

Ways of Knowing Metaphysical Being

Aquinas and Heidegger

Matthew S. Pugh

The most serious twentieth century challenge to Thomistic metaphysics comes from the work of Martin Heidegger. There are two versions of this challenge: the first appears in such early works as *Being and Time*¹ and the *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*,² while the second appears in such later works as the *Nietzsche* volumes,³ *Identity and Difference*,⁴ and *The Principle of Ground*.⁵ Both versions of the critique center on the notion of the ontological difference (the difference between Being and beings). Heidegger claims in his early works that Aquinas obscured the real difference between Being and beings by repeatedly conceiving Being, first in terms of the *essentia/existentia* distinction, and secondly as *actualitas*, or static presence. He claims in his later works that Thomas's metaphysics fails to think the *ereignis*, the event of appropriation, as that which gives Being to thinking in each historical age. Thomas's metaphysics fails, in other words, to grasp the *austrag* (difference) between Being and beings—the differing in the difference that makes the ontological distinction possible. Consequently, Aquinas's Being is mistakenly thought after the manner of a being; in this case, a Maker, or Uncaused Cause.

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

² Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1982).

³ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche* Vol. I-IV, trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991).

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

⁵ Martin Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, trans. Reginald Lilly (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996).

Heidegger's Critique of Aquinas

The *Basic Problems of Phenomenology* represents Heidegger's first extended critique of Aquinas's metaphysics. In that work, the basic problem of phenomenology is that of determining how to think the ontological difference, the difference between Being and beings, between Being understood transcendently as the *a priori* structures of consciousness that make experience possible, and being understood entitatively as objective presence.⁶ Any articulation of Being that fails to recognize this distinction, that fails to recognize the constituting role that consciousness plays in the determination of Being, necessarily obscures the true meaning of Being.

Now the medieval thesis which articulates Being into *essentia* and *existentia* is inadequate precisely because it fails to take into account the way in which *essentia* and *existentia* originate in experience. Its proponents fail to see, in other words, that the origin of the *meaning* of these terms lies in consciousness. That the origin of their meaning does lie in consciousness becomes obvious once one deconstructs the medieval thesis by tracing the philosophical genealogy of its key concepts.⁷

Aquinas, for example, typically takes existence to mean *actualitas*, that which makes a thing be real. Heidegger notes, however, that "*actualitas*" is derived from "*agere*" and "*actum*," whose meanings refer to the action of some human doer. Though *actualitas* appears to mean that which is purely objective, its more fundamental meaning is that which has its origin in some type of human activity. *Actualitas* thus makes a veiled reference to some productive agent; in this case, a human productive agent. The deeper meaning of "that which exists" or is actual, then, is "that which has been brought forth by some productive agent." In short, Thomas's understanding of the meaning of Being as *actualitas* is grounded in a meaning of Being originally projected in terms of making and producing. The same consideration applies to the original meaning of essence.⁸

The Greeks, for example, whose philosophy Thomas for the most part simply takes over, clearly understood essence in terms of making and producing. For the Greeks, the *eidos* of the artisan's work is the result of its having been impressed with a certain *morphe*; the form is in effect a function of the intended look (*eidos*) of the product. The Greek thinks of form in terms of what is to be made or brought forth, rather than what is to be made in

⁶ See *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, pp. 11-23.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 100-05.

terms of form. The *eidōs* is thus that from which the work, or thing, is descended (its kin or kind); any other thing descended from the same *eidōs* belongs to the same kind. *Phusis*, or nature, comes to mean that which produces its own kind—a nature is simply a self-producing essence. Obviously, then, if *phusis* is reality, and reality is made up of self-producing essences, then nature is something produced.⁹

Yet to produce also means “to put” or “to place” something “here.” But when so placed, the produced being takes on the appearance of “standing for itself,” and so becomes discoverable, first as that which is ready-to-hand in the equipmental context, then as disposable presence (that which is merely present-at-hand) and finally as static presence, as mere thing. The discovery of static presence is occasioned by a shift in awareness from that of circumspective concern, to mere on-looking. The present-at-hand becomes object, while the on-looker becomes subject. In short, for Heidegger the origin of the objective or speculative outlook lies in consciousness.¹⁰

