

# Establishing the Real Distinction between Essence and Existence in *De Ente et Essentia*

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## Abstract:

Undoubtedly, St. Thomas' *De Ente et Essentia* is significant on account of not only identifying essence and existence, but also establishing the real distinction between essence and existence. But at what point in the *De Ente* does St. Thomas actually assert that essence and existence are really and not just conceptually distinct? This work looks at the arguments of Joseph Owens and John Wippel, who point to two different parts of the fourth chapter of the *De Ente* in which St. Thomas asserts the real distinction. Afterwards, it goes through St. Thomas' whole argument, showing that while Wippel is right that the real distinction is already established in the "second phase" of the argument in the fourth chapter, the "third phase," which Owens defends as the point where the real distinction is established, completes it. Ultimately, this is clarified in order to point out just how this part of the *De Ente* is an important foundation in St. Thomas' metaphysical thought.

**Keywords:** existence, essence, real distinction, *De Ente et Essentia*, St. Thomas Aquinas, Joseph Owens, John Wippel

## Introduction

One of the things that makes St. Thomas' *De Ente et Essentia* a significant text not only for Thomism but also for metaphysics is the fact that it establishes the real distinction between essence and existence. This distinction is important because it not only spells out the difference between God and other beings, but also, and more

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importantly, enables one to know how every real being except God exist in particular ways and modes, with existence being received in and limited by particular essences.

But in the course of St. Thomas' brilliant work, where exactly does he establish this distinction as a real and not merely conceptual one? This is the question that this work tries to answer, as it discusses two important arguments on *where* the real distinction between essence and existence is established, namely those of Joseph Owens and John Wippel. After showing these arguments, this work visits the very structure of the argument to determine which of these two are consistent with what St. Thomas intends to say.<sup>1</sup>

### ***De Ente* Chapter IV and the Commentary of Joseph Owens**

The fourth chapter of the *De Ente* aims to show how intelligences or spiritual beings (i.e. angels) and the soul exist as composite beings and hence differ from God. Responding to the Muslim philosopher Avicbron's claim that intelligence and the soul are made up of a form-matter composition, St. Thomas argues that they are still composed beings; however, instead of being comprised of form and matter, they are composed of essence and existence.<sup>2</sup> Thus, they do not exist in the same way that God does, whose essence is existence itself and is therefore the subsisting being.<sup>3</sup>

To show this, St. Thomas first shows that essence and existence differ and are distinct from each other, saying that

[w]hatever is not in the concept of the essence or the quiddity comes from beyond the essence and makes a composition with the essence, because no essence can be understood without the things that are its parts. But every essence or quiddity can be understood without

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<sup>1</sup> It must be noted, however, that there are those who claim that the distinction that St. Thomas establishes in the *De Ente* is not real but merely conceptual. This paper does not completely go into this issue, and only focuses on two specific arguments which insist that there is indeed a real distinction between essence and existence in the *De Ente*.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Kenny, *Aquinas on Being* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 28.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Bobik, *Aquinas on Being and Essence: A Translation and Interpretation* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 1965), 162.



understanding anything about its existence: I can understand what a man is or what a phoenix is and nevertheless not know whether either has existence in reality.<sup>4</sup>

Here, Thomas argues that because existence is not part of the definition of a particular being, it follows that essence and existence are distinct from each other. This assertion, named as the *Intellectus Essentiae* (IE) argument, has been widely accepted as the point where St. Thomas firmly establishes the real distinction between essence and existence.<sup>5</sup> According to Joseph Bobik, what St. Thomas does here is to utilize “a certain relation of identity between what is in the real world and our knowledge about what is in the real world,” ultimately asserting that essence and existence are distinct from each other by the mere fact that existence is not part of the definition of something.<sup>6</sup>

However, more recent commentators of the *De Ente* as well as of St. Thomas’ metaphysics challenge the claim, saying that to conclude a real distinction from a conceptual one seems to be a “hurdle” in philosophical thought.<sup>7</sup> They claim that it is possible that it only shows that the mind

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<sup>4</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, trans. Armand Maurer (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute for Mediaeval Studies, 1949), 45-46. For subsequent references in this work, the abbreviation *De Ente* is used followed by the chapter in which the passage or idea is found.

