

AQUINAS, GEACH, AND EXISTENCE

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Abstract. In a series of influential publications, Peter Geach suggested that the correct semantic analysis of some existential propositions requires a first-order, individual, property of existence alongside with the nowadays standard, second-order, one. Moreover, Geach argues that Aquinas was well aware of this need and accepted both a first-order and a second-order property of existence—the first of which goes under the name of *actus essendi*. In this paper, I argue that Geach’s individual existence is not Aquinas’ *actus essendi*, for at least two crucial reasons. Geach’s existence is tensed and is instantiated by present entities only, whereas in a series of works which spans throughout his corpus, Aquinas attributes a tenseless property of existence to past and future entities as well.

I. INTRODUCTION

At least since Russell, it has been a dogma of analytic philosophy that existence is a second-order property.¹ Accordingly, seemingly individual existential attributions, such as “Augustus exists”, are interpreted as generic existential attributions, such as “there is a unique first Roman emperor” or as “there is a unique person that actually stands at the origin of the current use of the name ‘Augustus’”, where existence is intended as the second-order property of *being instantiated*, here attributed to properties such as “being the first Roman emperor”.

While this Russellian dogma is still mainstream today, it has come under attack on different grounds.² An early and influential dissenter has been Peter Geach who, in a series of publications, has advocated the need of distinguishing between two senses of existence, namely a generic, second-order, sense

1 Bertrand Russell, *Principles of Mathematics* (Routledge, 1903); W. V. Quine, *Word and Object* (MIT Press, 1960).

2 Michael Nelson, “Existence”, Spring 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existence/>.

of existence — his *there is sense* — and an individual, first-order, sense of existence — his *actuality*, or *present actuality sense*.³ Apart from this theoretical claim, Geach has also advanced the historical claim that his distinction between *there is sense* and *present actuality sense* coincides with a distinction Aquinas used to make, between generic and individual existence, called by Aquinas *esse ut verum* and *esse ut actus essendi*, respectively.⁴ Geach's theory of existence, as well as Geach's interpretation of Aquinas, have triggered an interesting line of research and are still under discussion.⁵

In this paper, I argue that there are good reasons to doubt that Geach's *present actuality sense* should be identified with Aquinas' individual existence. In particular, I argue that while Geach's *present actuality sense* is tensed, and is attributed to present entities only, Aquinas' individual existence is, in a consistent series of texts spread throughout Aquinas' corpus, intended as tenseless, and attributed to past and future entities too. Therefore, Geach's *present actuality sense* is both extensionally and intensionally different, or more simply is not, Aquinas' individual existence.

In the first section of this paper, I present Geach's two senses of existence and their alleged correspondence to Aquinas' *esse ut verum* and *esse ut actus essendi*. In the second section, I focus on the extensional difference between Geach's *present actuality sense* and Aquinas' individual existence and show that while Geach's *present actuality sense* is attributed to present entities only, Aquinas attributes individual existence to past and future entities as well. In the third section of this paper, I focus on the intensional difference, and show that while Geach's *present actuality sense* is tensed, Aquinas' individual exist-

3 Peter T. Geach, "Form and Existence", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 55, no. 1 (1955); Peter T. Geach, "Aquinas", in *Three Philosophers: Aristotle, Aquinas, Frege*, ed. Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter T. Geach (Cornell Univ. Press, 1961); Peter T. Geach and Robert H. Stoothoff, "What Actually Exists", *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 42, no. 1 (1968).

4 Geach, "Form and Existence".

5 Stephen Brock, "Thomas Aquinas and "What Actually Exists"", in *Wisdom's Apprentice: Thomistic Essays in Honor of Lawrence Dewan, O.P.*, ed. Lawrence Dewan and Peter A. Kwasniewski (Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2007); Anthony Kenny, *Aquinas on Being* (OUP, 2002); Barry Miller, *From Existence to God: A Contemporary Philosophical Argument* (Routledge, 1992); Barry Miller, "Existence", Fall 2009, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2009/entries/existence/>; Giovanni Ventimiglia, "Aquinas on Being: One, Two or Three Senses of Being?", *Quaestio* 18 (2018); Giovanni Ventimiglia, "Is the Thomistic Doctrine of God as "Ipsum Esse Subsistens" Consistent?", *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 10, no. 4 (2018).

ence is tenseless. In the fourth section, I address two worries that might arise as regards the status of future entities in Aquinas and Geach.

II. GEACH ON TWO SENSES OF EXISTENCE

In his *Form and Existence*, dedicated to the correct understanding and the theoretical significance of Aquinas' theory of existence, Peter Geach argues, against the Russellian dogma, for the need of a first order-sense of existence alongside the nowadays standard second-order sense. Geach asks us to consider the following negative existential propositions:

- (1) Dragons do not exist.
- (2) Simeon is not and Joseph is not.

On the one hand, Geach takes the first sentence to involve the standard, generic, second-order, sense of existence: when saying that dragons do not exist, we are not saying something about a given set of individuals; rather we are saying something about a property (or a concept), namely that of "being a dragon", of which we are saying that it is not instantiated.