Since Thomas’s understanding of the meaning of the essence/existence distinction is derived from Greek ontology, his metaphysics belongs to the same horizon of “bringing forth” and “producing.” However, because it fails to take account of the producer, it is incomplete. When Thomas considers human being, for instance, he considers human being from the standpoint of the merely present, entitatively, as something present; but since the meanings of essence and existence are themselves produced or constituted by consciousness, they cannot be used to account for consciousness. Neither, then, can they account for the meaning of Being in general. Though essence and existence are perhaps adequate as an articulation of the meaning of the Being of entities, they are not adequate as an articulation of the meaning of the Being of human beings. Aquinas simply failed to articulate, to think, their difference.¹¹

With the *Nietzsche Lectures* of 1941, however, Heidegger’s assessment of Thomas’s metaphysics changes. Whereas he maintained in *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* that Thomas’s version of the ontological difference was essentially a continuation of Greek ontology, he maintains in the *Nietzsche Lectures* that Thomas’s understanding of the essence/existence distinction in fact marked a radical break with the Greek understanding of that distinction.

Now the *Nietzsche Lectures* reflect the so-called “turn” in Heidegger’s thinking, wherein he shifts the emphasis of his ontology away from the con-

⁹ Ibid., pp. 106-11.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 112-17.

¹¹ Ibid.

stituting role of consciousness, to the way in which Being claims man historically. Consequently Heidegger had to re-think the problem of the origin of the ontological difference in light of his new approach.

For the Heidegger of 1941, the origin of the ontological difference still lies in the Greek philosophical experience, but whereas before the difference lay in the making activity of the human doer, now the origin of the difference lies in presencing.¹²

According to Heidegger, Being first came to light in the thinking of the pre-Socratics. But for those ancient philosophers the primary revelation of Being was as pure presencing, the upsurge of beings into Being, and of Being in and through beings. Being was understood to be an emergent process fluctuating between coming-to-be and passing away. But that which fluctuates between coming-to-be and passing away of the presencing process was soon viewed as that which stands between coming-to-be and passing away; in effect as enduring presence. The Being of a being came to be viewed, in other words, as something “set out,” or completed, as something “gathered into completion.” In that sense, of course, a being could still be called a work, for a work is simply a gathering into permanent presence of that which comes to be and passes away. Yet the work was not taken to be something made; rather it was understood to be something set out in its manifestness. Beings were viewed, then, not as the product of some making activity, but as what is unveiled through a disclosing revelation. The later Greek understanding of Being as *ousia* is grounded, claims Heidegger, in this pre-Socratic understanding of Being as presencing.

Specifically, this new revelation of the pre-Socratic experience of Being grounds the essence/existence distinction in *ousia*, or enduring presence, in the following way. That which is present primarily and immediately before us is the singular, the “*tode ti*,” while that which is present secondarily is the “look” of the thing, its outward appearance as something of a certain kind, its *eidos*. These two kinds of presence divide Being into the “that” (*existentia*) and the “what” (*essentia*), and the history of metaphysics is just the history of their interrelations; which of the two is emphasized is of little importance since both have their origin in the Being of static presence (presentness).

The problem with Aquinas’s metaphysics is that it overlooks the Greek understanding of *ousia* as crystallized *energeia* (the process of setting something into a work in regard to its look—the emergent process whereby beings emerge into Being, and subsequently “congeal” into permanence), and in-

¹² Martin Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), pp. 1-9.

stead transforms it into *actualitas*, into that which is made. For Thomas, the Being of a being no longer means a working which discloses itself through presence, but something causally made. Existence no longer means *ekstasis*, “stepping out of” into presence, but that which stands outside of its causes. A being, which for the Greeks had been a self-showing disclosing, becomes for Thomas something present as a product. And Being itself becomes that which is causally responsible for beings, for that which is present.¹³

This causal way of thinking about Being, of course, culminates in Thomas’s highest theology. There God is the fullness of Being, pure act, that Being whose essence is its existence, who as such is absolutely permanent. Now since the goodness of a thing is defined in terms of its coming to be in accordance with its end, and since what God is is pure act, God is necessarily pure goodness. And from this it follows that God is the ultimate Cause who is himself uncaused. God, then, is the maker of things—things real in virtue of the fact that they stand outside of their Ultimate Cause.¹⁴

In sum, Heidegger’s 1941 assessment of Thomas’s version of the ontological difference deepens, and in some respects overturns, the critique of 1928. *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* showed how the medieval thesis is grounded in the ancient Greek experience of artistic creation, and the productive comportment of consciousness. The *Nietzsche Lectures* of 1941, however, establish (in light of Heidegger’s “turn”) that Thomas’s version of the ontological distinction is ultimately grounded, not in any kind of making activity, as Thomas had thought, but in the process of presencing by which beings rise up into manifestness.

