Aquinas and Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Inquiry by Paul DeHart (review)

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The reliance of Radical Orthodoxy, primarily in the persons of John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, on Thomas Aquinas is notorious, both in the sense of being well known through the publication of Truth in Aquinas (2001) and in the criticism that book has received from such Thomist luminaries as Lawrence Dewan, Anthony Kenny, and Bruce Marshall. While some were more receptive (e.g., David Burrell, Adrian Pabst), none straightforwardly defended the work as true to the texts of Aquinas. DeHart is firmly in the camp of distinguished Thomist critics in that he is convinced that virtually everything that Milbank and Pickstock say about Aquinas is wrong. Yet, he hopes to avoid being purely negative by (1) providing an explanation for their errors, and (2) arguing that it is precisely those positions of Aquinas that they get wrong which are most important to retrieve for the task of contemporary theology. To anticipate my conclusion: I find DeHart’s exegetical deconstruction of Radical Orthodoxy’s Aquinas thoroughly convincing, but I find his attempt to retrieve something positive from this exercise less successful.

The bulk of the book is taken up with highly detailed presentations and refutations of Milbank’s and Pickstock’s interpretations of Aquinas on (1) analogy, (2) metaphysics, and (3) epistemology. Since it would be impossible to do justice to the intricacies of DeHart’s case here, I limit myself to summarizing his results in each area, beginning with analogy. Milbank’s interpretation of Aquinas on analogy is shaped by his dissatisfaction with the grammatical approaches championed by Nicholas Lash, Herbert McCabe, and David Burrell. All three propose that we understand analogy in Aquinas not fundamentally as a metaphysical theory about created and uncreated being but as an analysis of how certain words denoting creaturely perfections, such as ‘good’ and ‘living’, can be positively attributed to God in a nonmetaphorical manner. Such terms can be properly predicated of God because their semantic range is in principle unlimited. The predication remains analogical, however, because our “mode of signification” (e.g., how God is good), remains inescapably tied to our creaturely finitude. While the difference between
asserting that God is good and knowing how God is good is black-letter Thomist teaching, Milbank sees in this limiting of our ability to speak adequately of God the consequence of giving linguistics priority over ontology. Thus, as he sees it, Lash and company make common cause with the Kantian agnosticism characteristic of modern secularity. DeHart thinks that Milbank is being unfair to Lash and company, but his concern is with Milbank’s claim that Aquinas bases his doctrine of analogy on the Neoplatonic idea that all creatures are good because they participate in God’s own goodness. Thus, “affirming goodness of any creature involves the human mind in a dynamism whereby a certain implicit grasp of the creator’s goodness itself is already vouchsafed precisely in apprehending the creature’s mode of goodness as one of deficient participation” (47). For Milbank, the divine perfections are visible, albeit remotely, in created perfections, and when we see a created thing reflecting perfection we gain a glimpse of the related divine plentitude. Since the created goodness that we know is a participation in God’s goodness, our mode of signifying God’s goodness is “an inchoate but nonetheless actual experience of God’s mode of perfection” (60).

DeHart’s response is thorough and devastating. While granting that the metaphysics of participation plays a role in Aquinas’s approach, he shows how this in no way implies a proper knowledge of God in this life: “It is a fact that creaturely perfections are present in God in a more eminent fashion. We can indeed know that this is so, but this does not mean that we therefore know these as they are in God; indeed, we cannot know their eminent exemplification in God’s unimaginable simplicity” (61).

At this point, DeHart introduces his explanation for why someone as intellectually gifted as John Milbank gets Aquinas so wrong. The reason is that Milbank is not interested in Aquinas himself but rather Aquinas as the linchpin for Radical Orthodoxy’s genealogy of how Christianity lost its cultural dominance to a secularism devoid of beauty and meaning. That genealogy will be a familiar one to Thomists: Duns Scotus ruined everything. DeHart’s point, however, is not to assess the viability of the genealogy, which has been subjected to harsh criticisms by those schooled in the texts of the Subtle Doctor, but to show its potential for distorting Aquinas. When Aquinas is called upon to be the symbol of everything that modernity is not, his positions are determined beforehand. Accordingly, nothing about Aquinas’s theory of analogy can offer aid and comfort to those who would follow Kant in relegateing reason to the world of our experience. The problem, of course, is that Aquinas did not formulate his theories in order to combat Kant. Indeed, what appears as lazy agnosticism within our contemporary context could very well be a consequence of the medieval appreciation of the distance between human creatures and the divine majesty.

