

# Reviews

**CONTINGENCY AND FORTUNE IN AQUINAS'S ETHICS (Cambridge Studies in Religion and Critical Thought 6) by John Bowlin Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999. Pp. xiv + 234, £35 hbk.**

Tired of sterile debates between Kantians and consequentialists, many moralists now look to virtue theory for a more satisfactory account of the moral life. Bowlin's book offers an interpretation of key texts from the *Summa Theologiae* on the cardinal virtues in order to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of this material, to show how Thomas Aquinas comes armed with 'a collection of tools' from different philosophical traditions, and to suggest that at a key point in his ethics Aquinas draws on Stoic ideas and so cannot be described *tout court* as 'aristotelian'.

Bowlin begins with courage. Because we must contend with chance occurrences and fortuitous happenings there will be unavoidable conflicts of goods. The difficulty of silencing some goods in some circumstances presents us with difficulty even if not with irresolvable moral tragedy. Difficulties also arise from within ourselves. Hence the need for virtue, and that virtue take the shape of courage. Because of its link with difficulty, courage displays more vividly than other virtues the voluntariness of virtuous action.

However, prudence is required if courage is to be truly virtuous. In considering means and ends, prudence must cope with contingencies arising from the variety of circumstances and consequences. Because there can be 'false prudences', justice is needed to fix the will on true goods. And justice in its turn faces difficulties arising from the passions, which need to be guided by temperance and courage.

The first two chapters establish that, for Aquinas, virtue is about difficulty, especially as a result of contingency. The next two concern themselves with objections to this. Does not Aquinas, in his account of the first precepts of the natural law, imply that the moral good is relatively easy to know? Finnis-Boyle-Grisez believe Aquinas's account, if it is to be clear and specific, needs to be completed with intermediate principles they call 'modes of responsibility'. Bowlin believes Aquinas's account is complete as it stands not because it provides answers to every possible situation but because it provides a fundamental orientation while allowing for contingency and tragedy. There are good pages here on Aquinas and Kant, and contemporary discussions on natural law theory are well reviewed.

Bowlin himself argues that Aquinas's account of natural law is completed by remembering its connection with the eternal law. However he seems to collapse natural law into eternal law as if God's understanding were a more fundamental law through which we have access to 'the concrete content of right reason'. Aquinas believed we do have such access but that this is what the natural law is. So the appeal to eternal law seems, at this point, unnecessary.

The ancient moralists were much troubled by fortune and her capacity to alter states of affairs. For Aquinas providence ensures that

people are never left without the external goods they need to practise virtue. This may seem smug but Bowlin illustrates well the ambiguity in Aquinas about the relation of external goods and virtuous action. Virtues like magnanimity and magnificence do seem to presuppose a significant share in this world's goods. On the other hand fortune's goods are unnecessary for the beatific vision in which perfect human happiness consists.

That the virtues are rendered fragile by fortune's whim led Aristotle to a kind of asceticism in the face of possible despair. Aquinas replaces this asceticism with hope and with charity 'which eliminates fortune's authority'. For Bowlin this is a distinctively stoic feature of virtue theory, to remove the moral life from the reach of fortune. As regards natural virtue Aquinas is an aristotelian and refuses this 'stoic withdrawal'. But to express his theologically-charged discontent with the virtue and happiness available in this life, Aquinas resorts to a stoic account. Bowlin refers to Cicero, Gregory and Augustine as sources for this.

His point requires further substantiation, though, since the perceived similarity between Aquinas's theological virtue and stoic natural virtue may simply be accidental. If it arises for Aquinas in the conviction that the place of human happiness is the beatific vision, the attainment of which requires a kind of virtue other than that naturally acquirable, then we are dealing with something which cannot simply be described as stoic. Other traditions contained accounts of 'virtue ascending'. Plotinus offers one (which Aquinas considers at *ST I.II 61,5*) and Aristotle himself offers another in those problematic texts where he speaks of the highest human activities as 'divine'. For Aquinas there is also of course the New Testament, as Bowlin himself notes (pp.148–49).

This is a valuable book with fine expositions of many aspects of Aquinas's moral philosophy. But the assertion that Aquinas's understanding of theological virtue is, at a key point, stoic remains to my mind not proven.

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**'FIRST THE BOW IS BENT IN STUDY': DOMINICAN EDUCATION BEFORE 1350** by M. Michele Mulchahey *Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto, 1998. Pp. xxii+618, \$110 hbk.*

We are used to thinking of the early Dominicans as closely engaged with the great universities of Paris and Oxford, as both learning their intellectual trade there, and in many distinguished cases lecturing there themselves. Michele Mulchahey shows in this impressively learned book how the universities in fact hosted only a fraction of the total educational activity of the young Order of Preachers. She quarries a wide range of sources, from provincial *acta* to pastoral guides to high theology, and including a mass of manuscripts, to uncover the lives of the conventual schools and the houses of study of the Order's first hundred years, to trace their curricula and their methods of teaching, and to identify the wealth of written material used by, and provided for, their teachers. Above all, she emphasises the way in which the pastoral focus of the friars preachers shaped the structures and the details of their educational institutions; her title quotes a line from Hugh of St Cher: 'first the bow is bent in study, and then the arrow is released in preaching.'

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