Language and Thought in Aquinas: From the Semantics of Being to the Epistemology of Being
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In De pot. 7.2 ad 7, Aquinas remarks that “the mode of signification in the terms we impose on things follows on our mode of understanding.” The notions of modes of signification (modi significandi) and modes of understanding (modi intelligendi) are more often associated with the Modistae, but they have in fact a central role in Aquinas’ theory of language. Our terms not only signify things in the world, they also signify those things in a certain mode. This mode of signification is grounded in our modes of understanding the things signified by our terms. Thus, for Aquinas the relation between language and world is always mediated by thought. If our modes of signification follow on our modes of understanding, then an analysis of the mode of signification of a term provides an insight into our mode of understanding what is signified by that term. Following this line of thought, I analyze the modes of signification of the term ‘esse’ with a view to determining what those modes of signification tell us about our modes of understanding esse. Traditionally, esse is said to be signified in two different modes by the terms ‘esse’ and ‘ens’; ‘esse’ signifies esse in the abstract, ‘ens’ signifies esse in the concrete. I show that for Aquinas the term ‘esse’ not only has an abstract mode of signification but can also have a concrete mode of signification which is different from the concrete mode of ‘ens’. The term ‘ens’ signifies esse as subsistent and as a subject, while ‘esse’ in its concrete mode signifies esse as inherent in a subject. Finally, I discuss the two possible modes of understanding esse that grounds the two modes of signification of ‘esse’ distinguished by Aquinas and the implications of these modes of understanding for the traditional doctrine of the judgment of esse.