

AQUINAS ON THE EXISTENCE OF THE FUTURE: A RESPONSE TO GILI

DAMIANO COSTA
UNIVERSITÀ DELLA SVIZZERA ITALIANA

Abstract. I defend my paper “Aquinas, Geach, and Existence”¹ against objections from Luca Gili, who argued that, according to Aquinas, future contingents do not enjoy genuine existence but exist in God’s mind only.

I. INTRODUCTION

In my “Aquinas, Geach, and Existence”, I argued that, according to Aquinas,

- (1) God knows future contingents in themselves;
- (2) If something is known in itself, it exists in some way; and therefore
- (3) Future contingents exist in some way.

What kind of existence do future contingents enjoy? In my original paper, I argued that they enjoy what Aquinas calls *esse ut actus essendi*. This kind of existence — let us call it ‘genuine existence’ — characterizes positive, extra-mental, and relatively fundamental entities². Accordingly, I said that conclusion (3) implies a form of eternalism.³

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

2 See for example Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum Super Sententiis*, ed. Roberto Busa (Parma, 1856) d. 37, q. 1, a. 2, ad 3 and *In V Metaph.* 9. I say ‘relatively’ for there is of course a sense in which even substances, which are the most fundamental creatures, depend on God for their existence.

3 I did so with two provisos. First, this conclusion might be at odds with other texts which seem to betray more presentist leanings. Second, the conclusion concerns the future and not the past. The question of whether Aquinas was an eternalist has already been discussed in William L. Craig, “Was Thomas Aquinas a B-Theorist of Time?”, *New Scholasticism* 59, no. 4 (1985); Harm

Luca Gili agrees with (1)-(3) above but disagrees on the kind of existence that future contingents enjoy. While I argued that they enjoy genuine existence, Gili argues that they enjoy being as true (*esse ut verum*). Saying that something enjoys being as true simply means that there is something which is true of it⁴. So, for example, if my future grandson enjoys being as true, this means that there is something that is true of him, such as, for example, that he will be born. Crucially, according to Aquinas, being as true does not imply genuine existence. Indeed, for example, a privation such as blindness enjoys being as true—for it is true that someone is blind—but does not enjoy genuine existence. For blindness, Aquinas maintains, is no positive or extramental entity⁵.

If Gili's reading is correct, the conclusion that Aquinas is committed to eternalism would clearly be jeopardized. For, arguably, a given theory can properly be defined eternalist only if it affirms the extramental existence of past and future. But Gili claims that, according to Aquinas, past and future entities exist in God's mind *only*, insofar as "He decided *ab aeterno* to create them".

In my original paper, I had not discussed the hypothesis that the being of future contingents might be being as true. This hypothesis is not without appeal, for it would fit more easily with the aforementioned passages in which Aquinas seems to have more presentist leanings. So, it is a hypothesis that is definitely worth investigating. Still, in its present state, I take the hypothesis to remain substantially ungrounded. The reasons that Gili offers in support of it are inconclusive. Not only are they inconclusive; sometimes they even backfire and offer support for a reading according to which future contingents enjoy genuine existence. Or so I will argue in the rest of this response.

Goris, *Free Creatures of an Eternal God: Thomas Aquinas on God's Infallible Foreknowledge and Irresistible Will* (Thomas Instituut te Utrecht, 1997); Brian Leftow, "Aquinas on Time and Eternity", *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (1990); Delmas Lewis, "Eternity, Time and Timelessness", *Faith and Philosophy* 5, no. 1 (1988); John Marenbon, *Le Temps, l'Éternité et la Prescience de Boèce à Thomas d'Aquin* (Vrin, 2005); Brian J. Shanley, "Eternal Knowledge of the Temporal in Aquinas", *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (1997).

4 See for example *In IV Metaph.* I, 4 «when we ask if man is an animal, the answer is that he is, by which it is meant that this proposition is true». See also *De ente*, cap. 1. On the interpretation of *esse ut verum* see Anthony Kenny, *Aquinas on Being* (Clarendon Press, 2002).

5 See for example Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, tr. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, second and revised edition (Oates and Washbourne, 1920) I, q. 48, a. 2, ad 2; *In II Sent.*, d. 34, q. 1, a. 1.

