

RUDI TE VELDE, *METAPHYSICS BETWEEN EXPERIENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE: THOMAS AQUINAS ON METAPHYSICS AS A SCIENCE*, ASCHENDORFF VERLAG, MÜNSTER 2021 (BEITRÄGE ZUR GESCHICHTE DER PHILOSOPHIE UND THEOLOGIE DES MITTELALTERS, TEXTE UND UNTERSUCHUNGEN, N. F., 87), 246 PP., ISBN: 9783402103074, 9783402103081 (E-BOOK PDF).

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Rudi te Velde's recent book, *Metaphysics Between Experience and Transcendence*, a substantial (and somewhat creative) study of the nature of metaphysics, is certainly deserving of a place alongside some of the most important works of Thomistic metaphysics written by such scholars as John Wippel, Lawrence Dewan and Cornelio Fabro. This work is a circling meditation on its central theme: « the movement from physics to metaphysics » and especially « the double movement to the subject and to the principles of the subject » of metaphysics (p. 226). In this way metaphysics is between experience and transcendence as the metaphysician sees that « the whole of being, that is, the multiple and diversified being of the world, as given to us in experience, is ultimately not intelligible as being, *inquantum est ens*, unless it is reduced to a first principle of being, which is not itself part of that whole » (p. 30).

The first chapter considers metaphysics in its medieval context and is especially concerned with the differing conceptions of the nature of metaphysics. Te Velde touches on the positions of Averroes and Avicenna and correctly notes that Aquinas « adopted the Avicennian model » (p. 20). Te Vede then goes on to contrast Aquinas's understanding of metaphysics with that of Siger of Brabant (and briefly to that of Scotus), who lacks the « reductive movement » of metaphysics which is present in Aquinas's conception. Importantly, for Siger, being qua being includes God and « opens a space prior to the distinction of God and creation » (p. 20). What this means is that the consideration of God becomes, in some sense, just one more task of the metaphysician, whereas for Aquinas arriving at the knowledge of God is « not simply part of the business of metaphysics » but is its principal aim and goal without which being qua being cannot be rendered intelligible. After this te Velde considers John Haldane's understanding of metaphysics and concludes that it is too strongly influenced by the early modern distinction between general and special metaphysics and so

again, like Siger, lacks the reductive movement and conceives of metaphysics as in some way independent from the consideration of God. As such, this conception of metaphysics loses the classical focus on the notion of « being as expressing the intrinsic intelligibility of things » (p. 38). This contrast to Haldane would also help to differentiate the actual position of Aquinas from so many of the Thomistic manuals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which follow, somewhat uncritically, the division of general and special metaphysics.

While this first chapter is insightful insofar as it explicates Aquinas's understanding of metaphysics and how it differs from other medieval and modern conceptions, it is also valuable insofar as it acknowledges the Avicennian lens through which Aquinas interprets Aristotle's (apparently) disparate remarks concerning the nature of metaphysics as a science of first causes, the divine and being qua being. Still, one wonders if there is not a Dionysian element in Aquinas's thought conditioning the Avicennian. For Aquinas, like Avicenna, Siger and Scotus and contra Averroes, the subject of metaphysics is being qua being and not God. However, for Aquinas, God is beyond being – beyond *ens commune* – and this seems to be Aquinas's interpretation of Dionysius's frequent remarks that God is beyond being, while still being *ipsum esse*. Thus, following Dionysius, God is at once beyond being and at the same time, following Avicenna's identification of essence and existence in the *necesse esse per se*, God is *ipsum esse per se subsistens*.

The second chapter turns to the three degrees of abstraction and the famous, and thorny, issue of *separatio*. The two main questions of this chapter are, first, what is *separatio* and, secondly, how one can know that being « is separable from matter » or need not be material (p. 51)? The degree of metaphysical abstraction, *separatio*, is constitutive of metaphysics and « is special in the sense that the intelligibility of being is in itself free from matter and need not be made free » (p. 64). Thus, for te Velde, it is not so much that we discover being qua being through *separatio* but rather the being which is presupposed in every act of the mind is « uncovered in its intrinsic intelligibility, by positing it as being free from matter » (p. 67). Additionally, in this chapter te Velde cautions us against seeing the role of judgment as our way of « reaching out » to the real or bridging the gap between the mind and real existents since for Aquinas, because being is the proper object of the intellect, there is no gap with which to begin (p. 66). Finally, te Velde argues against the position of Benedict Ashley, that prior knowledge of immaterial being is required to ground the *separatio*. The first issue is that it is *inconveniens*, we might say, for prior knowledge of the Unmoved Mover, which for Aquinas is God, to be required so that we have access to the metaphysical consideration of being and then arrive at the knowledge of God's existence as the cause of being qua being. For te Velde this is « close to a vicious circle » (p. 68). The second, and more substantial worry, is that for te Velde to prove the existence of an immaterial being

« one already needs to have access to the notion of being according to its metaphysical degree of intelligibility » (p. 69).

