

# From Existence to Essence: Re-gaining the Aristotelian-Thomistic Doctrine in Front of Modern problems

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The traditional doctrine about existence and essence has become problematic in modern philosophies because they use still the two terms but no longer in their original meanings, by neglect of their sources. The result is a separation of existence and essence or even an opposition between them. By this the relationship of both terms and finally the meaning of essence itself becomes problematic. In the following, firstly, I would like to recall some of the modern problems regarding existence and essence in order to resolve them, then, from the perspective of the traditional doctrine of existence and essence in Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas in whom the two terms are not opposite but complementary.<sup>1</sup>

## I. Modern problems concerning existence and essence

### I.1. *In rationalism*

Descartes' general doubt about the existence of the external things, which may be perhaps a mere illusion, leaves behind as the only evident existence that of the thinking I: *cogito ergo sum; sum res cogitans*.<sup>2</sup> In order to justify the natural sciences and to recognize again the existence of the external world, Descartes takes, then, a long detours, which leads to his rationalism of theological form. He assumes that

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1. With this limitation my paper could not enter in the problem concerning the proof of the existence of God, in particular the ontological argument, although it implicates also the problem of the term of existence in general, as the appreciable article of I. MARTINEZ-LIÉBANA, *¿Es la existencia un predicado real?*, in *Espíritu* 54 (2005) 253-276.

2. R. DESCARTES, *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, III, Paris, 1641.

there are three ideas in the soul (an innatist assumption): *res cogitans*, *res extensa*, *Deus*, and that in God's mind there are all sciences, together with the ideas or essences of all things of this world. Hence, man when occupied with sciences participates at the thoughts of God and can understand how by God's creation the ideal essences of the things of this world come into existence. In this way existence, which before was a doubtful sensible datum, becomes now a rational derivative of the essences.

The new meaning of existence is found again in Spinoza and Leibniz, further in Baumgarten, a disciple of the latter, who declares in his metaphysical work that the existence of things is complementary to their essence: *existentia est complexus affectionum in aliquo compossibilium i. e. supplementum essentiae sive possibilitatis internae...*<sup>3</sup>

### 1.2. *In empiricism*

Before I pass to Kant, I have to take in account, briefly, the other philosophical school, opposite to the rationalistic one, namely empiricism. It is the continuation of the ancient empirical and sceptical school (Pyrrho, Protagoras, Sextus Empiricus), taking, at the beginning of Modern Times, a fresh start with Francis Bacon. In his *Novum Organon* he intends to liberate the sciences from –in his view– sterile speculations of traditional metaphysics and empty dialectical disputes. On the contrary, he re-organizes the natural sciences with the method of experiment in order to study the nature of things, that is the forces hidden in them, and to use them for ameliorating the human conditions of life on earth.

In this frame, the “existence” of natural things has only the meaning of their sensible empirical fact. Revising the Aristotelian *Organon*, he excludes the formal and final causes as mere “idols”, and with these the essences of things. What remains is matter and its motions the laws of which have to be researched.

David Hume, working out –in the line of Bacon, Hobbes and Locke– the empiricist theory, builds up human knowledge on the base of sense-perception, starting with the first sensible impressions,

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3. A. BAUMGARTEN, *Metaphysica*, from 1779, Pars I, cap. 1, sect. 3, § 55.

which are followed by images and ideas, accompanied by the reflection from the side of reason which puts in order the empirical material (by selection, combination, comparison etc.). In this position it is clear enough that “existence” of things can mean only their empirical fact, and that their “essence” becomes meaningless.

### 1.3. *In Kant*

Kant agrees with Descartes’ doubt about the existence of the external things. Even, he takes it for totally unknowable and eliminates the “Ding an sich”, will say: everything existing in itself, independently from the subject. But he refuses also the rationalist theory of the existence as derivative of the essence, understood as an intellectual concept. On the contrary, he separates “existence” or “being” from “essence”, in the well-known statement, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*:

Being is obviously no real predicate i. e. a concept of something, which could be added to the concept of a thing<sup>4</sup>.

On the contrary, he declares now “being” as a position (“Setzung”) of the object qua phenomenon in our consciousness, concerning the status of the subject in front of the object qua phenomenon. He uses the example with the 100 Thalers which can exist in my money-chest or only in my thought, what makes a decisive difference. Anyway, the “existence” of the Thalers does not add an essential predicate to them.

