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JOHN F. WIPPEL, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas. From Finite Being to Uncreated Being*, Monographs of the Society for Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy no. 1, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C., 2000, pp. xxvii + 630. ISBN 0-8132-0982-X.

If Thomas Aquinas had written a complete work on metaphysics, what would it look like? What order would it follow? Which doctrines would stand out? In the past, a student of Thomas might have tried to answer such questions by producing his own metaphysical treatise, *ad mentem Sancti Thomae*. Nowadays of course it is the historical approach that prevails. The preferred way to present Thomas's mind is to display it at work in his own corpus and context.

Interpretations abound. But perhaps none has had more influence than that of Etienne Gilson, who perceived in Thomas's "Christian philosophy" a spirit that positively resists disengagement from its original theological setting. To many, the idea of a separate thomistic metaphysics, a *Summa metaphysicae*, has come to seem almost an oxymoron.

Mons. John Wippel does not see it that way. That is, he does not think Thomas saw it that way. Wippel's Aquinas has a very definite conception of metaphysics as a science of its own, with its own subject-matter and procedure. No doubt it is in some way subordinate to theology, but it is no part thereof. This is not just a view about the structure of human knowledge. It also reflects deep elements in Thomas's understanding of the very nature of reality, i.e. in his metaphysics. So Thomas might well have written a *Summa metaphysicae*, and at least the general order that he would have adopted is not hard to surmise. It would proceed "from finite being to uncreated being". As though to drive the point home, Wippel has judged this the suitable order for his own comprehensive study of Thomas's metaphysics.

Wippel's general plan is thus "theoretical", but his method is largely historical. His typical way of handling the specific topics is to assemble all of the pertinent texts, normally in chronological order, and to subject them to painstaking

analysis and comparison. Wippel lacks none of the desired tools and qualities. He has Thomas's metaphysical writings, sources and chief interlocutors at his fingertips, and virtually all of the secondary literature on them as well (up to about 1997). He is alert and informed on questions of textual variants, genre, dating and readership. On disputed issues, whether textual or substantive, his account of the various positions is unfailingly careful and complete. His ultimate aim is clearly philosophical, not just historical (surely another desideratum, at least for a thomist); no mean philosopher himself, he is not shy about subjecting Thomas's arguments to critical examination. Yet he has no discernible philosophical axe of his own to grind, such as might prejudice his readings.

In two introductory chapters Wippel lays out Thomas's teachings on the general nature and subject of metaphysics and on how its subject is first grasped by the human mind. The amount of scholarly controversy about these matters is likely to surprise many readers, and so is the complexity of Wippel's own interpretation. All agree that the subject of metaphysics, for Thomas, is "being in general", *ens commune*; and most, including Wippel, agree that this neither is nor even includes the divine being. But is it identical with what Thomas identifies as the very first object of human understanding? Is it known by abstraction? Does grasping it in a truly metaphysical way presuppose acknowledging the existence of immaterial beings?

Relying mainly on the famous fifth *Quaestio* of the commentary on Boethius's *De trinitate*, Wippel answers all of these questions in the negative. The subject of metaphysics is being precisely *qua* being, and this means a) *qua* real or existing, and b) not merely *qua* existing in the sensible or mobile things that we experience, but formally, according to its intrinsic nature. The knowledge of being as really existing is not the fruit of mere abstraction, which only reaches quiddities. Instead, it arises from judgment, wherein the mind first grasps that something exists. Moreover, the formal knowledge of real being as being, not just as sensible or mobile, requires yet another judgment, a discernment that being does not essentially depend upon matter. Thus Wippel argues that metaphysical being cannot be the mind's "first" knowledge in any temporal sense, but only in the "order of resolution". On the other hand, the requisite negative judgment or *separatio* from matter only concerns the possibility of immaterial beings, not their actual existence. It is precisely through metaphysical investigation, into the causes of being, that their actual existence is known. The fact that natural philosophy already reaches immobile being is pedagogically useful, Wippel argues, but not an essential presupposition. Metaphysics arrives at such being from its own principles.