<sup>5</sup> The IE argument could have been taken by St. Thomas from his earlier work, namely his *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, where he also distinguishes essence and existence in understanding and reality. He points out that

[s]ince, in everything that exists, there must be considered its quiddity, by which it subsists in a determined nature, and its act of existence, in virtue of which it is said of it that it is in act, the name “thing” is imposed on the thing from its quiddity, as Avicenna says. . . . whereas the name “being” or what is imposed from the very act of existence itself. Now, since in any created thing its essence differs from its *esse*, that thing is properly named from its quiddity and not from its act of existence, as man is named from humanity. (St. Thomas Aquinas, “Commentary on Sentences,” in *An Aquinas Reader: Selections from the Writings of Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Mary T. Clark [New York: Image Books, 1972], 44.)

<sup>6</sup> Bobik, 167.

<sup>7</sup> See Joseph Owens, “Stages and Distinctions in *De Ente*: A Rejoinder,” *The Thomist* 45 (1981), 104.



forms two concepts, namely the thing's essence and its existence. If that is the case, then St. Thomas only establishes a conceptual distinction of two aspects of one and the same being, and it is possible that while essence and existence are distinct in the mind, it is not the case when it comes to reality. While one can raise that for St. Thomas, conceptual distinction already implies real distinction, one cannot immediately conclude that the IE argument guarantees that the distinction is real, especially when one raises the question whether one's concept of existence fully matches the actuality to which it refers to or not.<sup>8</sup> Considering this possibility, it seems that what has been generally established needs to be subjected to further investigation and questioning, placing this claim in the larger context where this argument is situated, first as a part of the whole *De Ente*, and second as a component of St. Thomas' metaphysics.

Joseph Owens raises this point on the IE argument on a more extensive note, emphasizing two points regarding the IE argument in relation to St. Thomas' epistemological background. First, he points out the accidental relationship of existence to essence, paying particular attention on St. Thomas' reasoning in the first part of the claim, namely that whatever that is not in the definition of a particular essence stands outside of it and enters into a composition with it. This reasoning, according to Owens, could be taken as well in the same way as knowing unity and plurality, which allows one to distinguish between a particular being's specific or individual nature,<sup>9</sup> as distinct from a particular essence. He says that while these two properties stand outside the definition of an essence, this does not mean that there is a real distinction between a being's essence or specific nature, as well as its individual nature. Instead, the distinction between the specific and individual nature is merely conceptual, and the difference between the two only lies in what their concepts express and cannot be found in reality. This is so because what is predicated to an individual existing being is nature absolutely considered, as in "Socrates is a man." Furthermore, Owens notes that if there indeed is a real distinction between specific and individual nature, then predication is impossible,

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 104-5.

<sup>9</sup> The difference between a specific and individual nature is that the former is what makes a particular being a member of a certain species, while the latter is what makes it a unique, particular being distinct from other beings that belong to other species, as individuated by primary matter. See St. Thomas Aquinas, *De Ente et Essentia*.



because, looking at the example stated by Owens, a real distinction implies that the nature of Socrates and the nature of man are completely distinct from each other and thus have no common properties. This whole argument delivered by Owens leads to the conclusion that what St. Thomas reached in the IE argument cannot be a real distinction but merely a conceptual one.<sup>10</sup>

Owens derives this argumentation and conclusion in another of St. Thomas' claims in his *Commentary on the Sentences*, saying that because existence is not contained in the definition of an essence, one can say that the relationship between the two is merely accidental, in the same way as "rational" is accidental to "animal" in the definition of the human being. And because this distinction between "rational" and "animal" can only be found in the mind insofar as the human being is concerned, then the IE argument is still open to the possibility that there is merely a conceptual distinction between essence and existence.<sup>11</sup>

Second, coming from Etienne Gilson's work on the nature of existence, Owens takes the IE argument as an attempt to show the otherness between a concept of essence and a concept of existence. However, he says that this does not already mean that there is a real distinction that exists between the two, because given that St. Thomas only looks at the concept of existence placed alongside a concept of an essence, existence cannot be known through the mere conceptualization and elaboration of this concept. Rather, existence is known only through judgment, the "second operation of the mind" through which a knower comes to awareness that something exists, coming from an encounter with a really existing being.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, if one tries to grasp a concept of existence in a finite being in the way one grasps the concept of quiddity, then "we cannot help but draw a blank."<sup>13</sup> Unlike essence, the concept of existence does not contain anything at all, and such a concept does not instantly correspond to something that exists in the real world. In fact, even the concept "existence

