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Lawrence Dewan and Stephen Brock: about the Real Distinction between Form and *Esse**

Lawrence Dewan i Stephen Brock: o rzeczywistej różnicy między formą a *esse*

Abstract. The main objective of this paper is to address the well-known issue, in the thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas, of the real distinction between form and *esse* in caused things. To achieve this, we present the approaches to the subject offered by Lawrence Dewan on the one hand, and Stephen Brock on the other. The first step is to highlight once again Fr Dewan's discussion about form as a cause of being, a premise which is shared by Professor Brock. The second stage consists of showing how Fr Dewan and Brock start from different perspectives to base their arguments for this distinction. Thus, the article is divided into two parts, one part for each of the above items. As a result, we hope to clarify Aquinas's real distinction between form and *esse* in caused things, due to the luminous contributions of these distinguished Thomists.

Streszczenie. Głównym celem niniejszego artykułu jest odniesienie się do dobrze znanej w myśli św. Tomasza z Akwinu kwestii realnego rozróżnienia między formą a *esse* w rzeczach sprawczych. Aby to osiągnąć, przedstawiamy podejścia do tego tematu zaproponowane przez Lawrence'a Dewana z jednej strony i Stephena Brocka z drugiej. Pierwszym krokiem jest ponowne podkreślenie refleksji o. Dewana na temat formy jako przyczyny bytu, którą to przesłankę podziela profesor Brock. Drugi etap polega na pokazaniu, w jaki sposób o. Dewan i Brock wychodzą z różnych perspektyw, aby

* We are grateful to Professor Stephen Brock for his valuable comments on the writing of this article.

oprzeć swoje argumenty na tym rozróżnieniu. W związku z tym artykuł został podzielony na dwie części, po jednej dla każdego z powyższych punktów. W rezultacie mamy nadzieję wyjaśnić rzeczywiste rozróżnienie Akwinaty między formą a *esse* w rzeczach sprawczych, dzięki światłemu wkładowi tych wybitnych tomistów.

Keywords: *Esse, essentia*, real distinction, Thomas Aquinas, Lawrence Dewan, Stephen Brock.

Słowa kluczowe: *Esse, essentia*, rzeczywista różnica, Tomasz z Akwinu, Lawrence Dewan, Stephen Brock.

Introduction. About the Kinship between Form and Being

We have emphasized in several papers¹ the extent to which clarifying this kinship was crucial for Fr. Dewan. In fact, he repeatedly said that this was necessary to have a correct understanding of both form and being in Thomas Aquinas. We read: “You ask what the importance is of ‘the role of form’. I ask what the role of each of the items in the ontological analysis is. Unless the role of each is understood, one does not understand things from the viewpoint of being” (Irizar and Dewan 2015, 26).

He was criticized for presumably over-exalting the role of form to the detriment of the act of being. Here is one of his answers to this “accusation”: “I would say that I **do** give full credit to the *actus essendi*. In writing the *Form as Something Divine* paper I happened upon the text [he is referring to *In De caelo* 1.6 (62 [5])] which seems to me to clear up any ambiguity” (Irizar and Dewan 2015, 18).

We will return to the *Form as Something Divine* paper, but first let us quote other places where Dewan emphatically rejects this presumption.

In fact, he pointed out “three targets of metaphysical attention,” the subsisting thing, the *essence* and *esse*: “ScG 4.11 (ed. Pera #3472–3473) is a passage from St. Thomas which shows the ineluctable variety of intelligible roles of the three items in the metaphysical analysis... We need to study all three. The task is to understand the proper roles of all three” (Irizar and Dewan 2015, 25).

¹ For an exhaustive study on the form-essence relationship according to L. Dewan see Irizar (2017, 17–29) and Irizar and Rodríguez (2016, 24–56).

However, he insisted on the need to recover the role of form even to understand the nature of the act of being. This insistence, he noted, came from the need to take the formula *esse per se consequitur ad formam*² seriously. “All the business of my pushing form really relates to taking ‘the per se connection’ between form and *esse* seriously. Thus, I speak of a ‘kinship’ between form and *esse*” (Irizar and Dewan 2015, 26).

This kinship is clear in God and most perfect beings, like separated substances and the human soul. On the matter, he called attention to this passage in *De ente et essentia*, c. 1:

[...] But because “ens” is said absolutely and primarily of substances, and posteriorly and in a somewhat qualified sense of accidents, thus it is that *essentia* also properly and truly is in substances, but in accidents it is in a certain measure and in a qualified sense. But of substances, some are simple and some are composite, and in both there is *essentia*; but in the simple in a truer and more noble degree, inasmuch as they also they have more noble *esse*; for they are the cause of those which are composite, at least [this is true of] the first simple substance which is God (Irizar and Dewan 2015, 26).³

For Dewan, the perfection of form, as a principle of *esse*, is shown by Saint Thomas in relation to immortality of the human soul:

When I want to focus on the “existential” role of form, I regularly refer to *S.Th.*, I–II, q. 85, a. 6, on whether death is natural; remember the teaching: [...] corruptions and defects of things are natural, not according to the inclination of form, which is *the principle of being and perfection*, but according to the inclination of matter [...] And he continues: [...] And though ***every form intends perpetual being as much as it can***, nevertheless no form of a corruptible thing can achieve its perpetuity, other than the rational soul, by the fact that it is not altogether subject to corporeal

² *S.Th.*, I, q. 90, a. 2, *ad 1*.

