CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

**ARTICLE**

# Existential Inertia and Thomistic *Esse*

Jack Boczar [iD]

Pontifical Faculty of the Immaculate Conception, The Dominican House of Studies, Washington, DC, USA
Email: jboczar@dhs.edu

## Abstract

In recent years, a considerable amount of interest has arisen in the topic of existential inertia (henceforth EIT) and its relation to the natural theology of Thomas Aquinas. While contemporary Thomists have engaged with proponents of EIT, strangely enough, no literature has focused on Aquinas's own response to the objection(s) from an EIT-like position. The intention of this article is to (1) lay out the basic thrust of EIT and then (2) articulate how Aquinas's own metaphysical commitments dissolve the problems that EIT raises. After formulating an argument based on Aqunias's own texts and paying attention to the metaphysical commitments it involves, I then level three objections and respond to them.

**Keywords:** Aquinas; God; *Esse*; Existential Inertia; Thomism

## 1. An account of existential inertia

Because the literature in contemporary metaphysics and philosophy of religion on existential inertia (henceforth EIT)[1] is relatively new, it is difficult to pin down exactly what EIT is. To make things more difficult, the current literature on the topic seems to indicate that there are multiple mutually exclusive accounts of EIT[2] and serious underdevelopment with respect to its (1) scope, (2) relation to time, and (3) modal quantification.[3] Despite this, it seems like a simple formulation of EIT can be put forth. Schmid says,

> In simplest terms, EIT is the claim that at least some temporal concrete objects persist in the absence of both (i) sustenance or conservation from without and (ii) sufficiently destructive factors operative on the object(s). EIT does not aim to answer what it is *in virtue of which* objects persist; instead, EIT aims merely to *describe* the way at least some objects persist.[4]

---

[1]For consistency, I follow the conventional usage of the acronym found in the literature.

[2]Joe Schmid, *Existential Inertia and Classical Theistic Proofs* (Cham, CH: Springer, 2022), p. 107. Schmid rightly points out here that there is mutual exclusivity in terms of the domain and modal quantification of EIT. Schmid points out that Paul Audi's formulation, for instance, claims that EIT applies to *everything*, while Adler and Feser formulate it as applying only to contingent things.

[3]Ibid., pp. 105–27.

[4]Ibid., pp. 83–03.

So, we can start from this account and plausibly say that EIT is a descriptive thesis about the *continued existence* (i.e., persistence) of concrete temporal objects, which claims that such objects persist in existence barring any sufficiently destructive factors. It is important to keep in mind that because EIT is a *descriptive thesis*, it needs to be supplemented with a metaphysics if one is to utilize it in any way other than a mere assertion against the metaphysics of Aquinas, e.g., supplementing the thesis with an atomistic, or Schmidian–Lindorff metaphysics.[5] More concretely, EIT can be stated formally as such:

> *Existential Inertia Thesis (EIT)*: For each member O of some (proper or improper) subset of temporal concrete objects and for each time t such that O exists at some time t* earlier than t, (i) at t, O does not concurrently ontologically depend on the existence or activity of some concrete object O*, where O* is not a (proper or improper) part of O, and (ii) if O is not positively destroyed within the temporal interval [t*, t], then O exists at t.[6]

Take, for instance, a book in front of you. This book is a member of the subset of temporal and concrete objects and exists now at time *t*, and has existed prior to *t*, at what we will call *t**. EIT makes two claims about the book. First, at *t*, the book depends on nothing outside of it for its continued existence, its continued existence is self-contained in all that it has. Second, the book will continue to exist barring any sufficiently destructive force.

## 2.  The problem

Interestingly, such an account of persistence has been applied by both Schmid and others as an undercutting defeater in Thomistic natural theology. Specifically, it has been utilized to attack the First Way,[7] Second Way,[8] *De Ente* Proof,[9] and other various aspects of Aquinas's system.[10]

---

[5]Ibid., pp. 131–84.

[6]Ibid, pp. 83–85.

[7]Joe Schmid, 'Existential Inertia and the Aristotelian Proof', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 89 (2020), 201–20; Graham Oppy, 'On Stage One of Feser's "Aristotelian Proof"', *Religious Studies*, 57 (2021), 491–502. Recently McNabb (2024) has brought up EIT in the context of defending the 'Aristotelian Proof'. While my current article goes beyond McNabb's in being focused solely on EIT rather than the Aristotelian proof, two things are worth mentioning. First, McNabb does an excellent job in showing the relationship between EIT and the Aristotelian argumentation put forth in recent literature. Second, McNabb provides fruitful ground for future work by discussing two notions related to the EIT debate: (1) the specification of efficient causality and (2) the relationship between physical and metaphysical components of a substance. Engaging with these topics would take me far beyond the scope of the present article and into the territory of Aquinas's transformation of the efficient cause in Aristotle through the reception of Avicenna's *Metaphysics*, but see Gilson (1958) for a start, and *In I Sent.*, d. 37, q. 1, a. 1, *resp.* for an insightful use of Avicenna in the context of EIT related issues.

