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## Language and Metalanguage in Aquinas\*

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David B. Burrell continues to develop as one of America's more challenging philosopher-theologians. In his new book Burrell offers a "fairly radical" (p. 116) interpretation of Aquinas's views on God, analogy, and the notion of action: "The thesis of this book is that Aquinas deserves to be placed among the critical philosophers if we scrutinize how he employs philosophical grammar to circumscribe discourse about God. Aquinas is certainly one of the paradigms of a 'classical' philosopher. But he is forced to a critical posture as his convictions regarding divinity clash with the presuppositions of a straightforward scientific inquiry into the nature of God" (p. 79). This interpretation is most forcibly expressed in Burrell's claim that Aquinas had no doctrine of God. Aquinas wanted only "to ascertain what logical structure true statements about God would have to have, and to determine a class of expressions which could be used of him with propriety. Both objectives fall short of providing a doctrine or concept of God, although each proves useful in sifting out pretenders [p. 69]. . . . We cannot pretend to offer a description of a transcendent object without betraying its transcendence" (p. 7). Burrell's chief example for this claim is the treatment of God's simplicity in the *Summa* I, 3. God is not like the objects we know, composed of matter and form, essence and existence. We cannot talk of God through our usual subject-predicate composition; we cannot say "God is wise" without having to add immediately "God is wisdom." This sounds like the traditional negative theology with Platonic roots, but for Burrell these points are made not through a study of principles of being, but by an investigation of grammar. Even the negative claims do not tell us what God is like. For instance, Aquinas's argument that God does not have a body does not really prove God is not bodily: "For all we know, God might well have a body. But . . . that is not the point of this inquiry. Aquinas deliberately eschewed any attempt to tell us what God is like . . . he undertook to map out the logic of divine matters, the upshot of which would be a series of restrictions on what we might

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appropriately say" (p. 20). Even the vaunted statements about God as *esse subsistens* do not describe him. Existence is not a predicate, so we do not know conceptually what it is for anything to exist. Thus a claimed resemblance between God and creatures because of the shared "feature" of existence "can only be taken as a joke" (p. 51). An insightful joke to be sure, but one that tells us more about what an adequate language for God might be than what God is.

Burrell proposes that philosophy works by interpreting distinctions found in ordinary language (pp. 12, 147). Philosophical arguments give us pictures and frameworks (p. 19), not theories or facts about the world (p. 43). Philosophy exercises us with reminders and tautologies which help us find our way around. This Wittgensteinian picture of philosophy is coupled with Wilfrid Sellars's sharp distinction between object-language and metalanguage discussions.

Aquinas's metaphysics is a metalinguistic investigation of formal features of our language, not a set of descriptions of objects. Even the doctrine of *esse* expresses the metalinguistic fact that a given language obtains. In all this Aquinas is sinuously grammatical while a philosopher he seems to resemble, Avicenna, is just "overtly metaphysical" (p. 138).

By thinking on the formal features of language we learn the contours of the world (p. 53) because grammar reveals the principles of a domain of speech and so the structure of the world (pp. 3-4). We manifest our understanding not by predicating metaphysical descriptions of things but by knowing our way around in ordinary talk, knowing what questions to ask, what tracks to follow, what postures to assume.

Ordinary talk about God is religious language. Biblical and devotional language is more than a code for austere metaphysical descriptions. It is the only descriptive language about God which is legitimate. Aquinas does not pretend "to know what he means in saying that God is wise, but at best to show how these traditional forms of address are legitimate" (p. 65). We use reason in the service of ordinary religion and the "original impulse of our heart. And we need not feel that reason must always be used to check it" (p. 75). Language about creation, for example, only offers a picture, not a description of the world, but by acting according to this picture "believers express their new relatedness in ritual, and ritual in turn offers us explicit postures to assume. In deliberately assuming them, we come to appreciate the import of the relatedness we have affirmed" (p. 140).

We come to understand God not by metaphysical descriptions but by a sensitive use of analogous terms that can reach beyond their

ordinary uses but still be used properly in other contexts. The best of such terms contain a built-in ratchet effect which allows us to lead ourselves beyond current use. But there is no literal way of stating this intimation, and Aquinas has no theory of analogy to allow us to construct it.

