

Discussion

Disputed Questions in Seifert's "Essence and Existence."

Josef Seifert's monograph on "Essence and Existence" is an elegant defense of a neo-classical doctrine of essence.¹ In the lengthy portion already published, Seifert gives a taxonomy of essences while preparing a critique of "existentialist Thomism" (p. 30). The taxonomy brings together and illuminates diverse doctrines about essences as it underscores the importance of the whole topic. Such work is important and sorely needed. But it is not clear that Seifert has *secured* the topic as decisively as he thinks, or that he has provided for a reasoned rejection of 'existentialist Thomism.' The essay is not completely in print; it would be foolish to pretend now to offer decisive objections against it. Still, there are enough problematic sections in the essay's first portion to justify the framing of a set of 'disputed questions.' I stress that they are *questions*, but questions which should touch on the chief contentions in Seifert's essay.

My difficulties cluster around four issues: that of Seifert's interlocutors; that of the rendering of *esse* as 'existence'; that of the analogical character of essence; and that of the ontological status of "ideal essences." I will take them in order and try to show their interconnection.

Question 1. Who should be Seifert's interlocutors?

From its half-title forward, "Essence and Existence" is concerned to perform a "critical investigation of 'existentialist Thomism'" (p. 17). Seifert singles out Gilson as the "founder" of this opposing "school." He insists that Gilson's Thomism "contains a number of serious errors concerning being, errors which have most wide-reaching consequences for metaphysics" (p. 30). The concern with Gilson re-appears regularly (e.g., pp. 39-40, 41, 44, 80). The dispute with Gilson colors — one might say, conditions — much of Seifert's strategy. But Seifert is thus limited by Gilson's articulation of the theme of *esse* in Thomism. Gilson is *not* the ablest exponent of the theme of *esse*. The dispute with Gilson will not force questions about essence and *esse* to the deepest level.

Seifert's choice of interlocutors is, then, more than a matter of erudition. A historian of neo-Thomism might rightly object to calling Gilson the "founder" of existentialist Thomism.² But that is a small matter. What is more important is that Gilson does not free the theme of *esse* from confusion with issues of facticity, informed existence, and so on. Seifert's case is

thus made deceptively easy. It is true that Gilson's *Being and Some Philosophers* does record Gilson's own discovery of the importance of *esse* in St. Thomas (in this, it completes the thinking of the two chapters inserted in the 1942 revision of *Le Thomisme*). But it is also true that Gilson's discovery is less nuanced and less persuasive than those of a group of European Thomists whose works he largely overlooked. Gilson did not trace the ramifications of his insight into a reworking of participation, of subsistence, of the 'real distinction' between essence and *esse*. Nor did he take into account its cognitive implications. In consequence, Seifert can seize upon the lack of a convincing re-orientation in Gilson to the advantage of the essentialist reading. He could not do the same with the works of Fabro, de Raeymaeker, de Finance, Hayen, or Coreth. Taking on the strongest interlocutors is not only a requisite for good debate, it is a necessity for the precise formulation of the questions. Might not Seifert's arguments be different (perhaps stronger!) if he were addressing Fabro or Coreth rather than Gilson? Mightn't the articulation of the issues change significantly?

Question 2. Is the theme of *esse* adequately articulated as a theme of 'existence'?

One of the large defects of Gilson's formulation is in the use of the terms 'existence' and 'existential.' The penultimate chapter in *Being and Some Philosophers*, for instance, is at pains to explicate the adjustment of substance with contingent *existence* in the Thomist economy of creatures. But 'existence' is not an apt rendering for *esse*. *Esse* is not existence, not facticity, but the grounding act behind existence and facticity. Fabro has shown this exegetically at some length in *Participation et causalité*.³ It can be shown *per se* in seeing that divine creation is primarily the 'making' of created *esse*. This does not mean (*pace* Avicenna) that creatures were so many possibles which were subsequently made to exist in fact. It means, rather, that creatures *are* primarily participating beings, grouped into kinds as they are variously delimited versions of the divine *esse*. (I will return to this in the fourth question.) In short, to take the theme of *esse* in St. Thomas as a question of existence is to misunderstand it fatally.