With regard to this chapter, first, te Velde's last point here could, I think, be strengthened by a brief consideration of the Fourth Way. Critics of the Fourth Way have at times argued that since it moves from gradations, then it ought to arrive at some being which is also, for example, the biggest, hairiest or smelliest. However, this argument does not deal with all manner of gradations, but with the transcendental perfections as found according to diverse grades within things. Thus, it must already be understood that for these perfections to lead to something that is most perfect and immaterial, that they must be, in themselves, independent from matter. Otherwise, the argument could only lead to a most perfect material being which, for Aquinas, would be impossible.

Secondly, one wonders if te Velde's position does not perhaps fall back into that of Ashley since, according to te Velde, the argument from motion at the end of Aristotle's *Physics* is neither physical nor metaphysical but « proves the necessity of making a transition from physics to metaphysics » (p. 73). However, would not Ashley essentially agree with this claim, since it is the argument from the *Physics* that is the gateway to metaphysics? Viewed in this light, it might be the case that te Te Velde and Ashley only disagree on whether it should be regarded as a « physical proof ». Furthermore, what does this mean for the integrity of physics as a science distinct from metaphysics if the argument at the end of the *Physics* is « neither physical nor metaphysical in character » (p. 73), especially since Aquinas says in *De Trinitate* V.2 ad 3 that natural science treats of the First Mover, not as its subject but as the end toward which it tends? Does this not make the argument proper to physics, showing that both physics and metaphysics arrive at knowledge of God through their own proper principles? And if the argument is not proper to physics, would this not render the investigation of mobile being incomplete? However, te Velde argues that the argument from motion is not based solely on an empirical fact, since that would make it an empirical argument. Rather, the argument's « underlying assumption » is that « nature is posited as being » and ultimately shows that « the whole of changeable reality as it falls under human experience would not be intelligible qua being if it were taken to be all there is, as Aristotle argues » (p. 73). Yet, if this is the case, as Aquinas says often in his *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, it pertains to the metaphysician to consider sensible substance qua substance or qua being. And so, to consider the realm of nature qua being or qua intelligibility is not the domain of the natural scientist but of the metaphysician. But would this then not make the argument at the end of the physics a metaphysical argument, proceeding from the distinctive metaphysical vantagepoint on reality?

The third chapter is devoted to *resolutio*, the process of « reducing something to its ground » upon which it depends for its intelligibility (p. 83). It is through this

process that « human thought becomes metaphysical » (p. 75). Such a process is necessary because an understanding of being, as the *primum cognitum*, is implicit within the mind's very first contact – and every subsequent engagement – with reality. Nevertheless, not every person is a metaphysician. Thus, as Aquinas writes concerning the discovery of the « object domain of metaphysics » (p. 76): *haec enim transphysica inveniuntur in via resolutionis, sicut magis communia post minus communia*. In this way being becomes the explicit object of philosophical investigation.

As it pertains to metaphysics, *resolutio* is twofold. There is the *resolutio secundum rationem* by which one proceeds from less universal to more universal intelligibilities or formalities and finally arrives at the consideration of being qua being and those properties that follow on being as such. Secondly, there is the *resolutio secundum rem* by which one proceeds from effects to causes and simultaneously arrives at knowledge of God as the universal cause of all being and the knowledge of creation. As te Velde observes, this means that creation « can only be conceived from a metaphysical standpoint » (p. 98).

In this chapter te Velde offers an interesting interpretation of the relation between the *resolutio secundum rationem* and the *resolutio secundum rem* which merits further reflection and discussion from fellow scholars of Aquinas. For te Velde, it seems that the *resolutio secundum rationem* is not exactly the « condition » for the possibility of the *resolutio secundum rem* – at least insofar as this language suggests two « distinct » stages or « steps » of metaphysical inquiry (p. 87, note 146). The worry is that to misconstrue this twofold *resolutio* is to compromise the « inner coherence of metaphysics » (p. 87). For te Velde, this is, it seems, exemplified in Wippel's methodology in his *Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, where he first analyzes the metaphysical structures of finite being independently from its divine ground. As te Velde writes:

what I find problematic in this approach is the idea that, while speaking of 'the structure of finite being', we could, for the time being, disregard the theological part of metaphysics and restrict our attention to the complex ontology of the world. But this goes against Aquinas's metaphysical intention (p. 105).

