

**BOOK-REVIEW**

*AN INTERPRETATION OF EXISTENCE*: Joseph Owens.  
Houston, Texas: Center for Thomistic Studies, University of  
St. Thomas, 1987. pp. 153.

Admittedly the concept of existence presents a great deal of difficulty in analysis mainly because it is empty of content, and to attempt an interpretation of existence would border on redundancy. Yet this closely argued essay by Father Owens is deeply reasoned and merits much serious study. Although the nature of existence has, it is claimed, been pushed aside in Western philosophical thought, the issue is here taken firmly in hand in order to arrive at some understanding of a type of existence that may be knowable from the observables of experience and arrived at through the powers of reasoning. The book is set out in six well-defined chapters beginning in chapter one with the Problem of Existence. The interpretation of existence is rightly said to be more than only an interesting philosophical problem in the abstract, because as Heidegger has observed, existence is not just a word for which there is as yet no clear meaning, but it is of such serious import as to hold within its grasp the spiritual destiny of the West.

It is in chapter two that an attempt is made to come to grips with the notion of existence itself although it is never pretended that its full meaning can yet be measured. It is repeatedly claimed

**Received : 13-6-87**

that an understanding of how a thing exists, while acknowledged to be an intellectual endeavour, must be reached not through conceptualization alone but always and in all cases through the intellectual activity of judgment. Judgment, then, for Owens is the intellectual activity by which the existence of a thing is or becomes known, a basic contention that is never abandoned throughout the course of the book. Existence is seen as a synthesizing process which progresses from past to future in any place and at any time. Full and real existence is more than simply the object represented in imagination, although a picturing of the objecting in the mind does, it is conceded, allow the object some lesser form of existence. Even hypothetical existence is also nonetheless a form of existence whereby the object is by some authorities said to subsist rather than to exist. Owens, on his part, in general seems to subscribe to an interpretation of existence which allows that any object may, at various levels, be freely brought by means of human cognition to some given state of perfection. A number of objections which might be brought against the legitimacy of the cognitive approach are readily countered by pointing out that only in this way can the mind be made ready to bestow a new and dynamic form of existence upon the given object, making it causally effective in the ongoing process of its development.

Having first barely confronted the issue of existence, chapter three moves on to try to draw out some of the characteristics which existence might possess. We are searching here for universal qualities, that is to say, all those shared characteristics common to individual existent things. In brief, existence requires an identity, but we might have first looked into all the identities which it is possible for existence to covertly possess until we could say in the very weak sense of possibility that it is not logically impossible for a thing not to exist as well as to exist. Such a con-

sideration the author scarcely investigates in his concern to establish a positive form of existence that is constantly undergoing synthesis in actual human experience. In any case, in a sense that is very basic to it, existence must cling to some form of substantive reality, and since it is thus considered to be prior to a thing's nature, existence can hardly be said to be the property of a thing in the ordinary sense. While existence is never spared the possibility of making use of the model of bare conceptualization, existence is again branded as no empty concept. The order of categories alone will not yield full-bodied existence. But granting that existence must possess a animal self-existence indispensable to its further development, the author is more than willing to bestow upon existence a categorical and hence from there an epistemological role without leaving existence devoid of the spontaneous synthesizing power of judgment.

In the next section the delicate issue of what maintains existence in its very own state of existence is probed, an investigation which takes us to no less than the point of asking what it is that preserves existence always in its continuing state of objective reality. In casting about for an answer there is no need to look for any help from rules, for laws are known not to furnish causal solutions. A prime cause for existence, or that upon which existence depends in order to exist, seems to call for some sort of metaphysical priority inhering in the subject rather than only a temporal priority, since existence must never find itself in separation from its own supportive state of subsistent existence. Owens understandably believes that the problem must be tackled from at least two levels of thinking, namely, from the point of view of the thing's accidental nature and also from the point of view of the thing's inner nature involving that type of subsistent existence whose nature it is to exist in and for itself alone. Clearly, to declare for an ultimate cause for existence in this

manner is to resort to metaphysical rather than empirical reasoning and not only opens the way to language that takes on a metaphorical colouring but also can lead to a dogmatism in the interests of whatever doctrine lies ready at hand to be promoted. Despite the possibility that in metaphysical endeavours it may be our aim largely to find ways of absolving ourselves from the tyranny imposed by nature's causal laws, a possibility which he apparently ignores, it is more than obvious that Father Owens is at pains to identify primary subsistent being with a primary efficient cause which he continuously emphasizes as the key factor in explaining how a thing is made to continue in its present state of existence and indeed in accounting for the thing's very existence in the first place. It seems unfortunate that efficient causality is stressed to the exclusion of any mention of an Aristotelian final cause which is surely also of prime importance in declaring for the ongoing progress of any existent thing in its development toward a rational end. Where on the one hand we are assured, in Owens' account, of the existence of everyday observable objects, and from such premises of original existence the reasoning is carried simply into the mystery of what is called the nature of existence as found in subsistent existence supported by sufficient causation, the argument is either circular or deliberately equivocates on the meaning of the term 'existence', rather to the detriment of a full understanding of existence itself, the very nature of which we set out to explore.

