New Blackfriars (2026), **107**, 514–525
doi:10.1017/nbf.2025.10111

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

Two Forms of Existence-Proposition

C.F.J. Martin

Thomas More Institute, Grandpont House, Oxford, UK
Corresponding author: C.F.J. Martin; Email: thapseies@gmail.com

(Received 3 September 2025; revised 3 September 2025; accepted 3 September 2025)

Abstract

Two forms of existential proposition are identified, one favoured by analytical philosophers, one by Thomists. It is argued, against objections, that both forms were recognized and used by Thomas. A useful way of labelling this point is to speak of the distinction between *esse ut verum* and *esse reale*: being in the sense of the true, the analytical notion, on the one hand, and the Thomist notion of actual or real existence on the other. The former is best expressed by a second-level predicable, the latter by a first-level predicable. Both express a valid notion which is fittingly called 'existential', and both are, indeed, analogically connected in meaning.

Keywords: Aquinas; *esse*; existence; first level predication; second level predication

My aim here is to try to persuade philosophers of two schools of the following thesis: there are two principal forms of propositions in the English language that have an equal right to be called 'existence-propositions'. These two forms are as follows:

(1) The form that is understood and adhered to by the majority of English-speaking philosophers, a form which is given its best analysis and explanation by Frege, Russell, and those who follow them, such as Quine.[1] Examples might be: 'The Loch Ness Monster does not exist', 'An even prime exists' 'God does not exist', and 'God exists'.
(2) The form that is understood and adhered to by most Thomist philosophers. Many of these prefer to use some part of the verb 'to be' in English to express this form, since Aquinas usually used some form of the verb *esse*, usually translated as 'to be', in his application of this notion. It is not hard to notice, however, that most English speakers would not use the verb 'to be' in sentences aimed at communicating their understanding of the truths that Thomas and Thomists wish to communicate in the Latin sentences that Thomas uses, but would more frequently use some form of the verb 'exist'. As an example I will give: 'God is

[1]For a general account, see https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existence/ 2025-9-8. Otherwise, see Frege, *Grundlagen der Arithmetik*, Russell, 'On Denoting,' (*Mind*,); Quine, W.V.O., 'On What There Is,' (*Review of Metaphysics*, 2: 21–38), reprinted in his *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953).

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10111 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> God's own existence' (as a translation of '*Deus est ipsum esse*', S.Th I q.12 a.11), and 'The word "evil" does not point to any real existent' (as a translation of '*Malum non significat aliquid in re*', I q.48 a.2 ad 2).

It is in this sense that a Thomist might speak of the *esse* of an accident being *inesse*, that is, of the existence of an accident being in-existence, or existence-in-a-substance, of its existence being dependent on the existence of its subject, or of the substance in which it inheres. A Thomist cannot avoid saying such things, in Latin or in English, or in the rather tedious and to my mind deceptive and confusing Latinised English or Anglified Latin that some choose to write in.

My first claim, then, is that significant sentences, both true and false, are found, that are of either form.

My second claim is that Aquinas is conscious of the existence of both forms, and uses both. I have dealt with this at some length in chapter 5 of my *Thomas Aquinas: God and Explanations*[2] Here, I shall adduce evidence for this claim, some of which I made use of in that chapter. I do not claim that Thomas reached the clear understanding of the distinction that is now possible for us, but I will claim that he had some understanding.

The account put forward of the first form was epigrammatically expressed by Frege in the words 'Statements of existence are nothing other than the denial of the number nought'.[3] This account maintains, roughly, that '__ exists' is not a first level predicable, one which can be affirmed or denied of an individual, but rather one that is to be affirmed or denied of a concept (*Begriff* in Frege's German) or, in rather more familiar terms, of a kind. To say that the Loch Ness Monster does not exist is not to affirm or deny anything of any individual – because, after all, there is no such individual if the claim made in this sentence is true. Rather, it is to say that the number of individuals belonging to the kind 'Loch Ness Monster' is zero.

The second form is one in which '__ exists' is definitely treated as a first-level predicate, one that can be true or false of genuine individuals.

My problem, which this paper is aimed at clarifying, is that most English-speaking philosophers, analytical philosophers, that is, cannot accept that there is a form of existence-propositions that uses a genuine first-level predicable of existence, and thus cannot accept that there can be anything of value or even significance in what Thomas seems to claim, and which Thomists certainly do claim.

