

# Being and the equilibrium of essence and existence

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## 1. Essence in contemporary Thomism

Since the late 1940's, a great deal of Thomistic philosophy is characterized by a predominantly existential conception of being. The word 'existence' might be avoided, "since it has no significant place in the works of Saint Thomas ", but in fact, 'esse' became more or less fused, if not identified with existential being, to the detriment of essence.[1] The concept of existence kept its objective meaning in the context of natural realism. On the contrary, transcendental and implicit-intuitive Thomism welcomed a modern-subjective concept of existence and of being, usually on epistemological and theological grounds.

In "existentializing" circles, essence kept on meaning traditional quiddity, but under its surface it could become fused with existence, by which it took over existential traits: a certain priority of the potential, the dynamic and the accidental. Being is experienced as a constant flow of energy, deprived of the stability that is guaranteed by essence, the formal part of esse. Fear for "platonic" hypostatization of form, but also a certain aversion from unchangeability in general, was apparently such strong, that essence became the stepchild of such recent Thomists and being itself became a hybrid of actus essendi and act of existence. It is no coincidence, that a couple of years after this "rediscovery of (existentialized) being", Thomism underwent an unprecedented collapse: if essence falls into the background and existence - clothed as being - practically dominates the field, the accidental and the contingent will march up, breaking through fixed boundaries, so that an exodus towards existential phenomenology sets in.[2]

In classical Thomism as a whole, a more receptive and positive attitude with regard to the formal/essential is desirable now; after all, the "essentialism" is yesterday's news.[3] Indeed, it seems fruitful to study more intensively the problem of essence in relation to esse and to existence, precisely because Thomism is already firmly established as a philosophy of esse with its 'maximum formale'.[4]

To be sure, in modern philosophy there was not only an obscuration of the ‘to be’, the ‘esse’, but no less a darkening of ‘essence’, which is not always sufficiently recognized or admitted! The eclipse of essence can be traced back to the beginning of the modern era, when mechanism started to rule. It is true, that modern idealism was – in a way – the outcome of a long development along platonic lines, heavily resting on essence, giving esse and existence only a modest part to play. Anyway, we should not forget that it was not essence as such that paved the path towards modern subjectivisms. Plato’s ideas were imagined as subsistential exemplars, standing above all thinking minds, and this means, that Platonism was still a philosophy of outward reality, although it had certainly its influence on the rise of nominalism and, much later, modern idealism. Only when epistemological nominalism and conceptualism incarcerated universal essences in the human mind, idealism came in sight.

The reaction against idealism in the earlier 20th century did not finish subjectivism, on the contrary. Only, this new subjectivism proclaims openness of a human mind, no longer locked up in itself, but disclosed in a striving forward in ex-tasis, ex-sistence, ex-expression of subjective ex-perience. The spirit of the age furthered a more or less spontaneous tendency, seeking authenticity under the “false appearances” and at times longing for a golden age in the past. A new generation of Thomists judged older colleagues – without much distinction - too much attached to “rationalism” or 19th-century’s romanticism. It were the years of: back to the sources, showing the outside world the – alleged – actuality of Thomism for our time. Curiously, it were above all modernizing Thomists, who preferred the use of the term “Thomasians”, supposing that the Doctor Communis was – in the 13th century already – announcing modern, secular times. Aristotelian dynamics of potency and act was over-emphasized and the presence of Augustinian divine ideas in the very heart of Aquinas’ metaphysics was concealed. In consequence of this, modern Plotinism entered the field of essence: the definite was born out of the indefinite, essence out of existence.

## 2. Preponderance of the factual- existential over the essential in the modern context

History of modern philosophy can be considered as a huge lixiviation of metaphysics. We know the principal agents starting this process: formalism and (partly as its extension) nominalistic conceptualism, both arriving at their ultimate consequences when they were no longer hampered by religious and other blockades.

As to essence or quiddity, this was firmly established in scholastic thinking by the doctrine of eternal divine ideas, on its turn based upon the platonic ideas. It was of decisive interest, that St. Augustine carefully kept intact the unchangeable essences, founded in God’s ideas, and did away with the Neo-Platonic notion, according to which the ideas/essences of things arise from

the self-reflection of a 'Nous', emanating from an indefinite One. Aristotelianism too, stressed essence in the 10 predicaments, crowned by substance.

The renewed Augustinianism of Olivi, De Trabibus and Duns Scotus – considerably marked by voluntaristic strivings- scraped not only Augustinian illumination, but also the eternal foundation of ideas/essences in the divine intellect. The production of finite essences by divine omnipotence out of the infinite, reintroduced in a way the Neoplatonic generating of ideas/essences, to a great extent conditioned by certain tendencies in Avicennism. The essential and the formal lost their proper character, whereby Scotistic formalism weakened and dissolved the Aristotelian notion of substance, preparing unintendedly a certain technification in the field of metaphysics, announced in the subtilities of the *Opus Oxoniense*. Although Scotism is considered to be an essentialism, it had undermined essence itself by endangering its unity, dissolving it in formalities and states and placing metaphysical contents in (semi-)logical schemes.

As to Ockamism, its conceptualism with regard to universals and its outspoken voluntarism speak for itself. Only singular essences were kept, and a metaphysics of the individual and the possible entered the stage, for a considerable part clothed in a logic of terms which laid aside all conceptual realism, still present in Petrus Hispanus.

During the late Middle Ages, Christian culture still mitigated the influence of formalism and nominalism, from the later 14th century onwards mostly diluted in eclectic systems. It can even be said, that per accidens moderate Scotism and nominalism contributed to the multi-colored aesthetics of the 15th century, with its abundance of liturgical treasures, devotions and varied utterances of art, no Thomist would not like miss in history, just as is the case with Renaissance-Platonism and its achievements in the field of the beautiful. But always classical Augustinism and Thomism were somehow supporting powers, thanks to their religious and metaphysical power, particularly in the domain of essence.

