

Book Notes

Recent Books on Thomas Aquinas

Leo Elders. *The Philosophy of Nature of St. Thomas Aquinas*. Pp. 387. (Frankfurt am Main and New York: Peter Lang, 1997.)

This book by the well-known Dutch scholar Leo Elders purports to examine the philosophy of nature and anthropology of Aquinas. In part, the book is an attempt to relate Elder's own controversial reading of the teaching of Thomas on man's place in nature to contemporary issues in the natural sciences. By doing this, Elders aims to argue that the vision of the natural world advanced by Thomas is still relevant to modern philosophy and that a number of important questions which are prompted by the engagement of philosophy with the natural sciences can find a credible answer in Thomism. Elders prefaces his discussion of these concerns with a long discussion of the classical philosophy of nature which Thomas inherited from Aristotle and Neoplatonism. He poses the question, 'What place does such a philosophy of nature have in our time?' He goes on to argue that modern scientific accounts of man's relationship to nature omit many important features of this older world view. In particular, he contends, modern treatments of man's place in the universe tend to view human beings as isolated from rather than as integrated within the natural order. Elders illustrates this view by contrasting Thomism with Darwinism and Marxism, these latter theories being the best representatives, he thinks, of so-called modern 'scientism'. What is remarkable about this book is not only its antiquated reading of Thomas – a reading which owes much to the NeoThomism of the early part of this century – but also its interpretation of the 'modern' theories that it seeks to oppose. It may well be true that certain versions of scientism can be opposed by recourse to arguments which lie at the heart of Thomist anthropology and natural philosophy. But it is quite another thing to claim, as Elders implicitly does, that a view of man's place within the natural order which is parasitic upon a thirteenth-century reconstruction of Aristotelian 'science' can be transposed to the concerns of the late twentieth century. The anachronism which lies at the heart of this strategy will no doubt alienate many readers from the subject matter of this book. This is to be regretted given the inherent interest of Aquinas's natural philosophy and anthropology.

MWFS

Ralph McInerny. *Ethica Thomistica. The Moral Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas*. Second Edition. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1997.) Pp. ix + 129. £11.95 pbk.

First published in 1982, *Ethica Thomistica* is widely recognized as one of the better introductions to Aquinas's moral philosophy. Long out of print, students and teachers will welcome its reappearance. In this slightly revised edition, McInerny revisits the basic elements of Aquinas's moral philosophy, providing persuasive summaries of his thinking on: the moral activities of man, the distinctiveness of moral goodness, practical reason and its relation to natural law, the bases of judging acts good and evil, the roles of intellect and will in voluntary activity, and the functions of prudence and conscience. The book is characterized by an absence of jargon and a commitment to relate Aquinas's simply and without philosophical idealization. McInerny's stated aim is to put before the reader the distinctive element of Aquinas's moral philosophy. What is initially striking about this philosophy is its responsiveness to what an agent already knows and acts upon. In this sense, the discipline of moral philosophy for Aquinas, as for his mentor Aristotle, is always answerable to the conditions of human life. This means that judgements arrived at in the domain of moral philosophy have necessarily to be tested against the exigencies and vicissitudes of moral practice. McInerny successfully brings out this dimension of Aquinas's thought in his discussion of prudence, conscience and the natural law. A further stimulating feature of the book is its pith and sensible discussion of Aquinas's account of the voluntary. The beauty of this discussion is the manner in which McInerny successfully brings out Aquinas's double emphasis upon the roles of the intellect and will in the formation of moral judgement. This is sufficient to establish that the beginning student ought to be aware that the relationship will and intellect in Aquinas's thought is more complex than is so often assumed. For this and for other compelling reasons, *Ethica Thomistica* recommends itself as an appropriate point of demarcation for the study of Aquinas's moral philosophy.

MWFS

Carlo Leget. *Living With God. Thomas Aquinas on the Relation between Life on Earth and 'Life' after Death*. (Leuven: Peeters, 1997.) Pp. viii + 304. BEF 1100 pbk.

In this lively study Carlo Leget attempts to make sense of the notions of 'life' and 'death' as they appear in the theology of Aquinas. As such, this book presents itself as one of the first studies in English to bring these notions under a common method of assessment. Drawing heavily on the work of Dutch-

speaking Thomists like F. De Grijns (Leget's book is published in a series sponsored by the Thomas Instituut at Utrecht), Leget's work attempts to bring together diffuse and difficult passages in order to forge a consistent reading. To this end, Leget surveys and comments upon what Aquinas has to say on the meaning of life, the nature of our mortality and our 'life' in the world to come. His main argument is that we ought to see what Thomas has to say about life on earth and 'life' after death as being two interrelated modes of living with God. In the course of putting forward this interesting thesis, Leget has many noteworthy things on Aquinas's view of death and related issues. The upshot of his remarks is to make Thomas views appear relevant to many contemporary discussions on death especially those which centre on the so-called 'deprivational account', a concept which has attracted much attention and comment in recent English-speaking studies of this issue. All of Leget's findings are heavily supported by wide textual illustration which evince a wide and flexible understanding of Aquinas's philosophical and theological corpus. The only problem with Leget's book, as I see it, concerns his somewhat idiosyncratic use of English. His style is occasionally wooden and frequently awkward. The effect of these infelicities conspire to make crucial points of his argument unclear and suggestive. On this evidence, I would infer that he is not a native speaker of English. If this is true, the interests of his book would have been served if the publishers had employed a competent copy editor. That said, Leget's study is deserving of study among Aquinas scholars.