To make it clear, though, that there is a real first-level predicable of existence, please consider the following puzzle:

There is a well-known list of seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The puzzle is, which of these is the odd-one out?[4]

Any person of roughly average education, and, *a fortiori*, any reader of this journal, will be aware that 'odd-one-out' puzzles can be tricky. To find which is the odd one

[2] *Thomas Aquinas: God and Explanations* (Edinburgh U. P., 1997), 212 + xx pp.

[3] 'Es ist ja Bejahung der Existenz nichts Anderes als Verneinung der Nullzahl' (*Grundlagen der Arithmetik*. Breslau: Koebner).

[4] (If you cannot remember them, Wikipedia is always helpful:
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_Wonders_of_the_Ancient_World, accessed 17 July 2025). 'The seven traditional wonders are the Great Pyramid of Giza, the Colossus of Rhodes, the Lighthouse of Alexandria, the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, the Temple of Artemis, the Statue of Zeus at Olympia, and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.').

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10111 Published online by Cambridge University Press

out in a list, the person to whom the puzzle has been set is expected to find some predicate that is true of every object on the list except one, or, if you prefer it, to find some predicate that is true of one and only one object on the list. This object, then, will be the odd one out, in the terms of the puzzle. Unfortunately, it is usually possible to find, for any object on the list, any number of predicates that are true of every object on the list except that very one, or any number of predicates that are true of that object on the list, and of no other. Hence the puzzle is, as I say, tricky.

For example, only one of the wonders of the ancient world was located in the mainland territory of the present-day Greek nation; only one was located on a present-day Greek island; only one was located in present-day Iraq; only one was a temple; only one was the tomb of a Greek-speaking person, and only one was a tomb of an Egyptian; only one was a bronze statue, only one was a chryselephantine statue; only one was a practical navigational aid; only one was of a simple geometrical shape that appears in Euclid; only one was a set of gardens; only one was more than a thousand years old when the list was first made; only one was more than five hundred years older than any of the others; only one was a lighthouse; only one was set up in honour of a satrap of the Achaemenid empire – or was Mausolus a king of Lycia? or both? – you see how the game can go on. Only one was the tomb of someone who died in the Hellenistic age; only one was the occasion of a riot directed against the apostle St Paul; and so forth. In this case, as in so many others, one has to guess what is the predicate that the puzzle-setter has in mind. Hint: It's usually a pretty simple one.

If you set the puzzle 'Which of these is the odd one out?' to anyone intelligent enough to understand it, who knows what is the list being asked about, or can find out, and who knows anything about the objects in the lands of the Eastern Mediterranea that are or have been the objects of touristic visits, the answer comes out uniformly. The odd one out is the great pyramid of Gizeh. The predicate that is true of the great pyramid of Gizeh and of no other on the list is that it still exists. The predicate '__ exists' is true today of one and only one object on the list; or, if you prefer it, the predicate 'exists' is false at the present day of all the other six. Hence, that's the odd one out.

Thus, the possibility of this puzzle, and the possibility of an obvious and correct answer being given, shows that there is, in ordinary English usage, such a first-level predicate as '__ exists'. Thank you for your patience in following this tedious travelogue. Now that you have done so, please do not make the false claim that 'existence is not a predicate', or 'is not a real predicate', anymore. Kant is often quoted as saying that 'existence is not a predicate', but he was wrong. He also thought that he could deduce *a priori* the physical sizes and even the moral dispositions of the inhabitants of other planets. (In his *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels* – admittedly an early work, and a good example of the dogmatic slumbers from which the reading of Hume awakened him.) He also said, in the *Kritik des Reinen Vernunft*, that logic was in his day a complete or nearly complete science, and that it only needed to be purged of a little bogus subtlety, *falsche spitzfindigkeit*. He was wrong there and he was wrong, or at least inaccurate in his expression, when he said existence is not a predicate. He was a great man and a great philosopher: but that is a reason to pass over his grosser errors in silence, in general, as people do with regards to his views of the necessarily holy wills of the inhabitants of Saturn. It is not a good reason to repeat an error of his as if it were unquestionable dogma.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10111 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Of the seven wonders of the ancient world, then, only the Pyramid of Gizeh, which is also by far the oldest of the wonders, remains standing, while the others have been destroyed over the centuries.

I maintain, then, that there is a perfectly good and widely used first level predicable of existence – or, if you prefer, and to put it more cautiously, I maintain that there is a perfectly good and widely used first level predicable of existence used in propositions that one is obliged to call 'existence propositions'.