It is the Gilsonian misunderstanding which allows Seifert to argue for essence as a transcendental property. The *transcendentalia* are features of *esse*; they constitute the structure of *esse* as such — eminently in uncreated *esse*, derivatively and by participation in created *esse*. For St. Thomas, the transcendentals reflect that *esse* is a manifestation, a 'diffusion,' which *can* be participated. They are also the basis for the perfections of *esse* which are labelled *existere*, *vivere*, *intelligere*. Both sets of features, the transcendentals and the perfections, 'reside' in *esse*. Seifert rejects this view in

rendering *res* as content or quiddity, *aliquid* as whatness and differentiation (p. 38). I would say, rather, that *res*, *unum*, and *aliquid* refer respectively to the three features of subsistence: insistence, integrity, and relation. It is not essence, then, which is a transcendental character, but rather that capacity for *esse* to become participated hierarchically in beings.

Seifert sees that Gilson tacitly admitted the transcendental character of essence when he says that all concepts refer to essences (p. 39). But here again Gilson does not correctly reproduce the Thomist thematization of *esse*. He is often criticized precisely for overlooking the higher intelligibility of *esse* which stands behind and secures the intelligibility of essence.⁴ Since *esse* is much more than existence, it is possible for *esse* itself to comprise the features of intelligibility, to be their one root, and so to precede essence *especially* in the intelligible order. The fact of intelligibility is a symptom of the 'physiognomy' of *esse* and not an argument that essence is transcendental. This can be grasped, of course, only if *esse* is properly understood not as existence but as what stands behind existence. The unity and ubiquity which Seifert attributes to essence may actually be marks of *esse*.

Question 3. Has Seifert shown that 'essence' is analogical?

Seifert completes his notion of the essence-transcendental by bringing forward what he calls the "analogicity" of essence (p. 40; cf. pp. 43, 54). Having said that "all beings and entities whatsoever must have an essence in the transcendental sense," Seifert must also stress that essence is "found on different levels of being in fundamentally different and dissimilar manners which do not lack, however, a certain similarity" (p. 40). The first Chapter of Seifert's essay is an exact catalogue of the varieties of essence. Differences and dissimilarities are there nicely described. But the fundamental unity of essence, the "certain similarity" which binds the analogy together, is not so surely grasped.

Analogy is, of course, a 'middle' between univocity and equivocity. Analogy yokes together a plurality of senses by placing them in hierarchical order with respect to one sense. This is the classical doctrine from Aristotle through the Scholastics. In order to establish an analogical term, then, one must show *both* that it bears different meanings *and* that these are hierarchically related to one central meaning. Seifert clearly does the first; it is not clear that he does the second. Although he gives priority to the essences of "really existing beings" (p. 72), he does not show how the other meanings of 'essence' are ordered to this one meaning. Has he shown, indeed, that 'essence' designates anything more than a class constituted by what Wittgenstein labels "family resemblance"?

Here again we are brought back to the troublesome aspects in

Seifert's exhibition of the essence-transcendental. Everything, he says, has some "quidditative determinateness." Is this what unifies all senses of 'essence'? But determinateness is not by itself sufficient to characterize essence. Bodies are determinate, but not essential as regards exact magnitude; Aquinas' *actus essendi* is determinate, but precedes *essentia*. The qualifier "quidditative" adds no specification to determinateness, since *quidditas* is no more than a medieval neologism regularly interchangeable with *essentia*. It is not enough to say that the similarity among essences is an *essential* determinateness! Perhaps Seifert would reply that transcendental essence is the *thisness* which must characterize everything. But what is at issue is just whether *thisness* is to be analyzed as essence or as *esse*, whether it is a feature of essence or of being. Seifert cannot, then, use *thisness* as his common feature in the purported analogy of essence. (My own view would be that essence is analogical for the material realm, only weakly so for immaterials, and *not* transcendental. Moreover, in all cases essence is a determination or feature of the act of *esse* of the entity and must be resolved back into *esse* when analyzed.) The problem of the analogy of the essence-transcendental is carried one step further in Seifert's analysis of "necessary essences"; perhaps the crucial disagreements will become clearest there.