During the late 16th century, when technical abilities and mathematics met, quantification and technisation pushed themselves into philosophy, sweeping away scholastic substantial forms and qualities. The innate ideas of Descartes can be considered as mathematical schemes to be filled in and to regulate a pure constructive thinking. In this respect, Cartesianism is not a continuation of Augustinism, nor does it match 16th century Platonism. Not only was the self-evidence of the outward world challenged by Descartes, but also essence in the platonic and Aristotelian sense.[5]

Mutatis mutandis, the same applies to Francis Bacon's empiricism. It is true, that he still accepted an outward world of the senses, but this world could easily transform in an inside world of experience ("esse est percipi", after Berkeley). Substantial forms and qualities gave way to clusters, composed by sense impressions, initially (Locke) fixed on physical "block-substance".[6]

With regard to our subject it should be clear, that - at the threshold of modern times - the traditional scholastic view on essence was completely absent in the rationalistic and empiricist lines of thought. But also realistic existence was weakened and faded away. Existence was (after its reduction to modality by Duns Scotus, but more so after its logification by Suarez) simply a matter of fact. Until criticism existence was the outward facticity, struck upon by perception, whilst Kant locked up existence in the modality-category as an entity of reason.[7] The Cartesian schemes of thinking were converted into the criticist apparatus of categories, transcendental ideas etc.: the old essence was left far more behind than ever before. In German idealism, essence was (nominalistically) identified with the conceptual, whereas especially in Hegelianism, existence meant the residue, left behind during the dialectical striding along of the objective mind. Reacting against Hegelian idealism with its disdain for singular existence, Kierkegaard established the modern subjective meaning of existence, identifying it with human inner experience, especially that of the doubtful, the alarming, but as much that of the esthetical, the ethical and the religious. Hegel's megalomaniac system was endured as a gigantic machine of "essence", marginalizing the individual.

In his way, Nietzsche carried on existential subjectivism in his emotional writings with its heavy attacks on the realms of traditional values, notably the ethical and religious ones. Dionysius triumphs over Apollo, the irrational over the rational. No trace of essential stability in his view on truth and "values". Freudianism too, matches with "existential subjectivism", explaining everything from inner experience (anxiety, wishes etc.) and mechanisms regulating it.

From 1900 onwards, pressure towards (existential) openness got its chance to find acceptance in wider and wide circles, promoted by the social and cultural conditions urging a new way of thinking.

The closed idealistic mind (in spite of its dialectical dynamics) could not longer satisfy a generation of light-hearted. Nor did Neo-Kantianism satisfy, swept away as it was by a more pragmatic and lively way of thought, presented by vitalism, utilitarianism and the like. Man was no longer a static Kantian postulate or a fleeting moment of the Hegelian mind, but rather a rushing forward, constantly exceeding itself and totally merging in its surrounding: the

intentionality in modern style. Victorian bounds were loosened, the last reminiscences of Cartesian substance (material and spiritual) melted away, just like artistic futurism and expressionism replaced naturalism and impressionism.

In this context, Husserl's phenomenology spread its intentional and transcendental dynamics, building up its (after all existential) synthesized "essences".[8] But it was rather existential phenomenology that was able to grasp the spirit of the age, together with Neo-Positivism, its antagonist. Both despised essence, but whereas Neo-Positivism kept 'the existential' of the sense data, existential phenomenology understood 'existence' in the subjective manner of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.

Usually, the arising of idealism and later subjectivisms are explained by pointing at platonic tradition as a counterpart of Aristotelian realism, in Thomism e.g. Ambroise Gardeil, Régis Jolivet and Étienne Gilson.[9] The reasoning is, summarized, that platonic ideas predominate at the cost of concrete reality, so that ancient and medieval essentialism prepared the path leading towards Descartes and successors. Of course this is (in several respects) a valid view on the rising of modern idealism (and subjectivism in general). Thus, Gilson is right in pointing out, that, if the real distinction essence/esse (existence) is neglected, idealism easily can appear on the horizon. Esse (existence) was made a property of essence and at the threshold of modern age, Suarez rendered it to a mere logical status: the pure and unlimited possibility, somewhat announcing Heidegger. Things were only their (singular) essence, but at least Suarez still cherished (nominalistic) scholastic essence. With Descartes only empty schemes were left, whether these were primitive ideas (substance), innate ideas (the idea of a highest) or man-made ones. Essence in the realistic sense of the word had gone and would not reappear in modern philosophy. Yet, Descartes had something like existence left, although it was no longer scholastic existence. "Existence" was equivalent with "noticed existence", the bottom of the rational.

We can say, that the modern philosophical era was primordially a period of "bare-facts-existence". The old scholastic notion of esse/existence had left the stage for already a long time. Kierkegaardian subjective existence was something new, but it confronted only modern "objective existence", already present. However, due to the complete disappearance of essence in the classical metaphysical sense of the word, modern philosophy can hardly be called 'essentialism', notwithstanding the origins of idealism etc. in certain traits of Platonism.

Much more than being an essentialism, modern philosophy appears as an existentialism of facts, either in a rational-idealistic or in an empiricist setting.

From the late 1920's onward, a new generation of (Neo)-Thomists were ready to rediscover the 'authentic Thomas' by going back to the texts of the Doctor Angelicus himself, divested from the burden of commentaries, especially those of Cajetan and Johannes a Sancto Thoma. The older Thomists, like Domet de Vorges and his pupil Garrigou-Lagrange, Del Prado, Hugon, Manser, Gredt and others were judged too essentialistic, having insufficiently stressed the impact of the act of being, that would have been considered by them as a mere entity, joined to essence, a category besides the 10 predicaments, or even worse, as a pure nominal 'esse'. Leaving aside the question, whether this is the whole truth, it is a fact, that the triumvirate Jacques Maritain, Étienne Gilson and Cornelio Fabro was credited for having brought to footlight again the authentic 'esse' of Saint Thomas. Reacting against 'essentialism' (including – perhaps – in some cases the hidden presence of Duns Scotus and Francisco Suarez), these new Thomists moreover walked in a 20th century cultural atmosphere that was longing for openness and authenticity, the age of existentialism. So it takes no wonder, that Maritain in 1932 called Thomism a philosophy of existence.[10] Gilson and many others also chose the word 'existential', partly to underline anti-essentialism[11] and to stress the realistic nature of Aquinas' metaphysics. He did not notice the dissolution of essence in the early 17th century, and this omission sealed his metaphysical destiny.

