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On Ex(s)istere: Revisiting the “to Be”–“to Exist” Debate *Richard Colledge*

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks to revive and advance dialogue surrounding John Nijenhuis’ case against ‘existence language’ as a rendering of Aquinas’ *esse*. Nijenhuis presented both a semantic/grammatical case for abandoning this practice as well as a more systematic argument based on his reading of Thomist metaphysics. On one hand, I affirm the important distinction between being and existence and lend qualified support to his interpretation of the quantitative/qualitative correlation between *esse* and *essentia* in Aquinas’ texts. On the other hand, I take issue with Nijenhuis’ relegation of exist(ence) to a second-rate ontological principle, and to this end undertake a brief historical and etymological survey, noting its emergence in Greek thought (ὑπόρχειν, ὑπαρξις), its translation into medieval Latin (*ex(s)istere*, *ex(s)istentia*) and thus something of the pedigree of this terminology in modern usage. I conclude with some brief remarks on the task of exegeting Aquinas vis-à-vis the revivification of contemporary metaphysical ontology in general.

Just over a decade ago, a lively debate sprang up primarily in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* concerning the common practice in Thomist scholarship of translating *esse* (and indeed εἶναι) by “existence” and its cognates.¹ At the time, the instigator of the discussion, John Nijenhuis, prosecuted a strong case against this practice. However, the dialogue between Nijenhuis and his interlocutors, Russell Pannier and Thomas Sullivan, ended abruptly with the conclusion that, as Nijenhuis put it at the time, “our visions are worlds apart, philosophically and ‘metaphysically’ ... we speak and think in two different languages”.² In what follows I would like to both revive and then further this unfortunately truncated discussion. My reasons for wanting to do so are twofold. First, Nijenhuis raised here an issue of great importance not only for Thomist scholarship in particular, but for the future of metaphysical ontology in general. Second, I believe that there is great potential for the conversation to be pushed much further than was the case a decade ago on the basis of something much closer to the shared “vision” and a common “language” that are needed if productive dialogue is to ensue.

I begin by presenting a brief précis of Nijenhuis’ several articles from the period which, beyond semantic and grammatical reasons for abandoning the still quite widespread practice of translating Thomas’ *esse* by exist(ence), presents also a substantial metaphysical argument rooted in his quantitative/qualitative reading of the *esse-essentia* relationship in Aquinas. My response to Nijenhuis’ position is rather complex. First, I affirm his semantic/grammatical argument, one that

¹ See articles by Nijenhuis: “‘To Be’ or ‘To Exist’: That Is the Question”. *The Thomist* 50, no. 3 (1986): 353-94; “‘Ens’ Described as ‘Being or Existent’”. *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (1994): 1-14; and “Existence vs. Being: An All-Important Matter of Terminology”. *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (1995): 89-95. See also the responses to Nijenhuis by Pannier and Sullivan: “Being, Existence, and the Future of Thomistic Studies: A Reply to Professor Nijenhuis”. *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 69, no. 1, pp. 83-88, Winter 1995. Note that in what follows I use the shorthand term “exist(ence)” to refer to “existence language” in general (including infinitive and substantive forms such as, respectively, “to exist” and “existence”).

² Nijenhuis, *Existence vs. Being*, 89.

has been made by several others in recent years (e.g., Cornelio Fabro³, Oliva Blanchette⁴ and to a limited extent John Knasas⁵). Second, I argue that insofar as his understanding of Aquinas is correct concerning the close quantitative/qualitative correlation between *esse* and *essentia* in his thought, then Nijenhuis' absolute opposition to the use of exist(ence) language for *esse* is also to be affirmed. However, third, while Nijenhuis may be correct in his *reading of Aquinas*, I nonetheless take issue with his relegation of exist(ence) to a necessarily second-rate ontological principle, and to this end I look to highlight something of the dynamism and metaphysical complexity to be discovered through a careful etymological investigation of its semantic field. Accordingly, I trace the emergence of this terminology in late Greek thought (ὑπάρχειν, ὑπαρξίς), its uneven translation into medieval Latin metaphysics (*ex(s)istere* and *ex(s)istentia*) and thus something of the pedigree of the modern and contemporary language of 'to exist' (*existieren; exister*) and existence (*die Existenz; l'existence*). I conclude with a few necessarily brief remarks on the obvious problems that are raised by a juxtaposition of the two 'horns' of my Nijenhuis interpretation, concerning the task of exegeting Aquinas vis-à-vis the context of contemporary metaphysical ontology in general.⁶

