

AQUINAS ON PREDICATION AND FUTURE CONTINGENTS. A REPLY TO COSTA

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Abstract. In his paper “Aquinas, Geach, and Existence”, D. Costa maintains that Aquinas’ solution to the puzzle of future contingent events entails that future contingent entities already exist (in God’s perspective). This is tantamount to state that Aquinas endorsed a form of eternalism, since he maintained that past, present and future timelessly exist in God’s sight. I object that Aquinas’ texts are also compatible with another reading. In any statement of the form “S will be P”, the verb “will be” simply states the truth of the predicative link between S and P, not the existence of either S or P. In other words, I take the verb “to be” occurring in sentences describing future events as having the meaning of the “esse ut verum” (“being as true”).

In his paper “Aquinas, Geach, and Existence”,¹ Damiano Costa argues that Peter Geach’s notion of being as “present actuality” does not capture Aquinas’ *actus essendi*. According to Thomas Aquinas, God knows future contingents *in themselves*. In Costa’s interpretation, the clause “in themselves” implies that future contingent beings *exist in themselves* already in the present (at least from God’s perspective), whereas Geach’s “present actuality” only applies to things that exist in the present but not to future or past things. In other words, Costa interprets Aquinas’ *actus essendi* as a timeless property of existence of things (at least from God’s perspective), thereby concluding that Geach’s notion of “present actuality” does not correspond to Aquinas’ *actus essendi*. Instead, Costa inquires whether the medieval philosopher may be regarded as “an eternalist *ante litteram*”.² Eternalism is the view that past, present and future tenselessly exist. In Costa’s reconstruction,

1 Damiano Costa, “Aquinas, Geach, and Existence”, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11, no. 3 (2019).

2 Ibid., 192.

[W]hile 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.³

Costa acknowledges that some of Aquinas' texts might be construed as supporting the presentist position, i.e. the claim that only present entities *exist* but leaves the discussion open to future research on the topic. *Prima facie*, presentism and eternalism might look like exhaustive alternatives, but I would suggest that they are both inadequate to represent Aquinas' ideas on temporal existence. Aquinas believes that (i) God is an a-temporal entity, thereby rejecting the presentist claim that only presently located entities exist, and at the same time (ii) denies that created beings *exist* outside of the present. Costa and I probably disagree on the second claim and I intend to show that Aquinas' texts support a *sui generis* presentist concept of existence rather than the notion of tenseless existence outlined by Costa. In what follows, I will first review the textual evidence discussed by Costa. Later, I will present other texts that make an alternative reading more compelling.

I. THE CASE FOR AQUINAS' ETERNALISM

Costa focuses on three texts taken from Aquinas' discussion of the problem of future contingents.

- (i) Hence, I say that the divine intellect has an intuitive cognition of each single contingent from eternity, not only inasmuch as it is in its causes, but also inasmuch as it is in its own being in a determinate way.⁴
- (ii) [God] sees all things that take place in the unfolding of time, and each thing as it is being-in-itself.⁵

3 Ibid.

4 “Dico igitur, quod intellectus divinus intuetur ab aeterno unumquodque contingentium non solum prout est in causis suis, sed prout est in esse suo determinate” (*Sent.*, Lib. 1, d. 38, q. 1, a. 5), my translation.

5 “[Deus] videt omnia quae aguntur secundum temporis decursum, et unumquodque secundum quod est in seipso existens” (Aquinas, *Expositio libri Peryermeneias*, lib. 1, l. 14, n. 20), my translation. Interestingly, here Aquinas uses not only the verb “to be” (“est”), but also the participle of “existere”. In this case, however, the clause “in seipso” does not seem to refer

- (iii) 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.⁶

Costa maintains that Aquinas is “attributing existence in act to future entities”⁷ because he specifies that God knows future contingent events not only in their causes (i.e., ultimately, in Himself) but rather *in their own being*, which is present to Him.

Costa maintains that Aquinas is consistently referring to the actual existence of future contingent events while stating that future contingents *are*. I maintain, instead, that the verb *esse* is ambiguous in Aquinas’ jargon and it does not straightforwardly refer to actual existence.