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<sup>10</sup> For the whole argument, see Owens, "Quiddity and Real Distinction," 9-10.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Owens, "Stages and Distinction," 108.



of  $x$ ” does not point to the fact that  $x$  actually exists or not.<sup>14</sup> This is the case because existence is not given in a concept, and it cannot be conceived with a particular definition in the way that one does with essences. Rather, existence is only grasped and understood through “the further and always concomitant activity of judgment.”<sup>15</sup> Only by judgment can one truly know, assert, posit, affirm, and conceive of existence, at least in the way one experiences it in every being.<sup>16</sup> And once one becomes aware of existence through judgment, one gains insight into the “actualizing character” of existence, as it enables nature to be actualized and hence known and experienced as such.<sup>17</sup> Finally, only through judgment can one gain knowledge of existence as the “actuality of all actualities,” or “that by which something exists,” concepts of existence which represent that which cannot be conceptualized and hence articulated and discussed.

Given these, the IE argument, as that which places a concept of existence as standing outside the essence, is not enough to establish the real distinction. This is so because the argument is supposedly a simple apprehension of concepts, and, as such, cannot grasp existence fully. If there is anything that the IE argument proves, then it is the fact that existence is conceptually distinct from essence, and that the former cannot be known in the same way as one knows the latter. The IE argument, therefore, still leaves the possibility of both these principles really one outside the mind even though they appear distinct in it.

If that is the case, then at what point does St. Thomas establish the real distinction? Owens claims that the real distinction is established at the point where St. Thomas proves the existence of God, who must first of all exist as the sufficient cause, through whom everything comes to be. After showing that hypothetically, there can only be one being whose existence is its essence, St. Thomas goes on to say that this subsistent being, who in fact necessarily exists, is the cause of all others. In the *De Ente*, he says that

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<sup>14</sup> Joseph Owens, “Aquinas on Knowing Existence,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 29, no. 4 (1976): 681.

<sup>15</sup> Owens, “Stages and Distinction,” 106.

<sup>16</sup> Owens, “Aquinas on Knowing Existence,” 673.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 681-82.



[e]verything that pertains to a thing, however, either is caused by the principles of its own nature, as risibility in man, or else comes from some extrinsic principle, as light in the air from the influence of the sun. Now, it cannot be that existence itself is caused by the very form or quiddity of the thing (I mean as by an efficient cause), because then the thing would be its own efficient cause, and the thing would produce itself in existence, which is impossible. Therefore, everything the existence of which is other than its own nature has existence from another. And since everything that is through another is reduced to that which is through itself as to a first cause, there is something that is the cause of existing in all things in that this thing is existence only . . . It is clear, therefore, that the intelligences are form and existence and have existence from the first being, which is existence alone, and this is the first cause, which is God.<sup>18</sup>

Owens points out that in this part of the *De Ente*, the argument shifts “from a mere elaboration of concepts to the order of efficient causality,”<sup>19</sup> for St. Thomas shows that existence is accidental to essence, and therefore concludes that existence not only comes from the outside, but is received from a subsistent being whose essence is existence itself. For Owens, the argument must proceed in this way if one seeks to establish real distinction, for it is only in establishing this condition that one comes to know existence as a real nature.

How does Owens show this? He says that the accidental nature of existence as related to essence requires that “it subsist in a primary instance.”<sup>20</sup> Likewise, to know existence as exercising causality upon nature in order to actualize it is recognizing as well that there is some subsistent being who bestows existence in order to actualize anything at all.<sup>21</sup> Given these, it is necessary therefore for St. Thomas to posit an efficient cause responsible for this bestowal in order to explain how a being exists as such. Furthermore, this being’s nature must necessarily be

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<sup>18</sup> Aquinas, *De Ente* IV, 47.

<sup>19</sup> Owens, “Quiddity and Real Distinction,” 16.

<sup>20</sup> Owens, “Aquinas on Knowing Existence,” 686.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 682.



existence itself, both recognized as a “something” and a “nature in its highest instance.”<sup>22</sup>

St. Thomas then points out that this subsistent being is God, the Creator from and through whom each and every creature receives existence. In asserting the necessary reality of God, as the uncaused cause and the subsistent being, one knows to some extent “what” existence is and how it is radically different from essence, as well as its relation to essence as a relationship between act and potency. It follows then that only in knowing existence as a real nature is to know, without any doubt, that essence and existence are really distinct from each other.

