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# Saint Thomas Aquinas, 'An Exposition of The Divine Names, The Book of Blessed Dionysius'. (Ed. and trans. by Michael Augros)

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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**Saint Thomas Aquinas.** *An Exposition of 'The Divine Names,' The Book of Blessed Dionysius.* Ed. and trans. by Michael Augros. The Thomas More College Press 2021. 549 pp. \$65.00 USD (Hardcover 9781950071227).

Michael Augros' translation of Saint Thomas Aquinas' account of Pseudo-Dionysius' work on the divine names marks a significant contribution to the Philosophy of God. This impressive 549-page book is amiable to use. The headings are clear and broken down, with Dionysius' Latin text on one side and Saint Thomas' commentary on the right-faced side. Sarrazin's Latin translation of Dionysius' original Greek is used. Where the translation is ambiguous, Michel Augros wisely defers to Saint Thomas' version.

As the author notes in his introduction, translating ancient texts presents challenges. However, this work is far more complex. First, there is the question of authorship. There are many controversies surrounding Dionysius, and this ambiguity is famously expressed in the name Pseudo-Dionysius. In an excellent and economical introductory essay, the author discusses this controversy and several others of a similar but historical nature. Though interesting, these controversies are less of a concern to philosophers. Rather, philosophers are solely interested in the argument itself—its logic and structure and the evidence it advances.

The book bridges the late classical Neoplatonic and Medieval Scholastic philosophies (xxi). This is an essential point as it underscores the breadth of Saint Thomas' philosophy but also because of the nuances such a viewpoint brings to crucial features of Saint Thomas' philosophy. One of these, discussed by Augros in his essay, is the philosophy of participation that Saint Thomas advances. In the text at hand, one can see the imprint of Dionysius on Saint Thomas' position.

There is another important sense in which this work is a vital bridge. It establishes Saint Thomas as a hermeneutical thinker of the first order. In this regard, he is positioned within a tradition that runs from Origen through Saint Augustine and Maximus Confessor and culminates in the philosophy of Meister Eckhart.

The connection of Saint Thomas Aquinas to this tradition is essential for several reasons, but I will focus on one. One of the criticisms of Saint Thomas and Scholastic's philosophy is that it is not philosophy, but theology from start to finish. It starts with theological premises, this position maintains, and then moves on to make its argument. One reply is that Neoplatonic Philosophers accept the basic ground established earlier by Plato and Aristotle. Generally, one need not start



from scratch but locate their argument in the context of those who preceded them. In the case of Saint Thomas, he accepts the ground rules for discussing metaphysics from Plato and Aristotle. For example, the idea of a hierarchy of what is real. He also accepts Aristotle's idea in *Metaphysics* that there must be One over and against the manifold of beings. So, the argument against Saint Thomas' work as theology and not philosophy is ahistorical.

One can see Saint Thomas' grounding in the hermeneutical tradition in this sentence, "Whatever the proper perfection of a thing is, it pre-exists principally in God" (29). By principally here, Saint Thomas is referring to the principle itself, for he says, "It is united to God; so that the deity belongs principally to itself, but secondarily and by participation to those who are deified" (29).

Finally, in expositing the being of principle, he notes, "For it is manifest that whatever things are found in creatures pre-exist in God more eminently" (29). The most crucial point to remember here is that this is against the backdrop of Saint Thomas' idea of participation. As philosophers sometimes put it. From the exterior to the interior to the superior. So, encountering things is mundane, but it also reveals a principle. Beyond the principle, however, is its spiritual meaning.

The humility of Dionysius and Saint Thomas is evident throughout the work, and one senses a partnership between the two thinkers. Saint Thomas, again underscoring his discernment of texts according to the hermeneutical tradition, quotes Dionysius's symbolic interpretation of the Book of Job, wherein God asks Job if he can follow God's tracks. So, too, in understanding God, one needs to take a step back and realize these are effects and not identities with God.

Some of the most profound and beautiful passages relate to Jesus as God and man. After mentioning Nestorius' errors, who maintained that God inhabited his human identity only, he offers an account of union. As Jesus is super-substantial, he exceeds every nature and is made within our nature and the human species (33).

