

# HOW THOMISTIC IS THE INTUITION OF BEING?

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I propose to evaluate Maritain's approach to Thomistic metaphysics as presented in *Existence and the Existent*. I conclude that, pruned of an excess, the approach is sound.

## I

In prose that is at once incomparable and frustratingly elusive, Jacques Maritain presents the intuition of being, *l'intuition de l'être*, as the entry into metaphysics. The initial difficulty in understanding Maritain lies in a hard-to-pin-down ambiguity in the word *être*.

On the one hand, *être* can mean the subject of metaphysics--*ens commune* or *ens inquantum ens*. 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*].<sup>1</sup>

As the last line makes evident, Maritain employs *être* in the sense of the Latin *ens*.

Earlier, in *The Degrees of Knowledge*, Maritain describes *ens*. He is commenting upon Aquinas' discussion of *ens* at *De Veritate* I, 1c. Maritain makes three points. First, *ens* designates an intelligible object that "is not the privilege of one of the classes of things that the Logician calls species, genus, or category. It is universally communicable."<sup>2</sup> The scholastics called such objects transcendentals. Second, *ens* is an analogous commonality. By an analogous commonality, Maritain understands a *unum in multis*, a one in many, that implicitly but actually contains the differences of the instances of the *multa*.<sup>3</sup> It makes only an incomplete abstraction from its analogates, or instances. Third, though the data in which *ens* is spied are sensible things,

the data release an understanding of *ens* that includes possible immaterial instances. The point will prove to be Maritain's Achilles' heel. He himself acknowledges surprise at it:

Such objects [e.g., *ens*] are trans-sensible. For, though they are realized in the sensible in which we first grasp them, they are offered to the mind as transcending every genus and every category, and as able to be realized in subjects of a wholly other essence than those in which they are apprehended. It is extremely remarkable that being, the first object attained by our mind in things . . . bears within itself the sign that beings of another order than the sensible are thinkable and possible.<sup>4</sup>

Hence, in one sense the intuition of being refers to the intellectual perception of *ens*, a transphysical analogous commonality. On the other hand, there is another sense. Now *être* refers to Aquinas' basic metaphysical principle of *esse*. The intuition of being becomes the intuition of *esse*. In *Existence and the Existent*, Maritain remarks:

This is why, at the root of metaphysical knowledge, St. Thomas places the intellectual intuition of that mysterious reality disguised under the most commonplace and commonly used word in the language, the word *to be* [*être*]; a reality revealed to us as the uncircumscribable subject of a science which the gods begrudge us when we release, in the values that appertain to it, the act of existing [*cet acte d'exister*] which is exercised by the humblest thing - that victorious thrust by which it triumphs over nothingness.<sup>5</sup>

Maritain identifies *être* with *acte d'exister*. Later Maritain says that the act of existing is what Aquinas calls *esse*.<sup>6</sup>

## II

In sum, the "intuition of being" has two senses. The intuition refers to the intellectual perception of a trans-physical and analogous commonality. "*Être*" in this sense is what Aquinas calls *ens* when he speaks of the subject of metaphysics. Maritain's intuition of being also refers to the *esse* of things.

Different as these senses are, a connection between them exists. The second sense is the basis for the first. A heightened appreciation of *esse* produces the realization that a being is not necessarily a body. 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 immersed, 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.<sup>7</sup>

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*.

At this point in *Existence and the Existent*, Maritain provides a footnote containing the most striking assertion of his thesis. The footnote is also important for the liaison made between the thesis and the Thomistic texts. Maritain refers to *In De Trinitate*, V, 3c as

confirm[ing] the thesis that the metaphysical concept of being [*le concept mtaphysique de l'être*] . . . is an eidetic visualisation of being [*l'être*] apprehended in judgment, in the *secunda operatio intellectus, quae respicit ipsum esse rei*. This doctrine shows indeed that what properly pertains to the metaphysical concept is that it results from an abstraction (or a separation from matter) which takes place *secundum hanc secundam operationem intellectus*. . . . If it can be separated from matter by the operation of the (negative) judgment, the reason is that it is related in its content to the act of existing which is signified by the (positive) judgment and which over-passes the line of material essences - the connatural object of simple apprehension.<sup>8</sup>

*Ens* is separated from matter thanks to a confrontation with the act of existing - an act that "over-passes the line of material essences." The immateriality of *ens* is squarely rested upon the immateriality of *esse*. Maritain notes that Aquinas prefaced his discussion of metaphysical separation, or negative judgment, with a discussion of the grasp of *esse* in the composing mode of the mind's second act - positive judgment. Maritain is confident, then, that for Aquinas also an appreciation of *esse* is the key for an appreciation of metaphysical *ens*. The judgment negating matter from

*ens* has its justification in a positive judgment whose content includes the act of existing.