Aquinas distinguishes several meanings of the verb “esse” in his commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, book VI. Aristotle had distinguished four senses of the Greek verb εἶναι:⁸

- (a) ‘is’ that indicates accidental predication;
- (b) ‘is’ that indicates *per se* predication:
 - (b.1) ‘is’ that indicates ‘truth’;
 - (b.2) ‘is’ that indicates ‘categorical’ predication;
 - (b.3) ‘is’ that indicates potentiality or actuality.

to “unumquodque”, i.e. to the known thing (“in itself”, as Costa translates) but rather to the participle “existens” that I chose to translate with “being”. In support of Costa’s reading, Jean T. Oesterle, *Aristotle: On Interpretation. Commentary by Thomas Aquinas Finished by Cardinal Cajetan* (Marquette Univ. Press, 1962) translates the phrase “unumquodque secundum quod est in seipso existens” as follows: “each thing as it is in itself”.

6 “Deus autem cognoscit omnia contingentia, non solum prout sunt in suis causis, sed etiam prout unumquodque eorum est actu in seipso” (Aquinas, *Summa Theol.* Ia, q. 14, a. 13c), my translation.

7 Costa, “Aquinas, Geach, and Existence”, 188.

8 I maintain that Aristotle is primarily concerned with the meanings of the verb εἶναι and especially with the meanings of ἔστιν (3rd person singular of the present indicative of εἶναι) in *Met.* VI (see Luca Gili, “Aristotle, De Interpretatione 3: Tensing the Verbs”, in *Le langage: Lectures d’Aristote*, ed. L. Gazziero (Peeters, forthcoming) on this issue). In ancient Greek, the verb εἶναι has indeed several meanings. Charles H. Kahn, *The Verb “Be” in Ancient Greek* (Hackett, 2003) argues that the verb εἶναι has primarily a predicative function and that it derivatively indicates existence and truth.

In his commentary, Aquinas endorses Aristotle's distinction.⁹ Although the medieval philosopher often speaks of the participle "ens", following in this Aristotle's text, it would probably be disingenuous to maintain that Aquinas is talking of an actually existent entity.¹⁰ C. Martin maintains that *esse ut verum* refers to second-order existence and is the analogous of G. Frege's *Es gibt Existenz*, whereas the *esse* that express "categorical predication" refers to first order existence.¹¹ Like Martin, I too believe that that the "esse ut verum" entails the existence of something, but not of the subjects or the predicates joined to form a proposition by the "is" of truth.

According to Costa¹², Aquinas distinguishes a tenseless usage of the verb "to be" and a tensed one. The first is used while referring to God's perspective, the latter occurs while describing the human perspective. Costa's conclusion is that there are two ways of approaching the existence of future (or past) beings: (i) an absolute perspective that is proper to God, according to which *all beings* — past, present and future — exist *praesentialiter*, i.e. in the eternal present that is God; (ii) our limited perspective that make us think that some things are no longer and others are not yet. In other words, the non-existence of past or future beings is a mere *façon de parler* that reflects the limits of created intellects. Costa does not expand on this remark, but it seems straightforward to further infer that, if God exists, He must know things better than we do.¹³ The very same entity *e* cannot both be existent (in God's perspective) and not-existent (in our perspective) unless the predicates "existent" and "not-existent" are relational ones.¹⁴ However, if these predicates are not relational, they are contradictory and cannot be attributed to the same subject

9 Cf. Alejandro Llano, "The different meanings of 'being' according to Aristotle and Aquinas", *Acta Philosophica* 10, no. 1 (2001) on this.

10 Cf. *in Met.* VI, lec. IV, n. 1223, p. 309 (ed. Marietti, Turin-Rome, 1964). In this passage, Aquinas clearly uses the participle "ens" as having a verbal value (thereby standing for its indicative use) and not as having a nominal meaning (thereby designating an "entity").

11 C. Martin, "A Distinction between different Notions of Existence in the Writings of St Thomas Aquinas, and its Use to Distinguish Logic from Metaphysics" (University of Oxford, 1984), 119-124 lists the passages where Aquinas presents the notion of the *esse ut verum*.

12 Costa, "Aquinas, Geach, and Existence", 189.

13 Along these lines, G. Barzaghi proposes an eternalist reading of Aquinas' theology and philosophy. See especially Giuseppe Barzaghi, *Oltre Dio ovvero omnia in omnibus: Pensieri su Dio, il divino, la deità* (2000).

14 It goes without saying that the very same entity *e* can be at the same time *existent-according-to-God's-perspective* and *not-existent-according-to-our-perspective*. But neither Costa

under the same respect. Since God's perspective is likely to be more accurate than ours, if we say that *e* does not exist *for us* but exists *for God*, we are saying that *e* truly exists, even though it appears to us as non-existing.¹⁵

II. CONTRA COSTA

The main exegetical issue raised by Costa is the interpretation of Aquinas' statement that God knows each future event "in itself" ("in seipso"). If one were to hold that Aquinas is a presentist, what is the "being" of future things that are known by God before their temporal existence?