Gili produces two⁶ texts which he takes either to go against my reading of Aquinas, or to offer support to his. I will discuss each of them in turn. For reasons of space, I do not aim at offering a definitive interpretation of these two texts. My aim here is simply to undermine Gili's reading and show how the texts can be taken to backfire against it.

II. WHETHER GOD KNOWS NON-BEINGS

The first text, taken from the *Summa Theologiae*, reads:

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 (...). 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 (...).⁷

Gili takes this text to go against my reading of Aquinas. He writes that here “Future and past events — and the beings involved in them — are explicitly included among non-beings”. Gili does not make his line of reasoning explicit. Clearly enough, much depends on the correct interpretation of “non-being”. For sure, “non-being” cannot mean “enjoying no form of being whatsoever”. This would not only backfire against Gili's interpretation but is also excluded by Aquinas himself. Indeed, Aquinas says that such non-beings are known by God insofar as they *are* in some way (*Deum scit omnia quaecumque sunt quocumque modo*). Maybe Gili is here assuming that “non-being” is equivalent to “non-genuinely existing”. This would explain why he takes this text to offer evidence against my reading. However, Aquinas does not say here that “non-being” is equivalent to “non-genuinely existing”. Moreover, this is hardly the only possible interpretation of what Aquinas means here by “non-being”.

6 A third text is presented by Luca Gili, “Aquinas on Predication and Future Contingents: A Reply to Costa”, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 12, no. 3 (2020) (*S. Th.* I, q. 14, a. 5) in order to show that, according to Aquinas, God can know something without its having to exist independently of God. I do not discuss that text here, for it is supposed neither to offer evidence against my interpretation nor to provide support for Gili's.

7 *S. Th.* Ia, q. 14, a. 9c, translation by the English Dominicans produced by Gili.

In what follows, I shall present an interpretation which sticks more closely to what Aquinas himself explicitly says about “non-being” and then discuss whether, if read in light of this interpretation, the text produced by Gili leads to a denial of eternalism. The interpretation consists of four steps. First, Aquinas here makes a distinction between two categories of things that God knows, viz. those that are absolutely (*simpliciter*), and those that are not absolutely, but still are. Second, Aquinas tells us how we should make sense of this distinction. To be absolutely is to be actual (*simpliciter enim sunt, quae actu sunt*), whereas things that are, but are not absolutely, are in potency (*in potentia*). Third, past and future entities do not fall into the category of things that are absolutely, but rather into the other category. For when introducing past and future, he says “a certain difference is to be noted in the consideration of those things that are *not actual*”. Fourth, putting points two and three together, we can conclude that past and future entities are not actual, but are in potency.

While this reading is plausible, its conclusion falls short of leading to a denial of eternalism. Aquinas implies that past and future entities are not actual. Admittedly, there is a sense in which an eternalist is bound to affirm that past and future entities *are* actual. It is the tenseless sense. When saying tenselessly that something is actual, we are not thereby implying that that thing is actual at any particular time. However, there is also a sense in which an eternalist can, and in fact is bound to, *deny* that past and future entities are actual. It is the presently tensed sense. When attributing presently tensed actuality to something — when saying for example that it “is now actual” — we are implying that that thing is in act at a particular time (in this case, the time of utterance). The interpretation given above might lead to a denial of eternalism only if actuality is here intended in the tenseless sense. However, I see no reasons to favour the tenseless reading over the tensed one⁸ (quite on the contrary, as we are about to see, the rest of the text offers evidence in favour of an eternalist reading). Therefore, I take the text not to imply a denial of eternalism.

8 Aquinas makes explicit use of the tensed notion towards the end of the text — “though some of them may not be in act now, still they were, or they will be”. However, admittedly, he remains ambiguous when he affirms that past and future entities are not actual.

