Contemplating Aquinas

On the Varieties of Interpretation

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The Varieties of Interpreting Aquinas

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Reception of Thomas Aquinas's work has been contentious from the beginning: as one recent study observes, 'There has never been one Thomism'.\(^1\) In contrast, Alasdair MacIntyre asks whether there are just 'too many Thomisms'?\(^2\)

One way of dealing with Thomas is to ignore him completely. The University of Oxford has one of the great faculties of theology in the Anglo-American world: a faculty from which one could graduate with a degree in theology without knowing anything of Aquinas. This ignorance might be better than the selective and partial version of Aquinas to which students would otherwise most likely be exposed. In the standard introductory courses in the philosophy of religion, for example, students will often hear of the Five Ways, taught as an early variety of natural theology. Again, until recently, if, for instance, in the University of Oxford one were to choose the paper on the history and theology of the Western Church from 1050 to 1350 (an option seldom taken), one would be expected to study 'on the theological side', issues of Aquinas's doctrine 'above all on transubstantiation and natural law', followed by 'Scotus's voluntarism as a reaction to Aquinas on intellect and will'. Third, in another optional paper, again seldom taken, one would work on Thomas, rather than on one of the other eight major theologians on offer from Origen to Tillich, but, as a glance at past examination papers would confirm, the questions would permit candidates to focus entirely on the Thomas whose work is interesting principally because of theistic proofs and natural law: his significance as a theologian could have been ignored.

Why is this interpretation of Thomas so prevalent? Is it because theology at Oxford is predominantly Anglican, and therefore sympathetic towards the use of reason in natural theology and Christian ethics? Or is it rather because theology in Oxford is affected by the presence of one of

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the strongest philosophy faculties in the world, interested in philosophy of religion, if at all, then only from the perspective of the quality of the logical arguments in which it can engage?

Perhaps there are answers here. Anglican theologians are, anyway, famously sceptical about systematic theology – and so sceptical about the very idea of a theological system – and Aquinas's theology has long been widely supposed to be, if nothing else, then certainly a 'system'. Where did this idea come from? The assumption that Aquinas's theology is a system, articulated in terms of Aristotle's metaphysics of being, and laying emphasis on theistic proofs and the natural law basis of ethics, has been taken for granted in British universities and mirrors the variety of Thomism that has been propagated in Catholic circles since the 1870s. This view is exemplified in many of the textbooks of 'philosophia aristotelico-thomistica', from the late nineteenth century right into the 1960s: it was this version of Thomism that was wanted in the Catholic Church as a defence against 'modern thought', by which was meant Descartes, Kant, the German idealists, the British empiricists, the French positivists and the whole panoply of nineteenth-century philosophical positions. To this must be added the fact that Anglo-American philosophers, at least until very recently, have been suspicious of anything that smacked of 'metaphysics'. Here again, Thomas Aquinas has been widely assumed to be a (or indeed the) 'philosopher of being'. This does not commend itself to the most sympathetic interpreter of Aquinas in Oxford, Anthony Kenny, who concludes a chapter on 'Being' in these words:

The theory of the real distinction between essence and existence, and the thesis that God is self-subsistent being, are often presented as the most profound and original contributions made by Aquinas to philosophy. If the argument of the last few pages has been correct, even the most sympathetic treatment of these doctrines cannot wholly succeed in acquitting them of the charge of sophistry and illusion.3

The divine simplicity and God as ipsum esse subsistens is reduced to being called 'sophistry and illusion'? Where Anglo-American philosophy got its contempt for philosophies of 'being' from would be a long story in the telling. Specifically, when one reads Kenny (who has done more than anyone to keep Aquinas on the Oxford philosophical agenda), it appears that what he most deeply dislikes is the interpretation of Aquinas, not so much in the seminary textbooks of Aristotelico-Thomistic philosophy nor in transcendental Thomism, but especially in the work of Étienne

Gilson and Jacques Maritain – respectively ‘the metaphysics of Exodus’, and ‘the degrees of being’.

Too many Thomisms? If the understanding of Aquinas still current in British universities is the mirror image of the Thomism of the Catholic seminary textbooks since the 1890s (such authors as Louis Billot, Josef Gredt, Thomas Maria Zigliari and so on), this was already challenged in Catholic circles in the 1920s by what would come to be called Transcendental Thomism (Joseph Maréchal, Pierre Rousselot, Johannes Lotz, Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan); the work of Gilson and Maritain; and several different ‘schools’, such as the Dominicans of Le Saulchoir (Antonin Sertillanges, Ambroise Gardeil, Marie-Dominique Chenu); the Dominicans at Toulouse (Michel Labourdette, the brothers Nicolas) and at Louvain (Désiré Mercier, Fernand van Steenberghen) and many others.