Men like Rousselot or Maréchal, who tried to fuse Thomism with Kantianism and other modern philosophies, prepared the introduction of subjective existential thinking in ecclesiastical philosophy and theology. Nevertheless, modern existentialism and suchlike were scarcely (if at all) known by these Jesuits before 1930, although the fundamental conception of notably Maréchal's thinking showed an astonishing resemblance with Heidegger's existential ontology. However, indirectly Heidegger seems to have given a few incentives to the rebirth of thomistic ontocentrism in the late 1920's.

A greater part of the (Neo)-Thomistic school of Louvain modified Thomism during the 1930's and 1940's in an outspoken existential direction, finally debouching in pure existential phenomenology. In this case, anti-essentialism had become synonymous with anti-objectivism (read: anti-realism), and in this climate, a humanized and subjectivistic conception of existence was greedily accepted, the Husserl-archive close at hand, De Waelhens running around.

With regard to 'Neo-Thomism' as a whole, the well-known sociologist of culture Bouman even suggests – with regard to theology from the 1930's onward -, that "forms of existential philosophizing were stimulated by neo-thomism, the later part of Barth's Dogmatik, but in the work of Schweitzer or Buber as well".[12]

Without generalizing, we could say, that in too many a contemporary thomistic circle, the existential dimension still seems to preponderate above the essential/formal. In order to rehabilitate the essential in thomism, without disturbing the absolute primacy of being as such, it is of utmost importance to distinguish between a full and a limited sense in which the term 'esse' is to be understood in the later works of Saint Thomas.

### 3. Another glance at esse commune, actus essendi, esse essentialia and esse existentielle

Throughout the later writings of Aquinas, the most fundamental meaning of 'esse' is that of constitutive act, bringing about and preserving all finite things.[13] Esse is called 'esse commune', if it is meant to indicate the being of all there is in the created world. This esse is the outcome of a separating activity of our intellect, compressing the many determinations, without losing the peculiarity of each of them. The esse commune is being, considered in its purity and all-embraciveness, covering metaphysical causation and its results (esse and ens). Emphatically it is not an infinite and bare possibility (esse logicum), such as the univocal being of Duns Scotus, but an esse participatum. It is not self-sufficient, but it depends on the Ipsum esse subsistens, that cannot receive determinations from the outside.

Another separating intellectual activity delivers being as an act, the constitutive principle of finite things. Although 'actus essendi' means the working/operating principle of things, it covers its results too: entia are not something outside of esse, but causation and effect are two aspects of the overall actus essendi. Being, as an act, executes its function, by bringing about and preserving whatever thing in the world.[14]

Hence, Saint Thomas wrote, that 'esse' as an act is perfectissimum, maximum formale etc., titles he never granted expressis verbis to esse commune, for this esse is taken as indefinite purity, apart from its contents and operations. There is only one esse, which – dependent on the angle of our metaphysical perception - can be taken apart in the two mentioned ways of separation.

Then, it is never superfluous to underline, that 'esse' is not something beyond things: esse is the principle that brings things to being and conserves them. This is far removed from the "ontological difference" of Heidegger, which implies hypostatization/reification of being.

In stressing being, 'esse' as the utmost principle and act, doors to Platonic-Augustinian essentialism and to a bare existentialism are tightly closed: essence and esse cannot be hypostasized and have to be combined in order to achieve a thing. 'Ens' is a noun; 'esse' is a verb, with all metaphysical consequences following from that. Therefore it seems

commendable, to reserve the word 'esse' for the act of being, causation, whereas the word 'ens' should be used for the result of esse, the thing that is.

Esse, taken as esse commune and esse, taken as actus essendi find themselves on different levels, as we indicated (although both aspects are taken from one basic esse). Therefore, it is not correct, to derive 'essence' and 'actus essendi' properly from the esse commune; they can only become attached to it, in a logical way.

The two main modes of being, given by Thomas in I Sent. I, 33, 1, 1, in De ente et essentia c 1 and in the Summa Theologiae I, 3, 4 ad 2, are those of essentia and esse. In his early teaching (during the years 1254-1256) esse is presented as 'actus essentiae', later as 'actus essendi', partly inspired by the Liber de causis etc. to clarify Boethius' pair ens/esse.[15] The early works, the Commentary on the Sentences and De ente et essentia, clearly identify 'esse' with the act that operates existence. Quidditative determinations are completely on the essential side, whereas the realization of the essence is taken care of by actus essentiae.[16] The main message of De ente et essentia is, that a finite essence cannot produce esse out of itself and that the two remain really distinct in created things. Further, that 'esse', realizing 'essence', is not some para-categorical accident, but the very act by which a thing is realized, sicut vivere est animae actus.[17] Saint Thomas visibly did not use the term 'existence' instead of 'esse', perhaps because it might be understood as only a state of being caused.[18] On the other hand, terminology was not yet fixed, and e.g. Aquinas' teacher, Saint Albertus Magnus, did not hesitate to use in some cases the expression 'esse' in order to indicate the state of existence, without excluding the notion of act by which the state is brought about.[19]

The 'esse' signifying 'actus essentiae' realizes a metaphysical essence, not a mere logical one (genus, species). The result is the thing in its concrete, complete 'whatness'. Only in its aptitude to accept the esse, essence can be said to be potency. The quiddity as such cannot be potential: an oak is an oak, white is simply white. Essence itself is not brought to reality, but – as a quidditative principle – it cooperates with the reality-founding principle, so that a thing is generated in conformity with the essence in concern. Saint Thomas says in e.g. Quest. Disp. De anima, 1, 6 ad 2: "Formae .... sunt quodammodo in potentia ..." and in the Summa Theologiae I, 3, 4 Resp. it runs: "Oportet quod ipsum esse comparetur ad essentiam .... sicut actus ad potentiam", not because essence as quiddity is a potency, but because "esse est actualitas omnis formae vel naturae", an act that constitutes a real thing, so that the determining principle 'essence' is able to exercise its own function.