³ “Sed quia ens absolute et per prius dicitur de substantiis et per posterius et quasi secundum quid de accidentibus, inde est quod *essentia* proprie et vere est in substantiis, sed in accidentibus est quodammodo et secundum quid. Substantiarum vero quaedam sunt simplices et quaedam compositae, et in utrisque est *essentia*, sed in simplicibus veriori et nobiliori modo, secundum quod etiam *esse* nobilius habent. Sunt enim causa eorum quae composita sunt, ad minus substantia prima simplex, quae Deus est”. To consult the complete works of St. Thomas in Latin, see the *Corpus Thomisticum* Online.

matter as are the other forms.⁴ Thomas had already taught, in *S.Th.*, I, q. 80, a. 1, that “some inclination follows upon every form whatsoever [... quamlibet formam sequitur aliqua inclinatio...]”. He also taught, in *S.Th.*, I, q. 42, a. 1, *ad* 1, that the two *effects of form* are being [*esse*] and operation [*operatio*]⁵ (Irizar and Dewan 2015, 29).

That is why: “[...] the doctrine that ‘being follows upon form because of what form is’ is important for the proof of the immortality of the soul [...]” (Irizar and Dewan 2015, 26).

Regarding the causality of form, it is important to remember that Fr Dewan said repeatedly that form is not an efficient cause, but a *formal cause*⁶:

In order to understand this “power of the form”, I should note two texts, as follows; first *S.Th.*, II–II, q. 23, a. 2, *ad* 3: “[...] Charity operates formally. Now, the efficacy of form is in function of the power of the **agent** which introduces the form [into the thing]. And therefore, the fact that charity is not emptiness, but rather brings about an infinite effect, inasmuch as it conjoins the soul to God by giving it righteousness, demonstrates the infinity of the *divine* power, which is the *author* of charity”⁷ (Irizar and Dewan 2015, 18).

Whereas, according to him, in *De potentia* q. 7, a. 2, *ad* 10, Saint Thomas presents *esse* as a final cause towards which the other causes converge, and God is the first cause of *esse*:

Thus, Thomas provides us with a vision of the essence and of the form of the thing as *causal* relative to the *esse* of the thing. They should be considered *instruments* of

⁴ *S.Th.*, I–II, q. 85, a. 6: “[...] corruptiones et defectus rerum sunt naturales, *non quidem secundum inclinationem formae, quae est principium essendi et perfectionis*; sed secundum inclinationem materiae [...] Et quamvis *omnis forma intendat perpetuum esse quantum potest*, nulla tamen forma rei corruptibilis potest assequi perpetuitatem sui, praeter animam rationalem, eo quod ipsa non est subiecta omnino materiae corporali, sicut aliae formae”.

⁵ His italics.

⁶ As we will see later, Saint Thomas’s doctrine of form as a cause of *esse* in created things presupposes divine agency.

⁷ “[...] Caritas operatur formaliter. Efficacia autem formae est secundum virtutem agentis qui inducit formam. Et ideo quod caritas non est vanitas, sed facit effectum infinitum dum coniungit animam Deo iustificando ipsam, hoc demonstrat infinitatem virtutis divinae, quae est caritatis auctor”.

the first principle, i.e. God himself.⁸ The created *esse* has the role of *final* cause. All of this picture, with God as the efficient cause giving power to the form, explains why, though the potency of form is a *receptive* potency [*S.Th.*, I, q. 104, a. 4, *ad 2*], it can be active. I see this same sort of thinking in the explanation of how the agent intellect, though the most noble of powers, can flow from the essence of the soul [*S.Th.*, I, q. 79, a. 4, *ad 5*] (Irizar and Dewan 2015, 19).

Regarding this, he made an important point concerning the topic: “The question is whether one envisages *esse* as ‘giving its actuality’ to the form, or whether *esse* ‘is the actuality of form’. I would stress the latter” (Irizar and Dewan 2015, 42).

1. Forma and *esse* in created things

As É. Gilson points out, the decisive influence exerted by revelation on the development of metaphysics consisted in introducing into it the identification between God and Being and, consequently, the real identity of essence and being in God (1940, 64–65). Thus, reading in the Bible that God Is, Christian philosophy was able to see the necessity of the real distinction between being and essence in all that is not God, that is, in all caused things. In *ScG I, 2*, St. Thomas says that Moses learned from the Lord “this sublime truth when he asked the Lord: if . . . the people of Israel . . . ask me, ‘what is his name?’ what shall I say to them? The Lord answered: I am who I am. Say this to the people of Israel: ‘he who is has sent me to you’ (Exod 3:13–14); thus, declaring his own name to be ‘he who is.’ Now every name is appointed to signify the nature or essence of a thing. Therefore, it follows that God’s very existence itself is his essence or nature” (Aquinas 2018, 42).⁹ Everything whose essence is not its own being is by *participation* of another, that is, of the same being (*ipsum esse*)

⁸ See *De veritate* q. 27, a. 1, *ad 3*: “Esse naturale per creationem Deus facit in nobis nulla causa agente mediante, sed tamen mediante aliqua causa formali: forma enim naturalis principium est esse naturalis”.

⁹ *ScG I, 2*, n. 10: “Hanc autem sublimem veritatem Moyses a domino est edoctus, qui cum quaereret a domino, Exod. 3 dicens: si dixerint ad me filii Israel, quod nomen eius? Quid dicam eis? Dominus respondit: ego sum qui sum. Sic dices filiis Israel: qui est misit me ad vos, ostendens suum proprium nomen esse qui est. Quodlibet autem nomen est institutum ad significandum naturam seu essentiam alicuius rei. Unde relinquitur quod ipsum divinum esse est sua essentia vel natura”.

which is God (cf. *ScG* I, 2, n. 9). Also, in q. 13 of the first part of the *Summa Theologica*, dedicated to the study of the divine names, St. Thomas shows us, in a. 11, why *Qui est* is the most proper of the names of God. Among the reasons he adduces to demonstrate the appropriateness of this name, he tells us that it is so by reason of its meaning and its universality, for (1) it does not designate a particular mode of being or a particular form, but being itself, and since “the being of God is his essence” this will be the name that corresponds to it with greater propriety,¹⁰ and (2) because since our knowledge cannot during the present life know the essence of God as it is in itself, in trying to understand what He is we make use of expressions that determine Him to a mode (*modus*, measure, limit) of being, all insufficient with respect to His Being; but the less determined and the more common and absolute the names are, more appropriately we apply them to God.¹¹ Thus, the name “Who is” fits better than any other, because “being means the whole reality and, with regards to the reality, it is the most intimate and perfect” (Clavell 2015, 460), or as St. Thomas show us, following St. John Damascene,¹² “embraces everything, because it includes being itself as an infinite and unlimited sea of substance”.¹³

