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Wippel, METAPHYSICAL THEMES IN THOMAS AQUINAS

Norman Kretzmann

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thought to eliminate the rationality of anyone's being a theist. The positive evidential considerations there are for theism (as slight as he thinks them to be), coupled with the lack of tight demonstrative proof that theism is incoherent or false, augmented by some pragmatic considerations regarding morality may, according to Gaskin, allow theism rationally to be held.

In the preface to his introductory book in the philosophy of psychology, *Psychological Explanation*, Jerry Fodor a few years ago remarked:²

I think many philosophers secretly harbor the view that there is something deeply (i.e., conceptually) wrong with psychology, but that a philosopher with a little training in the techniques of linguistic analysis and a free afternoon could straighten it out.

Substituting 'religion' for 'psychology' in this quote, I think we would have an illuminating explanation for one of the most common sorts of failing in much recent writing in the philosophy of religion: Too many philosophers have found themselves with a free afternoon. The failing I have in mind is the failure to take seriously the many profound, and profoundly difficult issues at stake in the responsible consideration of the major claims of the theistic tradition. The result is an unsatisfying degree of superficiality and a rash drawing of negative conclusions which, while it does represent one brand of philosophizing (one our students are all too prone to), does not represent the sort of philosophical care we want to find in even an introductory text. Though Gaskin's book is interesting and for the most part enjoyable to read, it seems to me to suffer from this failing throughout.

NOTES

1. Related issues, as the concern theism are explored in "Agnosticism," *Analysis*, (1985), pp. 219-224.

2. New York: Random House, 1968; page vii.

Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas (Series: Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy, Volume 10), by **John F. Wippel**. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1984. Pp. xii + 293. \$31.95.

Reviewed by NORMAN KRETZMANN, Cornell University.

The body of this book consists of the three chapters of Part I, "The Nature

of Metaphysics and Its Subject-Matter,” and the six chapters of Part II, “The Metaphysics of Created and Uncreated Being.” But in Chapter I, which stands alone outside both Parts, Professor Wippel addresses an issue that is likely to be of particular interest to members of the society whose journal this is. The chapter is titled “Thomas Aquinas and the Problem of Christian Philosophy,” and its special place in the book appears to reflect the author’s extravagant-sounding claim for it in the Introduction, where he says that “the twentieth-century controversy concerning the appropriateness of describing Thomas’s philosophical thought as ‘Christian philosophy’ . . . is important for anyone who would study Thomas’s metaphysics” (p. ix). But, as can be seen from Wippel’s own historical account in the first main section of Chapter I, the Christian-philosophy controversy was over more than the interpretation of Aquinas: it made a philosophical issue of the concept of Christian philosophy, and the defense and development of the concept by Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain affected the career of Catholic philosophy and the study of medieval philosophy in the twentieth century to an astonishing degree. I think it is too much to say that knowledge of that controversy is important for the study of Aquinas’s metaphysics, but reading this chapter convinced me that the currents in Thomistic philosophy and scholarship of the last fifty years cannot be understood without it.¹ For instance, one aspect of the controversy was Gilson’s contention that Aquinas’s distinctive philosophy is to be found only in his theological writings (his commentaries on Aristotle to be classified as “history of philosophy”), and that since the philosophy in, say, *Summa theologiae* “is there in view of a theological end, and since it figures in it as integrated with that which is the proper work of the theologian, it finds itself included within the formal object of theology and becomes theological in its own right” (quoted on p. 20). So in Gilson’s view everything that might otherwise be recognized as Aquinas’s philosophy is in fact to be read as merely an aspect of his theology. And when, in the second main section of Chapter I (pp. 22-33), Wippel opposes this Gilsonian line of interpretation by presenting his painstaking analysis of Aquinas’s own conceptions of philosophy and theology, we can see that the Christian-philosophy controversy has at any rate stimulated work that really is important for the study of Aquinas’s metaphysics. For one of the results of Wippel’s analysis is “to show that in Thomas’s mind there is no confusion between metaphysics, on the one hand, and the theology based on revelation, on the other. . . . Far from presupposing or beginning with God, Thomas’s metaphysics regards knowledge of the divine as the end or goal of the metaphysician’s investigation” (p. 32).

