



Recent work on Aquinas' metaphysics

Aquinas on efficient causation and causal powers, by Gloria Frost, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp. 288, £75.00 (hb), ISBN: 978-1-009-22542-7
Thomas Aquinas on the metaphysics of the human act, by Can Laurens Löwe, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021, pp. 280, £75.00 (hb), ISBN: 978-1-108-83364-6
Thomas Aquinas on virtue, by Thomas M. Osborne, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp. 250, £75.00 (hb), ISBN: 978-1-316-51174-9

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The three books reviewed here concern some interrelated elements of Thomas Aquinas' metaphysics: his general theory of efficient causation, his metaphysics of the human act, and his theory of virtue. These are, if in slightly different ways, all central elements of Aquinas' philosophy. First, his theory of causation lies in the heart of both his metaphysics and his natural philosophy, and while it broadly follows Aristotle, it also exhibits plenty of new features due to its Christian framework and some of Aquinas' other commitments. Second, Aquinas' theory of the human act, as presented here, is quite complex but fascinating, as it relies on not only his general theory of causation, but also on his hylomorphism. Finally, Aquinas' theory of virtue, in some sense, applies this metaphysical framework to develop again a broadly-speaking Aristotelian notion of virtue with many new elements.

While these themes in Aquinas' thought had been noted before, the books promise to offer new approaches to the questions, and as we will see below, they mostly fulfil that promise. Moreover, the reader will not only be acquainted with Aquinas' philosophy, but also, in most cases, with how this philosophy fares in light of some current debates. Thus, it is exciting to see these new attempts reviving scholarship on Aquinas in a way that makes it approachable to the non-medievalist audience.

In what follows, I will first introduce each book, and then provide some brief general remarks. I will proceed from the more general to the more specific, so will start with Frost's, then turn to Löwe's, and close with Osborne's contribution.

Gloria Frost's book offers a general introduction to and a full account of Aquinas' metaphysics of causation. Causation is a core concept in Aquinas' thinking, even though he never devoted a separate treatise to the topic, and

consequently, the literature considering the exact issue is rather scarce.¹ The lack of a subject-specific treatise in the corpus also means that the book draws on many different sources, including Aquinas' commentaries on Aristotle's *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, and occasionally other works; the *Summa Theologiae* and the *Summa contra Gentiles*; the commentary on the *Sentences*; and many of the disputed questions. The theory emerging from these works is a mostly unified view.

After a brief Introduction, the book is divided into two unequal parts: the first, much longer one, discusses the metaphysical framework of paradigm instances of efficient causation, while the second, shorter one, develops some complications in non-paradigm cases. The first part consists of six chapters, each building on the previous one.

The first two chapters give a basic summary of the account, starting with a very informative overview of the main metaphysical claims. We receive a (perhaps surprisingly long!) ontological list of all the constituents that make up the efficient causal relation: the efficient cause, with its active power and natural inclination, the patient, with its passive power, the action, the passion, and the motion or change. This list also serves as a map for the subsequent chapters, in which the items will be treated in more detail. The emerging outline of the account is situated within Aquinas' physics and within his metaphysics; we also receive an overview of Aquinas' sources, and of how his account compares both to some competing models (the Human and the nomic model of causation), and to his contemporaries. While we do not get a detailed map of the relevant medieval debates (such a map would require its own book), some major points of disagreements are pointed out.

In the second chapter, we receive a more detailed explanation of some of the previous concepts and conditions, such as the distinction between *per se* and *per accidens* causes, the simultaneity condition of the cause and effect, the necessity of the causal relation, and Aquinas' claims that there is no self-motion and no action at a distance. While Frost mostly stays away from minor interpretative debates in the book, here she defends the view that for Aquinas, the cause-effect relation is necessary in the (stronger than sometimes assumed) sense that if both the agent and patient have the suitable dispositions and there is no impediment, then the action of the agent is absolutely necessary. (It would be interesting to see how this interpretation can be squared with Aquinas' discussion of some odd cases of what he calls "contra naturam" miracles, such as the young men not burning in Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace; but this would again arguably lie outside the scope of Frost's study²).

The next four chapters of the book discuss some elements of the ontological list in more detail: active powers, natural inclinations, passive powers, and action and passion. The third chapter contains a detailed analysis of various features of

¹The only widely accessible English summary of the account seems to be Michael Rota's very brief one, "Causation". Of course, many different aspects of Aquinas' thought on causation, such as the problem of divine concurrence or human freedom, have been treated before (see, e.g. Dvořák, "The Concurrentism of Thomas Aquinas", and the extensive bibliography in Frost's book).

