
Gilson vs. Maritain: The Start of Thomistic Metaphysics

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My focus is two articles written by Jacques Maritain and Étienne Gilson late in their lives. Maritain's article, entitled "Réflexions sur la nature blessée et sur l'intuition de l'être," was the first to appear. It was published in the 1963 volume of *Revue Thomiste*.¹ In the section devoted to the intuition of being, Maritain depicts Gilson to be a proponent of the intuition of being.² Taking umbrage at Maritain's portrayal, Gilson presented his reflections on the intuition of being in his 1974 article, "Propos sur l'être et sa notion," published by *Studi Tomistici* in the volume *San Tommaso e il pensiero moderno*.

Though these articles raise many topics, I probe them from one angle only, namely, for their insights on how to start Thomistic metaphysics. I contend that Maritain and Gilson disagree on this topic and that Gilson's position possesses the advantage both Thomistically and philosophically.

Since both Frenchmen strive to be faithful to Aquinas and since for Aquinas metaphysics is a science distinct from others by its subject matter, I would like to set the stage with a brief sketch of Aquinas's description of the subject of metaphysics. Aquinas variously expresses the subject of metaphysics. Formulae include: *ens commune*, *ens qua ens*, and *ens inquantum ens*. Aquinas is on record as describing the subject of metaphysics in terms of its separateness from matter.

However, even though the subject of this science [metaphysics] is being-in-general [*ens commune*], the whole science is said to concern what is separate from matter both in existence and in thought. For not only are those things called separate in existence and thought that can never exist in matter, like God and the intellectual substances, but also those that can be without matter, such as being-in-general.³

1. The article also reappeared in Maritain's *Approches sans entraves* (Paris: Fayard, 1973).

2. Maritain, "Réflexions sur la nature blessée et sur l'intuition de l'être," *Revue Thomiste* 68 (1968): 18.

3. *In Meta.*, Proem; translated by Armand Maurer, *The Division and Methods of the Sciences* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1963), p. 89.

Also:

for something can exist separate from matter and motion . . . because by its nature it does not exist in matter and motion; but it can exist without them, though we sometimes find it with them. In this way being [*ens*], substance, potency, and act are separate from matter and motion, because they do not depend on them for their existence, unlike the objects of mathematics, which can only exist in matter. Thus philosophical theology [also called metaphysics] investigates beings separate in [this] second sense as its subjects.⁴

Most generally speaking, metaphysics deals with what is separate from matter both in existence and in thought. The meaning of this formula is clear from its subdivision. On the one hand, the separate refers to what is never a body. The examples are God and the angels. In short, this first sense refers to spiritual realities. On the other hand, the separate refers to what can be apart from matter as well as in matter. Examples include *ens commune* and substance. An indication of this second kind of separateness is offered by this text:

We say that being and substance are separate from matter and motion not because it is of their nature to be without them, as it is of the nature of ass to be without reason, but because it is not of their nature to be in matter and motion, although sometimes they are in matter and motion as animal abstracts from reason, although some animals are rational.⁵

While the first sense of separate refers to spiritual realities, the second sense refers to intelligibilities. As intelligibilities they can be compared to animal. Animal is an intelligibility common to Tom, Dick, and Harry, Fido, Flicker, and Flossy. What distinguishes the intelligible objects of being, substance, etc., from others is their range. These notions are realized in sensible things, though they need not be.

Items separate in this second sense constitute the subject of metaphysics. In fact, one among them, *ens commune* or *ens in quantum ens*, is most used to refer to the subject of metaphysics. Hence, the separateness of *ens* is the reason for calling the science “metaphysics”:

It is called *metaphysics* because it considers being [*ens*] and its attendant properties; for these objects that go beyond physics are discovered by a process of analysis as the more universal is discovered after the less universal.⁶

4. *In de Trin.* V, 4c; Maurer, *Division and Methods*, p. 45.

5. *In de Trin.* V, 4, ad 5m; Maurer, *Division and Methods*, pp. 48-49.

6. *In Meta.*, Proem; Maurer, *Division and Methods*, p. 89.