Before we turn to our response to Heidegger’s critique, however, a further refinement of it must be mentioned which centers on the notion of the *austrag*, or difference,¹⁵ and *ereignis*, the event of appropriation.¹⁶

With these two notions, Heidegger intensifies his attack on Aquinas, and indeed on all of metaphysics, for he claims that Thomas not only distorts the original Greek experience of Being as presencing, and thereby the ontological difference, but also (like all metaphysicians) fails to recognize that which makes the ontological difference possible. Thomas’s thought, in other words, remains focused on *what* is opened up by the ontological difference (Being and beings) rather than on the differing process itself.

But what exactly is the differing in the ontological difference? According to Heidegger, the distinction between Being and beings, what he calls

¹³ Ibid., pp. 10-19.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See *Identity and Difference*, pp. 62-74.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 23-41.

their *differenz*,¹⁷ originates in that process whereby Being and beings are carried outside each other while simultaneously coming to birth in each other. The way in which Being and beings are carried outside of each other while being simultaneously born in each other, identifies the differing in their *differenz*, that is, their dif-ference, or *austrag*. Every metaphysics recognizes a *differenz* between Being and beings, but no metaphysics recognizes the *austrag*, the dif-ference, between Being and beings, the differing in their *differenz*. This is no less true of Aquinas's metaphysics.

It must be understood, of course, that this refinement of the ontological difference is a direct result of Heidegger's philosophical "turn" away from the attempt to conceptually frame Being, toward letting Being be. After the turn, he no longer views the history of metaphysics as something made by man through his thinking activity, but rather as something given by Being to man's thinking in such a way as to completely claim that thinking. *What* is given in each historical epoch is the *differenz* between Being and beings, but *that which gives* the *differenz* to thinking, that which claims it in the way that it is claimed in each historical epoch, is the *austrag*.

How the *austrag* gives the *differenz* between Being and beings is fully described in *The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics*.¹⁸ Traditional metaphysics, says Heidegger, has a threefold focus: Being, God, and Reason. Metaphysics studies what is, but it also studies that which unifies and grounds Being. Thus it is a science, or logic, since it attempts to ground the ground, namely Being, through reason. Being then comes to mean the ground that gives itself ground through reason. In this way, Being claims thinking as the ground that grounds. Metaphysics is simply the science that gives account of the ground. Being is thought in terms of ground, and ground is provided for by thinking. And, since metaphysics attempts to give Being the ultimate, or highest ground, it is not only an onto-logic, but a theo-logic as well.

This means, in effect, that Being and beings hold each other in a kind of mutual embrace. Since Being is always the Being of beings, Being comes to birth, or reveals itself, only in and through beings. At the same time, beings appear only in and through the "coming-over" of Being to beings.¹⁹ Being unveils or discloses itself at the same time that beings arrive in Being as beings. Nevertheless, though the "coming-over" of Being to beings allows beings to appear in Being, their arrival in Being simultaneously has the ef-

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 62-74.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 42-60.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 69-71.

fect of concealing Being. Thus the extent to which beings are revealed in Being is also the extent to which Being is concealed in beings. This process of the mutual “coming-over/disclosing” of Being to beings, and the subsequent concealing of Being through their arrival in Being, is the *austrag*, a term taken from the Latin *dif-fere*, meaning “to carry away from.” *Austrag* simply identifies the differing in the *differenz* between Being and beings.

Now when Being comes over into beings, it does so as their ground, as that *in* which they arrive; in this way Being is called the ground of beings. But in so far as beings conceal Being in their very arrival, or appearing, beings determine and define Being. In other words, beings ground Being at the same time that Being grounds beings. As Heidegger says, Being and beings circle round each other in a kind of perduring dance.

Thomas, of course, thinks what circles in that dance, namely *esse* and *ens*, but he does not think the *austrag*, the difference in the *differenz*, for the *austrag*, the difference, is neither Being nor beings. The *austrag*, rather, is that which gives the ontological difference as the *esse/ens* distinction.

