

Gaven KERR, *Aquinas and the Metaphysics of Creation*. New York NY, Oxford University Press, 2019, 14.5 × 22 cm, viii-252 p., ISBN 978-0-19094-130-7

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RECENSIONS ET COMPTES RENDUS

PHILOSOPHIE

Gaven KERR, *Aquinas and the Metaphysics of Creation*. New York NY, Oxford University Press, 2019, 14.5 × 22 cm, viii-252 p., ISBN 978-0-19094-130-7.

Author Gaven Kerr characterizes *Aquinas and the Metaphysics of Creation* as enlarging in the final chapter of his previous book, *Aquinas's Way to God: The Proof in De Ente et Essentia*¹ (p. 2). There, Kerr considered Thomas's proof for the existence of God which relies upon the distinction between essence and *esse* (existence or being), and the causing of the joining of these in creatures. Such considerations, Kerr writes in *Aquinas and the Metaphysics of Creation*, "led me naturally to conclude with a brief account of what a Thomistic metaphysics of creation would look like" (p. 2), and thus *Aquinas and the Metaphysics of Creation* is concerned to expand on the brief account of creation found in *Aquinas's Way to God*, precisely as informed by the discussion of essence and *esse* that is so central to the latter work.

Indeed, one sees the fingerprints of *Aquinas's Way to God* throughout this work, from Kerr's many and tasteful references to his previous material, to the continued and central role that essence and *esse*, especially *esse*, play in *Aquinas and the Metaphysics of Creation*. And yet this book feels like a complete work in its own right, perhaps due to the fact that Kerr's primary source material is so much more varied than it was previously in *Aquinas's Way to God*, as Thomas nowhere presents a metaphysics of creation as such.

In what follows I will present a brief summary of the chapters of *Aquinas and the Metaphysics of Creation*; I will include occasional remarks as to the highlights of certain chapters. After this, I will explain what I take to be further strengths and the main weaknesses of the book, on which I will finally provide my final thoughts.

The first chapter concerns the history of philosophical thought around the idea of creation, from the Pre-Socratics until Thomas's time. Here, Kerr takes his cue from Thomas's own reading of the history of philosophy (pp. 15-16), although Kerr is keen on warning the reader that this first chapter is not *merely* a historical chapter (p. 12), and indeed it contains dense philosophical reasoning and argumentation. The thrust of the first chapter is that Thomas sees the history of philosophy as slowly unfolding a philosophy of creation, as in time philosophers approached a more nuanced and universal appreciation of being itself. What this chapter does especially well is laying the groundwork for the central role that *esse* will play in the remainder of the book.

1. Gaven KERR, *Aquinas's Way to God: The Proof in De Ente et Essentia*, New York NY, Oxford University Press, 2015.

God as the agent of creation is the focus of the second chapter. Here, Kerr follows Thomas's treatment of God's operation that is found in *Summa Theologiae* I.14-25; that is, Kerr considers God's knowledge, will, and power, which he labels as the "creative attributes" of God (p. 57). Especially useful in this chapter is how Kerr ties these attributes to the creative act, identifying in them formal, final, and efficient principles of creation respectively (pp. 70-71).

The third chapter concerns the nature of creation, and more precisely, the definition of creation; Kerr works from Thomas's definition of creation: "to create something is to produce it in being (*esse*) according to its total substance" (p. 75). Thus, Kerr locates the creative act in the production not just of *esse* (although this is primary, as the creature is produced *in being*), but in the creature whole and complete (according to its total substance). Included in this chapter is a treatment of the relationship of creatures to God, and vice versa. Here, Kerr argues that the relationship between creatures and God is a *real* relationship, owing to their causal dependence on God (p. 84). On the other hand, according to Kerr, the relationship of God to creatures is a relationship of *reason*, as opposed to a real relationship (p. 85), and this is owing to the fact that the relation of creation "is nothing real in God" (p. 85) and that God "remains the same whether He creates or not" (p. 84). Kerr's treatment of the category of relation with respect to creatures and God (and vice versa) is, to my mind, quite impressive in its simultaneous brevity and depth, as he successfully navigates the tricky waters of attempting to explain the real relationship that creatures have to God and that God does not have to creatures.

In the fourth chapter, Kerr considers the causality of creation with an eye to efficient causality; here, God is considered as the primary efficient cause of all creatures. Those who are familiar with Thomas's Five Ways (the first three in particular) should follow Kerr in his reasoning without much difficulty, as Kerr proceeds by utilizing the distinction between a *per accidens* causal series and a *per se* causal series, and denies the possibility of an infinite regress in the latter. And where the Five Ways demonstrate the existence of God in denying this infinite regress, Kerr instead uses this *per accidens* / *per se* distinction to establish that God is "the primary cause of the *per se* series whose causality is *esse*" (p. 116), a series which, Kerr argues, includes all of creation in its scope, effectively establishing God as the first efficient cause of all of creation. The thrust of all this is *not* that there is a *per se* series of creatures causing *esse* in each other, of which God is primary, but that owing to the nature of the *per se* series, the creative act of God is one single act by which God both creates and sustains all of creation in being (pp. 114 and 117).