The relevance for metaphysics of what has been said above is crucial for the understanding of the principle of participation which is mentioned again by St. Thomas in the commentary on the Gospel of John. There he tells us that “everything which is something is reduced to what is the same thing by essence, as to the first and highest”. So “there must necessarily be at the sum-

¹⁰ “Primo quidem, propter sui significationem. Non enim significat formam aliquam, sed ipsum esse. Unde, cum esse Dei sit ipsa eius essentia, et hoc nulli alii conveniat, ut supra ostensum est, manifestum est quod inter alia nomina hoc maxime proprie nominat Deum, unumquodque enim denominatur a sua forma”.

¹¹ “Secundo, propter eius universalitatem. Omnia enim alia nomina vel sunt minus communia; vel, si convertantur cum ipso, tamen addunt aliqua supra ipsum secundum rationem; unde quodammodo informant et determinant ipsum. Intellectus autem noster non potest ipsam Dei essentiam cognoscere in statu viae, secundum quod in se est, sed quemcumque modum determinet circa id quod de Deo intelligit, deficit a modo quo Deus in se est. Et ideo, quanto aliqua nomina sunt minus determinata, et magis communia et absoluta, tanto magis proprie dicuntur de Deo a nobis”.

¹² “...et Damascenus dicit quod principalius omnibus quae de Deo dicuntur nominibus, est qui est, totum enim in seipso comprehendens, habet ipsum esse velut quoddam pelagus substantiae infinitum et indeterminatum”.

¹³ For a more detailed study about the divine names in St. Thomas, his reading of the Exodus and the relationship between faith and philosophy regards the name of God “Who is”; see Clavell (2015, 457–480).

mit of all things something which is its existence through its own essence, i.e., whose essence is its existence. And this is God, who is the most sufficient, the most eminent, and the most perfect cause of the whole of existence, from whom all things that are participate in existence” (Aquinas 2013, 2). According to St. Thomas, this truth is confirmed by the authority of Sacred Scripture where it says “the Lord is high above all nations (Ps 112:4),”¹⁴ “which, according to Dionysius, refers to the divine nature” (Aquinas 2013, 2) and by St. John, who “shows us this dignity when he says below, the Word was God (John 1:1), with Word as subject and God as the predicate” (Aquinas 2013, 2).¹⁵

Now, the necessary consequence of being convenient to God by virtue of its own nature is the contingent character of all things to which being is convenient by participation, a truth that was virtually contained in the *metaphysics of Exodus*, an expression with which É. Gilson described the biblical passage of God’s revelation to Moses (1940, 94). This is what is expressed by the distinction made by St. Thomas between essence and being in creatures. That created beings are contingent beings means that they are subject to becoming, to movement and, in short, that there is in them a composition of act and potency (ScG II, 53). Thus, according to a very widespread patristic interpretation that St. Thomas follows from St. Augustine, the name “I am” spoken by God would serve rather to signify his eternity and immutability. This is, in fact, another of the reasons that Aquinas presents for maintaining that this is the name most proper to God. Again, in *S.Th* I, q. 13, a. 11 St. Thomas explains, with St. Augustine, that if this name means being in the present tense it is because (1) He knows neither past nor future and (2), as L. Clavell points out in his study of the divine name *Qui est* in the *Summa Theologica*, the Augustinian “I am that I am” is taken as excluding “the mixture of non-being” that is, “in the sense of divine immutability” (2015, 469). In the same sense, St. Thomas explains the meaning of some passages in the Gospel of John where Jesus is presented to us referring to himself as “I am”.¹⁶

The immutability of God is immediately deduced from the text of Exodus, “to the *Ego sum qui sum* of Exodus, there exactly corresponds this other word of Malachi (III, 6): *Ego Dominus et non mutor*” (Gilson 1940, 95). For Fr. De-

¹⁴ *Super Io.*, pr., n. 5: “Excelsus super omnes gentes Dominus”.

¹⁵ *Super Io.*, pr., n. 5: “...et Deus erat Verbum, quasi: Verbum erat Deus, ut ly Verbum ponatur ex parte suppositi, et Deus ex parte apposite”.

¹⁶ See Clavell (2015, 469).

wan, this is the starting point that is necessary to adopt for the real distinction between essence and being in creatures:

[...] I use the thing's being caused to distinguish between the essence and the *esse*. This, it seems to me, is the normal starting-point, and is the solid background of (1) [that *esse* is other than essence or quiddity]. That is, I think (1) involves the experience of generable and corruptible, and so caused, substances. Once it has been seen that there is such a distinction, it can then be used as the ontological root of causality: anything which has such a distinction in it is caused by another (1984, 148).

Based on this analysis of the meaning of the name of God in the exegetical writings of Aquinas and the implications that derive therefrom for the metaphysical analysis of the relationship between being and essence in caused things, we now wish to present some of the contributions of two contemporary Thomistic scholars on this topic that can be very significant for a metaphysical reading of the Sacred Scriptures, along the lines indicated by Fr. Clavell of a mutual hermeneutical help between the sacred text and philosophy (2015, 472).