And so, once thought becomes metaphysical it, *ipso facto*, becomes theological as well (p. 105). For te Velde, it seems that we ought not conceive of an established ontological study of finite being which could be conducted independently of the knowledge of a « transcendent cause of being » since « the intelligibility of reality cannot be fully accounted for before the absolute, the *primum ens*, is reached and affirmed » (p. 87). Turning to *Summa Theologiae* I.44.2 where both modes of metaphysical *resolutio* are at play, te Velde understands them to be « two sides of the same coin » (p. 88). Thus « when the *resolutio* of reason... finally leads to the discovery of the common dimension of being, then at the same time it will be

apparent that this common being, in each thing present in a particularised manner, must be reduced to the common cause of being » (p. 87–88). The simultaneous uncovering of being qua being and the arrival at the knowledge of the universal cause of being qua being are, then, indicative of *intellectus* or the « intellectual-intuitive mode of knowing » which characterizes metaphysics (p. 88). In support of this interpretation, while analyzing *Summa Theologiae* I.44.2, te Velde writes:

the text offers no argument to prove the existence of such a cause. It is as if, from the metaphysical viewpoint, the dependency of all things on a universal cause is immediately apparent. Once the intellect has discovered being in common, the subject of metaphysics, it immediately apprehends the reference of the subject to its principles, that is, the transcendent cause of being. As far as I can see, there is no explicit discursive reasoning which concludes to the existence of the ‘principle’ on the basis of the ‘subject’ of metaphysics. There is, strictly regarded, no step of discursive reasoning going from ontology to theology (p. 99).

Concerning a point of clarification, if this is an accurate characterization of Aquinas’s understanding of metaphysical progression (and some scholars of Aquinas might very well not agree), and even if there is « no step of discursive reasoning going from ontology to theology », is there not at least still a logical (and not necessarily temporal) priority – for us – on the discovery of being as common to all things?

The fourth chapter, devoted to the categorical division (or differentiation) of being and the transcendentals, opens with a consideration of the Aristotelian background to the categories and an analysis of *De Veritate* I.1. Te Velde, however, notes the Avicennian lens through which Aquinas approaches the Aristotelian categories as it was from Avicenna that Aquinas took the teaching that « nothing is posited in a genus by reason of its *esse* but only by reason of its *essence* » and « that everything which belongs to a genus must have an essence distinct from its essence » (p. 119–120). In this way the « categorical order of reality is seen to be a particular way of having something universal » in virtue of which the « transcendental character » of being « comes into view » and so can be realized as something « not absolute, existing in and from itself » (p. 121).

In addition to an insightful analysis of the Platonic elements at work within Aquinas’s metaphysics, due principally to the *Divine Names* of Dionysius and the *Liber de Causis* (p. 126–132), in this chapter te Velde offers some cautionary remarks about regarding metaphysics as a science of the transcendentals. As te Velde notes, Aquinas never regards metaphysics as a science of the transcendentals. Such a characterization is more indicative of the shift undergone in the thirteenth century from a theological to an ontological conception of metaphysics (p. 137). Again, this covers over the essential reductive movement of metaphysics from

experience to transcendence. In fact, such an understanding of metaphysics is more akin to a Scotistic or « conceptualistic approach » which lacks the reductive movement and is rooted in a concept of being which is prior to and attempts to embrace both the finite and infinite within a broader horizon (p. 139–140).

The fifth chapter is dedicated to analogy. Analogy is expressive of the « intelligible connections » the mind makes between things in different genera and, in the case of God, even between being as a whole and that which transcends every generic and categorical mode of being. As such analogical predication employs a « semantic transfer » to attempt to simultaneously express the similarity and difference between the analogates (p. 158). In this way « difference » is « a constitutive part of the ‘intelligible connection’ which underlies analogical sameness » (p. 150). Furthermore, analogy, Te Velde observes, is « located at the very center of the double metaphysical movement towards the subject of metaphysics » and the cause of its subject (p. 141). Te Velde applies the term « transcendental analogy » to the being which is predicated analogically of the ten categories and is arrived at via the *resolutio secundum rationem* and applies the term « theological analogy » to the order of creatures to God which is discovered via the *resolutio secundum rem*.