I suggest that in the above passages, expressions such as "in its own being" ("in esse suo") or "in itself" ("in seipso") do not refer to the being of actual existence, i.e. to the actual participation of the "act of being" (*actus essendi*) that brings to existence whatever exists in the created world. I maintain instead that Aquinas is merely referring to the "being" ("esse") indicating the truth of a predication, i.e. to the *esse ut verum*.¹⁶ In Aquinas' view, God does

nor Aquinas argue in favour of a relational understanding of existence and such a conception seems to be at odds with our grasp of what it is, for a thing, "to exist".

15 We could liken the two perspectives to the sight of people with normal vision and the sight of color blind people. The same colored image may look like an image of, say, number "74" in green on a red background to people with normal vision, but it does not look like the image of any number to color blind people. If we were to say that the same image both represents and does not represent the same number (barring relative predicates), we would be rejecting the principle of non-contradiction. The concept of "representing a number" appears to be non-perspectival as much as the concept of "existing" is.

16 This interpretation seems to be more likely also on the basis of the larger context of the *responsio* of *Sent.*, Lib. 1, d. 38, q. 1, a. 5c: "Sciendum est igitur, quod antequam res sit non habet esse nisi in causis suis. Sed causae quaedam sunt ex quibus necessario sequitur effectus, quae impediri non possunt, et in istis causis habet causatum esse certum et determinatum, adeo quod potest ibi demonstrative sciri, sicut est ortus solis, et eclipsis, et hujusmodi. Quaedam autem sunt causae ex quibus consequuntur effectus ut in majori parte, sed tamen deficiunt in minori parte; unde in istis causis effectus futuri non habent certitudinem absolutam, sed quamdam, inquantum sunt magis determinatae causae ad unum quam ad aliud; et ideo per istas causas potest accipi scientia conjecturalis de futuris, quae tanto magis erit certa, quanto causae sunt magis determinatae ad unum; sicut est cognitio medici de sanitate et morte futura, et iudicium astrologi de ventis et pluviis futuris. Sed quaedam causae sunt quae se habent ad utrumque: et in istis causis effectus de futuro nullam habent certitudinem vel determinationem; et ideo contingentia ad utrumlibet in causis suis nullo modo cognosci possunt. Sed quando jam efficiuntur in rerum natura, tunc habent in seipsis esse determinatum; et ideo quando sunt in actu, certitudinaliter cognoscuntur, ut patet in eo qui videt Socratem currere, quia Socratem

not merely know that (i) “S will be P at t_k ” because He sees how causes $[c_1, c_2, \dots c_n]$ will bring about (i). He also sees that P is linked to S at t_k from all eternity. This, however, does not entail that “P” or “S” or their reciprocal relations actually “exist” in order to make it possible for God to know them. He does not know the way we know. While we know x iff x is an object of knowledge, i.e. iff x exists and has an actual content, God knows x from eternity and, by knowing x , creates it *at the time He wills*. In what follows, I will present some philosophical and textual arguments in favour of this reading.

