Aquinas’s Way to God: The Proof in *De Ente et* Essentia. By Gaven Kerr. Pp. 205, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, £62.00.

Many trees have been sacrificed in order to abet philosophers in their pursuit of discussing Aquinas’ Five Ways for the existence of God. Until recently however, few philosophers –

especially in the analytic tradition – have paid attention to a proof that can be found in one of Aquinas’ earliest works, *De Ente et Essentia*. Gaven Kerr’s recent volume, *Aquinas’s Way to God*, does the philosophical community a service by giving this argument extensive coverage. The volume is broken up into two sections. The first section attempts to thoroughly convey and argue for Aquinas’ metaphysical presuppositions. In the second part of the book, Kerr gives a thorough explication of the *De Ente* proof. Both sections should be considered as valuable resources, even for the most seasoned Thomist.

First up, Kerr establishes that there is a real distinction between *esse* and essence. Specifically, he defends Aquinas’ point that you can understand the essence of a phoenix, and yet, the phoenix need not posse *esse (*p.13). In chapter two, Kerr goes on to explain what Aquinas has in mind when he utilizes the word essence. This chapter can be especially informative for those who are unfamiliar with the scholastic tradition. Instead of understanding essence to be the result of various properties composited together which an object has in all possible worlds the object exists in, Aquinas endorses the much simpler thesis of real essentialism. Roughly, the idea of real essentialism is that the essence of a physical object is the matter and form of the composite in question (p. 41). The object is structured in a certain way where the essence of the object can be intelligible without appealing to possible world semantics. A subject can simply observe the object and learn its essence. Properties are said to on this view, flow from the essence itself. There’s a simplicity to the real essentialism thesis that Kerr thinks, makes the thesis more compelling than its competitors, especially against those who endorse an overly inflated ontology (p. 47-48).

Moving on to the third and last chapter of the first section, Kerr explicates Aquinas’ account of *esse*, and then, engages competing accounts found within the analytic tradition. For example, Kerr discusses a weak or modified form of actualism which understands *esse* through understanding what features could possibly obtain. In doing so, one makes what doesn’t exist – that is, mere *possibilia –* more fundamental than *esse* itself (p. 83). This of course would be a mortal sin for Thomists. In contrast to this, Thomists see *esse* as pure act. It is ultimate reality, and as ultimate reality, essences can only be said to exist if the essence participates in *esse* itself.

After laying out the metaphysical groundwork for the *De Ente* proof, Kerr turns to developing the argument. If *esse* is a simple or a non-composite, how can an essence come to possess *esse*? Perhaps the reader is thinking that it could come to possess *esse* in a primitive and non-intrinsic way. Kerr entertains this possibility; however, he goes on to reject it (p. 101). For the Thomist, *esse* is to be understood as act while essence is a type of potency. Since composites aren’t self-explanatory as they in some sense depend on something for their existence, we needn’t take the possibility of an essence possessing *esse* in a primitive way too seriously (p. 102). Composites simply can’t be primitive.

So, what explains why a particular essence possesses *esse* if *esse* is distinct from essence and essence couldn’t possess *esse* in a primitive and non-intrinsic way? Kerr appeals to something like a soft PSR principle he calls the narrow principle. Roughly, the idea is that for anything whose essence is other than *esse*, its *esse* is caused (p. 119). Kerr then entertains the possibility of explaining how an essence comes to possess *esse* by way of appealing to an infinite chain of causes. Kerr further develops and uses the traditional ‘moving the rock by the hand’ example to argue that *per se* ordered causal changes require a prime mover (p. 130). What Kerr concludes then, is that the narrow principle leads us to endorse there being a cause of all existence which is *esse* itself (p. 147). Kerr then ends his volume by talking about how the *De Ente* proof addresses the doctrine of creation.

Overall, a work like *Aquinas’s Way to God*, is way overdue. And the precision and slow explication of the *De Ente* proof makes Kerr’s volume especially helpful for those who identify as a member of the analytic community. The only potential complaint that I can raise, is with respect to the lack of a comparative analysis between the *De Ente* proof and Aquinas’ traditional Five Ways. For example, it’s not *prima facie* obvious that one can accept the *De Ente* proof without also accepting the First Way. Both arguments seem to depend on the fundamental categories of act and potency. Similarly, it’s argued that Aquinas’ Third Way depends on a version of PSR. Is the success of the *De Ente* proof tied to the success of the Five Ways? Perhaps the *De Ente* proof just is a version of these various arguments, and maybe this is why Aquinas never came back to the *De Ente* proof. All of this is unclear to me. Nonetheless, the argument clearly deserves its own appraisal, and, Kerr’s work deserves to be on every Thomist’s bookshelf.

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