2. Form as a principle of *esse* and the real distinction between them in created things

In a previous section, we have recapitulated Dewan's discussion on the perfection of form as a principle of *esse* and, therefore, its close affinity with *esse*. However, Dewan was conscious of the risk that this vision involved:

The close relationship between form and *esse* is of great importance for the understanding of both these targets of metaphysical attention. They are so closely associated that they are most easily confused. Accordingly, my topic is how we say, with Thomas, that they are indeed really, and not merely notionally, distinct (Dewan 2006, 118).

Our aim now is to highlight how Dewan's understanding of form and its *per se* connection with *esse* and the efficient causal hierarchy influence his understanding of the real distinction between form and *esse* as presented by Thomas Aquinas.

Before we move forward, let us consider two topics which Fr Dewan focused on.

The first is *natura essendi*. He was convinced that this was a central item in Thomas Aquinas's *Metaphysics* and a fundamental aspect to understand the real distinction between form and being.

According to him, the likeness of created things to God is because they have in common the same *form* (i.e., *natura essendi*), but not in the same *ratio*. We read:

[...] this is the doctrine of *Summa theologiae* 1.4.3: all likeness is through having form in common. The "form" Thomas speaks of in that article as common to God and creatures is: "sicut *ipsum esse* est commune omnibus." Thomas is treating *esse* as *formal*: it is "maxime formale omnium" (1.7.1); it is the actuality of all things, even of the very forms, and is formal with respect to everything in the thing, including the particular forms (*S.Th.*, I, q. 4, a. 1, *ad* 3). – The community is not a univocal one, but analogical, i.e., according to priority and posteriority. *In Sent.* 2.1.1.1, which I quote near the beginning of the "Being as a Nature" paper, Thomas called the act of being "natura entitatis" (Irizar and Dewan 2015, 24).¹⁷

On one occasion I asked him what he meant by the *nature of being and its properties* without *the presence of some form* (obviously I had misunderstood Fr Dewan's argument). Here is his answer:

I mean that Thomas treats the act of being, *ipsum esse*, as a nature or form. One can see this in *S.Th.*, I, q. 4, a. 2 (second argument in the body of the article), where *ipsum esse* is compared to heat. The idea is that a nature has proper differences. The example for this is **whole number**: because of the very nature of whole number, it is necessary that a whole number be **either odd or even**. These follow from what it is to be a whole number. Thomas is saying that there are differences that pertain to what it is to be a being. Thus, a being is either corruptible or incorruptible, i.e., is such that it can be or not be, or else is such that it cannot not be. It is because God is the cause of the nature of being that he is the cause of things being necessary in their substantial being (like the human soul) or merely possible regarding substantial being (any corruptible substance). Notice e.g., *S.Th.*, I, q. 48, a. 2 where it is mentioned that these grades are found "in ipso esse" (Irizar and Dewan 2015, 56).¹⁸

¹⁷ His italics.

¹⁸ His italics.

He added:

... you say, “without the presence of form”. Did I speak of *esse* without form being present? Not that I know of. In fact, they are indissociable; they are identical in the case of God; they are “akin” in creatures; my point in the “Being as a Nature” paper was that even if one isolates the act of being for consideration, one is forced to speak of “its own nature” and what belongs to that nature, i.e., as properties. Thus, “nature” has a “transcendental” role in our discussion of being” (Irizar and Dewan 2015, 56–57).

So much so that: “We must not forget that *esse* is ‘maxime formale omnium’ [*S.Th.*, I, q. 7, a. 1]. – We need both form and *esse*” (Irizar and Dewan 2015, 21). And Dewan adds:

In this line you might read my paper which is chapter 3 in the Form and Being book, on the seed of metaphysics, especially at the end. I see our knowledge of *esse* as needing consideration of the sort of form, which is other than *esse*, but it is because our intellect has an order to a lower mode of being than e.g. the divine intellect has¹⁹ (Irizar and Dewan 2015, 22).

Regarding the above, he quoted a key text concerning the finite modes of *esse* in creatures from *De substantiis separatis* c. 8:

But it is to be considered that those things that participate being from the first being do not participate being in the universal mode of being, the way it is in the first principle, but particularly, **in some determinate mode or measure of being** which befits this genus or this species. Now, each thing is adapted to one determinate mode of being **in accordance with the mode of its own substance**. And the mode of each substance composed out of matter and form is **according to the form**, through which it pertains to a determinate species. Thus, therefore, a thing composed out of matter and form **through its form** is rendered participative of being itself by God according to some proper mode.²⁰

¹⁹ See *S.Th.*, I, q. 12, a. 4.

²⁰ *De substantiis separatis*, cap. 8 co: “Sed considerandum est, quod ea quae a primo ente esse participant, non participant esse secundum universalem modum essendi, secundum quod est in primo principio, sed particulariter secundum quemdam determinatum essendi modum qui convenit vel huic generi vel huic speciei. Unaqueque autem res adaptatur ad unum determinatum modum essendi secundum modum suae substantiae.

He associated this with *S.Th.*, I, q. 14, a. 6: “(Ottawa ed. 97b6–31) All that has the character of perfection within the creature, and not just its *esse*, relates to the divine *esse*” (Irizar and Dewan 2015, 22).

For it was shown above that whatever of **perfection** there is in any creature, the whole of it preexists and is contained in God in the mode of excellence. Now, it is not only that which creatures have in common, viz., being, that pertains to perfection, but also those through which creatures are distinguished from each other, such as to live, and to understand and the like, by which living things are distinguished from non-living things and intelligent things from non-intelligent ones. **And every form, through which every thing whatsoever is constituted in its own species, is some perfection.** And thus all preexist in God, not merely as regards what is common to all, but also as regards those items according to which things are distinguished.²¹

And concerning this, Dewan comments: “it shows that when Thomas calls *esse* the perfection of perfections, he means every word he uses. [*De pot.*, 7, 2, *ad 9: perfectio omnium perfectionum*]” (Irizar and Dewan 2015, 23). *Esse*, as form or nature, goes beyond all forms.

