

MAREK PIWOWARCZYK

PROBLEMS WITH THE INSEPARABILITY OF *ESSE**

One of the most important theses of Existential Thomism is that contingent things are composed of essence and existence. The thesis is immediately supplemented by a proviso that these components are not parts in the regular sense of the word. Essence and existence are not extended pieces of the thing which can be detached from it. They are inseparable aspects of the thing wherein inseparability is understood as a peculiar sort of dependence.

In this paper I would like to analyze the thesis of the inseparability of existence. For me the thesis is untenable. I argue that inseparability blocks up the essential function ascribed by Thomists to existence: the function of making the thing real. Thus to save this function we are forced to export existence to outside the thing. This then contradicts our deep belief that existence is the most intimate aspect of the thing. Therefore, the Thomistic analysis of existence seems to be invalid.

In recent literature the issue of the essence–existence composition is considered in detail by Gaven Kerr, O.P., in his *Aquinas's Way to God. The Proof in De Ente et Essentia* (KERR 2015). I will refer to this work.

1. THE THOMISTIC ANALYSIS OF EXISTENCE

Existential Thomists (at least those of whom I know) sometimes claim that Aquinas discovered the existence of things. This statement sounds a bit

Dr. hab. MAREK PIWOWARCZYK, Prof. at KUL — John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Philosophy of Religion; address for correspondence: Al. Raławickie 14, 20–950 Lublin; e-mail: piwowar1@wp.pl; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0112-8738>.

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surprising for non-philosophers who are convinced the existence of things is something which does not have to be discovered because we come across it every day. Of course non-philosophers do not know that Aquinas and his followers have in mind a peculiar concept of existence elaborated upon in philosophical analysis. By “existence of a thing” non-philosophers usually mean the “fact that a thing exists” or the “fact that there is a thing.” For example, the existence of John is the fact that John exists or the fact that there is John. People sometimes confuse existential facts conceived in this way with facts of the presence of something at some place. However, the awareness of the possibility of such confusion is evidence that non-philosophers do use the concept of the fact of existence understood as the most basic fact concerning things. This is so basic that we have problems to say in what existence consists. Usually we say that “to exist” means “not to be nothing” and this is correct unless we reify nothingness.

By contrast, existence in the Thomistic sense is a special component of a thing and is conceived as an ultimate act which makes a thing real (KERR 2015, 8). This act is called *esse* and this is what St. Thomas truly discovered. Notice that such a characteristic of *esse* is purely functional: *esse* is a component which existentially actualizes a thing, it is something due to which a thing is the existent. To this extent the nature of such an ingredient remains unspecified and thus we can state the question of whether *esse* is really distinct from essence—another component which determines what a thing is. This is called the real distinction question. The question is nothing more than the reverse side of the question of what plays the function of *esse* (the function of existential actualization, so to speak) (KERR 2015, 33). Is it form or mater, form and matter together, an accident, the whole substance, or something additional to all these entities? Both parties of the controversy, i.e. those philosophers who maintain that *esse* is not essence and those who claim it is, presuppose that some ingredient (proper or improper) of a thing makes it exist. When it comes to contingent beings Thomists argue that *esse* is neither essence, nor accident, nor anything known already to Aristotle, but rather is an additional component of being. Being different from all forms (accidental and substantial as well), *esse*, when being considered in itself, is devoid of any qualitative features (in philosophical jargon: *esse* is contentless) and is simple. *esse* actualizes essence and in this way both components make up one thing although they are still distinct (non-identical).

