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Gaven Kerr, "Aquinas and the Metaphysics of Creation."

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Gaven Kerr. *Aquinas and the Metaphysics of Creation.* Oxford University Press 2019. 264 pp. \$99.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780190941307).

Medieval philosophers such as St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) recognized that our understanding of creation (i.e., the ‘universe’) will affect our ability to perceive whether or not a supreme Creator exists. Contemporary debates on the existence of God rarely square off in a substantial way with classical theists such as Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas, but when these great saints are actually consulted, they are barely mentioned as part of the history of natural theology or superficially glossed over without taking an in-depth look at the metaphysical schema that undergirds the premises in their arguments for God. Biologist Richard Dawkins recently made this mistake when he briskly argued against Aquinas’s natural theology in his popular-level and best-selling work on atheism, *The God Delusion* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008).

The Irish philosopher Gaven Kerr recently presented one of the best defenses of Aquinas’s doctrine of the natural knowledge of God in *Aquinas’s Way to God: The Proof in De Ente et Essentia* (Oxford University Press, 2015). Kerr emphasized that, in order to get to the heart of the matter in a contemporary philosophical context, one must refer back to Aquinas’s early and influential tract, *De Ente et Essentia*, to sharpen one’s metaphysical acumen for properly interpreting Aquinas’ natural theology (lest we commit the same mistakes that Dawkins did in *The God Delusion*). Now, in *Aquinas and the Metaphysics of Creation*, Kerr complements his earlier work by concentrating on Aquinas’s metaphysics of creation: ‘This work substantially enlarges on that overview and comes as the natural completion of the demonstration of God’s existence in the *De Ente et Essentia*’ (2). Both of Kerr’s scholarly books will be studied at length and referenced in future studies on metaphysics and God.

Kerr commences his study by situating the reader with a proper understanding of metaphysics. Because many individuals do not think in metaphysical categories, this is an important starting point for Kerr: ‘Once we are at a level of thinking of things in terms of their actual existence and not passing over that in favour of conceptual abstractions pertaining to features of their essences we have entered upon a metaphysical consideration of things’ (7). Today most disciplines concentrate on an aspect of being, but none of them approaches the topic of being itself. As a case in point, scientists and mathematicians will conceptually abstract intelligible components of select features of beings, but they do not concern themselves with actual existence. That is reserved for the metaphysicians. Whether scientists or mathematicians recognize it or not, they will presuppose the validity of the metaphysical:

What we are doing is focusing on reality in a very particular way and considering it in terms of what it is for things to be rather than not to be... precisely because metaphysics considers things in their very being, without which such things would not be, it is a more fundamental science than natural science or mathematics, because it investigates and considers what the other sciences merely presuppose. (10)

Chapter one presents a short history of philosophical thinking on creation. Beginning with the ancient philosophers (the Presocratics, Plato, and Aristotle) and culminating with Aquinas, Kerr maintains that belief in a created universe took time to develop. The Presocratics held to some kind of eternal evolutionary change to material reality, but in Plato and Aristotle we read that an immaterial reality or first universal cause lies behind the material realm. Eventually, these contentions were spelled out in greater detail by Aquinas who worked with the category of existence in his

philosophy. Because existence was a central theme of his metaphysics, he was able to formulate and defend the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*.

In chapter two, Kerr concentrates on three key attributes that the Creator must have in order to bring the universe into being: divine power, volition, and intelligence. After delineating the major ontological distinctions that constitute Aquinas's metaphysics (i.e., act and potency, essence and *esse*, substance and accidents), Kerr argues that 'He who is' must have power, intellect, and volition: 'whilst creation is an exercise of power into an outward effect, it is dependent on two inward operations by which (i) God envisages all that He could create, and (ii) chooses both to create and what to create. So in light of this we must deal with the creative attributes of God, two of which, intellect and will, are inward, and one of which is outward, so called because it passes into an outward effect: power' (57). All of created reality is grounded in formal (intellect), final (will), and efficient (power) aspects of divine causality.

Considering the radical distinction between creatures and the Uncreated, it follows that the universe depends on the Creator for its existence. This dependence is equally marked by the participation of all creatures in the self-subsistent Creator. Although Aquinas did not hold that one can demonstrate that the universe had a beginning, he did believe in a universe *ex nihilo*. Nevertheless, he argued that one can philosophically demonstrate (apart from supernatural faith) that all created realities depend on the Creator for their existence in the here and now. This enabled Aquinas to distinguish between the origin of the universe and its current ontological dependence on the Sustainer: 'whilst creatures can be involved in the preservation of beings and indeed in God's providential ordering of things, they cannot play a role in the act of creation itself as the origination of being; this is because no creature is *per se* but always *per participationem*, in which no creature can be the source of *esse* for any other, even though a creature can be instrumental in the preservation of such being' (92). Conversely, if the Sustainer withdrew his causal influence on the creation, the latter would immediately cease to exist.

In the next few chapters, Kerr elaborates upon several interrelated themes in Thomistic philosophy as they relate to divine and creaturely causality. In Aquinas's view of causality, God serves as the primary cause of all created things, but creatures still play a significant role in causing other finite realities within the causal nexus. For example, a person may be responsible for the ink marks on a whiteboard (in this case the person serves as the primary cause of the marks), but the marker has a necessary causal role as well (the marker serves as the secondary cause). Both causes (i.e., the person and the marker) are co-operative at the same time in producing the visible effects of writing on the board. In the case of divine and secondary causality, God is the Sustainer of everything other than himself, but created realities equally cooperate in sustaining other finite realities in continuous being.

Kerr's publications on natural knowledge of God and the metaphysics of creation are a remarkable achievement. In *Aquinas and the Metaphysics of Creation*, we have a visionary, dispassionate work of scholarship that transcends the norm in contemporary God-debates. Too often we see atheists, agnostics, and apologists argue with one another over straw man depictions of God. What might be needed to bridge the divide is a healthy dose of Thomistic philosophy: 'The otherness of God from creatures is important to bear in mind, for frequently unreflective depictions of God as creator portray Him as just another albeit significantly more powerful being alongside creatures. Accordingly, God is thought of as a being different in degree but not in kind from creatures. For Thomas, God is wholly different in kind from creatures' (52). Few philosophers can match what Kerr has already produced at the service of metaphysics and natural theology. This book is highly

recommended for those who can handle the rigors of first rate analytic philosophy along with some understanding of Aquinas.

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