(By predicable I mean, following the usage of Geach in *Reference and Generality,*[5] an expression that *can be used* as a predicate, regardless of whether it is being used as a predicate or not, regardless of whether the sentence containing it is true or false. Thus, in, 'The object appearing in the famous photographs taken in the 1930's[6] is the Loch Ness Monster' the predicable '__ is the Loch Ness Monster' is in fact being used as a predicate. The sentence is false. But in the sentence 'There is nothing on earth that is the Loch Ness Monster' the very same predicable expression is not being used as a predicate. As Frege would say, what this sentence is talking about is the very concept or kind that the predicable expression 'the Loch Ness Monster' picks out or refers to, and it tells us, truly, that concept applies to 0 objects, or that the number of objects belonging to that kind is 0.

Well, if it's a first level predicable it should be possible to quantify over it, apply a second-level predicate to it, people may say. Nothing is easier. If I say 'By the evening of the first day of the first Battle of the Somme, 1 July 1916, nearly 20,000 of the roughly 120,000 British soldiers who went over the top at dawn, did not exist, anymore' then I have done it.

So much for evidence that the analytic philosophers need to recognize in order to grasp the Thomistic notion.

For Thomists, now: Thomas recognizes two different kinds of uses of *esse*, one of which corresponds closely to the Frege–Russell account of existence propositions, and is clearly distinguished by him from his own notion of *esse* – what I call the *real existence*, and what Geach calls the *actual existence* of a thing.[7]

A Frege–Russell kind of existence-proposition is used and explained by Thomas in the context of his affirmative answer to the question of whether God exists (*an Deus sit)*. It is also used in the context of his negative answer to the question *an malum sit aliquid in rebus? (*Is evil something in reality?). In both places, this usage is clearly distinguished from his own usage of *esse* as a real first-level predicate that is true of God and creatures; but not true of, for example, dead people, animals, or plants, nor of demolished buildings.[8]

[5]Currently available at http://philosophieweb0.001.free.fr/GeachRandG.pdf 2025-8-8.

[6]https://www.istockphoto.com/photos/loch-ness-monster 2025-8-8.

[7]In *God and the Soul*, chapter 5, 'What Actually exists?' I decided that Geach's terminology might be confusing, when I came to realise that it is necessary to use the word 'actual' in discussions of modality, as distinct from 'necessary' and possible'. To use the label 'actual existence' seemed to lead to possible confusions. And if asked what I mean by real – do I mean not fake? not forged? not a toy, or what? My answer is simple: real existence is the kind of existence that can be attributed truly to *res*, things; to things, people, and their real determinations or accidents.

[8]He also uses it, uncontroversially, in his discussion of whether the vacuum, empty space, exists: '*Commentary on the Physics* L.IV ll.13. nn. 541-3, e.g., 541.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10111 Published online by Cambridge University Press

A well-formed lump of bronze – a statue like the Colossus of Rhodes, for example – may fall down, be broken up, be broken into smaller pieces, be recast over the centuries into untraceable swords or ploughshares, church bells or cannons. Some pieces of that bronze, falling onto the hands of a determined iconoclast or hater of idolatry, may be melted, calcified, ground up, and thrown into the winds of heaven, thrown into the sea, or mixed into water which repentant or unrepentant idolaters may be forced to drink, passing out in their faeces. I seem to remember that when I was studying very basic physics and chemistry at school my teachers told me that there was an immutable scientific law that the atoms of the Colossus of Rhodes (say) would continue in existence as long as the universe did: perhaps I misunderstood this, perhaps the supposed law has been overthrown or radically modified, but this I know, as Aquinas knew: the individual formed lump of bronze that made up the Colossus of Rhodes has ceased, effectively, to exist, whatever may or may not have been the fate of the molecules, atoms or atomic particles that made it up.

Coming into existence and ceasing to exist are apparently universally possible occurrences in the world of material things that we inhabit, and so, therefore, continuing in existence, and continuing to exist, and therefore existence and existing are (at least) very widespread phenomena. And this means that there is a real first-level predicable of existence, whatever Kant may have thought.