Question 4. Are Seifert's "ideal essences" anything but abstractions from the features of *esse*?

Seifert wants to show that there are "ideal essences" apart from or "outside" really existing beings. He thinks that if he does this much, he will have persuaded the reader that essence is an ontological *archē* at least of equivalent stature with existence. I have already suggested, in the first and second questions, that the contest is not really between essence and existence, but between essence and *esse*. Even so, if Seifert can exhibit separate essences, he will have gone far in undermining existentialist Thomism of whatever shade. But I don't think Seifert will show me such essences. He *cannot*, first, because to do so would weaken the classical notion of God-Creator, which both Seifert and I hold to be true. He *does* not, second, because his arguments conflate epistemological and ontological qualities. Let me take these in order and treat them, again for brevity's sake, in Thomistic language.

Created essences are images or reflections of Ideas 'in' the Creator. God creates according to these Ideas. But they are neither outside of God nor distinct from Him. The Ideas are only versions of the divine 'essence,' which is nothing other than the divine *esse*. God knows both how he is and how he can be imitated in the various degrees of finite being — *that* is what constitutes the Ideas. But, to repeat, they are nothing but finite

images of the divine *esse*, perspectives on it.⁶ Indeed, the doctrine of the Ideas explodes the Aristotelian notion of essence. By extending divine Providence to every individual, St. Thomas implies that there is an Idea for every individual. This does not yield individual essences; rather, it revalues the notion of essence in favor of the (providential) pursuit of the divine *esse* by creatures. To hold otherwise is to introduce a dangerous multiplicity in God or to bind Him by an Avicennist catalogue of possibles (or a Scotist list of *creabilia*). When St. Thomas says that God cannot do the impossible, he only means to save the sense of 'impossibility' — and not to found an order of ideal essences.

This leaves Seifert's *arguments* for ideal essences (pp. 78-79). There are two. The first is that of the artisan working from an idea. The second is that of the mathematical. To the first, it can be replied that the artist's idea is itself a reaching after the divine *esse*. The artist's idea is an inner word which mirrors the divine *esse*. The same is true of any understanding; all our ideas depend on being, both as *in us* and as *about what is*. Why should this imply ideal essences? To Seifert's second argument, it can be replied that the ontology of mathematical is by no means clear. For Plato, to take up Seifert's references, the mathematical *are* really existing substances of a higher order than the corporeal; they approach the fullest subsisting Forms, which *are* most fully.⁷ Seifert's reference is not helpful, then, because the mathematical evidence is not unambiguous.

In all of this, Seifert seems to have overlooked the distinction between essence considered in abstraction (*absolute considerata*) and essence considered as it is (*considerata in esse*). St. Thomas, for example, makes the distinction in the third Chapter of *De ente et essentia*. He does so to avoid the confusion of the epistemology of essences with their ontology. Aquinas there criticizes Averroes for inferring from the universality of understandings to the oneness of mind. That is, Averroes moves from a quality of the intelligible likeness to an ontological conclusion. In a much subtler way, Seifert seems to be doing the same thing. He sees that there are meanings, ideas, logical necessities, sciences; he holds that these refer to something really in the world. So do I. When I have an insight into what something is, I want to say that the insight corresponds to an intelligible reality which is ultimately grounded in God. But Seifert goes on from this to postulate ideal essences. That is 'the small mistake in the beginning,' the faulty inference from the quality of understanding to the quality of the entity.