I am now going to argue that, somehow surprisingly, the rest of the *respondeo* from which the text has been taken actually *supports* an eternalistic reading of Aquinas. Here is the relevant text:

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.⁹

Here, Aquinas distinguishes between two kinds of things that are not actual, viz. those that are not actual now but were or will be, that is, *non-present things*, and those that are not, nor will be, nor were, actual, and yet are in the power of something, that is, *merely possible things*. Aquinas says that God knows both, but in different ways. Of merely possible things, God has knowledge of simple intelligence (*scientia simplicis intelligentiae*), whereas of non-present things, He has knowledge of vision (*scientia visionis*). What distinguishes these two kinds of knowledge? Clearly enough, that of vision is a metaphor, for God does not come to know non-present things through visual perception. So, what characterizes knowledge of vision? Aquinas says that knowledge of vision “is so called because the things we see around us have distinct being outside the seer”. The seer being the epistemic agent, here it is God. Hence, Aquinas is saying that non-present things have distinct being outside of God.

This result is clearly at odds with Gili's conclusion that the being of future contingents is merely being as true, so that future contingents exist in God's mind only. For, this would make future contingents lack “a distinct being outside the seer”. Instead, it suggests an eternalist reading of Aquinas, one according to which future contingents do enjoy extramental and relatively fundamental existence — traits that characterize what we have called ‘genuine existence’.

9 S. *Th.*, I, q. 14, a. 9c, translation by the English Dominicans produced by Gili.

II. WHETHER GOD KNOWS CONTINGENT BEINGS

The second text is taken from the *Commentary on the Sentences*:

One should therefore know that before a thing is, it does not have being but in its causes. But there are some causes from which the effect follows necessarily and which cannot be prevented and in those causes the caused has certain and determinate being, so that it can be known demonstratively, such as for example the rising of the sun, or an eclipse, and other similar cases. Moreover, there are some causes from which the effect follows in most cases but in some cases fails to follow. In the case of such causes, the future effects do not have absolute certitude, but only a relative one, insofar as the causes are more determined towards one effect instead of another. Hence, from these causes it is possible to acquire a conjectural knowledge of future things, which is going to be more certain, the more determinate towards a single effect the causes are; this is the knowledge of the physician about health and future death, and the judgement of the astrologist about future winds and rains. But there are other causes that are open to both outcomes and, in the case of these causes, future effects have no certitude or determination; hence, contingents which are open to both outcomes cannot in any way be known from their causes. However, when they are already realized in nature, then they have in themselves determinate being; and hence, when they are actual they are known with certitude, as much as it is clear in the case of someone seeing Socrates running, for it is necessary that Socrates runs when he runs, and of this it is possible to have sure knowledge. I say, then, that the divine intellect sees from eternity each of the contingents, not only insofar as it is in its causes, but also insofar as it is in its own being. For, since, while the thing exists, God sees the thing itself as it is in its own determinate being, He would know the thing after it is in a different way than before it comes to being; and so, something would be added to His cognition by the course of events. It is also clear that, from eternity, God has seen not only His order towards the thing, and that the thing would be future in virtue of His authority, but He also has seen the being itself of the thing.¹⁰

Gili comments:

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

10 *In I Sent.*, d. 38, q. 1, a. 5c, translation mine (Gili quotes the Latin text only).

opinion, the “being” cannot but be the “is” that connects the predicates to their suppositum.

Hence, Gili takes this text to offer evidence both against my reading and in favour of his reading. Against my reading, for Aquinas says that before a thing is, it does not have being but in its causes. And, presumably, Gili expects an eternalist to claim that before a thing is (that is, when that thing is future), it *has* being outside its causes. Moreover, Gili takes this text to offer evidence in favour of his interpretation, for he says that the being of future entities cannot but be the ‘is’ that connects the predicates to their suppositum, that is, being as true.

I take both points to be ultimately unpersuasive. I shall begin with the second one. Aquinas says that “before a thing is, it does not have being but in its causes”. Gili claims that this being ‘cannot but be’ being as true. Hence, he seems to proceed by exclusion. In order to see what he is excluding, we should first answer the question: how many senses of ‘is’ does Aquinas recognize? This is an old question that remains vexed to this very day¹¹. Still, Gili himself refers to a passage of Aquinas’ *In VI Metaph.* in which Aquinas, following in the footsteps of Aristotle, distinguishes four options.