The fifth chapter sees Kerr examine the object of creation, i.e., what it is that is created. As the third chapter established that what is created is something in being as to its total substance, Kerr rightly turns to the question of substance: substance itself, the creation of substance, and what is uncreatable. It is to Kerr's credit that he provides an extended treatment on accidents, noting that substance is one mode of being and accident is another (p. 141). Especially helpful in this regard is his exposition on Thomas's commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, wherein Thomas justifies dividing the various categories into different classes (pp. 141-145). This allows the reader of *Aquinas and the Metaphysics of Creation* to better follow Kerr into the following section of the chapter, wherein he establishes that the act of creation produces

the total substance in being in all of its aspects – including accidents in all of their various categories. Kerr's exposition of the classes of categories help the reader to see that the substance truly is, according to Thomas, created *in all of its aspects*, accidents included.

In the sixth chapter, Kerr examines the "history" of creation. This chapter stands out as being the most theological in character, as in it Kerr focuses upon an article of faith (that the world began to exist) and Thomas's commentary on the work of the six days of creation that one finds in Genesis.

The seventh and final chapter is called "The End of Creation," and concerns the purpose or goal of creation. In this chapter, Kerr returns to the idea of God as the primary efficient cause in order to integrate final causality into that *per se* series. In addition, Kerr examines the end of creation as a whole and the end of man [who is the "summit of God's creative causality" (p. 230)] in particular.

The seventh chapter is, to my mind, one of the primary strengths of *Aquinas and the Metaphysics of Creation*; Kerr rightly highlights the importance of the final cause in God's creative act – which is God himself – and indeed creation is incomprehensible without this crucial aspect. In the final section of the chapter, wherein Kerr examines the end of man in particular, one finds an exceptional integration of human nature, happiness, love, and the role of Christ within the broader discussion of finality in creation, so that in the end Kerr can write:

In Aquinas's metaphysical thought we can thus think of creation as an act of love, an unconditional act of love from the creator to the creature. This idea should cause us to stop and think, since whilst it does not deny the sheer power implicit in the act of creation, if one were to think of it solely in terms of power, one would belittle creation as nothing more than an awesome magic trick. (p. 237)

The love of the creator for the creature in the act of creation, Kerr writes, demands an act of love in return on the part of man for the creator (pp. 237-238). Thus, for Thomas, one's understanding of creation is incomplete without an understanding of the love that the creator has for creation and the love which the creature (man in a unique way) owes to the creator; all of this is an expression of the ultimate end of all of creation: God.

There are, however, some weaknesses in *Aquinas and the Metaphysics of Creation*. For one thing, with a few notable exceptions, there is rather little secondary literature, and what secondary literature there is, is usually in the form of suggested reading in the footnotes (again, with a few notable exceptions). By itself this could be acceptable, but combined with the fact that the book gives almost all non-English quotations in their original languages without any translation leaves me wondering whether *Aquinas and the Metaphysics of Creation* was meant to be more of a beginner's overview of the metaphysics of creation, or an in-depth academic specialist treatment of the issue where the reader is expected to have a reasonable reading knowledge of Latin (and French: p. 125, fn. 4; but not Italian?: p. 238, fn. 45). Certainly Kerr's treatment of the subject matter would indicate that he had something like the former in mind (as, for instance, Kerr takes the time to explain what the four causes are (p. 101), and this would certainly excuse the relative lack of secondary literature. However, it becomes difficult to understand why so many quotations that are sometimes rather

important to understanding Kerr's finer points are left untranslated, in their original Latin. Rather than straddle the two extremes, *Aquinas and the Metaphysics of Creation* could have benefited from a more middle-ground position, wherein there would be more review of the secondary literature, and the quotations would be presented in English when a crucial argument did not depend on precise meanings of Latin terms.

Yet these negative critical remarks should not deter one from reading this book. *Aquinas and the Metaphysics of Creation* is superb in its methodology and explanation of the issues at hand, and Kerr's writing style is rather easy and enjoyable to follow. The physical book itself is exceptionally well put-together; the binding in the hardcover edition is of particular high quality, yet this is outmatched by the quality of philosophy between the covers (I cannot speak to the theology). For all of these reasons, for those who are interested in Thomas, metaphysics, and / or creation, I must recommend *Aquinas and the Metaphysics of Creation*.

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C. Stephen EVANS, **Kierkegaard and Spirituality: Accountability as the Meaning of Human Existence**. Grand Rapids MI, Eerdmans, 2019, 15,2 × 23 cm, xiii-210 p., ISBN 978-0-8028-7286-9.

We are always running into people who describe themselves as “*very spiritual*, though not religious.” Usually it is just a virtue signal. They are either flaunting their exceptional intellectual integrity that disdains superstition, or the fuzzy piety manifested in their vegan lifestyle and large collection of crystals.

Because the word “spirituality” is burdened with such connotations, I opened Professor Evans' book, *Kierkegaard and Spirituality* (henceforward KS), expecting to damn it with a few dismissive words. That expectation grew firmer as I read the preface and the first few pages of Chapter 1. “Spiritual” and “spirituality” were used incessantly, without any attempt to pluck a meaning from the weedy semantic field in which they lie.

The first paragraph of this present review was the salvo with which I intended to launch a speedy demolition of the book. That was then.

In the review I am actually writing, that salvo figures instead as my only objection to this illuminating account of Kierkegaard's philosophy – the best I have ever come across. Evans has adopted an empirical approach to the meaning of spirituality in Kierkegaard. He constructs the meaning as one might a building. Sentence by sentence, he goes about it, page by page, chapter after chapter, the whole length of this lucid, jargon-free and exciting account of Kierkegaard's thought. Step by step he shows us what he (and Kierkegaard) mean by “spirituality” and why it is important that we know.

No critique of the current abuse of “spirituality” appears until the construction project is complete. But the need for such a critique is not forgotten. It is addressed