[8]Jordan Howard Sobel, *Logic and Theism* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 175–79.

[9]Schmid, *Existential Inertia and Classical Theistic Proofs*, pp. 236–52; Gaven Kerr, 'Existential Inertia and the Thomistic Way to God', in *Collected Articles on the Existence of God,* ed. by Gaven Kerr (London, EG: Editiones Scholasticae, 2022), pp. 77–96; Gaven Kerr, 'Aquinas's Argument for God in the *De Ente et Essentia*' in ibid., pp. 97–138.

[10]Schmid, *Existential Inertia and Classical Theistic Proofs*, pp. 265–364.

The basic intuition behind the family of objections can be grasped by thinking about causation. According to EIT, any existing thing *x* is created at some time *t* and continues to exist without any external influence (this would include any sustaining cause or participation in something external to *x*) or sufficiently destructive factors. *In other words, there just is no need to appeal to any external influence to explain the continued existence of x.* Broadly speaking then, EIT proponents pose an argument from Ockham's Razor:

(1) There is no need to multiply explanatory entities beyond necessity.
(2) (Because of EIT) Adducing God's causal power as an explanation of persistence is multiplying explanatory entities beyond necessity.
C: There is no need to adduce God's causal power in an explanation of persistence.

There are various ways of spelling out EIT and putting various twists on the basic syllogism above, but for the purpose of this article, the above analysis is sufficient. It is clear how one can start to see that EIT, if true, poses a devastating objection to Thomistic metaphysics and the doctrine of God: without the *need* for a sustaining cause, God's action in the world is much more difficult to prove, and as a result, creation becomes nothing more than God acting as some deistic prime mover that sets up the universe and leaves it alone to keep going. Hence Kerr's apt summary of the issue, (if EIT is true)

At most one could say that there is a first cause that passes on existence, but that existence once possessed simply remains in the thing until the thing loses it. Existing things then do not participate in existence for any moment that they exist, in which case they are not members of *per se* series.[11]

## 3. Aquinas's response

I now turn to one of Aquinas's responses to an account of persistence almost identical to EIT. In doing so, I will look briefly at a response to an objector in the *De Potentia Dei*. In the response, Aquinas provides a *negative* argument against EIT. In other words, he criticizes the thesis. But because criticizing opposing arguments is not sufficient to establish one's own position, I then look at Aquinas's remarks in his early *Commentary on the Sentences* and reconstruct a *positive* argument against EIT. (It is important to keep in mind this distinction between a negative and a positive argument in order to understand the various types of responses to EIT.)

### 3.1 The disputed questions on power

Surprisingly, Aquinas anticipates EIT and explicitly addresses it in at least one place. In the *De Potentia Dei*, Aquinas faces an objection very similar to those appearing in contemporary analytic philosophy. The objector states:

God is the efficient cause of things. But, the effect remains when the action of the efficient cause ceases. Thus, the builder ceases to act yet the house remains and

---

[11]Kerr, 'Existential Inertia and the Thomistic Way to God', p. 78.

the flame that generated the fire may cease to burn, yet the fire generated by it continues. Therefore, even if all of God's actions cease, creatures can continue to remain in existence.[12]

In response, Aquinas says:

These lower agents are the cause of a thing as to its becoming, but not as to its existence properly speaking. For God himself is the direct cause of existence; and thus the cases are not similar. Hence, Augustine says: *when a man is building a house and goes away, the building remains after he has ceased to work and gone: whereas the world could not stand for a blink of an eye if God withdrew his support*.[13]

Aquinas's response is a bit obscure. In response to the objector Aquinas seems to be pointing out that the objector is (1) giving an argument by comparison and (2) that the objector's argument fails because it assumes a faulty comparison from the way things are generated to the way that God generates (creates). The dialectic can be mapped out in a syllogism to see each person's moves more clearly. The objector seems to be reasoning along the lines of the following:

(1) The power of the efficient cause can be divorced from the effect after it is generated.
(2) God is the efficient cause.
C: Hence, His power can be divorced from the effect after it is generated.

Aquinas's response to this argument is that premise one assumes that *all* generation is of the same kind. But this is false since Aquinas's metaphysics of creation *demonstrated* the necessity for a mode of generation higher than mere change.[14] This higher mode of generation is creation. So, since premise one rests on a faulty assumption, the objector's argument seems to fail. In short, Aquinas is pointing out that God's way of generating differs from that of creatures, and because of that we cannot assume that the way that efficient causality works in the creaturely realm can be applied to how it works for God.

