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Hughes, ON A COMPLEX THEORY OF A SIMPLE GOD: AN INVESTIGATION IN AQUINAS' PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY

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BOOK REVIEWS

On a Complex Theory of a Simple God: An Investigation in Aquinas' Philosophical Theology, by **Christopher M. Hughes**. (Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion) Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989. Pp. xi + 281. $34.95.

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A prospective reader, noting this book's subtitle and catching glimpses of its nearly four hundred references to Aquinas's writings, might reasonably be led to expect another contribution to the vast scholarly literature on Aquinas. But the book turns out to contain exactly one stray reference to the literature (p. 26, n. 23), and Hughes no more intends to contribute to traditional Aquinas scholarship than to draw on it. His stated agenda—"to cross-pollinate medieval and contemporary ideas" (p. x)—leads him to engage as directly as possible with Aquinas's mind, treating the thirteenth-century theologian as a respected contemporary or recent predecessor whose positions one frequently opposes. Hughes on Aquinas is less like Gilson on Aquinas than like Ockham on Scotus.

Engaging historically remote philosophers in argument is just what makes philosophical scholarship philosophical. As for the scholarly side of the enterprise, Hughes's command of Aquinas's texts is impressive, and his Latinity is excellent; but his book disappoints some other scholarly expectations. The general index is incomplete and unreliable, and the value of the wide-ranging references to Aquinas's writings would have been enhanced by an *index locorum*.[1] Most importantly, his policy of ignoring the scholarly literature and much of the relevant contemporary literature in philosophical theology leads to discussions that are drastically narrowed and isolated in a way that reduces the practical value of Hughes's abundant philosophical talent.

His style is intense but engaging. The book has the tone of a brilliant, utterly unstilted talk, addressed to any philosopher conversant with the analytic tradition and willing to take seriously the metaphysical issues associated with the theses Hughes extracts from the core of Aquinas's philosophical theology. Because Hughes's critical assessments of those theses are often at least as acute and deep as any on record, Aquinas's defenders and philosophers working in the tradition of classical philosophical theology must consider them carefully. The challenge posed by Hughes's analysis might well prompt new departures in philosophical scholarship in those areas.

Hughes has divided his book into two parts, "The God of the Philosophers" (three chapters on simplicity; one on knowledge, change, and contingency in God) and "The God of Faith" (two chapters on trinity, one on incarnation). The division reflects Aquinas's own contention that some truths about God can be discovered by unaided reason and thus belong to natural theology, while other doctrines—paradigmatically trinity and incarnation—must be initially acquired through revelation. But Hughes's primary purpose in thus dividing his book is to use the division as a representation of his main conclusion: that God's absolute simplicity, the doctrine at the center of Aquinas's natural theology, is incompatible with the revealed doctrines of trinity and incarnation. That conclusion may seem trite: anyone who puts simplicity together with trinity and incarnation is bound to acknowledge at least an apparent incompatibility. But the details of Hughes's conclusion and his inferential route to it are certainly not such as would occur to just anyone.

Aquinas thinks he can show that God is absolutely simple, without composition of any sort (*Summa theologiae* [ST] Ia.3.7). Hughes notes (pp. 3-4) six specific theses Aquinas introduces on his way to this claim—i.e., God is not composed of (1) extended parts, (2) form and matter, (3) act and potency (and is consequently absolutely immutable and atemporal), (4) God's essence and God himself, (5) subject and attributes (and is consequently the same as his attributes, which are consequently the same as one another), (6) essence and *esse* (existence).[2]

According to Hughes, Aquinas claims that "(1)-(5) all follow from (6),"[3] and so (6) is "one of the most central" claims Aquinas makes about God (p. 4). Accordingly, Hughes devotes a long first chapter to a discussion of (6), which he equates with 'God is existence itself (*ipsum esse*).' He begins by announcing that he doesn't "know how to construe Aquinas' claim that God is *ipsum esse* in such a way that it fails to come out necessarily false" (p. 5).

