

THOMAS AQUINAS AGAINST THE SCOTISTS  
AND PLATONISTS. THE DEFINITION OF *ENS*:  
CAJETANO, ZIMARA, PERERIO 1495–1576\*

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Thomas Aquinas is usually studied as a metaphysician, this is not the reading given to him by three Renaissance philosophers. At the turn of the sixteenth century there were at least two schools of Thomists, one influenced by Avicenna and Scotus, and the other influenced by Averroes, a reading of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas himself. The discussion below traces how the interpretation of Thomas' *De ente et essentia* was changed from being a text for metaphysics to one used for physics. One of the meanings of *ens*—being—was as a term that was coterminous with the object. As a result, the debate over the first thing thought or the *De primo cognito* debate centered around the meaning for the term *ens*, the following essay demonstrates how it moved from metaphysics to physics.

Between 1495 and 1560 Thomas Aquinas' *De ente et essentia*<sup>1</sup> and his commentary on Aristotle's Physics were read with increasing interest.

\* I would like to thank Antonino Poppi and Charles Lohr for encouraging me to engage in further research into the *De primo cognito* debate. This paper is just a preliminary examination into the formation of the question. Charles Lohr pointed out to me that the *Quaestio de primo cognito* was a topic in metaphysics in the middle ages, thus it appears to be new for this question employed in logic and physics texts. It was during discussions with Eckhard Kessler that I realized how very important the Lohr article was.

<sup>1</sup> I will take as given Aquinas' definition of *ens* by John F. Wippel in 'Metaphysics,' *The Cambridge companion to Aquinas* (ed. N. Kritzman & E. Stump, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 88): "The better interpretation recalls that for Aquinas the notion of being (that which is) is complex, including both the quidditative and existential—essence and existence. Hence both simple apprehension and some judgement of existence seem to be required for us to formulate this primitive notion of being."

One of the central topics discussed was the meaning Thomas attached to the word *ens*. The question was *ens* the first thing thought and if it was, how was it defined? This was formulated into three questions : (1) was it a category or grade above the object?; (2) was it abstracted from the object, as the Platonists defined 'idea?'; (3) or was it coterminous with the object in some way?

The Scotists held that *ens* was the first thing thought while others influenced by the Platonists held that 'idea' was the first thing thought. While these philosophical positions were clearly defined, what the three philosophers, Cajetano, Zimara and Pererio who we will be discussing objected to most was a view taken by some who called themselves Thomists, yet claimed that Avicenna was correct when he wrote that *ens* was the first thing thought.

The first philosopher who was also a theologian of is a Dominican, partly educated in Padua, Thomas de Vio, Cardinal Cajetano.<sup>2</sup> He was a brilliant young student and began teaching in the University of Padua at 25 receiving the Chair of Thomistic Metaphysics at 26. He was ordered to write his commentary on Thomas' *De ente et essentia* in 1495, the object was to dispute against Antonio Trombeta, who held the Chair of Scotist Metaphysics.<sup>3</sup> Trombeta had attacked Thomas' interpretation of the future contingent.

Our second philosopher is a secular philosopher and student of both Cajetano and Pomponazzi. Marc Antonio Zimara gave a lecture at Padua in 1508 named *Questio de primo cognito*.<sup>4</sup> This treatise was read widely, discussed in the commentary on the physics, *De Communibus omnium rerum naturalium principiis & affectionibus* by Pererio and later by Zabarella in his *Opera Logica* where the question assumes a centrally organizing function, as we have stated elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> The last philosopher

<sup>2</sup> For Cajetano (1468–1534), see C.H. Lohr, *Latin Aristotelian Commentaries II*, Florence, 1988, p. 71–73; referred to as *LAC II* and Thomas de Vio Cardinal Cajetano, *Commentary on Being and essence (in De ente et essentia de Thomas Aquinatis)* trans. and intro. by Lottie H. Kendzierski and Francis C. Wade, Mediaeval Philosophical Texts in Translation, no. 14., Milwaukee, Wisc., 1964.

<sup>3</sup> Antonio Trombeta, *Opus doctrine Scoti Patavii in thomistas discussum Sententii*, Venice, 1493.

<sup>4</sup> For Zimara (1475–before 1537): C.H. Lohr, *LAC II*, p. 504–512; Antonio Antonaci, *Ricerche sull'Aristotelismo del Rinascimento, Marcantonio Zimara*, Pubblicazioni dell'istituto di filosofia universita delgi studi Bari, Edirice Salentina, Galatina, 1975, vols 2.