²For miracles against nature, see Aquinas, *De potentia*, q. 6, a. 2, ad 3, where he defines them as miracles in which "nature retains a disposition contrary to the effect produced by God".

active powers, which are one kind of potentiality (i.e. a potentiality for acting, as opposed to a potentiality for being); they are individuated by their actions and hence, ultimately, by the kinds of objects towards which this action tends; they are entirely due to form. In general, they educe their similarity from matter, although various seeming counter-examples to this general principle are also examined, including locomotion, equivocal agency, and powers that seem higher-order than their composing elements.

While it may seem that having described a causal agent and its active power gives a sufficient account of what Aquinas may say about the agent cause, that is not so; for, as we learn from Chapter Four, natural inclinations and hence final causality are also ineliminable elements of the account. Aquinas' rationale for this strikes me as the perhaps least plausible part of the whole account and consequently of Frost's analysis. It seems to originate from an analogy between rational and non-rational agents: just as in rational agents, there is a need for volitions to explain why a faculty is exercised even if there are no impediments, so too, on Frost's reading in natural agents there is a need for natural striving to explain why a causal power is exercised even if there are no impediments. It is not clear, however, why active powers couldn't be 'on' as default, and why they need an external principle to explain their operation.³

The fifth chapter presents Aquinas' account of passive powers, along the same lines (but perhaps in slightly less detail) as the previous third chapter did with active powers. While substances possess their active powers in virtue of their forms, they possess their passive powers in virtue of their proximate matter; in other words, while the general principle of passivity is matter, it is also through form that something can undergo *determinate types* of action. (Frost does not mention that for Aquinas, apart from matter and form, there is another factor that at least in certain cases explains passive powers: namely, how substantial form dominates the matter it informs. Again, this is to account for some unusual theological cases⁴). The chapter also discusses how passive powers are individuated by their active counterparts, and how there is no intrinsic principle explaining a creature's potentiality ('obediential potency') corresponding to God's infinite active power.

The sixth chapter, the last one discussing paradigmatic cases of efficient causation, considers the ontological status of action, passion, and motion. Are these distinct entities, or are they the same thing altogether? As Frost argues, they are neither. As she shows, actions and passions can be viewed in various ways: either

³In the passages Frost presents, there seems to be also some unclarity regarding whether inclinations are needed in order to account for the fact *that an agent acts at all* (Frost's reading); whether they are needed to account for the agent having the causal power to start with (Can Laurens Löwe's reading in his review of the book in NDPR 2023 1 March); or to account for the fact that the agent brings about *A* as opposed to *B*. The latter reading may be somewhat more promising, if we consider that Aristotle introduces final causes to explain why agents act *in a regular way* as opposed to randomly; and perhaps in this way, it would also give Aquinas the necessary tools to answer some worries akin to the 'problem of fit' (the contemporary formulation of the objection seems to originate from Williams, "Puzzling Powers", although there are early modern precedents).

⁴E.g. the case of the impassibility of the body of the blessed, as in *Commentum super IV Sent.*, d. 44, q. 2, a. 1, qc. 1. Impassibility was, of course, a difficult problem for the medieval Aristotelians (I examine some strategies to deal with it in "Perfect Subjects, Shields, and Retractions").

through the actuality-potentiality division, or through the division of the categories. With regard to the former, action and passion correspond to the same incomplete actuality (i.e. a motion) in the patient. So in this sense, they are identical, even though action originates from a substance's active power, while passion is received in another substance by the first one's agency. However, considered as belonging to different categories, action and passion must be numerically different accidents, which is explained precisely by how the same motion belongs to them differently.

With this, all the main items of the "ontological list" of the efficient causal relation have been elucidated. The emerging picture is detailed and complex, which complexity is especially apparent in the last two chapters, discussing some "Complications". I will leave aside a detailed summary of the contents of these two chapters, since they illuminate particular issues in the Thomistic account but do not obviously pertain to its core. As Frost convincingly shows, these unusual cases – the cases of preparing or disposing causes, instrumental causes, *sine qua non* causes – rely on and can be only made sense of by the paradigm cases of *per se* efficient causation.