The Case for Decoupling Being and Existence on the Basis of Semantics and Grammar

Aquinas writes of a real distinction in the determinate being (*ens*) between *essentia* and *esse*. That there is a well-established practice of substituting exist(ence) for *esse* in translating and discussing Thomist texts, is beyond dispute. In his tellingly entitled 1947 work, *Court traité de l'existence et de l'existant*, Jacques Maritain writes of "this concept of existence [*l'existence*], of to-exist (*esse*)"⁷,

³ E.g., Fabro. "The Intensive Hermeneutics of Thomist Philosophy: The Notion of Participation". *Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 27, Mar 1974, 450, 470.

⁴ E.g., Blanchette. *Philosophy of Being: A Reconstructive Essay in Metaphysics*. Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003, 13, 90.

⁵ E.g., Knasas. *Bring and Some Twentieth Century Thomists*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2003, 175.

⁶ Both questions deserve significant papers unto themselves. However, if this paper can succeed in raising again the issue at hand and bringing it forward even to a small degree, this will be achievement enough.

⁷ Maritain. *Existence and the Existent*. Translated by Lewis Galantiere and Gerald B Phelan. Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1956, 33.

and he regularly reinforces the purported equivalence of the *actus essendi* with the “act of existence” through direct allusion to the words of Aquinas himself.⁸ The consequence is the virtual proclamation of a doctrine of *ipsum existere subsistens*, as seen, for example, in Gilson’s claim that “God alone, Who is a pure act of existence, can cause an act of existence [*l’existence*]”.⁹ Two more recent figures who have routinely continued this practice are Joseph Owens¹⁰ and Norris Clarke, with the latter writing of “the essence-existence doctrine” as the “central piece of [Aquinas’] whole metaphysical system”.¹¹ While generally far more circumspect in this regard, John Wippel also lapses into ‘existence talk’ on occasion,¹² and the tendency is not unknown either in texts by John F. X. Knasas, even in his most recent book in which he nonetheless labels this very practice as “unfortunate”.¹³

Nijenhuis is vociferously opposed to this translatory and scholarly practice, and a close reading of his papers indicate both semantic/grammatical reasons for doing so, as well as a more substantial metaphysical reason. I will turn to the latter in a moment. Of his semantic/ grammatical case, he (and others) mention two main problems. The first of these concerns the pervasive tendency to translate an infinitive, *esse*, by a substantive, “existence” (*l’existence*, *Existenz*). Not only does this scholarly custom have the effect of pasting over the *dynamic* connotations of Aquinas’ *esse*, but it also opens the way toward an implicit *reification* of this supremely *active* principle. Accordingly,

⁸ See, e.g., his allusion to *De Potentia Dei*: 7, 2, ad 9; 223: “the act of existing is the act *par excellence* ... the act and the perfection of all form and all perfection. *Hoc quod dico esse est actualitas omnium actuum, et propter hoc est perfectio omnium perfectionum*” (*Existence and the Existent*, 45-46).

⁹ Gilson. *Being and Some Philosophers*. Toronto: Garden City Press, 1952, 90. See also, Clarke, W. Norris. “What Cannot Be Said in St Thomas’ Essence-Existence Doctrine”. *The New Scholasticism* 48, no. 1 (1974), 19, 23-25, 33 and *passim*.

¹⁰ See Owens. “Aquinas on Knowing Existence”. *Review of Metaphysics* 29 (1976), 670-90, which is filled with particularly blatant examples of this practice.

¹¹ “What Cannot Be Said”, 19. This language is continued in his most recent work: e.g., his talk of Aquinas’ real distinction between “an act of existence” and “a limiting essence” (*The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001, 80).

¹² See, e.g., Wippel. *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*. Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2000, 3. Later in the same text, he writes of “*esse* taken as actual existence, or as Thomas often expresses it, as the *actus essendi* (act of being)” (25).