<sup>5</sup> C. Blackwell, 'The Vocabulary for Natural Philosophy, the *de primo cognito* question: a preliminary exploration: Zimara, Toledo, Pereria, Zabarella', in J. Hamesse & M. Fattori (eds.), *Lexiques et glossaires philosophiques de la Renaissance (XIV<sup>e</sup>–XV<sup>e</sup> siècles)*,

to be discussed is a Spanish Jesuit, Benedetto Pererio<sup>6</sup> (1535–1610) from Valencia. He was educated at the Collegio Romano and not only read Zimara's treatise with care but examined it in detail in chapter xv, book three of his commentary on Aristotle's physics *De communibus omnium rerum naturalium principiis & affectionibus*.<sup>7</sup> He then went on to develop an explanation of what Aquinas meant by *ens*.

Why and how did a medieval scholastic topic in metaphysics become transformed into a debate over the meaning of *ens*? This debate narrowed down to the question of whether *ens* was coterminous with an object as well as one's sense perception or a concept in the mind. This is a complex question and some historical background that may help to explain the new interest in Thomas Aquinas and why were his texts so widely used to attack both Scotist and Platonist philosophy. Recent very interesting research by Charles Lohr and Antonino Poppi has suggested why important philosophical discussions took place that utilized topics from the medieval traditions and how, in the 1490's, an attack on Neo-Platonic philosophy began in Padua. In 'The Sixteenth Century Transformation of Aristotelian Natural Philosophy,'<sup>8</sup> Lohr suggested that there were different sources to some of the debates in sixteenth century philosophy than those usually studied. The opposition to Pomponazzi's assertion that it was impossible to prove the immortality of the soul from Aristotelian texts was not made by those afraid of atheism but by those who followed the northern Scholastic-theological philosophical tradition that developed around Paris in the 13th and 14th century. This tradition held that there was nothing true in philosophy that was not true in theology, a belief that suited a curriculum that had been taught as a preparation for the study of theology. All three of the philosophers treated here debated within the philosophical traditions of nominalism and Scotism and used their interpretation of Thomas to develop mediating positions between the two.

But the debate was not just between Scotism, nominalism and various types of Thomism, but as Poppi has pointed out, it was also against

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Actes du seminaire Roma, 3–4 novembre 2000, Brepols, Louvain-La-Neuve, 2003, pp. 287–308.

<sup>6</sup> For Pererio see C.H. Lohr, *LAC II*, pp. 313–320, and Blackwell (*ibid.*).

<sup>7</sup> Benedicto Pererio, *De Communibus omnium rerum naturalium principiis & affectionibus*, libri xv, Andreas Muschius, Venice, 1591, pp. 105–109.

<sup>8</sup> C.H. Lohr, 'The sixteenth century transformation of Aristotelian Philosophy', in E. Kessler & C.H. Lohr & W. Sparr (eds.), *Aristotelismus und Renaissance. In memoriam Charles B. Schmitt*, Wiesbaden, 1988.

Platonism.<sup>9</sup> We know from reading Pererio's commentary on Genesis,<sup>10</sup> that the Dominican Cajetano had been very aware of the theological and philosophical theories of the Florentines, and so disliked Pico's *Heptaplus*, a commentary on the first seven days of the world that interwove the tales of Homer and Zoroaster with the Biblical history of Moses, that he would not even mention the work in his own commentary.<sup>11</sup> Edward Mahoney<sup>12</sup> has engaged in detailed research on Zimara and reveals that he does not actually quote Ficino until late in his career. Whether Zimara actually quoted Ficino or not he certainly strongly questioned the Platonic philosophical method and terminology for use in physics or logic.

One could write a paper on how each philosopher developed the question, but the transformation of the definition of *ens* from one embedded within Thomas' own text into a place within the central argument on the first thing thought would not be appreciated. Thus this a short paper will be an initial summary of the approaches of each philosopher, setting similarities and differences between them. It is hoped it will open up the study of how Thomas Aquinas' writings were employed in logic and physics commentaries.

*CAJETANO'S COMMENTARY ON AQUINAS'  
'DE ENTE ET ESSENTIA'*<sup>13</sup>

Cajetano had marshaled excellent arguments for his treatise by the time he completed the work at twenty-seven. In the space available we can only discuss two of the opening questions. The treatise opened asking: Whether Being is What the Human Intellect knows first? Beginning in this way, Cajetano initiated the approach that would be later developed in Zimara's *Questio de primo cognito*. Cajetano wrote:

<sup>9</sup> A. Poppi, 'Anti-platonismo e flessioni nominalistiche nella dottrina del concetto di Pietro Pomponazzi', in *Saggi sul pensiero inedito de Pietro Pomponazzi*, Antinore, Padova, 1970, pp. 93–116.