Throughout this article and with a proviso, I utilize the word “immateriality” to designate the separateness from matter found in *ens*. The proviso is that “immateriality” should not be taken to mean that the concept of *ens* is realized only in spiritual things. As open to realization both in bodies and spirits, *ens* is neither material nor immaterial. Used in its regard, “immaterial” merely focuses attention upon the ability of the concept to be realized apart from matter.

Finally, if metaphysics treats of items separate in the first sense, it is only as causes of its subject matter:

There is one [kind of theology] that treats of divine things not as the subject of the science but as the principles of the subject. This is the kind of theology pursued by the philosophers and that is also called metaphysics.⁷

Besides immateriality, the subject of metaphysics is marked by composition. It is a composite commonality. At *Summa Contra Gentiles* II, 54, Aquinas remarks:

It is therefore clear that composition of act and potentiality has greater extension than that of form and matter. Thus, matter and form divide natural substance, while potentiality and act divide common being [*ens commune*]. Accordingly, whatever follows upon potentiality and act, as such, is common to both material and immaterial created substances, as *to receive* and *to be received*, *to perfect* and *to be perfected*. Yet all that is proper to matter and form, as such, as *to be generated* and *to be corrupted*, and the like, are proper to material substances, and in no way belong to immaterial created substances.⁸

The potency-act composition has a greater extension than the matter-form composition. The matter-form composition ranges only through material substances. The potency-act composition extends to immaterial created substances as well. Furthermore, the potency-act composition divides common being. Hence, the *ens commune* mentioned here is the same *ens commune* elsewhere characterized as the subject of metaphysics. Only now a further wrinkle is mentioned. The notion is composite. It harbors a potential and an actual element.

Earlier in the chapter, Aquinas identifies these elements.

there is in [intellectual and immaterial] substances but one composition of act and potentiality, namely, the composition of substance and being

7. *In de Trin.* V, 4c; Maurer, *Division and Methods*, p. 44.

8. *Summa Contra Gentiles* II, trans. James F. Anderson (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), p. 158.

[*substantia et esse*], which by some is said to be of that which is [*quod est*] and being [*esse*], or of that which is and that by which a thing is.

On other hand, in substances composed of matter and form there is a twofold composition of act and potentiality: the first, of the substance itself which is composed of matter and form; the second, of the substance thus composed, and being; and this composition also can be said to be of *that which is* and being, or of *that which is* and that by which a thing is.⁹

The potency-act composition common to both material and immaterial things is the substance-being (*esse*) composition. Substance and being are intelligibilities that in turn comprise another intelligibility—that of *ens commune* itself. In this text, the immateriality of *ens* lies especially in its *substantia* component. *Ens* is immaterial because *substantia* can be realized as a matter-form composition or as a form itself subsisting. In either case, however, *substantia* is still composed with *esse*.

From these texts, then, Aquinas portrays *ens commune* not only as an immaterial commonality but also as a composite commonality. *Ens commune* is (1) a commonality able to be realized apart from matter as well as within matter and (2) a commonality composed of two principles, substance and *esse*. In what follows I will refer to *ens commune* in the first respect as the immaterial sense of *ens* and to *ens commune* in the second respect as the *habens esse* sense of *ens*.

II

With this background I turn first to Maritain. In the portion of his article devoted to the intuition of being, Maritain affirms as the *sine qua non* for conducting metaphysics the attainment of the third degree of abstraction. In my own terminology, for metaphysics we must at least have grasped the immaterial sense of *ens*. For Maritain, all metaphysicians, even non-Thomistic ones, are metaphysicians because they at least do this much.¹⁰ Hence, Aristotle, in whom the intuition of being is only virtual, does succeed in bringing his notion of being beyond the meaning of presence in the physical world. What distinguishes the Thomistic metaphysician is that he reaches the third degree of abstraction in and through the power of the intuition of being (*esse*). Maritain explains it this way:

With [the intuition of *esse*] we leave the realm of simple apprehension in order to enter that of judgment. For there is a typical character absolutely

9. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

10. Maritain, "Réflexions," p. 31.

and uniquely proper to this intuition. It is produced in and by an affirmative judgment of existing: "I exist," "Things exist"; but this judgment is not like others, in which a subject with a certain essence is linked by the copula "is" to some attribute or predicate known in the way of an idea issuing from the abstractive operation. On the contrary, in the unique case of which I speak, that of the intellectual intuition of being, the idea or concept of existence does not precede the judgment of existence. It comes after it and comes forth from it. In this case we have a judicative act (the second operation of the mind) which is of another type than all other judgments.