We should also note Fr Dewan’s emphasis on Aquinas’s teaching about form as something divine of things. Accordingly, Dewan refers to this passage from *In Physic.*, lib. 1 l. 15 n. 7:

... form is something divine and best, an object of appetite. It is divine, because *every form* is something of a participation by likeness of the divine act of being [*divini esse*], which [divine act of being] is pure act: for each thing just to this extent is, actually [*est in actu*], viz., inasmuch as it *has form*. It is something best, because

Modus autem uniuscuiusque substantiae compositae ex materia et forma, est secundum formam, per quam pertinet ad determinatam speciem. Sic igitur res composita ex materia et forma, per suam formam fit participativa ipsius esse a Deo secundum quemdam proprium modum”

²¹ *S.Th.*, I, q. 14, a. 6, co: “Supra enim ostensum est quod quidquid perfectionis est in quacumque creatura, totum praeexistit et continetur in Deo secundum modum excellentem. Non solum autem id in quo creaturae communicant, scilicet ipsum esse, ad perfectionem pertinet; sed etiam ea per quae creaturae ad invicem distinguuntur, sicut vivere, et intelligere, et huiusmodi, quibus viventia a non viventibus, et intelligentia a non intelligentibus distinguuntur. Et omnis forma, per quam quaelibet res in propria specie constituitur, perfectio quaedam est. Et sic omnia in Deo praeexistunt, non solum quantum ad id quod commune est omnibus, sed etiam quantum ad ea secundum quae res distinguuntur”.

act is the perfection of potency and its good; and consequently, it follows that it is an object of appetite, because each thing has appetite for its own perfection.²²

To talk about “form as something divine in things” in turn presupposes two other statements from St. Thomas: “Obviously, to present form as something divine in things, one has to present the divine, i.e., God, and one has to present God as *ipsum esse subsistens*, the very act of being subsisting, and one has to present form as principle of being, *principium essendi*” (Dewan 2007, 12).

Thus, for Professor Dewan, “the *intimacy* of the relation” (Dewan 2007, 40) and, in turn, the real distinction between form and being, always refers us back to consider divine causality. Indeed, it is from a higher cause that Thomas Aquinas talks about form as a principle of *esse* and, therefore, as something divine in things, namely, as something through which created things participate, by way of likeness, in God’s nature, who is his own *esse*.

Because it is through form that a thing is a being in act, form is revealed as a participation by way of likeness of the divine nature, which is the subsisting act of being. Since, with Thomas, we affirm the distinction between a creaturely form and its act of being,²³ we might be tempted to see the likeness between God, the subsisting act of being, and the creature *merely* in function of the creature’s act of being. We must not be content with this. We must also see the relation between the creature’s substantial form and the divine act of being. To do so, we must exhibit the *kinship* between form and act of being within the creature. There is a continuity, as to *exemplar* causality, to be seen stretching from God as the subsisting act of being to *both* the creaturely form and the creaturely act of being (Dewan 2007, 39).²⁴

²² *In Physic.*, lib. 1 l. 15 n. 7, concerning Aristotle *Phys.* 1.9 (192a17): “... forma est quoddam divinum et optimum et appetibile. Divinum quidem est, quia omnis forma est quaedam participatio similitudinis divini esse, quod est actus purus: unumquodque enim in tantum est actu in quantum habet formam. Optimum autem est, quia actus est perfectio potentiae et bonum eius: et per consequens sequitur quod sit appetibile, quia unumquodque appetit suam perfectionem”. See also *ScG* 3.97.3 and *In De caelo*, lib. 3 l. 2 n. 2.

²³ See *Sent.*, *Metaph.*, 4.2 (556 and 558) and *S.Th.*, I, q. 50, a. 2, *ad* 3; see also *Quaestiones disputatae de anima* 6 and *De substantiis separatis* 8.

²⁴ In fact, he says, such *exemplar* causality extends in various degrees to everything in the created thing, even primary matter. See *S.Th.*, I, q. 14, a. 11, *ad* 3. At *ScG* 1.70.3 Thomas attributes a measure of nobility to potency through its order to act.

Dewan, in his argument, assumes a type of causality: “The general argument I wish to stress insists on the doctrine that the cause as such is more noble than its effect and insists on causal *hierarchy*” (Dewan 2006, 9). This is not merely a cause of *becoming*,²⁵ but of *being*, and so, a cause of a form or nature. But only God can be the cause of being.

According to these premises, Fr. Dewan concludes that causal hierarchy proves the real distinction between form and being in caused things. Let us see the complete argument:

[...] the effect of a cause of being ceases to be if its cause ceases to cause (*S.Th.*, I, q. 104, a. 1). Considering such dependence, it becomes clear that while both substantial form and act of being are within the thing, and most inwardly so, *the form pertains to the selfhood of the thing in a way that the act of being cannot so pertain.*

In the situation where one thing is the cause of being of another, the cause must have a higher, more noble form or nature than the effect (cf. *Quodl.* 12.5.1).²⁶ This is so precisely because to be cause of being, one must be cause of form as such.²⁷ *It is, indeed, the measure of this superiority of the nature of the cause over the nature of the effect that renders visible the difference between the form of the effect and its act of being* (Dewan 2007, 41–42).²⁸

To sum up Dewan’s argument, we have this picture:

1. We have to start from the intimate relationship between form and being because of the type of thing that form is: *essence* or form is cause of *esse* in caused things.

²⁵ He argues that univocal causality is only the cause of becoming, “dog cause dogs”. See Dewan (2006, 9), (2007, 29–30).

²⁶ “[...] unumquodque quod est in potentia et in actu, fit actu per hoc quod participat *actum superiorem*” (italics are ours). As the setting in the *quodlibet* makes clear, this is true not only for the effect of change but also for the effect of creative causality. *Qq. de anima* 6., ad 10: “[...] agens per motum reducit aliquid de potentia in actum; agens autem sine motu non reducit aliquid de potentia in actum, sed facit esse actu quod secundum naturam est in potentia ad esse, et huiusmodi agens est creans”.