In an earlier section Maritain describes the intellect's act of judgment. Characteristic of judgment is that it reintegrates with its existing subject a previously abstracted object of thought. In accomplishing this reintegration, judgment does not merely apprehend existence but lives it intentionally.<sup>9</sup>

But in his *Approches sans Entraves*, written at the end of his life, Maritain emphasized that the intuition of *esse* does not occur in all judgments. By the word *est* some judgments link the subject to a predicate expressing an idea previously abstracted. Other judgments, for example of the type "I exist," "Things exist," affirm in the mind the subject as in extra-mental reality. In these judgments the intellect intuitively knows the extra-mental *esse* of the subject.<sup>10</sup> The intellect produces an affirmative judgment of existence on the occasion of some individual reality known in its singularity by an external sense, e.g., sight.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, Maritain is unclear on the specifics of the production.<sup>12</sup>

In conclusion, what is Maritain's approach to the subject of Thomistic metaphysics? Maritain's approach to the transphysical commonality of *ens inquantum ens* is through one of its components, *esse*. A heightened judgmental appreciation of the *esse* of sensible things leads us to realize that *esse* itself is not necessarily confined to actuating bodies. Hence, *ens*, or that-which-exists, need not be a body.

### III

The difficulty in Maritain's presentation of the entry into Thomistic metaphysics has long been noted. Maritain's approach claims more from experience than experience can give. From a number of judgments, I can see that *esse* is an act that need not actuate this body or that body. Nevertheless in every case, *esse* is still presented as the act of some body. From the data no indication yet exists that *esse* possesses an ability to actuate more than bodies. From judgmentally grasped *esse*, Maritain draws an object too great for the data to bear. In general, the apprehension of a transphysical commonality presupposes some knowledge of an immaterial being.<sup>13</sup>

Aquinas shares this reservation. Aquinas understands abstraction to be determined by the data. For example, animality does not include rationality because the former is *found* without the latter. Hence, in the *De Ente et Essentia* Aquinas remarks:

If plurality belonged to [humanity's] concept, it could never be one, though it is one when present in Socrates. So, too, if oneness belonged to its concept, the nature of Socrates and of Plato would be identical, and it could not be multiplied in many individuals.<sup>14</sup>

In light of a reflection upon the *facts*, one realizes that an absolutely considered nature is neither one nor many. Likewise, in the commentary on Boethius' *De Trinitate*:

But finger, foot, and hand, and other parts of this kind are outside the definition of man. . . . For whether or not he has feet, as long as he is constituted of a rational soul and a body composed of the elements in the proper mixture required by this sort of form, he will be a man.<sup>15</sup>

Noteworthy is that this text is from the very article to which Maritain appeals for the intuition of transsensible *esse*. But later in the commentary, Aquinas also remarks:

We say that being and substance are separate from matter and motion . . . 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.<sup>16</sup>

The comparison with animal indicates that *ens* is abstracted as immaterial from data that include some immaterial instances. Just as one would never abstract animal from rational if one knew it only in humans, so too one would never abstract being from matter if one grasped it only in bodies. Aquinas is not drawing *ens commune* simply from sensible things.

#### IV

The standard neo-Thomist critique of Maritain is unassailable. Nevertheless, Maritain's position remains basically sound. For Aquinas *ens* means *habens esse*, and *esse* is grasped in judgment.<sup>17</sup> Maritain is, then, correct to begin Thomistic metaphysics with the judgmental grasp of the *esse* of sensible things. The defense of Maritain consists in correcting an overstatement on his part. Like most neo-Thomists, Maritain assumes that Thomistic metaphysics begins with the apprehension of a transphysical commonality. The assumption is not arbitrary. Aquinas specifies transphysical *ens* as the subject of metaphysics, and it seems only fair to initiate a science with its subject. Fairness aside, the assumption is the reef upon which neo-Thomistic ventures into metaphysics come to ruin. In this respect, neither the natural philosophy nor the transcendental Thomist approaches to Thomistic metaphysics do any better than Maritain's.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, there is an indication that transphysical *ens* is not the entry point of Aquinas' metaphysics. Transphysical *ens* characterizes the subject of metaphysics at a later and mature stage of reflection. The metaphysician formulates the notion after he alone, according to Aquinas, demonstrates an immaterial being in the form of a separate substance or the rational soul.<sup>19</sup>

Prior to that stage, the consideration of the metaphysician is targeted upon the *esse* of simply sensible things.

What is the Thomistic indication I am speaking of? Question 44, 2c, of the *Prima Pars* catches Aquinas in the act of initiating metaphysics simply from the judgmental grasp of the *esse* of sensible things. Simply *habens esse* specifies the consideration of the metaphysician. In the *responsio* Aquinas presents a three-fold breakdown of the history of philosophy. In Aquinas' eyes, philosophy has done more than spin on its heels. Little by little (*paulatim*) and step by step (*pedetentim*), philosophers advanced in a knowledge of the truth. Especially to be noted is what distinguishes the three stages. The principle of distinction is not increasing immateriality but increasing penetration of the sensible given.