Esse, the complete actuality of a thing, by far surpasses bare essence, as is indicated by S.Th. I, 18, 4 ad 3, where Saint Thomas states, that a real created thing is more than its idea in the mind of God, which (taken as such) is only a potential creature.

It seems that the turn from *actus essentiae* towards *actus essendi* (around 1255-'6) was inspired by the lecture of Boethius' *De Hebdomadibus* together with writings of Neo-Platonic (Dionysian-Proclean) origin and competently translated works of Aristotle, so that the Aristotelian notion of act was enriched and enlarged, i.a. for the sake of clarifying divine creation, referred to in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. Whereas the *actus essentiae* of the earlier works can be identified with existence (predominantly as an act, establishing the existence of a thing), the notion of '*actus essendi*' apparently implies much more. Indeed, the complete fullness of being resides in it, including formality.[20] We might get the impression, that there is nothing left for essence but to function as a receiving factor, to be filled by the rich contents offered by *actus essendi*. Many a vehement anti-essentialist eagerly stuck to this explanation, for it seems to put essence "where it belongs": a mere potency, deprived of formal contents and serving as a preparing instrument or even as a pure limitation .

Yet there is a serious problem here that cannot be dealt with in a superficial or vague way. Can this '*actus essendi*' simply replace the *actus essentiae* of the early writings? Mind, that with regard to this *actus essentiae* never is spoken of 'fullness', 'form(ality)' and 'perfection'. Or is the dichotomy *essentia/esse* (meaning '*actus essendi*'), properly speaking, unsuitable? It should be remembered here that 'essence', as pure quiddity, is not a potency (only *secundum quid*, as a receiver of existence) and that it is form (in material thing moreover extended in determinations caused by form). Well, what is not in itself a potency, must be an act, however – in this case - an act of a totally different character than the act of existence; essence is - from Aristotle onwards - presented as '*actus primus*', realized by *esse* as '*actus secundus*'. [21]

It should be admitted, that the relation between *actus essendi* (full being, inclusive form), and essence needs further study, because this *actus* is the full *esse*, possessing form/formality, whereas essence is ..... that very form. Saint Thomas gives some indications in his *De Potentia*[22], where he points out, that essence as a principle does not occur apart from things (essence does not exist), but is rooted in the divine ideas, from which it executes its quidditative function, as soon as *esse* brings about the real thing concerned. Here Saint Thomas kindly invites us to continue his investigations, taking into account the doctrine of the eternal ideas in God, communicating to the creatures by means of metaphysical efficient causality. The question that arises: is essence something, that is loosened from being (as its self-limitation and/or receiver) or is it the formal of *actus essendi* itself?

If essence itself, right from the beginning, is acknowledged as an integral part of the actus essendi, there is no need of an essence, acting as a 'receptaculum' and as a dividing, allocating and limiting instrument, placed in front of actus essendi. Essence (esse essentiale) has already distinguished contents from the overall esse, of which it is a basic mode. But the esse existentielle, the act of existence, is also part of actus essendi, having its own function. When a thing is realized, the two sub-principles work together, but they remain really distinct, because of their complete different character: the 'what-it-is' versus the 'that-it-is'. Of course, we are dealing here with pure metaphysical order, not with a quasi-physical process in a temporal succession. Now we can see why "essentialistic" Thomists missed the point. They made essence a semi-thing in state of potency, not receiving its form(ality) from esse. In this constellation, what is called esse, is something extrinsic, an entity, juxtaposed to essence. A joint state or act of existence realizes essence, so that the thing stands extra causas. With the exception of the juxtaposed esse and the existence, all metaphysical entities belong to the field of essence. The proper actus essendi as well as the esse commune is absent, together with participation..

However, not only the "essentialists" were besides the mark; rediscoverers of the "authentic esse" in the 1930's-1940's were on the wrong path too. They did not sufficiently notice the enormous difference between eminent-real condensed presence of contents in actus essendi and the state of dissolution, whereby the copiousness of esse is imagined as a kind of trans-formal closeness. A "charm" must be found then, to conjure the definite out of the indefinite: essence, drawing lines and thus splitting off contents, "circumscribed" forms. Setting aside the Augustinian divine ideas, inexorable delivers essence and esse to contingency: the partition wall with modern philosophies of existence became very thin. As is the case since 14th-century conceptualism, the thinking subject was easily seduced to take over the role of essence, and this meant here, that the subjective conception of existence could replace the objective one. This was the case with certain Thomists, who wanted to beat Descartes and Kant with rationalistic and criticist means and found finally themselves in kantian apriorism of forms.

The metaphysical essentialists neglected the act of esse, but they were right in their positive appreciation of essence, which is the formal itself. They were right too, in placing existence (and not esse) opposite to essence. Finally they were right in stating, that existence is only reality-founding, not formal (the mere existence, free from determination).

The renewers of thomistic metaphysics, reinstating *actus essendi*, were right in subordinating essence to *esse* and in raising *esse* to the rank of *actualitas omnium actuum, maximum formale, magis intimum* and *perfectio perfectionum*, doing away with essentialism, Suarezian nominalization of *esse* etc. But they were wrong in “elevating” their *esse* above form, intermingling *esse* with existence and degrading essence to an instrument of division and allocation. Besides, their instrumental essence is a kind of semi-thing, a ‘*suppositum*’, and as such a far descendant of Platonism.