Hence we have two concepts of *esse*: the purely functional concept (*esse* is a component of a thing which fulfills the function of existential actualize-

tion) and the strictly Thomistic concept (*esse* in itself is the contentless and simple element of being).¹ The two concepts do not exclude each other. Moreover, the second is complementary to the first, or rather the second is the specification of the first. Someone who accepts the second concept must also accept the first but not conversely. To presuppose that the functionally conceived *esse* is a component of a thing is not to beg the real distinction question. Without this presupposition the question could not be stated at all. Yet, when we accept this presupposition, it is still possible to say that essence plays the role of *esse*, i.e. that essence (or form, or form and matter) fulfills the double function: makes a thing what it is and makes it existing as well. Only if one implicitly assumes that a contingent thing contains the contentless and simple (in itself) component by which it exists, then one smuggles in the answer to the real distinction question. David B. Twetten, who accuses St. Thomas of the latter procedure, in his own argument for the *esse*–essence distinction is forced to accept the functional concept of *esse* and admits that it is impossible “to exclude all talk of «actually to be»” (TWETTEN 2006, 93) if we want to formulate the real distinction problem.

However Thomists could object to the suggestion that their conception of existence should be contrasted to the commonsensical notion of existence as a fact. Non-philosophers also distinguish *what a thing is* and *that it exists* and the doctrine of *esse* and essence can be read as the philosophical expression of this distinction. According to Thomists, facts of existence known from our everyday experience can be analyzed as having *esse*: that John exists means that John has *esse*. The doctrine of *esse* seems to be a methodical and systematic continuation of our spontaneous thinking about reality. Generally speaking, for Thomists *to exist* is *to stand in some relationship to esse* (functionally conceived). In just one case this relationship is identity, in all other cases it is non-identity. Anyway, Thomists maintain the relationship in question obtains *within* the thing. The solution of Henry of Ghent for whom *esse* was the relation to God is refuted by Thomists. The refutation is based on the correct (as I think) intuition that existence (also in the sense of fact) is intrinsic to the existent. At first sight the intrinsicness of existence

¹ Having in hand the two concepts of *esse*, we can provide two interpretations of the thesis that God is pure *esse*. According to the first interpretation the thesis means only that God makes Himself existing and we cannot automatically infer that He is simple and contentless — has no essence as Gilson maintains (GILSON 1960, 121). Only the application of the second concept of *esse* to God (and this is the second interpretation) forces us to say immediately (without any additional arguments) that He has no essence and is simple.

seems to be well expressed by the thesis that the *esse* of the contingent being is inseparable from the essence.

2. THE ACT–POTENCY MODEL OF INSEPARABILITY

For all Aristotelians, the metaphysical structures of substance do not contain physical parts. Accidents, form, matter, and *esse* are not extended pieces of a substance. They are rather inseparable metaphysical aspects. Indeed, one of the first restrictions which Thomists impose on the *esse*–*essence* composition is that it is not the composition of separate things (KERR 2015, 9). Moreover *esse* and essence are not things (substances) at all (KERR 2015, 65). They are merely principles which can be found within a thing, principles which supplement each other. This entails that *esse* and essence are somehow dependent on each other: in the contingent thing there is no essence without *esse* and vice versa. Furthermore it is not only a matter of fact that *esse* and essence are not separate. They must be so and this necessity comes from their “natures” (from that what they are in themselves). The dependence in question principally differs from the dependence of the creature on God not only in that that the latter is asymmetrical. Although creatures depend on God they are separate things. God does not supplement creatures nor are they complement of His being. The inseparability of *esse* from essence (and vice versa) is rigid: *esse* needs a determinate, singular essence; *esse* cannot exchange essences like how a substance exchanges accidents.

How does one understand the inseparability of *esse* from essence more precisely? Let us start with the model of composition adopted by St. Thomas. The model was reconstructed and approvingly analyzed by Gaven Kerr (KERR 2015, 57–66). There are two principal ideas underlying the model:

1. That essence participates in *esse*.
2. That essence is potency in relation to *esse* and the latter is an act in relation to essence.