- (A) The ‘is’ of accidental predication (*esse accidentale*);
- (B) The ‘is’ of categorial predication (which, at least in the case of substances, corresponds to *esse ut actus essendi*, that is, genuine existence);
- (C) The ‘is’ of being as true (*esse ut verum*);
- (D) The ‘is’ that indicates potentiality (*esse potentiale*) and actuality.

Gili says that the being that future entities have before being ‘cannot be but’ being as true, i.e. (C). Still, the most straightforward option seems to me to be being as potentiality, i.e. (D). Indeed, according to Aquinas, an effect exists in its causes insofar as it is in potency in them or it is in their power¹².

11 For a recent discussion, see for example Giovanni Ventimiglia, “Aquinas on Being: One, Two or Three Senses of Being?”, *Quaestio* 18 (2018).

12 See Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputate De Malo* (Textum Taurini 1953 Editum, 1953), q. 16 a. 7c.

On behalf of Gili, one might make the following conjecture. Aquinas says that future entities exist in their causes. Now, God certainly is the ultimate cause of all future things. So, in the end, saying that a future thing exists in its causes would be tantamount to saying that it exists in God. However, I take this possible line of defence to be incomplete and unpersuasive. Incomplete, insofar as even if future entities exist in God, they would exist in Him *as in their cause*. Hence, the text would lead us to conclude, once again, that they have being as potentiality (i.e. D), rather than being as true (i.e. C). Unpersuasive, because the context of the *responsio* makes it clear that here, when talking about the causes of future things, Aquinas is considering natural causes only.

Hence, I conclude that the text does not offer evidence in favour of Gili's reading. But does it offer at least evidence against my reading? Once again, I do not think so. The crucial passage is

(I) Before a thing is, it does not have being but in its causes.

Gili takes this claim to be incompatible with eternalism. I disagree. I see at least two possible readings of (I). Unpacking the two readings requires us to introduce four elements¹³. First, we have to introduce a distinction between the 'existence of ontology' and 'temporal existence'. One thing is to say that something exists, regardless of when it does — this is what I have called the 'existence of ontology' — quite another thing is to say that something exists now, or that it exists at a certain time — this is what I have called 'temporal existence'. While claims concerning the latter inform us about the temporal position, so to speak, of something (i.e. about the time at which an entity can be found), claims concerning the former inform us about the fact that something is part of our unrestricted ontological catalogue, no matter the time at which the thing exists, if there is one. Second, we have to introduce the idea that something might be in the unrestricted ontological catalogue relative to a time — call this 'relative and unrestricted existence'. To illustrate, a presentist typically believes that what is in the unrestricted ontological catalogue changes over time. On the other hand, an eternalist either believes that the unrestricted ontological catalogue is the same relative to all times, or that the very idea of relativizing it to times should be rejected. Third,

13 More on the first three elements in Fabrice Correia and Sven Rosenkranz, "Temporal Existence and Temporal Location", *Philosophical Studies* 177, no. 7 (2020).

relative and unrestricted existence should not be confused with temporal existence. An eternalist might believe that the unrestricted ontological catalogue is the same relative to all times, and hence that something falls in it relative to all times. However, crucially, this does not mean that that thing can be found at all times. For, as we have explained above, an eternalist, while believing that the future exists (existence of ontology as well as relative unrestricted existence), does not believe that the future exists now (temporal existence). Fourth, if being is not univocal, we might have to break down each of these senses of existence into further and more specific ones. For example, the existence of ontology might be either genuine existence, or being as true, or as potency, and so on. With these elements in place, we can spell out the two ways in which (I) might be read¹⁴. According to the first reading, (I) concerns relative and unrestricted existence. Let t be a time prior to the time at which x comes into existence. (I) would be the claim that:

- (I-a) Relative to t , x is not part of the ontological catalogue of things that have genuine existence, but only of those things that have existence in potency.

This first reading is incompatible with eternalism. For an eternalist would arguably want to either claim that the catalogue of what enjoys genuine existence is the same over time or reject the very idea of relativizing the ontological catalogue to times. However, there is a second and simpler possible reading of (I). According to this second reading, (I) concerns temporal existence. It would thus amount to the claim that:

- (I-b) x cannot be found at t but exists in potency *at that time*.