Many years ago, Henri de Lubac argued that Thomas is not only notable for the ‘robust but a little static mass of his synthesis’ – a phrase that encapsulates the then standard view – but equally notable as ‘a transitional writer’: indeed, ‘the ambivalence of his thought in unstable equilibrium, ransom of its very richness, explains how it could afterwards be interpreted in such opposed senses’. The ‘ambiguity of Thomism’, as he goes on to call it, which concerns de Lubac, bears on a quite specific question: how to interpret what Thomas meant by ‘natural desire for God’, and how to assess the validity and significance of the many conflicting understandings of what he meant. In retrospect, the controversy set off by de Lubac did more than anything else to reveal how deeply readers of Thomas could differ. The controversy spilled over into accusations and counter accusations, indeed to professors being dismissed from teaching, in the light of Pope Pius XII’s Encyclical Letter Humani generis. The Pope’s admonitions about not subverting Catholic doctrine by playing down the sheer gratuitousness of salvation were thought by many at the time, rightly or wrongly, to be inspired by Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange and others, defending the interpretation (standard since Thomas de Vio Cajetan and other Dominican comment-

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ators) according to which – for Aquinas – nature and grace were quite separate realities, with their distinctive teleologies, against de Lubac’s supposed naturalisation of the order of grace by supernaturalising the order of nature. In fact Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit and friend of de Lubac, was more likely to have been the target.

The repercussions of the quarrel over the relation between nature and grace were never much heard or discussed outside specifically Catholic circles. It was here, however, where the ground began to shift, when it became unavoidable to choose between the Aquinas who inaugurates theistic proofs and the tradition of foundationalist apologetics that runs on into our own day, and the Aquinas who inherits, synthesises and transmits the patristic tradition of Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius, and the legacy of Christian Hellenism.

We owe a great deal to pioneering studies by great scholars like Martin Grabmann and Franz Ehrle, as well as Gilson and many others. In the last sixty years, however, research on Thomas’s sources, and on his interaction with his contemporaries, as well as a much wider familiarity with the whole range of his writings, has transformed our understanding of his work. The very idea of conceiving of his work as a ‘system’ rests on the assumption that the Summa Theologiae is all that matters. Nowadays we are more likely to speak of Thomas’s theological vision or of his perspective, or to say that he made certain ‘options’ – rather than claiming that he left anything in his wake that is as rounded and coherent as a system. Readers who regard the Summa as a system, we might suspect, unwittingly allow themselves to be unduly impressed by the surface of relentless progress through objections, response, solutions to objections, and the like, instead of following the references to Scripture and patristic authorities that characterise the whole structure of Thomas’s discussions.

Ironically, as the Thomism of the Roman universities and most Catholic seminaries lost its privileged status in the 1960s, the volume of research has expanded, exponentially it seems. Serge-Thomas Bonino speaks of a ‘hermeneutic conflict, more or less hidden’, in recent interpretations of Thomas’s work: medievalists, philosophers and theologians focus on aspects of his work that give rise to somewhat divergent readings; a ‘truly Thomist approach’, he argues, ought to be ‘catholic’ (small c, of course, its being French), ‘integrating these diverse approaches’. 7

Whether or not the Dominicans at Toulouse – of whom Bonino is perhaps a representative voice – are anywhere near achieving or even envisaging the possibility of any such integration of approaches, we

surely have to say that in Britain we have yet to become fully aware of the diversity of approaches, and even fully to understand that there is a hermeneutic conflict.

The picture of Aquinas as of interest principally because of his epistemology, theistic proofs, natural law ethics, and so forth, gains a great deal of its authority from a certain grand-narrative which is widely believed amongst English-speaking theologians. By considering the unity of the divine nature before considering God as revealed in three Persons, as happens in the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas obscures the specifically Christian God and even initiates the way to Enlightenment deism and eventually to modern atheism, or so the story goes. For examples of this argument, see T. F. Torrance, Eberhard Jüngel, Colin Gunton, Catherine Mowry LaCugna, and countless others in widely read books.8

It is a story that can make an appeal to august authority: ‘In Catholic dogmatics, which follow St Thomas, the life of God was identified with the notion of pure being’.9 In other words, ‘the idea of God was not determined by the doctrine of the Trinity, but . . . shaped by a general conception of God (that of ancient Stoicism and Neo-Platonism)’.10 Thus Karl Barth has argued, as long ago as 1940, representing a view still widely assumed to be correct.

