

# A Problem with Feser's Defense of the *Intellectus Essentiae* Argument

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## 1. Introduction: The *Intellectus Essentiae* Argument

In his early treatise *De Ente et Essentia* (1250-1256), Thomas Aquinas briefly sketches an argument for the existence of God that begins with the real distinction of essence and existence (*esse*) in the things of our experience. From there, the argument says that a cause is needed to explain the *esse* of said things, and that such a cause ultimately needs to be something whose essence is identical to its existence (aka. God).<sup>1</sup>

Hence, a crucial step of the argument is to establish a real distinction between essence and existence. In the *De Ente*, Aquinas puts forward two arguments to defend such a step: (i) the so-called *intellectus essentiae* argument, and (ii) an argument from multiplicity. Out of the two, the first one has been highly controversial in the History of philosophy, even among Thomistic philosophers themselves. Aquinas's own statement of the argument goes as follows:

Whatever is not of the understood content of an essence or quiddity is something which comes from without and makes a composition with the essence, because no essence can be understood without the things which are parts of it. Now, every essence or quiddity can be understood without anything being understood about its existence. For I can understand what a man is, or what a phoenix is, and yet not know whether they have existence in the real world. It is clear, therefore, that existence is other than essence or quiddity, unless perhaps there exists a thing

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<sup>1</sup> The argument can be found in chapter IV of the *De Ente et Essentia*. Probably the best book-length treatment of the *De Ente* argument is to be found in GAVEN KERR (2015), *Aquinas's Way to God*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

whose quiddity is its existence.<sup>2</sup>

Now, both the soundness of this argument and Aquinas's own understanding of it have been and still are extremely contested issues. Some commentators, such as Fabro, Wippel and Kerr, have suggested that the argument does not succeed on its own in establishing a strictly *real* distinction between essence and existence, as opposed to a merely *conceptual* one. These commentators suggest that Aquinas himself maybe thought of it not as a separate independent argument, but as the first stage of a more overarching case that culminated with the argument from multiplicity.<sup>3</sup>

Others, however, such as Edward Feser and David Oderberg, seem to consider it as a plausible stand-alone argument for the real distinction, alongside others.<sup>4</sup> In this paper, I shall point to what seems to me a major problem with Feser's defense of the argument, without entering the interpretative discussion of how to better understand what Aquinas claims to be doing. I will end by briefly considering an alternative rendition suggested by some of Feser's own remarks which sidesteps the objection, but maybe at some cost.

Hence, the aim of this paper is quite a modest one. I will not be arguing that there is no possible sound '*intellectus essentiae*' inspired argument for the real distinction, but only that Feser's own presentation of it suffers from a major inconvenience. Nor does the soundness of the *De Ente* argument for God (or of Feser's own Thomistic proof), of which I myself am quite convinced, rest on the success of the *intellectus essentiae* argument. Feser himself gives, in favor of the real distinction, two other arguments (one from multiplicity and another from contingency), and there may

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<sup>2</sup> I follow Joseph Bobik's translation: see THOMAS AQUINAS (2007), *On Being and Essence*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 159-160. Here is the original Latin text: "Quicquid enim non est de intellectu essentiae vel quiditatis, hoc est adveniens extra et faciens compositionem cum essentia, quia nulla essentia sine his, quae sunt partes essentiae, intelligi potest. Omnis autem essentia vel quiditas potest intelligi sine hoc quod aliquid intelligatur de esse suo; possum enim intelligere quid est homo vel Phoenix et tamen ignorare an esse habeat in rerum natura. Ergo patet quod esse est aliud ab essentia vel quiditate, nisi forte sit aliqua res, cuius quiditas sit ipsum suum esse" (see *Corpus Thomisticum*: <<https://www.corpusthomisticum.org/oe.html>> [Consulted: 3 May 2022]).

<sup>3</sup> See J. F. WIPPEL (2000), *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, Washington, DC.: The Catholic University of America Press, 137-143; G. KERR, *Aquinas's Way to God*, 17; C. FABRO (1950), *La Nozione Metafisica di Partecipazione secondo S. Tomaso d'Aquino*, Turin: Società Editrice Internazionale, 218-219.

<sup>4</sup> Feser has defended the *intellectus essentiae* argument in E. FESER (2017), *Five Proofs of the Existence of God*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 117-119 as part of his Thomistic Proof, and also previously in E. FESER (2014), *Scholastic Metaphysics*, Heusenstamm: Editiones Scholasticae, 243-244. For Oderberg's rendition, see D. ODERBERG (2007), *Real Essentialism*, New York & London: Routledge, 122-123.

even be strong considerations from epistemology in favor of it too.<sup>5</sup> However, if my criticism is correct, this particular attempt to prove the real distinction should be reconsidered. Only in the case that the *intellectus essentiae* argument can't be reformulated to avoid the objection without losing its own specificity with respect to other arguments, it should be abandoned altogether. This I will leave to others to consider.