Before discussing the divine names *per se*, the question of how it is possible to know God is discussed. Here, participation establishes that although God is above mind, God as Good establishes specific footings for man through his goodness (one of His names). These are metaphors and signs which allow one to see. Here, it will be recalled that Plato's highest form of knowing was not calculative thought but seeing. However, it is essential to remember a caveat McKenna noted in his Plotinus translation. McKenna underscored that for Plotinus, one can see the good through human agency alone. For Saint Augustine and those in the Christian Neoplatonic

tradition, the grace of God is necessary.

Famously, Saint Thomas understood God through negation. First, one can undertake an Eidetic reduction in which things are removed from God. In addition, following Plato, while the house I see is real, what is more accurate—more universal and timeless—is the reasoning that gave rise to the house and its effects, blueprints, and so forth. This is also true of the divine names. Behind the symbolism of the divine names is the deity himself.

Dionysius then cites the many ways God is praised throughout the Bible, such as, *ancient of days*, or as a fire or a cloud. Although these are merely names, they are the effects of God's reality, which exceeds them.

One of the exciting aspects of this combined work by Dionysius and Saint Thomas Aquinas is that although it is a book about divine names, it introduces a vast amount of philosophical insight and argumentation. For example, the Divine Union and Discrimination section has a superb, subtle, and insightful discussion of the Trinity. Here, Dionysius uses the familiar example of light, explaining how the lights of many lamps are such that the wholes are wholly within each other and yet have precise discrimination. They have both discrimination and unity.

In contradistinction to minds generally, there is within the Trinity a proportional participation (75). There is something familiar to the whole Trinity and something distinctive about the Persons (75). The text then states that each divine Person is founded in another. The nuance here is that, at the same time, the things that pertain to the fecundity of the super-substantial God never *reciprocate* with each other (75). Dionysius expresses this distinctiveness and unity by underscoring that the Father is the super-substantial font of the deity (75). Saint Thomas then clarifies by adding that font here should be taken as meaning authorship or a principle, but one that is not from a principle (75). In this most subtle Christian idea, one can discern the above-noted partnership of the two thinkers.

The following section pertains to the union of the Trinity and the way the goodness of God is dispensed to creatures. Again, participation for creatures is not to be confused, Saint Thomas writes, with the meaning of participation within the Trinity. There is no contact between the Deity and creatures, and it is not to be construed as the participation one sees in a seal that leaves an imprint on wax. The effects of God's goodness are communicated to creatures through participation with the effects of God. This includes the kind of communion with things that poets and artists enjoy. One can add that this would also include the waiting upon things or the disclosure

of their being.

Interestingly, the two thinkers note that participation in the case of divine things has two directions. Later thinkers, such as those in the phenomenological tradition, argue that consciousness has two directions: from mind to world and from world to consciousness. Here, in the encounter with the divine, one's intellect participates in the light of divine wisdom. It also engages by way of the things which present themselves to our intellect. The intuitive flaring up of things as an effect of God is made possible because of God's goodness in things. I.P. Sheldon-Williams noted this in his study of the topic. In his discussion of Christian Neoplatonist Johannes Scotus Eriugena, he offers this quote, "God, in creating all things, creates himself in all things". Not as directly connected, of course, but by virtue of his goodness. Saint Thomas adds the following to ensure that this subtlety is not overlooked, "God is participated by creatures through likeness, but in such a way that he remains unparticipated above all things by the distinction of his substance" (85).

The work then discusses the good in God's name, using the various metaphors sacred writers use to convey different aspects of the deity. One of the book's most beautiful and engaging sections is the discussion of intelligible light. Here, Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* introduces the profundity of darkness as both a condition of bondage to error and a drain on one's energy for higher things. When the spiritual darkness of adherence to unreality is removed, there is a greater desire to seek genuine spiritual reality and the power and stamina to pursue it.

The book discusses many more topics, and thanks to the exceptional indexing and organization the author provides, these can easily be found and reflected upon.

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