Yet because giving is an event, what is given in the ontological distinction is given in terms of time. As we have seen, Heidegger explains Being in terms of presence. But presence is a temporal notion, for presence signifies the constancy of what passes away, and this in turn signifies the present, or that which remains constant.²⁰

Thomas, however, does not see Being in terms of historical presencing, as a temporal giving, as a process. And this means, then, that he misses the absencing, or the withdrawal, implicit in every presencing, for every sending or giving is at once a revealing disclosure and a concealing withdrawal. Every revealing of Being in beings is at once a withdrawing/concealing of Being, for in the present of presence is the absence of “having been,” and the futural “not-yet.” Presence itself, however, extends to include both the “having-been” of the past and the “not-yet” of the future—the “not-yet” of the future being framed in the context of the past, and the “having-been” of the past revealing itself in the light of future possibilities. The present, therefore, is just the time-space that presence (the mutual embrace of “having-been” and “not-yet”) opens up for us. In effect, temporality grounds Being when understood as presence. But in so far as the overreaching of presence into past and future makes the time-space of the present possible, Being grounds time. Time and Being are thus mutually given over to each other. In effect, each appropriates the other for itself, and this event is the *ereignis*, the event of appropriation.

²⁰ Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1972), pp. 1-25.

Time claims Being as presence, while Being claims time as time-space, as the opening that “lets presence”—that is, the space wherein presence becomes the present.

Together, then, the *austrag* (the differing in the *differenz* between Being and beings) and the event of appropriation, are the preconditions which make the ontological difference possible.

The Thomistic Response to Heidegger

Thomists have typically responded to the Heideggerian challenge by mounting three basic defenses: the Gilsonian, the Maritainian, and the Transcendentalist. The Gilsonians maintain that Aquinas’s philosophy is the one philosophy in the history of philosophy able to escape Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics, for Thomas’s metaphysics is built on the understanding that Being primarily means *esse*, or existence, a being’s act of existing, but not essence.²¹ As such, *esse* cannot be grasped *via* simple apprehension, and so cannot be known through a concept. *Esse*, rather, can only be captured, or “known” in judgments of existence.²² In order to be thought conceptually and raised to the metaphysical level, *esse* must be rejoined to essence and then brought under the operations of 1) abstraction (without precision)²³ and 2) separation in the form of a special negative judgment.²⁴ But here, however, it is precisely *ens*, not *esse*, that is the object of the abstraction/separation. The *esse* component of Being (*ens*) completely eludes conceptualization. For Gilson, rather, our ability to “know” *esse* is completely dependent on, and grounded in, pre-conceptual sensory experience.²⁵

The Maritainians, on the other hand, agree that *esse* means existence in the sense of a being’s act of existing, not essence, and that *esse* can only be grasped directly in judgment—or more specifically for metaphysical Being, in a specially heightened judgmental appreciation of existence—but nevertheless maintain that the *esse* component of Being can become, if only indirectly, the object of a concept, which must then become (in order to be

²¹ Étienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1949).

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 190-217.

²³ Joseph Owens, *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1963).

²⁴ John F. Wippel, “Metaphysics and *Separatio* in Thomas Aquinas” in *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1984)

²⁵ Étienne Gilson, *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), pp. 23-87.

raised to the metaphysical level) the object of an eidetic intuition or visualization grasped at the third degree of formal abstraction/separation. Far from being a universal, the resulting residuum is a transcendental whose mode of predication is that of the analogy of proper proportionality.²⁶

The Transcendentalists, of course, take a different approach, for they believe that Thomas's epistemology can be appropriated along Kantian lines, and that metaphysical Being must ultimately be apprehended through the inner dynamism of the intellect.²⁷

None of these defenses, however, fully answer Heidegger's charges. In short, in spite of the Gilsonian and Maritainian emphasis on thinking Being primarily in terms of *esse*, or existence, their understanding never overcomes Aquinas's conception of *esse* as *actualitas*, or hardened presence. Hence, like Thomas, they think Being after the manner of that which is made, or caused to be, rather than that which is revealed, or unconcealed. Being itself, pure act, is conceived as Ultimate Maker, Ultimate Cause. Furthermore, that which is fundamental to presencing, namely, absencing—that which withdraws in the revealing of beings (and thereby of Being) to consciousness—is lost sight of in their view. Thus not only have Thomists failed to articulate a real distinction between Being and beings, they have also lost sight of that which gives this distinction in the first place.

The Transcendentalists, for their part, grant Heidegger his starting point and recognize the difference between the ontological (the Being of human beings) and the ontic (the being of entities), and understand that the latter (in an ontological sense) is derived from the former. They nevertheless make the mistake of confining human Being to the subject (specifically the Kantian subject), and so undermine the *a priori* nature of the existential structures of consciousness, which are revealed to be already-in-the-world. For the Transcendentalist, Being is just the necessary guarantor of the unity of consciousness.