## II. The Problem with Feser's Rendition of the Argument

Edward Feser's 2017 book *Five Proofs of the Existence of God* provides an overall powerful case for the God of classical theism. In Chapter 4 he develops a Thomistic proof inspired in Aquinas's own *De Ente* argument, beginning with the real distinction between essence and existence in the things of our experience. As said, one of the reasons he offers in favor of the real distinction is the *intellectus essentiae* argument, which he frames like this:

Consider first that you can know a thing's essence without knowing whether or not it exists. Suppose a person had, for whatever reason, never heard of lions, pterodactyls, or unicorns. Suppose you gave him a detailed description of the natures of each. You then tell him that of these creatures, one exists, one used to exist but is now extinct, and the third never existed; and you ask him to tell you which is which given what he now knows about their essences. He would, of course, be unable to do so. But then the existence of the creatures that do exist must be really distinct from their essences, otherwise one *could* know of their existence merely from knowing their essences. [...] So, if the essence and existence of a thing were not distinct features of reality, then knowing the former should suffice for knowing the latter, yet it doesn't.<sup>6</sup>

The argument is pretty straightforward and barely needs any clarification. The problem I want to highlight is the following: it is difficult to see how the argument avoids the implication that *even in God*, the being in which essence and existence are identical, essence and existence are in fact really distinct. How so? Consider the following. If we grant that

- (1) If we can know the essence of a thing without knowing whether it exists,

<sup>5</sup> See E. FESER, *Five Proofs*, 117-123; *Scholastic Metaphysics*, 255-256, and D. ODERBERG, *Real Essentialism*, 125.

<sup>6</sup> E. FESER, *Five Proofs*, 118.

then the essence of such a thing must be really distinct from its existence;

and given that

(2) We can know the essence of God without knowing whether God exists;

it follows

(3) The essence of God must be really distinct from His existence; which is odd and paradoxical, given that God is supposed to be that whose essence simply *is* existence itself.

Now, one may want to dispute (2) on the basis that we do not have a complete grasp of God's essence, which is true and also classic Thomistic teaching. But that would not affect the objection *against Feser*, since, per his own admission, complete grasp of an essence is *not* required for the *intellectus essentiae* argument to go through. Building on this, Feser goes on to distinguish between *incompletely* conceiving something and *misconceiving* it:

Suppose you judge that a lion is a kind of animal but do not judge that it is a kind of cat. In that case, while you have only *incompletely* conceived of what it is to be a lion, you have not for that reason *misconceived* what it is to be a lion. By contrast, if you not only fail to judge that a lion is a kind of cat but judge that a lion *is not* a kind of cat, then you *have* misconceived what it is to be a lion. Now, if we suppose that you judge that lions don't exist [...] then while you have judged falsely, you have *not* misconceived *what it is* to be a lion. Yet if the existence of a lion were not distinct from its essence, this would not be the case. Judging it to be nonexistent would be as much to misconceive *what it is* as judging it to be a noncat would be.<sup>7</sup>

According to this, then, it would seem that we have

(4) If we can judge that some thing does not exist without misconceiving it, then its essence must be really distinct from its existence.

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<sup>7</sup> E. FESER, *Five Proofs*, 118.

But in that case, we seem to run into the same problem, because

(5) We can judge that God does not exist without misconceiving Him.

(5) has to be true for any standard Thomist, otherwise the truth of the Ontological Argument would seem to follow, something which Aquinas, Feser and many others reject. But in that case, from (4) and (5), (3) follows once more: The essence of God must be really distinct from His existence.

In short, Feser's defense of the *intellectus essentiae* argument runs into a problem: it seems to imply the paradoxical conclusion that, even if something whose essence and existence were identical existed, its essence and existence would still be really distinct. Otherwise we should be able to know whether such a thing exists merely by knowing its essence, but we can't; or we shouldn't be able to judge it as non-existent without misconceiving it altogether, which we can. All of this is reason to reject both (1) and (4), that is, to reject the idea that, if the essence and existence of something were not really distinct, either we could know of its existence merely by knowing its essence or we could not judge it as non-existent without misconceiving it.