<sup>10</sup> C. Blackwell, 'The challenge of Perennial philosophy, accepted and transformed into the history of logic: Benedetto Pererio, Zabarella, and Gassendi', in S. Hutton (ed.), *Platonism and modernity*, to be published in 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Benedetto Pererio, *Comm. on Genesis*.

<sup>12</sup> Edward Mahoney, *Two Aristotelians of the Italian Renaissance, Nicoletto Vernia and Augustino Nipho*, Variorum, Aldershot, 2000, pp. 525–528.

<sup>13</sup> Cajetano, *Commentary on Being*... cf. footnote 2. There is an extensive discussion of Cajetano's definition of *esse* and *essentia* on pp. 1–37.

since what the intellect first conceives is being and essence, as Avicenna says in the *Metaphysica*, we ought first, lest we fall into error through ignorance of them, state for the purpose of disclosing the difficulty they involve, what is meant by the names of Essence and Being, how they are found in different things, and how they are related to logical intentions, namely to genus, species and difference.<sup>14</sup>

Paraphrasing Thomas closely he wrote that when acquiring knowledge, we go from the easy to the more difficult, from the composite, to what is later simple. In this argument *ens* was designated as the composite and *essentia* was the simple and prior the two positions are contradictory.

At this point Cajetano introduced the caveat that *ens* “should not add a grade to any of its subjects of predication, which is not the opinion of Avicenna, Alfarabi, Algazel.”<sup>15</sup> Importantly Cajetano then criticizes Thomas’ explication of the question, pointing out that Thomas had not been clear on the subject.<sup>16</sup> Cajetano tried to solve the problem not with an analysis of the argument, but by giving *ens* a grammatical definition to tighten the argument by writing that *ens* taken as a noun is *esse actualis existentiae*, it is the first thing known. This first thing known, this *ens*, was confused and initial knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

In *Questio II*, ‘Whether Being and Essence Signify the Categories or Their Natures immediately or mediately,’ Cajetano began this section criticizing Scotus’s view in the *Sentences* that an a priori reality could be abstracted from similar things and this made it prior to all. Cajetano answers that being, or that abstract reality does not have nor does it signify a reality prior to categories.<sup>18</sup> This was because, as he stated in Question one, the term being is not a grade or level of thought. Being, he writes, and its attributes are in any grade and undivided. This view is completely opposed not only to Scotist definitions of being but Platonic views of reality.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* : 43.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* : 7.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* : 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* : 44–48.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* : 67. This is an argument Cajetano admits comes from Averroes commentary on *Metaphysics X*, com. 8 where Averroise says that the term being signifies what is signified in the category of substance, quantity and quality in the first signification without any medium or mediation of any common factor.

MARCANTONIO ZIMARA,  
 'QUESTIO DE PRIMO COGNITO', 1508<sup>19</sup>

To place Zimara's treatise it is useful to look at its date. He wrote his *Quaestio de primo cognito* four years after that his teacher Pomponazzi wrote his *Quaestio de speciebus intelligibilibus* 1504,<sup>20</sup> a work that denied that species were the first thing thought in the mind. Following Pomponazzi's secular tradition of philosophy, Zimara took the debate on the meaning of *ens* in Aquinas of the theological context and placed it into the curriculum of the Paduan medical school.

The treatise *De primo cognito*<sup>21</sup> was short well organized and only ten folio pages long. He began with the problem itself, then listed the discussion by setting out the opinions of those he calls famous philosophers and finally concluded with, he writes, his own opinion that he believes to be true.<sup>22</sup>

Zimara asked the question whether the universal was more known, the most universal, or the less universal. This question first enters Zimara's work in his comments on Averroes's commentary on Aristotle's Physics<sup>23</sup> where he asks if *ens* is the first thought in Physics, and if was, what kind of thought was it? He admitted that it was a question with many difficulties. "One can see where subtle doctor disagreed with beatific doctor and where it was difficult to see the truth, but I wish to show the truth in this material as much as it is possible for me."<sup>24</sup> By placing *ens* as a primary question in the physics he demotes metaphysics and concludes that it was clearly false that metaphysics was prior to the senses and that metaphysics preceded all of the sciences.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>19</sup> The following edition was used: Marcantonio Zimara, *Questio de primo cognito, Eiusdemque Solutiones contradictionum in dictis Averrois, in quibus eam solertiam internosces, ut eas ne parva quidem labes contaminet*, Lyon, 1442.