Statues and other homogenous lumps of metal or marble may be broken, may be ground into powder, be melted into pieces, and re-cast. So may an institution be dissolved, or a regime overthrown. A Thomist may want to add 'But institutions and regimes, though *entia*, are never more than *entia rationis* in any case, and so dependent on the thoughts and intentional actions of the rational agents who go to make them up, at any time.' The kingdom of Wessex, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the U.S.S.R. are not even *entia rationis* by now, in that, like a poor Tommy caught on the German wire on 1 July 1916, they have ceased to exist. (Like, indeed, by now, their more fortunate comrades in arms my grandfathers and others, who made it through that day and subsequent days of that war, and were at last able to come home and get married and beget children.) The institutions mentioned, though, are still different in important ways from Plato's Republic or the commonwealth of Utopia, or Lilliput, Blefescu and Brobdingnag, or the Riddermark or Mordor. If you want to say that these fictional entities have a mode of *esse rationis* too, well, feel free to say it; but do not blur the distinction. The Kingdom of Wessex has been real, though a product of human minds and actions: Mordor, though also a product of human mind and action, has not been real, except metaphorically.

Meanwhile, getting away from real existents for a moment, there is one and only one even prime; and there is no other. There is not and cannot be any largest prime number.

Thomas clearly has a grasp of the Fregean doctrine; he even has a label for the notion of existence that he employs, *esse ut verum.*[9]

Be that as it may, I take it that the Frege–Russell point is correct. To say 'God exists' is not to attribute existence to God: it is to attribute being God to something. To say 'The Loch Ness Monster does not exist' is even less to attribute non-existence to the Loch

[9]See, for example, *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, at L.VI l.4 n.1223.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10111 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Ness Monster – after all, *what* would I be attributing non-existence to? – but to deny being the Loch Ness Monster of everything. But though the contemporary idea, that some important truth is enshrined in the Frege–Russell point, is true, it does not follow, as so many think, that anyone before Frege's time, or Russell's time, or Kant's time, at a pinch, is necessarily involved in the same kind of confusion as was Descartes, in his Ontological Argument. Yes, we want to say, a God is necessarily something existing, live, and active, but that does not prove that there actually is an instance of the concept of that existing live and active thing that we call God.

Aquinas does indeed have a striking, original, and unusual account of being or existence, the notion he usually labels with the expression 'esse'. (Perhaps for the purposes of this paper we could label it '*esse simpliciter*'.) But he clearly distinguishes it, at half a dozen places, from the notion he calls '*esse ut verum*'.

This notion clearly derives from Aristotle, who in Book Delta, chapter 7 of the *Metaphysics* tells us the following:

> Again, 'being' and 'is' mean that a statement is true, 'not being' that it is not true but false – and this alike in the case of affirmation and of negation; e.g., 'Socrates is musical' means that this is true, or 'Socrates is not-pale' means that this is true; but 'the diagonal of the square is not commensurate with the side' means that it is false to say it is. (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Bk V Ch. 7.)

This is not terribly enlightening, and it looks no more than a linguistic comment that Greek has a veridical use for its verb 'to be'. The truth of this can be investigated more fully in Kahn's magisterial *The Verb 'To Be' in Ancient Greek*.[10]

Aquinas, in commenting ad. loc., adds little at first:

> Then he gives us another sense of 'the existent', according to which *exist* and *exists* mean the composition of a proposition, which is brought about by the intellect when it composes or divides. Hence he says that 'existence' here means the truth of a thing: or rather, as another version has it, that existence means that some sentence is true. Hence the truth of a proposition can be called the truth of a thing through its being so caused. This is because an utterance is true or false depending on what the thing is or is not. For when we say that something exists, we mean that a proposition is true: and when we say it does not exist, we mean that a proposition is not true. This works whether we are making an affirmation or a denial. In making an affirmation, we say that Socrates is pale, meaning that this is true. In making a negation, we say that Socrates is not pale, meaning that this is true, i.e., his not being pale. In the same way we say that the diagonal is not commensurable with the side of a square, meaning that this is false, i.e., the diagonal's being commensurable. (Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, L.V, *lectio* 9, nn. 895.)[11]

[10]Charles H. Kahn, *The Verb 'Be' in Ancient Greek* (Reidel, Dordrecht), especially Chapter VII.

