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## Book Review: The Cambridge Companion To Aquinas

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*. **Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump, editors**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Pp. viii and 302. \$59.95 (cloth), \$17.95 (paper).

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This excellent collection of essays on the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas constitutes another very fine volume in the Cambridge Companion series. As the preface to the book indicates, the series in general aims "to provide expository and critical surveys of the work of major philosophers" with substantial enough bibliographies to "serve as a reference work for students and nonspecialists." *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas* ably fulfills this commitment to students and non-specialists with essays by the leading scholars of the philosophy of Aquinas, written in a manner easily accessible to novices but without sacrificing scholarly sophistication. These essays will also be of genuine interest to specialists who will find in its pages careful and original expositions of Aquinas's thought, informed by the latest scholarship, and engaged in the latest interpretive debates. A specific aim of this volume is to render the philosophy of Aquinas more accessible to contemporary philosophers so that it may, in the words of its editors, "help speed the process of engaging philosophers as well as students in the study and appreciation of Aquinas's philosophy" (p. 2). All of the essays achieve this aim, some especially well.

One nice feature of this collection is the wide scope of its articles, including entries on "Aquinas and Islamic and Jewish thinkers" (David Burrell) and "Biblical commentary and philosophy" (Eleonore Stump), topics not customarily treated in volumes of Aquinas's philosophy. In addition to a helpful introduction by editors Kretzmann and Stump, the volume's other essays cover the following more standard topics: "Aquinas's philosophy in its historical setting" (Jan Aertsen), "Aristotle and Aquinas" (Joseph Owens), "Metaphysics" (John Wippel), "Philosophy of Mind (Norman Kretzmann), "Theory of Knowledge" (Scott MacDonald), "Ethics" (Ralph McInerny), "Law and Politics" (Paul Sigmund), "Theology and philosophy" (Mark Jordan). Despite the range of its selections, the relationship between philosophy and theology is a recurring theme within this collection. This is as it should be since the book is an anthology on the philosophy of an eminent Christian theologian. In this review, I will limit my discussion primarily

to those articles that have the most to say on this shared theme, although this should not suggest to the reader that there is no other issue in this collection worthy of similar attention.

The volume's introduction (Kretzmann and Stump) sets the tone for the book and stands on its own as an informative essay. It is partly an apologetic for the importance of studying medieval philosophy, and Aquinas in particular, and partly a primer on the state of medieval philosophical texts, the scholastic method, and the connection between philosophy and theology in the medieval period. All of this provides a useful context for appreciating the ways Aquinas is typical of his age and the ways he is atypical, particularly on the issue of the relationship between philosophy and theology.

On this issue, Aquinas is portrayed as primarily a theologian whose thought is largely guided by theological concerns but not restricted to them. An example of an area of Aquinas's thought that is not primarily guided by theological concerns is his philosophical theology. Aquinas's motivation in sorting out these matters, we are told, is "fundamentally philosophical" (p. 9). And even when Aquinas's motivation is theological, "what he produces in acting on that motivation is thoroughly, interestingly philosophical" (p. 9).

In making these claims, Kretzmann and Stump clearly hope to convince the reader that he or she should take Aquinas's philosophy "as seriously as that of any other philosopher of the first rank" and ought not to regard him as solely a theologian, suggesting instead that we see "his ostensibly theological works as also fundamentally philosophical" (p. 10). According to Kretzmann and Stump, Aquinas's theology is "fundamentally philosophical" since it contains discussions on matters that would interest non-religious philosophers, and it proceeds in the rational, analytical manner that we associate with the philosophical enterprise. As Kretzmann and Stump point out, "Aquinas is at least as concerned as we are with making sense of obscure claims, exploring the implications and interrelations of theoretical propositions, and supporting them with valid arguments dependent on plausible premises" (8). But it would certainly be odd if, *qua* theologian, Aquinas, or anyone else for that matter, were not concerned with these basic rudiments of intellectual inquiry. The attempt at clarifying obscure claims, exploring implications and interrelations of propositions, and employing reasoned argumentation is hardly the province of philosophy alone.

