

likewise from the omniscience of God to the omniscience of the beatific vision? Yet Aquinas's point is more modest: that the beatific vision has no end follows as a consequence of the condition of the thing known, namely God, and since God satisfies all desire no soul would ever voluntarily turn aside from that vision. At no stage does any creature acquire any divine attribute.

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THOMAS AQUINAS AND CONTEMPLATION by Rik Van Nieuwenhove, *Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2021, pp. viii + 220, £65.00, hbk*

For Aquinas, the ultimate goal of a human life is, of course, the beatific vision understood as a state of contemplation. So the reader will, naturally, expect this book to provide a route into core themes in his understanding of the human person and the conditions of their fulfilment in relationship to God, and on this point they will not be disappointed: this work can be read very profitably as an account not only of contemplation, as Aquinas understands it, but also of various allied topics that stand at the centre of his account of reality and the nature of our access to it. To set the scene, the second and third chapters are focally concerned, in turn, with key elements of his epistemology and metaphysics, and there follow chapters on faith, charity, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the question of how to understand the relationship between the active and contemplative lives, and how thereby to represent the distinctive character of the Dominican vocation.

The beatific vision has been a topic of lively theological and philosophical debate in recent years, and the final chapter of this book is reserved for a consideration of this theme. But the bulk of the text addresses Aquinas's treatment of contemplation as realised in our *ante-mortem* lives, and by the author's own reckoning, it is this broader focus that constitutes the book's claim to originality, in terms of subject matter. As one would expect, some of its key moves depend on differentiating between the various senses that the notion of contemplation can bear in Aquinas's writings, notably these four: philosophical contemplation, theological contemplation that is occupied with the data of revelation, the kind of contemplation that is proper to the life of the ordinary Christian and, finally, the contemplation that comprises the beatific vision. One target of the book is the view, which the author traces in a range of recent work, that Aquinas favours a 'charismatic' or 'sapiential' view of theological contemplation – and against this reading, he argues that the

gifts of the Holy Spirit, including wisdom, are indeed necessary for the contemplation that belongs to the Christian life broadly conceived, but not for theological contemplation. Relatedly, Professor Van Nieuwenhove considers how wisdom, ‘in which the act of contemplation comes to fruition’ (p.4), can be variously understood, distinguishing three senses that are particularly important for Aquinas: wisdom as *sacra doctrina*; as one of the cognitive gifts of the Holy Spirit; and as an Aristotelian virtue.

As one would hope to find given its title, the book is mostly exegetical in character, and Van Nieuwenhove charts, very beautifully and lucidly, not only the various strands of Aquinas’s understanding of notions such as contemplation and wisdom, but also, in a number of cases, the evolution in his perspective and the relationship between his views and those of various of his contemporaries, notably Albert and Bonaventure. A particularly striking example is the author’s account of Aquinas’s developing understanding of the nature of theology. In his *Commentary on the Sentences*, Aquinas takes the articles of faith, the first principles of theology, to be in some sense self-evident, and he assigns a role to the gift of wisdom in enabling a ‘deiform contemplation’ (*deiformem contemplationem*) of these foundational principles (p.105). By contrast, in later works, such as the *Commentary on Boethius’s De Trinitate*, dating from around 1265, Aquinas secures theology’s standing as a ‘science’ by representing it as a ‘subalternate’ science, which like other such sciences takes its principles from a higher science, here the science of God’s self-knowledge. (Compare the case of music, whose first principles are taken from mathematics.) Van Nieuwenhove sees this shift in Aquinas’s position as central to his mature understanding of theology’s status as a properly constituted form of enquiry, and to his progressive ‘shunning of a more charismatic, sapiential type of theology’ (p.105), since on his later view, there is no need to appeal to the gifts of the Holy Spirit to explain the Christian’s apprehension of the self-evidence of the articles of faith.

At several points in the book, Van Nieuwenhove seeks not simply to expound Aquinas’s view but to some extent to defend it, and this is one such point. Having introduced some examples designed to buttress Aquinas’s position, the author concludes: ‘All disciplines (apart from those that operate from principles *per se nota*) are characterised by a fiduciary rationality, starting out with key assumptions they simply accept. Theology is no exception’ (p.110). The reader may wonder a little about whether this parallel is enough to rebut concerns about the starting point of theological enquiry. For Aquinas, properly Christian assent to the articles of faith is grounded, of course, in the grace-infused, charity-informed movement of the will – and this picture might suggest that love can play an epistemic role and track the truth of the foundational contents of the Christian faith. If so, then it seems that there will, after all, be a rather significant difference between the procedures of Christian theological enquiry and those of other kinds of investigation, allowing for the fact that in each case the truth of their starting point is not self-evident, or capable of being established

within the terms of the relevant discipline. This reading of faith also suggests that its content will be fixed in part by the affections, which might seem to invite some qualification of Van Nieuwenhove's emphasis on the intellectualist bent of Aquinas's account of theological contemplation. Of course, the author is very much aware of the challenge that such issues pose, potentially, to a core claim of the book. As he says, if 'Aquinas's position [on the nature of faith] is open to the charge of voluntarism ... it would undermine a central argument of this study and move Aquinas's theological outlook in a more affective direction' (p.98) – and the reader should judge for themselves the cogency of his response, only one strand of which I have cited here.

There are many other fascinating discussions in this text: on the relationship of the active and contemplative life, on the sense in which earthly contemplation anticipates the beatific vision, by virtue of involving a non-discursive insight, or *intuitus simplex*, on the influence of Neoplatonic sources in shaping Aquinas's understanding of the distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus*, on the person-relative nature of the distinction between philosophical and theological argument, on the role of God-involving desire in ordering our relations to creatures, on the evolution of Aquinas's conception of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, on the idea of contemplation as a possibility not only for the philosophical sage, or intellectual sophisticate, but the *vetula* – and so on. No one who is interested in the question of what Aquinas might have to teach us about human life, and the conditions of our flourishing, could fail to be excited by this wide-ranging, rigorous, and judicious study – one that inspires as well as instructs.

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ASPECTS OF TRUTH: A NEW RELIGIOUS METAPHYSICS by Catherine Pickstock, *Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2020, pp. xx + 324, £29.99, hbk*

It seems best to begin with the concluding chapter. Three things are required if there is to be truth, Pickstock says there. One is an inherent connection between objects and subjects, between things and spirits, between things known and knowing minds. A second is that this connection cannot be exhausted as contingent but must somehow reflect the eternal, participate in it, because if there is no ultimate stability there is no truth. And the third is that the eternal cannot be a matter of ineffable being but must itself be dynamic or self-expressing: the eternal or the infinite must itself be