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Book Review: Aquinas On Mind

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Aquinas on Mind, by **Anthony Kenny**. New York: Routledge, 1995, Pp. 182. \$13.95 (paper).

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Anthony Kenny's book is one of the best of its genre, exemplifying the kind of introduction into (some field of) Aquinas's thought that endeavors to make his ideas accessible to the philosophically interested contemporary reader in terms of such philosophical, scientific and everyday concepts with which the reader can safely be assumed to be familiar. Indeed, Kenny's book provides us with such a good example of this genre that it brings into sharp focus the problems of the genre itself. Therefore, while duly acknowledging the book's virtues of clarity of presentation, and its highly readable, almost conversational style, let me concentrate in this brief review on this problematic aspect of Kenny's book, as someone who is just as much concerned with making Aquinas accessible to a contemporary audience as the author is.

In fact, my task is made relatively easy by Kenny himself, since at the beginning of the book he clearly points out the main source of the primary difficulty of his enterprise (16-18), although it is then all the more surprising how little attention he pays to this difficulty in the actual treatment of his subject.

In line with Kenny's observations in this passage, Aquinas's thoughts on the human mind can by no means be characterized as providing us with just another interesting (not to say, exotic) theory in the field commonly designated as "the philosophy of mind" in contemporary philosophy. For whereas *the* main problem of the contemporary field can justifiably be described as the problem of providing a coherent, philosophically acceptable account of the relationship between "the mental" and "the physical", for Aquinas this would be a pseudo-problem, constituted by a false dichotomy. The reason why Aquinas could react in this way is precisely what Kenny so clearly points out, namely, that the way in which Aquinas would delineate the realm of mental phenomena is radically different from the way modern philosophers would do the same. To put it briefly, for modern philosophers the realm of mind is the realm of consciousness, defined by the ("privileged") *access* self-conscious subjects have to their states of consciousness. By contrast, what constitutes the realm of mind for Aquinas is the domain of the peculiar *vital operations* of a rational animal, and accordingly, the faculties or powers accounting for these operations, intellect and will. This of course also establishes a certain dichotomy between mental and non-mental, but not the sort of dichotomy between mental and physical that has been operative in the post-Cartesian tradition—for instance, pain is not a mental phenomenon for Aquinas, but speech is.

Yet given this radical difference between the more familiar modern conception and Aquinas's conception of the very subject matter of this inquiry, anyone presenting their relevant thoughts should always be on the alert as to what we can or *should* take for granted in Aquinas's conception, and what we usually do, but perhaps *should not*, take for grant-

ed in the modern conception in these considerations. Indeed, this sort of alertness is required not only concerning issues directly involving Aquinas's obviously different conception of mind, but even in the case of such apparently absolutely "risk-free" considerations as the interpretation of the term 'body' (*corpus*). However, for Aquinas the term 'body' functions *both* as the correlative of 'soul' (in the context of the claim that a human being consists of body and soul, whence in this sense of 'body' a human being *has* a body, but *is not* a body) *and* as the generic term signifying the substantial form of both living and non-living bodies, which in the case of living things is their soul (and in this sense of 'body' a human being *is* a body). So, failure to take note of these different senses of the same term leads Kenny to raise some totally misguided objections to Aquinas's conception, contrasting his view with a "strict Aristotelian", "hylomorphic" view. (25-28, 138-139, 150-151) Had Kenny taken into account Aquinas's explicit distinction between the two senses of 'body' in these different contexts, he could have easily avoided this pitfall.¹ But instead, he apparently relied on what might seem to be an intuitively clear notion, simply ignoring the implication of his own correct observations that what may seem intuitively clear to us was not necessarily intuitively clear in the same way for Aquinas, precisely because of his radically different conceptualization of the issues under discussion. Yet we may add that it is precisely this radically different conceptualization that might render the study of Aquinas particularly enlightening for the modern reader, presenting us with a refreshingly different perspective on our own inquiries, teaching us not to take for granted certain things that we otherwise usually do.