The twelve chapters that follow are grouped into three parts: "Aquinas and the Problem of the One and the Many in the Order of Being", "The Essential Structure of Finite Being", and "From Finite Being to Uncreated Being".

The first part amounts to a presentation of Thomas's formal conception of *ens commune*, his understanding of the type of unity that "being" enjoys. Using parmenidian "monism" as an effective foil, Wippel sets forth the doctrines of the

analogy of being, participation in *esse*, essence-*esse* composition, and what he calls “relative nonbeing”. The prominence that he gives to essence-*esse* composition may remind readers of Gilson. Much of Wippel’s discussion, however, is in fact aimed against Gilson’s view that this doctrine depends upon prior knowledge of God. This issue pertains to the justification of the very plan of the book. While the account of essence and existence must stand almost at the very beginning of metaphysics, the account of God must stand at the end. If comparisons are of any help, Wippel’s approach to Thomas’s formal ontology seems rather more reminiscent of Cornelio Fabro than of Gilson. I refer to his emphasis on participation and on the principle that unreceived act is unlimited. However, the exceptionally fine chapter on relative nonbeing offers what to my mind is an important correction of Fabro’s “platonizing” tendency to assign a role to nothingness in the diversification of things.

Part 2 is about two other “compositions”, substance-accident and matter-form. A major concern throughout is how these are integrated into the doctrine of *esse*. There are also important treatments of their relation to Thomas’s distinction between two main metaphysical senses of “substance”, individual subject (*suppositum*) and essence. Along the way Wippel provides some very interesting remarks on Thomas’s view of the relation between metaphysics, logic and natural philosophy. Each of these disciplines has a way of approaching both the distinction between substance and accidents, or the derivation of the categories, and the distinction between prime matter and substantial form. I would also signal the section on the individuation of material substances (IX.4). Wippel negotiates the many shifts in Thomas’s presentation of the doctrine of individuation by quantified matter — shifts that he judges to be more than terminological — and in so doing he helps clear up a number of possible misunderstandings. He argues persuasively that Thomas views dimensive quantity not only as a principle of knowing the distinction between corporeal individuals but also as a real cause of the distinction itself, and that for all the importance that Thomas assigns to the individual’s act of being, he does not regard it as a principle of individuation.

The third and final part, of course, concerns the metaphysical doctrine of God. Wippel devotes three chapters to Thomas’s argumentation for God’s existence, offering extended treatments not only of the “five ways” (which he judges to be uneven in quality) but also of arguments presented in writings prior to the *Summa theologiae*. There follows a chapter on “quidditative knowledge of God and analogical knowledge”. The focus is not so much on particular divine attributes as on the general structure and limitations of our knowledge of them. Wippel shows how constant Thomas is in insisting that quidditative knowledge of God in this life is impossible, and he traces the development of the teaching that analogy nonetheless enables us to achieve some proper and substantial knowledge. This way of calling attention to the distinction between substantial knowledge and true quidditative knowledge should help lay to rest some common confusions. (For instance, by identifying essence and *esse* in God, Thomas is sometimes taken to mean that if we take the steps necessary to imagine a

“pure” instance of *esse*, we can actually arrive at what God is. But the point is that although of course the divine *esse* is pure, what “*esse*” signifies as said of God exceeds our grasp. The very fact that it is identical with what “essence” signifies, as said of him, is proof of this.) Because of what the distinction implies about the relation between the subject of metaphysics and God, it is also important for showing the very possibility of a “divine science” that is at once superior to metaphysics and somehow accessible to our minds.

Materially the book is of very high quality. I would register only one complaint: there ought to be an index of texts. Perhaps future editions could include one.

This is a magisterial work, years in the making and the culmination of a splendid career in the history of medieval philosophy. It should prove a precious resource for future work on the metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas, and indeed on metaphysics *tout court*.

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