---

[12]*De Potentia*, q. 5, a. 1, obj., 4 (S. Thomas Aquinatis, *Quaestiones Disputatae, t. 2: Quaestiones disputatae de potentia*, ed. by P. M. Pession, 10th edn (Marietti, Taurini-Romae, 1965)): 'Deus est causa rerum sicut efficiens. Sed cessante actione causae efficientis, remanet effectus; sicut cessante actione aedificatoris, remanet domus, et cessante actione ignis generantis, adhuc remanet ignis generatus. Ergo et cessante omni Dei actione, adhuc possunt creaturae in esse remanere'. (All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.)

[13]*De Potentia*, q. 5, a. 1, ad 4: 'Dicendum, quod huiusmodi inferiora agentia sunt causa rerum quantum ad earum fieri, non quantum ad esse rerum per se loquendo. Deus autem per se est causa essendi: et ideo non est simile. Unde Augustinus dicit: *non enim sicut structuram cum fabricaverit quis abscedit, atque illo cessante et abscedente stat opus eius; ita mundus vel in ictu oculi stare poterit, se ei Deus regimen suum subtraxerit*'.

[14]*In II Sent.*, d. 2, q. 1, a. 2, *resp.*, '… not only does faith hold that there is creation but reason also demonstrates it'. See also *De Substantiis Separatis*, c. 8 where I think Aquinas is the most explicit in his corpus that creation as an 'ontological category' can, and is, proven through various arguments. This occurs in response to the Latin Averroists, who likely denied that 'creation' refers to anything in philosophical discourse. For them, in the domain of philosophy, there is only eternal motion.

Taken in isolation, Aquinas's response can seem a bit dissatisfying. At best, it seems that what he is doing is attempting to shift the onus of proof back to the objector to prove that efficient causality works the same for creatures and God. But this is not possible for the objector to do, since it seems that this would presuppose knowledge of the divine essence, which on Aquinas's own grounds one cannot know. Even if the onus of proof is shifted to the objector, and the objector cannot *prove* that his position works, it still does not follow that Aquinas's own position is correct. Without any positive argumentation, it seems that Aquinas's position does not rise to the level of knowledge, but simply opinion. In other words, to establish that God is concurrently acting, *and* that EIT is false, it does not suffice to simply knock down the objectors. Aquinas must also give reasons for holding his own position. To that, I now turn.

### 3.2 Esse*, essence, and EIT*

It seems that Aquinas gives *three* positive arguments for God's sustaining causal activity in various places throughout his corpus.[15] I will focus only on the argumentation from *esse*/essence composition.[16] For this, we turn to the commentary on the *Sentences*. Aquinas says,

> … in a thing that is said to be created, non-being is prior to being, not by a priority of time or duration, as if it first was not and afterward was, but by a priority of nature such that the created thing if left to itself, would come to non-being, since it has being only from the influence of a higher cause. For in each thing, what is naturally in it that it does not have from another is prior to what it does have from another.[17]

---

[15] The first line of reasoning he gives is an argument from the nature of efficient causality in *De Potentia*, q. 5, a. 1, *resp*. The second seems to be an argument from contingency and the principle of sufficient reason in *SCG*, II.30. Finally, Aquinas seems to argue from the composition of *esse* and essence in various places such as *De Potentia*, q.5, a.1 and *In II Sent.*, d. 1., q. 1, a. 2. It also seems that he argues from the nature of God's providential activity to the conclusion that God is a sustaining cause, but it is unclear as to whether such claims are not reducible to the other lines of argumentation mentioned above. One may wonder why the topic of God's sustaining causality is treated in relatively few places in Aquinas's corpus, especially since many of the modern critics of Aquinas mentioned above (n. 6) think that the failure to address something like EIT is a weak spot in Aquians's thought. I do not think this is a failure on the part of Aquinas. While I hope to address it more in the future, consider that Aquinas has *no* distinction between creation and conservation in his metaphysics. Once this is understood, talk of creation just becomes talk of conservation, as there is no real distinction between the terms (see Mancha Jr., 2004). The arguments for conservation then are identical to arguments for creation, and vice versa. With this in mind, 'conservation' and an anti-EIT metaphysics saturates Aquinas's work, including even his theological texts (see O'Neill, 2019).