This part of the argument, which Owens calls its “third phase,” since it is St. Thomas’ third important assertion in his argument for the real distinction between essence and existence, strongly asserts that distinction between essence and existence is undoubtedly real. Furthermore, the accidental relationship that exists between these two must not be the same and must not be confused with that of “rational” and “animal,” or an individual and specific nature, for what is involved is neither matter and form, nor a part or aspect of a particular essence that existence actualizes.<sup>23</sup> And if it is received from an existing subsistent being, then what is received is conceived and accepted to be really other than the nature which receives it.

Related to this point is the claim that only in knowing existence as a real nature can one identify existence as “more than an empty term.”<sup>24</sup> Showing that existence is a real nature in the order of efficient causality is also asserting that such otherness is not just a matter of distinguishing two different concepts which allow one to understand some existing thing, or that existence can “coalesce in reality with any finite thing.”<sup>25</sup> Rather, the reality and uniqueness of existence allows one to see that it is above and really distinct from the essence it actualizes, for one comes to know that a being whose quiddity is existence itself exists truly and actively bestows something which enables beings to exist.

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<sup>22</sup> Owens, “Stages and Distinction,” 108.

<sup>23</sup> Owens, “Quiddity and Real Distinction,” 15.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>25</sup> Owens, “Stages and Distinction,” 110.



Therefore, for Owens, knowing existence as a real nature is to understand its primacy and metaphysical significance, as that by which a being exists. Only in knowing existence through judgment can one determine that existence is indeed really distinct from the quiddity or essence it actuates. Moreover, to know existence as a real nature is also to know that God exists as the subsistent being from whom the existence of other beings are received in a limited and definite way through their essences. Real distinction, then, for Owens, is established in St. Thomas' demonstration of God's existence in the *De Ente*.

### John Wippel: The Hypothetical Subsistent Being Is Sufficient to Guarantee Real Distinction

Like Owens, John Wippel agrees that the IE argument does not establish real distinction. Instead, [But] for him, what it shows is that it is different for one to "recognize something as possible and to recognize it as actual."<sup>26</sup> Moreover, he says that St. Thomas does not really intend the IE argument to stand alone, and to complete the argument for the real distinction, he "conjoins" it with the succeeding phases of the argument, with the aim of showing the composition of intelligences.<sup>27</sup> In this, he takes a different stand from Owens, saying that the real distinction between essence and existence in fact comes at a much earlier stage in the *De Ente*, namely the part where St. Thomas proceeds to show that there can be at most one being whose essence is existence itself. Here, St. Thomas claims that

[h]ence, it remains that a thing that is its own existence cannot be other than one, and so in every other thing, the thing's existence is one thing, and its essence or quiddity or nature or form is another.<sup>28</sup>

Wippel argues that the real distinction has already been established once Thomas shows the impossibility of having more than one being whose essence is existence itself, whether it exists in reality or not. This leads to the conclusion that in everything else save for this subsistent

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<sup>26</sup> John Wippel, "Aquinas' Route to the Real Distinction," *The Thomist* 43 (1979), 286.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Aquinas, *De Ente* IV, 46.



being, essence and existence really differ, and the distinction present is not only conceptual, but also and more importantly real.<sup>29</sup>

St. Thomas starts this argument by first considering the possibility that there could be such a subsistent being whose essence is existence itself, unique and different from other beings. He then proceeds to show that if there is such a being, then it can only be one. He proves this by showing three different ways in which something can be multiplied, namely (a) the addition of a difference, “as a nature of a genus is multiplied in the species,” (b) the individuation of a particular form in different instances of matter, and (c) the reception of something from another, with one as absolute and another as received in something else while existing in separation, as separated heat is distinguished from non-separate or received instances of heat.<sup>30</sup> He then says that the subsistent being cannot be multiplied in the first way, since it would not be a subsistent being anymore by virtue of the fact that it is differentiated by form. Nor can the subsistent being be multiplied in the second way, for when matter is added to the subsistent being, it is not anymore pure and subsistent existence but existence differentiated by matter. Thus, by way of elimination, St. Thomas accepts that existence can only be multiplied in the third way, wherein the subsistent being is considered as the absolute, while other beings receive existence from it and are differentiated by their respective essences.<sup>31</sup> For Wippel, it is at this point where St. Thomas concludes that the subsistent being, whose essence is existence, cannot be more than one, and it follows that in all other beings, existence is received and thus really distinct from their essences.<sup>32</sup>

At this point, one must note that St. Thomas, according to Wippel, does not reach the supposed proof of God’s existence in order to establish real distinction. Nor does he make any claims about the reality of that subsistent being. In fact, St. Thomas starts out with a hypothesis, reaching his conclusion through an analysis of possibilities that existence could be multiplied. However, Wippel clarifies that despite the argument’s

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<sup>29</sup> Wippel, “Aquinas’ Route,” 286.