The first part of the book sets out Burrell's interpretation and applies it by confronting process theology and Jungian objections to the classic theory of evil, as well as by some insightful comments on truth in matters religious. The second part develops the theme of *actus* as the primary term for analogical understanding under the strictures developed in the first part. *Actus* is chosen not because it is a metaphysically fundamental description but because it has wide analogical and grammatical applicability. Relying on Lonergan but extending him creatively, Burrell tries to show how *actus* has an irreducibly performative content. When understood, it is a self-exemplifying metaphor (p. 118) because the prime analogate for action is the act of understanding itself, intentional relating, rather than any causal process.

Burrell applies his insights about action to cognition, to an attack on the notion of will as decision, to natural causality, creation, the Trinity and, in his final chapter, a perceptive critique of our Western proclivity to identify action with the production of results. Some of the applications depend on a strained interpretation of Aquinas's doctrine of the inner word, but Burrell knows he is going beyond Aquinas here (p. 156).

Burrell writes in a style that is at times baffling and at times crisply illuminating. His arguments sometimes indicate rather than prove, but his points are always thought provoking. He has read widely and knows how to make fertile connections.

His interpretation is indeed fairly radical. If Aquinas has no doctrine of God, why was there such a fuss when Ockham and Nicholas of Autrecourt began to question knowledge and proof about God and to substitute metalinguistic for metaphysical discussion? Sometimes Burrell's Aquinas seems to belong in fourteenth-century Oxford instead of thirteenth-century Paris. And any Aquinas who looks more like Wittgenstein than Avicenna should give us pause.

Although it is true that Aquinas is not doing metaphysics to edify or to summarize religious experience (p. 16), may he not be doing metaphysics as description yet still as propaedeutic to ordinary religious talk? Why not see Aquinas in his own context developing a doctrine of God hedged by the negative theology and the practice of analogy? Burrell seems to force Aquinas to choose between

metalinguistics and a thorough description in the manner of Leibniz or Spinoza. But Aquinas's practice is more supple.

The early questions of the *Summa* place limits on our talk about God. But rather than deriving these from an examination of the form of language or thought, Aquinas finds them in the principles of being. The articles of the *Summa* Burrell treats as metalinguistic are filled with citations of standard descriptive principles which it seems strained to interpret as about language: act is simply prior to potency (3, 1), no body moves without being moved (3, 1), every agent acts through its form (3, 2), every agent produces something similar to itself (3, 4), and so on. These principles can be applied to God because of the native analogy of all metaphysical terms like "form" and "act," which are analogous even when applied to different categories of beings within our experience. There is little evidence in the *Summa* that Aquinas is doing metalinguistics or its medieval counterpart, discussing second intentions, although like Aristotle he uses grammatical observations as evidence for principles about being. The conclusions about being license grammatical restrictions, not the other way around.

Burrell's twentieth-century tools hamper him here, since they enforce a strict separation of object-language from metalanguage which is foreign to Aquinas's method. This very distinction seems somewhat at war with the late Wittgenstein elements in Burrell's position. Equally troubling is Burrell's sharp division of formal features of language from empirical descriptions of the world. Perhaps after Quine's attack this positivist distinction should have less currency and not be taken as a twentieth-century contribution that illuminates an Aquinas who in fact may have been spared its confusions.

Burrell struggles mightily to rid Aquinas of his Neoplatonism. Though I think his efforts do not succeed, his conclusions have their own independent value. The book proposes a challenging way for us to regard religious language and life and their relation to philosophy. Burrell's remarks on religious truth and the encounter of religious traditions are fascinating, though he underestimates the availability and the strength of sheer nonreligion and of honest suspension between traditions in our day. He is able, by creatively interpreting Aquinas, to suggest a freer and more open relation between thought and faith. The philosophical agnosticism of his position, however, seems to bring him close to what has been called "Wittgensteinian fideism," the idea that religious language is legitimate once you are within the language game but that there is no way into the game except by taking it all at once.

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Though he denies natural theology as a route into religious life, Burrell obviously does not agree with the modern reduction of the search for ultimates to just one game among many. There seems to be an inchoate argument in the book about the unavoidability of the religious search; if developed, this argument could bolster his claims about the complementary roles of grammatical observation and religious practice in focusing and purifying the religious dimension of life.

This book is suggestive and controversial; it deserves to be widely read and thought over.