<sup>20</sup> This text is printed for the first time in Poppi (1970).

<sup>21</sup> It was printed at least six times: Venice, 1508, 1516, 1550, 1560, and 1562, 1573 and two times in Lyon, 1530 and 1542, and widely collected in Germany.

<sup>22</sup> Marc Antonio Zimara, *De primo cognito*, Lyon, 1542: "In ista questione difficilima ita procedam, primo exponam titulum questionis. Secunduo ponam opinionones famosas [...]. Et prostremo ponam opinionem quam credo veram esse."

<sup>23</sup> Aristotle *Libri physicorum octo*, Louvain, 1563, proemium, fol. 2-4.

<sup>24</sup> *Quaestio, op.cit.*: "Dico quod ista questio est multum difficilis, quia ubi subtilis doctor discrepat a beato doctore, difficile est videre veritate, conabor tamen ostendere veritatem in hac material quantum mihi possibile fuerit." 9, r.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* fol 7v.

Zimara then sets out the contradictions in Thomas who on the one hand wrote that the most universal is the most difficult to know.<sup>26</sup> But this presents problems for Zimara, and he was forced to redefine terms on to make his treatise develop in the way he wished. Because like Cajetano, Zimara notes that in his commentary on the first book of the Physics that Thomas says quite the opposite: that the most universal is the most noted.<sup>27</sup> Zimara then sets out to redefine the universal into that which is not complex. He justifies this definition by quoting Aristotle that this imperfect first thought is like nature, proceeding from the imperfect to perfect knowledge. If the most universal was the first thought, it is not complex. He ends this part of the treatise with a paraphrase of Averroes on the physics,

If we who wish to know what is the first cognition, in confused cognition one must turn to sense. For it seems to me that this is the fundamental principle of Averroes in his proemium of the first physics was that the first known was confused, and that the singular can be identified through the confused, which though not the principle of scientia, is however the principle of looking into universals, which in turn is the principles of the arts and sciences.<sup>28</sup>

#### *BENEDETTO PERERIO: THOMAS' DEFINITION OF ENS GOES INTO THE MAINSTREAM*

Benedetto Pererio<sup>29</sup> is the best known of the three: his import as a philosopher is appreciated by Galileo scholars, his fights over the position of mathematics with Clavius detailed by historians of mathematics and read by those interested in new structures of Renaissance thought, like Charles Lohr. Pererio was read in England by John Case at Ox-

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* fol. 6v: "Ista responsio non est vera, nec est de intentione sancti Thome [...]."

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* fol. 7v, 8r: "Similiter illud non est de intentione sancti Thomae. Nam in praemio metaphysicae in lectione secunda super illo passu philosophi universalia sunt difficillima ad cognoscendum dubitat contra philosophum: quia ut inquit videtur contradicere sibi philosophus in primo Physicorum, text. com. 3 & 4. ubi oppositum videtur tenere videlicet, quod universalia sunt nobis primo nota."

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* fol. 8r.

<sup>29</sup> He studied at the Roman College of the Jesuits 1553–1556, teaching between 1556–1610. He taught first of *litterae humaniores* 1556–1558, and then in 1558–1567 was professor of philosophy. Between 1567–1610 he was professor of theology.

ford, quoted by Francis Bacon<sup>30</sup> and printed in Germany until 1647. Like many Jesuits few of his writings were published — only four of the 34 works listed by Lohr were printed.<sup>31</sup> Pererio was extremely well read, he studied not only Zimara but Pomponazzi and Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, and Plotinus. He even became so annoyed at Augustino Steucho's use of Simplicius' interpretation of Aristotle in the *De philosophia Perenni* that he devoted a chapter to criticize him in detail in Book 4, 'Preprehenditur Simplicius qui conatur ostendere, omnes supradictas opiniones veterum Philosophorum versa esse at que inter se consentientes' of *De communibus omnium rerum naturalium principiis & affectionibus*.<sup>32</sup>

Pererio imbeds the *De primo cognito* question in the centre of book three: *De via ordine doctrina Physicae?* If Zimara included the topic of the *De primo cognito*, and Thomas' definition of *ens* into a university oration, Pererio abstracts it even further and imbeds it in the centre of book three: "De via ordine doctrina Physicae?"

