

10-1-1999

Book Review: Dialectic And Narrative In Aquinas: An Interpretation Of The Summa Contra Gentiles

Thomas D'Andrea

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

D'Andrea, Thomas (1999) "Book Review: Dialectic And Narrative In Aquinas: An Interpretation Of The Summa Contra Gentiles," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 4 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol16/iss4/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

restrictions imposed by embodiment that allow consciousness to be synthesized into experience of an ordered world. This is a point urged by Kant and recently re-advocated by Strawson. In the case of *unrestricted* consciousness, however, there is no place occupied by the experiencer. There is, therefore, no way of correlating different appearances as appearances of a single object. Once again, therefore, we come up against a very substantial way in which divine consciousness fails to fit into the theoretical niche provided by human consciousness.

I am therefore left with the feeling that the speculation that God is unrestricted consciousness has been far from shown to be a genuine epistemic possibility.

Dialectic and Narrative in Aquinas: An Interpretation of the Summa Contra Gentiles, by **Thomas S. Hibbs**. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1996. Pp. x, 288. \$17.95.

THOMAS D. D'ANDREA, Wolfson College, Cambridge

There is much to be learned from Thomas Hibbs's excellent book on the *Summa Contra Gentiles* of Aquinas. Plainly, though relatively early in his corpus, the SCG is one of Aquinas's most important works and one whose overarching conception is least understood. This book is a solid aid to removing much of the incomprehension.

Hibbs's work is heavily preoccupied with questions of genre theory, and before turning to these it is worth addressing the question of the genre within which Hibbs himself writes. There is a fundamental problem of choice of style and idiom facing today's Thomist. On the one hand, the number of Aquinas's philosophical interlocutors was fairly limited, and he and they were more like minded than not. Metaphysical realism was far and away the background assumption of the day. Gaps between Platonists and Aristotelians, significant at the time, were small compared to the gaps between philosophical conceptual schemes today.

Moreover, Aquinas did not read his Greek philosophical predecessors in their own language, nor interpret their thought in its cultural context in any detailed way, as we can today. He was first and foremost a theologian addressing fellow Roman Catholics and, in so doing, making use of what were by his own judgment the best philosophical resources available at the time and in the manner in which they were then available. During the course of his lifetime he produced something which amounts to a philosophical system, a set of systematically interconnected philosophical theses, largely but not exclusively of Aristotelian provenance, covering the areas of ontology, natural philosophy, philosophical psychology, the theory of knowledge, moral theory, etc. And he did this to serve the presentation of revealed religious doctrine.

There is a spirit of Thomas Aquinas, a spirit which embraces both method and substance, and by which genuine devotees are, as it were, bound. On the former front there is the great commitment to philosophi-

cal dialectic common among high medieval scholastics: a commitment to bring one's own philosophical beliefs into direct dialectical engagement with all and any intellectually respectable views on offer. This amounts to a kind of philosophical catholicism: call this methodological Thomism. Latterly there is the systematic but creative Aristotelianism which comprises the bulk of Thomistic philosophical doctrine and which, because it is systematic, can only genuinely be learned and adhered to as something like a whole. Call this substantive Thomism.

Now the challenge facing today's Thomist is as follows. He cannot jointly satisfy both the methodological and substantive requirements as a Thomist could, say, in the fourteenth century. There are simply too many rival comprehensive philosophical standpoints with which to engage in the time available to any one individual. He is also worse off than his fourteenth century predecessor in that the social order, scientific beliefs, and language of thirteenth century western Christendom must be things largely alien to him short of an arduous task of recovery. To learn at any deep level what Aquinas may have to teach requires a commitment of many years: a knowledge of medieval Latin and of a reasonable amount of medieval intellectual culture; a knowledge of French, German, Italian, and Spanish in which much important secondary literature is written; a solid grasp of the meaning and range of application of the central and interdefinable Thomistic philosophical concepts (essence and existence, form and matter, act and potency, substance and accident, material and immaterial, etc.); and, a stamina to master the Thomistic conceptual framework as a whole including its culmination in Aquinas's philosophical theology.

When some progress has been made along these lines by an individual much of the philosophical work has just begun. As is fitting for any such philosophical construct—and as Thomas himself was undoubtedly aware—his synthesis is vulnerable to critique and refutation at its every node. The Thomistic explanatory paradigm moves forward as a whole by meeting every objection it can in turn, making adjustments from within when and where such are called for, and striving thereby to improve in adequacy and cogency. Its success in this task depends on the work of many committed Thomists, each contending with some relatively small set of interlocutors and philosophical issues and joined in their collective efforts by a number of generalists surveying and synthesizing the results of the specialists' work and brokering exchanges between them. Today's Thomism (Is not the same true of today's Kantianism or empiricist naturalism or of any aspiringly systematic philosophical standpoint?) can flourish by division of labor and interdependent cooperation or not at all.