Overall, the book is extremely clearly written and is an unusually pleasant read. While the emerging theory is detailed and, especially in the non-paradigmatic cases of the second part, somewhat complicated, the build-up to those cases is smooth. Frost introduces the reader to all major Aristotelian concepts along the way with admirable didactic skill: one can almost feel the excitement of being newly presented with the Aristotelian metaphysical framework, while the presentation remains interesting even for the more experienced reader. While a quibbler will likely find some minor interpretative disagreements with Frost's readings of certain passages, the overall picture given of Aquinas' account is persuasive. There are no obvious overlooked texts in the Thomistic corpus; the reader is given plenty of references of primary texts, both in English translation and in the original, and further ones to consult if she is inclined to do so. The translated texts are translated carefully, with consistent terminology (the details of which terminology are even explained in section 1.5). The reader will find further resources in the bibliography, and the structured table of contents and the brief index will help her navigate through the book.

Thus, the book clearly achieves its aim to give a reconstruction of the Thomistic account of causation; moreover, it is a reconstruction that will be useful for the specialist as well as for a more general audience. The book would be an excellent resource for scholars working on early modern or even the late scholastic accounts of causation, providing an accessible and relatively compact background to the later, more widely known debates. Moreover, especially the first two chapters would serve as a great resource for both undergraduate and graduate teaching (I will certainly assign it next year as optional reading in my upper-level undergraduate and MA-level Medieval Metaphysics course), and for PhD students interested in Aquinas' metaphysics.

Can Laurens Löwe's book, in some ways, builds upon the issues discussed by Frost. Instead of treating the metaphysics of causation in general, it focuses on the human act in particular, of which it provides a detailed and very illuminating

exploration. As Löwe argues, in Aquinas' framework, both choice and the resulting human act should be understood in hylomorphic terms, and most of the book is devoted to spelling out the components of these two hylomorphic composites. Just as Aquinas never wrote a separate treatise on efficient causation, he never wrote one on the metaphysics of the human act either; thus, just as Frost, Löwe must bring together various sources from Aquinas' writings to tackle this problem.

The book starts with an Introduction, briefly situating Aquinas' account of action with respect to the modern scene. The remainder is divided into three unequal parts: the first, consisting of one chapter, provides a general framework for the later discussion; the second, consisting of four chapters, focuses on Aquinas' choice-hylomorphism; the third, consisting also of four chapters, on his act-hylomorphism.

The first chapter provides an overview of the account, many elements of which will be spelled out later. Since we are now quite familiar with the usual Aristotelian framework of general causal happenings, we can concentrate on the specifically human-related features of this picture. An act, for Aquinas, is specifically human if and only if it is regulated by the powers of reason and will; more particularly, if it results from choice. As Löwe will show throughout the book, both the choice itself and the resulting human act can be understood as hylomorphic composites.

The second part of the book explicates in more detail the first of these theses, spelling out the hylomorphic composition of choice. Since choice is a volition whose freedom is a result of a preceding act of free judgement, the second chapter introduces the reader to Aquinas' account of practical judgement. Practical judgements are concerned with precepts, and the judgement of choice with how to apply a precept to a particular situation. Precepts can be of many kinds, and when they concern a particular good, whose relation to the ultimate end is not necessary, they can be subjects to free assent. On Löwe's reading, Aquinas defends a theory of "reason-based assent" (71): an agent can freely assent to p rather than q , but this freedom is a result of a cognitive process. The next step in understanding Aquinas' account of choice is to understand his account of volition in general (Chapter Four). Willing, for Aquinas, is a rational cognitive striving, relying on a cognition of something as good. Volitions depend on these cognitions similarly to the way in which a passive power depends on an active power; but contrary to regular cases of active-passive power-couples, the dependence can be understood by final and formal causation. The object that reason presents to the will (being a means ordered to some end) is a final cause insofar as it exists in the mind and guides the volition; but it is a formal cause insofar as it is what gives the volition its specific character. The efficient cause of volitions, however, is the will itself. Again, on Löwe's reading, the will, for Aquinas, derives its freedom entirely from judgement.

In Chapter Five, Löwe pulls many of these strands together to explain how choice is a hylomorphic compound – which was the first main target of the book. The material component of choice is volition, which is efficiently caused by a simple volition to pursue a particular end. Choice has both an intrinsic

and an extrinsic form (these can be conceived as species and exemplar): its intrinsic form is the adherence to a particular means for the sake of an end, which intrinsic formal component is derived from the judgement of choice, while the extrinsic form is this same object as intended by reason. The extrinsic and intrinsic forms coincide as the final cause of choice.