¹³ See *Being and Some Twentieth Century Thomists*, 211. Cf 175.

existence can quickly come to be thought of as a kind of *property* that can be possessed by an essence, by which it is made actual or real. The consequences of this kind of distortion of Thomist thought are well known. On one hand, there are questions concerning the “essence” of existence as the actualising principle of the being, a line of thought that raises the ghosts of late medieval debates around the infinite regress of principles of essence and existence.¹⁴ Blanchette is perhaps particularly alluding to this problem in his caveat that existence can be understood “as if it were ... another quiddity” besides essence itself,¹⁵ and in a similar vein Nijenhuis warns that replacing the verb *esse* by the noun *existentia* risks “turning *esse* ... into a kind of static receptacle into which ‘beings’ are thrown”.¹⁶ On the other hand, this talk of a metaphysical principle of existence suggests Kant’s famous analogy of the hundred Thalers, a scenario in which being/existence is presented as a pseudo quality which can by definition add nothing to the thing, *qua res*. This is presumably the context of Fabro’s warning about confusing *esse* with a “modal distinction”¹⁷ by which he seems to be suggesting understanding *esse* in the light of Kant’s *Wirklichkeit* and thus as a merely “logical predicate”. In sum, the use of a substantive to translate an infinitive risks obscuring what is most distinctive about Aquinas’ notion of *esse*: i.e., its active and yet abyssal character; its complete otherness to essence, by which it is to be understood as radical *act* (through which the thing *is* per se) rather than simply as a quality or mode or state of the thing.

The second problem is that since being and existence have quite distinct etymological roots, substituting exist(ence) for being amounts to a confusion of semantic fields. As will be seen shortly, the precise nature of the relationship between these two fields in terms of the history of usage in

¹⁴ The contributions of Giles of Rome and his kin on this issue are notorious. See, e.g., Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 134ff.

¹⁵ Blanchette, *Philosophy of Being*, 90.

¹⁶ Nijenhuis, “‘Ens’ Described as ‘Being or Existent’”, 3fn. I leave to one side Nijenhuis’ badly misplaced reference here to Heidegger’s *Geworfenheit* in his allusion to a supposed “Heideggerian” notion of being “thrown” into such a “static [existential] receptacle”.

¹⁷ Fabro, “Intensive Hermeneutics”, 450.

western metaphysics is extremely unclear. However, despite the extraordinarily ancient roots of this lack of clarity, one thing is clear: “to be” and “to exist”, εἶναι and ὑπάρχειν, *esse* and *existere*, are indeed different words arising from distinct roots and with their own quite different (albeit at times ambiguously overlapping) semantic fields. It therefore makes little sense for these highly metaphysically significant vocabularies to be used interchangeably as if they were virtually synonymous, even given the difficulties of translation involved. Nijenhuis is quite right to insist upon a higher level of scholarly care than is indicated by this practice, however well attested it is in the history of metaphysics.

The Case for Decoupling Being and Existence on the Basis of Thomist Metaphysics

Over and above this general contention, Nijenhuis also offers a relatively uniquely developed reading of Thomist metaphysics which leads him to conclude that Aquinas’ doctrine of *esse* has little to do with “existence” as such. In order to explore his case, it will first be useful to backtrack a little. The preceding discussion about the danger of reification mentioned that for some scholars the substitution of existence for *esse* is to be associated with the reduction of *esse* to a state-like designation which merely indicates the *fact* of exist-ing rather than the *act* of being. Fabro, for example, argues that the language of exist(ence) corresponds to the mere “actuality” of a being rather than to its basic *constitution* as a being. Consequently, a precise understanding of Thomist ontology requires “distinguishing *esse* as act not only from essence which is its potency, but also from existence which is the *fact* of being and hence a ‘result’ rather than a metaphysical principle”.¹⁸ This is to insist on the distinction between *esse* as a *cause* and existence as the *result*.