How, then, can Thomas Hibbs's book be classified? For whom and in conversation with whom does Hibbs write? In what genre and idiom? Hibbs belongs to a generation of Thomistic scholars who are a kind of bridge from the older tradition of high Thomistic exegesis (Chenu, Gilson, Pegis, Weisheipl, *et al.*) to a new tradition preoccupied more by dialectical engagement, from a broadly Thomistic standpoint, with issues and figures in contemporary philosophy (names like MacIntyre, Kenny, Finnis,

and Haldane come to mind). To simplify matters a bit, Hibbs's kind of Thomism is a bridge between an exegetical Thomism and a dialectical Thomism, and it merits to be read by practitioners of both. He has learned much from the former even as he tries to speak to the latter in this book—and not just the latter, but Straussian political philosophers and contemporary analytic philosophers of religion and neo-Aristotelians as well.

The book is concerned with dialectic and narrative in Aquinas's SCG, but is itself written in unequal parts of both. It is more narrational than dialectical, more concerned with presenting an overall vision than presenting sustained and detailed arguments for philosophical theses in Aquinas. It is an excellent interpretive guide to reading the SCG in its entirety, to the structure and purpose and significance of the work as a whole, and it contains numerous and generally persuasive exegetical asides, and numerous asides on matters of philosophical argument. But with its large canvas the philosophical arguments Hibbs advances on Aquinas's behalf are more suggestive than compelling; they lack the rigor and detail to secure assent from one schooled in analytic philosophy. Still, the work much deserves to be read by analytic philosophers interested in Thomistic theses because it supplies both valuable interpretive context for these theses and inchoate attempts at philosophical justification of a number of them.

Hibbs has a solid grip on much of the important, especially francophonie, secondary literature on the SCG, and much of his book's interest lies in its detail, which is often to say, in its numerous footnotes. In this review it is worth sketching out Hibbs's answer to the book's central question: Why did Aquinas compose the SCG and structure it in the precise way he did, that is, as opposed to the structure of the later *Summa Theologiae* and works by other roughly contemporaneous scholastic authors? This is not a question of merely antiquarian interest: the structure and purpose of the SCG reveals Aquinas's mind in important ways on the relationship between faith and reason and between philosophical and theological discourse and pedagogy.

Drawing on and extending the important work on this question by Anton Pegis and Mark Jordan, Hibbs argues persuasively against the received view that the SCG was composed by Thomas at the request of Dominican master general Raymond of Penafort as a manual for the Dominican mission to Islam in Spain. Instead the work belongs to an ancient and hallowed genre of philosophical protreptic, an exhortation to and enactment of the philosophical life in pursuit of wisdom or of a systematic understanding of the whole. This time it is a distinctively Christian wisdom which is in view: a wisdom in which theological reason eclipses philosophical reason as it picks philosophy up and carries it in the direction where it would go to answer a number of its own central questions, but where it cannot go for lack of native cognitive strength.

Employing a broadly neo-Platonic *exitus-reditus* motif, Thomas constructs a rigorous and thorough account of the divine nature followed by an account of the coming forth and returning to God of the entire created order, especially the human creation. The work is structured around a theme familiar to pre- and non-Christian philosophy, and yet into this structure Christian considerations strategically intrude. In particular, to discuss the

return of the human order to its ground and first principle, Thomas introduces the theology of the Incarnation, of the ecclesial community, and of grace and the sacramental system.

Hibbs puts together a compelling argument to show that Thomas composed the SCG for fellow Christian inquirers to show them how they can and should situate their philosophical inquiries within the broader and more ample horizons of revealed theology and speculative theological inquiry. Christian life itself can be viewed as the pursuit of the same comprehensive knowledge or wisdom sought by the pagan thinkers of old, but now a pursuit with enhanced chances of success. The Christian inquirer knows by gift both aspects of the inner life of that subject she or he most desires to know and the sure path to contemplative communion with the same. The SCG is then an important protest against both separatist views of the life of philosophical and theological learning and especially against those views, such as the movement of Latin Averroism, in which philosophical learning is accorded a practical if not overtly theoretical superiority to its theological counterpart.

Not so for Aquinas for whom faith is a higher mode of cognition than philosophical reason since faith in his view is nothing but a share in the cognition of a higher reason—divine uncreated reason. As Hibbs shows in detail, far from isolating the philosophical from the theological perspective on what is, the SCG continually interweaves philosophical and theological themes, and Thomas frequently takes his reader from the intelligibility of philosophical theses to the intelligibility of scriptural texts. Philosophical dialectic is inserted by Aquinas into the narrative of revelation and instrumentalized by that knowledge-by-divine-testimony which is faith. The great accomplishment of the SCG is the bringing into direct interrelation the theological and philosophical viewpoints and their respective methods of exposition and inquiry.

To summarize the book's content, Chapter 1 of *Dialectic and Narrative* treats Aquinas's understanding of the relation between pedagogy and philosophical-cum-theological writing; Chapters 2 through 5 canvass the central themes of the SCG's extraordinary attempt at a systematic and general explanation of the coming forth and return of all things to God. Hibbs then restates and amplifies his case against the SCG as a missionary manual or work of apologetics in a handy appendix at the book's end. All in all this is a very perceptive and valuable study of its kind, one well worth careful reading and re-reading.

Fact, Value, and God by **Arthur F. Holmes**. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997. Pp. viii and 183. \$18.00

PATRICIA SAYRE, Saint Mary's College

We live in confusing times. Eternal verities have come to look suspiciously like fictions masquerading as facts; rational justifications threaten to devolve into mere rationalizations; value claims appear all too