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W. Norris Clarke J, S. *The Philosophical Approach to God: A New Thomistic Perspective.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2007. viii + 150 pp. $20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8232-2719-8.

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A Thomistic Approach to God from a Distinguished Thomist

For centuries students of Saint Thomas Aquinas have studied and admired his metaphysics, especially his understanding of God. Thomas was able to synthesize important insights from many sources, including Plato and the Neoplatonic tradition, Aristotle and his Jewish and Muslim commentators and, of course, many Christian thinkers such as Saint Augustine. Although Thomas was a theologian, his philosophical arguments, in particular his five ways of proving God's existence, are widely known. Indeed, Thomas discusses the extent to which the human mind is capable of knowing God through reason in many of his works, and these discussions are as important today as they were centuries ago.

However, in order for a new generation of philosophers and theologians to appreciate the wisdom of Thomas, his thoughts must be translated into words and concepts that they can understand. In addition, to be relevant to contemporary discussions, Thomas's work needs to be refined and updated in light of the knowledge humans have acquired since the Middle Ages. As one might imagine, this is a large and difficult task. Fortunately for us, Father William Norris Clarke's book is up to the challenge. In this second edition, Fr. Clarke has made significant revisions to the original text, which was published, with a slightly different title, by Wake Forest University Press in 1979. The book is divided into three parts, and I will treat them in the order they are presented.

Part 1 of the book is called "The Turn to the Inner Way in Contemporary Neo-Thomism." Here Fr. Clarke discusses the contributions of Transcendental Thomism to the inner philosophical way to God through the dynamism of the intellect and will. In this approach, we investigate our inner consciousness and discover God as the ultimate goal of our natural affinity for truth and goodness. Although the inner way is associated more with Augustine than with Aquinas, Fr. Clarke attempts, drawing on the essential core of Transcendental Thomism, a "creative retrieval" of Aquinas (p. vii). In this case, he argues that Transcendental Thomism has given us "a new turn to the inner path, analogous to that in the Augustinian tradition, but discovered within the resources of St. Thomas's own thought and his more rigorous philosophical method–although he himself, aside from a few pregnant hints, never explicitly exploited these resources the same way" (p. 9).

Fr. Clarke engages in creative retrieval throughout the book, and, at his best, he is as good a synthesizer as was Thomas himself. This makes the book invaluable for neo-Thomists of all kinds. For example, followers of thinkers such as Joseph Maréchal and Karl Rahner will happily note that Fr. Clarke finds in Transcendental Thomism a much-needed answer to the objections of Paul Tillich and other theologians who think that Thomas's approach to God neglects the inner way. In contrast, followers of Jacques Maritain and Étienne Gilson, and others critical of Transcendental Thomism, will find vindication in Fr. Clarke's rejection of Transcendental Thomism's "roundabout way of grounding the validity of human knowledge by first going up through God as final cause, then back to our ordinary knowledge of the finite world of our experience" (p. 5). In this part of the book, I think Fr. Clarke appropriates the best of both schools of thought. In addition, I agree with his assessment that the inner way, as a philosophical approach to God, is incomplete without the metaphysical ascent to God through creatures. He covers the metaphysical ascent in part 2 of the book.

In part 2, Fr. Clarke begins with a discussion of what he considers to be serious deficiencies in the five ways of St. Thomas. For example, he notes that none of the ways, except for the fourth, conclude to a single Source of all being. In addition, he argues that the third way is formally invalid because it is missing a required premise. The missing premise, according to Fr. Clarke, is false and therefore the third way is not a proof at all. He is least critical of the fourth way, which he says is clos-

est to Thomas's "personal Neoplatonically inspired metaphysics of participation" (p. 44). Nevertheless, he argues that its premises are improperly ordered. Because of these problems, he considers the five ways to be incomplete sketches of philosophical approaches to God that require a great deal of explanation and revision to convince modern thinkers. In fact, they require so much work that he argues they are "no longer worth the effort, save for scholarly historical purposes" (p. 46). Fr. Clarke notes that not all Thomists share his assessment. Indeed, these claims are controversial and therefore require some comment.

While I agree with Fr. Clarke that the five ways are condensed and thus require significant work to adapt them to a contemporary framework, I do think the effort is worthwhile. In addition, although it is true that some of the five ways do not conclude to a single Source of being, Thomas gives other arguments, in later parts of the *Summa Theologiae*, which help to clarify that the Prime Mover of the first way, the Uncaused Cause of the second way, the Necessary Being of the third way, etc., are all one and the same being. Indeed, the view that God is Being Itself (*ipsum esse*), and the real distinction between being and essence in creatures, which is at the core of Thomas's metaphysics, are both demonstrated after the five ways, by using much of what the five ways have proven about God.[1] For these reasons, I regard the five ways, especially the third way, as quite important. Accordingly, I feel the need to address Fr. Clarke's strong criticisms of the third way.