The second part of the book examines Aquinas' account of the human act itself. Having most of the groundwork laid in the previous part, this second part starts with the hylomorphic composition of the human act itself, and then turns to some complications. The human act has three components: the act of command; use; and the commanded act (all these occurring after the agent has already made a choice about what to do). First, the act of command specifies what instrument (whether internal or external) should carry out the job prescribed by choice. Second, use is the volition by which an agent activates a power to the chosen end, informed by command. Third, the commanded act is simultaneous with use, and is efficiently caused by it, while also inheriting from it its form. Moreover, use itself has a hylomorphic structure: it is materially a volition, while its form is its intentional directedness to an object, which directedness it inherits from the act of command. The chapter also addresses an obvious difficulty arising from this account: how can the act of command (and in turn the act of choice) account for the commanded act, if it is prior to it, while for Aquinas (as we have seen in detail above), causation is a simultaneous relation? Löwe argues that Aquinas solves this difficulty by referring to 'virtual remaining': the act of choice virtually remains in the act of command, which virtually remains in the act of use. As we learn, "For an act to exist virtually, is for an act to have occurred in the past but to continue to exercise causal influence on some other act that is presently occurring" (140). It may seem, however, that this merely names the problem rather than solving it: if it is metaphysically necessary that causes coexist with their effects, it is not clear how something can "continue to exercise causal influence" once it is past.

The seventh and eighth chapters apply this general model of the human act to bodily and to mental human acts, respectively. A bodily human act, according to the model defended above, consist of use (form) and the bodily commanded act (matter). It has what Löwe calls a 'heterogeneous inherential structure,' that is, its hylomorphic components do not inhere in the same subject: use inheres in the agent's soul, while the bodily commanded act inheres in a separate patient. While this already seems a rather unusual kind of hylomorphic composition, having the somewhat odd implication that part of my act of raising a hand inheres in the affected air, bodily human acts also exhibit a heterogeneous durational structure: all bodily commanded acts are incomplete and hence temporally extended, while use is complete and hence instantaneous. As Löwe explains, this means that we have a succession of instantaneous, complete acts of use during the period in which the commanded act occurs. (One may worry here that for an Aristotelian, it is difficult if not impossible to fill up a segment of time with instants, and that in any case, the account will lead to (perhaps innumerably) many acts of use explaining a simple bodily human act. But these considerations lie outside the scope of Löwe's book). Chapter Eight turns to mental acts, focusing

especially on acts of memory. In contrast to bodily acts, the act of reminiscing is inherently homogeneous: both use (an immanent act of will) and the commanded act (an immanent act of memory) inhere in the soul. Similarly to bodily acts, however, they also exhibit a heterogeneous durational structure (the commanded act of reminiscing is an incomplete, while use is a complete act).

With this, we have seen a complete analysis of human acts, in hylomorphic terms. Generally, a human act is preceded by an act of choice, which itself has a hylomorphic structure (consisting of volition and its preferential character, derived from the judgement of choice). The human act then consists of a commanded act, which can be either physical or mental, and of use. Choice is supposed to explain the human act itself by virtually remaining in it.

The ninth chapter is dedicated to placing Aquinas' theory amongst some contemporary theories of action. As Löwe argues, Aquinas' theory can successfully solve some problems arising both for the alternative Davidsonian model and for the agent-causal approach, even if this advantage comes at a metaphysical cost: as Löwe calls it, the 'rampant dualism' upon which the account is predicated, which may seem problematic for the more naturalistically inclined contemporary reader. Löwe seems to think that this dualism can be removed without substantially affecting the account – but how this can be done is a topic for a different project (a difficult one, one may think, given the account's reliance on immaterial forms, immaterial intellect and will, with their instantaneous acts, just to mention a few).