The first half of Chapter 1 contains his evidence for the necessary falsity of the claim. The core of the evidence is his observation that it is impossible for anything's nature to consist of "pure subsistent existence." The observation does look undeniable: "nothing subsistent could be just existent: a merely existent substance is too thin to be possible" (p. 21). But in the very passage Hughes cites as the source for his claim that Aquinas confers a special logical status on the thesis that God is existence itself, Aquinas himself introduces the thesis as a version of 'God is *form* itself.' On that basis alone it seems clear that not even Aquinas would want to deny the observation; nor would he say, as Hughes puts it, that "God will be nothing more than existent" (p. 21; see also pp. 7-8). Furthermore, the textual context from which Hughes draws Aquinas's 'God is *ipsum esse*' makes it even clearer that Hughes's bare-bones interpretation of *ipsum esse* as pure subsistent existence unfairly prejudices his assessment of divine simplicity.

Eventually, Hughes comes close to acknowledging that Aquinas would not accept as part of his view the absurd thesis that God is nothing but pure subsistent existence (p. 22). But by that point the reader is likely to have received the misimpression that the basic thesis of Aquinas's concept of simplicity has already been shown to be necessarily false or, at best, hopelessly muddled on Aquinas's own understanding of it, and that it is only the author's patience and respect for Aquinas's philosophical stature that leads him even to consider Aquinas's attempts to argue for the already repudiated (6).

Hughes organizes Aquinas's many, widely scattered arguments for (6) into five sorts, devoting most of his attention to the first of them, "the argument from the nature of composites" [ANC] (p. 28): If God's essence is distinct from his existence, then God is composite; if anything is composite, it is c; God could not be c; ∴ God's essence is not distinct from his existence. As our variable 'c' is intended to indicate, ANC is really a family of arguments. The member of the family we will take as representative of ANC is the one in which 'c' is replaced with 'posterior to and dependent on its/his components.'

Hughes begins his evaluation of ANC by trying to specify the precise sense of priority/posteriority Aquinas intends in his brief presentations of it (at, e.g., ST Ia.3.7c and SCG I.18). Hughes discerns four senses he thinks need consideration, but we think it's clear that in ANC Aquinas intends what Hughes calls the "causal" sense: "what makes or causes something to exist is prior to the thing caused to exist (whether the causation in question is efficient, final, or...formal)" (p. 32). Here is Hughes's evaluation of this version of ANC:

> "Why should we suppose that God could not be causally posterior to some (proper) part of Him? If it seems obvious that He could not, this is probably because we have in mind a much narrower conception of cause than the one relevant here. All it means to say that God is causally posterior to one of His parts is that there is some constituent of God (distinct from God) whereby God is a certain way (existent, divine, wise, *vel cetera*). How do we know this is false? I think Aquinas would answer that if God existed or was a certain way, because He had a certain kind of proper part, He would have composition of act and potency; and if He had composition of act and potency, he would be causally dependent on something outside of Him." (pp. 35-38)

Hughes thus sees this version of ANC as dependent on another of the five sorts of supporting arguments, the one he designates "the argument from act and potency" [AAP] (p. 29) and later rejects. Aquinas, however, considers ANC and AAP to be independent arguments. Moreover, there is a simpler basis on which to infer that God could not be "causally" posterior to anything other than himself: dependent posteriority of that sort would compromise God's aseity.[4]

Given Aquinas's Aristotelian conception of properties, even if God were composite, the form of, say, perfect goodness wouldn't be *ontologically* prior

to or independent of God. Still, there seems to be a sense in which it would be true to say in this connection that God's existence and his being what he is are dependent on something he himself did not bring about—*viz.*, his having the form of perfect goodness. It isn't obvious to us that this fundamental difficulty could be avoided without introducing absolute simplicity, and Hughes's failure to resolve the difficulty convincingly and to investigate its relationship with simplicity leaves an important gap in his attempt to show that the arguments Aquinas offers in support of simplicity lack cogency.[5]

A famously counter-intuitive thesis of absolute simplicity is the claim, fully endorsed by Aquinas, that all the various perfections we attribute to God are really one and the same in him—i.e., that God's goodness = God's power = God's wisdom, etc. ((5) above). These properties are obviously not the same in general: the good are often powerless, the powerful are even more often not good, and so on. Might God's *perfect* goodness nevertheless be the same as God's *perfect* power in virtue of being the same as God?[6] This way of handling thesis (5) is, perhaps surprisingly, *not* one that Hughes finds troublesome. Instead, as he sees it, "The problem is that if God has the attribute of perfect goodness (or perfect wisdom), then *a fortiori* God has the attribute of goodness (or wisdom).... And even if the attributes of perfect goodness and perfect wisdom are had by God alone, the attributes of goodness and wisdom are shared by God and creatures. ...[But] if God's goodness is an attribute He shares with creatures, then it cannot be an insular attribute, and thus cannot be identical to God" (pp. 67-68).