²⁷ So true is this that Thomas, arguing that God must be the first cause of form, uses the premise that God is the cause of being: *since being is caused by form and not by matter*, God must be the first cause of form. Cf. *ScG* 2.43.8: “Sicut esse est primum in effectibus, ita respondet primae causae ut proprius effectus. Esse autem est per formam, et non per materiam. Prima igitur causalitas formarum maxime est primae causae attribuenda”.

²⁸ Italics are ours.

2. Forms of different species are *particular* forms. So, although form is perfection, it determines *esse*. Forms receive *esse*, which is their *actuality*.
3. *Esse* is also *nature or form*, but it is universal: *esse* is the most formal of all.
4. Only in God are form and *esse* identical, as God's *essence* is His *esse*. Therefore, because of God is *ipsum esse subsistent*, only He can cause *esse* in caused things. And He gives *esse* through a particular form.
5. Now, the caused thing depends on its cause of being and staying in *esse*. This shows the superiority of cause over effect and explains the difference between the form and *esse* of the caused thing.

Indeed, if we consider a caused thing under the influx of divine causality (a causality of being and a hierarchical one), we can distinguish two natures or forms: the nature of the act of being and the specific nature of the thing, which are both *effects* caused by God. Why is there a difference? Because, Dewan concludes, "the form pertains to the selfhood of the thing in a way that the act of being cannot so pertain" (Dewan 2007, 42).

3. Stephen Brock and the multiplicity of acts of being in caused things

Up to here, we have examined Lawrence Dewan's presentation of the issue. Now, we turn to Stephen's Brock argument to support the difference between form and being in caused things.

As a starting point, we should note that Professor Brock shares with Dewan points 1 to 5.²⁹ However, he departs from Dewan in the conclusion he draws from such premises. Let us consider his line of reasoning.

We will focus on the two papers in which he most explicitly addressed the topic. The first is "How Many Acts of Being Can a Substance Have? An Aristotelian Approach to Aquinas's Real Distinction," (Brock, n.d.)³⁰ and the second, "La forma tra la potenza e l'atto in Tommaso d'Aquino" (Brock 2016).

²⁹ In fact, Stephen Brock has studied the nature of form and its kinship with *esse* in Thomas Aquinas and even in Aristotle. See Brock (2017); see also Brock (2020).

³⁰ Originally published in *International Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 54, no. 3 (September 2014): 317–331.

In “How Many Acts of Being Can a Substance Have?”, Brock develops a theme about the discussion of the act of being (*esse*) that is unique in God and multiple in creatures. His thesis is given below:

[...] in God, fullness of being consists in a single actus essendi – the act of being that in reality is identical with His essence – the fullness of being in any created substance consists of many acts of being, all of them distinct from its essence, and each possessed in function of a different factor (n.d, 3–4).

He makes his point starting from *S.Th.*, I–II, q. 18, a. 1:³¹ “But God alone has the whole fullness of His being in function of something one and simple; every other thing in fact has the fullness of the being suited to it in function of diverse factors” (Brock n.d., 3).³² Next, he gives us some examples of these “factors”:

Thus, in some things it happens that they have some measure of being, and yet they lack somewhat of the fullness of being that is due to them. For instance, the fullness of human being (*esse humani*) requires that there be a certain composite of soul and body, having all the faculties and instruments of knowledge and of movement; whence if some man lacks any of these, he will lack somewhat of the fullness of his being. Therefore, however much he has of being, so much he has of goodness; and insofar as he lacks somewhat of the fullness of being, to that extent he lacks goodness and is said to be bad; as a blind man has of goodness the fact that he lives, and it is bad for him that he lacks sight. But if he had nothing of beingness (*entitate*) or goodness, he could not be called either good or bad (Brock n.d., 5).³³

³¹ There, he refers us to *S.Th.*, I, q. 6, a. 3. Commenting on these lines, Brock notes: “Thomas holds that God’s being ‘good by His essence’ fits not only with Plato’s thought but also with Aristotle’s. See *S.Th.*, I, q. 6, a. 4” (n.d., 25).

³² The translations of Thomas in this section are by Fr. Brock. “Solus autem Deus habet totam plenitudinem sui esse secundum aliquid unum et simplex, unaqueque vero res alia habet plenitudinem essendi sibi convenientem secundum diversa”.

³³ *S.Th.*, I–II, q. 18, a. 1: “Unde in aliquibus contingit quod quantum ad aliquid habent esse, et tamen eis aliquid deficit ad plenitudinem essendi eis debitam. Sicut ad plenitudinem esse humani requiritur quod sit quoddam compositum ex anima et corpore, habens omnes potentias et instrumenta cognitionis et motus, unde si aliquid horum deficiat alicui homini deficit ei aliquid de plenitudine sui esse. Quantum igitur habet de esse, tantum habet de bonitate, in quantum vero aliquid ei deficit de plenitudine essendi, intantum deficit a bonitate, et dicitur malum, sicut homo caecus habet de bonitate quod vivit, et malum est

Professor Brock admits that, although in the lines quoted above Aquinas is not very explicit on the topic (many acts of being in created things), nevertheless, according to him, in *S.Th.*, I–II, q. 5, a. 1, *ad* 1,³⁴ Thomas gives us clearer bases to affirm that in created things there are many acts of being beside the substantial being. Saint Thomas’s argument states:

For since “a being” (*ens*) properly bespeaks something in act, and act properly has order to potency, something is called a being unqualifiedly in function of that by which it is first divided from what is merely in potency. And this is the substantial being (*esse*) of each thing. Hence each thing is called a being unqualifiedly in function of its substantial being. But, in function of acts that are added on, something is called a being in a certain respect, as being white signifies being in a certain respect. Being white, in fact, does not take away [a thing’s] being unqualifiedly in potency, because it comes to a thing already pre-existing in act (Brock n.d., 10).³⁵

Indeed, there, Aquinas argues about the conceptual distinction between being (*esse*) and good (*bonum*). Even though being and good are convertible, he makes an accurate distinction: a thing, because of its substantial act of being, is a being *simpliciter* (taken unqualifiedly), but for this (only) act is a good *secundum quid* (in some respects). Inversely, a thing, by virtue of the acts that are added (accidental act of beings), is a good *simpliciter*, but it is a being *secundum quid* because of these added acts.