In effect, it does not apply an attribute to a subject. It is the subject itself which it affirms or poses in the mind in the manner in which the subject is outside the mind, in extra-mental reality. And to conduct this judicative act correctly is for the intelligence to know intuitively, or to see, in the bosom of the spiritual intimacy of its proper operation, the extra-mental being, the existing, the *esse*, of this subject. Here is the intuition of being. By it I plunge into the realm of the existing, while escaping from the realm of essences and their relations.

It is after this that a return of the first operation of the mind upon that which had been seen (but not by it) will produce for it an idea, a concept or mental word which will designate it and which will be handy for discourse. What we will then possess will be the idea (of a judicative origin and consecutive to the intuition of being) of the *esse* known as such or of the existing exercised in act outside of the mind (as when I say, for example, "the soul communicates to the body its proper existence or its proper *esse*").

In other words, in the (unique) case of the intuition of being, the concept, this concept of the *esse*, formed after I have *seen* it, is *second* in respect to the judgment of existence where and in which, while pronouncing existence in itself, my intelligence has seen the *esse*. This concept is owing to a reflective return of simple apprehension upon the judicative act in question.¹¹

The nature of this second concept of *esse* is described this way.

On the contrary, when it is a question of the second concept of existence, that which proceeds from the intuition of being, we are in the register of *Sein*, which goes with the third degree of intelligibility. The assertion of the existence is not then a copulative assertion, but a properly existential one, the assertion of the existing. The being is then known as such, in its proper light, which is the revelation of the extramental existing made to the mind in the mind. It is no longer taken in its relation to the sensible world; it is taken absolutely, in its limitless and intrinsically differentiated universality which embraces all that which is (and is in a manner irreducibly varied).¹²

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

Thanks to this second concept of existence, as it captures what is known in judgment, our conceptualization of *ens* itself attains the third degree of abstraction. For the concept of existence is the keynote in the concept of *ens*. Maritain says:

It appears to me important to remark, moreover, that what I have said of the existence, it is also necessary to say of the existent (*l'existant*) or the being (*l'étant*). Today it is fashionable to oppose the being (*l'étant*) to the existence (*l'être*); this is a mistake. A being or an existent is quite evidently a subject that exists or possesses existence.

There are, then, two different senses of the word *ens* or being (*étant*). In the first sense, the word refers to *Dasein* and to the plane of the first degree of abstraction. . . . In the second sense, the word *ens* or being refers to *Sein* and to the plane of the third degree or intelligibility.¹³

In sum, Maritain squarely rests the attainment of the subject of Thomistic metaphysics upon a heightened judgmental appreciation of the *esses* of sensible things. Such an appreciation enables the mind to frame an analogous concept of *esse* that outstrips the material and sensible order. Since the meaning of *ens* is that which has *esse*, then it too attains its immateriality thanks to the mentioned analogous concept of *esse*. In this fashion Maritain accounts for both the immateriality and essence-existence components in the subject matter of Thomistic metaphysics, namely, *ens commune*. Noteworthy is that Maritain employs the phrase “intuition of being” to designate only the judgmental grasp of the *esse* of a sensible thing. The subsequent conceptualizations of both *esse* and *ens* are not instances of what is meant by the intuition of being.

III

For the most part this final position on how to attain the subject of Thomistic metaphysics echoes what Maritain said earlier. In his *Degrees of Knowledge* (1932), he wrote:

The metaphysical transsensible [e.g., *ens*], since it is transcendental and polyvalent (analogous), is not only free from matter in its notion and definition but can also exist without it. That is why the order to existence is embowelled in the objects of metaphysics. If . . . metaphysics descends to the actual existence of things in time, and rises to the actual existence of things outside time, it is not only because actual existence is the sign *par excellence* of the intrinsic possibility of existence.¹⁴

13. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

14. *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), p. 218.