Overall, while treating Aquinas' theory of human acts in hylomorphic terms is an unusual approach, Löwe's treatment is illuminating, and the plausibility of the emerging picture can serve as the main argument for his interpretation. When one encounters Aquinas' various views on both choice and the human act, the number of different elements (objects, mental propositions, judgement, assent, volition, choice, ends, means, precepts, commanded act, use, etc.) is slightly overwhelming, and the various relations between them are not always perfectly clear. In this hylomorphic analysis, all of these components play a precise and determinate role. We do not acquire much of a sense of how Aquinas' theory compares with those of his contemporaries, or whether his contemporaries thought about acts in hylomorphic terms at all; but that was admittedly not the aim of the book, which, again, it clearly achieves in providing a detailed picture of Aquinas' own account. Similarly to Frost, Löwe leaves the minor interpretative debates to the footnotes, but the interested reader can find plenty of references in these and in the extensive bibliography. The exception is the short Appendix to the book, which discusses a possible objection to the interpretation proposed in Chapter Two.

Löwe's book is also lucidly written, contains a detailed Table of Contents, and of the three books reviewed here, this was the only one in which I did not notice any obvious typos. The concepts are introduced precisely, and the terminology is consistently used throughout. Even though the emerging view is highly sophisticated, the examples (helpfully, the same few examples are used throughout) greatly help the reader to have some intuitive grasp of its intricacies. The book also contains some diagrams, which – after some acclimatization to their style

– are enlightening. While I found the book, perhaps partly due to its rather niche topic, overall a little more difficult to read than Frost's, and would consequently be somewhat hesitant to assign it to undergraduates, even here, there are exceptions. For instance, the discussion of natural law and precepts gives an unusually clear and brief summary of Aquinas thoughts on the issue, and the first chapter, while technical, provides an accessible and quite complete introduction to his theory of action. But primarily, the book would be an excellent resource for graduate students or scholars working on theories of action in contemporary philosophy, providing a background that is, in some ways, strikingly different from most contemporary accounts, and yet – as Löwe plausibly demonstrates – is highly relevant. The book does not presuppose detailed knowledge of Aquinas' thought, just a willingness to follow the detailed argumentation. Moreover, the book would also be of great interest for medievalists interested in how the general theory ofhylomorphism can serve as an explanatory framework in some more unusual cases.

Thomas Osborne's book considers Aquinas' account of virtue, which in some ways assumes his account of human acts. Osborne's book stands apart from the other two treated in this review in that while Aquinas, as was mentioned above, never wrote a treatise on either causation in general or on human acts, he did devote a well-defined part of the *Summa Theologiae* to virtues (questions 55–67 of the *Prima secundae*), and this is the main text that the book relies on, deeming it Aquinas' "most significant work" (1). The book, perhaps somewhat less than ideally, also follows the structure of Aquinas' text – which means that some of the issues are treated multiple times in slightly different ways. But overall it provides a good overview of Aquinas' considerations of virtue, and while it is often similar in style to a companion,⁵ primarily providing extensive paraphrases and brief explanations of Aquinas' text, it is of course much fuller and also compares the text of the *Summa* to relevant bits in Aquinas' other writings (most often the disputed questions *On virtue* and *On Truth*).

After a brief Introduction, the book is divided into six chapters. The first chapter gives a general overview of the theory, focusing on Aquinas' definition of virtue. While the chapter is not structured around this problem, the perhaps most interesting issue arising for Aquinas in this context is how to reconcile the Augustinian definition of virtue ("a good quality of the mind, by which we rightly live, which no one uses badly, which God works in us without us," quoted on page 10) with the Aristotelian one (according to which virtue is a good operative habit, which, we may add, Aristotle also thinks we acquire by repeated actions). First, the chapter starts with a description of the various parts of the Aristotelian definition. We learn that virtues are habits because they are perfections of powers, in particular of the intellect and of the will; and that they are directly concerned with human operations. Moreover, a virtue is a *good* habit because it makes one suitable to one's own nature as well as (in the case of heroic or infused virtue) to a nature that is higher than one's own. Next the chapter turns to the Augustinian definition, which, according to

⁵See, e.g. Davies, *Thomas Aquinas' Summa Theologiae*, chapter 12.2.

Osborne, results in an “enhanced Aristotelianism” (43). While we do not get a very satisfactory explanation of how exactly these two strands of Aquinas’ thought on virtue fit together, we learn that Aquinas thinks that virtues can be, and indeed sometimes must be, directly caused by God.