On the other hand, Geach takes the second sentence — a quote from Genesis, where Jacob is lamenting the fact that, he believes, his sons Simeon and Joseph are not there anymore — to offer reasons to acknowledge an individual, first-order, sense of existence. For, in his words:

[it] would be quite absurd to say that Jacob in uttering these words was not talking about Joseph and Simeon but about the use of their names. Of course he was talking about his sons; he was expressing a fear that something had happened to them, that they were dead. We have here a sense of "is" or "exists" that seems to me to be certainly a genuine predicate of individuals ...⁶

Geach refers to this individual, first-order, sense of existence as *actuality*⁷ or *present actuality*.⁸ Geach writes:

We may express the difference between the two senses of 'is' as follows: An individual may be said to 'be', meaning that it is at present actually existing; on the other hand, when we say that 'there is' an X ..., we are saying concerning a kind or description of things, Xs, that there is at least one thing

6 Geach, "Form and Existence", 266–67.

7 Geach and Stoothoff, "What Actually Exists", 7.

8 Geach, "Aquinas", 90.

of that kind or description Frege was clear as to this distinction, though he rightly had no special interest, as a mathematical logician, in assertions of present actuality. It is a great misfortune that Russell has dogmatically reiterated that the ‘there is’ sense of the ‘substantive’ verb ‘to be’ is the only one that logic can recognise and legitimate; for the other meaning — present actuality — is of enormous importance in philosophy, and only harm can be done by a Procrustean treatment which either squeezes assertions of present actuality into the ‘there is’ form or lops them off as non-sensical.⁹

Let us focus on Geach’s individual existence, and more precisely on its intended extension. The name used by Geach to indicate it — *present actuality* — suggests that one can correctly attribute it only to things that are both present and actual. Clearly enough, this imposes a double restriction on what can correctly be said to individually exist. First, only *actual* things can be said to exist in this sense. Here, ‘Actuality’ is not taken in its modal sense, but rather in the Fregean sense of causal efficacy (*Wirklichkeit*): to be actual is either to act or to undergo change.¹⁰ Hence, Geach’s individual sense of existence can be correctly attributed to things which are causally efficacious only — a set which Geach takes to include individual substances as well as events¹¹ but not, for example, numbers or concepts.¹²

The second restriction on the possible extension of this individual sense of existence — a restriction which will turn out to be crucial later — is a temporal one: only present substances and events can be said to exist in this sense — present actuality is *present* actuality, after all. Geach writes that present actuality is “the sense of ‘exist’ in which one says that an individual came to exist, still exists, no longer exists, etc.”¹³ If *present actuality* is the sense in use when we say that an individual has come to exist, continues to exist, or no longer exists, it comes as no surprise that *present actuality* is neither possessed by future entities — because they have not yet come to exist — nor by past entities — because they no longer exist — but only by temporally present entities — those that have come to existence and still exist. To briefly illustrate the point, Geach’s second example — “Simeon is not and Joseph is not” — involves the negation of individual existence to Simeon and Joseph, entities that the utterer takes to have

9 Geach, “Aquinas”, 90–91.

10 Geach and Stoothoff, “What Actually Exists”, 7.

11 Ibid., 29.

12 Ibid., 27.

13 Geach, “Form and Existence”, 266–67.

died and not to exist anymore. In other words, Simeon and Joseph do not have individual existence insofar as they are not present.

To sum up, Geach is here making a theoretical point about existence. The theoretical point is that the correct analysis of some existential propositions highlights the need to acknowledge — alongside the standard, generic, second-order sense of existence, namely his *there is sense* — an individual, first-order, sense of existence which is restricted to entities that are present and actual — his *present actuality sense*.

Geach does not take such a distinction between two senses of existence to be anything new. He is persuaded that the distinction was already clear to Frege and is even to be found in Aquinas. Indeed, Aquinas used to distinguish at least two senses of the verb *esse*, ‘to be’, namely a generic sense, i.e. *esse ut verum* and an individual sense, i.e. *esse ut actus essendi*.¹⁴

In Aquinas, the need of distinguishing such two senses comes from considerations ranging from the metaphysics of privations, such as blindness or evil¹⁵, to analysis of the nature of Christ.¹⁶ To illustrate, let us briefly consider a reason that concerns the essence of God.¹⁷ Aquinas believes that we cannot know God’s essence. Now, in God, essence and existence are one and the same. As a consequence, we cannot know God’s existence (*esse Dei*) either. However, Aquinas also holds that we *can* know God’s existence (*an sit*), through his well-known proofs of God’s existence. How is it that we both can and cannot know God’s existence? Aquinas’ solution is based on the aforementioned distinction between two senses of existence. He explains:

‘To be’ can mean either of two things. It may mean the act of existence [*actus essendi*], or it may mean the composition of a proposition effected by the mind in joining a predicate to a subject [*esse ut verum*]. Taking ‘to be’ in the first sense, we cannot understand God’s existence nor His essence; but only in the second sense. We know that this proposition which we form about God when we say ‘God is’ is true; and this we know from His effects.¹⁸

14 Geach, “Form and Existence”, 265.

15 Geach, “Form and Existence”, 266; Geach, “Aquinas”, 89.

16 Geach, “Aquinas”, 90.

17 Geach, “Form and Existence”, 266.

18 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, second and revised edition, ed. the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Oates and Washbourne, 1920), I, q. 3, a. 4, ad 2. (The translation has been slightly modified).

