

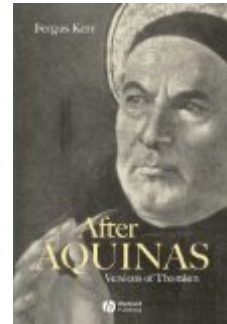
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Fergus Kerr. *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism*. Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002. viii + 254 pp. \$28.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-631-21313-0.

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Published on H-Catholic (June, 2005)



In his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, John Henry Newman recalls an exchange in 1842 with his old friend Robert I. Wilberforce. Newman had hinted that their brand of Anglicanism had placed them out of the Church. In reply, Wilberforce wrote:

“I don’t think that I ever was so shocked by any communication, which was ever made to me, as by your letter of this morning. It has quite unnerved me.... I cannot but write to you, though I am at a loss where to begin.... I am ready to grieve that I ever directed my thoughts to theology, if it is indeed so uncertain, as your doubts seem to indicate.”[1]

Upon reading Fergus Kerr’s wonderful book, *After Aquinas*, certain Thomists may have the same reaction and be forced to admit: “I am ready to grieve that I ever directed my thoughts to Thomism, if it is indeed so uncertain, as your doubts seem to indicate.” Kerr has outlined and has given so many trenchant examples of the countless “versions of Thomism” which have come down to us through the centuries that the reader may certainly despair of knowing what Thomas “really” said.

This is not a mere matter of scholars debating arcane subjects and interpretations. On the contrary, for when one is so central to Christian theology, as Thomas Aquinas is, the result, as Kerr frames it, is quite unsettling. Consider what Kerr believes to be on the periphery: “I have paid no attention to what Thomas Aquinas says that is now totally unacceptable. I have left aside much that is still of interest: his work on the sacraments as signs of faith, for example. As far as recent reception of his work goes, my principal interest throughout, I have said nothing about Thomist studies in Italian, Spanish, Dutch, and Polish, and little enough about

current French and German work” (p. 207). It is a matter of seeing that issues at the heart of what Thomas Aquinas was doing admit of so varied and conflicting and even mutually-exclusive interpretations—key interpretations made by even great theologians and philosophers. Wilberforce believed Anglicanism to be historically, theologically, and hermeneutically secure. It was a monumental entity that had stood the test of time. Was it not? Along came Newman. And now we have Fr. Kerr writing to us about Thomism.

It is this presentation of the radicalism of conflicting “versions of Thomism” that in part makes this work so exciting and interesting, if not unnerving. The other part, which makes the work so rewarding, is Fr. Kerr’s intimate familiarity with at least three related fields as they impinge on Thomistic studies: philosophy, theology, and history. His remarkable breadth of scholarship means that he not only understands and can explain with clarity the intricacies of the philosophical and theological issues Thomas and his (worthy and unworthy) successors (and commentators) raise, but that he can also set each point within the wider and deeper historical context that each point demands for its full appreciation. Indeed, he seems to do this so naturally, with such an unassuming lack of pedantry, that only those who know fairly well the history of the various internecine conflicts he discusses can appreciate that some of his off-handed sentences and summaries reflect years of scholarship and professional contemplation. A scholar with deep knowledge of any two disciplines mentioned above, but without the third, would have written an exponentially weaker book.

There are eleven chapters to the book, along with a short but trenchant conclusion. Many of these chap-

ters began “as lectures or seminar papers, delivered over many years” (viii). Sometimes books pasted together on this basis may have brilliant moments, but are sometimes painfully disjointed, with little or no conceptual unity, but this is not true here. Kerr’s arguments do not run with a desired seamlessness, but they do display continuity insofar as they elucidate his main thesis, that there is a “diversity and incommensurability of the available interpretations of Thomas’s work” and, particularly, that “the received account [of Thomas’s work] in the English-speaking world, we may surely say[,] ... will not do” (p. 207). However much the metaphor is hackneyed, this book is a window of stained glass. The chapters are the pieces of different colors and shapes, but they do make up a coherent whole.

The first chapter is a “Life and Times” essay, which is not as perfunctory as it may at first seem in a work like this. The essay lays the foundation for the hermeneutical conflicts to come, and it makes an important point, often reiterated in the following chapters as a refrain: “Coming to Thomas cold, so to speak, isolated from context, it is easy to assume, either delightedly or dismissively, that he has appropriated Aristotelian ideals of reasoning and systematic thought. If, on the other hand, we read Thomas in the light of the ideal of the philosophical life that seems to have caught the imagination of some of the leading masters in the arts faculty in his day, we begin to see how he distances himself from everything they say. Ironically, instead of almost replacing Christian doctrine by Aristotelianism, as critics sometimes say, Thomas was out, historically, to resist the ‘wisdom-lovers’—the *philosophi* in the arts faculty, by trying to transpose and integrate key Aristotelian terms into traditional Christianity” (p. 14). There are other “contexts,” too, including the atmosphere of the Church’s fight against Cathars (including Albigensians) and against Islam. These are mentioned in the first chapter, but appear throughout the work.