The problem with such a critique, however, is that Existential Thomism certainly does not simply stop at existence qua fact. Rather, all grammatical issues aside, it is clear that these scholars’ use of

¹⁸ Fabro, “Intensive Hermeneutics”, 470.

existential language is suffused with an eminently active sense appropriate for Aquinas' *esse*. One need only look, for example, to Clarke's description of "the act of existence *by which* ... every real being ... actually exists"¹⁹ as well as his strong emphasis on "being as active"²⁰, to see how despite all inappropriate renderings, a strong sense of Aquinas' *esse qua act* is nonetheless conveyed. The claim that Existential Thomism is, on the basis of its faulty translation of *esse*, involved in a simple confusion between *acts* (cause) and *facts* (results) is unsustainable. Words and meanings are not so two-dimensionally correlated.

Nijenhuis' more substantial case concerns his claim that the language of *esse* (as well as *actualitas*) is historically rooted in a "quantitative" sense not possessed by *existere* and its kin, and certainly absent from the contemporary language of exist(ence). This argument is linked, it seems, to the intensified interest in Thomist scholarship – championed by Fabro himself – into the influence of the Platonic participatory motif on Aquinas' notion of *esse*.²¹ Nijenhuis argues that Aquinas' *esse* is related less to the Aristotelian tradition (with its categories of δύναμις and ἐνέργεια) than to Plato's εἶναι, in that both Plato and Aquinas understand beings as relative mixtures of being and non-being. Aquinas' use of *esse*, therefore, must be understood in the context of varying *levels* of the perfection or "fullness" of acts, all of which are relative to the total fullness or perfection of God who is, of course, *pure esse* and the source of all finite beings who share (or participate in) this fullness. Nijenhuis sets out his textual evidence for this reading in some detail, attending especially to the quantitative/qualitative language Aquinas uses to discuss the participation of the *ens* in *esse*: e.g., "All *entia* ... to the degree that [*inquantum*] they are *entia* ... are in act [*in actu*]",²² such that "some things participate more fully [*quaedam perfectius*] in *esse*; other things less fully [*quaedam*

¹⁹ Clarke, *The One and the Many*, 80 (emphasis added). Many other texts might also be offered. See, e.g., Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, 74.

²⁰ See Clarke, *The One and the Many*, 294, where he even raises this principle in Aquinas to a virtual "transcendental".

²¹ It is important to note that Existential Thomists are among those who have also strongly pointed out this link. See, e.g., Clarke, *The One and the Many*, chapter 5 and *passim*.

²² *De Veritate*., q.21, a. 2.

imperfectius”.²³ And again, “[t]o the degree that a creature approaches God, to that extent does it possess being [*quantum – tantum habet de esse*]; but to the degree that it is removed from God, to that extent it is affected with nonbeing [*habet de non esse*]”.²⁴

This, then, is for Nijenhuis the deepest reason for the inappropriateness of using existential language for Aquinas’ *esse*. Even if exist(ence) is understood in a purportedly active sense, it cannot also be understood in a quantitative/qualitative sense. Beings can only be said to exist or not exist; they cannot be said to “exist to some extent”. As such, exist(ence) is an irretrievably *locative* notion: i.e., things are said to “be there”, as opposed to “not being there”, or being absent. In sum, exist(ence) is “an all-or-nothing notion”,²⁵ and thus contrasts sharply with being, that is able to be possessed in degrees of intensity and perfection. In making this claim, Nijenhuis argues against both some standard translations of Aquinas and the claims of Existential Thomists themselves such as Gilson.²⁶

Nijenhuis’ reading of Aquinas on this point deeply influences his understanding of the relationship between *esse* and *essentia*. Albeit only in a footnote, Nijenhuis enthusiastically recommends the work of John A. Peters who some time earlier had taken this argument further still by portraying essence as a virtual function of the relative fullness of the being’s participation in *esse*; i.e., of essence as a qualitative correlate of the (quantitative) degree of *esse* possessed by the *ens*, by virtue of its participation in the Divine fullness. Peters put it this way: “The all-embracing nature of [*esse*] means that it constitutes also all contents, all essences. An essence ... has value only because it

²³ From *De substantiis separatis*; quoted in Nijenhuis, “‘To Be’ or ‘To Exist’”, 371.