DeHart next moves to Milbank’s view of the place of metaphysics in Aquinas’s system. While the assertion of metaphysics as a discipline capable of operating apart from revelation is associated with Thomism and appears to
have obvious support from Aquinas’s texts, Milbank makes the quite shocking claim that a consideration of the deep logic of Aquinas’s thought yields a different judgment. Aquinas, according to Milbank, established the conditions for the evacuation of metaphysics in the face of revealed theology. Aquinas does this, primarily, by treating our knowledge of being *qua* being in a way that requires the extraphilosophical assumption of an infinite divine being that can only be known by revelation. Here Milbank is relying upon the argument that the category of finitude requires the existence of an extraphilosophical infinite. If this is true, and Milbank posits that Aquinas believed it was, metaphysics requires *sacra doctrina* for its own rational coherence. In particular, Milbank points to the “obvious” vicious circularity of the Five Ways. To be sure, Aquinas follows Aristotle in holding that physical change is a matter of a thing’s movement toward its own perfection. Yet Aquinas, according to Milbank, also holds that since “creaturely perfections can only be apprehended as participant in absolute perfection,” the conclusion from movement to a first mover as cause presupposes “the first mover as a kind of tacit principle” (67). With respect to metaphysics, the search for “the ‘adequate cause’ of its subject matter (*ens commune,* the existent-in-general or being-*qua*-being) can only conclude with God as the perfection of infinite being”; but to make its philosophical categories—such as existence, essence, and substance—metaphysical, arguments must go beyond philosophy and posit the revealed God as “the proper locus and perfection of these principles” (67-68). Thus Aquinas knowingly set metaphysics on the path to its incompleteness as a strictly rational discipline with a dependence on revealed theology. Left to its own devices, the more a purely philosophical metaphysics seeks to understand finite objects, the more it undermines the possibility of a purely finite starting point.

How does DeHart counter what he calls Milbank’s “interpretative lunge” concerning the mind of Aquinas? Without following him into the details of his refutation, it can be said that DeHart correctly places the burden on Milbank to show why his assertion of Aquinas’s true intent should in any way be persuasive to an honest reader of the texts. After marshaling passage upon passage in which Aquinas plainly asserts, or assumes, the possibility of an independent metaphysics, as well as pointing out instances in which Milbank seems to have misunderstood basic Thomistic principles, DeHart concludes that all Milbank has to offer is his own belief that Aquinas’s philosophical arguments need theological support, and not proof that Aquinas thought so. Contrary to Milbank’s reading, Aquinas takes special pains to uphold a theory of divine participation while also ensuring that metaphysical concepts can, when properly employed, apply to created realities: “Whereas Milbank must question whether finite things are existent in the proper sense, Aquinas readily assumes the latter and understands that it is rather the fact that term ‘existent’ can be applied properly to God that stands in need of argument” (70).
As was the case with analogy, DeHart judges that the best explanation for Milbank’s quite weird reading of Aquinas on metaphysics is the desire to present Aquinas as the anti-Kant. The mistakes are too numerous, the lunges too strained, to allow another explanation.

Next DeHart turns to the epistemology found in Pickstock’s contribution to *Truth in Aquinas* and a reply Milbank made to critics. Since DeHart’s appraisal of each is basically the same, I shall focus on Pickstock’s proposal. Pickstock’s goal is to show that Aquinas’s theory of truth as the correspondence of mind to reality is thoroughly theological and for this reason successfully escapes the common complaints leveled at modern correspondence theories, namely, that they present a static view of the mind “mirroring” the world and lack an epistemological mechanism with which to measure the extent to which ideas in the mind “mirror” extramental reality. Her arguments stand in contrast to Bruce Marshall’s effort in *Trinity and Truth* to appropriate aspects of Aquinas to construct a theological account of truth that meets the standards of contemporary analytic philosophy. Marshall fails, according to Pickstock, because in presenting a viable Thomism, he jettisons the antimodern elements that make Aquinas’s theory successful as an alternative. Aquinas, for example, bases his epistemology upon an ontology of the “fittingness” (*convenientia*) of all things, including the knower and the known. Thus when the mind grasps the truth of a concrete reality, a relation of fittingness prior to the act of knowing is unveiled. Moreover, such an ontology allows one to speak of the object’s transcendentals of existence, goodness, truth, and beauty, and even more radically of its relationship to the archetypal pattern in the mind of the creator. Thus the act of human knowing involves a simultaneous knowing, albeit inchoate, of the divine ideas. Indeed, our knowing brings forth an interior *verbum* akin to God’s primordial action of creation. In this way, “Aquinas’s theory of knowledge can be read theologically as participatory in God’s knowledge of creatures because the latter is itself essentially that of an artist, whereby God knows each and every created thing in its singularity” (102).

