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Book Review of *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*, by Fran O’Rourke

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The importance of doctrines found in the Latin translations of the late fifth-century Greek works of pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite for the formation of the theological and philosophical thought of Thomas Aquinas is obvious to anyone well-versed in the texts of Aquinas. However, it is by no means obvious how Aquinas read, understood, and transformed the Christian Neoplatonic theology of this apparent disciple of Proclus or Damascius so as to make it an integral part of his understanding of God and creation. O'Rourke rightly conceived his task as twofold: first, the texts of Dionysius must be properly understood; second, the interpretation and use of these by Aquinas can itself be assessed and appreciated in its own thirteenth-century context. In the first part of the book he examines the question of knowledge of God, with one chapter devoted to Dionysius and a second devoted to Aquinas's use of "Dionysian Elements" in discovering God. Part Two examines their teachings on the "Transcendence of Being and Good" in chapters 3 and 4. Part Three contains three chapters on the "Unity of Divine Causation in Dionysius": "Transcendent Causality and Existence," "Dionysian Elements in Aquinas' Notion of Being," and "Goodness of God as Subsistent Being." The last of the book's four parts concerns creation in Dionysius and related matters, such as emanation, causation, freedom, etc., in Aquinas.

The aim of the book is succinctly expressed by O'Rourke in his preface, namely, "to show that, in the encounter of Aquinas with Dionysius, there emerges an integral and comprehensive vision of existence, a vision embracing the finite and the infinite, depicting the universe in its procession from, and return to, the Absolute, and according to each grade of reality, including man, its place in the hierarchy of being" (xv). This book is certainly welcome for its effort to deal with a great many of the metaphysical concerns in Aquinas's use of Dionysius throughout his many works. Still, it lacks substantial discussion of important formative influences on the thinking of Aquinas from the work of Avicenna (with respect to abstraction, efficient causality of existence, and the essence/existence distinction), Boethius (on *esse* and *id quod est*), and Albert (whose lectures on Dionysius Aquinas heard). Nevertheless, the author moves without this directly into discussion of important related metaphysical concerns in the most important parts of this work, Parts Two and Three, concerning the teachings of Dionysius and Aquinas on being or existence (*esse* in the Latin, to *einai* in the Greek). For Dionysius, as the author remarks, "God is the One and the Good beyond Being" (70). Yet He is appropriately denominated as Being insofar as He can be named from the characteristic most widely caused by Him in creatures: God is known as Being only *causaliter*. Herein lies the chief difference between the teachings of these thinkers and the central issue upon which any book on their metaphysical theologies must focus. For, in contrast to Dionysius, Aquinas holds that He Who Is (*Qui est*) is the most appropriate name of God and that this name is not merely said *causaliter* but rather as rightly denominating the very essence of God. Earlier O'Rourke correctly notes that the thought of Dionysius is transformed when taken over by Aquinas and that "this is rooted in the new meaning which Aquinas discovers in the notion of being or *esse*" (56). Yet, rather than pursuing Aquinas's sources for this notion in Avicenna, Boethius, the *Liber de causis*, Aristotle, Albert, William of Auvergne or others, O'Rourke is content to follow Fabro in holding Dionysius to be the primary source ( 181). This is certainly a matter for more critical discussion. Employing the Platonic methodology of abstraction to grasp the thearchic processions out of which creation is constituted, Dionysius considers Being as the first and highest of processions or participations and Aquinas calls this *ipsum esse* and *esse* commune. This, as the author notes ( 112), is recognized by Aquinas as the same sort of thinking as is found in the *Liber de causis* where being is said to be the first of created things (*prima rerum creatarum est esse*).

Yet this sort of thinking, which allows for the language of participation and procession, is for Aquinas a consequence of the mind's consideration of things of the world by way of abstraction. Abstracted without precision, *esse commune* is a concept which indifferently includes all creatures insofar as it is representative indifferently of finite being in all actually existing things. Abstracted with precision, *ipsum esse* is a concept which focuses the mind on the characteristic of created finite being itself in separation from its various manifestations in the world. In Dionysius this latter corresponds to the procession Being and is rightly seen not to reveal the very nature of the Deity. Insofar as all creatures are beings, they give evidence of God as the cause of Being, not as Being Itself. In the thought of Aquinas, however, the grasp of being is not limited to a conceptual grasp by way of abstraction. Rather, in individual things being is grasped in judgment as the act of existing of a finite thing. That grasp of actual existence allows for an argument to the nature of the cause of being insofar as finite being is unable to account for itself in actual, individual existence. This is not an argument based on concepts but is based on actually existing things and the need for an extrinsic efficient cause of their actual existence. In the context of the metaphysics of Aquinas, this requires a demonstration of the actual existence of a unique efficient cause of being, God. But this is apparently not the way O'Rourke understands Aquinas: "It is of course only on the basis of *esse commune*," he writes, "that we may affirm the reality of divine being and it is in refining and determining our concept of *esse commune* that we come to define God as *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*" (154). Such a statement does not seem to be correct, even when read in light of the author's earlier brief comments about judgments and his remark that in Aquinas "there is an advance in appreciation from being viewed as the fact of existence affirmed in the judgment, to being discovered as the primary and interior principle of all perfection" (111). Without more explicit discussion of the role of the doctrine of judgment and the metaphysics of efficient causality, this book provides a less than fully satisfactory account of the matters at issue.2

While this is a valuable, stimulating and very substantial book on a fascinating and important topic, the full story has not yet been told in all its historical and philosophical complexity. Moreover, the tale would benefit from a telling perhaps less enthusiastic and partisan and more philosophically critical of both Dionysius and Aquinas and their metaphysical perspectives. Technically the book is generally well-presented, despite some typographical errors (39, 40, 138, 147, 167, 228, 245, 263, 274); it would have been much improved by the addition of a substantial index of topics and terms.

# Notes

1*Summa theologiae* 1.13.9 resp. et ad 1.

2See Michael B. Ewbank, "Remarks on Being in St. Thomas Aquinas's *Expositio de divinis nominibus*," AHDLMA 56 (1989): 123-49, for an account along the lines indicated.

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