Here Pererio first defines what he means by the *De primo cognito* question — the following is a paraphrase of the text:

It is not about what ever thought man had among others, nor is he asking a question in Metaphysics (i.e., he is not asking what is man's very first knowledge of God). Instead he wants to know what is the first sensitive thought of all known to man. Pererio emphasizes that he is not interested in identifying the first clear and distinct thought, but that what he is trying to identify is the rude and confused first thought. It is a type of cognition first noted by man in the very first origins or moments of time. Man has this type of first thought because the intellect of man is not eternal and thus does not have semi eternal thoughts of things — man's thought in the beginning is in various different ways and understands ambiguously.<sup>33</sup>

He wants to know: "what is first noted by this or that man but says that what one man experiences is merely a singular contingent and known by accident."<sup>34</sup>

Because this is a conference on Thomas Aquinas I will skip Pererio's detailed critique of Scotus and his followers and set out his basic

<sup>30</sup> I would like to thank Graham Rees, editor of the new Oxford Edition of Francis Bacon for that information. On Pererio, see P.R. Blum, 'Benedictus Pererius: Renaissance culture at the origins of Jesuit science' and M. Ciliberto 'Pererius e la magia', forthcoming in *Science and Education*.

<sup>31</sup> *LAC II*.

<sup>32</sup> Pererio, *ibid*.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*: 97–101.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*: 100f.



argument attacking—as Cajetano and Zimara—Scotist Thomists’ distortion of Thomas. In Chapter xv “Discutitur opinio Thomistarum; qui colent primo cognito esse ens” he wrote that these Thomists collected evidence that supported their view that *ens* was the most universal and as such was most known to us—Avicenna, notes Pererio—had this point of view, but he lived before Thomas and thus had no authority. Pererio decides to use Thomas’ own arguments against them. He argued against this view in the following way: “if pure potential leads to action, imperfect action comes before perfect action—thus first something is not hot and then becomes hot. This does not happen in reverse.”<sup>35</sup>

Pererio then discusses Zimara’s critique of the false Thomists. Zimara had written that they believed that *ens* was the first thought which, notes Pererio did not please Zimara, as Zimara preferred the opinion of Hervet Natalis, who maintained that when our senses feel solid matter we know this first before the concept of substance. Unlike what Pererio will write, Zimara’s own view was that the first cognition is universal (as he opposes the idea that it could be individual), but it is not substance, but the feeling of solid matter, an encounter with the senses of the body, shape colour, and motion.

Pererio then criticizes these false Thomists himself. Their argument that *ens* is by necessity the first of all things to be discovered by the intellect and they leave the argument at that, incomplete. They did not deal with qualities and wrote that qualities did not have to be discovered even in a confused way before things which are less universal.

After discussing the views of Ockham, Durand, Burley and Gregory of Rimini, Pererio confesses that he prefers the nominalist position that the singular is known first and judges it the most true. He then side steps writing that he will try to improve on the argument by linking the singular to the intellect, an argument we will not follow here.

We will end this summary of some very complex arguments summarized in a short list of six propositions Pererio lists at the end of chapter 17. Here he summarises some of the basic arguments about the logic of *De primo cognito* and how it applies to sense perception. He begins by reminding the reading of what Aristotle said in the Posterior Analytics 1, text 5: what is first and best known to us is closest to our senses, and what is most remote is known later and is least known.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*: 106f.

1. Our intellect first knows other things than itself.
2. Material things are known to us sooner than immaterial things, this experience declares and reason teaches that immaterial things are more remote from the senses and more difficult for us to understand.
3. When we view material things we see them first rather than the parts and their principles.
4. Accidents are noted sooner than substance, as Hervet Natalis says.
5. Among accidents, the individual thing is known to us sooner than the universal thing.
6. Among individual things in the case of accidents what is more greatly felt by the senses is better known.<sup>36</sup>

We have barely begun to exhaust the various subtle arguments written around this debate, but it is hoped that the basic theme of the paper, Thomas' texts the *De ente et essentia*, provided a source of important arguments against the Scotists and the Platonists, demonstrating how *ens*—being—could be used as a term in physics rather than metaphysics. By placing the term in physics the definition of *ens* was transformed in the *Questio de primo cognito* debates. The central issue became, as one can see in Pereira's interest in sense perception, a central question for sixteenth and seventeenth century logic and natural philosophy.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*: 115.