Aristotle and the Ontology of St. Bonaventure

van Buren, Franziska

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Conclusion

To begin this conclusion with a question which I’m certain has been in the reader’s mind until this point, and this is now the historical question as to which philosophical school or tradition Bonaventure belongs – or better, here we need to give a response to that usual divide between Augustinians and Aristotelians, between Bonaventure and Aquinas. Attempts have been made – in the early twentieth century, as we have seen, by scholars such as Gilson – to characterize Bonaventure as a traditional Augustinian, defender of Christian Neoplatonism. Thereby, we should place Bonaventure into a category along with Alexander of Hales, John de la Rochelle, and the like. Others, such as John Francis Quinn, have attempted to tie Bonaventure rather more closely to his contemporary, Thomas Aquinas, admitting that Bonaventure is a philosopher of a different sort than his Franciscan predecessors and, rather, very much a man of his times – thereby rightly placed alongside Aquinas. Here, it is fair to say that van Steenberghen would be in agreement with this latter characterization, particularly with regard to Bonaventure’s use of Aristotle which van Steenberghen portrays as being no different than the somewhat liberal, or rather “eclectic,” use of Aristotle found in Aquinas and other scholastics.

Here, I would like to introduce a further option. There is of course a crucial break which Bonaventure makes with the Neoplatonic tradition, namely, that decidedly non-Neoplatonic – but Aristotelian – position that forms are not separate from sensible things. The strength of this position in Bonaventure quite obviously rules out the first characterization, which portrays Bonaventure purely as a defender of the traditional Augustinian and Neoplatonic sources. However, I don’t want to place Bonaventure in the same category as Aquinas, either. My reasoning for this is that (a) when it comes to his understanding of God, Bonaventure is tied to the Neoplatonists, albeit perhaps not Augustine (as I will discuss momentarily), in a way Aquinas is not; and (b) Bonaventure’s way of reading Aristotle, and his resulting understanding of forms, expresses a deep dissatisfaction with other medieval readings of “Aristotelian” realism.

Bonaventure is a realist, but, just as he is an Aristotelian of a much different kind than his contemporaries, he is likewise a realist of a much different kind than his contemporaries. His dissatisfaction with the “realist” and “conceptualist” notions of his contemporaries was made abundantly clear in the arguments we discussed in chapter 5. Indeed, much of Bonaventure’s notion of form develops as a result of addressing these issues with his contemporaries. Moreover, the issues which he had are extremely similar to issues raised by later Franciscans, who likewise take up the task of critiquing these alternative accounts of universals – and taking such
critiques as starting points for developing their own positions. These positions, however, are clearly very different from Bonaventure’s.

Accordingly, I rather see it more fitting to place Bonaventure into a school of his own, along with his students, John Peckham and Matthew of Aquasparta. It is true, on the one hand, that Bonaventure shares in common with the Neoplatonists the position that forms exist; with his contemporaries, such as Aquinas, he shares the interest in utilizing the philosophy of Aristotle to explain what these forms are and how they exist; and again with the later Franciscans, he shares a deep skepticism of the traditional ways of explaining the existence of these forms, Aristotelian and Neoplatonic alike. Yet, on the other, Bonaventure belongs to none of these schools: his interest in Aristotle prevents us from calling him a traditional Neoplatonist/Augustinian; the distinctiveness of his reading of Aristotle prevents us from placing him in a category with any of the alternative readings of Aristotle in the scholastic period; and his strong commitment to the position that forms primarily exist prevents him from being placed along with the Franciscans who came after him.

As I have emphasized above, Bonaventure’s turn to Aristotle – and precisely the distinctive way in which he reads Aristotle – expresses to a great extent his dissatisfaction with the solutions to the problems of universal forms found in his predecessors and contemporaries. Thus, we return to our perennial question of Bonaventure’s relationship to Aristotle. As I hope to have made clear in the preceding chapters, I am not defending the position that Bonaventure felt any kind of personal affection for Aristotle, or a kind of call to defend him from interpretations other than his own– the kind of zeal we rather see in Aquinas’ dedication to commenting on Aristotle’s corpus and defending precisely his own reading of Aristotle. Bonaventure showed no interest in doing this – no interest in defending the man, or his philosophy against the evils of alternative readings. He admittedly states that Aristotle is unclear on certain issues. However, and this is the point of emphasis, even when it comes to issues like the eternity of the world, Bonaventure never admits that Aristotle is in contradiction with Bonaventure’s own positions. Thus, while he does not see it as a goal to defend Aristotle, when the pressures of politics are removed, Bonaventure views Aristotle very much as an authority and does not want to be in contradiction with him. To make a more forceful assertion, I do think that it is quite clear that Bonaventure’s appropriation of Aristotle’s corpus is done with great enthusiasm – particularly when it comes to the question of the ontological status of the forms. When it comes, on the other hand, to the understanding of God’s causal efficacy, Bonaventure turns rather to Dionysius – and understandably so, insofar as Aristotle does not provide enough discussion of God to resolve the questions which are being asked of Bonaventure. But when it comes to the question of the forms and their presence in physical things, the source for Bonaventure is Aristotle.

What, then, of the question of Augustine’s influence on Bonaventure? On a number of issues we have seen Bonaventure bring in Augustine, e.g., exemplarism, and
(nominally, at least) seminal reasons, and there are also a number of issues which we have not examined where Augustine would be a key influence on Bonaventure, e.g., illumination. However, we also have seen Bonaventure quite explicitly part ways with Augustine on a number of points. This is why I put the caveat about Augustine on my claim that Bonaventure is tied to the earlier Neoplatonic sources. In a number of places, we saw – perhaps surprisingly – that Aquinas retained an Augustinian position which Bonaventure relinquished or even explicitly rejected. The most obvious, and important, example is the notion of God. While Aquinas retains that very Augustinian equation of being and goodness as applied to God, Bonaventure rejects such a notion and applies the being=goodness equation rather to the forms, turning instead to Dionysius’ God beyond being as the cause of the forms. In a similar vein, while Aquinas’ position on the ontological status of evil is quite similar to Augustine’s, Bonaventure explicitly rejects Augustine’s position in favor of his own which he bases on Aristotle.