In doing so, Kant re-discovers, without being aware, the traditional distinction between existence and essence. However, he does no longer understand “existence” in realistic sense (as the tradition did) but takes it –with his Copernican turn– for something in the subject. Here it assumes two meanings, a sensible and an intelligible one (like in Descartes): a) In the first meaning “existence” is the sensible datum of the material in the sense-perception (Sinnesanschauung) or in the “sensual consciousness” (sinnliches Bewusstsein); b) in the second meaning “existence”, now pronounced as “being”

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4. “Sein ist offenbar kein reales Prädikat, d. i. ein Begriff von irgend etwas, was zu dem Begriffe eines Dinges hinzukommen könne”. I. KANT, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 2 edition from 1787, B 626.

(Sein), is the “position” (Setzung) of a “transcendental object” on the whole (überhaupt), in the “transcendental consciousness”.

#### I.4. *In the time after Kant*

Regarding post-kantian thinkers I would like to mention only Gilson, Husserl and Heidegger, concerning our topic of existence and essence. É. Gilson<sup>5</sup> tries to overcome the so-called essentialism of modern rationalism, which gave priority to the essences of things, deriving from them existence, and introduces a Christian existentialism with an absolute priority of existence of things, which is withdrawn from any rational analysis. Rather, existence of all things (from stones, plants, animals to human beings and God) is a “fait brut”, an impenetrable bloc. The only access we have to it is a feeling of reality, or a “common sense” (sens commun), which arrives at an evidence in the Christian belief of existence as creation by God.

E. Husserl, in his phenomenology<sup>6</sup>, separates completely existence from essence, considering the “existence” of external things as a mere thesis (Daseinsthese) of an empirical fact which he puts into brackets (eingeklammert), interesting only the natural sciences, not philosophy. After this “phenomenological reduction” he concentrates his attention upon the pure phenomena of things in us (following Kant’s transcendentalism) in order to construe –by our vital intentionality of our consciousness –our “Lebenswelt” (world of life) and to arrive (going beyond Kant) to an intuition of essences (Wesensschau) in it.

M. Heidegger introduces an existentialism, based on the human existence, describing its characteristic features, by means of Husserl’s phenomenology, which should substitute man’s essence. Indeed, in his writing on metaphysics, he interprets the essence of man as his existence.<sup>7</sup> There we read:

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5. Cf. É. GILSON, *L'être et l'essence*, Paris, 1948.

6. “Zur Entscheidung steht, ob das Sein selber aus seiner ihm eigenen Wahrheit seinen Bezug zum Wesen des Menschen ereignen kan” (page 10). E. HUSSERL, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*, from 1912-1913.

7. M. HEIDEGGER, *Was ist Metaphysik?*, Frankfurt, 1965.

The decision is at stake whether the being itself, from its own truth, can make its relation an event with man's essence, in the quoted text

Such an existentialist thinking of being which makes "the being" (das Sein) itself the acting instance, becoming now an event (Ereignis), aims at "the question of the truth of the being" (die Frage nach der Wahrheit des Seins). By this the traditional metaphysics should be overcome which was only a theory of being (von Seiendem), obstructing to man the original relation of the being (des Seins) with man's essence". The intended relation can be obtained in this way that thinking comprehends itself as an event in the being itself:

In this way, will say in service of the question about the truth of the being, the reflection upon the essence of man becomes necessary; indeed, the experience of the oblivion of the being, which is unexpressed because still to accomplish, implicates the all-bearing conjecture that, according to the oblivion of the being, the relation of the being even belongs to the being of man's essence itself.<sup>8</sup>

Contemporaneously to these schools the English empiricism has entered in new schools like the positivistic one of B. Russell and K. Popper. They exercise a hard criticism on scholastic metaphysics, especially on their doctrine of substance and essence of things. They consider the empirical things as phenomena, the only objects of our knowledge, and discredit any substance and essence as obscure metaphysical things behind the empirical ones, refuting them as non-sense.

