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*Dynamic Transcendentals: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty from a Thomistic Perspective* by Alice Ramos (review)

James Brent

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*Dynamic Transcendentals: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty from a Thomistic Perspective.* By ALICE RAMOS. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012. Pp. 259. \$65.00 (cloth). ISBN: 978-0-8132-1965-3.

Being is true in itself, but its truth is not just some lifeless or passive property of *being knowable*. Being is good, but its goodness is not just some lifeless or passive property of *being desirable*. The truth and goodness of being are, rather, active attributes of being. Having come from the One True Good, beings tend (each in its own way) to be and to become like the One True Good. And this tending-to-be-and-to-become-like-the-One-True-Good is something dynamic in things, a dynamic that is now returning (or likening) beings to the One True Good, who is now giving them being. Persons are caught up in the dynamic of the transcendentals in a particularly noble way, for persons tend to be and to become true and good precisely by knowing and loving the true and the good. By knowing and loving the true and the good, persons are being likened to the One True Good, God, as to him who knows and loves all. Such, in broad strokes, is the portrait of being that I find in the pages of *Dynamic Transcendentals*—a remarkable collection of essays by Alice Ramos.

The collection is divided into three parts. The first is on truth, the second on the perfection of the universe, and the third on moral knowledge and art. In considering truth, chapters 1 and 2 provide an overview of the metaphysics of truth—how truth permeates creation and is measured by the divine mind by which all things are measured and to which all things seek conformity. Chapter 3 is a noteworthy essay on “Affections and the Life of the Mind.” It is standard for Thomists to hold that it is one thing to know the truth and another to be a morally good person. The distinction is in effect the denial of Plato’s thesis that knowledge is virtue. The Thomist position, however, can easily be misunderstood to mean that in real life knowing the truth and being a good person have nothing to do with each other. This essay is a masterful corrective to that misunderstanding. Ramos explains how in real life (not just in the abstract) certain moral virtues are essential prerequisites for truth seeking and truth finding. A culture of individualistic autonomy, unrestrained concupiscence, rampant *curiositas*, and “aesthetic self invention” so warps the characters of persons that their likening to God as knower is impeded. In our society, agents of truth are threatened on the one side by despair of ever finding truth and on the other side by a superficial and distracted glance at it (*curiositas*). Full flourishing as an agent of truth, especially in our culture, requires persons thoughtfully to aim at growing in hope, humility, and *studiositas*, and to call others to that same path. Ramos points to the lives of Jacques and Raissa Maritain as contemporary examples of lives lived in such a way.

The second part of the book, on the perfection of the universe, introduces a theme that continues until the end: the beauty of being. Ramos is careful *not* to take a stand on whether beauty is a transcendental attribute of being (although the subtitle suggests she thinks it is). She explores the more modest claim that the whole universe of finite beings is beautiful insofar as it is well ordered (chap. 4), and that evil and suffering do not ultimately show otherwise (chap. 5). The remaining essays of the book together show the great variety of topics in Aquinas's thought in which beauty makes an appearance. The order of the cosmos is a grand display of beauty; moral character (especially temperance) is spiritual beauty; a life lived in consonance with Christ is beautiful; and ultimate human happiness calls us to a particular sort of beauty, namely, glory. Chapter 7, "On The Good and Glory" is an especially noteworthy account of honor, praise, and glory, their role in human life, and their connection with happiness. Humans are happy not only when we praise God, but when, in the eternal now of the beatific vision, God praises us. In the end, God approves of our virtues like a craftsman approving of his own work. Humans desire approval, and this desire is not only a narcissism reflecting the Fall, but a manifestation of being made in the *imago Dei* on the way toward happiness. To be sure, in the fallen state the desire to know and be known, to love and be loved, tends to degenerate into vainglory. But in wisdom the same desire can also be moderated so that one seeks approval from the right being (God) for the right reasons (virtue) at the right time (eternity) and in the right way (in truth). Chapter 8 raises the theme of the transfiguration of the world. In this second part of the book, there are many scattered seeds of a Thomistic theology of glory.

The final part of the book is on moral knowledge and art. Chapter 9 gives an account of how nonvirtuous persons can still recognize virtue in others. The nonvirtuous still retain *synderesis*, and it is *synderesis* that allows one to see the virtue (spiritual beauty) in others. Chapter 10 responds to a certain desperate need in our culture to see once again the distinction between the pleasant good, the useful good, and the honorable good (*bonum honestum*). The honorable good is a well-ordered character. The honorable good is the spiritual beauty of being a good person. In a culture of sexual license, the honorable good is particularly worth pointing out, for chastity is above all an honorable good. Sexual sin disfigures the soul. Only the chaste are beautiful in spirit. Such thoughts from ancient times are a welcome star guiding those who are looking for something better than what the world advertises.

Those looking for a purely historical-critical study of Aquinas on the transcendentals will not find it here. This collection of essays is remarkable because it exemplifies something Pope John Paul II called for in *Fides et Ratio*: "Philosophy needs first of all to recover its *sapiential dimension* as a search for the ultimate and overarching meaning of life" (FR 81). In these pages, Ramos starts with the results of the best recent historical and critical studies of Aristotle, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Aquinas; indeed, she begins where the

historical-critical studies end. Given what the experts say was the wisdom of Aristotle, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Thomas Aquinas, what does their wisdom mean for us as human beings in our world? The reader is treated to an inquiry into being that covers truth, knowledge, love, desire, affective knowing, person, *imago Dei*, likeness, perfection, participation, God, providence, evil, shame, guilt, morality, art, and glory. In more than a few of the essays, the topics at hand are discussed in light of an opening statement about the current state of Western culture and prevailing opinions. Many of the essays are thus a kind of metaphysical commentary on the days of our life here below. These are sapiential essays that treat being, not only *sub specie aeternitatis*, but also as we live out our being clothed in circumstances.

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*Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages.* BY MICHELLE KARNES. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011. Pp. xii + 268. \$ 50.00 (cloth). ISBN: 978-0-226-42531-3.

Any visitor to the annual International Congress of Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo, Michigan or to the Medieval Academy of America annual conference will be aware that medieval studies is by no means one thing. Rare is the scholar who can (or wants to) converse with both the Scholastic philosophers on the one hand and the Langland scholars on the other. Michelle Karnes is one of those rare scholars, as this ambitious and well-crafted volume demonstrates. This study begins with Aristotle's theory of cognition, journeys through St. Augustine, St. Bonaventure, and *Piers Plowman*, and ends with the Middle English translations of the pseudo-Bonaventurean *Meditationes de vita Christi*. Such an interdisciplinary scope is admirable and marks clear and hopeful promise for a growing dialogue in medieval studies between philosophers and theologians on the one hand and literary critics on the other.

Karnes, a literary critic herself, aims to demonstrate how medieval cognitive theory, specifically the Bonaventuran strong understanding of the role of the imagination, influenced and infused devotional practices such as meditations on the life of Christ. She argues that, under such influence, medieval writers conceived of the imaginative meditation as a path "from sensory knowledge of [Christ's] humanity to spiritual knowledge of his divinity" (20). Her case is built fundamentally around two central chapters on