Hughes recognizes that many will be inclined to respond to this problem by appealing to Aquinas's view that properties are predicated of both God and creatures only analogically, pointing out that the problem generated here depends on their being univocally predicated (p. 69). But, Hughes replies, Aquinas bases his view that such predication is analogical on the doctrine that God, very unlike creatures, is not distinct from his existence or any of his attributes—a doctrine that Hughes takes himself to have shown to be unfounded. His project in Chapter 2 is thus in this respect dependent on the alleged result of Chapter 1. But if the doubts we raised above deserve consideration, Hughes's project in Chapter 1 is inconclusive; and its inconclusiveness undercuts to some extent the project of Chapter 2.

Nevertheless, in a suggestive, potentially illuminating discussion Hughes goes on to propose that even if the thesis that God is not distinct from any of his attributes had to be given up, much of the motivation for it might be satisfied by reconstruing it in terms of strong supervenience. He then suggests that we recast simplicity thesis (5) as (5+): Wisdom, power, goodness, and all the rest of God's intrinsic attributes are 'nothing over and above,' or 'consist in'—that is, have as a supervenience base—the simple but superrich attribute that is the divine essence" (p. 82).

The most damaging philosophical objection to divine simplicity, in Hughes's view, is the one he presents in Chapter 4 in the form of a simple argument: "since God is essentially omniscient, at every possible world, He knows whatever is true at that world. Because different things are true at different worlds, what God knows must vary from world to world. Knowledge, whatever else it involves, involves belief:[7] so God's beliefs vary from world to world. But if God's beliefs vary from world to world, so too must his intrinsic properties" (p. 108).

Hughes considers (pp. 110-13) basing a reply to this objection on some examples of Tyler Burge's that seem to show that there may be variation across worlds in an individual's beliefs while his intrinsic properties remain constant. The resultant suggestion would be that God's mental state is intrinsically the same in all possible worlds, and that his beliefs vary only as a consequence of a purely relational property obtaining between God and *w*, for each world *w*.[8] We think Hughes is right to reject this strategy. It involves an implausible notion of belief and a mistaken assessment of the requirements of the doctrine of simplicity. In our view, a more promising way of dealing with this objection would be to discard Hughes's assumption that Aquinas's position entails God's being the same in all possible worlds.[9]

In Part II of his book Hughes examines Aquinas's attempt to reconcile divine simplicity with trinity and incarnation. He mounts a two-pronged attack, arguing (a) that both Aquinas's account of trinity and his account of incarnation are internally inconsistent (just because, Hughes suggests, Aquinas tries to reconcile each of them with his account of simplicity), and (b) that while an orthodox account of trinity might be reconciled with Hughes's own versions of simplicity interpreted in terms of supervenience, incarnation cannot be reconciled with even that version of simplicity.

Hughes begins Part II with a chapter-length consideration of whether trinity is provably inconsistent, given its inclusion of these three claims: "(1) There are exactly three divine persons. (2) Each divine person is God. (3) There is exactly one God" (p. 153). He helpfully distinguishes "the way of analysis" and "the way of analogy" by which medieval philosopher-theologians tried to rebut charges of inconsistency in (1)-(3) (p. 156). The former involves restating the propositions of trinity in metaphysical terms and defending the consistency of the restated claims; the latter involves pointing to actual (hence consistent) structures and arrangements in the world that resemble those that figure in trinity.