²⁴ *De Veritate.*, q.21, a. 2; quoted in Nijenhuis, “‘Ens’ Described as ‘Being or Existent’”, 8. Other passages cited by Nijenhuis concerning *esse* as quantitative in this sense include *ST*: 1, 20, 2; 1, 5, 3; 1, 48, 2; *De Potentia Dei*: q. 1, a 2; q. 5, a. 8; q. 3, a. 4; and *De Ver*: 2, 3, 16.

²⁵ Nijenhuis, “‘To Be’ or ‘To Exist’”, 357.

²⁶ See Nijenhuis, “‘To Be’ or ‘To Exist’”, 384ff and 363f, fn 33 (and 389) respectively.

contains more or less [*esse*]; because it indicates the measure in which a being participates in [*esse*].”²⁷

This qualitative/quantitative conception of the *esse-essentia* relationship in the *ens* is deserving of a great deal more attention than it can be given here, and indeed than it has thus far received within Thomist scholarship in general.²⁸ Suffice to say that to the extent that this reading is judged to be an accurate interpretation of Thomist texts, doubt will justifiably be cast over the continued practice of using the language of exist(ence) as a convenient substitute for Aquinas’ being (*esse*). In what follows, however, I hold this question somewhat in abeyance in order to undertake a fresh examination of the pedigree of existential terminology.

An Etymological Reclamation of the Depth-dimension of Exist(ence)

In what follows, I reject Nijenhuis’ claim (shared, as has been seen, by Fabro, Blanchette and others), that while the language of being is to be extolled for its etymological and semantic richness and metaphysical depth, exist(ence) is to be viewed as a second-rate ontological principle insofar as it denotes mere “thereness”. It is in this context that I present a very different reading of the category of exist(ence) within the western metaphysical tradition, by looking to reclaim its *active sense* and indeed its *depth-dimension*. And I should say at the outset that in what follows, I am deeply indebted to the still seminal work of Charles Kahn for his detailed etymological insights into these matters.

In Greek, the semantics of exist(ence) are closely connected to the category of ἀρχή, and this sense of origin or foundation clearly emerges in the verb, ὑπάρχειν (to exist), which originally meant “to

²⁷ Peters, *Metaphysics: A Systematic Survey*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1963, 108. Quoted in Nijenhuis, “‘To Be’ or ‘To Exist’”, 363, fn 32.

²⁸ Take, e.g., Thomas A F. Kelly’s contention that Aquinas’ language of *esse* sits unintegrated alongside “another more traditional view of the ascending hierarchy of actuality” (“On Remembering and Forgetting Being: Aquinas, Heidegger and Caputo”. *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 76, no. 2 (2002): 321-40).

make a beginning” or “to take the initiative”. By the fifth century BCE, the verb ὑπάρχω was used in several poetic and prose texts not so much in the sense of “making” a beginning (i.e., in conjunction with ποιεῖν), but rather of *being* a beginning in its own right, and in this way of speaking there is a strong convergence between ὑπάρχειν and εἶναι itself, both carrying the connotation of availability or being on-hand.²⁹ However, what ὑπάρχω adds to εἶναι is *temporality*, originally in the direction of past emergence, but eventually also encompassing the idea of present actuality, though even here generally retaining the broader context of temporal situatedness.³⁰

Evidence for a “hardening” of the various “quasi-existential” uses of ὑπάρχειν into a fixed term that is discrete from εἶναι and its cognates appears as early as the generation after Aristotle’s death, and by the Roman era, ὑπαρξις was being used as an abstract substantive form. Indeed, Kahn goes as far as to say that the difference between essence and existence was already in place in Hellenistic philosophical texts of the third century BCE,³¹ and thus much earlier than is often assumed by those who would see it as a function of the medieval worldview of the Abrahamic religions. After all, once the notions of being and non-being are implicitly juxtaposed in the context of beginnings and thus the emergence of something that once was *not*, it is only the shortest of steps to a reflection upon the *contingency* of exist(ence) per se: the *thatness* of what is.

ὑπάρχειν and its cognates were often used in Hellenistic literature as roughly synonymous with εἶναι, though the temporal connotation of the former remained central throughout. In this way, ὑπάρχειν is implicated in the (in)famous distinction between “being” (εἶναι) and “becoming” (γίγνομαι) as it was set up by Parmenides in particular, whereby the dynamism of γίγνομαι (and

²⁹ Kahn, “On the Terminology for Copula and Existence”. In *Islamic Philosophy and the Classical Tradition*, edited by S.M Stern et al. London: Bruno Cassirer, 1972, 152.