Something about the actual existence of sensible things indicates that existence need not be confined to those things. The intrinsic possibility of existence is manifested in the actual existence of sensible things. Built upon existence, the notion of *ens* manifests a freedom from matter.

The approach to metaphysical *ens* through the *esse* of sensible things is used again in *Existence and the Existent* (1947). After insisting that the concept of existence (*esse*) cannot be cut off from the concept of being (*ens*, that-which-is, that-which-exists, that whose act is to exist), Maritain says:

When, moving on to the queen-science, metaphysics, . . . the intellect disengages being from the knowledge of the sensible in which it is emersed, in order to make it the object or rather the subject of metaphysics, when, in a word, it conceptualizes the metaphysical intuition of being . . . what the intellect releases into that same light is, here again, first and foremost, the act of existing.¹⁵

Something about the existence of a sensible thing informs the intellect that to have existence is not necessarily to be a body. To have the intuition of *ens* is to have the intuition of *esse*. The insight into the immateriality of *ens* is rooted in an insight into the intelligibility of *esse*.

In one respect, however, the earlier positions differ from the last. In the earlier accounts the “intuition of being” sometimes refers, not to the judgmental grasp of *esse* but to the grasp of *ens*. Examples of passages in this vein are as follows. In his *Preface to Metaphysics*, Maritain specifies the true subject of metaphysics as *ens secundum quod est ens* (*l'être en tant qu'être*). He then remarks:

The being which is the subject matter of metaphysics, being as such [*l'être objet du métaphysicien, l'être en tant qu'être*] . . . is real being in all the purity and fullness of its distinctive intelligibility—or mystery. Objects, all objects, murmur this being; they utter it to the intellect, but not to all intellects, only to those capable of hearing. . . . Being is then seen in its distinctive properties, as transobjectively subsistent, autonomous, and essentially diversified. For the intuition of being is also the intuition of its

15. *Existence and the Existent*, trans. Lewis Galantieri and Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), p. 26. Also, “It is being, attained or perceived at the summit of an abstractive intellection, of an eidetic or intensive visualisation which owes its purity and power of illumination only to the fact that the intellect, one day, was stirred to its depths and trans-illuminated by the impact of the act of existing apprehended in things, and because it was quickened to the point of receiving this act, or hearkening to it, within itself, in the intelligible and super-intelligible integrity of tone peculiar to it” (*ibid.*, p. 20).

transcendental character and analogical value. It is not enough to employ the word being, to say "being." We must have the intuition, the intellectual perception of the inexhaustible and incomprehensible reality thus manifested as the object of this perception. It is this intuition that makes the metaphysician.¹⁶

Maritain repeats the point in a discussion of the "metaphysical intelligible" from *The Degrees of Knowledge*. Maritain is discussing the intelligible object predicated in saying, "Peter is a being." The general lines of the discussion follow Aquinas's analysis of *ens* at *De Veritate* I, lc. At one point Maritain remarks:

There is, therefore, an intellectual perception of being [*une perception intellectuelle de l'être*] which, being involved in every act of our intelligence, in fact rules all our thought from the beginning. And when this is disengaged from itself by the abstraction of the transsensible, it constitutes our primordial philosophical intuition [*notre intuition philosophique primordiale*] without which we can no more acquire the science of metaphysical realities than a man born blind acquires the science of colors.¹⁷

Here the intellectual perception of being is the philosophical intuition of *ens*.

Finally, Maritain continues to emphasize this meaning of the intuition of being in his *Existence and the Existent*. He writes:

A philosopher is not a philosopher if he is not a metaphysician. And it is the intuition of being [*l'intuition de l'être*] . . . that makes the metaphysician. I mean the intuition of being in its pure and all-pervasive properties, in its typical and primordial intelligible density; the intuition of being *secundum quod est ens* [*l'intuition de l'être secundum quod est ens*].¹⁸

As the last line makes evident, Maritain again is using "être" in the sense of *ens*.