In attempting to show that (1)-(3) need not be construed as inconsistent, Hughes very ingeniously employs his own blend of these approaches. But for two reasons the result is bound to be perceived as offering no help for the traditional doctrine. First, it requires taking God's mode of existence to be temporal; second, and even more troublesomely, it requires conceiving of

each of the divine persons as having "layered parts." Of course, Hughes knows his solution looks unorthodox. He admits that the idea that "the divine persons and God have a plurality of parts...is a surprising one, which would have been denounced not just by Anselm, but by Augustine, Aquinas, and the whole pantheon of medieval philosophical theology. There is, however, a difference between the tenets of medieval Christian philosophers and the tenets of the Christian faith.... Similarly, I don't think the view that God and the divine persons are temporal and mutable is heterodox, even if it was very unpopular with (Christian) medieval philosophical theologians" (pp. 181-82). His position here challenges the basis of some recent work in philosophical theology, and the challenge needs to be addressed carefully in the long-range response Hughes's book deserves. But since a theory of trinity in terms of "thing-stuff-co-composition" (pp. 178-80) could not even make contact with Aquinas's philosophical theology, its development in this book strikes us as misplaced.

The notion of relative identity has recently attracted the attention of some philosophers (Peter Geach, most notably) as a basis for explicating trinity, enabling one to maintain consistently that, e.g., the Father is not the same person as the Son although he is the very same God as the Son. Hughes recognizes the relative-identity approach as a rival to his thing-stuff-co-composition account, and he dismisses it, mainly on the basis of two considerations. First, alleged non-theological instances of relative identity are unconvincing. We tend to agree, but it's conceivable that sortally-relativized identity may be instantiated only in the special context of trinity. Hughes's second consideration is distilled in his suggestion that "(on anyone's account) certain inferences of the form 'a has the property P, a is the same K as b, therefore b has the property P' are valid. Someone [*viz.*, a relative-identity theorist] who thinks that some but not all inferences having this form are valid owes us an explanation of just when they are" (p. 158). But why does Hughes assume that a relative-identity theorist will accept any such inference as valid? Any rational person who maintains that in at least one case a statement employing such a relative-identity predicate as 'is the same God as' is true, while the corresponding claim of absolute identity is false, will certainly refuse to make it part of the *logic* of *any* such predicate that it entails the indiscernibility of the relata. Of course, one may suppose (as a *metaphysical* thesis) that, e.g., for any x and y, if 'x is the same dog as y' is true, then x and y are indiscernible with respect to any property—and, hence, that if 'x is brown' is also known to be true, then one may validly infer that 'y is brown' is true. But anyone who supposed this and espoused a relative-identity account of trinity would insist that the inference holds partly in virtue of the meaning of 'dog' in a natural language. Its "validity" cannot be a feature of the formal language because, the relative-identity trinitarian would maintain,

at least one instantiation of the general schema 'x is P, x is the same K as y; therefore, y is P' will take you from truth to falsity. We think relative identity offers a strategy that merits more consideration than Hughes gives it.[10]

When Hughes turns (in Chapter 6) from his own and others' alternative accounts of trinity to Aquinas's, he begins by noting that it is developed on the twofold basis of an examination of God's understanding (or intellect) and God's will. Hughes's own "focus is on Aquinas' account of how divine understanding gives rise to a plurality of divine persons, rather than on his account of how the divine will does" (p. 188). The elements of Aquinas's approach via the divine intellect may be seen in the following passage (SCG IV.11 [n. 3473]), which Hughes does not cite:

> Now it belongs to the nature of an interior word, which is an understood concept (*intentio*), that it proceeds from the one who understands, in accord with his act of understanding, since it is, so to speak, the terminus of the intellect's operation. For the intellect in understanding conceives and forms the understood concept or idea (*ratio*), which is the interior word. Therefore, God's Word must proceed from God, in accord with his own act of understanding. Therefore, God's Word is related to the understanding God whose Word it is as to him from whom it is; for that [relationship] is part of the nature of a word. Therefore, although in God's case the one who is understanding, the act of understanding, and the understood concept or the Word are one in essence, and although it is consequently necessary that each of those is God, there nevertheless remains a relational distinction only, in keeping with the way the Word is related to the one who conceives as to the one from whom it is.