DeHart does yeoman’s work in disentangling the various threads of Pickstock’s notoriously complex position and in showing how it lacks a solid basis in Aquinas. He focuses on two aspects. The first is that Aquinas does not view the production of an interior word as creative, much less artistic. The aesthetic imagery upon which Pickstock relies refers to translating an interior word to an external communication and not the act of knowing itself. More important is Pickstock’s claim that knowing an object involves “gauging its relation to its archetype or exemplar in God’s mind.” Such a position, whatever its possible merits, is an impossible interpretation of Aquinas since he not only never says anything like that, but emphatically denies such access to the divine mind and its ideas prior to the beatific vision. Knowledge of the divine ideas is simply not part of human knowledge according to Aquinas.
The last two chapters engage Milbank’s claims that a vision of God is required for all knowledge—which vision for him supplies a “graced supplementation”—and his notion that the truth of the Trinity is available to reason and indeed necessary for its proper functioning. Together these ideas give serious primacy to Platonic over Aristotelian elements in Aquinas’s thought and erase any firm boundaries between faith and reason, or nature and supernature. Again the details are too much for exposition here; suffice it to say that in piling on arguments contrary to Milbank’s interpretations, DeHart turns what Milbank calls the hermeneutics of Sherlock Holmes against Milbank himself. Holmes famously said that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth. Milbank, accordingly, argues that once the standard reading of these issues in Aquinas has been rendered impossible, Milbank’s own conclusions, however unlikely, must be true. DeHart begs to differ: “Meanings have continually been foisted upon the texts that they cannot bear, and the radically orthodox Aquinas that emerges from their pens is (reluctantly as it must be admitted) largely a work of fiction” (188). Milbank’s Aquinas, in other words, is a real impossibility.

Yet, as I have said, DeHart desires his work to be about more than showing how wrong Radical Orthodoxy is about Aquinas. He wants to show that these thinkers’ genealogically inspired reading of the Angelic Doctor obscures precisely those elements that contemporary theologians need the most. He highlights three issues. The first he calls “glory as rupture,” referring to Aquinas’s claim that we are “designed” for total communion with God but are incapable of achieving or even imagining it apart from grace. Milbank misses the “rupture” by enfolding so much of the Christian mystery in our natural desire for God. Second, Aquinas insists that theology cannot operate apart from other intellectual pursuits, in particular a metaphysics capable of rendering aspects of our common reality intelligible. Today’s theology desperately needs to recover Aquinas’s confidence that human beings can know creation and through creation its creator. Again Milbank misses this because of his fear that any concession to knowledge apart from revelation supports the narrative of secularism. Third is the unique capacity for metaphysical argumentation to make credible the theological claim that God created ex nihilo. Such an argument will require “reconstituting the class notions of ‘substance’ and ‘form’ (albeit enriched by more materialist motifs and post-Aristotelian discoveries)” (195). For obvious reasons, the Aquinas of Radical Orthodoxy cannot be part of this project.

This positive conclusion is quite brief and a bit unsatisfying after so many pages of negativity. The problem is not the dismantling of Radical Orthodoxy’s claim to be representing Aquinas—which is important work well done—but the failure to keep the reader’s interest after the umpteenth take down. After all, if Milbank were convinced by DeHart’s arguments, he would be perfectly entitled to say: “Well, I wish Aquinas thought something like this,
but I see now that he didn’t. Even so, I am right.” For that reason, it would have been better, in my opinion, to frame the critical chapters in light of the conclusion. In that way, the reader could consider DeHart’s view of the importance of retrieving metaphysics as he goes through the ways the real Aquinas can do what Milbank cannot. Of course, he could always write a sequel.

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This latest book from one of the most creative philosophers of our time explores the prospect of constructing a metaphysics in the wake of the modern erosion of confidence in such an enterprise (4) and in the face of a number of powerful explicit critiques of it from Kant to Heidegger. In line with his numerous previous productions, and especially his trilogy on a metaxological metaphysics, Desmond argues for the return of metaphysics by recurrence to its ground in the dense milieu of phenomena that give themselves to embodied and responsive selves in communion with each other. As he does so, Desmond assesses Kant’s and Heidegger’s critiques of metaphysics and their postmodern developments (chaps. 4, 5). Yet ultimately this assessment is a sideshow to the critique of the speculative dialectic of Hegel, who offers a reconstruction of metaphysics this side of Kant’s destruction (chaps. 1, 3, 5, 9).

Throughout his distinguished philosophical career, Desmond has shown the ability to ramify and refresh the major features of his analysis of the everyday as well as his critique of the modern philosophical tradition. This book is no exception. Desmond’s fidelity to the matrix of our acting and thinking which enfolds us is again explored, and his powers of description and discrimination—what he would call finesse—rarely fail him. Crucial for Desmond is our experience of excess in our encounter with a reality, at once plural and imbricated, and irreducible to percept and concept. In addition, reality gives itself to us neither as purely multiple nor unitary but rather as a complex unity of both. To be faithful to reality, we have to acknowledge the ‘more’ in every phenomenon and at a limit acknowledge the ‘more’ that sustains the matrix. Analysis of the latter was the defining characteristic of the third and final book in Desmond’s hugely important metaxological trilogy, God and the Between. In the milieu, in the between, the proper response to reality is wonder. Desmond worries, however, that wonder can too quickly