The other chapters proceed on an issue-by-issue basis. Chapter 2, “Overcoming Epistemology,” sets the various interpretations of Thomas in the light of the Cartesian/Kantian themes of epistemics so overarching in modern philosophy. Chapters 3 and 6, “Prolegomena to Natural Theology” and “Natural Law: Incommensurable Readings,” discuss how appeals to Thomas by friend and foe take a manifold view of “nature.” Chapter 4, “Ways of Reading the Five Ways,” is self-explanatory: different theologians and especially philosophers appropriate the “Five Ways” differently, based on their own agendas and concerns. Here particularly, the English-speaking analytic philosophers, Kerr claims, have an at-

tenuated view of the Five Ways because they treat them as two-dimensional, philosophical textbook “proofs,” an approach that is hopelessly inadequate because it doesn’t take account of Aquinas’s context or intent. Chapter 5, “Stories of Being,” discusses how “active” or how “static” the concept of “Being” is for Thomas, especially in his understanding of God as “pure being.” Chapter 7, “Theological Ethics,” surveys interpretations of Thomas’s ethical theory and, after submitting these to scrutiny, ends up stressing that Thomas’s eschatological vision of beatitude is what really forms the backdrop to all of his ethics: “Ethics, for Thomas, is not so much founded on reason or law as motivated by anticipated happiness” (p. 130).

In the engaging Chapter 8, “Quarrels about Grace,” Kerr recounts controversies about grace that are related to post-Reformation concerns about salvation, faith, and works. Among these are Henri de Lubac’s 1946 study, *Surnaturel*, and the quarrels it engendered among Thomists as well as “Barthian anxieties” about supposedly Pelagian Catholic conceptions of grace. Chapter 9, “Deified Creaturehood,” is an excellent discussion with its own “mini-thesis” complementing the whole work. Thomas is very much situated within the “undivided Church’s” understanding of “deification”—especially noting the contributions of the Eastern Fathers to this Christian concept. Because of Thomas’s central explication of Christians “sharing the divine life” or, as II Peter puts it, being “partakers of the divine nature,” he has been misread by those, like Harnack, who see this idea as hopelessly pagan and corrupting; but for good or bad, it demonstrates that Thomas was at heart someone who took the Eastern tradition very seriously and whose views on “deification” are certainly not stale holdovers from either Aristotle or pagan neo-Platonists. Kerr also locates Thomas’s “deification” idea in the trajectory of controversies on salvation leading to the Reformation. Chapters 10 and 11 both deal with some central theological principle of the *Summa*: “Christ in the *Summa Theologiae*” and “God in the *Summa Theologiae*.” These chapters deal with the question of the relationship between Christology and Theology proper, in both the work of Thomas himself and later theologians, inside and outside the Thomistic tradition. Also, Kerr takes up the pedagogical and theological significance of the placement of these topics within the *Summa*. He also touches upon questions of modern theology, especially surrounding Christology as “bottom-up” or as “top-down.”

The foregoing summary has been purposefully skeletal because the heart of the book can perhaps better be explicated by an analytical breakdown of the nature of the

varying and conflicting “versions of Thomism” that Kerr discusses throughout the work. He ends the first chapter with these words: “We need to ask what it is, in Thomas’s work, and in the uses to which it has been put by opponents as well as disciples, that makes certain misreadings attractive, and almost unavoidable” (p. 16). This is true. But the genius of the book is that, in discussing the various interpretations of Thomism, Kerr usually gives just enough evidence to *imply* why various versions are out there. But he very rarely states his view outright as to why. And he very rarely states his view (if he has a particular one) as to which view he thinks is more correct. He allows the reader “to ask what it is” that sets up these varying interpretations, given their historical and theological settings. This is an intriguing approach and fosters further hermeneutical questions.

A rough-and-ready classification of the *types* of hermeneutical problems Kerr deals with in his book could look like the following: (1) There are objectively wrong ideas about what Thomas actually wrote; (2) There are wrong interpretations of what everyone agrees Thomas is, at least in his words, writing down. On this, Kerr remarks: “Sometimes, no doubt, this or that interpretation must be regarded as simply mistaken” (p. 209); (3) There are interpretations developed since Thomas’s time that give a differing sense of *proportion* to what he wrote. He wrote so much, and it’s a matter of having a right sense of balance as an interpreter; (4) There are interpretations developed because of the *placement* of the material within, for example, the *Summa*. Does “placement” mean anything important hermeneutically? If so, what? (5) There are interpretations developed as a result of Reformation debates—as in Karl Barth’s theology, for example—that see Thomas through a particular Protestant lens that may be unhelpful (this lens may be neo-orthodoxy, or classical

Protestant liberalism, or whatever); (6) There are interpretations that have to do with Catholic responses to the Reformation and the later stand-on-their-own schools that developed as a result of those responses (the “Leonine Thomists” vs. the existential Thomists—the Maritains and the Balthasars, et al.); (7) There are interpretations developed in the modern world—especially in philosophical circles—that neglect Thomas’s own special Christian and Dominican context; (8) There are interpretations of different philosophical schools of Thomas (even when he is considered *as a philosopher*) that largely relate to the continental (more speculative) philosophical tradition and the English-speaking (more analytical) philosophical tradition; (9) There is just not a clear understanding of (a) what “Aristotelian” means and (b) what Thomas’s real relation to Aristotle actually was.

Deftly and often subtly, Fr. Kerr weaves a narrative of Thomas Aquinas’ multi-faceted work. His is a compelling book, one that destabilizes and yet increases Thomistic study, one that helpfully collates a mass of recent scholarship that has never yet been brought together. Kerr’s book demonstrates a fertile mind at work, one with a sense of the delicious and captivating way in which historical texts take on meaning by the very history of their interpretation. As he deals with other “great minds,” he is ever present, though quite often aloof and in the background, as a master theologian placing his finger on a truly important subject—not just for his own field, but for the Western Church, the Eastern Church, and the broader scholarly world.

Note

[1]. John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, ed. Ian Ker (New York and London: Penguin Classics, 1994), pp. 153-154.

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Citation: Scott Brenon Caton. Review of Kerr, Fergus, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism*. H-Catholic, H-Net Reviews. June, 2005.

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