This account, generally taken for granted by Reformed theologians, has also gathered distinguished Roman Catholic support: you don’t have to be Barthian to regard Aquinas’s God as non-Christian; the Catholics themselves admit it! For example: ‘According to Karl Rahner, the first decisive move in the isolation and subsequent sterilisation of the doctrine of the Trinity was the separation of the discussion of “the one God” from the discussion of “the triune God”.’ Indeed (as I believe has been said before), the deleterious effects of this separation have been classically illustrated in Karl Rahner.

These days, Hans urs von Balthasar rises higher than Rahner in the Roman Catholic theological galaxy. Much less frequently cited in this regard, for whatever reason, he too once claimed that Thomas has a defective doctrine of God. Bizarrely enough, he charges Karl Barth as

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10 Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, p. 329.
well as Thomas Aquinas with favouring discussion of the one God, creation, conservation and providence, and especially ethics and eschatology, at the expense of the doctrines of the Trinity, Christology and the Church.\textsuperscript{11}

Much as with his teacher and friend Henri de Lubac, Thomas is admitted by von Balthasar to be a ‘transitional figure’: ‘Whoever does not realise how Thomas was open both to the past and to the future will misunderstand his position in the history of human thought.’\textsuperscript{12} Yet, if de Lubac encouraged us to read Thomas as the inheritor of the patristic conception of natural desire for God, von Balthasar (here at least) preferred us to read Thomas more in terms of what was to come. The notion that philosophy and theology should divide and go their separate ways is the ‘authentic spirit of Thomism’. In the event, the three treatises that did not interest Aquinas – God as Trinity (here Thomas demonstrates his excellent formal training but the doctrine has no shaping influence on the project of the \textit{Summa Theologiae}), the doctrine of the nature of Christ (carefully done but with no influence on all that precedes), and the doctrine of the Church (simply absent from treatment or discussion) – are, von Balthasar contends, precisely what Christian theology is about. In other words, for von Balthasar here, Thomas’s options already opened him to the modern account in terms of theistic proofs, natural law, and so forth. Von Balthasar’s discussion of Thomas’s options turns on the argument that Thomas’s predominantly philosophical methodology prevents him from doing Christian theology properly. Von Balthasar reminds us above all else that, for Thomas, theology does not deal with singularities: the very particular historical events – these are to be interpreted as mere examples. So, in the end, von Balthasar chooses Barth over Aquinas, precisely because Barth’s methodology means theology practised as a knowledge and science of singular events.\textsuperscript{13}

Considered more widely, the story runs that Western Latin Catholic scholastic medieval rationalist philosophical Aristotelian essentialism (to categorise endlessly) is opposed to the properly biblical Christian Trinitarianism of the East, and of (especially Greek) Orthodox patristic theology – a story deriving from a misreading of the survey of Trinitarian doctrine conducted by the French Jesuit Théodore de Régnon, in the 1890s.\textsuperscript{14} Michel René Barnes has started to break the grip that this myth has held on Anglo-American theology, though the news has not

\textsuperscript{12} von Balthasar, \textit{The Theology of Karl Barth}, p. 262.
\textsuperscript{13} von Balthasar, \textit{The Theology of Karl Barth}, p. 266.
\textsuperscript{14} Théodore de Régnon, \textit{Études de Théologie positive sur la Sainte Trinité} (Paris, 1892).
yet spread far into university course books and suchlike, so far as I can see.15

Thus, the standard British account of Thomas is backed by Barthian suspicions of the role of ‘being’, but also by Catholic claims such as are offered by Rahner and Balthasar, about there being in Thomas’s work a defective doctrine of the Trinity; and, behind this, de Rénoun’s story supposedly setting a philosophically inspired essentialism against a biblical-patristic Trinitarianism. All of this is allowed to add up, confirming the inadequacy of Aquinas’s contribution as a specifically Christian theologian. The result is that, with these various narratives in play, you cannot but approach Thomas as an exponent of natural theology and a philosopher.

