

# Reviews

**THE THOUGHT OF THOMAS AQUINAS** by Brian Davies. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. Pp.xvi + 391.£45.00.

This book is a remarkable achievement. It brings alive a man about whose life we really know very little beyond the bare bones of his movements; and makes accessible a body of thought and writing which can seem forbidding to the modern reader. Those who come to know Aquinas discover him to be engagingly drawn to problems mostly as important now as then. Dr. Davies knows him very well and brings to the writing of this book many years of experience of introducing him to modern minds in teaching. That is perhaps a significant reason for the book's success. The writing of intellectual biography requires an effort at fellow-feeling with the strivings of its subject. Dr. Davies knows as Aquinas did what it is to face the task of making a gigantic quantity of intrinsically difficult material seem manageable enough to encourage the new reader to make a start on it.

Aquinas passed from very nearly being censured on a list of theologians whose opinions were condemned in 1277 to canonisation in 1323 and in later centuries to a place of high approval. Something similar happened in the case of the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, which were at first looked on with suspicion, and then became the standard textbook for centuries of work in theology. This fine line between acceptance as authoritative and condemnation as erroneous is trodden still by academic theologians and the sense of Aquinas' care in negotiating it gives edge and tension to the treatment here. He paid a high price. We shall not now know what caused his breakdown before he died, but certainly he became unable to go on.

The subject-matter is treated topically and systematically, as Aquinas would, one feels, have approved. Aquinas' own sequences and structures are not always used, however, with the result that there are some surprising juxtapositions of issues. Some of these are challenging and throw new light, though not all are successful. The chapters cover 'getting to God', which includes the question of proofs for his existence and the issues about creation; 'what God is not', on some of the epistemological problems of knowing about God and Aquinas' thinking on divine simplicity; 'talking about God', which includes a treatment of analogy and of real and notional relations; 'perfection and goodness', which covers the problem of evil with masterly clarity but perhaps too much brevity; 'ubiquity to eternity'; 'oneness to knowledge' (which makes the transition Aquinas himself makes, though perhaps a little awkwardly (p. 124); 'will to mercy'; 'providence and freedom' (here again a slightly awkward transition, though one natural to Aquinas, from providence

through miracles to the problem of freedom of choice to prayer-to-change-things); 'the eternal triangle', on the Trinity; 'being human', which concentrates upon the body-soul problem, on the question what happens to their relation at death, and on the operations of desire and action through body and soul; 'how to be happy' takes virtue and natural law under its heading; 'how to be holy', which explores the questions of the nature and purpose of human beings, and the roles of law and grace in making them what they ought to be; 'the heart of grace', which deals with faith, hope and charity; 'God incarnate', which conveys elegantly the shadings of interest in the implications of Chalcedonian Christology for thirteenth century minds; 'the life and work of Christ', which deals with sin, satisfaction for sin, merit, justification and the resurrection and ascension; 'signs and wonders', which places the sacraments in context.

In two areas of current concern it would have been valuable to have rather more. Aquinas was interested in the nature of theology as an academic discipline, and more importantly, as a discipline in its own absolute right. He was also writing at a time when elements of an ecclesiology which was both to reflect and to influence the events which divided the Church in the West in the sixteenth century were being made explicit. On the latter there are useful points on the Eucharist as 'the reality which constitutes the Church as the Church' ( p.363), but that is only part of the contemporary story. It would also be helpful here and there to have a clearer indication how far Aquinas' ideas are those of his contemporaries or immediate predecessors, and where he is saying something new.

One might perhaps also wish for a little more on the effects upon Aquinas' mind of teaching within the confines of sequential lecturing on texts and of treating questions within a formal structure which tends to reduce all issues to the appearance of being much the same size. Dr. Davies has himself had to stand away from these structural limitations in order to discuss what Aquinas has to say, and makes excellent use of the difference it makes to be free to do so.

But these are quibbles, this is a comprehensive book, and it achieves balance in the areas of its great strengths, the analysis and presentation of Aquinas views on what Aquinas himself put in the forefront of his teaching. It should establish itself as a definitive study.

G.R. EVANS

**THE REALITY OF TIME AND THE EXISTENCE OF GOD: THE PROJECT OF PROVING GOD'S EXISTENCE** by David Braine, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1988. Pp.383.

This book is without doubt a serious contender for the title of the most important contemporary work of metaphysics: and if metaphysics is the first philosophy, for the title of the most important contemporary work of philosophy, *tout court*.

Braine tells us that his project is to show that God exists from the