Geach takes *esse ut verum* as the same as his *there is sense* and *esse ut actus essendi* as the same as his *present actuality*. In other words, under this interpretation, what we can know is merely that there is a God, or that the concept of God is not empty, while his individual existence remains unknown to us. Geach writes:

Aquinas' conception of *esse* thus depends on there being a sense of the verb 'est' or 'is' quite other than the 'there is' sense It is the present-actuality sense of 'est' that is involved in Aquinas's discussions of *ens* and *esse*. It corresponds to the uses of the verb 'to exist' in which we say that an individual thing comes to exist, continues to exist, ceases to exist, or again to the uses of 'being' in which we say that a thing is brought into being or kept in being by another thing.¹⁹

III. THE EXTENSIONAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GEACH'S PRESENT ACTUALITY AND AQUINAS' INDIVIDUAL EXISTENCE

In the previous section, we have seen Geach making a theoretical as well as a historical point. The theoretical point is that the semantic analysis of some existential sentences requires to acknowledge, alongside the standard, generic, second-order sense of existence, an individual, first-order, sense of existence, which he calls present actuality and which is restricted to entities that are present and actual (i.e. causally efficacious). The historical point is that the distinction between these two senses of existence traces back to Aquinas, insofar as Geach's *there is sense* corresponds to Aquinas' *esse ut verum*, whereas Geach's present actuality corresponds to Aquinas' *esse ut actus essendi*.

The aim of this section is to put the correspondence between *present actuality* and *actus essendi* into doubt, by highlighting an important difference in the extension of the two senses of existence. While Geach's *present actuality* is correctly attributed to present entities only, throughout his *corpus*, Aquinas repeatedly attributes existence in act to future entities as well.

The texts concern mainly, if not exclusively, the topic of God's knowledge of future contingents. Aquinas' line of reasoning, which recurs throughout his *corpus*, goes as follows:

- (i) God knows future contingents;

¹⁹ Geach, "Aquinas", 90–91.

(ii) in order for God to know future contingents, future contingents must exist in act; hence

(iii) future contingents exist in act.

As regards (i), Aquinas affirms repeatedly that God knows future contingents, and does so infallibly. For example, in his *Scriptum Super Sententiis*, *Summa contra Gentiles*, and *In Aristotelis Libros Peri Hermenias* he writes, respectively²⁰:

God knows not just what is present to us, but also what is past and future to us.

From this we can begin to understand somewhat that God had from eternity an infallible knowledge of contingent singular facts.

Hence it follows that God knows all things that take place in time most certainly and infallibly.

Aquinas takes (ii) to be true because God knows future contingents infallibly, and the only way of knowing them infallibly is to know them in themselves, which in turn implies the existence in act of what is known. Let us have a look at his line of reasoning in more detail. (I shall first break down the argument in its premises and conclusion, and then offer citations in support of each premise and of the conclusion). Aquinas holds that God can know entities in three different ways: (a) as producible by him (*in potentia Dei*), (b) in their causes (*in suis causis*), i.e. through inference from their causes and inclinations, or (c) in themselves (*in seipsis*). Aquinas is persuaded that God must know future contingents not only in the first two possible ways, but in the third as well. Indeed, if God knew future contingents merely as producible by him, he would not know them infallibly: he could not dis-

20 “Deus non tantum cognoscit ea quae sunt nobis praesentia, sed quae sunt nobis praeterita et futura” (Aquinas, *Scriptum Super Sententiis*, ed. Roberto Busa (Parma, 1856), lib. 1, d. 38, q. 1, a. 5). (Translation is mine).

“Ex his autem iam aliquialiter patere potest quod contingentium singularium ab aeterno Deus infallibilem scientiam habuit” (Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (Notre Dame Univ. Press, 1975), lib. 1, cap. 67). (The translation has been slightly modified).

„Sic igitur relinquitur, quod Deus certissime et infallibiliter cognoscat omnia quae fiunt in tempore (...)“ (Aquinas, *Expositio libri Peryermeneias: Aristotle on Interpretation* (Marquette Univ. Press, 1962), lib. 1, l. 14).

tinguish between those future contingents which will be realized and those that will remain merely possible, given that both are producible by him. Neither does God know future contingents in their causes only. Once again, this source of knowledge would not be enough to account for the infallibility of his knowledge. Indeed, when it comes to future contingent facts, this source would only allow to make plausible conjectures instead of acquiring infallible knowledge.²¹ Hence, God cannot know future contingents in their causes only. Aquinas writes in his *Summa Theologiae* (parallel segments in *Scriptum Super Sententiis*, and *Summa contra Gentiles*, are provided in footnote)²²:

In another way a contingent thing can be considered as it is in its cause; and in this way it is considered as future, and as a contingent thing not yet determined to one; forasmuch as a contingent cause has relation to opposite things: and in this sense a contingent thing is not subject to any certain knowledge. Hence, whoever knows a contingent effect in its cause only, has merely a conjectural knowledge of it. Now God knows all contingent things not only as they are in their causes.²³

Given that God knows future contingents and that he cannot know them in the first two ways only, he must know them in the third way as well, i.e. in themselves. For only this third source can properly account for God's infallible knowledge of future contingents.