In concluding the explanation and justification of his own approach to the subject of this book Wippel says, “It would seem, therefore, that if one wishes to recover the elements of this metaphysics from Thomas’s various writings, one should present these elements according to the philosophical order outlined

by Thomas himself, not according to the theological order proposed by Gilson” (p. 32). Coming at the end of Chapter I, this well-supported practical conclusion is likely to arouse certain expectations in students of Aquinas’s philosophy: having put Chapter I’s useful meta-philosophical discussion behind us, we are now going to take this non-theological approach to Aquinas’s metaphysics itself. But such expectations are not fulfilled in Part I, whose three chapters continue to have more to do with meta-philosophy than metaphysics itself, at least as non-Thomists are likely to conceive of it. I suspect that Wippel’s extensive preoccupation with these meta-philosophical issues (developed in Chapters II-IV, pp. 37-104) is to some degree a by-product of the investigations on which he bases his anti-Gilsonian interpretation of Aquinas. All three of these chapters depend heavily on Questions 5 and 6 of Aquinas’s Commentary on Boethius’s *De trinitate*, where Aquinas works out the hierarchy and methodology of the speculative sciences; and in a passage of Chapter I where Wippel is summing up the basis of his opposition to the Gilsonian line he concludes by saying, “But Thomas has developed each of these points in considerable detail, especially in his Commentary on the *De Trinitate* of Boethius,” with a note referring to Questions 5 and 6 (p. 29). So it may well be that what is likely to strike many readers as this book’s inordinate concern with the nature and subject matter of metaphysics is another remote consequence of the controversy over ‘Christian philosophy.’ Still, even though I think a full quarter of the book is too much space to devote to the topics of Part I, especially in view of the wealth of genuinely metaphysical themes in Thomas Aquinas, I want to emphasize that in the hands of a scholar as deeply learned and insightful as John Wippel, the treatment of those topics generates a surprising amount of philosophical and scholarly illumination. Philosophers who do not at once see the interest in a study whose announced purpose is “to attempt to determine more precisely why Thomas sometimes refers to metaphysics as first philosophy because it gives principles to the other sciences, and why he sometimes applies this same name to it because it investigates the first causes” (p. 59) will miss a good deal that is more widely recognizable as philosophically interesting if they do not read these chapters.

The six chapters of Part II, on the other hand, deal with themes any philosopher would recognize as belonging to metaphysics itself. The first two of them, Chapters V and VI, are devoted to Aquinas’s well-known doctrine of essence and existence. (The second half of V and all of VI were written especially for this volume; all the other chapters had been previously published.) Metaphysical issues involving the nature of God emerge more and more prominently in the course of the remaining chapters—VII: “Thomas Aquinas, Henry of Ghent, and Godfrey of Fontaines on the Reality of Nonexisting Possibles”; VIII: “Thomas Aquinas on the Possibility of Eternal Creation”; IX: “Quidditative Knowledge

of God"; and X: "Divine Knowledge, Divine Power, and Human Freedom in Thomas Aquinas and Henry of Ghent."

I found these last four chapters especially interesting and valuable, and not only because of their novel contributions to discussions familiar in philosophy of religion. They are, I think, also the most impressive chapters in the book in respect of philosophical scholarship generally. Chapter VII uncovers sophisticated medieval philosophical discussions relevant to current discussions of the ontological status of possible worlds and especially pertinent to David Lewis's realism regarding non-actual possible worlds. Chapter VIII, addressing an issue of particular importance for medieval Christian Aristotelians, shows conclusively that Aquinas went further than the position historically associated with him—that neither the beginninglessness nor the temporal beginning of the universe is demonstrable—arguing for a bold, ingenious, intriguing expansion of the options: "An eternally created world is possible!" (p. 214). Chapter IX will be especially valuable to philosophers of religion generally, even those who ordinarily manage (somehow) to pursue their special interest without consulting the works of Aquinas. Wippel's account of "the way of negation" in ascribing predicates to God (and the significant differences between the uses made of it by Maimonides and Aquinas), and his explanation of the importance in such predication of the distinction between the thing signified and the manner of signifying it (*res significata* and *modus significandi*), are the best treatments I've seen of these difficult topics. Although the issues of Chapter X are easily the most familiar philosophical topics addressed in the last four chapters, Professor Wippel manages in this chapter not only to provide interesting historical material that will be new to most readers but also to extract from Aquinas's treatment of these issues the concept of "the modality of the knower," which Wippel believes—rightly, I think—preserves a valuable consideration that has been overlooked in recent discussions of divine foreknowledge and human freedom.

So I found much to praise in Wippel's book, and I know I'll return to it often for its wealth of information and insights. (Many a footnote in it could all by itself provide the stimulus, outline, and initial bibliography for a philosophical article or even a dissertation.) All the same, I came away with some sense of frustration stemming from features of the book which may well obscure or diminish its value for the people who are nowadays likely to be most keenly interested in it: secular philosophers working in the Anglo-American tradition.