The second chapter distinguishes between moral and intellectual virtues, and shows that the definition just given applies primarily to the former, since that is the only one that makes an agent unqualifiedly good. Thus, while intellectual virtues are superior in the sense that they perfect the intellect, which is a higher power, moral virtues are superior in the sense that they make an agent good, while perfecting her will. Intellectual virtues are further divided into speculative intellectual virtues and practical intellectual virtue, that is, prudence. Prudence is unique among the virtues, since it is about human operations, but it concerns immanent acts. How these immanent acts lead to other acts is not very clear; as Osborne summarizes, “the immanent act of willing ... directly leads to transitive [*sic*] acts such as an act of production” (63; although as was seen above, this “direct” leading to is itself a rather complicated process, involving many elements). Moral virtues depend on prudence for their choice of the right means to an end; and prudence also depends, uniquely among intellectual virtues, on these moral virtues for its rectitude to the end, and also on the right appetite concerning the end.

The third chapter turns to the division of moral virtues. Some of these virtues perfect the rational appetite (will), while some the sense appetite. The chapter gives an interesting overview of the disagreement between the Stoic and the Peripatetic view of passions. While the Stoics regarded passions as always bad, and thus not possessed at all by the truly virtuous, Aquinas, agreeing with Aristotle, thinks that passions remain even in the truly virtuous state. Moral virtues regulate passions, since they perfect the entire appetite; some regulate them directly (such as courage, or temperance, which are about passions in the proper sense), while some indirectly (such as justice, which perfects the will and is rather about operations). Virtues are individuated by their formal objects, and so Aquinas distinguishes ten moral virtues that are directly concerned with passions. The chapter also discusses cardinal virtues, which Aquinas regards both as proper virtues and as general conditions of any virtuous act; and Aquinas’ assimilation of the Neoplatonic divisions of virtue (political, purgative, purged, and exemplary), to its more Aristotelian counterparts.

The fourth chapter describes two distinctions: one between theological and moral virtue, the other between infused and acquired moral virtue (importantly, these do not overlap). Theological virtues are supernatural because they are directed to an end to which there is no natural inclination in the same way at all (in what way there *is* an inclination, is not made very clear); these theological virtues, according to Aquinas, can only be recognized by revelation. Infused moral virtues are also supernatural in the sense that they cannot be caused by secondary causes; but unlike theological virtues, infused virtues share their name with their acquired counterparts, and they do not order us to God directly but perfect with respect to other acts insofar as they are ordered to God. In some

ways, infused virtues are virtues for living in the Heavenly City, and they are gained immediately alongside charity.

The fifth, last thematic chapter considers some of the details of the various virtues, as well as their rather complicated dependence-relations. As Osborne shows, according to Aquinas, all the virtues (moral, intellectual, even the theological ones) meet the Aristotelian definition of virtue, and they all conform to some mean. In the moral case, the mean is about the agent's own passion or about some external thing; in the intellectual virtues it is about the thing known (in Osborne's example, the intellect can lack conformity to the thing through excess or deficiency; the 'whole is not greater than its part' would be a deficiency, while 'the whole is less than its part' an excess). The mean of a theological virtue is only *per accidens*; for example, the right kind of faith is a mean between being a Nestorian heretic and a Monophysite. These examples are somewhat puzzling, and it is difficult to escape the feeling that Aquinas is really stretching the Aristotelian theory here to fit his purposes. The second part of the chapter considers the connection between the various virtues. As was mentioned earlier, prudence and the moral virtues are interdependent, and the moral cardinal virtues are also connected through prudence. Prudence, however, depends on infused prudence, which depends on the theological virtue of charity; and if this is right, this means that even the acquired moral virtues depend on charity. Osborne explains this by observing that for Aquinas, the acquired virtues *can* exist without charity, but in that case they will fail to make the agent good. (One may wonder how this explanation fits with the earlier remark in Chapter One, according to which it is a characteristic of moral virtues in general that they make their agents good.) The discussion closes with some considerations about the hierarchy of the virtues, and which one(s) we can possess in the next life.