Ad 1. Participation obtains between something which needs some perfection and the perfection in question. The participant is neither identical to the participated perfection nor can supply itself with it. For example I participate in humanity, the rose in my garden participates in redness and so on. Participation has a causal (in the broad sense of the word) character: the participation in humanity makes me human and the participation in redness makes the rose red. As such, participation is always asymmetrical: redness is

not redness and neither is red due to the fact that the rose participates in it. We usually associate the concept of participation with Platonism. Kerr interprets Platonism in the same general way as David M. Armstrong does (KERR 2015, 51–4; ARMSTRONG 1978, 66–9). According to this interpretation, since all participated perfections are exported to Platonic heaven, the participants in themselves are qualityless blobs. What we need is to bring perfections back to the real world. Kerr believes the act-potency scheme can do the job (KERR 2015, 66).

Ad 2. It is worth emphasizing that in the context of the composition problem both St. Thomas and Kerr do not use dispositional concepts of potency and act but by potency they mean something which is perfected, and by act the perfection in question.² Thus in fact the Aristotelian potency–act scheme already has the structure of participation. Yet this is the participation transferred into the inside of a thing. For potency in itself is in some way determinable, it is something which must be supplemented by something else. Act is then the factor which determines potency, which supplements it. Potency and act are not two separate things but act, metaphorically speaking, saturates potency, permeates it. Of course this saturation or permeating is not identity. In other words: the act-potency scheme is introduced to express the idea that the inner principles of things stand in a causal (in the broad sense) relationship (KERR 2015, 96–8) and are mutually inseparable. Since ingredients of the act–potency scheme are causally related, they are not ontologically equal. Act is ontologically prior over potency.

The problem with this model is that it is hard to understand from its grounds the *mutual* inseparability of inner principles. Participation is an asymmetrical relation and it remains so when it obtains inside a thing. The act–potency scheme is also asymmetrical. We understand that potency needs to be actualized but it is hard to find a reason why act *has to* make up one whole with potency, or to use Thomistic terminology: why act *has to* be limited by potency. With this respect Platonism was more consistent: the

² Potency as a disposition is a special property of a thing. Dispositions are powers to do something (active potencies) or to undergo some changes (passive potencies). In this sense properties like: plasticity, musicality, strength, nimbleness, will, and intellect are potencies. On the other hand, acts are manifestations of powers; i.e. processes or states which are the results of the exercising of powers. Undergoing a change of shape, playing the violin, lifting a barbell, moving quickly and lightly, making decisions, thinking — all these things are acts. Of course potencies and acts conceived in this way only are some accidents. Since accidents are forms and forms are acts in the compositional sense, some accidents are potencies in the dispositional sense and acts in the compositional sense.

idea was not dependent upon its instances at all and this is why Plato made ideas transcendent.

How does one introduce mutual inseparability into the act–potency scheme? Especially: how does one understand that *esse* is inseparable from essence? Essence needs *esse* just to exist. But why does *esse* need essence?

3. INSEPARABILITY AND EXISTENTIAL ACTUALIZATION

Let us start with the more basic problem of whether *esse* can be inseparable at all. Some Thomistic arguments for the real distinction seem to presuppose that inseparability excludes the possibility of serving the function of existential actualization. The main idea of Twetten’s “Form–Matter Argument” is that neither matter alone, nor form alone, nor the composition of them can be *esse* because they need each other. Matter needs form, form needs matter and the compound needs matter and form. Of course form plays the first fiddle in this trio with the main question thus being whether form is *esse*. One of Twetten’s arguments against the positive answer is that “otherwise the form of material things would not need matter to be” (TWETTEN 2006, 86). In another place Twetten writes that if a form accounts for an ‘actually to be’ “the Aristotelian finds that form has been substantified or Platonized as what ‘is’ on its own” (TWETTEN 2006, 88). A similar argument can be found in writings of Mieczysław A. Krąpiec (the most influential Polish existential Thomist): “Form is also different from existence, for in material beings form does not exist independently of matter and cannot exist without matter” (KRAPIEC 1991, 398). In other words: form cannot be *esse* because form is inseparable from matter. Inseparability is understood as a specific existential dependence, as being impossible *to exist* separately. This argument can be stated in the more technical Thomistic terms of having *esse*: form cannot be *esse* because it can have *esse* only indirectly, only due to being a component of the matter–form compound. Of course if something has *esse* indirectly it cannot be *esse* because it is hard to imagine more direct having of *esse* than just being *esse*. But why can the whole compound not be *esse*? The answer is simple: because it is also in a sense inseparable from its components. And although the compound has *esse* directly, it cannot be *esse* because the compound is actual insofar as it has a form, and form is not *esse*. Notice that the inseparability of form, matter, and the compound is the reason that they are not *esse*. Form cannot play the role of existential actua-

