* signifies a complete sentence. This, as we just saw, is precisely the reason why Aquinas asserts “is” signifies “to be.”

⁸¹ McInerny, *Being and Predication*, 187.

that what is signified by “is” is some act over and above form. It also implies that, by the abstract word “actuality,” Aquinas intends us to understand some concrete act—presumably, the act of existence or presence to sense logically contrasted with essence earlier in McInerny’s essay. The alternative to McInerny’s interpretive suggestions here is that when Aquinas says “is” signifies the actuality of form or act, he is using the abstract word “actuality” quite precisely to signify not some concrete act, but rather that whereby the “form or act” being predicated of a subject has the character of an act. I think this latter reading is more plausible. Third, in (1), Aquinas says what the intellect signifies is *per modum actualitas*. In (3), however, he says that what it signifies is *actualitas*. It cannot be the case that both of these mutually exclusive formulations are equally proper. McInerny follows the second formulation. Thus, whereas Aquinas seems to take actuality not as itself what is signified, but as the determinate mode in which “is” signifies something besides actuality, McInerny implies that what “is” signifies is itself actuality. Again, McInerny presumably has in mind that “is” signifies the act (or actuality) of existence or presence to sense.

Several things serve to undercut this last aspect of McInerny’s reading. First, the fact that Aquinas even once says that what “is” signifies is *per modum actualitas*, as opposed to *actualitas* itself, makes it clear that *actualitas* does not enter into the content of what “is” signifies. The same conclusion can be reached from the fact that Aquinas, in (2), says that what “is” signifies is *esse actu*. The ablative form of *actu* here forces us to deny that actuality itself is what “is” principally signifies. Rather, “in act” determines the mode in which “is” signifies whatever it is that it signifies. This can be shown by an example. When we say, “Socrates is literate,” this can mean either that Socrates is actually literate or potentially so. What “is” signifies simply is literacy in Socrates *per modum actualitas*, not *per modum potentialitas*. If we switched “is” to past or future tense or added some modal qualifier, such as “possibly,” then “is” would no longer signify literacy *per modum actualitas*, but only *per modum potentialitas*.

In sum, this remarkable text from *In peryermenias* has historically been taken as a dividing line between so-called existential and Aristotelian Thomists. Existential Thomists assert that *esse* is apprehended first in judgment, not the first operation of the intellect. Against such a theory stands lecture 5 of *In peryermenias*, a text well-beloved by Father Régis and McInerny, in which Aquinas says in the clearest language that verbs signify concepts in the first operation of the intellect, and that “is” is a verb, and that “is” signifies *esse*. Apparently, this is proof positive that the existentialists are wrong. Our contention in this section has not been to show that the existentialists are correct, but only that McInerny’s school is also incor-

rect. It is incorrect inasmuch as it imagines Aquinas to be asserting that “is” signifies a particular concept of “actuality” or “existence” in the first operation. The truth of the matter is much less philosophically momentous. When Aquinas says “is” signifies *esse*, he merely intends to deny that it signifies the whole enunciation *aliquid esse*. What “is” signifies is nothing more than what the *esse* portion of *aliquid esse* signifies, whatever that unspecified signification is. Likewise, when Aquinas says “is” signifies *actualitas*, he does not mean that “is” signifies some act of form. Again, Aquinas has not told us the content of what “is” signifies. Rather, what he means is that, whatever it is that “is” signifies directly, “is” principally signifies this something *per modum actualitas*. Throughout this famous passage, Aquinas seems to have in mind the copula “is” and he seems to use the word “is” alone to stand for the whole predicate. Thus, what Aquinas presumably means by saying that “is” signifies *per modum actualitas* or *esse actu* is nothing else than that “is” (or “is white”) signifies the predicated form (e.g., “white,” “man”) as joined to the subject *per modum actualitas* unless some temporal or modal qualifier is added.

Conclusion

Thus far, then, we have shown first, against the existential Thomists—Maritain and Gilson—that *esse* is not, for Aquinas, the object of the second operation of the intellect. It cannot be said to be what that operation properly cognizes. Rather, what the second operation properly and principally cognizes seems to be whatever is signified in the first operation of the intellect by the predicate of an enunciation. In the enunciation “man is risible,” for instance, the second operation cognizes risibility principally. It differs from the first operation not by cognizing something new, but by cognizing something old in a new way. Now risibility is not cognized alone, but precisely as in a subject—namely, humanity. The traditional answer to existential Thomism, embodied in the writings of Father Régis and Ralph McInerny, has been to say that *esse* is cognized not in the second operation, but in the first. The implicit or unstated suggestion of Father Régis and McInerny in asserting this is that existence or *esse* (at least as nominally defined) falls within the proper object of the first operation of the intellect. While we do not dispute that the word “*esse*” must have some meaning in the first operation if it is to enter into sentences as a subject or predicate, we have merely argued that the text from Aquinas’s *In peryermenias* supposedly describing what this existential meaning is, does not in fact do so. The intent of that text is not to tell us that “is” signifies the concept of existence or actuality in the first operation of the intellect. Rather, the intent of that text is merely to say that, whatever the copula “is” signifies, it does not

signify a complete enunciation, but rather some concept connected to a subject *per modum actualitas* unless some qualification is added. Thus, although, in agreement with McInerny, it must be granted that the word “*esse*” as used for something contrasted with essence signifies *some* conception of the first operation; nevertheless, given that Aquinas says that the proper object of the intellect is *quidditas rei*, it is doubtful that the concept signified by *esse* falls within the proper object of the intellect and its first operation any more directly than the concepts signified by “blindness” and “genus” fall within that proper object.

Given our rather deflationary reading of *esse* in Aquinas’s *In peryermenias*, we may wonder whether the *esse* used there can have any connection with the *esse* contrasted with essence in Aquinas’s metaphysics. Against Maritain, Monsignor John Wippel famously distinguishes between an “act” sense of *esse* and a “fact” sense.⁸² Certainly, our reading of *esse* in *In peryermenias* would locate Aquinas’s usage there squarely within what Wippel calls the “fact” sense of *esse*, not the metaphysical “act” sense. Yet, the striking similarity between, on the one hand, *In peryermenias*, in which Aquinas says “is” signifies *esse* and the actuality of every form, and, on the other hand, Aquinas’s metaphysical treatments of *esse* elsewhere as the actuality of all acts, even of forms,⁸³ should make us wonder whether, in the thought of Aquinas, there is anything besides the “fact” sense of *esse* at all. This question—as well as a clarification of what precisely is meant by the “fact” sense of *esse*—must be left to future research. NEV

⁸² John Wippel, “Maritain and Aquinas on Our Discovery of Being,” *Studia Gilsoniana* 3 (2014): 415–43. For an excellent summary of the historical development of the act–fact distinction in the debate among Wippel, Owens, and Cornelio Fabro, see Kevin White, “Act and Fact: On a Disputed Question in Recent Thomistic Metaphysics,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 68, no. 2 (2014): 287–312. Concerning Wippel’s contribution to this debate, White focuses on “Truth in Thomas Aquinas, Part II,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 43, no. 3 (1990): 543–67, which expresses essentially the same doctrine as his “Maritain and Aquinas on Our Discovery of Being.”

⁸³ *ST* I, q. 4, a. 1, ad 3.