## II. Critical revision of the modern views

After my short survey of modern problems, regarding existence and essence, I try to re-examine them, articulating some objections:

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8. "Auf diesem Weg, und das sagt, im Dienst der Frage nach der Wahrheit des Seins, wird eine Besinnung auf das Wesen des Menschen nötig; denn die unausgesprochene, weil erst zu erweisende Erfahrung der Seinsvergessenheit schließt die alles tragende Vermutung ein, gemäß der Unverborgenheit des Seins gehöre der Bezug des Seins zum Menschenwesen gar zum Sein selbst."

### II.1. *The rationalistic view*

Regarding the irreconcilable dualism between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, Descartes speaks of both as existing. Hence the common use of the term “existence” for the external things and the internal thinking soul must indicate some common feature. In both existence is intelligible and evident to our intellect.

Also in our individual biographic development we acquire first, already in childhood, an understanding of existence in contact with external things and only later, when the ego is taking shape in growing reflection, we attribute also analogously existence to the thinking I.

Hence Descartes’ dualism is due to the absence of the analogy of being which concerns a common mark in object and subject.

Further on, in Descartes neither the definition of matter as *res extensa*, nor that of the soul as *res cogitans* is satisfying, because for matter extension is only an attribute, not its essence. (As physics teaches us, visible extended matter can be transformed in energy. And with regard to the soul, again thinking is an attribute of it, not its essence, because thinking is a second act, different from the first act of soul’s ontological being. Traditional philosophy has a better insight when putting material and formal cause in the relationship of potency and act, two modes of being.

For the rest, although Descartes speaks of the soul as substantial, he reduces, in fact, its substantial being to the act of consciousness.

### II.2. *Kant’s position*

Regarding Kant’s position, I consent with his reflection upon “the condition of the possibility of experience”, leading him to the “transcendental consciousness”, which differs from knowledge and experience, because it is its condition. However, he understands, then, consciousness in the Cartesian sense as reflection of the thinking I, whereas it should be understood in the traditional sense as simple intuitive-receptive act which grasps the being / existence of things.

It was a mistake of Kant to refute any intellectual intuition (intellektuale Anschauung) to human beings, having in mind certain Platonists of his time who claimed an intellectual intuition of Platonic

essences of things.<sup>9</sup> However, even if we do not dispose on such an intuition, we possess nevertheless the simple act of consciousness (in the traditional sense), with which the intellect grasps the being / existence of things. And this intellectual act is intuitive-receptive, not discursive, nor an act of “position”.<sup>10</sup>

Consciousness (derived from *conscientia*) means originally a “concomitant knowing”, which concerns being, being one, being real, being good of things etc., and accompanies all discursive knowledge. Descartes, using the term *conscientia*, gives to it the meaning of reflection of the thinking I, what is mistaken, because this reflection is a discursive act, namely the beginning self-knowledge. With regard to sensible data, Kant speaks (with the empiricists) of sensual consciousness (*sinnliches Bewusstsein*). However, this term is self-contradictory. Senses have no knowing (*scire*).

By the way, all modern philosophies of consciousness are concerned with the problem of the immanence of consciousness in which reason is enclosed. How can it be conscious of external things? A problem which rises from the identification of consciousness with reflection. Indeed, reflection encloses the subject in itself, whereas consciousness (in the classical meaning) is open to all beings, subject and objects.

With regard to the two meanings which, according to Kant, existence or being assumes, namely as sensible-empirical and as thinkable (as “position” of the transcendental object in relation to the subject), it cannot have either the one or the other meaning; for existence is not a sensible fact, but an intelligible act of given things; and being / existence of things is no position of our intellect, but is given to us so that it must be received by our intellect, in the simple intuitive-receptive act of consciousness.

Seen more closely, we can accept –with the tradition– that the representation of the external object in the intellect is a position in it,

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9. Cf. the late writing of Kant: *Von einem neuerdings erhobenen vornehmen Tone in der Philosophie*, from 1796.

10. These considerations, and the following, are developed more in detail in my treatise: *Sein und Bewußtsein*, Hildesheim, 2001.

because constituted by the intellect itself (Aristotle: not the stone is in the soul, but its form). In Kant, however, after the elimination of the external thing in itself (Ding an sich) from our knowledge, the internal representation becomes now the object itself qua phenomenon, –what is unacceptable. Indeed, as already the tradition has seen, the internal cognitive content is only the *medium quo* of our knowledge of the external object, never the object itself.

