Thomas Aquinas and the First Debates on Essence and Existence

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In the years following Thomas Aquinas’ death, the theory of the real distinction between essence and existence (*esse*) became a topic of great controversy. Giles of Rome made the real distinction a cornerstone of his metaphysics, but his theory drew sharp criticisms from Henry of Ghent and Godfrey of Fontaines, each of whom defended a non-real distinction between a creature’s essence and its existence. Other thinkers, such as James of Viterbo in the 1290s, agreed with Giles’ claim that the doctrine of creation requires a real distinction between essence and *esse*, but understood this to be a distinction not between essence and existential act, but rather one that remained in the order of essence. This paper examines how Thomas Aquinas might have reacted to these first debates on essence and existence. I focus on two sets of issues. First, to what extent would Thomas have endorsed Giles of Rome’s own version of the real distinction? Would Thomas have approved of Giles’ arguments to establish this distinction? Are there significant differences in the way these two thinkers conceptualized essence and existence? If so, what sorts of philosophical and historical considerations might account for the differences in their respective theories? Second, how might Thomas have responded to the argumentation brought forward by Henry and Godfrey against the real distinction? To what extent is Thomas’ own theory vulnerable to their criticisms? How might Thomas have reacted to James’ somewhat idiosyncratic version of the real distinction? Is substance-accident composition sufficient to preserve the created character of finite being, as James seems to think? In examining these issues the paper highlights some of the remarkable differences between Aquinas’ metaphysical principles and those of his contemporaries.