At the first stage the given is analyzed into the components of substance and accident. The first of these is regarded as eternal. Progress to the second stage is made from the recognition of substantial change. Substances themselves transmute. Change in this zone of the sensible given leads to understanding substance itself as a composition of substantial form and matter--the latter being uncreated. This deeper penetration of the sensible given allows reasoning to a more encompassing cause. In Aristotle's hands, matter/form reasoning went as far as the oblique circle--a reference to the celestial sphere responsible for the movement of the sun.

Finally, advance is made to a third consideration--*ens inquantum est ens*. The nature of this third consideration is not delineated. By extrapolating from the first two stages, however, one can understand the third consideration--at least in a rudimentary way. The consideration of the first stage is denominated *ens inquantum tale ens*. As noted, the object of the consideration is composite--a substance in the light of its accidental determinations. The consideration of the second stage is denominated *ens inquantum hoc ens*. Again, the object characterizes the consideration; the object is a composite--the thing in the light of its substantial form. With this procedure in mind, *ens inquantum ens* should signal a consideration marked by the discovery of a still more profound region in the sensible given. Will this region not be the thing's *esse*? Such is a safe bet. Earlier at 8, 1c, *esse* is described as what is most intimate (*magis intimum*) and deeply set (*profundius*) in creatures. Also at *De Potentia* III, 5c - a parallel text to 44, 2c, the third stage of the history of philosophy is said to be marked by a "*consideratio ipsius esse universalis*." Every indication is that the consideration of *ens inquantum ens* is a consideration of the sensible given as *habens esse*.

For my purposes four points can be taken from 44, 2c. First, in the third stage, Aquinas finds a distinct philosophical consideration of the sensible given. This consideration is not specified in terms of accidental and substantial form but in terms of *esse*--existential act.

Second, the third stage is described in terminology otherwise used to characterize the subject of metaphysics. The terminology of 44, 2, is *ens inquantum est ens*; in *In De Trin.*, V, 4c, the subject of metaphysics is identically expressed.

Third, Aquinas' 44, 2, portrayal of the history of philosophy as it rises to the metaphysical stage is not marked by increasing immateriality but by increasing profundity. Each succeeding viewpoint goes deeper into the given. Only the causes, not the considerations, become more universal. The third stage reaches the most universal cause because it deals with the most basic principle in the sensible given. Fourth, Aquinas gives no indication of how the third stage is reached. As the basis for the second stage, he mentions substantial change. In the background, then, is Aristotle's trenchant analysis of *Physics* I, 7, for the intrinsic principles of change. The third stage contains no similar indication. Yet in the the *Prima Pars* and scattered in earlier writings are texts that argue for God on the basis of *esse*.<sup>20</sup> These texts should be explicating the third stage reasoning for the most universal cause. But, most importantly, they indicate how the consideration of *habens esse* is reached. According to the texts, to understand *esse* so that *esse* leads to God, *esse subsistens*, is to understand the *esse* of the thing as *praeter essentiam eius*: as besides its essence. This understanding immediately calls to mind Aquinas' doctrine of the two-fold operation of the intellect.<sup>21</sup> In its first operation the intellect spies the essence of the thing; in its second operation the intellect grasps the thing's *esse*. The consideration of the third stage would have been reached by reflection upon the intellect's two-fold operation.

In sum, the third stage of 44, 2, shows Aquinas presenting metaphysics simply in terms of *habens esse* rather than *ens commune*. To move to a consideration of *ens inquantum est ens*, it suffices to grasp the sensible real as *habens esse*. The text shows no preoccupation with understanding *ens* as able to be in matter as well as apart from matter. The sole concern is with *ens* as *habens esse*. In the formulae for the three various considerations, the first *ens* seems to be consistently just the *sensible* existent.<sup>22</sup>

## V

In conclusion, *Prima Pars* 44, 2, catches Aquinas in the act of presenting metaphysics simply in terms of *habens esse*. No Thomistic need exists to burden Maritain's intuition of being with the intellectual perception of a transphysical commonality.

The first mentioned sense of the intuition of being can be dropped and the second retained. Pruned of that excess, Maritain's position avoids the major philosophical criticism directed against it. In that light, Maritain's intuition of being is an enduring contribution to metaphysical reflection.

