

LAWRENCE DEWAN O.P., *Form and Being. Studies in Thomistic Metaphysics*, Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy, vol. 45, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C. 2006, pp. xiii + 265.

FOR years now Lawrence Dewan, O.P. has held a position of eminence among students of Thomas Aquinas, especially in North America. His writings, however, have had nothing like the proportionate circulation. The Catholic University of America Press has taken a welcome step toward remedying the situation with this handsome volume of thirteen Dewan papers, selected from among the more than a hundred he has produced over the years.

If there is a dominant theme running through these studies, Dewan says in the Introduction, it is «the centrality of form in metaphysics» (xi). There he also expresses the hope of publishing two more metaphysical collections, one on the doctrine of the act of being (*esse*), the other on natural theology. That he has begun with these underscores how very central he judges form to be, and perhaps also how urgent he regards its due consideration, even (or especially?) among Thomists. He reports an amusing bit of encouragement he once received from Marshall McLuhan: «Larry, be the first to discover formal causality!» (xii). To this Dewan only adds drily that «it was already a little late for that». But I dare say that at least in some respects his treatments do almost amount to a *rediscovery*.

Dewan takes full seriously Thomas's assertion that metaphysics considers and demonstrates *chiefly* by the formal cause. Putting form on display would be one of the metaphysician's main tasks. On Dewan's account, this is anything but a distraction from the metaphysician's primary interest, which of course is in *being*. The concern with form is directly in function of that. (Hence the book's title.) In fact setting the papers on form ahead of those on *esse* reflects Dewan's understanding of the intrinsic relation between these two "targets of metaphysical attention". For he gives full weight to Thomas's (innumerable) treatments of form as causal with respect to *esse* itself. Form is central *because* the metaphysician's chief aim is to understand *esse*.

So it is hardly that *esse* is merely left on the sidelines in these pages. That would be strange indeed for one schooled under Etienne Gilson, whose thought Dewan knows intimately, and Joseph Owens. (His dissertation, directed by Owens, was on *esse* in Capreolus.) «I am very much of the view», Dewan assures us, «that my teachers were entirely correct to feature Thomas's doctrine of *esse*» (xii). However, I cannot quite agree with the blurb on the dust jacket, which says that «Dewan's essays present what is essentially the same picture» as that of the «most prominent twentieth-century Thomistic metaphysicians». Surely there are significant, even essential differences in Dewan's picture – his picture of *esse* itself. A remark in the Introduction is indicative: «My contention is that a healthy conception of form should tend to confuse it with the act of being; this is precisely because of the kinship between the two» (xi).

This is undoubtedly connected with another difference that he signals between him and his teachers: he is «much more inclined than they were to stress the continuity of thought between Aristotle and Thomas, even as to the doctrine of the act of being» (xii). I think we can say that on Dewan's reading, although the *distinction*

between form and the act of being is much more explicit and thematic in Thomas, the act of being is nevertheless quite “on the scene” in Aristotle’s metaphysical vision. This is *because* form is so prominent in it. On the other hand, Dewan holds that «it is only by appreciating the implications of efficient causal hierarchy that the necessity to conclude to a real distinction between form and *esse* in caused things is rightly seen» (xi). This suggests an integral role for natural theology in the full doctrine of *esse*, something that Gilson and Owens certainly insisted on in their own way.

The papers are ordered not chronologically but somewhat systematically, from principles to conclusions and from the general to the particular. Mostly they are close readings of St Thomas. Dewan’s writing is always pellucid, and free of unnecessary technicalities or displays of extraneous erudition. (This is hardly for want of resources. A distinguished professor of modern philosophy once told me that he often queries Dewan on the reading of Descartes). One quickly senses how thorough his command of the material is. I mean, real philosophical command, not just a knack for pushing the pieces around. I do suspect though that taking full advantage of what he has to offer requires at least some previous familiarity with Thomas. Otherwise one may not appreciate his extraordinary sensitivity to what is *happening* in the texts – the decisions involved in the construction of a passage, the movements of thought across various presentations of a theme, and so forth – or his capacity to help re-enact the intellectual “sightings” that they are meant to convey.