In sum, in his earlier accounts of the approach to metaphysics, Maritain employs the intuition of being terminology with a twofold ambiguity. The terminology refers both to the judgmental grasp of the *esse* of sensible things and to the conceptualization of the immaterial sense of *ens*. In his last *Revue Thomiste* account, Maritain forsakes this ambiguity and precisely limits the phraseology to judgment's grasp of *esse*. Though Maritain's second sense of the intuition of being involves

16. *A Preface to Metaphysics* (New York: Mentor Omega Books, 1962), p. 49.

17. *Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 215.

18. *Existence and the Existent*, p. 19.

a conceptualization of judgmentally grasped *esse*, as far as I know, Maritain never calls this conceptualizing a third sense of the intuition of being. Yet, since it is the crucial element for the grasp of *ens qua ens*—the second sense of the intuition of being—it may not be too inappropriate for someone to refer to it also as an intuition of being.

The above precisions are important to make before turning to Gilson. For although Gilson is responding to an article in which Maritain is speaking of the intuition of being's first sense, Gilson criticizes no such thing. What Gilson targets as the intuition of being has more to do with Maritain's second sense as that involves the conceptualization of *esse*. To a reader Gilson's equivocating is undoubtedly disturbing. Yet it perhaps has some excuse in Maritain's own loose use of terminology. More importantly, however, Gilson's terminological incongruence with Maritain's last article indicates no philosophical failure to understand Maritain and to deliver a fatal criticism.

IV

As mentioned, Gilson in his article took umbrage at Maritain's portrayal of Gilson as a proponent of the intuition of being.¹⁹ Gilson's various criticisms of the intuition of being are as follows.

What is the existence (*l'être* meaning *esse*) of the existent (*l'étant*). It is not itself a being (*un être*). As such the existence of the existent does not exist. It does not have some proper existence apart from that of the substance which it makes an existent. The substance exists only by the existence, but the existence exists only in the substance and as the existence of this existent. This is even why one could not have the intuitive intellection of the existence of an existent (*d'intellection intuitive de l'être d'un étant*), because the existence is perceptible to us only in the sensible perception of the substance which it actualizes. From the act of perceiving such or such an existent, we are able to abstract the abstract notion of existence, this common and universal existence attributable to all that which exists; but the existence proper to each existent is known to us only as a cause imminent to that which it makes exist. The only *esse* perceptible in itself and as such is God, because "God is *esse* itself" (C.G. I, 22; I, 33); "the *esse* of God is his substance" (C.G. II, 52, 7); "the quiddity of God is his being itself" (C.G. I, 25, 5). No existent is such that its quiddity is its existence; it is not then necessary to take the sensible intuition of the existent for an intellectual intuition of its existence.²⁰

19. Gilson, "Propos sur l'être et sa notion," *San Tommaso e il pensiero moderno*, ed. Antonio Piolanti (Città Nuova: Pontificia Accademia Romana de S. Tommaso d'Aquino, 1974), p. 8.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Also,

Consequently, we apprehend existence only as the existence-of-such-an-existent, which is for us an object of sensible intuition; we never apprehend existence in itself and apart in its proper quality of existence. It is necessary to return to this text: "it is not properly said that *esse* exists but that through *esse* something exists" (*De div. nom. Pera*, 751). One has the intuition of things that exist in virtue of their *esse*, one could not have an intuition of an act of existence which itself does not exist.

One is able to distinguish as many degrees of abstraction as one wishes; nothing will make our apprehension of existence not be an abstraction of the intellect taken from the sensible. . . . We see the actual existence only in the effect in which it manifests itself, which is the existent sensibly perceived and intellectually known. If the existence were perceptible in itself, as it is in the case of God and only thus, it would indeed be an object of intellectual intuition. This is not a question of degrees of abstraction if it is not that. The very nature of the human intellect is the cause: the human intellect "does not think without an image," and since there is not some image of existence insofar as existence, which is a pure intelligible, the intellectual intuition is refused here below to minds that are most skilled in metaphysical meditation.²¹