currere dum currit, necessarium est; et certam cognitionem habere potest. Dico igitur, quod intellectus divinus intuetur ab aeterno unumquodque contingentium non solum prout est in causis suis, sed prout est in esse suo determinato. Cum enim re existente ipsam rem videat prout in esse suo determinato est, aliter cognosceret rem postquam est quam antequam fiat; et sic ex eventibus rerum aliquid ejus accresceret cognitioni. Patet etiam quod Deus ab aeterno non solum vidit ordinem sui ad rem, ex cujus potestate res erat futura, sed ipsum esse rei intuebatur. Quod qualiter sit, evidenter docet Boetius in fine de Consol. Omnis enim cognitio est secundum modum cognoscentis, ut dictum est. Cum igitur Deus sit aeternus, oportet quod cognitio ejus modum aeternitatis habeat, qui est esse totum simul sine successione”. Costa’s interpretation is certainly reasonable, because expressions like “esse” or “in esse suo determinato” seem to refer to the very timeless *existence* of the future contingent entities. However, the passage begins with a consideration on the fact that “before a thing is, it does not have being but in its causes” (“antequam res sit non habet esse nisi in causis suis”). According to Aquinas, then, it is possible to “have being” without existing or before existing. In my opinion, the “being” cannot but be the “is” that connects the predicates to their suppositum. This “is” has an indeterminate truth-value according to our perspective, but a determinate one in God’s perspective. After Aquinas, other medieval philosophers will speak of an “esse essentiae”, i.e. the “being of the essence” that connects all properties in a bundle that does not necessarily exist (unless God provides the act of existing). Aquinas seems to be using a similar language in the context of *Sent.*, Lib. 1, d. 38, q. 1, a. 5c. God knows these contents inasmuch as they are possible participations to His Divine Essence and He knows His own Will to bring them to actual existence at time t_k (where “k” refers to a future instant of time). For this reason, God’s knowledge of future contingent events is infallible, even though they do not *exist* yet. They merely *exist* in a timeless way according to their “esse essentiae”, i.e. according to the being connecting in a bundle all their properties except existence, not according to their “actus essendi”, i.e. to their actual participation to God’s perfection of existence. Henry of Ghent is commonly credited as the philosopher who introduced the concept of “esse essentiae” in the medieval debate (on Henry’s treatment of the “esse essentiae” see, e.g., Pasquale Porro, “Universaux et esse essentiae: Avicenne, Henri de Gand et le ‘Troisième Reich’”, in *Le réalisme des universaux*, ed. Vincent Carraud (Presses univ. de Caen, 2002)). Aquinas already uses the expression with the same meaning in the context of Trinitarian theology (see, e.g. *Summa theol.* Ia, q. 28, a. 2c; *De Pot.* q. 9, a. 5, ad 19).

The main text suggesting that Aquinas does not maintain that future contingents *exist* is the following:¹⁷

I answer that, God knows all things whatsoever that in any way are. Now it is possible that things that are not absolutely, should be in a certain sense. For things absolutely are which are actual; whereas things which are not actual, are in the power either of God Himself or of a creature, whether in active power, or passive; whether in power of thought or of imagination, or of any other manner of meaning whatsoever. Whatever therefore can be made, or thought, or said by the creature, as also whatever He Himself can do, all are known to God, although they are not actual. And in so far it can be said that He has knowledge even of things that are not. Now a certain difference is to be noted in the consideration of those things that are not actual. For though some of them may not be in act now, still they were, or they will be; and God is said to know all these with the knowledge of vision: for since God's act of understanding, which is His being, is measured by eternity; and since eternity is without succession, comprehending all time, the present glance of God extends over all time, and to all things which exist in any time, as to objects present to Him. But there are other things in God's power, or the creature's, which nevertheless are not, nor will be, nor were; and as regards these He is said to have knowledge, not of vision, but of simple intelligence. This is so called because the things we see around us have distinct being outside the seer.¹⁸

Here Aquinas is talking about God's knowledge of non-beings. Future and past events - and the beings involved in them - are explicitly included among non-beings. It is difficult to think that Aquinas is adopting the alleged "human perspective" in describing God's objects of cognitions in a question explicitly devoted to God's knowledge. Aquinas states that God knows non-beings ("non entia") either as they are merely in His power - as in the case of things that will never exist - or as they are in His power and He decided *ab aeterno* to create them - as is the case for past and future entities.

An external confirmation for this reading comes from the previous articles of the same question of the *Summa theologiae*. In *Summa theol.* I^a, q. 14, a. 8, Aquinas states that God's knowledge is the *cause* for the existence of things, thereby showing that in God the distinction between the knowledge of the cause of the thing *x* and the knowledge of the thing *x* is a mere distinction of reason since God's knowledge is identical to His own Essence (cf. *Summa*

17 Cf. also *Summa theol.* Ia q. 14, a. 15, ad 2; *Sent. Lib.* I, dist. 38, a. 4, *Lib. III*, dist. 14, a. 2, q. 2; *Contra Gent.* *Lib.* I, c. 66; *De Ver.* q. 2, a. 8; q. 3, a. 3.