Nevertheless, in spite of these failures there is another possible defense of Aquinas that has yet to be tried. This defense is grounded in a reconsideration of the ontological distinction that Aquinas does make, establishing that it is, when rightly understood, the real ontological distinction that does not obscure the difference between Being and beings by misconceiving the former in the manner of the latter.

²⁶ Jacques Maritain, *A Preface to Metaphysics: Seven Lectures on Being* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1948), pp. 62-90.

²⁷ Joseph Maréchal, *Le Point de départ de la métaphysique: Leçons sur le développement historique et théorique du problème de la connaissance* (Paris: Desclée De Brouwer, 1944-1949), chap.V.

Now there appear to be five viable interpretations of Thomas's ontological distinction. Historical and textual cases, of course, can be made for each of these interpretations, but only the fifth escapes Heidegger's critique.

The first version of Thomas's distinction defines the difference in terms of *esse/essentia*, or *existentia/essentia*, where *esse/existentia* means a being's act of existing, or existence, and *essentia* means essence, or that which makes a being be what it is. The second version defines the ontological distinction in terms of *ens commune/ens*, or to be more exact, *ens commune seu universale in universali/ens particulare*, where *ens commune* means common, universal being, or being in general (a universal notion formed via abstraction without precision, from beings understood generally), and *ens* means the particular being. The third version defines the distinction in terms of *esse commune seu universale/esse proprium seu particulatum seu determinatum*, which again, means common or universal being (a universal notion formed by abstracting from individual acts of existing), and *esse proprium seu particulatum seu determinatum* means the determined or particular act of existing. The fourth way defines the distinction in terms of *esse/ens*, understood to mean either a) a being's act of existing, and a being, or b) Being and beings, where Being is pure act, or God, and beings are God's creations.

Now it is the second interpretation of the fourth way that comes the closest to Heidegger's notion of the ontological difference between Being and beings, whereas the first three view the distinction either in terms of metaphysical co-principles applicable to beings, or in terms of a common abstraction based either on the composite being, or the existence component of the composite being. But, even in the fourth way, Being is ultimately just that Being whose essence is its existence—which is the same as to say pure, or unlimited existence, or that Being in whom the existence/essence distinction collapses.

Yet, in all of these interpretations of Thomas's ontological difference, the primary term is taken to mean existence, or act of existing—either a being's act of existing, the act of existing in general, or pure, unlimited act of existing. Here *esse* always means *actualitas*, and *actualitas* always means *existere*, to be, to be actual as that which stands outside of its causes. But we must ask at this point, must *esse* be thought strictly in terms of existence?

We should note, first of all, that *esse* and *existere* do not necessarily mean the same thing, for *esse* means "to be," while *existere* means "to exist." Though both words are verbs, they seem to function in rather different ways. For instance, we can say "Would that she might be more generous!" However, we cannot say "Would that she might exist more generously!" We

also note that in Latin *esse* and *essentia* are linguistically related, though essence and existence are not so related. *Esse* means “to be” or “to be real,” but *existere* means “to be actual” or “to be outside of its causes.” If existence is made synonymous with *esse*, then when placed back into the ontological distinction, the “to be” of *esse* is displaced in favor of *existere*’s nounal sense of *existentia*, or existence, thereby simply identifying a being as that which stands outside of its causes. *Esse* properly understood, however, retains its fundamental verbal sense. *Esse* means being, not existence, for even when conceived as “act of existence,” *existere*’s verbal sense defers to the nounal sense of “act” understood as enduring, or hardened presence

Heidegger, it seems, has failed to see this possibility in Thomas. He claims that Thomas does not make a true ontological distinction because he views Being in terms of act and hence in terms of beings that are simply present. But if Thomas in fact distinguishes Being and existence, *esse* and *existentia*, then he at least escapes the first part of Heidegger’s critique. Existence must then have the sense of “coming out of,” or when accompanied by a noun or adjective, mean “to show itself,” a meaning immediately bringing to mind Heidegger’s notion of Being as presencing. A being may be said to come into existence by coming out of Being, i.e. by showing itself. Only after a being comes to stand on its own, outside of its causes, can it be viewed in the lesser existential sense of “that which is,” the hardened actuality. Existence, then, becomes a derivative of Being (*esse*). In other words, by differentiating *esse* and *existere/existentia*, and then showing how the latter is related to the former, the deeper sense of Being as presencing can be recovered in Thomas’s thought.