³⁰ Kahn, “On the Terminology for Copula and Existence”, 152.

³¹ Kahn, “On the Terminology for Copula and Existence”, 154.

thus by extension, ὑπάρχειν) is distinguished from the strongly durative sense of εἶναι.³² A very similar sense is evident in the Latin verb used to translate ὑπάρχειν – *ex(s)istere* – with the dynamic connotations suggested by the prefix *ex-* (“to come out from”) alongside *sistere* (“to cause to stand firm”, derived from *stare*: “to stand”). To *exist* in this Latin sense, then, is to come-to-be, to emerge as something new and to thereby stand as a viable and independent entity. As Kahn points out, the prefix (*ex-*) that speaks of emergence, suggests “the completion of a process”, while the punctual form, *sistere* (i.e., the idea of momentary action) contrasts with the durative sense of *stare*.³³ In this way, the substantive, *ex(s)istentia* – which seems to have been coined around the fourth century C.E. from *ex(s)istere* specifically in order to translate ὑπαρξις – is precisely the state or result of the process of having come-to-be. Similarly, an individual *ex(s)istent*, which performs the *act* of *ex(s)istens* (the present participle of *ex(s)istere*), is “that which has emerged” through this process. Note the strong sense here of the deep ontological contingency of each *ex(s)istent*, a dimension that bears close comparison with Aquinas’ *ens*.

Despite this pedigree, however, the fate of the language of exist(ence) throughout the medieval era is decidedly mixed and generally confused. The substantive, *ex(s)istentia*, appears to have largely fallen out of usage not long after it was coined. Boethius preferred *esse* to translate ὑπαρξις, while Priscian used *substantivum*. While the language of exist(ence) was reclaimed in the high medieval period, its usage even then was far from consistent. Aquinas essentially adopted (or continued) the usage of Boethius, with the dynamic and emergent sense of exist(ence) being taken over into his use of *esse*, a practice which (as has been seen) had clear systematic metaphysical advantages for him.³⁴

³² See Kahn, “The Greek Verb ‘to Be’ and the Concept of Being”. *Foundations of Language* 2, 1966, 255.

³³ Kahn, “The Greek Verb ‘to Be’”, 256.

³⁴ There is one fascinating exception to this rule in the Thomist corpus that Nijenhuis does not mention. A quick search of the *Index Thomisticus* lists a single case (in an opuscula in response to Johannes de Vercellis) of Aquinas’ use of the expression, “*actus existendi*” (act of existence): “*Quod vero quadragesimo septimo dicitur, actus existendi triplex est: quidam omnino potentiae impermixtus, ut esse divinum; alius semper potentiae permixtus, tale est rerum generabilium; tertius modo medio se habens: est enim potentiae permixtus in quantum est ab alio; partim vero non, in quantum est simplex et simul totus completus, et tale est esse Angeli, sanum potest habere intellectum*” (*De 108 articulis*, q. 47).

Yet it was Duns Scotus rather than Aquinas who established the usage subsequently bequeathed to modernity in his distinction (inspired by Ibn Sīnā and passed on to later figures such as Henry of Ghent) between ~~between~~ *esse essentia* and *esse existentiae*.

In turning to the modern era, then, there is a strange paradox concerning the fate of the language of exist(ence). On one hand, it survived, and further (by virtue of the early modern predominance of the Scotist over the Thomist formula) it did so largely in terms of a couplet involving essential and existential being respectively. Yet on the other hand, while it survived linguistically, it also underwent a striking delimitation in its semantic field by which the dynamic, temporal and emergent sense of ὑπάρχειν and *existere* was lost, even as the kindred qualities of Aquinas' *esse* failed to be translated into early modern ontology. The result was twofold. First, the theme of emergence and ontological contingency in metaphysics was decidedly dissipated as neither of the two alternative means by which it had been expressed –*existere* and/or *esse* – continued to carry this sense. Second, now shed of these connotations, the whole *raison d'être* of the language of exist(ence) vis-à-vis the language of being was quite lost, and this is, I would suggest, the historical context for the strange afterlife of exist(ence) in modern philosophical texts where the word is used as a quite superfluous synonym for being.³⁵