Crucially, while the first two ways do not imply the existence in act of what is known, the third one does. Indeed, for God to know something in

21 "Ut tamen communiter de cognitione futurorum loquamur, sciendum est quod futura dupliciter cognosci possunt, uno modo, in seipsis; alio modo, in suis causis ... prout sunt in suis causis, cognosci possunt etiam a nobis. Et si quidem in suis causis sint ut ex quibus ex necessitate proveniant, cognoscuntur per certitudinem scientiae; sicut astrologus praecognoscit eclipsim futuram. Si autem sic sint in suis causis ut ab eis proveniant ut in pluribus, sic cognosci possunt per quandam coniecturam vel magis vel minus certam, secundum quod causae sunt vel magis vel minus inclinatae ad effectus" (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 86, a. 4).

22 "Dico igitur, quod intellectus divinus intuetur ab aeterno unumquodque contingentium non solum prout est in causis suis" (Aquinas, *Scriptum Super Sententiis*, lib. 1, d. 38, q. 1, a. 5). "Non enim Deus rerum quae apud nos nondum sunt, videt solum esse quod habent in suis causis" (Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, lib. 1, cap. 6).

23 "Alio modo potest considerari contingens, ut est in sua causa. Et sic consideratur ut futurum, et ut contingens nondum determinatum ad unum, quia causa contingens se habet ad opposita. Et sic contingens non subditur per certitudinem alicui cognitioni. Unde quicumque cognoscit effectum contingentem in causa sua tantum, non habet de eo nisi coniecturalem cognitionem. Deus autem cognoscit omnia contingentia, non solum prout sunt in suis causis" (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 14, a. 13).

itself is to know it inasmuch he created it, i.e. inasmuch as he caused the existence in act of that thing (*inquantum facit eas esse in actu*). Hence, if something is known by God in the third way, that thing must exist in act.

To illustrate, Aquinas says expressively that God knows each future contingent by seeing it in its own being (*ipsum esse rei*)²⁴, by seeing the being that it has in its own (*illud quod habent in seipsis*)²⁵, by seeing it in its own existence (*in sua existentia visum*)²⁶, inasmuch as it is posed by him in nature (*secundum quod ponitur esse in rerum natura*)²⁷, inasmuch as it exists in itself (*secundum quod est in seipso existens*).²⁸ In his *Summa Theologiae* and his *Compendium Theologiae*, he writes²⁹:

24 “Dico igitur, quod intellectus divinus intuetur ab aeterno unumquodque contingentium non solum prout est in causis suis, sed prout est in esse suo determinato Patet enim quod Deus ab aeterno non solum vidit ordinem sui ad rem, ex cuius potestate res erat futura, sed ipsum esse rei intuebatur.” (Aquinas, *Scriptum Super Sententiis*, lib. 1, d. 38, q. 1, a. 5).

25 “Ea vero quae sunt praesentia, praeterita vel futura nobis, cognoscit Deus secundum quod sunt in sua potentia, et in propriis causis, et in seipsis. Et horum cognitio dicitur notitia visionis: non enim Deus rerum quae apud nos nondum sunt, videt solum esse quod habent in suis causis, sed etiam illud quod habent in seipsis, inquantum eius aeternitas est praesens sua indivisibilitate omni tempori.” (Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, lib. 1, cap. 66).

26 “Rursus, cum dicitur, Deus scit, vel scivit, hoc futurum, medium quoddam accipitur inter divinam scientiam et rem scitam, scilicet tempus in quo est locutio, respectu cuius illud quod a Deo scitum dicitur est futurum. Non autem est futurum respectu divinae scientiae, quae, in momento aeternitatis existens, ad omnia praesentialiter se habet. Respectu cuius, si tempus locutionis de medio subtrahatur, non est dicere hoc esse cognitum quasi non existens, ut locum habeat quaestio qua quaeritur an possit non esse: sed sic cognitum dicitur a Deo ut iam in sua existentia visum” (Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, lib. 1, cap. 67). On a possible difference between *existence* and *actus essendi* in Aquinas see Cornelio Fabro, “Per la semantica originaria dello “esse” tomistico”, *Euntes docete* 9 (1956) and Étienne Gilson, *L'être et l'essence* (Vrin, 1948), even though it seems to be not problematic to assume that if a substance has *existentia* it also has *actus essendi*.

27 “... contingens refertur ad divinam cognitionem secundum quod ponitur esse in rerum natura” (Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 14, ed. J. V. McGlynn (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Company, 1953), q. 2, a. 12).

28 “[Deus] videt omnia quae aguntur secundum temporis decursum, et unumquodque secundum quod est in seipso existens” (Aquinas, *Expositio libri Peryermeneias*, lib. 1, l. 14).

