

## REVIEW

*St. Thomas Aquinas*. By RALPH MCINERNY. The University of Notre Dame Press 1982 (reprint of Twayne Publishers 1977). Pp. 172. \$5.95.

McInerny has succeeded at a demanding task: he has written a compact and lucid introduction to the philosophy of Aquinas that manages to be philosophical at the same time. By a liberal use of quotation and paraphrase McInerny presents Aquinas's own arguments for evaluation, drawing us into the inner works of his philosophy. This method, coupled with McInerny's sure touch, makes Aquinas speak directly and forcefully as a philosopher. McInerny's style remains cogent while ranging across a wide variety of topics; those unfamiliar with mediæval philosophy will find it an invaluable introduction. The seasoned scholar too will find plenty of interest here, such as McInerny's striking analysis of the *praeambula fidei* and his exquisite explanation of participated perfection.

McInerny's format is unusual but effective. After a brief chapter in which he sketches the life of St. Thomas, McInerny presents Aquinas's philosophy in close connection with its various sources, devoting a chapter apiece to Aristotle, Boethius, and the platonism of Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius. Such an approach allows McInerny to discuss many differing topics in a natural and coherent manner. The book concludes with a chapter on Aquinas's view of theology and its relation to both faith and philosophy. Certain themes are developed throughout, in particular the nature of metaphysics.

Aristotle was not immediately accepted in the thirteenth century; in the eyes of many he seemed to teach doctrines inimical to the Christian faith. First, Aristotle seems to argue for the eternity of the world, a view incompatible with the doctrine of creation. McInerny gracefully presents Aquinas's well-known view that the eternity of the world can be neither proven nor disproven. Second, the so-called "Latin Averroists" read Aristotle as denying personal immortality in *De anima* 3.5. McInerny carefully proceeds through Aquinas's painstaking analysis and rejection of this as a tenable philosophical interpretation of Aristotle, based on the immaterial reception of forms in the intellect and the qualitative distinction of the sensitive and intellectual faculties of the soul. Although McInerny mentions Aquinas's belief in immortality and the resurrection of the body, disappointingly he

does not give these reasons (for immortality see *Summa theologiae* Ia.75.6; the need for resurrection is grounded in the theory of the soul as an “incomplete substance” given in Ia.76.2 *ad* 2 and Ia.76.5).

Aristotle’s moral philosophy is distinctively non-Christian; Aquinas adapted it for the faith by distinguishing natural and supernatural ends, thereby amplifying the Aristotelian framework. Here McNerny weaves several different texts together into a single presentation of the main tenets of Aquinas’s ethics. What is distinctive about man as man is that he has free will and may choose his actions. By the doctrine of natural law certain self-evident moral principles are known to us, *e. g.* the first principle of practical reason, that the good should be pursued and evil avoided (*Summa theologiae* IaIIae.94.2). This leads to one of McNerny’s more striking points, that theoretical moral knowledge —moral science—is generally useless, for the precepts of natural law and their consequences are too abstract to guide us in concrete situations. Rather, we require practical, not speculative, wisdom in knowing which course of action to adopt by means of the practical syllogism. McNerny also sees this as providing scope for free will: although we necessarily will the good, as the formal object of the will, we are not determined to any particular course of action. But here I must register my disagreement with McNerny; if we must choose the good then we will always choose the course of action which is best, and this is hardly “free will.” Duns Scotus recognized this point in his *Opus Oxoniense* IV d. 49 q. 10, and some have observed a change in St. Thomas himself (see Karl Riesenhuber, *Die Transcendenz der Freiheit zum Guten*, Munich 1971), to seeing the will as the efficient rather than the material cause and the intellect as the final rather than the formal cause. McNerny does not take account of this. Nevertheless, he reviews Aquinas’s argument that the good is single and identifies the ultimate final end as God and beatitude, thus christianizing Aristotle.

McNerny next turns to St. Thomas’s debt to Boethius, beginning with his early commentary on Boethius’s *De Trinitate*, and in an extended discussion tries to specify the exact nature of metaphysics. The standard view of Aquinas takes metaphysics to be defined by degrees of abstraction, citing Aristotle (*Metaphysics* 6.1.8–10): physics deals only with matter and motion; mathematics with only matter; metaphysics with only being *qua* being. But McNerny notes that Aquinas only allows two forms of abstraction, namely the abstraction of a whole (proper to physics) and the abstraction

of a form (proper to mathematics). Metaphysics, then, is not arrived at through either kind of abstraction. To resolve this dilemma, McNerny notes that abstractive judgements are one form of *separatio* (judgements of separation). He then suggests that, for Aquinas, metaphysics is characterized by the separative judgement that there are incorporeal items which exist, such as God and angels. If he is correct, then this can also serve as a polemical answer to those who see no need for a discipline beyond physics and mathematics. There is not much textual evidence, but McNerny makes a plausible case.