Both conceptions have their valid and their invalid traits and therefore they are also incomplete. If, the wrong elements are cut off, a succeeded synthesis can be brought on the carpet.

Once again, both, *esse essentiale* and *esse existentiale* are included in the all-comprising *actus essendi*. Essence is not a kind limiting factor or a second flow like a potency besides the *actus essendi*. On the level of ultimate constitution, there is no such dispersion potency/act as is the case on the level of things, where potencies pass into acts. The *actus essendi* is self-sufficient and it does not need a potency like a flowing river that needs a channel. The metaphysical foundation of things does not occur by a free floating *potentia (= essentia)* realized by free floating kind of *actus purus restrictus*, but by *actus essendi* as a whole, operating by two sub-acts: essence and existence. Thus, immediately after *esse* as such, the ontological division *essentia/existentia* possesses the metaphysical primacy, above than the division potency/act.

As Saint Thomas would agree upon, it is advisable, to reserve the word ‘*actus essendi*’ for the broad, all-constituting act, elevated above the mutual-complementary modes ‘essence’ and ‘existence’, which are respectively *actus (subordinatus) primus* and *actus (subordinatus) secundus*. Therefore, *actus essendi* is as broad as *esse commune*.

We are perfectly aware, that this transposition of elements turns out to be slightly different from the usual view. Commonly it is thought, that it is the *esse commune* which is divided in essence as potency and *actus essendi* as its realizing act.[23] As is pointed out earlier, it is no longer necessary to place an *esse* (as a kind of *actus purus restrictus*) opposite to an essence as a kind of (impossible) *potentia pura*.[24] Receiving its forms from the divine ideas, *actus essendi* proceeds in accordance with the well-ordered complex of forms/essences, regulating the specific working of *actus essendi*: essences are placed in a punctual manner, including more or less close mutual or more complex affinities, so that existence is enabled to find its way in the field of potencies, asking for realization. The inner order of *actus essendi* also

implies that the real distinction *essentia/existentia* finds itself inside *actus essendi*. So, this ‘*distinctio realis*’ is not to be affixed between essence and *actus essendi*, but between essence and existence (as *esse essentiale* – act -, not as a state).

In the old setting, the relation of *essentia* versus *esse* remains problematic: is *esse* (*actus essendi*) an act containing formality/quidity too, or is it confined to an act of existence? But now that we have – instead of a “trans-morphous” *esse commune* - a full *actus essendi* on top, essence gets what it is entitled to, just like existence, by the way. Each of them has a primacy of its own, without throwing obstacles to the other.[25] The equilibrium of essence and existence is firmly established, whereas the absolute primacy of *esse*, residing above both (but also containing them), is guaranteed. The *distinctio realis* remains as rigid as ever: ‘essence’ is a mode of being that is totally different from ‘existence’, irreducible to it. The formal part of *actus essendi* rests entirely on the essential side, the *esse essentiale*, whereas realization – making the real thing – is completely entrusted to the *esse existentiale*, without adding whatever contents to essence.

Divine operation *ad extra* must be considered the bridge from the *ipsum esse a se subsistens* to the realm of the created *esse commune*. In this operation, primary causality generates secondary causality, which profiles itself as ‘*actus essendi*’, containing all its perfections.

So, the dichotomy essence/existence is placed now under the *actus essendi*. Would the *actus essendi* as such be put into the dichotomy, then it would be reduced to a mere act of existence, a part of *actus essendi*. And nothing can be a part of itself. Confusing *actus essendi* with the existential act can easily result in a kind of (unjustified) primacy of existence above essence, whereas only *esse* in the broad and full sense transcends essence.

As we remarked already, existentializing Thomists let all determinations rise from the indeterminate. Here sounds an echo of Neo-Platonism in its breaking and limiting function of the ‘*Nous*’, fabricating ideas out of a bare self-reflection. It is a matter of urgency, not to follow Plotinus here, but rather Saint Augustine with his eternal ideas (essences) in God, luminous example for Saint Thomas and his disciples.

It could be of some use, to schematize very briefly the incomplete (i.a. the essentializing and the existentializing view) and the complete conception with regard to *esse*, essence and existence.

Essence-directed	Existence-directed	Esse-directed
Esse as juxtaposition	Esse commune	Actus essendi
	↓       ↓	↓       ↓
Essentia       Existentia	Essentia « Actus essendi»	Essentia       Existentia

Let us now sum up a few difficulties, turning up, if actus essendi functions in fact as an act of existence, already filled with quidditative formality.

In the first place, it is hard to understand, in what way esse as a principle of things could produce a self-limitation. Further, an essence as only a limiting factor is pure negativity, unable to be a principle or an instrument. Inside actus essendi, the essential is already ordered, so that essence only limits in obliquo: one form is not another.

Should essence as such be a mere potency, than it must be actualized by an esse that contains actual form(ality), whereupon the thing in concern would be there. But now, the real and permanent distinction of essence and esse/existence is destroyed, because essence=potency is no longer there, consumed as at was by the act of esse/existence.

Further it can be imagined, that essence is some provisory form (“blue-print”) or suppositum (“matrix”), ready to receive the “definite form”, which is taken out of a stream of formality, presented by esse. In this case, all difficulties mentioned above, return. Especially the pre-presence of the formal (essential) in the esse/existence is fatal, for this would destroy the distinctio realis, the core of Thomism.

A main objection to these questionable solutions is, that the very nature of essence is misjudged. It should be acknowledged as quiddity in the full sense of the word, not as an implement for filtering formal contents out of a full but still unarticulated esse.

As to the terminology, the word 'esse' should be decidedly reserved for the complete 'actus essendi', whereas its main modes, essence and existence, are to be seen as 'esse essentiale' (actus primus) and 'esse existentiale' (actus secundus) respectively.