29 “Deus autem cognoscit omnia contingentia, non solum prout sunt in suis causis, sed etiam prout unumquodque eorum est actu in seipso” (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I q. 14, a. 13). (The translation has been slightly modified). “Manifestum est autem quod hoc modo futura contingentia cognoscere, prout sunt actu in suo esse, quod est certitudinem de ipsis habere, solius Dei proprium est” (Aquinas, *Compendium Theologiae* (B. Herder Book Co, 1947), lib. 1, cap. 134). (The translation has been slightly modified).

Now God knows all contingent things not only as they are in their causes, but also as each one of them is in act in itself.

To know future contingents in this way, as they are in act in their own being, that is, to have certitude about them, is evidently restricted to God alone.³⁰

Aquinas takes each future contingent, be it a substance, an event or a state of affairs, to exist in act, and thus to enjoy individual existence. Hence the difference in extension between Geach's *present actuality* and Aquinas' individual existence: while future entities are not presently actual, Aquinas takes them to exist in act.

IV. THE INTENSIONAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GEACH'S PRESENT ACTUALITY AND AQUINAS' INDIVIDUAL EXISTENCE

In the previous section, I have argued that Geach's *present actuality* and Aquinas' *actus essendi* have different extensions: while Geach's *present actuality* ranges over present entities only, Aquinas' *actus essendi* ranges over future entities too. The aim of this section is to argue in favour of yet another aspect which makes *present actuality* and *actus essendi* different: Geach's present actuality is tensed (and specifically in the present tense), whereas Aquinas' *actus essendi* is tenseless.

Before proceeding, we should briefly have a look at the relevant meaning of the dichotomy between tensed and tenseless existence and, more generally, between tensedness and tenselessness. Let us begin with three examples of propositions which are, in the relevant sense, tensed:

- (3) The Great Library *was* located in Alexandria
 - (4) Your laptop *is still* on my desk
 - (5) The ITER nuclear reactor *will* be completed in ten years' time
- and three propositions which are, in the relevant sense, tenseless:

- (6) Three *is* the square root of nine

30 A similar conclusion might be reached if Aquinas' treatment of future contingent statements is considered from the logical point of view, insofar as Luca Gili and Lorenz Demey, "Thomas van Aquino, niet-normale modale logica's en het probleem van toekomstige contingenties", *Tijdschrift Voor Filosofie* 79, no. 2 (2017) argued that future contingent substances and properties are to feature in the semantic treatment of Aquinas' view on future contingents.

(7) 400 BC *is* before 399 BC

(8) WWII *is* after WWI

First, notice that propositions (3), (4) and (5) require to adopt the present time's perspective in order to be evaluated. This is a crucial feature of tensed propositions. As Sider puts it, "tensed propositions are those which presuppose a certain position or vantage point within the whole of time"³¹ – that position being the present time. On the other hand, no particular temporal perspective is required in order to evaluate propositions (6), (7) and (8). Second, it should be clear that tense in the relevant sense, while having to do with the predicates involved in the proposition, is not simply grammatical tense: suffice it to remark that propositions such as (6), (7) and (8), while tenseless in the relevant sense, are expressed using verbs that are conjugated at the present grammatical tense.

A third important point which concerns the distinction between tenselessness and tensedness concerns the connection between tense and temporal location. Tensed propositions place the relevant individuals in time. If the Great Library was located in Alexandria, then the Great Library is somewhere in time and, more precisely, it is at a time which is earlier than the present. More generally, the use of the past/present/future tense in a tensed proposition places the relevant individuals at the past/present/future time, respectively.³² On the other hand, tenseless propositions do not necessarily have such a consequence: while years 399 and 400 BC are in some sense placed in time (for one is before the other, and in order to be before and after, one might argue, something has to be in some sense in time), and WWI as well as WWII are definitely temporal entities, one might accept that three is the square root of nine even if one believes that numbers are not in space and time. Moreover, it should also be clear that the use of the present tense in a tenseless predication does not imply that the entities involved in the tenseless predication are to be found at the present time. To illustrate, when we say that your laptop is still on my desk, we are implying that your laptop and my desk are to be found at the present moment. On the other hand, when we say that 400 BC *is* before 399 BC, or that WWII *is* after WWI, we are not thereby

31 Theodore Sider, *Four-Dimensionalism: An Ontology of Persistence and Time* (OUP, 2001), 12.

32 Fabrice Correia and Sven Rosenkranz, "Temporal existence and temporal location", *Philosophical Studies* 57 (2019).

implying that such years or events are located at the present moment. We might therefore take the use of a predicate at the present tense positively attributed to non-present entities as a clear indicator of the fact that the resulting proposition is tenseless in the relevant sense — or at least we shall make this assumption for the rest of the paper.

It should now be evident that Geach's present actuality is intended to be a tensed notion. Geach says that present actuality is the "sense of 'exist' in which one says that an individual came to exist, still exists, no longer exists, etc."³³ Commenting on the status of a past entity vis-à-vis present actuality, he adds that "poor Fred was, and is not."³⁴ Hence, the use of grammatical tense here makes it clear that Geach's present actuality is intended to be a tensed notion (where the specific tense is the present one).