It is essential to Aquinas's account of trinity that such intra-trinitarian relationships are real, not merely conceptual. Moreover, they must distinguish and even constitute the divine persons.

The difficulties apparent in those claims might strike many as providing grounds enough on which to dismiss the account, but Hughes, characteristically and admirably, begins his critique by providing a means of making sense of what may seem incoherent. Hughes argues in support of Aquinas's contention that there can be individual substances discernible only with respect to relational (and haecceitistic) properties.[11] But then his doubts emerge: "What new supposition do we make when we say [as Aquinas says concerning the divine persons] that the distinctness of those substances is not just entailed by, but also grounded in, their discernibility with respect to relational properties? I don't know.... I'm not saying: it is necessarily false that relational facts not only entail the distinctness of a pair of incomposite individuals, but also ground that distinctness. But I do think there is a puzzle about what it could be like for the proposition in question to be true" (p. 206). It seems to us, however, that no new supposition is called for. A relational distinction formed around a real, asymmetric relationship (such as generation) entails

different relational properties in the two relata, and it seems arguable that that additional entailment might well count as showing that the distinctness of the persons is *grounded* in the relationship.[12]

Hughes's final criticism of Aquinas's philosophical theology is that incarnation entails composition within the second person and so is incompatible with simplicity. He thinks the following simple argument establishes the claim: "if the Word is God, and if whatever is God is immutable and atemporal, then the Word is immutable and atemporal. In that case, if the Word is the very same hypostasis or individual as Jesus Christ, then Jesus Christ is immutable and atemporal. Now, we know that Jesus Christ 'began to fear and be weary'... [But] if an individual was first less fearful, and then more fearful,...that individual must be different intrinsically from the way he was—and any individual who is different intrinsically than he was is both temporal and mutable" (pp. 253-54).

Aquinas's rejoinder to this argument would, naturally, be based on a distinction between what may be predicated, on the one hand, of Christ qua human and, on the other, of Christ qua divine. Now Hughes appears to agree that such a distinction provides a sufficient basis on which to refute the charge that incarnation is incoherent because it licenses attributing contradictory predicates to the same individual. But, he argues, that is not enough to save simplicity; for it remains true that the individual God the Word went from being less-fearful-natured to being more-fearful-natured, and hence changed. "'God the Word changes' comes out true, because God the Word has the attribute *changing*, and 'God the Word is atemporal and immutable' comes out true, because God the Word's divine nature (but not God the Word) is atemporal and immutable" (p. 260). But in that case we are forced to say what Aquinas would certainly want not to say, that "God the Word is a changing individual one of whose natures is timeless and unchangeable" (*ibid.*).

One option available to Aquinas here is suggested by Hughes: "when the Word goes from being less-fearful-natured to being more-fearful-natured, the Word does not really change, because the assumed nature that undergoes a real change shares no parts with the assuming Word. (More precisely, nothing that is ever a part of the assumed nature is ever a part of the assuming Word.)" (p. 261). But we're inclined to agree with Hughes in thinking that if the human nature assumed by the Word is disjoint from the Word in this way, then the claim that it is *the Word's* human nature seems untenable.

We have criticized Hughes's neglect of some of the amenities of scholarship and his ignoring of the relevant literature. Without those shortcomings his book would have been sounder, but it would probably also have been less exciting. With an unusually keen eye, Hughes has taken a fresh look at those old texts. His interpretation of what he's seen should not be readily accepted

by anyone who has an interest in understanding Aquinas, but it certainly must be carefully considered. Our rapid survey cannot convey the subtlety, complexity, and novelty of his exploration. With this book Hughes earns the respectful attention of every student of Aquinas's philosophical theology.[13]

NOTES

1. The book is generally attractive and well-produced, as one expects Cornell Press books to be. But we did find nearly a hundred typographical or substantive mistakes, many more than we expected. Here are some of the more important ones: 28.18 [uninterpretable reference to "*quaestiones*"]; 45.7: the *esse*/the essence; 91.13b: essence/individual essence; 126.3: equivalent/inequivalent; 129.n22: DV/DP; 134.17b: (i)/(ii); 195.17: by b,/by a,.

