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*Review of Some Philosophical Issues in Moral Matters:  
the Collected Ethical Writings of Joseph Owens*

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**Joseph Owens**

*Some Philosophical Issues in Moral Matters:  
the Collected Ethical Writings of Joseph Owens.*

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This collection brings together a number of papers of one of the towering Christian philosophers of the century, Fr. Joseph Owens. Owens is most recognized for his contemporary expositions of Thomistic metaphysics, and for the profound perspective he brought to bear on the metaphysical thought of Aristotle. But, in the burst of productivity that has marked the past twenty years of Owens' career, much of his attention has turned to Aristotelian ethics. We do not (yet) have a synthesis of Owens' thought on Aristotle's ethics, comparable to *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics* (Toronto: 1951, rev. 1963 and 1973), but the gap is partially filled by the present collection.

All of the papers deal with ethical matters, though some do so less directly than others. Many, but not all, bear on the ethical thought of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas. They are marked by Owens' clear and vivid style. As is to be expected in such a collection, there is a good deal of repetition, as Owens often approaches the same general issues from slightly different perspectives. I here discuss only four major points that Owens makes in these 500 rich pages.

1) Owens argues that it is indeed the case that an 'ought' cannot be derived from an 'is' statement, and that Aristotle recognized this fact. That is why Aristotle, and after him, St. Thomas Aquinas, insisted that the first principles of ethics have as their origin a human act of reason: choice. Owens argues that this is why the goal of ethical action, the Aristotelian *kalon*, differs from 'values' posited by contemporary thinkers, which are thought to exist in the world independently of human will.

2) Owens exploits the above point to explain how Aristotelian ethics is flexible enough to account for the fact that different people, in different cultures, will make different ethical judgments. Ethical first principles are due to choice, and these people choose differently on account of differing habituation. Yet the common truth of human nature and the stability of a common culture keep this flexibility within certain limits (52-4, 168-75).

3) Such flexibility accounts for the possibility of universality in moral science, and is what enables Aristotle to appeal to 'right reason' (*orthos logos*) as an ethical criterion. Owens worries about a theoretical circularity here: right reason depends on cultural habituation, which depends on someone's prior right reason, and so forth. Owens claims that a Christian, committed to the temporal beginning of the world, would find this circularity intolerable, and would avoid it by appeal to a supernaturally revealed morality (228, 238).

4) Owens argues that the open-ended character of Aristotelian ethics is to its credit. It is this which allowed it to be imported into the Christian theological framework, as in the ethics of St. Thomas Aquinas. Owens argues that this strengthens Aristotelian ethics in a number of respects. Following Maritain, Owens asserts that revelation has identified the true ultimate object of intellectual contemplation, of which Aristotle was unaware (136-7). The revelation of divine rewards and punishments provides an effective deterrent against evil, which, in Owens' view, is missing in the original formulation of Aristotle's ethics (240-3). Only such theological grounding leads to proper respect for human life (292).

The first of these points is central to Owens' understanding of Aristotelian ethics. In my view, however, it is questionable. To support it, Owens repeatedly appeals to two passages. One is *NE* III 5, 1113b7-21, in which Aristotle compares the relation of agent to ethical action with the relation between a parent and child. Owens interprets this as meaning that the ethical choice one makes is bringing something totally new into the world, an 'image of what is dominant in oneself' (41, see also 235), but surely this is an over-interpretation. The relation of parent to child is Aristotle's standard example of efficient causation (*Phys* II 3, 194b30-1), and Aristotle need not be saying

more than that the efficient cause of a chosen action (not the ethical principle that governs this action) is the one performing the action. The other is *Metaph* E 1, 1025b18-27, in which Aristotle denies that first philosophy is a practical science, on the grounds that the principle of things that are done lies in the doer, i.e., in choice. Owens interprets this as meaning that practical science differs from theoretical science insofar as the first principles of a practical science such as ethics have their origin in human choice, not in the being of things antecedent to choice (159-61). Again, the passage need not be read in this way. The context shows that Aristotle is distinguishing the sciences of physics and ethics not on the basis of the source of the principles of each science, but on the basis of the efficient cause of the change that is studied by each kind of thought. Physics studies things with efficient causes internal to the changing substance at issue; practical science studies changes in the world of which the efficient cause is the choice of the human agent. That is not to say that the first principles of that study are themselves chosen. Owens' view that Aristotle takes the first principles of ethics to be chosen also runs into problems when considering the central role given in his ethics to the biological notion of the 'good' of each substance, its intrinsic final cause. Animals without reason nonetheless have a *telos* which is their true good, although they do not choose it; the argument of *NE* I 7 identifies a life of rational activity, that is, happiness, as just such a good in the case of human beings.

All of the essays are reprinted, with the exception of the Introduction, written especially for this volume. This piece itself is a gem that admirers of Owens' writing will not want to miss. In presenting an overview of the themes of these essays, Owens sheds new light on the issues they raise, situating their problems in the context of the larger issue of the possibility of a Christian philosophy.

The volume is unfortunately marred by many typographical errors, many of which obviously resulted from lax proofreading following the computer scanning of the original articles.

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