Geach's commentators agree on this point. For example, Lloyd writes "According to Geach there are two distinct senses of the verb 'to be' ... [The second sense] is a tensed predicative use of 'exists' which holds of temporal objects for the duration of their temporal existence but not at other times."³⁵ Kenny, drawing on Geach, says, about individual existence, that "Statements of this kind of existence are tensed like other subject-predicate sentences. The Great Pyramid still exists, while the Pharos of Alexandria does not."³⁶ And Miller writes "Geach's position on tense is bound up with the two-sense thesis of the predicate '___ exists' ... The first, which Geach calls the present actuality sense, is tensed."³⁷ After all, the fact that Geach's present actuality is a tensed notion comes as no surprise given that, more generally, Geach kept a generally sceptic stance as regards tenseless talk: "Mortal men who try to speak the tenseless language of the Immortals will find their tongues confounded as at Babel."³⁸

We have remarked before that the use of the past/present/future tense in a tensed proposition places the relevant individuals at the past/present/future time, respectively. So does Geach's present actuality. When Geach says that

33 Geach, "Form and Existence", 266–67.

34 Ibid., 268.

35 Genevieve Lloyd, "Time and Existence", *Philosophy* 53, no. 204 (1978): 217.

36 Kenny, *Aquinas on Being*, 190.

37 Barry Miller, "Individuals Past, Present and Future", *Philosophy* 56, no. 216 (1981): 253.

38 Peter T. Geach, *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977), 42. I would like to thank an anonymous referee for drawing my attention to this fact.

something still exists, he is implying that the relevant thing is to be found at the present moment. And when he says that something was/will be but is not, he is implying that the relevant thing is not to be found at the present moment but is to be found at an earlier/later time. This fact sits well with the intended meaning of present actuality. Present actuality amounts to being presently causally efficacious. Arguably, something needs to be found at the present moment in order to be presently causally efficacious. And the fact that present actuality is in the present tense makes sure that anything that enjoys it is to be found at the present moment.

Let us now pass to Aquinas' individual existence. Is it intended to be a tensed or a tenseless notion? Are propositions involving it tensed or tenseless? First of all, let us remind that we take the use of a predicate at the (grammatical) present tense positively attributed to non-present entities as a sufficient condition for the predicate, and the resulting proposition, to be tenseless. Now, looking back at the texts in which Aquinas attributes existence in act to future contingents, we see Aquinas constantly using the (grammatical) present tense. Here are a few examples (emphases both in the translation and the original Latin in footnotes are of course mine):

From eternity, the divine intellect gazes over each single contingent, not only inasmuch as it is in its causes, but also inasmuch as it *is* in its own determinate being.³⁹

He sees in everything that is effected in the unfolding of time, and each thing as it *is* existent in itself.⁴⁰

Now God knows all contingent things not only as they are in their causes, but also as each one of them *is* in act in itself.⁴¹

39 "Dico igitur, quod intellectus divinus intuetur ab aeterno unumquodque contingentium non solum prout est in causis suis, sed prout *est* in esse suo determinate" (Aquinas, *Scriptum Super Sententiis*, lib. 1, d. 38, q. 1, a. 5). (Translation is mine).

40 "Deus] videt omnia quae aguntur secundum temporis decursum, et unumquodque secundum quod *est* in seipso existens" (Aquinas, *Expositio libri Peryermeneias*, lib. 1, l. 14). (The translation has been slightly modified).

41 "Deus autem cognoscit omnia contingentia, non solum prout sunt in suis causis, sed etiam prout unumquodque eorum *est* actu in seipso" (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, q. 14, a. 13). (The translation has been slightly modified).

Given that Aquinas makes use of the present tense while attributing existence in act to future entities, we can conclude that, unlike Geach's, his individual existence predicate is tenseless.

V. TWO WORRIES CONCERNING THE STATUS OF FUTURE ENTITIES IN AQUINAS AND GEACH

In this section, I shall address two possible worries that might arise from my reading of Aquinas and Geach on the existential status of future entities and on the notion of individual existence.

Let us begin with Aquinas. I hold that Aquinas affirms the existence in act of future entities. Still, in some passages, Aquinas says that future entities have not been created yet, and that they are in potency. A text in which this apparent difficulty emerges in a clear way is in the *Compendium Theologiae*, in which Aquinas claims⁴²:

This also makes it clear that He has a certain knowledge of contingent things, because even before they come into being, He sees them as they are in act in their own being.

How is it possible to hold together that future contingents (i) exist in act (*sunt actu in suo esse*) before they come into being (*antequam fiant*), and hence (ii) before existing? Isn't this a blatant contradiction? Some considerations offered by Aquinas' in the comment on *De Interpretatione* will help us clarify things here. First, Aquinas follows Aristotle in saying that verbs co-signify a time through their tense.⁴³ This means that the tense of the verb indicates that the action indicated by the verb takes place in the present time (if the tense is present), in the past (if the tense is past), or in the future (if the tense is future). This feature seems to be typical of what we have taken to be tensed predication and tensed propositions. In a tensed proposition, the tense of the proposition informs us about the temporal position of the involved entities. Then, Aquinas goes on in explaining why in everyday propositions the verb always co-signifies a time. This is due to our human condition, in which we

42 "Ex quo etiam manifestum fit quod de contingentibus certam cognitionem habet, quia etiam antequam fiant, intuetur ea prout sunt actu in suo esse" (Aquinas, *Compendium Theologiae*, lib. 1, cap. 133). (The translation has been slightly modified).