Now, to his credit, Feser himself seems aware of this objection (or at least a similar one). Though he does not do this in *Five Proofs*, in *Scholastic Metaphysics* he addresses the claim that the *intellectus essentiae* argument entails the truth of the Ontological Argument. He writes:

It might be suggested that by implying that if a thing's essence and existence were identical, then we would know from a thing's essence that it exists, the Thomist is essentially committed to the thesis that God's existence can be known from his essence, since they are identical. But that is not the case. All the Thomist is committed to is the thesis that from knowledge of God's essence alone, we can know that *if* God exists *then* he exists necessarily rather than contingently. But to know whether he really does exist we need a further argument.<sup>8</sup>

But this, it seems to me, just *is* to acknowledge that we *can* know God's essence without thereby knowing if He exists, which is proposition (2); or that we *can* judge God as non-existent without thereby misconceiving what He is (or would be, if He existed), which is proposition (5). And given how the *intellectus essentiae* argument was framed by Feser –that is, employing (1) and/or (4)–, that just gives us the absurd

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<sup>8</sup> E. FESER, *Scholastic Metaphysics*, 244. To be sure, Feser's defense of the *intellectus essentiae* argument is not relevantly different there than how it appears in *Five Proofs*, at least not that I'm aware of.

result (3), which would appear to be reason enough to doubt the truth of (1) and (4). So, we would need to reframe the argument without appealing either to (1) or to (4). Let's examine a possible way to do it.

### III. Reframing the Argument

A possible way to salvage the argument is suggested by some of Feser's own remarks. As Feser himself says, one can turn the objection that the *intellectus essentiae* argument entails the truth of the Ontological Argument against the critic: "If the existence of a lion, velociraptor, or unicorn were *not* really distinct from its essence, then we should be able to argue, after the fashion of the ontological argument, that lions, velociraptors, and unicorns would exist necessarily rather than contingently, if they exist at all – which is absurd".<sup>9</sup> Now, this is *de facto* to change the argument, or so it seems to me. We should not be saying

(1) If we can know the essence of a thing without knowing whether it exists, then the essence of such a thing must be really distinct from its existence;

But rather

(1') If we can know the essence of a thing *without knowing that, if it existed, it would exist necessarily*, then the essence of such a thing must be really distinct from its existence.

Or, alternatively, instead of

(4) If we can judge that some thing does not exist without misconceiving it, then its essence must be really distinct from its existence;

we should be saying

(4') If we can judge that some thing, *if it existed, would not exist necessarily* without misconceiving it, then its essence must be really distinct from its existence.

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<sup>9</sup> E. FESER, *Scholastic Metaphysics*, 244.

The key point would not be any more our *inability* to know from a thing's essence whether it actually exists or not, but our *ability* to know from a thing's essence whether, if existent, it would exist *necessarily or not*. In other words: if I can exclude not existence simpliciter but "necessary existence" from my understanding of a thing and not misconceive it, then that thing's essence and existence must be really distinct.

If we made these changes to the argument, the problem I've been pointing to vanishes, for now (3) cannot follow neither from (1') and (2) nor from (4') and (5). For knowledge of God's essence does give us the knowledge that, if He existed, He would exist necessarily, and hence if we were to judge that he would *not* exist necessarily, we *would* be misconceiving what it is to be God. Now, if this new rendition remains true to what Aquinas himself was originally arguing in the *De Ente*, I'll leave it to others to decide (though it does not appear to me that way). However, my concern would now be whether such a change does not, so to speak, change the argument too much, turning it into an altogether different one.

Recall that, alongside the intellectus essentiae argument, Feser utilizes another argument for the real distinction from the contingency of the things of our experience. As he puts it: "[I]f the existence of a contingent thing was not really distinct from its essence, then it would have existence just by virtue of its essence. It would exist by its very nature, and would therefore not be contingent at all but necessary [...]. Hence, since it is not necessary but contingent, its existence must be really distinct from its essence".<sup>10</sup> Changing the intellectus essentiae argument in the way stated above would seem to make it dependent on the argument from contingency, if not in essence identical to it. To say that "If a thing's essence were not really distinct from its existence, then we could, from knowledge of its essence, infer that it would have to exist necessarily" does not appear to be relevantly different from saying that "If a thing's essence were not really distinct from its existence, then it would exist necessarily". Or at least not relevantly different enough as to constitute a separate independent argument from the one about contingency.

#### IV. Conclusion

To sum up, we have seen that Feser's defense of the *intellectus essentiae* argument leads to the absurd conclusion that essence and existence are really distinct even in God, that is, even in the only being in which they are supposed to be identical. Some changes could be made to the relevant premises of the argument, but plausibly at the cost of rendering it superfluous or redundant in the face of the argument from contingency.

<sup>10</sup> E. FESER, *Five Proofs*, 119. See also *Scholastic Metaphysics*, 242-243.

To reiterate what I said at the beginning, the stakes of this critique are not that high. I'm not claiming that there cannot be a sound *intellectus essentiae* argument, only that Edward Feser's particular defense of it seems to run into a significant problem. Fortunately, the real distinction between essence and existence rests on several other arguments that go unaffected by this problem, and so Feser's Thomistic proof could still go through even if we dropped the *intellectus essentiae* argument altogether, as I think we should.