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# Brian Davies, "Thomas Aquinas's Summa Contra Gentiles: A Guide and Commentary."

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**Brian Davies.** *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Contra Gentiles: A Guide and Commentary.* Oxford University Press 2016. 506 pp. \$135.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780190456535); \$53.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780190456542).

Catholic philosophers and fundamental theologians are well-known for providing rigorous arguments to exposit and defend the foundational beliefs of Christianity. The enterprise of defending the faith has a venerable history and can be traced back to the earliest phases of the Christian movement. In the middle ages, the most sophisticated defenses of Catholicism came steadily and swiftly from the pen of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-74). In his multi-volume work, the *Summa Contra Gentiles* (1265), Aquinas relied heavily on Aristotelian philosophy in order to strengthen the case for Catholic faith. As the Thomist philosopher Brian Davies explains: 'In short, Aquinas tells us that his intention in writing the *Summa Contra Gentiles* (SCG) is to provide an extended essay in natural theology ... and then to offer defenses of the articles of faith. And that, I think, is all that we can confidently refer to when it comes to the question, "Why did Aquinas write the SCG?"' (15).

Today the endeavor to defend the existence of God and the articles of faith is not always endorsed by philosophers of religion and Christian theologians. But such resistance is not due to substantial changes or reversals within the official teachings of the Catholic Church. As the bishops of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) announced, the faithful 'are more perfectly bound to the Church by the sacrament of Confirmation, and the Holy Spirit endows them with special strength so that they are more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith, both by word and by deed, as true witnesses of Christ' (*Lumen Gentium*, 11). Thus, the Catholic faithful are not merely called to dialogue with secular humanists and the religious others, or even dedicate themselves exclusively to the work of social justice, but must engage the world with philosophical arguments in the hopes of triggering conversions to Christ and his body on earth, the Church.

Davies' book not only brings the thought of the Angelic Doctor up to date, making it comprehensible for educated, contemporary readers, it also serves as a clarion guide and commentary that will highlight the perennial value of Thomistic philosophy. One of the most important themes in the section on natural theology is that normally functioning individuals can arrive at natural knowledge of the existence of God. In order to convince his readers of this profound realization, Aquinas cites and defends Aristotle's classical argument from motion for the existence of God (cf. Aristotle, *Physics*, VII). The argument leads inevitably to the existence of an unmoved mover whose essence must be utterly indivisible (otherwise known as the doctrine of 'divine simplicity'). Furthermore, Davies carefully and consistently informs the reader that Aquinas's entire project of philosophical theology in the SCG assumes that the doctrine of simplicity is sound. Says Davies: 'It cannot be sufficiently stressed that what Aquinas says in SCG 1.18-27 represents a line of thinking that is fundamental to the SCG as a whole. Aquinas draws on it continually. Indeed, his SCG thinking on simplicity is central to almost all of his major writings' (62). While finite, limited beings are composed of essence (potency) and existence (the act of being), there is no room for interconnected parts within God.

Because the doctrine of divine simplicity came under rapid fire in the modern period, Aquinas's view of the divine nature is not a trivial matter. Correlatively, the undaunted rise of modern approaches to belief in God (which are typically synonymous with belief in a complex, deistic God) set in motion a predictable dialectic between the caricatures of Christian belief on the one hand, and atheism and other forms of unbelief on the other. This dialectic continues to affect the surrounding culture of the so-called God debates in the twenty-first century. Again, Davies says: 'Aquinas holds

that God belongs to no species or genus. He also holds that it is God's nature to exist. In this sense, Aquinas would be at one with [D.Z.] Phillips when it comes to the statements "God is not an existent among existents" and "God is not an object." And he would certainly deny that God is something in the world accessible by empirical investigation or inference from this' (29).

An added bonus is that Davies does not merely exposit the thought of Aquinas; he also defends the central arguments of the SCG against philosophers who have quibbled with Aristotelian philosophy in general and Aquinas's natural theology in particular. A good example can be found in the section immediately following the argument from motion (which is outlined in SCG I, 13). This is a consistent practice within Davies' book. In this particular case, Davies succinctly takes on Hume's famous theory of causation, Newton's first law of motion (according to which a body will continue to move in a straight line unless interfered with), the problem of an infinite regress of caused causes, the possibility of self-causation, and the contention that Aquinas's natural theology cannot demonstrate a single First Cause. Davies handles these concerns with grace and with skill in the light of Aquinas's underlying metaphysical schema.

Aquinas spends a considerable amount of time showing how the Cause must have the attributes that are consistent with classical theism. While many apologists will merely argue for a 'designer,' 'the ground of moral values,' or the 'first cause of the universe,' Aquinas shows how a series of divine attributes must coincide perfectly and unitedly within the Cause itself. In general, this aspect of natural theology needs to gain more momentum within theistic circles. For the 'ultimate designer' of the modern natural theologian does not sufficiently interact with the most serious challenges within the atheist literature. Instead, the modern theistic philosopher tends to complicate the divine nature, making the nature of the Cause indefensible. As atheist Richard Gale states: 'The most telling objection that can be lodged against the cosmological argument is that it is impossible for such a being to exist, thereby showing that this argument's conclusion is necessarily false' (Richard M. Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God*, Cambridge University Press 1993, 238). While Gale's contention might be leveled against modern arguments for God's existence, it does not affect the sequence of arguments within the SCG.

Once the Thomistic argument has demonstrated the existence of the unmoved mover, a series of the divine attributes come cascading down, one after the other. To give a few examples, the Cause is not sensible; since changing beings can only be known through the senses, the Cause is known by negating what is conclusively known about the fact of changing beings within the world of experience. Therefore, the Cause is immutable. Moreover, the Cause of changing beings must be nonspatial (infinite) and atemporal (eternal). For, changing beings exist within the timespace continuum. Conversely, an immutable being must be indivisible. For if the unchanging Cause were composed of parts, then it would be capable of decomposition. But, the Cause does not have potential for any kind of change, including change for decomposition. It follows that the Cause must be utterly simple.

This review constitutes some of the major philosophical themes within the pages of Davies' outstanding guide and commentary on the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. While readers of Aquinas are usually introduced to the *Summa Theologiae*, I cannot think of a better single volume that will introduce keen students to Aquinas' second-most famous work. Although it is already well-known that Davies is one of North America's finest communicators of Thomistic philosophy, his book will serve as a powerful reinstatement of the classical demonstrations for the existence of a Creator for many years to come. His book will also help bring specialists and college level students of Aquinas into the best dialogues now taking place between unbelievers and Catholic scholarship. This squarely positions Davies' book within the mainstream of postconciliar Catholic philosophy. I highly

recommend this book to readers who are invested in the history of ideas as it relates to contemporary Catholic theology and the dialogue between faith, atheism, and the fittingness of receiving and preserving special communication from God.

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