When read in this second way, claim (I) is compatible with eternalism. For, once again, an eternalist is not bound to claim that future entities exist in the present, or that, more generally, a thing can be found at times prior to the ones at which it starts to exist. Which of the two readings is the correct one? Once again, I see no direct reasons to prefer one reading over the other. Hence, I do not take claim (I) to imply a clear denial of eternalism. (Still,

14 In principle there might be other readings of (I) that can be processed in light of the four elements presented above, but these are the two most plausible ones. Discussing each of them is impossible in the short space allowed for this discussion note. Nor would it be very useful, I suspect, for the two readings presented here seem to me to be the most plausible ones.

there is circumstantial evidence that the correct reading is the one that is compatible with eternalism, as I shall now explain.)

Far from offering straightforward evidence *against* the eternalist reading, this text, too, seems to offer evidence *in favour* of it. Indeed, towards the end of the responsio, Aquinas seems once again to claim that future entities enjoy genuine existence, and that their being cannot be reduced to God's simple will. Indeed, Aquinas writes:

God has seen not only His order towards the thing, and that the thing would be future in virtue of His authority, but He also has seen the being itself of the thing.

Here, when talking about God's knowledge of future entities, Aquinas insists that God knows them *not only* by seeing "His order towards the thing, and that the thing would be future in virtue of His authority". While the phrasing is admittedly obscure, the overall meaning seems to be clear. God knows future entities, but not only insofar as he intends to create them or to sustain them into being. So, against Gili's reading, it cannot be the case that past and future entities exist only insofar as God "decided *ab aeterno* to create them". Rather, Aquinas insists, God sees the "being itself of the thing" (*ipsum esse rei*), which, contrasting with God's simple intention of creating it, must be, or at least must imply, the existence of that thing outside God.¹⁵

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aquinas, Thomas. 1856. *Scriptum Super Sententiis*. Edited by Roberto Busa. Parma: —. 1920. *Summa theologiae*, tr. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, second and revised edition. London: Oates and Washbourne. <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/>.
- . 1953. *Quaestiones Disputate De Malo*. Textum Taurini 1953 Editum.
- Correia, Fabrice, and Sven Rosenkranz. 2020. "Temporal Existence and Temporal Location". *Philosophical Studies* 177, no. 7: 1999–2011. doi:10.1007/s11098-019-01295-z.
- Costa, Damiano. 2019. "Aquinas, Geach, and existence". *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11, no. 3: 175–95. doi:10.24204/ejpr.v11i3.2837.

15 I am grateful to David Anzalone and Paolo Natali for their comments and suggestions.

- Craig, William L. 1985. "Was Thomas Aquinas a B-Theorist of Time?". *New Scholasticism* 59, no. 4: 475–83. doi:10.5840/newscholas19855946.
- Gili, Luca. 2020. "Aquinas on Predication and Future Contingents: A Reply to Costa". *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 12, no. 3. doi:10.24204/ejpr.v11i3.2837
- Goris, Harm. 1997. *Free Creatures of an Eternal God: Thomas Aquinas on God's Infallible Foreknowledge and Irresistible Will*. Nijmegen: Thomas Instituut te Utrecht.
- Kenny, Anthony. 2002. *Aquinas on Being*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Leftow, Brian. 1990. "Aquinas on Time and Eternity". *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 64, no. 3: 387–99. doi:10.5840/acpq199064315.
- Lewis, Delmas. 1988. "Eternity, Time and Timelessness". *Faith and Philosophy* 5, no. 1: 72–86. doi:10.5840/faithphil1988514.
- Marenbon, John. 2005. *Le Temps, l'Éternité et la Prescience de Boèce à Thomas d'Aquin*. Paris: Vrin.
- Shanley, Brian J. 1997. "Eternal Knowledge of the Temporal in Aquinas". *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 71, no. 2: 197–224. doi:10.5840/acpq199771244.
- Ventimiglia, Giovanni. 2018. "Aquinas on Being: One, Two or Three Senses of Being?". *Quaestio* 18: 509–38. doi:10.1484/J.QUAESTIO.5.118132.