By our natural consciousness of reality we comprehend being / existence of things, present to us, in our everyday life. Modern thinkers have criticised it as naïve. We shall discuss this later.

Kant's elimination of the "thing in itself" (Ding an sich) includes a dilemma. Indeed, the elimination of "the thing in itself" presupposes in us, the readers, a natural, immediate understanding of the expression "thing in itself". But as soon as we actualize this expression we grasp it evidently so that its elimination becomes impossible. In effect, even if we doubt all things in what they are, we cannot doubt that there is something "in itself" in front of our mind, because we cannot doubt something, starting from nothing.

### II.3. *The empiricist view*

Regarding Bacon's view, I can understand that he eliminates the formal and final causes from the research of the natural sciences, because these are focused only on the material aspect of things, which does not show formal, nor final causes. Indeed, these enter only in the realm of living beings, under the aspect of their life-principles. The error in Bacon consists in the fact that eliminating from scientific knowledge the formal and final causes nature is reduced to the mere material level.

Empiricism has been worked out in detail by John Locke who founds it systematically upon sense-perception<sup>11</sup> He relies on the thesis, ascribed to Aristotle: *nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu*, to which Leibniz has answered: *excipe: nisi intellectus ipse*.<sup>12</sup> By

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11. J. LOCKE, *Treatise concerning human understanding*, from 1690.

12. W. G. LEIBNIZ, *Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain*, from 1704. Cf. book 2, chap. 1.



this answer Leibniz reveals the problem of empiricism and gives the solution: namely that intellect belongs to the condition of experience, being the subject also of sense-perceptions. It is not the senses which perceive sensible things and judge about them, but the intellect with the senses. And the intellect knows itself directly, not via sense-perceptions, nor by abstraction from them. This clarification (relying on tradition) has overcome empiricism completely. Indeed, the simple self-perception or self-awareness of intellect, in its self-presence, is an intellectual act, not a sensual one, because intellect is no longer sensible.

In Kant's position (which contains, besides the rationalist premise, also an empiricist one) only the empirical subject is given to himself in the so-called "inner sense" (of time), whereas the intellectual (transcendental) subject no longer. He can only think himself as existing thing in itself, but is not given to himself realistically. Intellect is no longer present to himself. However, this contradicts his consciousness of real self-presence, which is, at no rate, empirical, sustained by the senses.

David Hume has elaborated the empiricist theory<sup>13</sup> so that the only base of our knowledge from which it starts is sense-perception, with the first "impressions" of sensible objects upon our senses. The existence of them becomes evident, thanks of these primary impressions. However this explanation is falsified by the true evidence of our intellect, referred to the simple act of being of the empirical things, which is no longer sensible but intelligible (as mentioned above). Sensual feelings refer always to sensible material data (like red, or cold, or hard etc.), whereas the simple being of things, in their formal presence, has no colour, no sound, no smell, no taste. Only intellect is aware of it, none of the senses.

#### II.4. *Post-kantian positions:*

Considering thinkers after Kant, until our time, I should limit myself only to a few:

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13. Cf. D. HUME, *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding* etc., from 1777. More recent edition by L. A. Selby-Bigge, Oxford 1902. Reprint 1966.

Gilson opposes existence and essence, because he refuses the rationalist speculation of ideal essences without concrete existence, giving absolute priority to the latter. I cannot enter here in discussion of his position but only consider an interesting argument which expounds what he calls the “dilemma of realism”, in the following form:<sup>14</sup> On the one side, it is typical for realism to grasp reality in an immediate and evident manner. Insofar, however, for Gilson realism remains below the rational level of philosophy and needs a philosophical foundation. Without this it would be unacceptable, irrational. On the other side, every philosophical foundation would take away the immediate character of realism, losing it at all. The dilemma can be formulated also in this way: Without critical reflection realism would remain on an irrational level of sentiments, whereas with a philosophical foundation it becomes an idealism.

However, this argument has two implications which are questionable: that our everyday natural realism, without philosophical reflection, is irrational (or emotional), and 2. that philosophical reflection has to furnish a critical foundation. However, both implications are not necessary, nor even acceptable. Indeed, natural realism, without philosophical reflection, is not irrational, but relies on the natural immediate consciousness of the (intelligible) real being, which our intellect possesses of things (as explained above). And philosophical reflection must not be *eo ipso* critical (as in sceptical schools), but also affirmative, justifying that which is evident.