<sup>30</sup> Aquinas, *De Ente* IV, 46.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> John Wippel, “Essence and Existence in the *De Ente*, Ch. 4,” in *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1984), 131.



“hypothetical character,” the conclusion that St. Thomas reached applies in the real world, primarily because St. Thomas argues that what can only be accepted not just in the mind but also in reality is the fact that “there can at most be one being whose essence is its existence or in which essence and existence are identical.”<sup>33</sup>

In this regard, an objection can be raised, and one that Owens himself does. At this point, does Wippel make a haste jump from conceptualization and possibility in the mind to reality? Wippel responds to this criticism by saying that St. Thomas in fact proceeds by eliminating all possibilities that are contradictory not just in the mind but also in reality, namely the first two ways in which something can be multiplied.<sup>34</sup> Wippel notes that what enables St. Thomas to conclude that essence and existence are really distinct from each other is that the only reasonable and logical possibility left is that there is at most one being whose essence is his existence, while other beings receive “instances” of existence alongside something that differentiates beings from one another, leading to the conclusion that in all other beings, essence and existence are really distinct from each other.

Given that the real distinction is established in what can be called the “second phase” of the argument, what then is the role of the “third phase,” which Owens claims to be the point where real distinction is established? Wippel says that St. Thomas includes the third phase “for the sake of completeness,” showing that the subsistent being exists and thus strengthening the claim that there is a real distinction between essence and existence in every being save one.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the “third phase” shows how these really distinct components in a being are related to each other, specifically in an act-potency relationship. And for Wippel, this allows St. Thomas to say that the soul and the intelligences are composed of beings made up of form and existence and not matter and form as opposed to Avicbron’s claim.<sup>36</sup>

Going further, Wippel says that had not the real distinction been established before the third phase, St. Thomas could not have proceeded to assert and prove God’s existence, for St. Thomas uses the real distinction in

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<sup>33</sup> Wippel, “Aquinas’ Route,” 289.

<sup>34</sup> Wippel, “Essence and Existence,” 125.

<sup>35</sup> Wippel, “Aquinas’ Route,” 293.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.



all other beings save one in order to at least demonstrate the existence of God and His relationship with creatures.<sup>37</sup> Because St. Thomas already establishes in the second phase of the argument that there can only be one such being whose essence is existence itself, while in everything else there is a composition of essence and existence which are really distinct, he easily establishes the relationship of efficient causality between God, the subsistent being, and creatures. Through this, he establishes in the third phase the necessity of the subsistent being as the first cause, from whom everything receives existence. Finally, this allows St. Thomas to assert the relationship between the existence that is received and the essence which receives it as potency to act.

Given these, for Wippel, the second phase of the argument of the *De Ente* is the critical part in terms of establishing the real distinction, primarily because it is the only one that is reasonable and logical, without any contradiction both in the mind and in reality.

#### Reconciling Owens and Wippel: Reviewing *De Ente* Chapter 4

In establishing the real distinction between essence and existence, two different views surface, each arguing from different positions and interpretations on what St. Thomas has in mind as well as the nature of essence and existence. On one hand, Joseph Owens largely considers St. Thomas' epistemological background, emphasizing the unique character of existence and how it is known through judgment. He says that if one cannot inquire about the real distinction unless one knows existence as a real nature, then the real distinction is established in the third phase, where the existence of God is proved and his relation to creatures is demonstrated. On the other hand, John Wippel says that this epistemological background is not significant in establishing the real distinction, for what St. Thomas does is to reject possibilities that result in contradictions, allowing him to conclude that the real distinction must be accepted because it is the only possibility that could occur in reality.

Both of these are valid arguments, but which of these claims are valid and consistent with what St. Thomas points in the *De Ente*, considering the nature and structure of his argument as part of a larger work? Perhaps this is reason enough to once again review the three phases

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 292.

of the argument, connecting them to each other's claims, and determining where the real distinction is established.