When in the next chapter the discussion turns to an in-depth account of the bestowal of existence, the term 'bestowal' will come to mean the actual bestowal of existence upon things as they are observed in the real world of phenomena. Important to the author's overall interpretation of existence is his belief that an inner subsistent existence alone is unable to bestow what may be called a full existence upon all the things that might be met

with in observable experience such that in our investigations it will be necessary to reason from observations said in sensible experience to that which is contained in subsistent existence than from an inner existence to the observables. The argument is strengthened by the claim that the perfection and hence the freedom of subsistence offers no framework from which to determine any sequence of existing events. The bestowing of existence is therefore taken to mean not alone the sharing of a basic common form, but also to mean that natures 'different from subsistent existence are made to actually exist', for the existence that is imparted to something must never be identical with that which is made to only subsist within itself. Owens leads us into some confusion when he avows that a finite existence bestowed on something other than itself is limited by that which is knowable according to the thing's nature, whereas he has just previously claimed that the nature of existence remains entirely unknown to the human mind. Unless it is intended to be read with ambiguity it is apparent that two different senses of 'nature' have become involved, *viz*, a nature that becomes apparent in the phenomenally real world and a nature that subsists outside of experience altogether.

Owens speaks of each new existence as a potency which limits actual existence into producing something 'other', that is, the existence of this or that finite object, but he will not admit that a material substratum need be presupposed as a prime condition for the thing becoming objectively real, either in the disposition of its several properties in its going out of existence or in the bestowal of a new seminal identity upon a thing in its coming into existence. This departure from Aristotle's teaching points up the fact that Owens believes that existence, real or cognitional, is simply bestowed upon a thing which otherwise has no being unless or until its subsistent level of existence is presupposed.

It is maintained, rightly it would seem, that subsistent existence must act as an agent in producing a new effect, that is that all things coming into existence must originate with the activity of subsistent being, although, as we have already noted, it was claimed that it is not possible to begin our reasoning process from only subsistent existence as a premise. In order to produce the whole of observable existence act of judgment, Owens opts for at least two types of causation, a first cause and a secondary cause, each operating from its own point of departure and with the concurrence of both at different levels. Cognitive existence must always be enacted according to a secondary cause, yet it is never conceded that subsistent existence, with which is identified primary causation, is anything less than completely identified with real existence at every spontaneous moment of the thing's actual existence. Subsistent existence never remains simply an inoperative 'ground of being'. When Owens puts forth the notion that primary efficient cause never remains inactive at any moment of a thing's existence and that there is also an ongoing secondary cause concurring and ready to continuously bestow new modes of existence upon thing in question, it is his way of saying that the doctrine of creationism and the scientific hypothesis of evolution combine in intellectual harmony to complement each other in rendering a more complete and full understanding of reality.

The final chapter attempts to penetrate still deeper into the meaning of existence, although such meaning cannot help but possess a certain consanguinity with the beliefs that have already either been spelled out or implied. Owens sometimes surprisingly talks as if his argument unfolds from strictly observational premises, an empirical point of departure that any metaphysician would surely not want to long entertain. But the strength of his presentation is that subsistent being is acknowledged as playing

a central role in any account of existence, and its weakness is that subsistent being is too readily shaded into some form of real existence with the result that it becomes all too easy to blend being with existence and to offer no distinction between the two. No attempt is made to explain how the time factor enters into existence from a state of pure being, a noumenal realm outside of time and space altogether. In any event, at any of its various levels, real existence is never obtained by cognitive existence alone, for existence cannot be genuinely arrived at without cognition through the power of human judgment, as Owens reiterates. But by virtue of our ability to exercise cognitional existence, the individual, from his essentially finite state of existence is nevertheless seen to be placed ultimately in that exalted state where he may achieve a direct relationship with infinite being. Not without paradox it is insisted that all limiting factors must be excluded from the concept of existence in order that an existence known to subsist in itself may be accessible for a basic understanding of the principles involved in affording us freedom in any present state of conscious existence.

The overall aim of *An Interpretation of Existence* is not to deduce existence from basic premises, nor yet to define existence in meaningful terms other than existence, but, simply as the title indicates, to lend some understanding to the concept of existence by way of delineating manageable procedure that may be followed in coming to grips with the issues involved. We might like eventually to discern any object that existence might have or what it is that existence itself possesses as to content, if indeed existence as such may be said to possess any content at all that may be predicated of it. If with Meinong (p. 38n) we wish to say there is not the slightest doubt that the object of knowledge need not exist at all, we are confronted with the paradox that

the content we thought existence might have does not after all exist, so that we have an existence that does not exist, or at least cannot be so designated to exist as an object of knowledge. But Father Owens is never in doubt that the techniques for handling the problems associated with imponderables such as existence, essence, substance and causation remain creatively alive, although often neglected in the late twentieth century. The secret of existence itself, an existence which appears to have no discernible reference and which carries a meaning which cannot be readily fathomed is not soon disposed to relinquish either the mystery it contains or its hold upon the imagination of mankind. Whether overtly admitted or not, the logic behind the present essay assures us that this is the case. Owens, after all, tries to take an eclectic approach in his interpretation of existence, sweeping through a broad historical spectrum from Greek philosophy to existentialism, and is ready to utilize, if necessary, the techniques that are available in analytic philosophy and modern logic. Owens' study could be taken almost as a critique, not of existence, but of the voice of judgment brought to bear upon existence, which amount, to saying that there can be no final engagement with, and no final resolution of, the problems associated with existence so long as self-doubt lingers as an indispensable characteristic of our ongoing human experience.

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