Unfortunately, the Neo-Scholastics confused or collapsed the two meanings, and so severed their unique relation. Consequently, *esse* came to take on both a copulative *and* an existential function—positing a being as that which stands outside of its causes. But if Thomas is to be retrieved, then the function of *esse* must not be primarily to posit the existence of something in a “yes” or “no” fashion.

Nevertheless, if *esse* does not mean existence, what does it mean? When beings come into existence by coming out of Being, that is, by showing or disclosing themselves, there is always necessarily something that withdraws in the process. In so far as beings show themselves, they ultimately come into Being as existence, as hardened presence, but this showing presupposes, and so is made possible by, that which withdraws. In other words, it is the sending withdrawal of Being, or *esse*, that allows beings to stand forth in hardened presence, or existence. This “letting presence” is not a making, but a revealing through absenting. In so far as *esse* overwhelms or arrives in beings, *esse*

reveals part of itself, but in so far as beings arrive in their Being through the unconcealing of Being, something withdraws.

For Thomas, then, Being and beings circle round each other in perduring difference. The one grounds the other, and through their differing, we arrive at a *differenz*, the essence/existence distinction. Yet that which sends the *differenz*, withdraws. Absencing withdrawal is the differing in the *differenz* which opens up, or makes possible, the essence/existence distinction. Being as existence stands forth presently in beings, while Being as *esse* withdraws. Existence then comes to the fore, taking the place of *esse*. Yet the existence which comes to the fore is not something made, or caused to be, but rather that which is revealed through presencing. Neither, then, is that which presences by withdrawing a maker; it is rather, that which unconceals through absencing. Thus, the differing in the *differenz* which gives the ontological distinction, its origin or source, is revealed to be no-thing, nothing other than a withdrawal of Being.

The fifth interpretation of Thomas's ontological distinction thus defines that difference in terms of *esse* and *ens*, but refuses to view *esse* as existence. By so doing, we allow Thomas to recapture the primordial sense of Being as presencing/revealing/withdrawal, while at the same time allowing him to not only make a genuine ontological distinction, but also to think that which makes or gives the ontological distinction in the first place.

Finally, we must ask what all of this means for traditional Thomistic epistemology. Well, as what is present, the completed presence can become the object of an abstraction, either with or without precision. But *what* is captured in that case is either the whole essence of the thing, or its form, either man or humanity, either animal or animality. What is left out of the abstracting process, however, is the Being of the being. Thomists normally say that *esse* is grasped in the judgment; but what is grasped in the judgment when *esse* is re-thought as Being rather than existence, is not a being's act of existing so much as the how of its Being. In other words, when *esse* is re-thought as *Being*, the copulative function of judgment, rather the existential function of judgment, takes priority. If we say, for example, "Mahler's eighth symphony is beautiful," we are saying something about how it is, how its being is; in effect, we are saying something about its degree of perfection, or Being. But this is not the same as saying, "The symphony's existence is beautiful," or simply "The symphony exists."

What presents itself to us in the hardened presence, then, can become the object of an abstraction—and this accounts for Aquinas saying that metaphysics studies the formal being of all things as its subject matter. However, that Being is the Being distributed among the ten categories, and is to be

distinguished from transcendental Being, or Being itself. Transcendental Being can be known only through an act of separation, a negative judgment which says that that which makes a being be, need not be identified with that which makes it be a being of a given kind. In a sense, then, what is grasped in the negative judgment is indeed Being.

But there is also something that eludes the metaphysical judgment, for something withdraws with every presencing. As such, this “something” cannot become the object of an abstraction, and cannot be captured in a concept, because as no-thing, as a withdrawal, it is unconditioned. Hence, when viewed in the light of our fifth interpretation of Thomas’s ontological distinction, the metaphysical separation of the negative judgment opens the way for thinking to enter into the event of appropriation in a conscious way, by letting Being be. Simply stated, the negative judgment of metaphysics must be viewed as separating not existence but Being—the fullness of perfection—that cannot be identified with any kind of being that would limit it. Yet, because the metaphysical separation necessarily takes the form of a negative judgment, the object of the judgment, pure *esse*, withdraws. *Esse* thus partly reveals itself in predicative judgments and in *essentia*, but ultimately withdraws from conscious appropriation.