lization because form is existentially conditioned by something else. The same should be said about matter. Yet notice also that if we want to be consistent we cannot say that *esse* (in the functional sense) is the inseparable component of a thing because then *esse* could not play the role it is supposed to play. The alleged inseparability of *esse* is incompatible with the function of existential actualization.

If the above is true then mutual inseparability cannot be understood as a mutual serving of the function of existential actualization. Form is mutually inseparable from matter and this is the reason why form does not existentially actualize matter and matter does not existentially actualize form. The same should be said about substance and accidents (at least proper accidents). If inseparability blocks up the function of existential actualization then none of the mutually inseparable items can play this function. A thing containing mutually inseparable entities cannot be existentially actualized by any of them and its *esse* should be exported outside the thing. But this stands in disagreement with the intimacy of existence.

4. HOW TO SAVE THE INSEPARABILITY OF *ESSE*?

One could try to defend the inseparability of *esse* by noticing that the function of existential actualization is excluded only by *existential* inseparability, i.e. by dependence with respect to existence, but with there also being other types of inseparability. It seems possible that essence is existentially inseparable from *esse* but *esse* is non-existentially inseparable from essence. For example: *esse* existentially actualizes essence but essence individuates *esse* (as some Thomists think). In this case essence and *esse* are mutually inseparable but in different aspects, accordingly, with respect to existence and with respect to individuality, with the latter dependence not blocking up the proper function of *esse*. Yet such a solution fails because inseparability with respect to individuation (or other non-existential aspects) insofar as it is implied by the nature of an inseparable component, entails existential inseparability. Accidents are individuated by a substance and this is why they are rigidly inseparable from the substance. Moreover, if we introduce such a aspectual dependence and insist that individuation does not imply existential dependence, then there is no reason to deny that form can be *esse*. Nothing prevents us to say that form is individuated by matter and that matter is existentially actualized by the form, and thus the form is *esse*.

However Thomists could object to the way in which the inseparability problem is stated. We assumed that inseparability is a sort of existential dependence; i.e. a dependence with respect to existence. Thus when we say that something is inseparable we implicitly ascribe existence to it. However, for Thomists, existence can be ascribed only to a complete thing and not to its inner principles. But what does this restriction mean? It cannot mean that there are no inner principles. What Thomists have in mind is that existence does not belong to an inner principle directly but only to the full composition of inner principles—as was mentioned above. Inner principles do have *esse* but indirectly. Thus they can be existentially inseparable; i.e. inseparable with respect to existence.

Yet Thomists would notice that although this interpretation of the “no existence of inner principles” restriction works when it comes to matter, form, substance, and accidents,³ it does not work in the case of *esse* (WOJTYŚIAK 2017, 108–9). Existence cannot be ascribed to *esse* either directly nor indirectly because then, given that “to exist” = “to have *esse*,” this procedure leads to an infinite regress of *esse*. We can stop this regress by accepting the thesis that *esse* does not need any additional *esse* because *esse is just esse*. *esse is* the existence and thus it does not make any sense to ascribe existence to *esse*. The “no existence of *esse*” restriction is similar to the thesis that humanity is not human, or that whiteness is not white. Thus the inseparability of *esse* cannot have the existential sense at all but is just the necessity (implied by the ‘nature’ of *esse*) of standing in the relation of completion to the essence. Let us take this concept of the inseparability of *esse* for granted.