An account like this may very well have a strong appeal to those who wish to defend Aquinas, as we will find with Norman Kretzmann. Those who dislike it may employ the story as a way of discounting Thomas, as Protestant theologians usually do; but it would be possible to take a different line altogether – interpreting Thomas, even in the *Summa Theologiae*, as starting not from God understood as Father (Rahner is surely right about that, albeit he thinks this a defect), nor simply from the God of the ancient philosophers either (certainly not from the God to whose existence modern apologetics might reason by means of theistic proofs). Rather, so this account might argue, Thomas has a phased or layered conception of the One God: that is to say, God as source and goal of the world, *principium et finis*, the God of whom the pre-Christian philosophers – ‘wisdom-lovers’ – had knowledge; second, that God understood as the Lord whom the people of the Law were commanded to obey; and third, the very same God as Trinity, of whom knowledge has been communicated by Christ to the Apostles and thus to Christian believers.

On this reading, one which would need to be supported by argumentation and quotations from his biblical commentaries, Thomas would not be a precursor of modern natural theology but more like a theologian engaging with diverse religious traditions: the already religious wisdom-loving of ancient pagan philosophers; the Law revealed on Mount Sinai to Moses and the Israelites; and the fulfilment of both in the revelation by Jesus of the Triune God in the Christian dispensation. This is to accept a certain reading of the philosophy of ancient Greece, as itself already religious and indeed theological.

Such a reading is also dependent on accepting a certain reading of Holy Scripture. In particular, when Aquinas cites Scripture he cites the Vulgate. This, in turn, means that Thomas’s theology is rooted, not in the

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Hebrew scriptures, but in the Septuagint of which Jerome’s Vulgate was a translation. If there is any understanding of God accessible solely in virtue of the originally Hebrew books of the Bible, it has to be said that, for Thomas, it would already be decisively modified by the Greek books (not in any way ‘apocrypha’ or supplemental for him) and by the Septuagint translation.

In short, centuries before Thomas Aquinas, Jewish philosophers such as Philo of Alexandria could envisage God as the metaphysical first principle of the universe, perfectly simple, unchangeable, and with many of the attributes of the Greek philosophical understanding of the divine. Thomas’s One God may be approached, that is to say, not as the first step towards presenting God as ‘the God of the philosophers’, oblivious to Scripture; but as a significant moment in the long tradition of considering the God of the Septuagint in the light of a Platonising ontology that dates back at least to Philo and receives a strong Christianising influence in the person of Philoponus.16

If it is possible to read Aquinas like this, in addition we now also want to read Thomas in the more immediate context of his interaction with his Jewish and Muslim predecessors. In his recent work, for example, David Burrell shows how Thomas fashioned his doctrine of God and his doctrine of creation by drawing on the work of Ibn Sina and Rabbi Moses ben Maimon.17

It cannot be said that this work has yet percolated into the standard teaching and writing of the philosophy of religion. But what this interpretation demonstrates is that whatever others may feel free to do, the scholarly work of interpreting Aquinas should not be focused on some generic notion of deity. What Burrell questions is the point of ever attempting to treat of God whilst prescinding from the specific religious tradition in which the understanding of God arises. He prefers to acknowledge that human beings’ primary relations with the divine occur in specific historical settings and that the major religious traditions have developed sophisticated ways of articulating and criticising their theologies. In this recent work, Burrell retraces the immense effort of conceptual clarification in the three traditions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, particularly as it comes together in the Middle Ages. He offers ‘the medieval crucible of exchange’ as ‘an object lesson for our understanding of the matter in hand’, rather than simply as an historical inquiry on its

own. It would be misleading to say that he offers a distinctively new (or for that matter reheated) version of ‘Thomism’.

On the other hand, Burrell clearly believes that the distinctions made by Thomas, as he learns from his great non-Christian precursors, come much closer to the truth about the matters in hand than a good deal of modern theology has been able to achieve. By exploring the ‘interfaith’ perspectives operative in thirteenth-century philosophical theology, Burrell certainly challenges the standard account of Aquinas as the precursor of post-Enlightenment apologetics.

A different, much more recent and successful approach is surveyed by Roger Pouivet under the heading of what he labels ‘Wittgensteinian Thomism’. This was inaugurated by close friends of Wittgenstein in his last years: Elizabeth Anscombe, in her work *Intention*, can be seen demythologising modern notions of will,18 and Peter Geach, in *Mental Acts*,19 drawing more openly on Aquinas, and quite bluntly contemptuous of ‘decadent Scholasticism’ and the work of ‘many of [Thomas’s] professed followers’, doing the same for notions of mental states.