To make his case, however, McNerny gives short shrift to the view that the separative judgement in question is that there is a real distinction between essence and existence. This view deserves a better hearing. McNerny does go on, though, to discuss this distinction, and to his credit not only gives the classic phoenix-argument from the *De ente et essentia* to establish the difference between essence and existence, but also gives the full technical argument from Aquinas's commentary on Boethius's *De hebdomadibus*, too often ignored by scholars. McNerny ends this chapter with some brief remarks about free will and determinism.

McNerny then takes up the Platonism of Augustine and the Pseudo-Dionysius, separating such 'platonism' into two components: the role of Ideas, and the nature of participation. When discussing the Ideas, McNerny first treats their ontological role in the problem of universals, and gives a concise outline of Aquinas's solution by the so-called 'doctrine of the three-fold universal'. Here again I must say that platonic Ideas could not have solved the problem of universals as the problem was understood by Boethius, for the universal was meant to enter into the metaphysical constitution of the particular, which Ideas notoriously cannot do. Ideas are therefore irrelevant to the mediæval problem of universals. McNerny then treats of the epistemological role of Ideas in connection with the theories of abstraction and illumination. Finally, McNerny discusses participation in connection with the names of God and the distinction between essential and participated perfection. His discussion of these points is the finest I have ever read, and clearly states how the platonism St. Thomas rejected in most cases had to be employed when reasoning about God. This discussion alone is worth the price of the book.

In the last chapter McNerny takes up Aquinas's views on theology. He starts by outlining the argument of Werner Jaeger that the *Metaphysics*

vacillates between two irreconcilable conceptions of metaphysics—as the study of being *qua* being and as the study of God—and so is not a unified work but rather a patchwork quilt of essays composed at different times. While acknowledging the useful results of the philological research that Jaeger inspired, McNerny gracefully illustrates Aquinas’s view that metaphysics is in one sense theology and equally is the study of being *qua* being. Aquinas reconciles Jaeger’s “irreconcilable conceptions” by denying the possibility of a science which alone studied God (preface to his commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*). There is theology as metaphysics, which investigates the world according to the canons of philosophy, and there is theology as the study of revealed truths, but there is no philosophical science of God.

With that, McNerny takes up several questions about theology and faith. He analyzes several senses of ‘belief’ and ‘knowledge’, attending particularly to the analogical character of religious language, and then asks whether it is rational to believe the doctrines of the Christian faith. Here McNerny is excellent: he introduces St. Thomas’s notion of the *praeambula fidei*, and notes that some propositions which are to be *believed* may also be *known* to the theologian. This has always seemed peculiar, but McNerny uses his earlier analysis of knowledge and belief to show how these propositions can be both known and believed, and then suggests that such propositions illustrate the rationality of faith: we can come to know in some instances that what is taught in Scripture is true’ we never discover that it teaches what is false; thus Scripture is known to be a reliable guide to truth. Therefore it is only rational to believe other propositions found in Scripture, even those which are in principle unverifiable in this life, just as it is rational to believe any reliable source. This discussion is clear, cogent, and remarkably persuasive.

McNerny concludes by hoping that his book will cause the reader to turn to the works of Aquinas directly. He should have every confidence, for his presentation invites the reader to think through each issue and problem as it is raised. This work is a *sine qua non* for all those interested in mediaeval philosophy.

Some final words of caution. McNerny’s translations are rarely wrong but they are sometimes misleading, for instance the translation of *secundum quid* as “broadly speaking” on p. 37, or the phrase on p. 50 “which his power voluntarily produces according to his image,” which should be translated

as “which proceeds from Divine Power according to his will.” Second, there are several minor errors a more careful job of proofreading would have caught, the most serious of which is that Augustine is incorrectly said on p. 107 to have been born in 345 AD rather than 354 AD. And finally, there are many classical Thomistic theses about which McNerny says little or nothing: the unity of substantial form; the *a posteriori* proofs of God’s existence in the Five Ways; the potential nature of prime matter; the primacy of the intellect over the will; matter as the principle of individuation. But McNerny’s choice of theme is careful and judicious, and there is no reason to favour these theses over McNerny’s selection. He has written, quite simply, the best short book on Aquinas available.