New Blackfriars

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Introduction

Ignacio Silva

The six articles presented in this special issue are very good examples of the Thomistic reflection taking place at the Aquinas Seminars held at Blackfriars Hall, University of Oxford, during the past few years. The seminar, convened by Dr William E. Carroll every year throughout January and February, attracts Aquinas scholars from around the world to present their research in a variety of topics. This volume brings together discussions which took place between 2010 and 2012, ranging from issues on natural indeterminism, intelligent design, and teleology, to considerations on sex specification, natural law, and the problem of evil.

All the arguments present in this issue are rooted on the very notion of nature, as creation of God, with its autonomous behaviour. Thus, even though the articles might seem to deal with different issues, their core is the same: a nature which is dependent upon God on its activity.

In the first article, I present Aquinas' ideas on indeterminism in nature, mapping his doctrines to Werner Heisenberg's considerations on quantum indeterminism. Heisenberg's discovery of his uncertainty principle drew him to reconsider causality in Aristotelian terms. I show how Aquinas' understanding of Aristotelian causality could be useful to appreciate under new light Heisenberg's findings about quantum reality.

Michael W. Tkacz, from Gonzaga University, argues that even though modern biology claims a strong commitment to a non-teleological mode of explanation, some adaptation studies show a typical teleological understanding of nature, in terms which correspond to those proposed by Thomas Aquinas and Albert Magnus. In this sense, then, Tkacz suggests a non-reductionist Neo-Aristotelian conception of final cause consistent with modern science.

Marie George, from St. John's University, endeavours herself to study the ideas held by intelligent design proponents, such as William Dembski and Michael Behe, and respond to their position from a Thomistic perspective. From this standpoint, George argues that neither Dembski nor Behe succeed in explaining design in nature, showing how Aquinas' teachings integrate in an efficacious manner God's activity and the activity of secondary contingent causes.

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Finalising the discussions on natural contingent phenomena, Nicanor Austriaco, OP, from Providence College, looks at the problem of sex/gender specification. Austriaco argues that the sex/gender specification mechanisms are better understood if looked at from the perspective of system biology articulating and reformulating Aristotelian-Thomistic hylo-morphism.

Moving from natural phenomena to issues related to human activity, Angelo Campodonico, from the University of Genova, Italy, presents a contemporary reading of Aquinas' doctrine of natural law. He argues that natural law, as the work of practical reason, follows natural inclinations, which should not be understood as opposed to natural law, since they follow the good, which is their perfection. In fact, these natural inclinations are, then, known, valued, and interpreted by natural reason, becoming the norms expressed by natural law, which has thus a teleological dimension.

The final article of this issue is devoted to the problem of evil. In this paper, Agustín Echavarría, from the University of Navarra, Spain, shows how Aquinas' perspective on the problem of evil differs from modern and contemporary approaches, in particular those known under the labels of 'optimistic theodicies' and 'free will defences'. Echavarría argues that Aquinas' metaphysics of being, in which evil is considered a privation, and thus a lack of perfection, cannot be caused by God, the primary cause of being, but only by the created free agent.

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