[11]'Ponit alium modum entis, secundum quod esse et est significant compositionem propositionis, quam facit intellectus componens et dividens. Unde dicit, quod esse significat veritatem rei. Vel sicut alia translatio melius habet, quod esse significat quia aliquod dictum est verum. Unde veritas propositionis potest dici veritas rei per causam. Nam ex eo quod res est vel non est, oratio vera vel falsa est. Cum enim dicimus

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10111 Published online by Cambridge University Press

But in the next paragraph he develops the doctrine in a direction that takes him away from purely veridical uses and into existential uses:

> But you should know that this second sense is related to the first as effect to cause. This is because truth and falsehood in a proposition follow from what a thing is in reality. Truth and falsehood are signified by this word 'is', used as the copula. But there are things which are not existents, but which are dealt with by the intellect as if they were: such as negations and the like. Thus sometimes we speak of the existence of something in this second sense and not the first [i.e., in the sense of 'existence in the sense of the true', and not in the sense of 'real existence']. We say, that is, that blindness exists in the second sense, on the grounds that the proposition is true which says that something is blind. We are not saying that it is true in the first sense. For blindness has no existence in reality: rather it is being deprived of some existent. But it is merely coincidental that anything should have something truly said or thought of it: because reality does not depend on knowledge, but *vice versa*. The existence which each reality has by nature is substantial. So if, when we say 'Socrates exists', we take this 'exists' in the first sense, it is a substantial predication. The existent, after all, is a kind which is superior to all existents, as the kind 'animal' is a superior kind to 'human being'. But if we take it in the second sense, it is a coincidental predication. (Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, L.V, *lectio* 9.)[12]

I would wish to maintain (and have elsewhere maintained)[13] that the sense of '*esse*' in which blindness exists – i.e., in that some animals are blind – is the key to St Thomas's account here, and shows that he fully understood the Frege–Russell point. The unknowable *esse simpliciter* by which God exists forms no part of the affirmative answer to the question 'Does God exist?' which consists in a use of the notion of *esse ut verum*. See, for example, *Summa Theologiae* I q.3 a.4 ad 2.

Let me show you, first, the two texts of St Thomas to which I have referred to above:

---

aliquid esse, significamus propositionem esse veram. et cum dicimus non esse, significamus non esse veram; et hoc sive in affirmando sive in negando. In affirmando quidem, sicut dicimus quod Socrates est albus, quia hoc verum est. In negando verum, ut Socrates non est albus, quia hoc est verum, scilicet ipsum esse non album. Et similiter dicimus quod non est diameter commensurabilis lateri quadrati, quia hoc est falsum, scilicet non esse ipsum non commensurabilem.'

[12]'Sciendum est autem quod iste secundus modus comparatur ad primum sicut effectus ad causam. Ex hoc enim quod aliquid in rerum natura est, sequitur veritas et falsitas in propositione, quam intellectus significat per hoc verbum "est"' prout est verbalis copula. Sed quia aliquid quod est in se non ens, intellectus considerat ut quoddam ens, sicut negationem et huiusmodi, ideo quandoque dicitur esse de aliquo hoc secundo modo et non primo. Dicitur enim quod caecitas est secundo modo, ex eo quod vera est propositio, qua dicitur aliquid esse caecum; non tamen dicitur quod sit primo modo vera. Nam caecitas non habet aliquod esse in rebus, sed magis est privatio alicuius esse. Accidit autem unicuique rei quod aliquid affirmetur intellectu vel voce. Nam res non refertur ad scientiam, sed e converso. Esse vero quod in sui natura unaquaeque res habet est substantiale. Et ideo cum dicitur 'Socrates est', si ille 'est' primo modo accipiatur, est de praedicato substantiali. Nam ens est superius ad unumquodque entium, sicut animal ad hominem. Si autem accipiatur secundo modo, est de praedicato accidentali.'

[13]In my *Thomas Aquinas: God and Explanations*, ch. 5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10111 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> Is God's act of existence identical with his essence? We approach this point in this way: apparently God's act of existence (*esse*) is not identical with his essence. (..) Moreover, we can know of God that he exists, as has been said above. But we cannot know what he is. So God's existence (esse) is not identical with what he is, his essence or nature. (..) The answer to the second objection is that *existence* (*esse*) has two senses. In one sense it means the act of existence; in the other it means the composition of a proposition, which is made by the mind in joining a predicate to a subject. Taking *existence* in the first way, we cannot know the existence of God, just as we cannot know his essence: we can only know it in the second way. For we know that this proposition which we make about God, when we say God exists, is true: and we know this from his effects.'[14]