[16] What is unclear, but would require a much larger project is the relationship between (1) Aquinas's modality and God's creative action (see McGinnis, 2012, esp. pp. 565–74 for a start) and (2) the relationship between causation, contingency, composition, and the real distinction. With regard to the latter, is a thing caused because it is contingent, and contingent because it is composite? At what level does the composition hit rock bottom, and is composition rock-bottom spelled out in terms of *esse* and essence, or in terms of something else, like being and nonbeing (cf. Wippel, 1985 and Zoll, 2022)?

[17] *In II Sent.*, d. 1, q. 1, a. 2, *resp.*, 'Secundum est, ut in re quae creari dicitur, prius sit non esse quam esse: non quidem prioritate temporis vel durationis, ut prius non fuerit et postmodum sit; sed prioritate naturae, ita quod res creata si sibi relinquatur, consequatur non esse, cum esse non habeat nisi ex influentia causae superioris. Prius enim unicuique inest naturaliter quod non ex alio habet, quam quod ab alio habet' (trans. Baldner & Carroll).

This argument is difficult to understand. In the immediate context, Aquinas is attempting to prove that creation and eternal movement are different. While interesting, I set this immediate dialectical context aside in order to concentrate on the essential insight that Thomas expresses here: *because a thing does not have esse in virtue of what it is, it would come to nonbeing if left to itself.* Before laying out the argument, I wish to stress that we must be very careful to read Aquinas's argument in line with his metaphysics as a whole[18] and resist the temptation to isolate the causal principles underlying the argument without recourse to his account of participation.[19]

### 3.3  The argument reformulated

It seems that the argument can be reformulated with close attention paid to the causal principles and Aquinas's broader metaphysics as a whole. I have formulated it as such and bracketed the justification for each premise for those unfamiliar with Thomas's broader metaphysical commitments:

(1)  Composite things do not have *esse* in virtue of what they are. (This is justified by the real distinction.)

(2)  If composite things do not have *esse* in virtue of what they are, then they must have it from another. (This is justified by principle of sufficient reason [PSR] since self-causation and bruteness are ruled out.)

(3)  A composite thing participates *esse* at all times. (This is justified by Aquinas's account of participation.)

(4)  A composite thing must have *esse* from another at all times. (This follows from (2) and (3) – if it cannot have it from anything but another, and it has it at all times, then it has it in terms of another at all times.)

(5)  Only God can be the cause of *esse*. (This is justified in *De Potentia Dei*.)

C: At all times God causes the *esse* of things.[20]

---

[18]I also wish to stress that one must not read into Aquinas's account of God's causation the notion of concurrence, where God and the creature cooperate fully in causing the same action. This is the view of Suarez, and as Baldner (2016) has cogently shown, not the view of Aquinas, who holds that the action of God's sustaining power takes place in an *entirely different causal order than that of the creature's power to move*. This seems to be one place where Oppy (2021) mistakenly goes wrong in his criticism.

[19]It seems to me that Schmid (2022) struggles to grasp the underlying account of how a thing participates *esse*, and for that reason fails to give a proper rendering of Aquinas's view. See Zoll (2022) for Aquinas's account of a thing's participation in its own *esse* (*esse commune*).

[20]I recognize that Schmid (2022, pp. 236–52) has laid out an interpretation of Aquinas's claims about *esse* and persistence and criticized them based on his engagement with Kerr's article on EIT (see n. 9 above). However, I think Schmid's interpretation suffers from problems, perhaps because he does not fully grasp Aquinas's broader metaphysics of *esse*. Also, his criticisms seem to be on the weaker side as I will presently show. First, his formulation of Aquinas's position makes no reference to God, which means that it does not establish that God sustains things in existence. This is rather important, as sustaining causality in Aquinas is *always* interconnected with the causality of God, and divorcing the two can easily lead to confusing Aquinas's views on creation with Bonaventure's (see Baldner, 1989, esp. pp. 225–27, and Baldner, 2016). Second Schmid sets up premises one and two of his argument in such a way that enables him to claim shortly thereafter that such premises are absurd. But no Thomist, and certainly not Aquinas himself, would agree to Schmid's formulation to begin with. Third, most, if not all, of Schmid's criticisms function as *moorean defeaters*, and simply beg the question against the very metaphysics that he is criticizing. I will address them briefly. Regarding the criticisms, he gives four. (1) In reference to a thing requiring *esse*

This formulation of the argument avoids the over-determination problem. In other words, the causal principles here do not over-determine the scope of the expected causality and restrict the causality only to *esse* and its causation. My reformulation of the causal principle to avoid the over-determination problem is *prima facie* plausible because the causation of *esse* is unlike any other type of causation that is experienced since it is the condition for the possibility of any causation at all.[21]