43 Aquinas, *Expositio libri Peryermeneias*. lib. 1, l. 5

come to know time successively, ‘a time at a time.’⁴⁴ However, this need of knowing only a time at a time, in a successive manner, is a human cognitive limitation, which does not concern God, and becomes evident in the case of God’s knowledge of future contingents. He writes

God sees such a time inasmuch it is present, and the thing that is present in such a time. This cannot happen in our intellect, for the act of our intellect is successive with respect to different times.⁴⁵

Hence, when Aquinas claims that future contingents ‘exist in act’, he does so from a divine perspective, by abstracting from any particular time at which this proposition could be stated; accordingly, in this proposition the verb ‘to exist’ does not co-signify a time; it is tenseless. On the other hand, when we say that future contingents exist ‘before being created’, and hence before existing, we are using the verb ‘to exist’ in the common way, in which it co-signifies the present time; it is tensed.

This reading is confirmed by other passages in which Aquinas says that future contingents do not exist yet, but they do not *for us* — not for God.⁴⁶ He writes

For of the things that for us are not yet God sees not only the being that they have in their causes but also the being that they have in themselves, in so far as His eternity is present in its indivisibility to all time.⁴⁷

and also

We can talk of foreknowledge only inasmuch as [God] knows things that are future to us, not to him.⁴⁸

44 “Quia igitur cognitio nostra cadit sub ordine temporis, vel per se vel per accidens (unde et anima in componendo et dividendo necesse habet adiungere tempus, ut dicitur in III de anima), consequens est quod sub eius cognitione cadant res sub ratione praesentis, praeteriti et futuri. Et ideo praesentia cognoscit tanquam actu existentia et sensu aequaliter perceptibilia; praeterita autem cognoscit ut memorata; futura autem non cognoscit in seipsis, quia nondum sunt, sed cognoscere ea potest in causis suis” (Aquinas, *Expositio libri Peryermeneias*, lib. 1, l. 14).

45 “[Deus] videt istud tempus in quo est praesens, et rem esse praesentem in hoc tempore, quod tamen in intellectu nostro non potest accidere, cujus actus est successivus secundum diversa tempora” (Aquinas, *Scriptum Super Sententiis*, lib. 1, d. 38, q. 1, a. 5). (translation is mine).

46 On the distinction of these two senses of existence in Aquinas, see also William L. Craig, *The Problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents from Aristotle to Suarez* (Brill, 1988).

47 “Non enim Deus rerum quae apud nos nondum sunt, videt solum esse quod habent in suis causis, sed etiam illud quod habent in seipsis, in quantum eius aeternitas est praesens sua indivisibilitate omni tempori” (Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, lib. 1, cap. 66).

48 “Sed tamen potest dici praesentia, in quantum cognoscit id quod futurum est nobis, non sibi” (Aquinas, *Scriptum Super Sententiis*, lib. 1, d. 38, q. 1, a. 5). (Translation is mine).

A similar treatment can be given to those passages in which Aquinas says that future entities are not in act, but in potency. In the already quoted article 13 of the *Summa Theologiae*, he writes:

Since as was shown above, God knows all things; not only things actual but also things possible to Him and creature; and since some of these are future contingent to us, it follows that God knows future contingent things.⁴⁹

Here Aquinas says that God knows not only what is actual, but also what is possible, among which future contingents. One might be tempted to conclude that future contingents are in potency, and not in act.⁵⁰ However, Aquinas clarifies that this is not what he has in mind. He continues:

[A] contingent thing can be considered in two ways; first, in itself, in so far as it is now in act: and in this sense it is not considered as future, but as present; neither is it considered as contingent to one of two terms, but as determined to one In another way a contingent thing can be considered as it is in its cause; and in this way it is considered as future, and as a contingent thing not yet determined to one Hence it is manifest that contingent things are infallibly known by God, inasmuch as they are subject to the divine sight in their presentiality; yet they are future contingent things in relation to their own causes.⁵¹

In other words, future contingents are in potency, but only from our present perspective, *to us (nobis)*, insofar as we are only able to consider them in relation to their causes, and as future to us. On the other hand, if considered in themselves, they are in act.

I shall now pass to a worry concerning my reading of Geach. I hold that Geach's notion of individual existence is presently tensed. It is crucial to real-

49 "Respondeo dicendum quod, cum supra ostensum sit quod Deus sciat omnia non solum quae actu sunt, sed etiam quae sunt in potentia sua vel creaturae; horum autem quaedam sunt contingentia nobis futura; sequitur quod Deus contingentia futura cognoscat" (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, q. 14, a. 13).