18 *Summa theol.*, Ia, q. 14, a. 9c, translation by the English Dominicans.

theol. I^a, q. 14, a. 4; *Contra Gent.* Lib. I, c. 45) and His Essence is absolutely simple (cf. *Summa theol.* I^a, q. 3, a. 7; *Contra Gent.* Lib. I, c. 16, c. 18). In *Summa theol.* I^a, q. 14, a. 5,¹⁹ Aquinas describes the way in which God knows other things. Aquinas explicitly states that a knower may know the object *x* either in the knower himself or in another thing. God can only know things other from Him *in Himself*. The passage is worth quoting in full:

Now in order to know how God knows things other than Himself, we must consider that a thing is known in two ways: in itself, and in another. A thing is known in itself when it is known by the proper species adequate to the knowable object; as when the eye sees a man through the image of a man. A thing is seen in another through the image of that which contains it; as when a part is seen in the whole by the image of the whole; or when a man is seen in a mirror by the image in the mirror, or by any other mode by which one thing is seen in another. So we say that God sees Himself in Himself, because He sees Himself through His essence; and He sees other things not in themselves, but in Himself; inasmuch as His Essence contains the similitude of things other than Himself.²⁰

Aquinas uses the expression “in seipso” to refer to God’s mode of cognition, but the context makes it clear that God knows things other than Himself “in Himself”. In this sense, whenever Aquinas talks about God’s knowledge of *x* qua *x* or of *x* in its own being, he means that God knows *x* in His own absolute Essence qua *x* and not qua effect of causes [c1, c2, ... cn]. In other passages, like the ones discussed by Costa, Aquinas omits the qualification according to which God knows whatever He knows *in Himself* and not in any other means, but the above text suggests that such clause is always implicitly present.

III. CONCLUSION

Aquinas distinguishes the ways in which God may know a future contingent event in the passages discussed by Costa in his paper. God knows it either

- (i) in its own causes;
- (ii) in Himself as something *present* to Him.

Costa implies that for Aquinas God knows the future contingent event “in itself” (“in seipso”) and this is tantamount to say that the future contingent

19 Cf. also *Sent.* Lib. I, dist. 35, a. 2; *De Ver.* q. 2, a. 3; *Contra Gent.* Lib. I, cc. 48-49.

20 *Summa theol.*, Ia, q. 14, a. 5c, translation by the English Dominicans, slightly modified.

entities involved in said event exist timelessly. I suspect that Costa might have understood the passages in this way in an effort to explain the distinction between the above two modes of cognition (i and ii). In fact, since the causes of x ultimately include God, who is the cause of everything, if God were to know x in its causes (i.e., in Himself *qua* First Cause) and in Himself *qua* something that is *present* to Him, Aquinas would have not drawn a proper distinction between the two modes of cognition. Aquinas, however, is only drawing a distinction of reason in God's way of knowing things inasmuch as God's knowledge is absolutely simple. If the texts are understood in this way, (i) refers to God knowledge of x by knowing all the causes of x , whereas (ii) refers to God knowing x without any mediation as x is actual to Him from all eternity.²¹ In conclusion, it seems to me that it is more historically accurate to present Aquinas as a philosopher who in general maintained that only presently located entities actually exist even though he also admitted that one Entity, i.e. God, timelessly exists.

Future contingent events *are true* in the present, they do not *exist* in the present.

One could obviously object that from the truth of the predicative link "S-is-P" it seems reasonable to infer that both S and P exist. Things, however, are not so simple when we deal with future contingents. Suppose that it is true to state that

- (i) Louis XIX will be king of France.²²

This does not entail that the future king Louis XIX is already alive, nor that he *exists now* in in God's sight.²³ It rather means that God *will now* that at a certain future time t_f there will be a man called Louis XIX and that this man

21 Aquinas talks about the "being" of non-existent things that God knows (cf. *Sent.*, Lib. 1, d. 38, q. 1, a. 5), but parallel passages demonstrate that this "esse" is nothing but the Being of the Divine Essence (cf. e.g. *Contra Gent.* Lib. I, c. 66: "Et tamen esse quodcumque rei Deus cognoscit per essentiam suam. Nam sua essentia est repraesentabilis per multa quae non sunt nec erunt nec fuerunt. Ipsa etiam est similitudo virtutis cuiuslibet causae, secundum quam praeexistunt effectus in causis. Esse etiam cuiuslibet rei quod habet in seipsa, est ab ea exemplariter deductum").

22 I avoid the traditional example of the sea battle in order to have a sentence with a grammatical subject and a grammatical predicate.

23 C. Martin's account of the relationship between "esse ut verum" and actual existence is consistent with my interpretation (cf. Martin, "A Distinction between different Notions of Existence in the Writings of St Thomas Aquinas, and its Use to Distinguish Logic from Metaphysics", 116).

will be king of France. Since God's Will is always fulfilled,²⁴ it is enough for God to will that Louis XIX will be at some future time king of France for (i) to have a truth-value at the present instant of time, regardless of the actual existence of its subject or predicate.²⁵

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24 Cf. *Summa theol.* Ia, q. 19, a. 6.

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