The author does not profit from the traditional distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus*, reason and intellect. The former is discursive, the latter intuitive. Thomas<sup>15</sup> appreciates the use of these terms, offered by a long tradition, and states that the intellect, as the broader faculty, embraces that of reason. Indeed, all discursive operations start from certain data, which have to be grasped intuitively, and finish in complex relations of knowledge which must be again unified intuitively. The being of things, as a primary datum, must be grasped intuitively by intellect, just with the simple act of consciousness.

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14. Cf. É. GILSON, *Réalisme thomiste et critique de la connaissance*, from 1939; later edition, Paris, 1986.

15. THOMAS AQUINAS, *De veritate*, q. XV, a. 1.

Gilson therefore, in order to speak of reality, without using critical reflection (which would take away realism at all), claims for the *common sense* of reality which is a certain belief in it. The author develops the concept of *sens commun* towards a certainty of the existence of things, which is put in existential feelings, life-experience, and finally in Christian religious belief (the existence of things as creatures of God).

Regarding Edmund Husserl, I wish to remark that being / existence of the external things is not a question of an opinion (Seinsmeinung) about a sensible fact which we could neglect and “put into brackets” (einklammern). On the contrary, it is an intelligible act of all things which can never be “put into brackets”. The corresponding consciousness accompanies all our cognitive activities, experiences, opinions etc. and offers the base for the traditional ontology of being.

Under the influence of the Cartesian dualism between *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, Husserl, retracing the whole history of occidental philosophy, divides it in objectivism and subjectivism.<sup>16</sup> The former covers Ancient and Medieval Times and a part of Modern Times, the latter starts only with Hume, Kant and psychological thinkers until himself, Husserl, who declares his phenomenology as “radical subjectivism”. However, being of things, already as simple existence, is not a sensible fact of material objects, but an intelligible act which we find analogously in objects as well as in subject. We have to recognize it, or we lose realism.

Further on, it becomes questionable to speak about essence and intuition of essence (Wesensschau), when the basis of essence, the substantial being of real things, is taken away. What Husserl calls “essence” consists only in characteristic features of phenomena. In truth, however, the essence of things does not appear “leibhaft” (embodied) in phenomena, but is the intelligible form of the being of things. Phenomenology has its value in analysing and describing psychic phenomena –called by Husserl himself “transcendental psychology”–, but it cannot

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16. Cf. E. HUSSERL, *Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*, from 1936.

substitute the traditional ontology, which starts from the simple being of things.

Concerning Heidegger's utterance that man's essence is his existence, I would like to observe this: Since Heidegger disqualifies the traditional ontology of being as "a superficial opinion of being" (eine oberflächliche Seinsmeinung) and disregards the scholastic term of being as "empty" (leer),<sup>17</sup> he tries to create his "fundamental ontology" by filling up "being" with the existential experiences, historical living events (Erlebnisse), like a hidden destiny etc. However, by this procedure existence becomes the essence of man, and the simple existence is lost.

Concerning Russell's and Popper's<sup>18</sup> criticism on Western metaphysics, they consider it mainly under the aspect of Plato's doctrine of the two worlds, the sensible one and that of the ideas, substantialized concepts, without reality. They are not aware that Plato (in the dialogue *Parmenides*) distinguished between the concepts in our mind (*noema*) and the ideas (*eidos, idea*) as real formal causes on the side of things. The separation of them from the material phenomena does not make him an idealist. For the rest, already Aristotle has corrected the separation, retaining the formal causes in the empirical things themselves. Russell and Popper ignore Aristotle's correction and his own doctrine of substance, which distinguishes, according to the categories of substance and accidents, between substantial and accidental being of things. Certainly, if one identifies being with a sensible material fact, in an empiricist and nominalist way, the categorical distinctions become meaningless. There remain only phenomena as objects. However, then it will be also problematic to speak of "phenomena" which mean "appearances" of something. However, of what? Not again of phenomena but of substances.

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17. Cf. M. HEIDEGGER, *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, from 1935. Cf. my treatise: *Heideggers Fehlinterpretation antiker Texte*, Bonn, 2005.