Mutatis mutandis, the same can be said about Kenny's fumbled treatment of the notion of *phantasm* (sensory information received, stored, retrieved and/or further processed by the sensitive faculties of an animal), comparing it to what he apparently takes to be an intuitively clear notion of *mental image*, and then wondering why Aquinas at times seems to speak as if we had mental images in sense perception (38), why he seems to attribute mental images to animals (39), and in general whether he held "the regrettable theory that external sense-experience was accompanied by a parallel series of phenomena in the imagination" (93). Well, I for one certainly do not find this notion of "mental image" intuitively clear at all, even if I am of course familiar with the modern philosophical tradition that takes it for granted. Am I supposed to have a "mental image" in my mind when I am listening to Beethoven's *Pastoral*, when I am recalling it, and when I am inventing possible variations of it; or am I just receiving, retrieving, and further processing auditory information? But then this may be just my problem. In any case, while on p. 37 we are informed that "Clearly a phantasm is like a mental image. But the two do not seem to be entirely equivalent.", on p. 38 we can only learn that "... he [Aquinas] did not mean by 'phantasm' simply a mental image". What we do not learn about at all is what we should understand by a "mental image", and in what way our assumed familiarity with mental images could be helpful in understanding Aquinas, given that Aquinas's theory apparently

does not have much to do with them, whatever they are.

Again, considering Aquinas's conception of the immateriality of the intellectual soul, Kenny wonders how Aquinas could ever maintain that a form could exist without matter, save for his non-philosophical, religious beliefs, and "a disconcerting disdain for distinctions between abstract and concrete" (138). But it is rather Kenny's discussion that is marred by an utterly disconcerting disdain for *Aquinas's own distinction* between the different modes of signifying of abstract and concrete *terms*, and his analyses of under what conditions there are *real* distinctions between distinct entities, indeed, distinct *types* of entities, corresponding to this *semantic* distinction, and under what conditions there are no such *real* distinctions, while the *semantic* distinction still remains in force.² Instead, Kenny uses the garden-variety, but hopefully "intuitively clear" talk about "abstract and concrete" [terms, or entities other than terms?—Kenny never tells], so no wonder he ends up with blaming Aquinas for confusion.³

Many similar examples could be listed from Kenny's book,⁴ but I think even the ones mentioned here should enable us to draw some quite general lessons concerning the whole enterprise of making Aquinas's thought accessible to the contemporary philosophical audience as well as concerning the place of Kenny's book in this enterprise. First, as should be obvious, we shall never understand properly any of Aquinas's theories without first "learning his language". However, "learning his language" does not mean just learning Latin, but rather acquiring the radically different conceptual apparatus encoded in his language, constantly reflecting on how this different apparatus constitutes its own self-evident truths, while questioning the validity of what *we* take to be self-evident truths on account of the conceptual apparatus encoded in *our* philosophical language. Second, we shall never be able to communicate our understanding of Aquinas authentically unless we learn how to "teach his language". For if we do not manage to "teach his language", the best we can come up with is some more or less matching "translation" of his thought, with the appropriate footnotes on the defects of available "translations", and recurrent complaints on the "confusions" of the author, as is exemplified by Kenny's book. But in order to be able to "teach this language", we have to provide the appropriate "learning tools", that is, to put the whole point in less metaphorical terms, we have to provide the contemporary reader with a description of the underlying semantics of St. Thomas's substantive philosophical theories, constituting the self-evident principles *presupposed* by those theories. The best passages of Kenny's book from this point of view are precisely the ones in which he remarks on certain principles of Aquinas that they should be taken as "truisms"—it is a pity that these remarks do not stand together to form a consistent methodology.

In fact, it might seem preposterous that I should call attention to the importance of semantic analysis in connection with the approach of an outstanding analytic philosopher. However, as a rule, contemporary philosophers have the unfortunate propensity to take as the ultimate standard of the correctness of their (or others') analyses something

which is “intuitively clear”, *without any further qualification*. But it is precisely the study of Aquinas that should make us realize today more than ever that what may appear intuitively clear, or self-evident *to us* (*per se notum quoad nos*) may not be self-evident *to others*, let alone *in itself* (*per se notum secundum se*)—whereas what is self-evident *in itself*, or at least what used to be self-evident *to our predecessors*, is definitely no longer self-evident *to us*.⁵

In view of the above-mentioned troubles with Kenny’s approach (and many others not mentioned here, but the reader may also wish to consult Robert Pasnau’s review of the same book in *The Philosophical Review*, 4(1994), pp. 745-748), I find this book rather disappointing, not only from the point of view of the Aquinas scholar, but especially from the point of view of those students of Aquinas who think Aquinas’s thought bears more than historical relevance to *our* philosophical concerns. At the beginning of the book Kenny promises to show us “through a close reading of texts from Aquinas that medieval thinkers still have much to teach us about the philosophy of mind” (20). I sincerely believe that medieval thinkers in general and Aquinas in particular do have a great deal to teach us about the philosophy of mind, so I find it particularly regrettable that Kenny never fulfills this promise. In fact, in Kenny’s book, instead of getting the well-deserved role of our teacher, Aquinas gets chided at every turn when he does not quite meet Kenny’s identifiably Wittgenstein-Ryle-informed expectations. Nevertheless, on account of the virtues of the book mentioned at the beginning of this review, I also think that despite all these shortcomings, with the careful guidance of a competent Aquinas scholar, Kenny’s book can play a useful role in an introductory course on Aquinas’s philosophy of mind.