. One can still ask why *esse* must stand in such a relationship. What does essence “give” to *esse*? Of course the answer that essence *enables esse* to serve its function of existential actualization is excluded because it would mean that essence makes *esse* what it is; that *esse is esse* just due to its relationship with essence. This would lead to another vicious circle. Therefore we should engage again the thesis of aspectual inseparability. At first sight the combination of aspectual inseparability and the “no existence of *esse*” restriction seems to be immune to the argument that non-existential inseparability entails the existential one. For example: *esse* existentially actualizes essence and essence individuates *esse* but we cannot say that *esse* is existentially inseparable from essence nor that *esse is esse* due to being individuated by essence.

³ If the *esse* of accidents is not distinct from the *esse* of substance. There is a controversy in the Thomistic family of whether this is so. See (BROWN 1985).

Of course if one is convinced that *esse* is not individuated by essence but vice versa, one can try to find some other non-existential condition which essence imposes on *esse*. Generally, a Thomist should search for such a function of essence that is fulfilled with respect to *esse* and which makes *esse* inseparable from essence. However, I think this investigation would be futile, for it must be a function which does not presuppose essence's being existentially actualized by *esse*. Otherwise we still would have a vicious regress. If *esse* and essence are mutually and aspectually inseparable, then the aspects in question cannot presuppose each other. But all functions essence can play with respect to *esse* essentially presuppose being actualized by *esse*. Kerr (KERR 2015, 115–8) frequently says that essence is totally dependent on *esse*. Essence cannot play any function unless it is existentially actualized by *esse*. The latter must then be completely unconditioned by essence, and thus separable from it.

But is a mutual, rigid, and aspectual inseparability still possible if aspects engaged in aspectual inseparability must not presuppose each other? Consider the relationship between substance and the so called proper accident, for example the relationship between a human being (let it be John) and his will. They are mutually rigidly inseparable in different aspects: the will makes John able to make free decisions and John individuates the will; i.e. makes the will *this* will. But the will does not make its bearer *this* human. A human being as a substantial subject enjoys individuality unconditioned by his accidents and this is why he can individuate his accidents. Of course John cannot exist without will, but he can individuate his will not because he is characterized by will. Being able to make decisions does not enable John to individuate his will. Fulfilling the function of individuation is not directly founded in any proper accident of the substance. The substance can individuate accidents because substance is primitively individual. Proper accidents, although indispensable, do not activate the substance's function of individuation.

In contrast, every function which the essence could fulfill with respect to *esse* is directly founded in *esse*. For all functions of essence are played by it insofar as it is in act. But *esse* is the actuality of all acts (KERR 2015, 89–90). *Esse* could be inseparable from essence only if there is any function performed by essence with respect to *esse* which is not founded in the basic function performed by *esse*. There is not such a function of essence and thus *esse* cannot be inseparable from essence. Hence, the inseparability of *esse* is untenable also if we accept the “no existence of *esse*” restriction. Now we

know why a substance and its proper accidents can be mutually, rigidly, and aspectually inseparable: because none of the functions they play to each other is the function of existential actualization.

Thomists could respond that essence plays some role to *esse* just as a potency and not as an act. This is true but the function in question cannot be played if the essence is in potency. Playing the function as a potency is not the same as playing the function when being in potency. The latter is impossible. Moreover the only function the essence can perform as a potency correlated to *esse* is the simple converse of the function which *esse* fulfills. Essence's function as potency is being actualized by *esse*. Thus the alleged individuation of *esse* by essence is in fact just essence's being actualized by *esse*. Of course we can say that *esse* is inseparable from the essence because the latter is actualized by *esse* and that essence is inseparable from *esse* because *esse* actualizes essence. But in this situation *esse* and essence are conceived as purely relative features. Yet such features trivially condition each other to the same extent and it is impossible to decide which of them is ontologically prior towards the other. Furthermore, this mutual conditioning is possible if none of the relative features perform the function of *esse*. It is evident in the case of such features as being a husband and being a wife. Even if the only function of essence is being an argument of the relation in which *esse* must stand, essence cannot "perform" this function without *esse* and we again have the vicious circle.