Highlighting how Bonaventure parts ways with Augustine – especially when he explicitly rejects a position of Augustine, as with the notion of evil – indeed further undermines the usual division of medieval thinkers into the categories of Augustinians vs. Aristotelians, in which “Augustinians” is supposed to include anyone influenced not only by Augustine but also by other Christian Neoplatonic thinkers, such as Dionysius. Indeed, while Augustine and Dionysius share certain positions, such as a notion of exemplar causation, they differ on certain foundational issues, such as their notion of being and its relation to God – thereby it is plainly odd to put them so quickly in a category together, as if being influenced by Dionysius means being in accordance also with Augustine, or vice versa. Thus, when Bonaventure rejects certain Augustinian metaphysical positions, he is able to turn to an alternative position, e.g., that of Dionysius.

To return now to what I think is the key import of this book, we can make a few comments about the understanding of forms in Bonaventure’s thought which we have presented. Here, I wish to stress that the foundational insight which Bonaventure provides regarding the forms is the claim that only the forms exist. My reasoning for singling out this one point is twofold. From our discussion of Bonaventure in the three preceding chapters, it is clear that this position is the foundation of Bonaventure’s entire ontology. From this basic position, all of his others flow – that the presence of the forms qua operator (i.e. as a seminal reason) in this or that sensible thing is a contingent, not necessary aspect of forms; that sensible things do not exist but only have a likewise contingent existence, etc. Moreover, as we have seen, many of the possible objections to Bonaventure’s positions – such as Ockham’s objection to Platonic forms about the form being separate from itself, or Plato’s own sail problem – may be responded to by emphasizing this foundational claim: only the forms exist, and so there is nothing for the forms to be separate from, nor anything for the form to be divided amongst. Thus, this point is central to
Bonaventure's understanding of the forms and their place in the wider ontological structure of God and creation.

My second reason for singling out this point is that I think this is an insight which is beneficial not only taken in itself, but also for the task of reading and interpreting ancient philosophy, the way in which it was received by medieval philosophers, and understanding better the relationship between these two philosophical eras. This is to say, this book – whose focus is mainly the notion of form provided by Bonaventure – should not serve as useful solely for those interested in Bonaventure or medieval philosophy in general. First of all, as I’ve highlighted above, insofar as the understanding of forms which we find in Bonaventure is very clearly based on his interpretation of Aristotelian metaphysics and physics, he is simultaneously providing us with just that: an interpretation of Aristotle. Moreover, it is an interpretation which, as I have tried to show, is not only reasonably substantiated by the texts but also coherent taken as a whole. In this sense, then, Bonaventure is not very far from many contemporary scholars of ancient philosophy. Granted his own goals are different from ours, insofar as he is looking to develop his own philosophy, whereas we want only to understand Aristotle’s, nevertheless examining his texts gives us better insight into how we also might approach Aristotle. As I mentioned in the introduction, while we have made good use of other medieval interpretations of Aristotle, we have yet to utilize Bonaventure’s interpretation.

In chapter 4, I highlighted what I considered to be the benefits of Bonaventure’s reading of Aristotle. The main point there was that Bonaventure’s reading doesn’t reduce Aristotle’s realist metaphysics to the realist metaphysics of Aquinas in which the only existence which a form has is a contingent and individualized existence within the sensible composite – an account which, as we saw, ended up as unsatisfactory in its attempt to ground knowledge (i.e. of a universal) in such a form. Indeed, the standard way of reading Aristotle makes his account of forms similar to Aquinas’ – and thereby susceptible to similar objections made to Aquinas, as we find, e.g., in Ockham, or, as we have seen, in Bonaventure himself. While contemporary scholarship on Aristotle has examined alternatives to this reading of Aristotle’s forms, maintaining instead that Aristotle’s forms are indeed universal or that they are both universal and individual, etc., a reading along the lines of Bonaventure’s has yet to be offered in contemporary debates. Indeed, the fact that Bonaventure’s thought is an untapped resource for scholars of Aristotle extends further than the topic of forms, to the other ways in which Bonaventure utilized Aristotle’s texts – ways which might at first have sounded idiosyncratic but ended up providing a convincing position, as we saw with Bonaventure’s interpretation of God’s will or the ontological status of evil in Aristotle.

Moreover, just as an examination of Bonaventure’s philosophy has brought into question our standard divisions of medieval thinkers – Augustinian vs. Aristotelian, or Augustinian vs. Neoplatonic – it also to a great extent undermines yet
another way of categorizing philosophers: the division between Platonism and Aristotelianism. The indeed overly simplistic way of separating out the Platonic from the Aristotelian is often based on the position that, for the Platonists, forms are separate and ontologically independent, and that, for the Aristotelians, forms are inseparable and ontologically dependent. Yet, as we have seen, Bonaventure quite clearly breaks yet another mold here, insofar as his understanding of forms, as inseparable yet ontologically independent, would fit into neither of these categories. Thus, on this point, a study of Bonaventure’s metaphysical thought paints a very different picture not only of what Aristotle himself might have meant with his theory of the forms, but also a very different picture of what Aristotelianism and Platonism should mean to contemporary scholars – and indeed meant during the scholastic period.