NOTES

1. Cf. for example, EE, c. 3; SCG lb. 4, cp. 81, n. 7; 1SN ds. 25, q. 1, a. 1, ad 2-um. Klima, G. (1997) “Man = Body + Soul: Aquinas’s Arithmetic of Human Nature,” in *Philosophical Studies in Religion, Metaphysics, and Ethics. Essays in Honour of Heikki Kirjavainen*, eds. Timo Koistinen and Tommi Lehtonen (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola Society, 1997), pp. 179-197.

2. For a detailed discussion of these issues see Klima, G.: “The Semantic Principles Underlying Saint Thomas Aquinas’s Metaphysics of Being”, *Medieval Philosophy and Theology*, (5)1996, pp. 87-141, especially n. 96.

3. In fact, Kenny’s discussion of this issue throughout the book seems to suffer from what may be called “the curse of J. S. Mill’s ghost”, namely, the implicit, but in contemporary analytic philosophy still prevalent (since presumably “intuitively clear”) assumption that while concrete terms name concrete entities (i.e., particulars with genuine causal powers), abstract terms name only the attributes or properties of the former, which are presumably “abstract entities” [universals?, entia rationis?—we never learn], in any case, some quasi-entities without any agency or other sort of causality. (For Kenny’s troubles see pp. 133, 138, 149. For Mill’s analysis see “Of Names and Propositions”, in: J. L. Garfield and M. Kiteley: *Meaning and Truth*, Paragon House: New York, 1991, pp. 8-34, especially, p. 17; also, note the easy shift from ‘form’ to ‘attribute’ in n. 8, on p. 33.) However, for Aquinas an abstract common term is the common name of the (ultimate)

significata of its concrete counterpart, which signifies the *forms* of those things which fall under it. But *forms* for Aquinas, even if they of course can be *conceived* and thus *signified* in an abstract, universal manner, are nothing but the individualized determination of some particular act of real being, and this is precisely why they are the principle of being and action in any sort of agency.

4. Just to take one more example, from the chapter on appetite and will, consider Kenny's self-assured judgment that Aquinas's natural teleology "is something which must be discarded if we are to make any use of his philosophy at the present time", on the hopefully "intuitively clear" basis that while the growth of a plant is teleological, the falling of a stone is not. (p. 61.) To be sure, Kenny deserves credit here for not assuming the otherwise perhaps also "intuitively clear", but in Aquinas's Aristotelian framework totally false and unjustified claim that all teleological activities must be conscious. On the other hand, he never even tries to consider how Aquinas may have held that even the falling of a stone is teleological. To that end, however, Kenny would have had to give a comprehensive account of Aquinas's theory of causation in the overall context of his Aristotelian natural philosophy, which is again radically different from modern conceptions of causation. But since Kenny fails to do so, his account is misleading also in the subsequent chapter, where he simply classifies Aquinas as a "soft determinist", as if the contemporary classification could be applied to Aquinas's theories without any further ado, despite the radical differences between Aquinas's and the contemporary concept of 'cause'. (pp. 77-78.)

5. ST1 q. 2, a. 1; in Phys lb. 1, lc. 1; in De Hebd. lc. 1.

The Evidential Argument from Evil, edited by **Daniel Howard-Snyder**. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996. Pp. 384. \$45.00 (cloth), \$22.50 (paper).

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This important anthology offers not only some significant new statements of and attacks on arguments that purport to provide strong, but not conclusive, evidence for atheism based on evil but also a fairly comprehensive bibliography on the subject. In what follows I will summarize some main themes of each essay and briefly reflect on a few central issues in the debate.

The first two chapters formulate the most potent versions of the evidential challenge to theism. Chapter One reprints William Rowe's "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism". Assuming that God would only allow evil that was (logically) necessary for a greater good, Rowe argues roughly that atheism is reasonable because it is likely that there are some instances of suffering that are not necessary for any greater good. In other words, because it seems that God (if such a being existed) could have thwarted the occurrence of certain instances of suffering without forfeiting any greater good (or at least we see no reason why God could not have done so), atheism is rationally justified. The second chapter reproduces Paul Draper's "Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists". Draper contends that theism fares