Anscombe’s pupil, Anthony Kenny, who had already studied philosophy at the Gregorian University, attended her classes on Wittgenstein in Oxford between 1957 and 1958. He – ‘like many others’ – came to Wittgenstein’s *Investigations* regarding the attack on the very idea of a private language ‘with incomprehension mixed with hostility’.20 He goes on to say:

> The seminar completely changed the way in which I looked at issues in philosophy of language and philosophy of mind: various lines of thought which until that time I had found seductive, and which many others still follow enthusiastically, lost all their attraction and were revealed as blind alleys and dead ends.21

Thus, in their approach to Aquinas, it was assumed that there were – are – two major issues: first, the ‘Cartesian’ conception of the self, involving privileged access by means of introspection of our interiority; and second, if we are to have knowledge, the need to posit intervening entities of some kind, sense data or whatever, that stand between our minds and the objects that exist in ‘the external world’.

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21 Kenny, ‘The First Person’, p. 3.
In contrast, Aquinas thinks of the objects in the world as becoming intelligible through actualising our intellectual capacities – there is nothing intervening between the mind and the world (‘intellectus in actu est intelligibile in actu’). This is a central plank in what John Haldane has recently labelled Analytical Thomism. While it would be exaggeration to claim that this use of Aquinas is transforming current debates in analytical philosophy about the relationship between mind and world, there is a significant appeal to Aristotle which now often also includes reference to Thomas.

‘We need to stand firm on the idea’, John McDowell says, ‘that the structure of elements that constitutes a thought, and the structure of elements that constitutes something that is the case, can be the very same thing’, a claim, as John Haldane says, that comes ‘as close as makes no substantial difference to the old orthodoxy of Thomist metaphysical realism’.

So, this way of engaging with the work of Thomas Aquinas is to explore (1) his non-Cartesian approach to self-knowledge and (2) his mind/world identity view of knowledge as possible ways of recovering from what are perceived as still deeply entrenched and widely influential modern philosophical myths about the self and about our cognitive situation in the world.

In Wittgensteinian Thomism (from about 1957 onwards) and Analytical Thomism (from about 1994) Thomas has been appealed to as a source of good philosophy. Not, therefore, as the source of the theism, natural theology, and so forth, that allegedly distorts and subverts Christian doctrine (as Barth, Rahner and others suggest), but as a resource in identifying, exposing, and overcoming Cartesian and empiricist approaches to mind and world.

22 Cf. In II Sent, Ds. 17, Q. 1, art. 1, resp. ad 4; SCG, Bk 1, Ch. 46, N. 3; ST Ia, Q. 12, art. 9, obj. 1 et passim.
cist presuppositions about self and world that continue to drive much thinking – presuppositions (we might naughtily suggest) that are not too difficult to find at work in much modern Christian theology.

On the other hand, we need not write off natural theology. On the contrary, one of the major achievements in recent Anglo-American philosophical theology is the reading of Thomas’s *Summa contra Gentiles* that is offered by Norman Kretzmann, in a set of lectures at the University of Oxford. He argues that, in the *Summa contra Gentiles*, we have not just a monumental achievement of medieval philosophy, but a vast thought experiment that should be studied on its own, for itself (and so independently of the *Summa Theologiae*); but also a great work of philosophy that offers the best available natural theology in existence.

Kretzmann holds that, prescinding from appeals to divine revelation as evidence and justification, it remains possible, desirable, indeed inescapable, for a philosopher, with the appropriate skills and interest, to investigate by means of analysis and argument, the question of the existence and nature of God and the relation of everything else to God considered as reality’s first principle. Not all, or even many, philosophers in the analytical tradition are likely to turn their attention to these issues; but, for Kretzmann and the ‘school’ he has built up round his work at Cornell University, there is nothing marginal, second-rate, out of date or vaguely shameful about dedicating philosophical energy and textual scholarship to the study of medieval philosophy and specifically of the work of Thomas Aquinas.27

From a theological point of view, given the pervasive ‘Barthian’ suspicions of natural theology, it is even more interesting that, for Kretzmann, there is nothing misguided or misleadingly inadequate about reasoning about God: on the contrary, it is now, as it was before the birth of Christianity, and quite independently of personal religious allegiances, a worthwhile and enjoyable intellectual endeavour. Interestingly, it is with Thomas’s *Summa contra Gentiles* that Kretzmann was primarily concerned. Beginning in 1983 when he taught a graduate seminar at Cornell based on this text, he continued to work on it and to inspire a generation


of younger students to consider central philosophical topics in the light of how they were treated in the Middle Ages.