2. Hughes omits without comment a seventh such thesis: that God is not composed of genus and differentia (ST Ia.3.5 and 7c).

3. His only reference here is "see, e.g., ST Ia.3.7, *responsio*," presumably this sentence in particular: "Thus, since God is form itself or, rather, *esse* itself (*ipsum esse*), he cannot be composed in any way." Perhaps (6) 'God is not composed of essence and *esse*' may be identified with 'God is *ipsum esse*,' and the passage does suggest that 'God is *ipsum esse*' or 'God is *ipsa forma*' may be taken to be the basis of the doctrine of absolute simplicity. Notice, however, that (4) seems as nearly identical with 'God is *ipsa forma*' as (6) does with 'God is *ipsum esse*,' an observation that casts some doubt on Hughes's claim about the special logical status of (6).

4. Later (p. 50) Hughes does consider this way of posing the difficulty but also expresses doubts about the strong version of aseity required here.

5. Even in view of Hughes's attending only to recent philosophical literature it is surprising that he takes no account of such discussions of the relationship between simplicity and aseity as Alvin Plantinga's Aquinas Lecture, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), William Mann's "Simplicity and Immutability in God" (*International Philosophical Quarterly* 23 [1983], pp. 267-76), and Thomas Morris's "Dependence and Divine Simplicity" (*International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 23 [1988], pp. 161-74.

6. For some discussion of this issue, see Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Absolute Simplicity" (*Faith and Philosophy* 2 [1985], pp. 353-82), pp. 354-57.

7. Some contemporary philosophers would disagree (see esp. William P. Alston, "Does God Have Beliefs?," *Religious Studies* 22 (1987), pp. 287-306). See also Hughes's own remarks on p. 115.

8. A similar move is suggested by E. Zemach and D. Widerker in "Facts, Freedom, and Foreknowledge," *Religious Studies* 23 (1988), pp. 19-28.

9. For some development of this strategy, see Stump and Kretzmann, "Absolute Simplicity" (n. 10 above), pp. 367-71.

10. The most promising development of this approach we know of is Peter van Inwagen's "And Yet There Are Not Three Gods But One God" in T. Morris, ed., *Philos-*

ophy and the Christian Faith (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), pp. 241-78.

11. He is drawing on a discussion by Max Black in "The Identity of Indiscernibles" in his *Problems of Analysis* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953), pp. 80-92 (to which Hughes provides no reference). The fact that Black's example is of a world containing only two qualitatively *and relationally* indiscernible spheres seems to make it inappropriate for Hughes's purpose here: "We might suppose that each was made of chemically pure iron, had a diameter of one mile, that they had the same temperature, color, and so on, and that nothing else existed. Then every quality and relational characteristic of the one would also be a property of the other" (p. 83).

12. Hughes comes close to admitting this when he says "the Father and the Son are discernible, *in that* the Son is generated by the Father and the Father is not" (p. 214; emphasis added).

13. We are grateful to Christopher Hughes for corresponding with us about some of the issues in his book.

Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage, by **Lee Yearley**. Volume Two in the series, "Toward a Comparative Philosophy of Religions," Frank E. Reynolds and David Tracy, editors. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990. Pp. xiv and 280. 16.95 (paper).

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In his introduction, Frank Reynolds describes the aim of the series, "Towards a Comparative Philosophy of Religions," as "the development of a new kind of comparative philosophy of religions that is global in its perspective and in tune with contemporary philosophical developments and issues" (xi). At least some of the philosophical developments to which Reynolds refers have made this a daunting task indeed. In particular, the growing consensus against epistemological foundationalism has raised questions as to whether it is possible genuinely to understand, much less to assess, intellectual and moral traditions radically different from the observer's own. Seen in this light, earlier efforts to spell out a universal core of beliefs and values embedded within the world's great religions are likely to appear as drastic oversimplifications at best, distorting projections of the observer's own convictions at the worst.

And yet, it is hard to know what alternative we have. We could follow the example of those anthropologists who offer detailed "thick" descriptions of the traditions of other societies, without attempting to identify any common ground between them and us. But while this approach avoids the pitfalls of a false universalism, it does not offer much in the way of a basis for dialogue among those who have been formed in disparate traditions. And given the