Thomas here makes an objection based on his own doctrine that the real existence of God is indistinguishable from God's essence. Thomas notoriously holds, against a number of his contemporaries, that a crucial difference can be found between God and creatures. In every creature, essence and real existence (*esse*) are really distinguished; in God, essence and *esse* are not distinguished. We do not need to enter into a discussion of this teaching of Thomas to understand the point being made. God's essence is accepted to be unknowable. But if there is no distinction between God's essence and God's *esse*, what is true of one must be true of the other; how, then, can God's *esse* be unknowable? Thomas's answer is that *esse dicitur dupliciter*, there are two ways in which expressions of existence are used. The full interiority of God's real existence is indeed unknowable, as is God's essence. But that does not mean that we cannot know that there is a God, that the kind or concept we pick out by using the predicable '__ is God' is not empty, that the number of Gods is greater than zero, as Frege would put it. This is made all the clearer when in S. Th. I q.12 a.8 Aquinas insists that the word 'God' is not a proper name, but a *nomen naturae*, a word that stands for a potentially multipliable nature, not an individual. Really, short of inventing an anachronistic theory of quantification, and Frege's notion of first-level and second-level predicates, it is hard to see how Thomas could have made things any clearer.

In fact, Geach makes all this perfectly clear in the papers 'Form and Existence' and 'What Actually Exists' (chapters 4 and 5 of *God and the Soul*).[15] It should not need restating here by me. But I have found so many Thomists incapable of grasping the point that Geach clearly makes there that I feel obliged to repeat it.

Likewise, evil exists, even though it is not an *ens* and has no *esse simpliciter*, no real existence. To say 'malum est', evil exists, is to employ the notion of *esse ut verum*, the

[14] *Summa Theologiae* I q.3 a.4 ad 2. 'Utrum in Deo sit idem essentia et esse. Ad quartum sic proceditur: videtur quod in Deo non sit idem essentia et esse. (...) Praeterea, de Deo scire possumus an sit, ut supra dictum est. Non autem possumus scire quid sit. Ergo non est idem esse Dei, et quod quid est eius, sive quidditas vel natura. (...) Ad secundum dicendum quod esse dupliciter dicitur. Uno modo significat actum essendi, alio modo significat compositionem propositionis adinvenit coniungens praedicatum subiecto. Primo igitur modo accipiendo esse, non possumus scire esse Dei, sicut nec eius essentiam, sed solum secundo modo. Scimus enim quod haec propositio quam formamus de Deo, cum dicimus *Deus est*, vera est: et hoc scimus ex eius effectibus.'

[15] P.T. Geach, *God and the Soul* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 2003).

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10111 Published online by Cambridge University Press

notion of existence that is used above in Thomas's answer to question *an Deus sit?*, does God exist?

To look at the other key text:

> 'Is there evil in reality? We approach this point in this way: apparently there is no evil in reality. (..) Moreover, *the existent* (*ens*) and *reality* are convertible terms. So if evil is an existent in reality, it should be a reality, which goes against what we have said. (..) The answer to the second objection is that (as it says in Book Five of the *Metaphysics*) the *existent* has two senses. In one sense, it means the existence of a reality: in this sense the *existent* is divided into the ten categories, and in this sense it is convertible with *reality*. In this sense no privation is an existent, and hence evil is not an existent. In another sense the *existent* means the truth of a proposition, which arises in predication. The mark of predication is this word *is*: and this is the *existent* which is an answer to the question *does it exist?* In this sense we say that there is blindness in an eye.'[16]

Thus, there are two kinds of existence-proposition. But if there are two meanings here, is the verb *esse* and its derivatives, or the word 'exist' and its derivatives, simply equivocal? I answer that it is not. Clearly it is not univocal, and I am not well enough informed in all the discussions that there have been in the concept of analogy to claim that the two meanings are analogical, in any of the senses or kinds of analogy that others have found in or read into Thomas's discussions. I will simply maintain that the two meanings, the two kinds of proposition, though not univocal – as Thomas himself is clearly aware – are systematically connected in meaning. I hope that that phrase will be admitted as marking out a vague and general mode of non-univocal, non-equivocal meaning, within which true analogy, on any Thomist's account, will fall.