If this is not extraordinary in itself, consider the remarkable revival of interest in ‘virtue ethics’, increasingly engaging with Thomas. Here again, the key intervention was Anscombe’s famous attack in 1958 on modern moral philosophy.\(^{28}\) To summarise briefly, in the days when philosophers were split between the attractions of utilitarianism (consequentialism as Anscombe renamed it) and Kantian deontology (in the form of R. M. Hare’s prescriptivism), Anscombe dismissed the former as barely worthy of being called moral philosophy at all, and concentrated on exposing the latter as continuing surreptitiously to feed off biblical theism. Her argument was that now that belief in divine law has been abandoned, the deontological interest in such notions as duty, obligation, and the like had become senseless. She claimed that while Protestants at the time of the Reformation did not deny the existence of divine law, their most characteristic doctrine was that the law was given by God, not to be obeyed, but to show sinful humankind’s incapacity to obey it, even by grace; this applied particularly to the requirements of ‘natural law’. Anscombe’s proposal, in this ground-breaking essay (much cited since) was that the best course was to abandon any further attempt to make sense of duty or obligation, and to return instead to Plato and Aristotle. Should we do this, we would then find that ‘philosophically there is a huge gap, at present unfillable as far as we are concerned’ – a gap which needs to be filled, she contended, by ‘an account of human nature, human action, the type of characteristic a virtue is, and above all of human “flourishing”’.\(^{29}\)

While not explicitly mentioning Thomas Aquinas, Anscombe’s provocative sally signalled the return to Aristotle (rather than Plato, as it turned out) and the massive expansion of interest in ‘virtue ethics’, particularly since the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. As he recognised, her essay was the catalyst.\(^{30}\)

Another preconception that colours interpretations of Aquinas has to do with ‘classical theism’ and the impossible impassibility of God. When Thomas identifies God as *ipsum esse subsistens*, ‘being itself’,\(^{31}\) the word ‘being’, for many people, connotes something static, empty, inert, virtually dead. Barth, for example, says that if God is *actus purus sine


\(^{31}\) Cf. *In I Sent*, Ds. 23, Q. 1, art. 1, resp. ad 4 et passim; *SCG*, Bk 3, Ch. 19, N. 3 et passim; *ST* Ia, Q. 4, art. 2, resp. et passim.
potentialitate,\textsuperscript{32} that means God lacks all capacity for change, life, development; whereas we need God to be dynamic, and so understood as becoming, or being in process. To speak of God as the ‘unmoved mover’, students often suppose (incredible as this may seem), is to say that God never moves. Even worse, to say that God is impassible is to say that God doesn’t suffer, and is thus incapable of love. To say, as Thomas does, that, while creatures are really related to God yet God has no real relationship with creatures, appears to have the effect of rendering God as something aloof and incapable of relationships, a being that is entirely self-sufficient.

Over against all this, we have Tom Weinandy’s splendid book, \textit{Does God suffer?}\textsuperscript{33} For a vast number of modern theologians the patristic and medieval tradition of divine impassibility is regarded as utterly unacceptable, in the light of the immense record of suffering of the twentieth century. Think only of Jürgen Moltmann’s statement: ‘The doctrine of the essential impassibility of the divine nature now seems finally to be disappearing from the Christian doctrine of God.’\textsuperscript{34} Once the doctrines of divine immutability and impassibility have been jettisoned, it is no wonder that the only way to read Aquinas is as unbiblical and unchristian, or as offering only the Aristotelian or Parmenidean God.

There is much else I could mention to illustrate the breadth and contradictions in the current plurality of readings of Aquinas; in particular the effect on reading Thomas of certain readings, and misreadings, of the Heideggerian story about the ‘forgetting of being’ (with its ambiguous objective and subjective genitive), \textit{Seinsvergessenheit}. Here we can find some readers conceding that Thomas is yet one more instance of ontotheology, while others contend that Thomas is the unique exception, the one who got away from the Heideggerian history of being.\textsuperscript{35}

But to understand this debate fully would require us to make a crossing of the English Channel into the European discussion which has hardly even begun to touch Anglo-American concerns, and would be to begin to explore many other varieties of understanding Thomas than

\textsuperscript{32} Pure act without any potentiality. Cf. Aquinas’s definition of God in CT, Bk 1, Ch. 11: ‘deus est actus purus absque aliaeius potentialitatis permixtione’.

\textsuperscript{33} Thomas Weinandy OFM Cap., \textit{Does God Suffer?} (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999).


those which have achieved even limited respectability in the United Kingdom or North America. The purpose of this collection of essays is to disclose something of the range of current interpretations – rival, conflicting, even incommensurable – the very many ways of contemplating Aquinas.