In light of this brief survey, I wish to make a three brief comments concerning the Nijenhuis thesis considered earlier. First: While Nijenhuis is largely correct to point to the contemporary sense of exist(ence) as indicating mere “thereness” or bland actuality, it is crucial to note that this current situation has a very long history, and that it certainly was not always thus. To the contrary, there is evidence that the Greek and Latin precursors of contemporary exist(ence) language contain much that he considers to be rather native to the medieval language of being (*esse*). Consequently, his

³⁵ In his “‘To Be or ‘To Exist’” (359-362), Nijenhuis provides a useful overview of this practice of “clumsy, unnecessary, or tautological” uses of being and exist(ence) language in a survey of texts by Locke, Hume, Descartes and Kant.

comment that in comparison with the Indo-European verbs “to be” *exist(ere)* has a “rather dull origin” in the mere conflation of *ex* and *sistere*,³⁶ rings decidedly hollow. It is of course true that the verb “to be” has an etymologically more diverse pedigree than the verb “to exist” (being related to ancient Indo-European roots with senses as diverse as living, being true, being real, emerging, growing and abiding) and that it functions across a hugely more diverse semantic range (having predicational, identificational, copulative as well as existential and other functions). However, as an historic marker of the depth dimension of actuality, there is absolutely nothing “dull” or flat about exist(ence).

Second: It is perhaps telling that Nijenhuis’ etymological excursions rarely venture back behind the Latin terminology of being and exist(ence) to the Greek precursors, since in this way he misses the temporal dynamism and emergent sense of ὑπάρχειν and its progeny. But even given this omission, Nijenhuis’ declaration of the self-evident metaphysical poverty or flatness of *existere/existentia*, is still somewhat surprising, for even the Latin etymology – of which he makes specific reference – provides a clear glimpse of precisely this sense. At one point, for example, he claims that for Aquinas *esse* means “to stand out of (be removed from) nothingness”, and then acknowledges in a footnote the “irony” of understanding *esse* in this sense given that “this definition is couched in terms reminiscent of the classical *ex(s)istere*”.³⁷ Indeed! In any case, even while identifying the emergent sense of *existere*, Nijenhuis’ interpretive emphasis clearly falls much more on “-*sistere*” (“being at a stand”) than on the active and dynamic sense of the “*ex-*” (the coming-out-of).

Third: Nijenhuis’ contention that exist(ence) is a matter of the mere “thereness” of things, leads him to conclude that “the ‘existence’ of things is perceived by the senses” which is a matter only of

³⁶ See Nijenhuis, “‘Ens’ Described as ‘Being or Existent’”, 2 and “Existence vs. Being”, 92.

³⁷ Nijenhuis, “‘To Be’ or ‘To Exist’”, 365 and fn 35.

empirical noticing by which things are considered “from the outside”; whereas the investigation of the “be-ing” of things “is a matter for the intellect” by which “we look into them, examine their inside”, and in this way engage in metaphysics per se.³⁸ The foregoing analysis of the historical semantic field of exist(ence), shows that any such neat demarcation between the acts of recognising the existing and be-ing of things is unsustainable. True, *that* a being exists (or not) is something perceived by the senses. But this sight becomes metaphysical *insight* to the extent that the underlying truth uncovered by such perception is the *act* by and through which the being exists. There is a major difference between just noticing that something exists, and metaphysically *contemplating* its existing.

Concluding Remarks: Exist(ence), Thomism and Contemporary Metaphysics

In this paper I have responded to Nijenhuis’ thesis along several lines. On one hand, I have agreed that one cannot simply slide between the language of being and exist(ence) as if they were synonymous; and further, I have given a qualified but sympathetic account of his reading of Thomist metaphysics by which it would appear that the practice of substituting exist(ence) for *esse* seriously distorts the presentation of Aquinas’ own distinctive vision of creation. On the other hand, I have argued against Nijenhuis’ dismissal of the depth and richness of the language of exist(ence) per se, suggesting that much of the dynamic and emergent quality that is central to Aquinas’ notion of *esse* is equally to be found in the traditional language of exist(ence), even if the sense of graduated levels of fullness is not as clearly apparent. In the time remaining I wish to conclude with a few brief remarks on what I see as perhaps the most pressing question raised by this position: i.e., concerning the relationship between exegesis of Thomist texts and the furthering of contemporary metaphysical ontology in general.