A conspicuous feature of Dewan’s style of metaphysics is in fact his constant use of the language of vision. To practice metaphysics is not just to think “about” being. It is also, and more fundamentally, to see things “from the viewpoint” of being. That there even is such a viewpoint, and how to take it up and exploit it, are of course things that most of us have to be taught. But somehow we do see that there are others who see better than we do, and that our sight improves as we watch them. (Maritain once said of Thomas that «the contribution of Aristotle was decisive only in this sense that he helped Thomas to see». «Only»!). Dewan says he agrees with Gilson that «the soundest approach in philosophical education is to live a sort of apprenticeship with a great philosopher. I have lived an apprenticeship with Thomas Aquinas. That at this relatively late date in my life I am still presenting his views, as well as I can, simply means that I am still an apprentice» (xiii). Some of us even need another apprentice’s help to watch the master.

The first four essays are on the nature and principles of metaphysical knowledge itself. In the first (“What is Metaphysics?”), which he describes as a kind of caveat, he reflects on the somewhat paradoxical fact that for the human mind metaphysical vision is at once most certain and most difficult, and he surveys some of Plato’s and Aristotle’s strategies for reaching it. The second (“What Does It Mean to Study Being ‘As Being’?”) presents a kind of panorama of the vision’s field, showing that for Thomas being really does have a “nature”, though one that is intrinsically diversified and stratified hierarchically. This too involves something of a paradox: the more one succeeds in taking in the full scope, the absolute universality of this nature, the more one also appreciates its character as a *product*, which is to say, its derivation from something even larger.

In both essays the hylomorphic conception of sensible things is presented as fundamental, and as by no means a “once and for all” achievement. Indeed Dewan fin-

ds the pre-Socratic, materialistic mind-set to be a “perennial presence”. He dwells on this at length in the seventh piece (“The Importance of Substance”), where he diagnoses the ontology implicit in much of contemporary cosmological and evolutionary theory, and, drawing on Charles de Koninck, envisions therapies that would involve developing ideas about substantial form which Thomas only hints at. Thus we see that there is a difference between apprenticing and aping.

But if the stress on hylomorphism and the formal cause still seems a relapse into “mere Aristotelianism”, one should work through the eighth essay, “St. Thomas, Metaphysics, and Formal Causality”. This is an exegetical tour de force on Thomas’s treatment of the formal cause in his commentary on *Metaphysics* 7 and 8. (We might call it a study in Thomas’s own style of “apprenticeship”.) Dewan shows how Thomas tweaks the text toward a *stronger* emphasis on hylomorphism, in the places where Aristotle falls back on a merely “logical” consideration of substance in terms of genus and differentia. Thomas calls the analysis of sensible substance in terms of matter and form the “philosophical” one. The further point is that it is through this analysis that the true status of form as “cause of being” comes to light.

The third and fourth papers (“St. Thomas and the Seed of Metaphysics” and “St. Thomas, Physics, and the Principle of Metaphysics”) present a thesis that sets Dewan apart from a good many other Thomists. This is that the *ens* which is the subject of metaphysics, or of which metaphysics seeks the principles and causes, is nothing other than the *ens* that St Thomas identifies as the *primum cognitum*, the first item grasped by the human mind. Although we first apprehend *ens* in material things, Dewan argues, matter is never included in its own *ratio*; and although it is reached by abstraction, having thus the character of a simple intelligible *species* or *form*, it is nonetheless already somehow inclusive of *esse* (and so is rightly denominated *ens*). It does not include matter because it is an apprehension of form, not determinately as the sort of form that inheres in matter, but simply as form. And it includes *esse* for the same reason: it is an apprehension of form as form, which is to say, as act – as that according to which a thing is “in act”, a “being” in the proper sense of the term.