In an implicit recognition of how difficult it is to disentangle the philosophical and theological in Aquinas's thought despite their efforts, Kretzmann and Stump simply describe Aquinas as a "philosopher-theologian" (p. 9). While this may be a fair enough characterization of Aquinas, it hardly clarifies matters. In their brief overview, Kretzmann and Stump avoid facing the main interpretive issue, namely, whether or not Aquinas presents a philosophy, even what might be called a "Christian" philosophy, that stands independently of his theology. Admittedly this is a large matter to resolve in an introduction to a book of this kind, but acknowledging that it is a matter not easily resolved would not have been inappropriate.

Jan Aersten ("Aquinas's philosophy in its historical context") continues the theme of the complex connection between philosophy and theology in Aquinas and reiterates the perspective stated in Kretzmann and Stump's introduction. Aersten makes the point that while Aquinas is foremost a Christian theologian, he was still noted in his own day for "writings of a philosophical nature" (14), and that his theology is scholastic precisely because it incorporates philosophy. Aersten goes on to make the important point that Aquinas's theological framework was as influenced by Neoplatonic philosophy as it was by Aristotelian philosophy. For example, Aertsen notes that a key original feature of Aquinas's commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, the standard theological exercise for master's degree candidates in the thirteenth century, was its circular Neoplatonic organization depicting the emergence of creatures from God (*exitus*) and the return of creatures to God (*reditus*), an organization Aquinas would use again in the *Summa Theologiae*.

Although Aersten rightly emphasizes the Neoplatonic as well as Aristotelian elements in Aquinas's thought, his portrayal of Aquinas is still somewhat misleading in its emphasis on his philosophical rationalism. For example, while Aertsen is correct to maintain that Aquinas follows Aristotle in believing that "all human beings by nature desire to know" (p. 27), it would be a mistake to think that he is wildly optimistic about our ultimate success in this pursuit. Twice in this very volume contributors remind the reader of Aquinas's claim in *Collationes super Credo in Deum* that "our cognition is so feeble that no philosopher has ever been able to investigate completely the nature of a fly" (cf. Kretzmann, "Philosophy of Mind", p. 157, fn. 56; and Jordan, "Theology and Philosophy", p. 234). Nor does Aquinas's belief in our natural desire to know warrant the too facile contrast Aersten makes between Aquinas and Augustine on the legitimacy of purely philosophical inquiry (p. 28). While, as Aersten points out, Augustine does condemn the vice of curiosity as "a vain desire cloaked in the name of knowledge" (*Confessions* X, 35), it is not the desire to know *per se* that is condemned but rather its mere semblances (*simulacra*), distorted by human depravity in one way or other. Nor is Aquinas himself blind to the deleterious effects of original sin on human reason (*Summa Theologiae*, IaIIae, q. 85, a. 3) and the need for grace to assist it and bring to completion what our natural desire to know alone cannot achieve (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 12, a. 4).

Aertsen does recognize some of these aspects of Aquinas's thought and includes them in his discussion of the limits of philosophy and the necessity of theology (pp. 32-34). Yet the portrait of Aquinas presented by Aertsen is that of a philosopher who regards theology as a handmaiden to philosophy; theology serves the aims of philosophy and comes to the lady's aid only when her powers grow weak. It would be more accurate to portray Aquinas as fundamentally a theologian who incorporates Aristotle and Greek philosophy into an overall Augustinian theological framework, enriching that framework by a philosophy that is itself transformed and enhanced in its new context.

In his contribution to this volume ("Theology and Philosophy"), Mark Jordan paints a more realistic portrait of the relationship between

philosophy and theology in Aquinas. In Jordan's account the very question of their relationship is misleading for it supposes that Aquinas "would admit to having two separate doctrines" (p. 232), one philosophical and one theological. Jordan believes Aquinas would never make such an admission and that he would be "scandalized" to hear himself referred to as a philosopher, "since this term often had a pejorative sense for thirteenth-century Latin authors" (p. 232). Jordan does not deny that Aquinas writes philosophically, or on philosophical matters, or that he uses philosophy in his theology. His point is that Aquinas's original philosophical work must be seen within the context of his career as a theologian, serving the aims of theology rather than its own independent ends.

Thus, for Jordan's Aquinas, the relation of philosophy to theology is one of "subjugation" (cf. Kretzmann and Stump's introduction). Philosophy may be said to be subjugated to theology not only in that it serves theology's ends, but also in that theology serves as a corrective to philosophy. And as Jordan points out, for Aquinas, theology guides and corrects philosophy not only in matters of doctrine but also matters of practice. For in proceeding "according to Christ" and not the ways of men, "the impure motives of philosophy," vanity among them, "may be transformed into the motives of the Christian believer" (p. 236).