Human understanding does its work largely through what seem to be definite meanings. Human understanding does its work *truly*. Are there then essences corresponding to those definite meanings? Not really. Human language is only seemingly literal; it is basically metaphoric. The same is true of human understanding. Its metaphoric character reflects the

fundamental analogy of *esse* and its attendant features, transcendentals and perfections. That analogy is the intelligible side of the hierarchial participation of *esse*. The participation of *esse* is the creature's link with the divine being. It is the intelligibility of God's life that secures meaning, and not any catalogue of essences. To think otherwise is to imagine that the quality of understanding is the quality of entities.

Josef Seifert has raised fundamental questions in a serious and illuminating work. I have tried to suggest ways in which he has not entirely answered those questions, ways in which he has not come to grips with his opponents. But it would be dishonest as well as discourteous to end without saying how much of Seifert's essay is plainly *true*.

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NOTES

1. The First Part of the monograph is published in *Aletheia*, 1 (1977), 17-157. I will cite the article parenthetically by page number.
2. The accolade of "founder" would have to go either to Cornelio Fabro or, more justly, to Joseph Maréchal, whose major writings on *esse* antedate Gilson's by more than twenty years. See H. J. John, *The Thomist Spectrum* (New York: Fortham Univ. Pr., 1966), p. 38, p. 148 n.2.
3. Cornelio Fabro, *Participation et causalité selon S. Thomas d'Aquin* (Louvain: Presses Universitaires, 1961), pp. 53-63, 208-44, *et passim*.
4. Van Riet's criticism quoted in John, *Thomist Spectrum*, pp. 46-47.
5. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, K.3, 1060^a 36-1061^b 7; St. Thomas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, c.34; and so on.
6. For a summary treatment, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, c. 54; but this does not mean that there are 'no Ideas in Aquinas,' as Henle and others would want to infer.
7. Plato, *Republic*, VI, 510b-511a; *Meno*, 82b-86b; *Epinomis*, *passim* (if this is not spurious). Cf. J. Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968), pp. 79-99.

Answer To "Disputed Questions" Concerning "Essence and Existence"

By Josef Seifert

I am grateful to Dr. Mark Jordan for having very well formulated a number of "Disputed Questions" concerning my paper on "Essence and Existence." I am particularly grateful because I am convinced that the concerns which he expresses are not exclusively his but are shared by many other Thomists. These questions and the attempt to answer them cannot fail to be extremely helpful in clarifying the meaning of my position and, far more importantly, the issues at stake.

Answer 1. On my Interlocutors.

Before even starting to answer this question, I should like to stress that the main goal of "Essence and Existence" is *not* a "critical investigation of existential Thomism," but a "new foundation of classical metaphysics on the basis of a phenomenological realism." This applies especially to the first chapter of the essay to which Jordan's first "disputed question" exclusively refers. This chapter is primarily dedicated to the thematic and systematic task of exploring the different data to which the term "essence" can refer. Moreover, to the extent to which this chapter contains many historical references, those refer primarily to the great contributions made to the topic of essence within the *philosophia perennis*, especially by Plato and Aristotle, and more recently by members of the movement of "phenomenological realism." Even in the second part of the essay I did not consider it my task to analyze *all* important versions of existential Thomism. Rather, I restricted the critical analysis to *some* of the most articulated positions of existential Thomism as they are defended by Gilson, Phelan, Owens, Wilhelmson, Carlo, and others. I cannot see why such a restriction — especially in a paper which presents primarily thematic and systematic investigations on metaphysical issues — should be illegitimate.

I shall not even attempt to judge here whether Gilson has presented "existential Thomism" in its philosophically *strongest* version or not. I definitely think, however, that Gilson is the "founder" and the most original exponent of the school which calls itself and which has been referred to by others as "existential Thomism." I definitely agree with Jordan that I should attack not the weakest but the strongest version of the "school" I want to analyze critically. Yet not only did I try to do precisely this, but