As mentioned, the first phase of the argument (the IE argument) is understood as a way of determining the distinction between essence and existence through an apprehension and analysis of concepts. Owens' claim is that here, St. Thomas only works within a concept of an essence and of existence, and this is problematic for Owens because existence cannot be conceptualized. Therefore, this first phase cannot stand alone as an argument for the real distinction.<sup>38</sup>

However, one cannot claim that it is a mere apprehension of concepts in the mind, because in this phase there already is an implicit assumption that is going to be important for the rest of the argument as a whole. Scott MacDaonald notes that once St. Thomas starts saying that whatever is not part of the essence come from without and enters into a composition with it, there is a prior claim that *some beings exist*, and this serves as the real starting point of the whole argument.<sup>39</sup>

This claim serves as the implicit starting point of the argument primarily because St. Thomas already has a prior recognition that there is something that belongs to an existing thing that is not part of its definition, and thus enters into a composition with the essence in question (or itself constitutes an essence). This recognition requires empirical knowledge on the part of the knower, enabling him to recognize the truth of the claim that indeed, some beings exist. From this, one can see that St. Thomas, as the knower, experiences something as real, as opposed to merely imaginary,<sup>40</sup> and this is his basis for saying that there indeed is a distinction between a definition of an essence and the fact whether it exists or not. Had he not experienced this, then he could not recognize this distinction.

This experience of things as existing, which brings forth recognition of a distinction, has bearing on Owens' argument for the real distinction, especially regarding his claim in the first phase of the argument. If beings are experienced as existing in the first place, then the argument

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<sup>38</sup> Owens, "Stages and Distinction," 106.

<sup>39</sup> Scott Charles MacDonald, "The Esse/Essentia Argument in Aquinas' *De Ente et Essentia*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 22, no. 2 (1984), 165. One must clarify that when St. Thomas speaks of "whatever," i.e. anything, it clearly means "whatever that comes with or belongs to a thing, to put it explicitly" (*ibid.*, 160.).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.



does not start from a mere apprehension of concepts, contrary to what Owens claims. One can say that judgment has taken place prior to the argument itself, because St. Thomas, as the knower, is aware of existence outside the mind in a particular existing thing. He could have been aware of the unique character of existence as *that by which something exists* or as a *principle of actualization* in the first place, because of the fact that he experiences it as such. This perhaps could be the reason why St. Thomas finds it necessary to prove his point in the first phase of the argument, juxtaposing the concept of a man and a phoenix while taking into mind that the former could exist outside the mind while the latter could not. In doing this, he implicitly asserts and recognizes the unique character of existence even before he talks about it and fully articulates it as such.

With this unique character of existence in mind, he does not proceed with an investigation of it as of yet, perhaps because in doing such, it would be more difficult for him to establish the real distinction. Instead, he proceeds with what is immediately known and conceptualized, namely the essences. And from knowing what belongs to its definition, he concludes that essence and existence differ *at least* conceptually.

Afterwards, St. Thomas enters the second phase of the argument by inserting a possibility that must be seriously considered. He says first that essence cannot be understood without its parts, but can be understood even if one does not think of existence, concluding that essence and existence differ from each other. Taking a step further, he says that it is possible that there is at most one being whose essence is existence itself, and for him, it is valid because he does not find anything contradictory with it in thought, not saying or even asserting its existence in reality.

In saying this, St. Thomas goes further, asserting that if such being exists, then it could be only one, and he proves this by taking into account the only three possible ways in which existence can be multiplied. In eliminating the first two possibilities he stated because they present contradictions, he concludes that the only possibility which is acceptable in reality is the third, namely that in one thing, existence is absolute, while for the rest, it is received in something else. He uses this to ultimately prove not only the fact that there can only be one possible subsistent being whose essence is existence, but also that this one being must necessarily exist because it is from and through him that other beings exist. And given this, one can conclude that existence, which could be a real nature absolutely existing in only one being, really differs and is distinguished from essence.