For those unfamiliar with the third way, it is a *reductio ad absurdum* about possible beings. Possible beings are things that are capable of existing and capable of not existing because they are generated and they corrupt. If we were to maintain that everything in existence is a possible being then we would be logically committed to holding that nothing exists now, which is absurd. Unfortunately, the chain of reasoning in this argument can be interpreted in two very different ways. One way, which I call the temporal interpretation, focuses on the fact that possible beings eventually pass out of existence. If possible beings are given infinite time, then, eventually, all of them will pass out of existence such that nothing at all would exist. However, if nothing ever existed in the past then nothing would exist now because *ex nihil, nihil fit* (from nothing, nothing comes). But it is absurd to say nothing exists now since you and I are here to talk about it. Therefore, a Necessary Being must exist.

Fr. Clarke holds, along with some other commentators who defend this interpretation, that that the third way requires the following principle in order to be valid: "given infinite time, all possibilities will come true" (p. 43). This is because it is merely one possibility, among others, that all possible beings pass out of existence together. The only way we are guaranteed that this possibility will happen is if all possibilities come true in infinite time and we assume that the universe did not have a beginning in time. Because this principle is not in the text, it seems that Thomas has given us an enthymeme. In addition, Fr. Clarke holds that the principle is false. This is because he thinks the principle allows for two logically incompatible possibilities: (1) that all possible beings pass out of existence together; and (2) "that each corruptible being should generate another before it perished, and so on forever" (p. 43). Because both of these possibilities cannot happen in the same universe, he thinks the principle "given infinite time, all possibilities will come true" is false.

In contrast, others, such as John F. X. Knasas, have argued that the third way should not be interpreted in the temporal way described above.[2] Instead, the focus should be on coming into existence. If everything were a possible being then it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist since possible beings only come to exist through an already existing cause. If it were impossible for anything to have begun to exist then in the past there would have been nothing in existence and, consequently, nothing would exist now, which is absurd. Note that this interpretation of the third way does not require the principle "given infinite time, all possibilities will come true." I think Knasas's interpretation is the correct one.

In the rest of part 2, Fr. Clarke discusses some other important topics within the metaphysical ascent to God. First, he presents his own reconstruction of two arguments for God's existence based on "the deepest and most original level of St. Thomas's metaphysics" (p. 48). These arguments, which he calls "From the Many to the One" and "From the Finite to the Infinite," incorporate Thomas's "synthesis of Neoplatonic participation, Aristotelian act-potency and efficient causality, and his [Thomas's] own notion of existence as intensive act and the core of all perfections" (p. 61). In many ways, these arguments are the heart of this book since they represent Fr. Clarke's deepest reflections on Thomas's metaphysical ascent to God. Second, he masterfully defends Thomas's understanding of efficient causality against rival conceptions by thinkers such as David Hume and Immanuel Kant. Third, he asserts, correctly in my judgment, that only the ontological bond of causality allows us to give meaning to language about God in philosoph-

ical theology. Here Fr. Clarke develops Thomas's doctrine of analogous predication in his own direction, arguing that "all terms expressing a proper analogy of proportional similarity are action-terms, activity-terms, expressing some action or activity that can be exercised diversely by different subjects, proportionate to their natures" (pp. 73-74). His excellent treatment of the above topics should prove useful to anyone interested in natural theology.

In the third and final section of the book, Fr. Clarke tries to bring Thomas's thought into dialogue with process theologians such as Alfred North Whitehead, Lewis Ford, Marjorie Suchocki, Jorge Nobo, and others. This part of the book usefully highlights areas of incompatibility between traditional and process theology, as well as areas where fruitful dialogue is possible. For example, on the one hand, he concludes that Whitehead's conception of God is incompatible with Thomas's conception of God. On the other hand, he thinks the core contribution of process theology to religious-metaphysical thought is "that God can be said in some significant though carefully qualified way to be both (1) *really related* to the world in His intentional consciousness and (2) contingently *different* in his 'eternal Now,' *because of* what happens in the created world–but all this only in His relational, intentional consciousness with respect to us" (p. 147).

Fr. Clarke's rich synthesis of so many philosophical and theological schools of thought and his creative development of Thomas's metaphysical insights and principles make this an invaluable book for philosophers and theologians interested in the philosophical approach to God. In a recent interview, speaking about the importance of creative retrieval, Fr. Clarke said: "You are taking a risk whenever you re-express the thought of an older thinker in your own terms, more modern terms ... but without that the seed can't take root in new soil. It is just restricted to a small group."[3] I have great hope that this superb book will inspire others to dig deeper into the rich soil of Thomism.

Notes

[1]. For the view that God is being itself (*ipsum esse*), see *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 11, a. 4, respondeo; for the real distinction between being and essence in creatures, but not in God, see *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 3, a. 4, respondeo.

[2]. John F. X. Knasas, *An Analysis and Interpretation of the "Tertia Via" of St. Thomas Aquinas* (PhD diss., Toronto: University of Toronto, 1975).

[3]. This interview was conducted by James Arraj, and is available online at his website: http://www.innerexplorations.com/catchmeta/a1.htm.

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