The last, sixth chapter of the book is perhaps the most surprising one. While given the chapter's title, "Thomistic Virtue and Contemporary Thought", one may expect, as in Löwe's book, some kind of justification for the relevance of the Thomistic account to contemporary ethical discourse, the chapter argues mostly for the opposite. According to Osborne, Aquinas' account of virtue greatly differs from contemporary virtue ethics as it does not replace moral rules, and perhaps most importantly because "[c]ontemporary accounts of charity and other such virtues seem to reflect contemporary prejudices and customs rather than sustained reflection on the good life or the practices of healthy societies" (200), while Aquinas' account, in Osborne's view, does not make this mistake. More broadly, as the rest of the chapter argues, Aquinas' account is clearly incompatible with most of contemporary philosophy, which, according to Osborne, includes a general "penchant for naturalism" (201) irreconcilable with many elements of Aquinas' account, as well as a general rejection of Aristotle's understanding of the physical world. While Osborne thinks that "this naturalism usually seems to result from arbitrary definitions or culturally formed but questionable intuitions" (202), he gives no examples for this claim. As he points out, Aquinas' virtue ethics is much more salient when considered in the context of Aristotelian science; but unfortunately we are left mostly unsure about how to go about it if that science turns out to be mistaken at

least about some things. Overall it seems that this concluding chapter, instead of aiming to convince the perhaps initially skeptical contemporary reader why she should bother with trying to understand Aquinas, rather aims to resist some objections from this contemporary reader by pointing out that most of contemporary thought is not very relevant to the Thomistic project. Indeed, as Osborne summarizes, “insofar as Thomas’s account of the virtues rests on supernatural revelation, it should be inaccessible to contemporary science” (209); and while this may be good news for those already immersed in Aquinas’ thought, it may provide a less than convincing case for those who are merely interested in getting acquainted with it.

Despite this perhaps somewhat disappointing ending, the book is a clear and comprehensive presentation of what Aquinas says about virtues especially in the *Summa* and some related texts. While the book, in some ways, is the least technical of the ones considered here, in other ways it assumes quite a lot of its readership. Its admitted aim is to “guide the reader through the various perils resulting from unfamiliarity with the relevant texts, as well as with the philosophical and historical contexts” (9), which, especially the first of these aims, it does quite well. However, the overall framework is generally assumed, and neither explained nor defended; and if one is not already familiar with and especially friendly to some elements of the Thomistic account, she may lose interest in following its intricacies. The terminology is mostly consistent, although sometimes does not entirely match with the usual practice (e.g. Osborne calls transeunt acts ‘transitive’, which may be slightly confusing; or the perhaps now more common Odo Rigaldus by his French name, Odo Rigaud). The immediate intellectual context of Aquinas’ work is sometimes mentioned, although the treatment of other figures is rather superficial. We also do not get a very good sense of the broader context (e.g. we hear that the Augustinian definition of virtue became widespread by Lombard’s *Sentences*, “which was the standard textbook for theology for many centuries” (10); which is true, but of course at the time of Aquinas, it had been so for at most about a hundred years, a few scholarly generations⁶). It would have perhaps also helped the reader if instead of leaving issues in the order Aquinas treated them, the more interesting points (of which there are many) had been flagged a little more. But with all this said, the book would be a very helpful resource for undergraduate teaching, or for someone with some background in Thomistic metaphysics who is interested in getting acquainted with Aquinas’ theory of virtues. The book comes complete with an index and extensive bibliography, although of the three considered here, this is the only one that does not have a detailed Table of Contents (which can be somewhat frustrating, as the chapters are rather long with many sections to each).

All in all, if one were tempted to think that Aquinas is the last medieval author who needs more scholarship, as all three of these books demonstrate, one would be wrong. All three books raise problems that are philosophically genuinely interesting, and especially Frost’s and Löwe’s, provide some novel and even surprising approaches to these problems. While Aquinas had been, for a long time, almost

⁶For a good summary of its history, see Hödl, “Die Sentenzen des Petrus Lombardus”.

exclusively read by a somewhat isolated group of Christian philosophers, these books show that some of his views may be of more general interest, and that one can be a sympathetic reader of Aquinas' texts even if one does not share all his pre-suppositions. While it is clear that Aquinas' approach to these problems in many respects differs from the contemporary approaches, we can also see that the problems themselves have mostly remained the same, and encountering different paradigms about causation or human action or even virtue, apart from being intrinsically interesting, can move the contemporary discussion forward as well.


It is a characteristic of all three books that they keep the focus almost exclusively on Aquinas, and we gain very little (if any) knowledge of his contemporaries or of the broader context. While Osborne engages a little with Augustine and Bonaventure, Frost with some early modern accounts, and Löwe with some recent philosophers, the dialogue between them and Aquinas could be explored further. But these seem to be topics for further projects. Most certainly, these books will contribute to our understanding of medieval philosophy, and also likely help medieval philosophy become more part of the contemporary canon in both research and in teaching.

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