Each premise is defensible from within the broader schema of Thomas's metaphysics. Premise one seems to follow from the arguments for the real distinction between *esse* and essence. Premise two seems to follow from the PSR since that would rule out brute facts and self-causation. I take bruteness and self-causation to be the only other types of coming to be besides origination from something's nature or *ad extra*. Premise three seems to be justified on account of Aquinas's metaphysics of participation. Premise four is a deduction from premises two and three. Premise five is held on account of Aquinas's independent argumentation that only God has power over *esse*.[22] It seems then, that at the very least, this argument is rationally defensible

---

from another, Schmid's claim that 'to "have existence from something *ad extra*" is ambiguous' (p. 249) is simply false and showcases a misunderstanding of the position he criticizes. God's causality of *esse* is both *efficient* and *extrinsic exemplar* causality. And since God is the ultimate explanation of all that is, to say that creatures have *esse ad extra* (from God) is to say that God is *both* the cause and explanation of *esse*. I do not see what the problem with this is, and it certainly is not a criticism of the Thomist; at best it's a call to clarify what is meant by the Thomist's claim. (2) Looking at another one of Schmid's criticisms, he claims that there is a middle ground between the options of a creature having *esse* ad extra, and having it in virtue of what it is (pp. 248–49). In support of this, he adduces a thought experiment in which a divine entity whose essence and existence are distinct functions as the First principle of all reality. He then claims that this is a counter-example to the Thomist assumption that a thing can either (1) have *esse* in virtue of what it is or (2) have it *ad extra*. This is quite a strange assertion. Being composite, such a divine entity would necessitate an explanation and merely claiming that it is the ultimate explanation would seem to be a contradiction in terms. The very fact of its composition screams out for an explanation. A Thomist's response would be to say that 'an ultimate explanation of reality that is composite' is a contradiction in terms. Schmid has (1) failed to understand what the nature of theistic explanation is (see, for starters, *Phaedo* 95A4–102A9 and Gerson, 2021, esp. pp. 48–87), (2) deployed a red herring that does not function as a counter-example, (3) claimed that the mere logical possibility of something being the case is sufficient to discount the original claim, and (4) failed to rule out how such a hypothetical does not collapse into bruteness, self-causation, or logical impossibility – all of which the Thomsit denies from the outset. As for criticism (3), Schmid claims that his formulation of premises one and two in the Thomistic argument entails that nothing can exist in virtue of what it is, thereby contradicting the Thomist claims about God's *esse* being identical to his essence (pp. 246–47). But in doing so, it seems to me that Schmid explicitly lumps God into the category of creatures. Perhaps I have misunderstood him here, but I fail to see how he reaches his conclusion other than by assertion. Following this claim, Schmid then sets up a supposed dilemma for the De Ente argument in which he claims that proponents will fall into a catch-22 if they accept or reject the claim that in order for x to metaphysically explain y, x needs to be prior to y. This seems far-fetched, as Schmid here conflates the nature of creaturely explanation with the nature of the explanation of the First Principle. Finally, as for criticism (4), I mentioned above that Schmid's own formulation of the argument has enabled him to set up a criticism in which his rendition of premises one and two are labeled absurd (pp. 246–47). Would it be plausible, though, that they just need to be reformulated instead of rejected? No Thomist would accept premises that entail an absurdity from the outset, and a charitable interpretation of Aquinas would avoid such a dilemma in the setup of the argument.

[21]This claim simply follows *per se nota* from the concept that *esse* is the *actulitas* of all act. For anything *to be*, including for causation to be, it must be conditioned by *esse*.

[22]*De Potentia*, q. 3, a. 4, *resp.*

and provides good reason to reject EIT. Needless to say, three objections to the argument can be leveled. I will now lay out such objections and give a brief response to each of them, and I hope to be able to formulate a longer response in the future.

### 3.4 Objection one and counter-response

First, it might seem that the argument against EIT relies on the claim that some sort of causal disposition is added to things that do not exist, namely essences. That is to say, the word 'thing' in premise four refers to *an essence*, which receives *esse* from without. Essences without *esse* are nonexistent, however. In talking about essences throughout the argument, it seems that I am speaking of them as if they are things that have a causal disposition to not exist, or that they have some sort of *tendency* to go out of existence if left alone. And of course, since essences without *esse* do not exist, this way of talking would make no sense, as something that does not exist cannot have any causal dispositions or tendencies. There is both an ontological and a linguistic point to be made here. The ontological point is that the argument seems to attribute a disposition to a nonexisting thing, and the linguistic point is that speaking of essences without *esse* is extremely difficult to do, since doing so seems to require speaking about nonbeing.