18. See for instance B. RUSSELL: *The Problem of Philosophy*, from 1912, and: *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, from 1940. – Regarding K. POPPER, I used the selection of writings: *A Pocket Popper*, edited by David Miller, Oxford 1983, especially: *Two kinds of definition*, from 1945; *The problem of induction*, from 1953 / 1974; *Metaphysics and criticizability*, from 1958.

In summary, substance in Aristotle is not some metaphysical obscure thing behind the empirical thing, but is the empirical thing itself, seen under its aspect of substantial being (according to the first category).

### III. The doctrine of existence and essence in Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas

My short survey on modern problems about existence and essence justifies us to return to their original meanings which we can re-gain from some relevant texts in Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas.

#### III.1. *Being as most evident*

Confronted with the modern criticism that traditional realism of being is naïve, that is not reflected, uncritical, we notice that it ignores the classical sources. Already Aristotle justifies his statement of the being of things as most evident by a fundamental reflection, expounded in his epistemology.<sup>19</sup> There he puts the question what is presupposed for acquiring knowledge whatsoever, and arrives to the answer that this is the being of things in every domain of knowledge, more precisely: their being under the aspects of being-there (existence) and being something. The two aspects answer to the two questions: whether a thing is, and what it is.<sup>20</sup>

Thomas Aquinas –by mediation of Avicenna, the great Persian commentator of Aristotle’s *Metaphysica*– has taken up this doctrine<sup>21</sup> and brings the Aristotelian reflection to the result that being of

19. Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Analytica posteriora*, book I, chap. 1-2, and my edition with commentary: *Aristoteles’ Zweite Analytiken*, Hamburg (Meiners Phil. Bibl.), 1995.

20. The subject is discussed more in detail in my treatises: 1. *Sein und Bewußtsein. Erörterungen zur Erkenntnislehre und Metaphysik in einer Gegenüberstellung von Aristoteles und Kant*, Hildesheim 2001; translated in Czech language: H. SEIDL, *Bytí a vědomí. Gnoseologie a metafysika v klasické a moderní tradici*, Vyšehrad, 2005; 2. *Realistische Metaphysik. Stellungnahme zu moderner Kritik an der traditionellen Metaphysik*, Hildesheim, 2006; translated in Italian: *Metafisica e realismo*, Roma 2007; in English: *Metaphysics and Realism*, Roma, 2008; in Chinese: 实在主义的形而上学, ransl. and introd. by Zhou Chunsheng, Shanghai, 2008.

21. THOMAS AQUINAS, *De veritate*, quaest. I, art. 1.

things is the most known for our intellect: “*illud quod primo intellectus concipit quasi notissimum est ens*”. This important statement expresses that being of things is immediately known, even most known, not an acquirable knowledge. But the statement itself is the result of an epistemological reflection. Hence classical realism, on the one side, is immediate but, on the other, not naïve because justified by a profound reflection.

It is noteworthy that the reflection of the presupposition of all acquirable knowledge includes also the reflection itself, so that this reflection goes beyond itself, recognizing its own ontological foundation in the being of everything. In so far this reflection is more profound than the Cartesian and the Kantian one which ends in the reflection itself as last foundation of our knowledge.

The corresponding act which grasps being, is the simple receiving act of intellect (in Greek *noein*, in Latin *intelligere*), contacting being in what is given in all categories. Cf. *Metaph.* IX, 10. Thomas indicates it precisely in this way:<sup>22</sup>

intelligere autem dicit nihil aliud quam simplicem intuitum intellectus in id quod sibi est praesens intelligibile ...Sed secundum quod intelligere nihil aliud dicit quam intuitum, qui nihil aliud est quam praesentia intelligibilis ad intellectum, quocumque modo, sic anima semper intelligit se et Deum.

This simple act by which intellect perceives the being of things, which are present to it, we have called above consciousness, in this original meaning.

To return again to Gilson’s dilemma of realism, I would like to underline this: When we reflect on the condition of what is most evident to us, and find it in the being of things, then we can only recognize it as most evident or cannot have reached it at all. He who wants to speak about being can do it only through the traditional reflection, which (in Parmenides, Plato and Aristotle) for the first time has set out “being” thematically, or cannot speak about it at all.