About the lines above, Brock notes:

Although these add-on acts are only accidental, not substantial, I see no reason not to think that they are certain acts of being, albeit qualified ones. They are acts of being that are received by way of some accident or other, as being white is received

ei quod caret visu. Si vero nihil haberet de entitate vel bonitate, neque malum neque bonum dici posset”.

³⁴ He mainly bases his discussion on the question to which in fact Thomas refers to right there in *S.Th.*, I–II, q. 18, a. 1.

³⁵ *S.Th.*, I, q. 5, a. 1, *ad* 1: “Nam cum ens dicat aliquid proprie esse in actu; actus autem proprie ordinem habeat ad potentiam; secundum hoc simpliciter aliquid dicitur ens, secundum quod primo discernitur ab eo quod est in potentia tantum. Hoc autem est esse substantiale rei uniuscuiusque; unde per suum esse substantiale dicitur unumquodque ens simpliciter. Per actus autem superadditos, dicitur aliquid esse secundum quid, sicut esse album significat esse secundum quid, non enim esse album aufert esse in potentia simpliciter, cum adveniat rei iam praeexistenti in actu”.

by way of whiteness. At the same time, the subject of this act of being is not the accident itself.³⁶ It is the substance in which the accident inheres. That which is *a cat* and *is white* is *the cat*. That which is *a human being* and *is a statue* is *the human being*. And there you are. One substance with a certain multiplicity of acts of being – one unqualified, and another qualified (Brock n.d., 11).

But the importance of the text for his point is this:

... although a single substance does not have more than one substantial act of being, in function of which it is a being unqualifiedly, this is only its “first being.” It is the being that belongs to the substance precisely as the substance that it is, its “proper” being. And it is to this act of being that we are normally referring when we speak simply of the being of a thing. Any further act will be merely accidental. But it certainly will not be nothing, since such further acts will be what render the thing good unqualifiedly. They will be other acts of being. It is in this sense that a substance can have “a certain” multiplicity of acts of being. Speaking unqualifiedly, it will have just one act of being, but speaking in a certain respect, it can and should have many (Brock n.d., 13).

For Professor Brock, the thesis he defended, that is, in created things there are many acts of being, offers solid bases for arguing the real distinction between form and being in created things. According to him, we should consider “Thomas’s first assertion in *S.Th.*, I, q. 5, a. 1, *ad* 1: “properly speaking, ‘a being’ (*ens*) means something in act” (Brock n.d., 11). In fact, if a thing (a cactus, a whale, a man, etc.) is a being, this is because a form is actualized by an *esse*, or in other words, this *esse* is the actuality of that form.³⁷ However, that thing

³⁶ See *Expositio libri De ebdomadibus*, l. 2: “Accidentia enim non dicuntur encia quasi ipsa sint, sed in quantum eis substantia est aliquid”. For this reason, “properly speaking, an accident neither comes into being nor passes away; but it comes into being or passes away insofar as the subject begins or ceases to be in act with respect to that accident” (Brock n.d., 27). *S.Th.*, I–II, q. 110, a. 2, *ad* 3: “proprie loquendo, nullum accidens neque fit neque corrumpitur, sed dicitur fieri vel corrumpi, secundum quod subiectum incipit vel desinit esse in actu secundum illud accidens”

³⁷ As Brock notes (2016, 13) “being (*esse*) pertains *per se* to form, which is act. There is no doubling of acts here. It is not that the form has some sort of actuality of its own prior to the act of being that it brings with it. The actuality of the form is nothing other than the act of being that it brings with it *per se*. The act of being is the actuality of *an act*. It is that on account of which the form itself is act. The substantial act of being presupposes no other actuality in the thing.”

would not be able to receive other acts unless it had some potentiality. But, to the extent that *esse* is by definition nothing but act, that “residual” potentiality has to pertain to form:

[...] that same form – again, I am speaking of substantial form – renders the substance apt for many acts of being. At least one of them, the substantial being, is inseparable from the form, following upon it immediately and *per se*. But the same form also orders the substance to other acts. The unity to which the form determines the thing’s substantial being is the unity of a kind or a species.³⁸ It is unity according to a certain formula or *ratio*, a certain “proportioning.” And the substantial being is only the first of the acts that are proportioned to the substance according to its form. There are also accidental acts that “follow on the species” and “pertain to the form” (Brock n.d., 13).

Thus, Brock affirms, for Thomas, this is the heart of issue: in a created thing its substantial form must be different from its *esse*. In fact:

[...] even though for him every form is essentially act,³⁹ no created form is pure act or nothing but act. It also has potentiality. What is nothing but act is an act of being. A created form cannot be really identical with an act of being (Brock n.d., 17).

Now, let us consider the second of Stephen Brocks’s papers. In it, he offers his thesis about what kind of potency is form: “It hinges on the exact sense in which created form is called ‘potency’ for the *actus essendi*. Precisely this sense of potency, I believe, explains the sense in which the form is also called act” (2016, 72–73). In addition, Brock deals with the issue of another meaning of form or as a quasi-active potency, *virtus*: “So understood, the potency of form can be attributed even to God” (2016, 74).