Then,

Would we betray this thought ["and just as God's substance is unknown, so too his *esse*" (*De Pot.* 7, 2, ad 1m)] by simply saying: the *esse* of God is unknown? This is, however, the immediate and inevitable consequence of the fact that we do not have the intuition of *esse*; for since God is *esse* itself in its purity, he necessarily escapes our view.²²

In explaining this unknowableness of God, Gilson remarks:

it is based on the primitive fact that existence (*l'être*), the immanent formal cause of the existent (*l'étant*), is conceivable to us only in its effect.²³

. . . the intellect is not able to represent to itself the quiddity of the act of *esse* except under the form of the existent that it causes to exist.²⁴

A final critical text is:

The intellectual intuition of *esse* as such would be an intuition of a pure intelligible; in the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, this intuition is refused

21. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

to us as inconceivable with the present human condition: "the soul understands nothing without a phantasm," said Aristotle; Aquinas comments: "It is impossible that our intellect, according to the state of the present life in which we are joined to a passible body, understand something in act, except by turning itself to the phantasm." (S.T. I, 84, 7) The rule is founded on nature, it then allows no exception.²⁵

What is Gilson saying? The key to answering that question is a grasp of what Gilson criticizes as the intuition of being. Gilson's target is not what Maritain's *Revue Thomiste* article calls the intuition of being. Undoubtedly, since Gilson is explicitly responding to Maritain's article, the reader would at first think otherwise. Nevertheless, a careful reading fails to support that impression. In the sense of the grasp of the thing's *esse*, Gilson attributes the intuition of being to a number of thinkers.

All men who philosophize and turn their mind toward this problem push the metaphysical analysis of being (*l'être*) more or less far; Thomas has many times described their pilgrimage towards being. There comes a point where certain thinkers refuse to push beyond the existent as existent (*l'étant comme étant*); they refuse precisely because they do not recognize the intuition of being (*intuition de l'être*) as the ultimate and root of the existent (*l'étant*); such is for example the case of Duns Scotus. Others, quite rare indeed, but Avicenna, Thomas Aquinas, Bañez and their successors, attest their existence, dare to affirm as the supreme act, the *esse* in virtue of which the existent exists.²⁶

Neither is Gilson quibbling with Maritain about judgment as our resource for grasping *esse*. True, in his article Gilson never mentions judgment but does affirm that the discernment of the act in virtue of which the existent exists, namely, *esse*, is "the effect of a more extended abstractive reflection."²⁷ With this characterization, however, Gilson repeats his words from his *Elements of Christian Philosophy*:

[The awareness of *esse*] certainly results from a supreme effort of abstraction, since, in order to form it, the intellect must conceive, apart from the condition of being an existent, the act owing to which the existent finds itself in this condition: *ipsum esse significatur ut quiddam abstractum*.²⁸

Gilson appends to this text footnote 29. It reads: "Judgment posits *esse* as separated from essence although, in finite beings, it cannot subsist

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

28. Etienne Gilson, *The Elements of Christian Philosophy* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1960), p. 131.

apart." Hence, Gilson's talk of apprehending *esse* by an abstraction, though at first alarming, should not be taken as opposing judgment as the original distinct grasp of *esse*. It is his repeated teaching elsewhere.²⁹ In sum, Gilson admits that there is an intuition of being if that means the judgmental grasp of the *esse* of things.

Neither is Gilson targeting Maritain's second sense of the intuition of being. That second sense concerned the grasp of immaterial *ens*. But in criticizing Maritain's intuition doctrine, Gilson clearly speaks about *esse*, not about *ens*. As far as I can tell, Gilson's article never discusses Maritain's second sense.

What Gilson is intent upon discussing as the "l'intuition de l'être" is in truth Maritain's second concept of *esse*. As noted for Maritain, this second concept is subsequent to the judgmental grasp of the *esses* of sensible things. It is an analogous concept and occupies the third degree of abstraction. So located, we appreciate its meaning as not limited to realization in matter. This position seems just the target of Gilson's previous remark:

One is able to distinguish as many degrees of abstraction as one wishes; nothing will make our apprehension of existence not to be an abstraction of the intellect taken from the sensible. . . . This is not a question of degrees of abstraction if it is not that.