During the 13th century, Aristotelians were at the defense of reality as opposed to Platonic (-Augustinian) ideality. In the firmly established Augustinian tradition, the realm of ideas continuously tended to supersede material reality. Even if epistemological 'ultra-realism' was rejected, platonic inspired theologians still stuck to ideas/essences, conceived as the metaphysical source of things. Here esse was only some self-identity of essence or framework to support essence. Augustinianists, old and new ones, elevated essence to the rank of a full and exclusive source of reality, whereas esse was given a subordinated place.

It takes no wonder, that Saint Thomas and his confratres took the defense of the real world of esse, rightly stressing the overall importance of being, without diminishing the importance of essence. As the Doctor Communis was primarily involved in theology with its many problems and because his metaphysical system was yet in construction, it could be imagined, that his metaphysics of being would have had some redressment with regard to actus essendi and essence. Whereas in his monograph on the subject, *De ente et essentia*, a relatively closed vision is laid down, the later conception – with actus essendi involved – must be found by combining statements, taken from the two *Summae*, the *In Boeth. De Trinitate* etc. The outlines, undoubtedly, are there, but details and nearer explanations can still be added. Together with other factors, this accounts for the diversity of interpretation, appearing from the 14th century onward.

If we try to look for a theological foundation of the 'distinctio realis' between essence and existence, we find that the divine intellect, containing realiter-eminenter all ideas, grants formality to things in an efficient manner. Essence/form can have a proper operation, thanks to spiritual quantity, allowing essences to multiply in things participating.

The divine will, in its decree of creation, radiates the complementary working principle, the act of existence. Both are two sides of the complete actus essendi. The Augustinian eternal ideas are perfectly connected here to Aristotelian causality, by "Dionysian" analogy and by efficient participation.[26] In the esse divinum, perfection and 'aseitas' are equivalents. Looking for some priority of one pole above the other (as is the case with divine intellect which precedes divine will) makes no sense here. Favoring exclusively 'perfectio' may lead to

theological essentialism and – possibly - petrification, giving all the benefit to ‘aseitas’ brings the risk of theological existentialism and dialectical dynamization.

In distinguishing clearly existence from esse (actus essendi) and by placing actus essendi on top, confusion of esse and existence is prevented. Actus essendi can be called formal in a not longer problematic sense; essence has its own, rich value, received from the full esse; existence (thoroughly distinguished from essence) exercises its own task.

If we look at the ‘existentializing’ conception of ‘essence’, two traits are noticeable. In the first place its limiting function and in the second place its catching function (stopping and holding the arriving existence or esse). The first-mentioned feature could be carried back to preoccupations, instigated by post-Parmenidian motives: the dividing element that reconciles the one and the many. The second characteristic could be supposed to result from an oriental separating dualism in the field of matter versus spirit; later matter versus form, transferred to other dichotomies in philosophy.

#### 4. Existentialization of esse and depreciation of essence

Overseeing philosophy’s history, we must come to the conclusion that real essence was lost when the mechanization of worldview occurred, to speak with Eduard Dijksterhuis.[27] A world of fact-existence stayed behind. It is true, that – what may be called - existential psychology can be found in the more remote past (stoics cynicists, the biblical Koheleth [Preacher], Saint Augustine and so on), but this did not lead to an existential philosophy in the true sense of the word.

Everywhere the essential predominates, even amidst materialists such as Democritus, whose ‘atomoi’ are substances of a qualified nature, real essences. Pre-Socratics, Socrates, Plato (the zenith of essential thinking), Aristotle (being as ‘ousia’, doing justice to essence and existence at the time), the Stoics, in their way the Sceptics, Neo-Platonists, patristic thinkers, scholastics, renaissance philosophers, briefly practically all thinkers before the modern age put essence thematically in the center. It was Saint Thomas, who gave absolute priority to being above essence, but this does not mean, that the Doctor Angelicus underestimated quiddity, otherwise he would not have characterized ‘esse’ as ”id quod est maximum formale”: essence receives its form(ality) from the real divine ideas. In this respect, St. Augustine triumphs over Pseudo-Dionysius and his companions.

It takes no wonder, that philosophy concentrated upon essence, for the reality of the outside world was not disputed in those centuries, apart from some shallow experiments among the sophists and the like. In this atmosphere 'esse' was spontaneously dealt with as 'esse of essence', 'esse essentiae', significations which echoed even still somewhat in 'actus essentiae'.

The early disciples of Aquinas were too well aware of the novelties they adhered to, confronted as they were by utterances such as the 'Correctorium fratris Thomae'. Especially in England, the question of esse became an item of importance as a consequence of Scotist formalism, provoking the denial of real distinction essentia/esse. In the disputes, the term 'esse' appears to be predominantly conceived as 'act of existence', possibly because mainly was referred to the *De ente et essentia*. It is striking, that none of the early Thomists uses the term 'actus essendi' opposite to essence. Obviously, the full esse of Saint Thomas' later writings was understood in a different way from the esse (as *actus essentiae*), met with in the early contributions.

Duns Scotus, the main 'corrector' of Saint Thomas, also used the term 'esse' versus 'essentia' in the sense of 'existence'[28], and this could explain, why early Thomists – defending their master – did not turn to the later use of the term 'esse' by Saint Thomas himself. During the late 13th century, the Dominicans Thomas of Sutton, William Hothum and Richard Knapwell continued to use the term 'esse'. In France the early Thomists Bernardus de Trilia and Johannes Quidort did the same, accompanied by Humbert of Preuilly who specified, that "esse est summe simple", indifferent existence.[29] A majority of Thomists seems to have conserved the expression 'esse', instead of 'existence', well into the 14th century. The first presenting of the pair *essentia/existentia* is given with Ricardo de Primadizzi, around 1290, but already 20 years before, Petrus de Torotasia already substituted 'esse' by 'actus existendi', instead of thomasian 'actus essentiae'. This substitution was, by no means, a reduction of existence to a bare 'extra causas', but in the course of time, the notion of constituting-preserving *actus* gradually weakened. Well-known is Capreolus' terminology 'esse essentiae/esse existentiae', taken over by Silvester Ferrariensis and paving the path for what was later called essentialism, whereby 'essence' became the focus of thomistic metaphysics, whereas 'existence' got rid of all associations with the old notion of *actus* and was reduced to mere standing outside the causes, the state of being present in the real world. The over-all 'esse' could scarcely find its proper place in such a scheme, so that it was understood as a 'fluidum' holding things together, or faded away towards the status of a logical entity. This process announced itself in Capreolus, took firm foot in Cajetan and was