About the first point, Brock, agrees with Thomas Aquinas who in Book IX of his Aristotle *Metaphysics* commentary says that form is a kind of act (2016, 74–75). And Brock examines in greater depth in what sense form is an act. According to him, here Thomas is referring to form as the cause or principle of *esse*:

³⁸ See *S.Th.*, I, q. 54, a. 2.

³⁹ See *S.Th.*, I, q. 77, a. 1.

Indeed, in the text that we have of the Commentary on Book Nine, form is called the ‘primary cause’ of being. What Thomas means, I believe, is that the form is the proper or immediate cause of the being of a thing. The other causes – the agent, the matter, the end – can exercise their causality even before the thing exists, i.e., while it is still only in potency. But upon the form, being in act follows in an immediate and necessary way [...] (Brock 2016, 76).

And he adds: “The texts in other works where Aquinas characterizes form in this way, as act and as cause of being, are very numerous. In the *Summa theologiae*, he says that a form is ‘through its essence act.’ Occasionally he even says that act is form; for example, when he explains the absurdity of the idea of matter existing without form: it would be a being in act without act” (Brock 2016, 76).

However, Brock notes that for Aquinas form is also receptive potency. How do we resolve this paradox? For him the solution to the paradox is a formula like this: *form is an act as such potency* (Brock 2016, 82).

Let us see how Professor Brock develops this formula. In the first place, as we saw above, he explains the meaning of form as an act because it is the “primary cause of being”. In the second place, Brock tells us that in that sense form is potency:

I think that in reality there are two senses. The first, which more directly concerns the paradox established here, belongs only to the created form. It is potency with respect to the being in the sense that it is receptive of being. For this reason, the creature receives and appropriates the impact of the being of God (2016, 84).

And about the second sense, he says:

In this way, although it is receptive, form is not a passive principle. That is, it does not pass from privation to possession of what is received, nor from possession to privation. It is potency only with respect to the being that it has, not with respect to non-being or another being. It is not potency in relation to opposed terms, as matter is. In this sense, it is more similar to another type of potency indicated in *Metaphysic IX*⁴⁰, that is, natural or non-rational active potency (2016, 84).

⁴⁰ See *Metaph.*, IX.2, 1046b4–24, e IX.5, 1048a3–8. In *VIII Fis.*, lect. 21, §1153[13].

In other words:

[...] a form cannot have a being other than that which it has, nor can it lack it. The soul only can have life, no other type of being, and not death or privation of life or being. Again, it is never simply *in* potency with respect to its being. It is necessarily in act (2016, 84).

To sum up:

A created form, as form, establishes the identity, i.e. the substantial unity, of the subject. With it, the essence of the subject, which is its capacity to be, is complete. And its being, which is act, follows upon it immediately, in a necessary and immediate (Brock 2016, 85).

According to these premises, form, by its nature, is an act because from it always follows *esse*; it is called “act” analogically because of bringing *esse* with it *per se*. And it is “potency” regarding to *esse* which is primarily act. Here is where Brock’s argument once again serves to support the real distinction between form and *esse*: as a *created* form. This has some potentiality to receive multiple acts of being, *but not another substantial act of being* distinct from its own, but rather accidental acts of being. And the reason for this is that created form is not its *esse*, that is, it is not a pure act, which is an exclusive feature of God.

Conclusion

Fr Dewan, following Thomas, considers that the real distinction is explained based on the causality of the *esse*. Although the form is also created, the emphasis is on the *esse* because Dewan is emphasising, and we should not forget this, the *kinship* between form and being, which is *identity* in God. He wants to show us up to which point there is affinity between both and reminds us that:

What is special in creatures is not that they have an essence and an act of being, but that these two must be distinct, and that the essence or form must be potential relative to the act of being. [I might add here a reminiscence of Thomas’s *De ente et essentia*, chapter 1 [ed. Leonine, lines 49–52], on the word: “essence”. He says: “Quiditatis” vero nomen sumitur ex hoc, quod per diffinitionem significatur. Sed

“essentia” dicitur secundum quod per eam et in ea ens habet esse] (Irizar and Dewan 2015, 46).

In short, it would seem that all his arguments about this *kinship* naturally put their focus on God as a cause of being *through* form. In this way, God, whose form is his being, *causes* the being of the entities created by means of a form. From this perspective of divine causation, for Dewan the real distinction between form and being is manifest, as on the one hand we have form of the thing, which is, so to speak, what is strictly “characteristic” of it,⁴¹ and on the other hand, we have something in which the thing participates, by means of its form, which is the *esse*.

Stephen Brock, who does share Dewan’s argument, has highlighted another aspect that also reveals the real distinction, namely, the peculiar act that the form is insofar as it is capable of being actualized in turn by another act, the *esse*. According to Brock, the potentiality of the caused form shows its lack of identity with the being itself, referring to the first cause. Indeed, the form, despite its ontological nature of the first act, is evidence of a kind of unfolding of actuality, of plenitude or perfection, which takes place due to the main acts of being of which it continues to be “receptive” throughout the course of its existence. This does not occur in God, in which the form is pure actuality, it is its own being.

In our opinion, Lawrence Dewan and Stephen Brock, in highlighting different aspects to evidence the real distinction between form and being, offer conceptual tools to scholars of Thomas of Aquinas, always drawn from Saint Thomas, which invite us to explore and examine in greater depth the thinking of the saint and doctor.

After all, this is where the work of the philosopher lies: to be able to deepen and develop what others have said very well, but that can still be understood and verified from other perspectives. In this respect, Thomas Aquinas is the main example to follow for those who study his thinking.

⁴¹ Because, unlike *esse* which is a common form, common to all beings, forms are “those through which creatures are distinguished from each other, such as to live, and to understand and the like, by which living things are distinguished from non-living things and intelligent things from non-intelligent ones” (Irizar and Dewan 2015, 23). See *S.Th.*, I, q. 14, a. 6.

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