How could the Thomist stave off this objection? Two routes are open to diffuse it. (1) The idea that a causal disposition is being adduced to an essence can be rejected. And (2), one may affirm that such an idea is plausible. I opt for the former since the attribution of a causal disposition would seem to require an underlying substrate in which the disposition inheres; but this cannot be the case, for essences without *esse* do not exist. Taking the first option, then, one is not adducing a causal disposition to essence. What is being said is *not* that there *exists* some *x*, such that it has a causal disposition to go out of existence if left to itself. This is because the essence does not exist apart from its *esse*, and as nonexistent, it cannot be the case that a causal disposition is added to it. The essence just is nothing *sans* being actualized by *esse*. Instead, since it has *esse* at all times from a principle *ad extra*, then at all times it requires such actualization to exist. At any time essences exist, they exist in tandem with *esse*, i.e., as being actualized by, *esse*,[23] and so the objections do not seem to get off the ground.[24]

---

[23]My response relies on the assumption that *a real distinction does not entail separability*. If it did, then essences would be able to exist apart from *esse*, leading to the objection (cf. Feser, 2014, esp. pp. 72–79 and pp. 246–56, and Klima, 2013).

[24]A further response to my counter-response could be that Aquinas's counterfactual conditional that 'essences, if left to themselves, would cease to exist', simply makes no sense as it refers to nonbeing. As a result, Aquinas has no warrant to make any claims about essences. This is a difficult objection, but I think that going back to the text is helpful (see n. 15 above). Aquinas does not talk of essences in this manner. He speaks in terms of *res creata*, meaning the created thing, or the entire existing substance. The *res creata* is an existing thing, and so Aquinas can coherently speak of it. It could, however, be plausible to respond further by saying that Aquinas's use of the *res creata* cannot account for our ability to speak of nonexisting essences, such as those of a Phoenix. At this point, the debate will reach the deep waters of medieval philosophy in attempting how a semantics can adequately account for the speaking of nonexisting essences. It seems to me that Aquinas has the resources to respond to such a challenge. One such way to respond is to say that while essences do not exist without *esse*, one can still speak of nonexisting essences because they are not total nonbeing, but relative nonbeing as related to the divine ideas in the exemplar cause, i.e., God. This brings the argument into the realm of exemplar causality, divine simplicity,

### 3.5  Objection two and counter-response

A second objection is that the argument commits some sort of equivocation fallacy by referring to two different things: essence$_1$ and essence$_2$. The former is used to designate essence *sans* actualization by *esse*, while the latter is used to designate essence simultaneous with, and posterior to its actualization by *esse*. To see why it seems that there are two types of essences being referred to, consider that essence is discussed in two ways in the argument: as actualized with *esse* and as not. It would seem that this would suffice to invoke Leibniz's Law of the Indiscernibility of Identicals (IoI). IoI states that $x = y \rightarrow \forall F(Fx \leftrightarrow Fy)$. In other words, for the domain of two objects $x$ and $y$, if $x$ is identical to $y$, then for all properties F, $x$ possesses F if and only if $y$ possesses F. Since essence$_2$ has the property F of *esse*, but essence$_1$ does not have property F, the two are not identical with each other. Because the argument treats the two as identical to each other, it thus commits an equivocation rendering it invalid.

In other words, the argument seems to refer to two different things (essence$_1$ and essence$_2$) under the same term – essence – thus committing an equivocation fallacy and rendering it logically invalid.

This objection, however, can be responded to by (1) questioning the scope or formulation of IoI or (2) denying that essence is not being equivocated on here. Consider first, that it is questionable whether IoI would apply in this case. The objection from IoI seems to assume that essence$_1$ and essence$_2$ are being differentiated by a property. *Esse* is not a property of things but the actuality (*actulitias*) of all acts.[25] Because *esse* is not a property, it seems that it would not fall under the purview of IoI. I admit however, this is only a *prima facie* response, as much more work would be needed to spell out what this means. Needless to say, it is an open route.

With regard to (2), it would seem that the argument does not explicitly speak of essence without *esse* and with *esse* – that essence$_1$ and essence$_2$ are never explicitly mentioned. In spelling out how the argument refers to essence$_1$ and essence$_2$, the objector may point out that premises one and two refer to essence without *esse*, and premises three and four refer to essence with *esse*. But this seems to be untrue because it trades on a misapplication of what an essence is for the Thomist. Instead, all of the premises one through four refer to a *substance*, not an essence. Hence, there is no equivocation going on in the argument.