For one thing, little or no effort seems to have been expended in showing the general philosophical reader the relevance of some of these specialized topics to widely recognized philosophical issues. I'm not at all sure I haven't missed some of the philosophical significance of the long discussion of Aquinas's conception of the nature and subject matter of metaphysics, for instance, but I would have been more inclined to look for it if those chapters had been prefaced by a

paragraph or two suggesting some points of connection with other philosophical issues. The wider relevance of a specialized historical topic in philosophy is sometimes indicated less obtrusively by citing some well-known current discussions in the literature with which it can and should be associated, but the references in Wippel's admirably detailed bibliographical notes are almost exclusively to writings by other scholars on the very same or closely related historical topics. There is, for instance, not a word about current possible-worlds discussions in Wippel's Chapter VII, which cries out for at least an allusion of that sort. A note in Chapter X seems intended to suggest that Kenny's well-known article on foreknowledge and freedom might have turned out differently if he had taken advantage of the concept of the modality of the knower, but even such a tentative foray outside the circle of institutionalized Catholic historical scholarship is extremely rare, perhaps unique, in this book. A discussion of Aquinas's use of the distinctions between modalities *de dicto* and *de re* and between *necessitas consequentiae* and *necessitas consequentis* is carried on apparently in total detachment from all the discussions and applications of those distinctions in recent ahistorical, secular philosophy—a detachment that looks really stunning when he says, "For fuller discussion of the difference between 'logical' necessity or contingency, on the one hand, and 'ontological' necessity or contingency, on the other, see H. J. McSorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong?* . . ." (p.249, n.21), the only reference he provides for this purpose. Even philosophers like Geach and Plantinga, who have contributed to the understanding and utility of such distinctions in contemporary philosophy besides writing on Aquinas and on some of the topics of Wippel's last four chapters, go unmentioned in this book.

Furthermore, Wippel's approach to historical topics in philosophy is very different from, say, Kenny's, my review of whose recent book on Aquinas follows this one. Wippel, unlike Kenny and many others in the Anglo-American tradition, plainly draws a sharp line between philosophy and history of philosophy; while the results of historical studies no doubt can and should be employed in philosophizing, the historian of philosophy must refrain from philosophical extrapolation or criticism if he is to do his job properly. That something like this conception of a division of labor shapes Wippel's work here is indicated by that fact that again and again he presents a position that begs for criticism or development, and then just steps away from it in silence. This hands-off historiography of philosophy is epitomized in the final sentence of the excellent but purely uncritical exposition making up Chapter VII: "So much, then, for our three thinkers and their answers to our three questions concerning nonexistent possibles" (p. 188). (For a more substantive example of pure exposition where some critical probing of Aquinas's position seems clearly called for, even as an aid to comprehending it, see the presentation of his attempts to shield human freedom from the causal character of God's knowledge, pp. 262-263.)

It is not only Aquinas's philosophy itself that fails to get the critical questioning it deserves (and can very often withstand) as a consequence of the hands-off policy. When scholars and philosophers in the Anglo-American tradition take up Aquinas (as they are doing more and more frequently), they often find some feature of his thought to criticize. Kenny, for instance, devotes a tenth of his small book on Aquinas to an attack on the famous essence/existence distinction, which he takes to be "the most overrated" element of his philosophy. I would be very surprised if Wippel didn't have solid grounds on which to oppose Kenny's appraisal, and his book would have been more timely if he had added new material to his essence/existence chapters, addressing Kenny's recent criticism of the doctrine (along with the new material addressing Fr. Owens's opposing interpretation of the argument in *De ente et essentia* 4.²).

Professor Wippel's writings on Aquinas (and other medieval philosophers) will of course retain their great scholarly value if he makes no move at all in the directions I've been indicating. And, as a matter of fact, some of their remarkable reliability and clarity may be a consequence of their deliberate detachment from contemporary issues and philosophical criticism. All the same, as I emphasized in my review of Kenny's *Aquinas*, the center of philosophical interest in Aquinas appears to have already moved out of Catholicism and into secular philosophy, perhaps particularly into Anglo-American secular philosophy. As Ralph McInerney put it recently, "In the past several decades, interest in the thought of Saint Thomas has waned among Catholics even as it has waxed among our separated brethren."³ We separated brethren, the latter-day audience for Wippel's work on Aquinas, will benefit from it as it stands; but I think we could get even more from him in the future if he would try to address us more directly.

NOTES

1. Wippel's notes to Chapter I are rich in information about the controversy over 'Christian philosophy,' but he does not mention the papers presented at the symposium "*Aeterni Patris* and Afterwards", published as *One Hundred Years of Thomism* (ed. Victor B. Brezik, C.S.B.; Houston: University of St. Thomas, Center for Thomistic Studies, 1981), which contains articles relevant to this discussion by Armand Maurer (on Gilson), Ralph Gallagher (on Maritain), and Ralph McInerney (on Christian philosophy, with special reference, on pp. 71-72, to the Society of Christian Philosophers).

2. For a precise, illuminating analysis of this argument which lends support to Wippel's interpretation as opposed to Owens's, see Scott MacDonald, "The *Esse/Essentia* Argument in Aquinas's *De ente et essentia*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 22 (1984), 157-172.

3. "Reflections on Christian Philosophy," pp. 63-73 in the book cited in n. 1 above; p. 70.