Here Gilson criticizes the intuition of being in the sense of a conceptualization of the *esse* of sensible things that reaches the third degree of abstraction. But that is Maritain's second concept of existence. My conclusion, then, is that in his article Gilson understands as the intuition of being Maritain's formation of the second concept of existence. Though Gilson uses the language differently than Maritain, Gilson

29. "These two distinct operations both see the real, but they do not penetrate it to the same depth: intellection attains the essence, which the definition formulates, judgment attains the very act of existing [*le jugement atteint l'acte même d'exister*]" (Gilson, *Le Thomisme: Introduction a la Philosophie de Saint Thomas d'Aquin* [Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1972], p. 184). Gilson insists that only judgment can attain *esse*: "...le jugement seul peut atteindre l'existence. . . . l'acte de juger peut seul atteindre le reel dans sa racine" (*ibid.*, p. 185). These texts reiterate what Gilson said in *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Random House, 1956), p. 42. Also, "...for judgment itself is the most perfect form of intellectual knowledge, and existence is its proper object" (Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers* [Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952], p. 202). For a defense of Gilson against the charge that he rests Aquinas's metaphysics upon Revelation, see my "Does Gilson Theologize Thomistic Metaphysics?" in *Thomistic Papers V* (Houston, Texas: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1990), pp. 3-19.

still employs it to designate something Maritain espouses. In sum, though Maritain's *Revue Thomiste* article understands the intuition of being as the judgmental grasp of the *esse* of a perceptible thing, Gilson's *Studi Tomistici* article locks the phraseology on Maritain's subsequent conceptualization of judgmentally grasped *esse*.

But if we now know about what Gilson is talking, what is he saying? As I understand him, Gilson's point is that given the way we originally know *esse*, we can never claim to know it as it is in itself. In other words, we only know the analogon of analogous *esse* through its analogates, and these are sensible. This locus for the apprehension of the analogon fails to provide sufficient insight into the analogon to grasp possible immaterial instances of analogous *esse*. If Maritain is claiming an understanding of immaterial analogates, then his intuition of being must be occurring thanks to a grasp of the analogon itself. This is a grasp independent of the creaturely analogates with which we are familiar. But there is in Thomism no such type of knowledge. Gilson gives two reasons. First, for Aquinas all this life's knowledge begins from phantasms. These present existence as the act of sensible things. This acquaintance with analogous *esse* rules out a direct acquaintance with it. Second, since for Aquinas God is existence itself, Maritain's position would also mean a knowledge of what God is. But for Aquinas the divine nature remains to the natural capacities of the human intellect as something *penitus ignotum*.

As a Thomist Maritain should realize that no way exists for simply the judgmental grasp of the *esses* of sensible things to release to the intellect a concept of existence that attains the third degree of abstraction. Understood as Maritain's second concept of existence, there is no intuition of being in Thomism. It can be quickly noted that Gilson's critique also undercuts Maritain's second sense of the intuition of being—the grasp of the immaterial sense of *ens*. Since Maritain ties the attainment of this notion to the second concept of existence, then failure to attain the second concept is tantamount to failure to attain the second sense of the intuition of being. Gilson, though, does not carry his critique that far.

V

I am interested in another implication of Gilson's critique. This implication concerns the requirements for initiating Thomistic metaphysics. In his *Studi Tomistici* article, Gilson speaks of metaphysicians who lack the intellectual intuition of being that he has criticized but nevertheless possess the intuition of being in the sense of a grasp of the

esse of sensible things. I have quoted Gilson's remark and among these metaphysicians Gilson includes Avicenna, Aquinas, Bañez, and himself. What does this mean if not that the immateriality of *ens* and all talk of attaining the third degree of abstraction are nonessentials for starting Thomistic metaphysics. I repeat, Gilson claims that Aquinas and others are metaphysicians and yet they lack what Gilson calls Maritain's intellectual intuition of being. In other words, they were metaphysicians before they attained any third degree of abstraction. What made them metaphysicians? Simply their grasp of *esse* as the most profound principle in the sensible existents before us. It appears to me that Gilson is saying that a grasp of Aquinas's *habens esse* sense of *ens commune* sufficiently distinguishes the beginning of the metaphysical enterprise. The inception of the enterprise has no need of the other immaterial sense of Aquinas's notion of *ens commune*.³⁰