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22. THOMAS AQUINAS, I *Sent.*, dist. 3, q. 4, a. 5.

III.2. *From existence to essence*

Aristotle introduces in *Metaphysica*, book IV 1 and VI 1, its object, “being qua being”, with reference to the epistemological reflection of *Analytica post.* and expounds the following reflection: Whereas all other single sciences presuppose the being of their objects, *Metaphysics* has no further object in addition to them, but deals with that formal presupposition of the other sciences, that is: with the being of their objects, now declared thematically as “being qua being”: under the two aspects of being-there and being-something. Aristotle underlines then that it concerns substance, the primary being according to the first category, which is or exists substantially.

Aristotle’s *Metaphysica*, starting with this object, proceeds then, book VII, in direction of the causes by which beings are. These causes are the material, formal, moving and final ones.

The first approach to them is by the consideration of the essence of things, with the question, *Metaph.* VII, chap. 4 ss., what things in themselves (*per se*) and identically are, taking away all accidental features. In correction of Plato who conceives the essence under the universal form, with the question “what it is” (*tí estin*), Aristotle considers the essence of things with regard to their specific being, with the question “what was the proper being of the individual” (*tò tí ên eînai*), its essence. Hence Aristotle conceives the essence as the form under which each thing specifically is what it is (e.g. the horse a horse, the human being a human being).

By this the connection of existence and essence becomes manifest; further also by the procedure of the definition.<sup>23</sup> It begins with the question whether the thing (to be defined) is or not and goes on with the question what it is. For we can search for the essence of a thing only when it exists and is observable. Further on, the being of the thing (to be defined) is a presupposition of its definition and must not enter in it, “the being is not the essence of anything”: *tò d’ eînai ouk ousía oudení*.<sup>24</sup>

23. Cf. *Anal. post.* II, 4-10.

24. *Ibidem*, II, 7, 92b 14.

Here we have the source-text of the distinction between existence and essence. Usually the term “the being” (*tò eînai*) in the text is translated with “existence” what is right, because it corresponds, in that context, with the question whether the thing (to be defined) exists. Nevertheless the term *eînai*, “being”, is open for the connection with *ousía*, the verbal substantive of *eînai*. The term *ousía* can mean substance (e.g. Socrates) and also the essence (of Socrates), what depends on the context.

### III.3. *The essence as the cause of existing things*

*Metaph.*, book VII, deals with essence, chap. 4-12, from the view-point of definition, but passes then, chap. 17, to the view-point of causes, so that the question: “What is the thing (to be defined)“?, is modified to the question: “Why belongs this to that”, namely a formal or final cause of the thing to its matter?

Indeed, it makes a great difference, when we study a thing, whether we look only to its matter, or also to its formal or final cause. As the text here (and in *Physica*, book II) explains, things are more than only their material parts, what holds true especially in living beings, which are endowed with a life-principle, a soul.

Thomas has apprehended from Aristotle the methodical procedure from the initial object, the being, towards the causes by which it is, towards the essence, in the metaphysical sense, and has accomplished it in his writing: *De ente et essentia* which is, in large extent, a commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysica*, book VII.

In Aristotle’s epistemology the definition, which proceeds with genus and specific differences, is closely combined with induction, the way of finding the generic and specific causes, namely the material and the formal causes.

Modern criticism on the Platonic and Aristotelian method of definition has totally ignored that it is orientated to the search of causes. Let us take the simple scholarly example with the definition of man as “biped animal”. Beginning with the genus “animal”, the definition must find those specific differences which divide the genus exhaustively into two domains. This succeeds with the two differences “aquatic



animals” and “terrestrial animals”, which indicate two essentially different modes of life, with two completely different organisms.

The next pair of differences, regarding the terrestrial animals, namely the “winged animals” and the “pedestrian animals” concern again essential differences in the mode of life and biological organisation, and the same holds with the third pair of differences, regarding the pedestrian animals in “multiped” and “biped animals”. The latter are combined with an upright position, connected with the larger form of the brain and the transformation of the anterior feet in arms and hands for the specifically human functions. The exterior morphology manifests the efficiency of a formal and final cause, a psychic principle of life.

Further more it is noteworthy that every pair of specific differences is made with regard to the being of the object in question –in our example: man– and conveys a decision of being or not being: being aquatic or terrestrial, being winged or pedestrian, being multiped or biped. Hence, the example shows also the connection of essence with being.