³⁸ Nijenhuis, Existence vs. Being, 92.

Central to the account I have given here of the development in western thought of the idea of exist(ence) in its depth dimension, is the contention that there have been various ways in which this idea has been deployed. The genius of Aquinas' approach was to bring the insight of existential contingency back within the category of "to be" itself, and in an extraordinarily theologically-productive way, to integrate this with a theory of essence. In making such a statement it is clear that I am suggesting a degree of inspired contrivance on Aquinas' part to pull the threads together in quite this way. Nijenhuis himself provides what I think is a fine glimpse into something like this process in action in noting a small liberty Aquinas took in his commentary on Boethius' *De Hebdomadibus*. While closely paraphrasing a sentence from Boethius' text that includes a rare use of the term *existere*, Aquinas simply replaced "*existere*" with "*esse*". Nijenhuis finds this "curious enough".³⁹ But far from a mere curiosity, does not this provide a telling example of the relative contingency of such linguistic choices as means of expressing central concerns? A similar point can be made using either the language of exist(ence) or of being, the eventual decision being dictated much more by systematic concerns than by the precise semantic fields of the terms themselves.

My argument here is that the language of western metaphysics is not to be uncritically conflated with the canonical way it is defined and deployed by individuals within the tradition, even the towering figure of Thomas Aquinas. When such conflation is avoided, this has the effect of freeing up the key insights of the western tradition to a broader range of mindsets than would otherwise be the case. There is, I would contend, a real danger of *locking up* the insight into the depth-dimension of exist(ence) within the Thomist paradigm alone, for if the latter is rejected (as will inevitably be the case at some point), the former can so easily be disregarded along with it. And this is, I submit, precisely what has happened over the last century via the purported "*Destraktion*" and "deconstruction" of metaphysical ontology in general.

³⁹ Nijenhuis, "'To Be or 'To Exist'", 357.

A prime case in point is the parlous state of the dialogue (such as it still is) between Thomists and Heideggerians. Here is a debate that, in my judgement, could only ever gain real traction to the extent that it focused unrelentingly on the idea of exist(ence). As I have argued elsewhere,⁴⁰ for all his telling insights that have greatly enriched contemporary metaphysics, Heidegger – and much subsequent Continental philosophy that has followed in his wake – is much the poorer for its blindness to the idea of exist(ence) as I have tried to sketch it here today. In conceiving of metaphysical exist(ence) only in terms of that which is “*vorhanden*”, Heidegger strongly rejected the priority of this category, and in so doing he engaged in a wholesale redeployment of this terminology by which it becomes the name for a quite distinct idea at the heart of his own rival “fundamental ontology”. There is much at stake in this matter: viz, the very idea of existential (as distinct from semantic) contingency. However, insofar as the category of exist(ence) is inextricably (if also ambiguously) tied into the category of *esse*, the Thomist tradition – which in all other senses is the richest source available for a nuanced appreciation of this depth dimension – is rather hamstrung in presenting a powerful dissenting case. The conversation is inevitably sidelined into an all-or-nothing confrontation between Aquinas’ *esse* and Heidegger’s *Sein*, and the result of such a clash is predicable: stalemate and the discontinuation of the conversation.

In sum: what is needed, I suggest, is that parallel with greater sensitivity to the *esse-existere* difference in Thomist texts themselves, is a heightened appreciation of the general heritage of existential metaphysical language, not only as an historical influence on Thomistic thought, but as a key resource for a revival in contemporary metaphysical ontology. Nijenhuis’ legitimate caveat concerning the understanding of Aquinas need not *and should not* determine the options open to current thought in its attempt to reclaim the deepest insights of the western metaphysical tradition.

⁴⁰ Citation suppressed