Jordan's essay is itself a much needed corrective to the too frequent attempts by philosophers such as Kretzmann and Stump to extract a Thomistic philosophy from the heart of Aquinas's theological, and indeed, spiritual project. Jordan is especially good in his treatment of Aquinas's conception of virtue (pp. 236-241), showing how it is the divinely infused virtues, so often ignored by contemporary philosophers who turn to Aquinas in the hopes of recovering an ethics of virtue, which are central in Aquinas's account since they alone completely satisfy the true notion of virtue as he conceives it.

Jordan's essay is useful in helping us reframe the question of the relationship between philosophy and theology in Aquinas. His suggestion that "the question must be reformulated so that it asks about theology's transforming incorporation of philosophy" (p. 248) should prove fruitful in directing further attempts at understanding central concepts of Aquinas. Yet Jordan should be more careful than to make rather loosely the assertion that, for Aquinas, "a Christian theology well done ought to speak more and better about matters of concern to philosophy than the philosophers themselves can say" (p. 248). For surely Aquinas would acknowledge that there are some "matters of concern to philosophy," the nature of valid inference, to name an obvious example, for which Christian theology has little if anything to say.

Other articles in this volume do an excellent job of making it clear what difference the theological context of Aquinas's thought makes to his philosophy. Burrell ("Aquinas and Islamic and Jewish thinkers"), for example, explains how "existence" becomes a central concept in philosophy only when classical Greek ontology is revised in light of the theological doctrine of the creation, and that Aquinas achieves greater clarity here than his Islamic predecessors precisely because he understands the

*esse* of things not in terms of a received “accident” but as an “act” of existing identified in terms of a “relation-to-a-transcendent-agent” (p. 69). Similarly, Owens (“Aristotle and Aquinas”) sees “a radical difference in the philosophical thinking of Aquinas and that of Aristotle, despite Aquinas’s use of the Aristotelian vocabulary” (40) owing to the different cultural contexts of the two thinkers. Aquinas’s medieval Christian enculturation not only influences the topics of his philosophical reflection but also the philosophical meanings of the terms he inherits from his pagan Greek masters. The concept of being, for instance, undergoes dramatic changes as it passes from Aristotle to Aquinas for whom “the primary instance of being” (p. 46) is God, the first efficient cause of all other things. Actuality is no longer understood, as it is in Aristotle, in terms of a thing’s finite form or sensible nature, but rather in terms of a thing’s “existence” which is always distinct from its nature or essence. And the only being in whom the distinction between essence and existence does not hold is God, who as creator, exists essentially and is the efficient cause of all that exists.

McInerney (“Ethics”) also gives a balanced account of the relationship between philosophy and theology in Aquinas’s ethics, although he is primarily concerned with providing an overview of central notions in Aquinas’s moral theory. The essays by Kretzmann (“Philosophy of mind”), MacDonald (“Theory of knowledge”) and Sigmund (“Law and politics”), also cover more straightforwardly philosophical matters. MacDonald’s essay is particularly good and raises the level of discussion on Aquinas’s epistemology by bringing it into dialogue with contemporary debates. Sigmund’s essay, while adequate for this volume, is rather brief and cursory, although it alone among the contributions includes some discussion of Aquinas’s legacy. An unfortunate omission from this volume is an essay on Aquinas’s aesthetics.

All in all, this book is first-rate and deserves to be a standard reference work for the philosophy of Aquinas. It is highly recommended for all students of Aquinas’s thought regardless of level of expertise. The fact that the book features a diversity of opinion by prominent scholars of Aquinas makes it a particularly valuable collection. This is especially true for non-specialists, who will be introduced not only to differing interpretations of specific doctrines of Aquinas, but in the guise of the question of the relationship between philosophy and theology, will be introduced to differing interpretations of the very characterization of his thought. Such a reader will be led to ask important questions about the place of Aquinas in the history of philosophy: Is Aquinas a “Christian philosopher” as well as a Christian theologian? If so, just how does the Christian faith inform his philosophy, and just how does his philosophy inform his Christian faith? And just what, if anything, distinguishes his Christian philosophy from his theology? Far from being just a matter of historical interpretation, the sorting out of these questions has important contemporary implications, particularly for those who are presently struggling with what it means to be a Christian philosopher.