The order of creatures to God is particularly important insofar as the failure to keep this in mind leads to the erroneous understanding of analogy as an attempt to bridge the gap between the infinite and finite in virtue of a concept which can « stretch » or « extend » to both God and creatures. Such a view, it seems, implicitly conceives of God as an instance of being, himself contained within *ens commune* (p. 151). Instead, creatures only are in virtue of their similitude and order to God. To use Aquinas’s example of pure subsisting whiteness, if such a thing existed there could be no more universal analogate or concept of whiteness which could contain both it and the particular white things which participate in it. To use a different image, there can be no third analogate or concept in virtue of which a woman’s portrait would bear its likeness to her face. Rather, her face would simply be the exemplar to which the portrait would be the analogical likeness and to which it would be ordered. No all embracing « stretch » concept would be needed (or intelligibly could) bridge the gap between and ground the likeness of her face to her portrait.

Te Velde states that the metaphysical foundation for this correct understanding of analogy can be seen in Dionysius’s statement that God is not a this or a that but is *omnia ut causa omnium* (p. 163). As such, God comprehends within his absolute simplicity the whole of being and so he

cannot be characterised in opposition to something else, or as a part of a whole, but only in terms of the whole of the God-world complex: God is that whole, in the manner of the cause, thus as gathering (*prae-habet*) the distinct manifold of the world

in his simple unity; the world is that same whole, but in the manner of the effect, a differentiated order of many and diverse things. Dionysius's formula emphasises that we cannot posit the existence of the world and then add to this, from the outside, another reality of God, ending up with two distinct realities (p. 164).

In the sixth chapter te Velde continues his circling meditation on metaphysics as mediating between experience and transcendence and investigates the inner logic of the reductive movement of metaphysics. Here one of the major themes that is treated in detail are the first principles of all intellectual life which are at once naturally known and, in a sense, derived from sense knowledge (p. 174). In particular, being is known « spontaneously » and « immediately » in the minds very first contact with reality. This expresses the mind's always already « being-in-contact-with-reality » (p. 175). As « these first principles virtually contain all the knowledge which can be derived from them » but still cannot « carry us beyond that which we can know from objects grasped by the senses » (p. 176) this naturally leads to the analogy of the human intellect to the eye of an owl. Nevertheless, insofar as the owl has eyes it still has a natural affinity for the sun. In an analogous way, even though the human intellect must begin with what is most intelligible to it but which is least intelligible in itself and proceed to what is most intelligible in itself, still insofar as the proper object of the intellect is being there remains in the human person an inclination or orientation to arrive at knowledge of the First Cause of all reality (p. 180–181). Although te Velde does not refer to it, a relevant text that would pertain to the point under discussion is found in *Summa Theologiae* II-II.2.3 where Aquinas writes *natura autem rationalis, inquantum cognoscit universalem boni et entis rationem, habet immediatum ordinem ad universale essendi principium*.

In the seventh and final chapter te Velde addresses two especially prevalent challenges to the possibility of metaphysics in the modern world. The first is the challenge of a scientific naturalism while the other is a Heideggerian inspired critique of metaphysics as onto-theology (p. 197–198). In this chapter, in the course of critiquing naturalism, te Velde draws an interesting connection between Aristotle's remarks in *Metaphysics* IV and Newman's *Idea of a University* as both thinkers saw the need of a more universal perspective to integrate the distinctive particular branches of scientific inquiry (p. 202). As such, the committed naturalist overlooks the way in which the various empirical scientific disciplines depend on deeper and more fundamental principles for their intelligibility; principles which they themselves do not examine and which if they did they would (by definition) no longer be empirical sciences. In addition to this, te Velde observes the various ontological claims that are uncritically made by such figures as Richard Dawkins and notes the way in which they misconstrue the God-world relationship as that of two extrinsic entities added together.

In addressing the second challenge, the Heideggerian charge of onto-theology, te Velde compares Aquinas's understanding of being to that of Suarez and suggests that « in Suarez's conceptualistic approach to metaphysics, we are much closer to Heidegger's onto-theology » (p. 2015). Finally, in addressing the attempt to have theology without being te Velde takes up as something of a test-case God's immutability, God's promises and the philosophical presuppositions in Scripture. As such te Velde concludes that « the metaphysical thinking of God in terms of being, as found with Aquinas, is not necessarily opposed to the hermeneutical approach to religious belief [...] but rather is presupposed by it » (p. 220, 225).

In conclusion, te Velde's *Metaphysics Between Experience and Transcendence* is an excellent treatment of the nature and methodological progression of metaphysics, written by a master metaphysician. This book contains much that deserves careful consideration and is one which this reviewer has himself returned to several times. Indeed, no review can do justice to the wealth and depth of metaphysical reflection present in this text. While not everything in the book will garner universal agreement from scholars of Aquinas and other metaphysicians, it is a very valuable contribution to metaphysical research and is a tremendous accomplishment.