Pure equivocity is perhaps rarer than one might think, if one takes equivocity as excluding analogy and includes within 'analogy' any systematic and comprehensible connection of sense.[17] The use of the word 'date' to mean a small, sweet Mediterranean palm-fruit, and its use to signify a person one is taking out, for a meal or joint activity, with romantic or sexual intent, is perhaps a good case. 'Good evening, mother, I want you to meet my date for tonight', I say, pulling out of my pocket a small Mediterranean palm-fruit: this is the sort of joke one might get away with in a rather boring lecture, but not otherwise. Contrast the use of the word 'date' to mean, for example, a day of the month: This is my date, I say, the eighteenth of February – obviously there is a connection between making an appointment to take a lady out for a meal on a certain

[16] *Summa Theologiae* I q.48 a.2 ad 2. 'Utrum malum inveniatur in rebus. Ad secundum sic proceditur: videtur quod malum non inveniatur in rebus (...) Ens et res convertuntur. Si ergo malum est ens in rebus, sequitur quod malum sit res quaedam, quod est contra praedicta. Ad secundum dicendum quod sicut dicitur in *V Metaphysicorum*, ens dupliciter dicitur. Uno modo secundum quod significat entitatem rei, prout dividitur per decem praedicamenta, et sic convertitur cum re; et hoc modo nulla privatio est ens, unde nec malum. Alio modo dicitur ens quod significat veritatem propositionis, quae in compositione consistit, cuius nota est hoc verbum *est*: et hoc ens est quo respondetur ad questionem *an est*, et sic caecitatem dicimus esse in oculo.

[17] Though not as rare as a Spanish Thomist once told me, alleging that there were no pure equivocities in his language. I asked if he had never heard of the delays (moras) encountered by the female Moors (Moras) when they went out to gather blackberries (moras). Apparently, he had not.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10111 Published online by Cambridge University Press

day on the month, and actually going out with her – my 'date' in the other sense – on that day. But the connection of sense here is remote – we would not admit this as a case of analogy, I think. Nor do we think of analogy when we use the word 'bank' to mean a financial institution, and equally of a low ridge of earth, or the margin of a river, though the two usages are etymologically connected through an archaic word which we use in another form as 'bench'.

For analogy we need a stronger connection than that – and, again, the fact that in putting across his ontological argument for the existence of God, Descartes fooled himself and has fooled others makes one suspect that a stronger connection exists. But is it possible that there should be such a connection across the huge logical gap between a first-level and second-level predicable? One might answer to this by citing the joke 'What's orange and sounds like a parrot? A carrot'. This joke is not very good, but it depends on a connection in sense between 'This *thing* sounds like a parrot sounds' and 'This *word* sounds like the *word* 'a parrot' sounds. Some people might rather strictly claim that any connection between 'This thing is F' and 'This word, which stands for this thing, is F' must be pure equivocation, but I do not think so. The connection between a word and the thing it stands for is, though conventional and possibly arbitrary, stronger, and more systematic than mere equivocation. If we cannot call it analogy, in the strict senses that Thomists have elucidated, then we must find another word for it.

Even stronger is the connection between the first-level and second-level uses of the predicate 'exists'. Such analogies are known. As Williams points out,[18] if I say 'Native Americans are disappearing, Three Thunder Clouds is a Native American, therefore Three Thunder Clouds is disappearing', the joke works on the basis of the analogy, as he puts it, between the number of Native Americans getting smaller and smaller, and my view of Three Thunder Clouds getting less and less distinct. Not terribly funny, perhaps, but one that works on a clear analogy, not on an equivocation. Equally, I might say 'Red-haired Irishwomen are common, Roisin is a red-haired Irishwoman; therefore, Roisin is common'. This silly insult works because as a second-level predicable, 'common' means 'there are many of them', while as a first-level predicable 'common' means 'has such properties as are found in many people, e.g., unrefined manners'.

Shakespeare called his friend 'O rare Ben Jonson'. 'Rare' in English is usually a second-level predicable, meaning 'infrequent' or 'few'. What Shakespeare meant was that poets with the qualities he found in Ben Jonson are few. In the same way – not to rely only on the linguistic oddities of an original genius for my examples – in my youth football fans of Newcastle and England, teams for which Kevin Keegan used to play, used to salute him with 'One Kevin Keegan! There's only one Kevin Keegan!' to the tune of 'Guantanamera'. Frege regarded the sentence 'There is Julius Caesar' as meaningless, but even he offered us the sentence 'Trieste is no Vienna', which he glossed, correctly, as 'Trieste is not a metropolis' or capital or major city. (He would have maintained, though, that it was rightfully an Austrian city, long after the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye.)[19]

[18]C.J.F Williams, *What is Existence?* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1981), p. 305.