Thus *esse* seems to be completely independent of a thing. As I said many times this contradicts the thesis regarding the intimacy of existence. To avoid this contradiction we must resign from intimacy or must sacrifice the thesis that existence is a component which plays the role of existential actualization. Personally I prefer to save the intimacy of existence. My intuition (which I cannot develop in this paper) is that the relationship between a contingent thing and the fact of its existence should not be analyzed in terms of an *esse* on which a thing is mutually or only asymmetrically dependent. Contingency does not consist in the fact that a thing contains a dependent existence (dependent on the thing itself and on God). Contingency consists in the fact that a thing itself is dependent for its existence on something else. That a thing depends existentially on something is not the same as that thing having a dependent existence. Existence can neither be dependent nor independent. For dependence is defined in terms of existence. Yet if existence is neither dependent nor independent and if a

thing is neither dependent on nor independent of its existence then existence is an unanalyzable state which does not fulfill the function of existential actualization. Thus the real distinction question seems to be invalid or trivial: Everything is distinct (non-identical) from its existence, even God. But this is a thesis of no metaphysical importance. What really counts is the question of whether or not things are dependent for their existence on something else.

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S u m m a r y

One of the most important theses of Existential Thomism is that contingent things are composed of essence and existence. The thesis is immediately supplemented by *a proviso* that these components are not parts in the regular sense of the word. Essence and existence are not extended pieces of the thing which can be detached from it. They are inseparable aspects of the thing wherein inseparability is understood as a sort of dependence. In my paper I analyze the thesis of the inseparability of existence. For me this is untenable. I argue that this inseparability blocks up the essential function ascribed by Thomists to existence: the function of making the thing real. Thus to save this function we are forced to export existence to outside the thing. It

contradicts our deep belief that existence is the most intimate aspect of the thing. Therefore the Thomistic analysis of existence seems to be invalid.

PROBLEMY Z NIESAMODZIELNOŚCIĄ ISTNIENIA

Streszczenie

Jedną z najważniejszych tez tomizmu egzystencjalnego jest, że rzeczy przygodne składają się z istoty i istnienia. Teza ta jest od razu uzupełniana zastrzeżeniem, że nie chodzi tu o części w regularnym sensie. Istota i istnienie nie są rozciągniętymi kawałkami rzeczy, które mogą być od niej oddzielone. Są niesamodzielnymi aspektami rzeczy, przy czym niesamodzielną rozumiana jest jako pewien rodzaj zależności. W moim artykule dokonuję analizy tezy o niesamodzielnosci istnienia. Jest ona dla mnie nie do utrzymania. Argumentuję, że niesamodzielną blokuje istotną funkcję, którą tomisci przypisują istnieniu: funkcję czynienia rzeczy realną. Stąd, aby zachować tę funkcję, zmuszeni jesteśmy do przeniesienia istnienia poza rzecz. Przeczy to naszemu głębokiemu przekonaniu, że istnienie jest najbardziej intymnym aspektem rzeczy. Dlatego tomistyczna analiza istnienia wydaje się być nietrafna.

Key words: *esse*; essence; inseparability.

Słowa kluczowe: *esse*; istota; niesamodzielną.

Informacje o Autorze: Dr hab. MAREK PIWOWARCZYK, prof. KUL—Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski Jana Pawła II, Wydział Filozofii, Katedra Filozofii Religii; adres do korespondencji: Al. Raławickie 14, 20–950 Lublin; e-mail: piwowar1@wp.pl; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0112-8738>.