One is struck here, among other things, by the nobility that Dewan finds Thomas attributing to the operation of abstraction in general, and in particular to the human mind’s most primitive movements. These “pertain to wisdom”. This means that they establish an “immediate relation” between the mind and the highest cause. The mobilization of this relation is in fact the very life of faith. It is thus in a very strong sense that Dewan can endorse the assertion in *Fides et ratio* (§ 64), that «the human being is by nature a philosopher». Dewan can even say a “first” philosopher, a metaphysician – of course only in germ – which, I dare say, is what *Fides et ratio* intends.

Dewan’s conception of metaphysics as “first” philosophy is also remarkably strong. Although he does not put it quite this way, I would venture to say that on his view, metaphysics is not just the most fundamental or the highest of the philosophical sciences. It is more like the primary *sense* of philosophy. That is, taken unqualifiedly, philosophy *is* metaphysics, and nothing else is philosophy at all except in conjunction with it. This means that metaphysics is not in play only at the extremes of the philosophical quest, nor concerned only with the broadest generalities. It somehow gets into everything – everything *about* everything. A striking example of this is in the

sixth essay, “St Thomas and Analogy: the Logician and the Metaphysician”, where Dewan argues that even concerning names, which most would regard only as matter for logic, the ultimate determinations belong to the metaphysician – the one who considers the *being* of names, which of course is in relation to the beings they name.

The fifth essay, “St Thomas and the Principle of Causality”, concerns the intelligibility of causal notions. One naturally thinks of Hume in this connection, and Dewan finds Hume’s position to be the quite logical result of having neglected – can you guess? – the formal cause. For the formal cause is the most, and most immediately, intelligible of the causes. The intelligibility of the others depends on it. Efficient causality, for instance, can only be understood as the giving of form. In a masterful piece of metaphysical reduction, Dewan goes on to explain the greater intelligibility of the formal cause by its greater proximity to the nature of *substance* rather than *accident*; that is, to the more intelligible mode of *being*. It is a fine example of an exercise in seeing things – in this case, causes – from the viewpoint of being.

It is in essays nine, ten and eleven that the causal role of form with respect to *esse* is given really sustained treatment. The ninth (“St. Thomas, Metaphysical Procedure, and the Formal Cause”) brings out the *per se* nature of the relationship between form and *esse*, the connection being even tighter than that of a thing with its properties. In the tenth (“St. Thomas, Form, and Incorruptibility”), Dewan surveys the various discussions of the immortality of the human soul produced over Thomas’s career, bringing out the gradual progression from “physical” accounts – based on the soul’s lack of contraries or on its not being subject to motion – toward what Thomas will eventually regard as the most proper and explanatory one. It rests on a metaphysical vision, the very vision of form as *per se* cause of *esse*. Interestingly, this account brings with it the possibility of seeing the soul’s subsistence not as a mere accompaniment of its nature as form, but as pertaining to its very perfection in that nature. Finally, the eleventh paper (“St. Thomas and the Distinction between Form and *Esse* in Caused Things”) provides the explanation of the need that I touched on earlier, that of bringing in causal hierarchy in order to grasp the reality of the “real distinction”.

The twelfth and thirteenth essays help to remove any suspicion that metaphysical “abstraction” must involve losing sight of the dynamism and concreteness of the real. Of these too there is such a thing as a vision from the viewpoint of being. The focus of essay twelve is on the metaphysical notion of “nature”, essence as ordered to operation: “Nature as a Metaphysical Object”. Here Dewan argues for the presence of the notion in the very conception of metaphysics as a science, and then he works through *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 77, which is on the relation between the human soul and its powers, and which he regards precisely as Thomas’s metaphysical exhibition of the soul *qua* a nature. The final paper, on “The Individual as a Mode of Being according to Thomas Aquinas”, urges the need to conceive individuality not just in terms of the distinction between the particular and the universal, but also and above all as the primary mode of being: that of *the subsisting thing* (as opposed to mere invariants). Along the way Dewan disputes the rather common view that in all things the true “principle of individuation” is *esse*. It is so only in the one instance where *esse* subsists.