Aquinas’ Essentialism as a Key to His Doctrine of Being
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Gilson and Fabro, the greatest Aquinas scholars of the last century, have each admitted that Aquinas mounts no demonstrative proof of the real distinction between essence and esse (act of being). They conclude, for example – as is now widely accepted – that most of Aquinas’ early Avicennian arguments on behalf of “the real distinction” fail. I show that early Aquinas defends, in a way often overlooked, another crucial real distinction: between individual substance and essence. If such a distinction holds, then each of the arguments for the famous “real distinction,” including in the early works, readily succeeds. I consider the sort of argument that Aquinas has for the essence-supposit distinction, and what the distinction involves. I suggest that, as important as it has been to see Aquinas as an “existentialist,” it is also important to see him as an essentialist, that is, to appreciate his commitment to real essences as grounding our semantics, our epistemology, and, indeed, our metaphysics. Given developments in contemporary analytic philosophy, this conclusion is perhaps not as hard to swallow as it once was.