[19]I heard this from Geach in conversation. He maintained that a philosopher's choice of examples often betray more about his personal beliefs and attitudes than one realized, and that Frege's examples, make

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10111 Published online by Cambridge University Press

We can do better than this. Suppose we say that the Stuarts do not exist – or at least, that there are no Stuarts of the direct line ruling England or Scotland, as they once did. This is clearly a use of 'exists' or 'there are' as a second-level predicable. Contrast the Mountbatten-Windsors, if that's what they call themselves, or the Saxe-Coburg-Gothas, as they used to be called, or the Bourbons, who still rule in Spain, or the Bourbon Carlist heirs who claim to have a right to rule in Spain, or the Bourbon heirs who claim to have a right to rule in France. There are still such people, I think, whereas there are no such people as Stuarts. The Duke of Bavaria, I believe, is able to claim some right as the heir of the Stuarts, but since the death of Henry Stuart, Cardinal Duke of York in 1807 there have been no legitimate male-line Stuarts.

Since his death, I say. The truth of 'There are no Stuarts' or 'Stuarts do not exist' depends on the truth of 'Henry Stuart, Cardinal Duke of York is dead and had no legitimate heir' – likewise on 'Bonnie Prince Charlie, the Young Pretender, alias Charles III, is dead and had no legitimate heir' – back through his father, his grandfather, his two great aunts, as far as the first Robert Stewart, second King of Scotland of that name, who achieved the throne in 1371. The truth of the sentence that uses the second-level predicable 'exists' or 'there is' depends on the truth of a whole series of sentences that use the first-level predicable of 'exists'. Are we to say that there is no connection of sense here, that we have a case of pure equivocation?

Some – Dummett, I believe, was one of them – objected that between first and second level predicates there was so 'great a gulf fixed' that there was no possibility of a connection of sense across it. I use the Biblical expression - as I seem to recall, Dummett himself did – to draw attention to the dogmatic nature of the claim. *Contra factum non valet ratio*, no amount of reasoning can overcome an established fact. I can think of a number of predicates that jump this gap.

Consider the old joke that as I get older I find the police getting younger. We all know that no-one in fact gets younger, and the impression that I have that police are in general much younger than they used to be is an illusion based on the fact that when I was myself young most policemen were older than I, while now most policemen are younger than I. To apply the first level predicable is a mistake, whereas to apply the second-level predicable, at least in a relative sense, at least might be true. If there has been a change in recruiting policy in the police force, it might even be true (or false) in a non-relative sense.

I believe it to be the case that Baylor University and Houston Baptist University, fine old Protestant institutions, have recently started hiring Catholics in important positions in their philosophy departments. If this is true, then the faculty of the philosophy departments of those colleges are now more Catholic than they used to be, in that more and more Catholics are employed there: a second-level predication. To that extent, the universities are less Protestant than they used to be. But first, for this to be the case we first need '__ is a Catholic' to be true of this or that member of faculty. Secondly, for these appointments to have been made, the governing bodies must have changed their policies: the members of the board must have decided that Catholic faculty are not, as they previously thought, a threat to their intellectual heritage. Does this mean that the governing bodies are less Protestant, more Catholic than they used

clear that he was a very solid German nationalist of an older school, disliking the French, the British, the Italians, and apparently all Slavs, with the possible exception of Poles.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10111 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to be? 'More Catholic', 'less Protestant', they certainly are, if this is to include in its meaning 'more open to the ideas of Catholics'.

You can pick out here the uses of 'more Catholic' and 'less Protestant' as second-level predicates used of the faculty body as a whole, or of the governing body as a whole, and you can pick out the uses of 'more Catholic' and 'less Protestant' as used as first-level predicates of this or that member of the faculty or governing body. What you cannot pick out is an ambiguity or equivocation in the use of 'Catholic' or 'Protestant'. It seems clear to me that we have a clear case of systematically connected meanings, that is, in the way I think of analogy.

A Thomist is likely to ask, if this is an analogy, what kind of an analogy is it? Is there a prime analogate? Which comes first? I am not sure I know how to answer. In the case of 'Catholic' and 'Protestant', we will prefer to put the first-level predicable first, I suppose: one can imagine a person who could understand what it is for a professor to be Catholic, but not understand what it is for an academic department to be Catholic – one can imagine a sacramental theologian maintaining that it is impossible for a department to be baptized. Are we going to say the same of the existence of the Stuarts? The example seems to tend that way.

I think that this question is possibly unanswerable. I have a feeling that priority in analogy may be context dependent. In any case, I am sure that it is a question that I cannot answer, and have no intention of trying to do so.

Cite this article: C.F.J. Martin, 'Two Forms of Existence-Proposition', *New Blackfriars*, 107 (2026), 514–525. https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10111

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10111 Published online by Cambridge University Press