Read in this way, one can point out that St. Thomas argues “negatively,” for he presents that the real distinction must be accepted even if not yet extensively proven in reality because all other possibilities bear contradictions that cannot occur in reality. And in this regard, Wippel’s claim that the second phase of the argument is sufficient to establish real distinction is valid, reasoning not from possibility of something to its actuality outside the mind, but from “impossibility in the conceptual order to impossibility in reality.”<sup>41</sup>

Proceeding to the third phase, St. Thomas determines how essence and existence, established as really distinct, are related in the composed being, and in turn how the composed being is related to the one subsistent being. Given that essence and existence are really distinct in all beings, St. Thomas now considers the possibilities on how existence becomes present in a being, whether it is caused by something intrinsic, as in its essence, or extrinsic. Since it is impossible for something to cause itself to exist, then one must be caused by another, ultimately by a first uncaused cause, whose existence is unreceived. He finally identifies this uncaused cause as God, adding that this existence actualizes that which receives it in a limited manner. In this way, he shows how essence and existence, as really distinct, are related to each other within one existing being, whose efficient cause is the subsisting being Himself.

In this regard, one can say that Owens’ observation regarding the third phase of the argument is valuable as well, for it is a further elaboration or a “positive characterization” of the real distinction that St. Thomas establishes prior to this. Therefore, this argument strengthens what has already been established in the second phase. But more than that, Owens points out that St. Thomas not only proves the existence of God in this phase, but also affirms the all-embracing and infinite character of existence, which in turn leads to the conclusion regarding the causal relationship between Creator and creature.<sup>42</sup> Not only does Owens affirm that existence is above and over individual natures, set apart from them in such a way that existence enables natures to be actualized in reality, but he also affirms that existence limited by particular natures comes from an existing subsistent

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<sup>41</sup> Wippel, “Essence and Existence,” 126-27.

<sup>42</sup> Owens, however, notes that technically, this supposed proof of God’s existence in the *De Ente* is not found in the list of proofs formally offered in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* and *Summa Theologica*, yet it can be counted as a proof of “something else concerning God” (see Owens, “Stages and Distinction,” 112.).



being, the Pure, Simple, Unreceived Actuality, whose causal activity enables everything to exist.

Indeed, Owens is right in saying that the third phase goes toward efficient causality, enabling St. Thomas to say something more about what he was aware of from the very start through judgment, elaborating and stressing its significance and primacy in metaphysics as the “actuality of all actualities” and “the perfection of all perfections,” providing a richer meaning to existence as *that by which something exists*. However, Wippel is right as well in saying that the third phase is included for the sake of utmost completeness, for in this part, we fully understand what existence is and how it is important in talking about everything that exists as a unified whole.

This review of the *De Ente* reveals to us the significance of the arguments of Owens and Wippel in establishing the real distinction between essence and existence. In the first two phases, one can see how St. Thomas works with something that can be grasped, and through logic and experience, he is able to determine what possibilities must be considered and accepted, in which he concludes that the only principle which we can accept in accordance with our experience of existing beings is that essence and existence are really distinct from each other. Finally, in the whole of the third phase, St. Thomas points to the primacy of existence and why the distinction claims a significant and central position in his metaphysics, for it is that which enables one to talk of similarities and differences, plurality and differentiation, and most important of all, the unity of everything that exists, under the one efficient cause who is God Himself.

## Conclusion

Through this treatment of St. Thomas’ argument, one can see that St. Thomas arrives at the real distinction in the second phase in the argument, as upheld by Wippel. However, one can also see that Owens’ observations on the unique character of existence bears significance when one reaches the third phase of the argument, where St. Thomas fully articulates existence and how it brings everything together.

Looking at the logic of the argument, one can see that it is clear and conclusive enough; however, there are still further inquiries and questions that can be entertained and answered, especially with the St. Thomas’ assumptions. David Twetten points out that the argument cannot establish a real distinction between essence and existence because it



already assumes existence as “the actuality of an essence in potency to it” without any sort of proof.<sup>43</sup> He says that St. Thomas must have provided some proof beforehand which could defend the nature of existence as something that radically differs from form and matter.<sup>44</sup> This question raises issues on how St. Thomas talks about and refers to existence in his own metaphysics, able to provide new entry points for discussion on the distinction that lies between essence and existence. Going to this direction, however, entails entering into another discussion which requires going beyond the *De Ente* toward his later writings both in philosophy and in theology.

But insofar as determining that there is a real distinction between essence and existing while holding the assumption that in existing things, existence is that by which something exists, then St. Thomas’ demonstration of the real distinction follows from and is consistent with his metaphysical thought, which puts emphasis on the act of existence and how it enables one to understand and bring everything into a meaningful synthesis.

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<sup>43</sup> See David B. Twetten, “Really Distinguishing essence from Esse,” *Proceedings of the Society for Medieval Logic and Metaphysics* 6 (2006): 61.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.



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