## NOTES

1. Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, trans. by Lewis Galantiere and Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), p. 19. Other references to this sense of *être* are: *A Preface to Metaphysics* (New York: Mentor Omega Books, 1962), p. 49; *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. by Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), p. 215.
2. *Degrees*, p. 210.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 212-213.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 214. By way of clarification, not contradiction, Maritain subsequently acknowledges that this grasp of possible immaterial beings is as yet "entirely undetermined." One is not yet talking about possible human souls, pure spirits, or subsistent being.
5. *Existence*, p. 19. Other references include: *Preface*, p. 51; *Approaches to God*, trans. by Peter O'Reilly (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 18; *The Peasant of the Garrone*, trans. by Michael Cuddihy and Elizabeth Hughes (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), p. 134.
6. In *Existence*, p. 36, Maritain remarks that *l'acte d'exister* is the act and the perfection of all form and all perfection and then quotes to this end Aquinas' *De Pot.*, VII, 2, ad 9m, mention of *esse*.
7. *Existence*, p. 26. See also p. 20.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 28, n. 14. Cf. "There is finally a concept of being which the mind forms in itself upon a judgment of existence sufficiently penetrating and sufficiently spiritual to read through the empirical conditions of the existing given. . . ." Olivier Lacombe, "Jacques Maritain Metaphysician," *The New Scholasticism*, 46 (1972), p. 22.
9. *Existence*, p. 18. Also, *Degrees*, p. 97.
10. *Approches sans Entraves* (Paris: Fayard, 1973), p. 264. In his "Maritain's Three Concepts of Existence," *The New Scholasticism*, 49 (1975), pp. 298-9, Joseph Owens notes that in Aquinas the situation is more complicated. Every use of the copula bears upon *esse*, substantial or accidental.
11. *Approches*, p. 271.
12. Just how the mind is led to make an affirmative existential judgment remains a mystery in Maritain. This is especially true given Maritain's earlier presentation of judgment as essentially copulative. As noted, judgment reintegrates the abstracted nature or essence with its extra-mentally existing subject. How does this analysis elucidate affirmative existential judgments?
13. This criticism is found in Joseph Marechal, *Le Point de départ de la métaphysique*, V, as partially edited and translated by Joseph Donceel, *A Maréchal Reader* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), p. 146. For a list of neo-Thomists who require a proof of immaterial being to grasp transphysical *ens*, see my "Ad Mentem Thomae Does Natural Philosophy Prove God?," forthcoming in the 1987 *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*.
14. *De Ente et Essentia*, ch. 3; as trans. by Armand Maurer, *On Being and Essence* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1968), p. 46.
15. *In De Trin.* V, 3c; as trans. by Armand Maurer, *The Division and Methods of the Sciences* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1963), p. 32.
16. *Ibid.*, V, 4, ad 5m; Maurer, *The Division*, pp. 48-49.

17. See Gerald B. Phelan, "A Note on the Formal Object of Metaphysics," in *G.B. Phelan Selected Papers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1967), as edited by Arthur G. Kirm, pp. 64-66; "The Existentialism of St. Thomas," *ibid.*, pp. 74-55, 80-81. On the judgmental grasp of *esse*, see *infra*, n. 21.
18. For problems in these other approaches, see my "Immateriality and Metaphysics", forthcoming in the 1987 volume of *Angelicum*.
19. At *In De Trin.*, V, 4c, the natural knowledge of God and separate substances is exclusively reserved to the philosopher who reasons from being as being. The latter is the subject of metaphysics. At *In VI Meta.*, lect. 1, n. 1159, Aquinas also reserves to metaphysics the knowledge of the human soul as separable from matter.
20. *S.T.*, I, 3, 4c, first arg.; *S.C.G.*, I, 22, *Amplius. Si*; the Marietti ed. of *De Ente*, ch. V, n. 4, p. 17. For texts in the commentary on the *Sentences*, see Joseph Owens, "Quiddity and Real Distinction in St. Thomas Aquinas," *Mediaeval Studies*, 27 (1965), p. 18, n. 32.
21. *In I Sent.*, d. 19, q. 5, a. 1, ad 7m; d. 38, q. 1, a. 3, Solut. Also *In De Trin.*, V, 3c.
22. Why does Aquinas so often present the subject of metaphysics in terms of the transphysical commonality of *ens*? A plausible answer is provided by Joseph Owens. From a study of the texts, Owens sees the Thomistic presentation as motivated by the need to launder Aristotelian metaphysical terminology for Christian theological purposes. For Aristotle, metaphysics dealt with the "separate" in the sense of immaterial beings. In a Christian context this understanding of metaphysics would make revealed theology a branch of metaphysics--something intolerable. To safeguard the autonomy of revealed theology yet permit continued use of Aristotle's "separate" terminology, Aquinas made metaphysics bear upon common notions that were separate from matter in the sense that they could be found outside of matter as well as within matter. See Owens' "Metaphysical Separation in Aquinas," *Mediaeval Studies*, 34 (1972), p. 306; "Aquinas as Aristotelian Commentator," as edited by John Catan, *St. Thomas Aquinas on the Existence of God* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), pp. 4-12.