Thomas F. O'Meara O.P. *Thomas Aquinas Theologian*. (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997.) Pp. xxi + 302.

The aim of Father O'Meara's book is to present Aquinas as a theologian and teacher who exerted a powerful influence on western thought since his death in 1274. Drawing on the tradition of his own and Aquinas's religious order, the Dominicans, O'Meara seeks to communicate in great detail the faith and vision of the Angelic Doctor. Introducing readers to the historical and theological world of Aquinas, O'Meara examines the *Summa theologiae* in terms of its purpose and structure. He presents it as a summary of the great themes of Christianity, themes which range from the Triune divine being to the person in receipt of grace as being in the image of God, and to membership of the body of Christ and life beyond corporeal existence. This study of the *Summa* is then complemented with an overview of six centuries of interpretation of Aquinas, a study which aims to reveal how many diverse and even competing schools and traditions have advocated and employed Thomistic thought. Later chapters of the book are devoted to the state of contemporary theology and world religions. While O'Meara's book is aimed

at a theological as opposed to a philosophical constituency, the philosopher will still find something of interest in its pages. Of particular interest is O'Meara's concise and instructive representation of the history of Thomism, a history which will certainly serve the needs of a philosopher trying to make sense of Aquinas's difficult views on, for example, analogy and trinity, as it will the theologian. If there is a defect in the book as a whole, it might be said that O'Meara's work is very reticent to sketch in convincing detail the exact relationship that exists between theology and philosophy in Aquinas's system. The underlying assumption of the work is that Aquinas is first and foremost a theologian. While there is much evidence to support this view, one thinks of the recent influential studies of Jean-Pierre Torrell, the reader would have been better served by an attempt to take seriously the view that there are alternative readings of Aquinas's intellectual project and that these readings contribute to a portrait of Aquinas's intellectual project and that these readings contribute to a portrait of Aquinas as a self-conscious 'philosopher'. These doubts aside, one can safely recommend O'Meara's thoughtful book as a welcome addition to Thomistic studies.

C. J. F. Martin. *Thomas Aquinas: God and Explanations*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997.) Pp. xx + 212. £40.00 hbk.

Christopher Martin is well known to English-speaking students of medieval philosophy as an accomplished translator and interpreter of Aquinas's work. Many have long urged him to produce a substantial work which would finally do justice to his masterly insights and considerable knowledge of Aquinas and other medieval philosophers. For this reason his new book, *Thomas Aquinas God and Explanations*, will be welcomed in many quarters. It is to be regretted, however, that the resulting work does not do justice to Martin's abilities as set out above. In many ways the book he has produced is more about Martin and his own confessional concerns than about Aquinas. As a work on Aquinas it fails on three counts. First, the book exclusively focuses on well known and much discussed parts of the Thomistic corpus. Secondly, the book fails to deal with most of the important recent studies on Aquinas, especially those coming from continental Europe, and thirdly, Martin's work pays scant regard to Aquinas's own historical and theological context. What the reader is invited to consider is a picture of Aquinas which has its origins in the work of Peter Geach and Martin's very personal commentary upon Geach's work. The work is frequently punctuated with tedious personal asides and confessional apologies which will no doubt distance a great many readers from seriously engaging with the points Martin raises. One can not help but feel that this book is an opportunity missed. Martin has real philosophical ability and philological skill. If these genuine abilities can not

be harnessed to produce a worthy book on Aquinas, then it is difficult to see what can. It is further regrettable that the issues which Martin has chosen to write about, the concepts of demonstration and explanation and their place in Aquinas's discussion of the 'Five Ways', are of intrinsic interest and are presently crying out for imaginative reinterpretation. While there is something to commend in Martin's discussion of the Five Ways, particularly if they contrasted with earlier treatments like those offered by Kenny, his narrow focus and lack of attention to other parts of Thomas's writings – here one thinks of the *Commentary on the Sentences* and the *Commentary on the Book of Causes* – undermine some of the more suggestive points he advances. To sum up, one is left with the impression that *Thomas Aquinas God and Explanations* should have been a much better book. It is to be hoped that Martin will eventually produce a book on Aquinas which his considerable talents merit.

MWFS