Hence the result comes forth that the essence of things consists in their constitutive causes of being.

Thomas, following Aristotle, has expressed essence or essential form as that by which a thing is what it specifically is.<sup>25</sup>

#### III.4. *Potency and act, regarding essence*

In the Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics the material and the formal causes are defined by potency (*dynamis, potentia*) and act (*enérgeia, actus*). These two terms express two modes of being and are complementary to each other like the undetermined / determinable and the determining principle. They have been introduced

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25. Thomas teaches in many places, often referring to Aristotle, that the essential form (as formal cause) gives to every thing its being, for instance, *Summa contra gentes*, I, c. 26, n. 4: “forma dicitur esse principium essendi, et similiter agens quod facit aliqua esse actu”; *Summa theol.* I, q. 5, a. 4: “in causato, quod primum sit ipse forma, per quam est ens”; q. 14, a. 8: “forma naturalis ...manens in eo, cui dat esse”; q. 41, a. 2: “forma naturalis, per quam res habet esse”; et passim.

in Aristotle's *Physica* in order to define movement, namely as the passage of the natural thing in movement from potential to actual being.

This presupposes in the moving thing two causes which are responsible for its potentiality and its actuality: namely the material cause, on the one side, and the formal, efficient and final cause, on the other.

Thomas Aquinas is familiar with this doctrine, namely that the essence or the decisive formal cause gives the act of being to the complex thing, composed of matter and formal cause (as explained just now). However, a new question rises –which goes beyond Aristotle– asking from where the essence has its act. It cannot have its act by its own, but must have received it from a transcendent cause, which is identical with God. Under this new “theological”–metaphysical aspect essence is related to its being as potency to act.

This Thomistic doctrine of essence as potency has influenced largely modern rationalism and idealism, where potency becomes the possibility of thought so that essence, as thinkable possibility, results in an opposition to being as act.

Yet the modern misunderstanding ignores that Thomas' doctrine of the essence as potency in front of actual being does not contradict or substitute the Aristotelian doctrine of the essence as act-principle, because the two doctrines belong to two different dimensions. The latter concerns the relation of the formal cause with matter, immanent in the natural things, the former, instead, concerns the transcendent relation of the formal cause with a first metaphysical divine cause, from which it receives its actual being.

### III.5. *Essence as being in the divine substance*

In Aristotle's *Metaphysica*, book XII, which is his natural theology, the first transcendent cause of being of all things is determined is immaterial, pure act (without any potency). This means that its essence is identical with its actual being.

Thomas has assumed this doctrine in the first part of *Summa theologiae* I, q. 3, a. 3, teaching that in God his essence is identically his being: *in Deo idem est essentia et esse*, God is essentially *ipsum esse subsistens*. Modern criticism puts this in question, ignoring that this

statement is made of the first cause, the divine substance, which presupposes the whole foregoing metaphysics. Whereas in all beings the being differs from their essence, in God –in a unique exception– both fall into one. The expression “*ipsum esse*” may not be isolated from its metaphysical context in order to put it, then, into question what it could mean, as Heidegger does.

### III.6. *Ontological truth of being*

Regarding the truth of being, the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition distinguishes logical from ontological truth: Logical truth or falsehood concerns relations between things and properties and is expressed in true or false judgements and propositions. Ontological truth, instead, concerns the being of things themselves, in their simple existence and being something, which we can only grasp evidently as true, or not at all.<sup>26</sup>

Evidence of a true insight means, by definition, that falsehood, that is: the opposite possibility, is excluded.

The immediate comprehension of the existence of things is presupposed for all reflection, also the logical one –concerning the rules of thinking and of propositions– which comes later, seen from the traditional view-point. Analytical philosophy, instead, has opened a new field of questions which to discuss here is no longer the scope of our paper.

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[artículo recibido el 2 de octubre de 2010 y aceptado para su publicación el 13 de diciembre de 2010]

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26. PAOLO CRIVELLI, in his interesting study: *Aristotle on truth*, Cambridge / England, 2004, maintaining the logical-propositional perspective also in his interpretation of *Met.* IX 10, would not like to see two essentially different forms of truth. I cannot enter here in the discussion.