### 3.6  An important historical and exegetical note

Interestingly, this second objection has deep precedent in the 20th-century Thomistic commentarial tradition, though it is not formulated as an analytic-styled objection but an exegetical problem in Aquinas's writings, which is perhaps the reason that it has been missed in the contemporary discussion of EIT. It is worth briefly summarizing the exegetical issue and solution since it could help to elucidate the avenue by which I push my response. Joseph Owens points out that a real issue facing Aquinas,

---

and the relationship of those to predication. I am preparing a future article on this topic, but for now see Wippel (1984) for a start at investigating essences without *esse* and their relationship to God's exemplar causality.

[25]*De Potentia*, q. 7, a. 2, ad 9: 'Unde patet quod hoc quod dico esse est actualitas omnium actuum, et propter hoc est perfectio omnium perfectionum'.

and philosophy as a whole, is how to conceptualize *existence* and speak about it, since *esse* considered in itself does not have an essence and thus does not seem like it can be grasped.[26] And Wippel has pointed out the difficulty in thinking about essence *sans esse*, since there is no room in Aquinas's thought for any preexisting essences prior to their actualization.[27] In short, 20th-century commentators on Aquinas have noted the difficulty in conceptualizing *esse* and essence.

A very brief summary of the exegetical solution will have to suffice. One must understand that *esse* and essence are *never* reified principles but co-principles in a thing. In other words, *esse sans* essence and *vice versa* do not exist.[28] Because the principles only exist in things as constituting their whole substance, and as the deepest level of composition in a thing, our knowledge of the principles comes through knowledge of things, but in a specific way, that is, first through the cognitive action of *judgment* and then secondly through the grasp of a thing's essence. Owens says, 'What things are is known through conceptualization. That they exist is known through a different activity technically called judgment'.[29] *Esse*, then, is known through the cognitive faculty of *judgment*, rather than intellection. Further, *esse* is grasped (through the intellectual activity of judgment) only *in* the thing that it constitutes and never as a reified principle.

The difficulty of objection three has its roots in the 20th-century exegetical debates of Aquinas and is tackled through a deepened inquiry into the Thomistic conception of human cognition.[30] We can see how my response in the preceding section was to deny that there are *two types of essence* and explain that premises one through four of the argument refer to *substances* and not reified principles. My response seems to parallel the exegetical solution of Owens and Gilson in which it is stressed that *esse* and essence are never grasped by the intellect alone, since they never exist alone.

### 3.7 Objection three and counter-response

A third objection comes from the nature of the real distinction itself. It would appear to be the case that *esse* and essence are *either* (1) logically distinct or (2) *really* distinct. The Thomist opts for the latter, while critics of Thomistic existentialism usually opt for the former. But, it seems that there may be a third option available. Perhaps it is the case that the justification for the real distinction has failed to rule out the alternative that the real distinction *changes* once a thing becomes actualized – that *esse* and essence are

---

[26]Joseph Owens, *An Interpretation of Existence* (Milwaukee, WI: Bruce Publishing, 1968), pp. 14–24.

[27]John Wippel, 'Thomas Aquinas, Henry of Ghent, and Godfrey of Fontaines on the Reality of Nonexisting Possibles', in *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas*, ed. by John Wippel (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1984), pp. 163–89.

[28]God is a special case in which *esse* and essence are identical, cf. *ST* I, q. 3, a. 4.

[29]Joseph Owens, *An Interpretation of Existence*, p. 24. Owens notes just a few pages later the radical nature of this solution to what he designates the problem of existence, 'But the genetic leap to judgment as a distinct synthesizing cognition that apprehends an existential synthesizing in the thing appears for the first time in Aquinas. It ushers in a profoundly new metaphysical starting point'.

[30]Hence Étienne Gilson can say in the final chapter of *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto, CA: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1949), 'A critical examination of the data provided by the history of philosophy leads to the conclusion that "to be" does not contradict being, since it is the cause of being, and that judgments do not contradict concepts, since all judgments are finally rooted in the existential act of what first falls under the apprehension of understanding, that is, being'.

really distinct before (*sans*) creation of a substance but only logically distinct after the creation of a substance. Because *esse* and essence are not really distinct after creation, *esse* just is included *within* essence: *what* a thing is includes its existence (*esse*). This amounts to a denial of premise one in the argument. Intuitively, it can be summed up by saying that a thing receives existence and 'holds it' without any external aid.

It *could* seem that this just amounts to a denial of the real distinction, but it seems to me that the criticism cuts a bit deeper. Rather than flat-out denying the real distinction, the objection denies that it holds universally. The question here is whether or not the arguments from the real distinction prove that the distinction holds at all times *and* in all things – ruling out the possibility that *esse* could be subsumed into *essence* post-creation of the substance.