well-established in the “Cursus thomisticus” of Johannes a Sancto Thoma[30], leaving its impress upon subsequent neo-thomism until the revitalization of Thomism as a metaphysics of being during the 20th century. Commonly, essence was seen as a primary and comparatively independent factor. The state of potency, essence was in before the entering of realizing causes, was – properly speaking – only something on the outside of essence. ‘Existence’ was administered mainly by the efficient causes and remained together with essence, both of them really distinct, not separated from the other.

The evaporation of ‘esse’ (in the sense of ‘actus essendi’) had several causes. Firstly, the old Augustinianism was still strong during the later Middle Ages, favoring continuously metaphysics of essence and affecting many a Thomist. Besides, Scotistic influences at times penetrated without being noticed and even nominalistic conceptualization of being exercised a hidden influence. Moreover, it was the -often obscure- relation between esse, essentia and existentia, which conditioned the disappearance of esse, particularly in the sense of esse in actu. The dichotomy essentia/existentia took the whole field of metaphysics, whereas the once all-constituting esse diluted to a category besides the other ten, or even to a logical entity. The influence of Suarez, who combined Scotistic formalism and Occamistic nominalism hollowed essence on the eve of mechanistic times, ringed in by the schematism of Descartes. Although Suarez made existence a logical addition to essence, in fact essence was dissolved and a meager, factual existence remained.

The ‘organic’ essences of mediaeval centuries were replaced by mechanistic constructions, which also entered Neo-Scholasticism of 17th, 18th and early 20th centuries: esse had become a logical category, essence was materialized and existence was neutralized to bare facts, the metaphysical was divided over physics and logic in rationalistic Neo-Scholasticism. Désiré Mercier, organizer of Neo-Thomistic teaching in Louvain, followed Cartesian tracks and professed a standard-essentialism with little real essence and existence as standing-out-of-the-causes. Being became more or less identical with thought being, because Mercier wanted to prove the truth of outward reality. Especially among Dominicans, there were classical Thomists, such as Garrigou-Lagrange, who were not affected by modern rationalism and technicism. Had they more thoroughly by the next generation, then its metaphysics of being would certainly have been less ‘existentialistic’, from the early 1920’s on.

Jacques Maritain rejected Bergsonism, but he retained the idea, that living reality exceeds the mere, fixed essential and with this he initiates the new thomistic resistance against

‘essentialism’. In his “Antimoderne” (1922) the main accent is placed on existence, but essence conserves its quidditative function. The act of esse is practically identified with existence, next to which essential fullness was recognized, but considered less important: the reality of a thing preponderates above ‘what it is’. This position was kept and strengthened in his later works.[31] In 1926 Étienne Gilson demonstrates an extreme anti-Augustinianism, leading an existentialized Aristotle into the field and forgetting that the Aristotelian being is fundamentally being of primary substance, firmly including essence. Gilson becomes an outspoken existentialist in his “Being and some philosophers” (1948), where the act of esse totally is identified with the act of existence. This book turned out to be most influential, sweeping essence in the corner of metaphysics and making standard Thomism of the 1950’s and later a metaphysics of existentialized being. Not only in Europe, but in the America’s too, Gilson set the trend, and ‘Paleo-Thomism’ (Garrigou-Lagrange etc.) was committed to paper as ‘essentialism’.

Cornelio Fabro rejected the Heideggerian and Sartrean existentialisms, but this was not in favor of essence. On the contrary, his preference for that type of metaphysical participation which is committed to anti-essentialist potentia/actus-priority, automatically slides down to a ‘full’, but existentialized act of being.

De Finance, Phelan, De Raeymaeker and many others, the whole company made essence a mere potency and/or a limiting factor, putting all perfection in an existentialized actus essendi, as this was concluded from their prejudiced reading of Saint Thomas.

If we look at the most recent developments in Thomism, we perceive some changes in the direction of re-appreciation of essence. Thus some young scholars, like David Berger, consciously prefer the Paleo-Thomism (of i.a. Garrigou-Lagrange) to that of the Gilson-generation. It dawns upon other minds too, that the so-called rediscovery of esse by Gilson, Fabro and others, was not a real return to thomistic esse, but a more or less veiled philosophy of existence. Remarkable is a book of the Dominican Vivian Boland, defending the doctrine of Augustinian ideas in Saint Thomas’ Summa Contra Gentiles and elsewhere Boland is clearly opting for the restoration of essence in thomistic thinking.[32] However, one swallow does not make a summer, for in a most recent book of Battista Mondin, the road of Gilson and others who intermingled esse and existence is still uncritically dealt with.[33] We can only hope for better times, when essence will be re-appreciated and esse will be purified from existence.

