This paper will bring into focus an issue that has been germinating in published discussions among major Thomistic interpreters in recent decades, namely, whether Aquinas distinguishes, at least implicitly, between *esse* as act and *esse* as fact. The interpreters tend to present the issue in a way that might make it seem incidental to greater concerns, but it is of crucial importance to understanding what they mean, and what Aquinas means, by *esse*. I introduce the issue with three quotations, the first by Cornelio Fabro:

... [T]he authentic notion of Thomistic participation calls for distinguishing *esse* as act not only from essence which is its potency, but also from existence which is the fact of being and hence a “result” rather than a metaphysical principle. (“The Intensive Hermeneutics of Thomistic Philosophy: The Notion of Participation,” *Review of Metaphysics* 27 [1974]: 470)

The second is by Joseph Owens:

Metaphysical therapy shows . . . that the existence so important for the Thomistic metaphysician and conceptualized by him as actuality is the existence conceptualized in “the fact” that something exists. But Fabro concludes that Thomistic participation distinguishes existence as actuality from its result, the existence as fact . . . . The texts of Aquinas seem rather to make what is grasped through judgment basic, allowing the existence thereby known to be conceptualized subsequently as the actuality of an essence. Where the notion of resulting is introduced in this context, the existence is regarded as resulting from the principles of the thing’s essence, and as actuality seems in no way distinguished from the fact that the thing exists. (“Aquinas on Knowing Existence,” *Review of Metaphysics* 29 [1976]: 689)

The third is by John Wippel:

Some such as Joseph Owens question the validity of seeing this distinction between *esse* as facticity and *esse* as intrinsic *actus essendi* in Thomas . . . . [I]t seems to me that such a distinction is indeed present in Thomas’s writings, although it is sometimes difficult to determine in which sense he is using *esse*. (“Truth in Thomas Aquinas, Part II,” *Review of Metaphysics* 43 [1990]: 552, n.20)

All three interpreters agree that *esse* and essence are distinguished as two principles of a peculiar kind, namely, metaphysical or entitative principles. Fabro introduces the further suggestion that *esse* as principle must be distinguished twice: not only from (1) the essence that is its fellow-principle, but also from (2) the “result” of *esse* as principle,
namely, “existence which is the fact of being.” It is the requirement of this second
distinction that Owens denies and that Wippel reasserts (while describing the “result” as
“esse as facticity”). Is this second distinction, then, at least implicitly present in, or is it
alien to, Aquinas’s thought?

The paper will attempt to clarify this question of interpretation by discussing four
central terms of the dispute, namely, principle, act, result, and fact. Consideration will be
given to Thomistic texts, interpreters’ comments, comparison of Latin and English
philosophical vocabulary, and the special use of language in metaphysics.