This is a bit abstract. Phrasing it differently could help. A denial of the real distinction is what enables one to get out of the argument against EIT, since premise one would fail. In doing so, one denies that essence and *esse* are really distinct at all times and instead says that once a thing is actualized, the *esse* comes under the essence of what it is, and they are no longer really distinct but only logically so. Because they are no longer distinct, they no longer need a cause *ad extra*, and thus no longer need God's causality acting on them. This objection seeks to push the claim that the Thomistic real distinction is underdeveloped. It grants that there is a real distinction between *esse* and essence in the logical order and *sans* creation. But, once created, a thing's *esse* is subsumed into the thing's *essence*, and the real distinction no longer holds.

This objection is plausible at first glance, but what does it really amount to? Putting it in concrete terms is crucial. The objection claims that the real distinction does not hold in the real order (after the creation of a substance) since *esse* is brought under the concept of *essence* once a thing is actualized. For instance, Fido, once actualized, is no longer a composite of *esse* and essence, but just is *essence* with *esse* subsumed under it. But, under further analysis, this does not seem to make sense. For starters, *esse* just is what makes *essence* possible; and as being the condition for the possibility of *essence, esse must be distinct from it at all times*. At all times, *esse* is functioning at the condition for the possibility of essence, and thus as the very condition for an essence being able to be actualized at all. Since this is a relevant difference operative at all times, it seems to be sufficient to establish that *esse* and essence must be really distinct at all times.

This response can be further detailed. The objection seems to make some crucial assumptions that Aquinas would disagree with: it seems to assume (1) a 'thick' theory of essences, whereby essences without *esse* have *some* sort of ontological status, and (2) that essences and *esse* are *separable*. Aquinas's metaphysics would not allow for these two assumptions.[31] For Aquinas, the components of a substance, e.g., *esse* and essence, are *really distinct* but not separable; they are co-principles or constitutive elements of a thing. To understand this point, it is helpful to consider the concept of a

---

[31] Compare, for example, the view of Henry of Ghent, who distinguished between *esse essentiae and esse existentiae*. Aquinas explicitly does not hold to such a view, as essences *are not* until actualized by *esse*. See Gilson (1949), esp. pp. 74–79, for a general overview of this idea, and Wippel (1984) for a close look at Ghent compared to Aquinas. For the view that the real distinction does not entail separability see n. 23 above.

suppositum. A suppositum is an individual, which includes all of its own parts.[32] Within a suppositum, there are constituent elements that are really distinct, but not separable, and at the most fundamental level, the suppositum is a composite of *esse* and essence. It is important not to confuse essence here with an abstract nature or universal in the modern sense. As Aquinas makes explicit, an essence of a thing is *that which is signified by the definition of a thing*, i.e., all that a thing is without *esse*.[33] When a suppositum is created, *esse* does not 'fill in an essence', as one would fill a preexistent mold, but simultaneously actualizes the entirety of the suppositum's essence, thereby giving rise to all that the definition (essence) includes, and thus the suppositum itself. *Esse*'s actualization of the essence and thus the entire suppositum occurs at all times the suppositum exists. Since *esse* is the principle making the essence and the suppositum to be at all times, *esse* cannot simply be subsumed into the essence as the objection claims but must be distinct from essence. So, it would seem that the objection does not work.

## 4. Conclusion

I have sought to show that Aquinas's metaphysical commitments – especially his account of *esse* – can diffuse the objections stemming from contemporary discourse on EIT. From the real distinction of *esse* and essence in created things, it follows that such things do not have *esse* in virtue of what they are but receive it from another. Since they have *esse* at all times, they must receive it from another at all times. Since the only 'thing' that can give *esse* is God, it follows that at all times God gives created reality *esse*, albeit it *esse* of a different kind than God himself (*ipsum esse*). If successful, this argument does not demonstrate *how* God's causality works on creatures, only *that it does*, and specifically that God's causality is active at every moment anything exists causing the thing to *be*.[34]

---

[32]*Compendium Theologiae*, I.211; *De Unione Verbi, Incarnati* a. 2, *resp*.; J. L. A. West, 'The Real Distinction Between Supposit and Nature', in *Wisdom's Apprentice: Thomistic Essays in Honor of Lawrence Dewan, O.P.*, ed. by Peter Kwasniewski and Lawrence Dewan (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), pp. 85–106, esp. pp. 93–95.

[33]*De Ente et Essentia*, c. 2., 'Ex his enim quae dicta sunt patet quod essentia est illud quod per diffinitionem rei significatur; diffinitio autem substantiarum naturalium non tantum formam continet sed etiam materiam, aliter enim diffinitiones naturales et mathematicae non differrent … Patet ergo quod essentia comprehendit et materiam et formam'.

[34]I would like to thank two anonymous referees for their very helpful suggestions and my parents for continuing to encourage me to seek the truth.