## 5. Epitome

Historical studies - meant to bring back authentic esse to Thomism - emphasized, that modern subjectivism was the outcome of placing essence in the center, as a consequence of which esse (resp. existence) became mere mental being. However, these studies were one-sided, for they neglected to put the blame on the nominalistic undermining of essence, so that a meager fact-existence remained. The medicine, recommended to get rid of essentialism, was re-establishing “the original doctrine of being of Saint Thomas himself”. We noticed that ‘essence’ as a limiting instrument, a mere potency or a suppositum is superfluous and misplaced. Superfluous, because form(ality) of actus essendi itself is ordered and operates by the esse essenziale as such. Misplaced, because in this case, quiddity would occur on both sides, in essence and in esse and this would frustrate the real distinction between essence and existence. If actus essendi plays the part of existence, they will fuse, so that an existentialized esse will be the result, what will have its emptying consequences for essence. In classical metaphysics of being, the actus essendi should also comprise potency of things, because this actus is the ultimate constituting principle of all modes of being, including potency. The first division of actus essendi is that of esse essenziale and esse existentielle, really distinct from each other, but intimately co-operating in bringing about real things. Esse as such transcends its two supreme modes of constitution, but ‘what a thing is’ is as important as ‘that it is’: the balance of essence and existence is the hallmark of realistic metaphysics!

The weakening of essence among quite a few Thomists, deprived theology from a valuable apologetical instrument; still stronger, it drove theology out of its course. Moreover, an existentializing Thomism is not equipped to combat all sorts of theoretical errors (mostly based upon nominalism) in natural and other sciences. Vide e.g. the weak stand with regard to evolutionism and the like. So, if the esteem of essence is not drastically and soon increased in Thomism as a whole, marginalization will continue.

## NOTES

[1] Fr. Dr. L. J. Elders, on the contrary, defends essence as a metaphysical dignity: “Let us note down, that a total reduction of essence to a potency without contents, is untenable: in this way, multitude and ordination of things are no longer explained, but rendered dependable on a (blind) pressure for realization on account of being. Essence is no longer a participation in the essence of God; the mutual causality of being and essence is deprived of its value.” (De

Metafysica van St.Thomas van Aquino in historisch perspectief. Deel I: Ens commune, Tabor, Brugge, 1981, p. 218).

[2] J. Van Boxtel, *Metaphysiek van het wezen of metaphysiek van het zijn?*, Utrecht 1951. After a Mercier-based Neo-Thomism (without taking the route of Maréchal), a classical current followed with J. Hoogveld en I. Van den Berg. Existentializing Thomism in the Netherlands started with G. Kreling and M. Marlet a.o.

[3] G. Emery, 'Essentialisme ou personnalisme dans le traité de Dieu chez saint Thomas d'Aquin ?' in: *Revue thomiste*, 98 (1998), p. 5-38. Emery defends a balance of essentiality and personality in Thomistic doctrine of Trinity.

[4] Cf. STh. I, 7, 1c.

[5] R. Descartes, *Méditations* IX 3me obj. Innate ideas are powers of thinking to produce mathematics-like concepts.

[6] J. Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, L. II, c. XXII.

[7] I. Kant, *Prologomena*, Transz. Hauptfr. I, Anm. II. The outward thing is unqualified existence; known existence is part of a mental category.

[8] Husserl's "essence" is composed of protentions and retentions, both perceptions in itself.

[9] H. Gardeil, *Les étapes de la philosophie idéaliste*, Paris, 1935; R. Jolivet: *Les sources de l'idéalisme*, Paris, 1936; E. Gilson, *L'Être et l'essence*, Paris, 1948. Attention is only paid to absorption of existence/being by essence (idealistically conceived), not to the deterioration of essence itself by nominalistic-mechanistic influences.

[10] J. Maritain, *Sept leçons sur l'être*, Paris, 1932-1933 (*La philosophie thomiste est une philosophie existentielle*).

[11] Anti-essentialism in French Thomism started with Gilson's 'Pourquoi Saint Thomas a critiqué Saint Augustin', in: *Archives D'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen Age* 1 (1926-1927), pp. 5-127.

- [12] P.J. Bouman, *Cultuurgeschiedenis van de twinstigste eeuw*, Utrecht , 1964, p. 83-84.
- [13] *De Pot.* 7, 2 ad 7 (esse commune contains the many in a virtual way); *ScG I*, 26 (actus essendi contains the many in a real and eminent way).
- [14] *I Sent.* 33, 1, 1 ad 1.
- [15] Dionysius Areop., *De Div. No. I*, 1a
- [16] *De Ente et Essentia* c. 2
- [17] *In IV Metaph.* 2
- [18] J. De Finance, *Etre et agir*, Paris , 1945, p. 122; G. Phelan, 'The Existentialism of S. Thomas Aquinas', in : *Proc. Of Amer. Cath. Philos. Ass.*, 1946, pp. 35-36.
- [19] S. Albertus Magnus, *De causis et proc. Univers.* II, 1, c. 17
- [20] *STh.* Ia , q. 4, a. 1 ad 4 (perfectio omnium perfectionum); Ia, q. 8, a. 1c (magis intimum cuilibet); *De Pot.* 27, 2, 9 (actualitas omnium actuum).
- [21] *ScG IV*, c. 14
- [22] *De Pot.* 7, 2 ad 9 etc.
- [23] *STh.* Ia, q. 44, a. 1c (esse sequitur formam)
- [24] Potency is always bound to an act (actus prius potentia).
- [25] *De Pot.* 3, 5, 2 (Ipsa quidditas creatur simul cum esse).
- [26] L.-B. Geiger (*La participation dans la philosophie de Saint Thomas d'Aquin*, Paris, 1942) stresses communication to (augustinian) ideas.
- [27] E. J. Dijksterhuis, *De mechanisering van het wereldbeeld*, Leiden , 1950.

[28] Duns Scotus, *Opus Oxoniense*, lib. IV, d. 13, q. 1, n. 38 (Simpliciter falsum est quod esse sit aliud ab essentia.).

[29] Humbertus Prilianus, *I Sent.* d. 8, q. 2.

[30] Joh. Capreolus, *Defensiones theologiae* II, d. 1, q. 2, a. 2.

[31] J. Maritain, *Sept leçons sur l'être*, Paris, 1933, p. 70.

[32] V. Boland, *Ideas in God according to Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Leiden , 1996.

[33] B. Mondin, *La metafisica di S. Tommaso d'Aquino e i suoi interpreti*, Bologna, 2002.