50 I would like to thank an anonymous referee for pointing out that it might have been interesting to discuss this possible problem.

51 "Contingens aliquod dupliciter potest considerari. Uno modo, in seipso, secundum quod iam actu est. Et sic non consideratur ut futurum, sed ut praesens, neque ut ad utrumlibet contingens, sed ut determinatum ad unum Alio modo potest considerari contingens, ut est in sua causa. Et sic consideratur ut futurum, et ut contingens nondum determinatum ad unum Unde manifestum est quod contingentia et infallibiliter a Deo cognoscuntur, in quantum subduntur divino conspectui secundum suam praesentialitatem, et tamen sunt futura contingentia, suis causis comparata (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, q. 14, a. 13).

ize that in so doing, I am not only claiming that Geach's notion is tensed, but also that the specific tense is the present tense. This reading is supported by the fact that Geach calls this notion of existence *present* actuality. However, the term "*present* actuality" is used in one of Geach's publications only, namely in the relevant chapter of his *Three Philosophers*. In other publications, such as "Form and Existence" (1955) and "What Actually Exists" (1968), Geach refers to this sense of existence merely as "actuality". If individual existence is taken to be mere actuality, it might be tensed and yet positively attributed to past and future entities as well. After all, past entities *were* actual, and future entities *will be* actual.⁵²

Interpretation 1. According to Geach, an individual's existence is its present actuality.

Interpretation 2. According to Geach, an individual's existence is its past, present, or future actuality.

If the second conception of individual existence is assumed, my argument falls, for both past and future entities will enjoy individual existence too (though not in the same way in which present ones do). Thus, it will no longer be true that Geach denies individual existence to past and future entities.

I see three reasons to prefer the former interpretation. First, while the fact that in some publications Geach talks simply of "actuality" might be taken not to favour any of the two interpretations, the fact that in *Three Philosophers* Geach talks of "*present* actuality" speaks clearly in favour of the former, and this fact cannot simply be ignored. Second, suppose for the sake of the argument that despite not being explicit about this, in his "Form and Existence" (1955) and "What Actually Exists" (1968) Geach intended actuality in the latter way. If that were the case, Geach must have changed his mind at least twice, given that *Three Philosophers* has been written after "Form and Existence" and before "What Actually Exists". One would expect to see signs of this double change of mind in Geach's writing, but this is not the case. Third, several scholars take Geach to adhere to the first interpretation. For example, Kenny, Miller, and Ventimiglia, in speaking of Geach's individual existence, call it "present

52 I would like to thank an anonymous referee who suggested this alternative interpretation of Geach.

actuality”.⁵³ They give no sign of believing that the term “present” is there inappropriate, nor they mention any sign of disagreement about that; thus, one might reasonably be tempted to conclude that they *don’t* disagree with him on this, and that they also take individual existence to be present actuality.

I take none of these reasons, some of which *ex silentio*, to be totally irresistible. For one might believe that Geach’s use of the term “*present* actuality” was only occasional and due to inaccuracy, or that he might not have fully realized that at least two interpretations of his theory were possible. The same might hold for his commentators. However, those who like simpler explanations will probably be attracted by the hypothesis that Interpretation 1 is to be preferred.

VI. CONCLUSION

I have argued that Geach’s and Aquinas’ notions of individual existence are extensionally and intensionally different from one another: while the former is tensed and extends to present entities only, the latter is tenseless and extends to future entities as well. From a contemporary reader’s perspective, this suggests that Geach’s individual existence and Aquinas’ individual existence are fundamentally different: while the former concern the temporal location, so to speak, of an entity⁵⁴ (Correia and Rosenkranz forth.), the second one concerns the sheer fact that something is part of one’s ontological catalogue, no matter where in time, if anywhere.

While Aquinas does not explicitly say that his individual existence extends to past entities — and while his arguments do not allow us to draw such a conclusion — one might reasonably expect him to hold this view as well, for one might expect him to hold that God knows past, present, and future entities in the same way, namely also in themselves. If that is the case, one might be tempted to take Aquinas to be an eternalist *ante litteram* — eternalism being the view that past, present and future tenselessly exist. However, much more needs to be done before drawing such a conclusion. For, admittedly, one can find in his corpus elements that suggest a presentist stance.⁵⁵ And

53 Kenny, *Aquinas on Being*; Giovanni Ventimiglia, *To be o esse? La questione dell’essere nel tomismo analitico* (Carocci, 2012); Ventimiglia, “Aquinas on Being”.

54 Correia and Rosenkranz, “Temporal existence and temporal location”.

55 For a discussion of this problem, see William L. Craig, “Was Thomas Aquinas a B-Theorist of Time?”, *New Scholasticism* 59, no. 4 (1985); Richard Cross, “Duns Scotus on Eternity and

even though Aquinas takes future entities to individually exist, the tenseless existence of the contemporary eternalist is usually interpreted in quantificational terms. While the latter problem might be solved, insofar as we might take individual existence always to imply generic existence, the former problem requires a comprehensive study of Aquinas' metaphysics of time — a daunting task which is of course left for future work.⁵⁶

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