On the neo-Thomist scene, such an opinion is undoubtedly a singular one. Almost unanimously, other neo-Thomists regard as the *sine qua non* of metaphysics, the attainment of concepts whose meaning spans the material and immaterial orders.³¹ As I have argued elsewhere,³² this assumption presents serious philosophical and Thomistic problems. By questioning the immaterial requirement, Gilson's approach should be welcomed as a new opportunity to make the doing of Thomistic metaphysics intelligible.

I would like to respond to two obvious problems facing anyone wishing to develop Gilson's position. First, it is no objection against Gilson to note that in his commentary to Boethius's *De Trinitate*, question V, article 1, Aquinas philosophically argues for the immateriality of metaphysics. As Aquinas himself notes, any number of possibilities exist for a third speculative science whose object includes independence from matter. First, the science could deal with something that never exists in matter, for example, God and the angels. Second, it could deal with objects able to be in matter and apart from it, for example, substance, quality, being, potency, act, etc. Third, the science could deal with both the previous. These manifold possibilities should cause one to

30. At this point the reader can profitably turn to Gilson's earlier critique of Maritain's interpretation of how to do Thomistic metaphysics. Gilson sets aside Maritain's intellectual intuition of "real being in all the purity and amplitude of its own intelligibility or its own mystery" for a universal concept of being whose "wealth consists, first, of all the judgments of existence it virtually comprises and connotes" (*Christian Philosophy of Aquinas*, pp. 43-44).

31. For Joseph Owens as the exception, see my "Metaphysics and Immateriality," *Angelicum* 65 (1988): 54-57.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 44-54.

hesitate to say just how metaphysics deals with what is separate from matter. Apparently for Gilson the proper thing to do is to begin with *habens esse* and to see in the unfolding of the science where immateriality emerges. It is noteworthy that at *In VI Meta.*, lect. 1, n. 1163, Aquinas presents the immateriality of metaphysics in virtue of its treating God and angels.

What then of Aquinas's already cited frequent remarks on the immateriality of the subject of metaphysics? How should they be handled? If I understand Joseph Owens correctly, the texts can be taken as expressing a circumstantial requirement rather than a philosophical statement on the entry into metaphysics. The texts express a medieval theologian's need to take Aristotelian metaphysical terminology and give it a nondivine reference. In this fashion the intellectual world is made safe for revealed theology. Owens remarks:

All this is involved in the use of the formula "separate in being and notion" to characterize the subject of metaphysics in the new understanding brought to it by Thomas Aquinas. Presumably the interest of the theologian in assuring for sacred theology its proper place among the sciences was his dominant concern. As subject of a science, separate substance had to be reserved to sacred theology. In contrast, the philosophical theology of Aristotle had to be dealing with a different subject. Yet in conformity with Aristotelian terminology, the latter subject had also to be separate, not only in notion like the mathematics, but in a stronger way. The formulation of this further type of separation was found in Avicenna and Albert "separate in being and in notion."³³

This medieval theological concern to launder the Greek terminology should not lead us astray on the entry point of Thomistic metaphysics. *Quoad se, ens* is immaterial. It is realizable apart from matter. Accordingly, Aquinas emphasizes this point to give the Aristotelian terminology a nondivine reference. But *quoad nos, ens* is first appreciated as *habens esse*. This sense of *ens* is doctrinally sufficient to initiate metaphysics.

In conclusion, these two late articles by Maritain and Gilson present a provocative exchange of opposed views on the undertaking of Thomistic metaphysics. The thunder claps in the exchange should not be allowed to grow silent but should be made to echo through contemporary discussion of Thomistic metaphysics.

33. Joseph Owens, "Metaphysical Separation in Aquinas," *Mediaeval Studies* 34 (1972): 306. Also see Owens, "Aquinas as Aristotelian Commentator," in *St. Thomas Aquinas on the Existence of God: Collected Papers of Joseph Owens*, ed. John R. Catan (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1980), pp. 4-12.