

The Fatal Flaws of the Thomist Greek – Christian Philosophical Synthesis

Review of Bernie van der Walt, *Thomas Aquinas and the Neo-Thomist Tradition: A Christian-Philosophical Assessment* (Jordan Station, Ontario: Paideia Press, 2021)

The Christian-philosophical assessment referred to in the title of this book is van der Walt's discovery and rejection of what he considers to be pagan philosophical ideas that Thomas Aquinas brought into his synthesis of Greek philosophy and Christianity in his new system, with special focus on his *Summa Contra Gentiles*. He seeks to show that these pagan ideas are incompatible with equally basic Christian ideas, and this synthesis philosophy is both not viable as a philosophy and damaging to Christianity. Van der Walt also describes the continuing influence of these pagan ideas, even in Reformed theology, as once they are embedded in a tradition of thought, they are very hard to get rid of.

He begins with a brief account of Aquinas' times and personal philosophical development. Early on Aquinas was exposed to an Aristotelianism that was interpreted from a Platonic point of view. With time he came more and more under the direct influence of Aristotle, so his thought evolves from a more Platonizing philosophy to a more Aristotelianizing one, but without the Platonic influences entirely disappearing. Van der Walt breaks this development down to four periods, and says that the *Summa Contra Gentiles* belongs to the third, still showing more Platonic influence than is in Aquinas' final thought.

Van der Walt, following the neocalvinist Vollenhoven (a movement called by van der Walt Reformational philosophy), lays out three types of synthesis thinking, which are both continuing practises but also describe a sequence of historical development. The first he calls Biblicism, but he means eisegesis. This is reading various pagan ideas into the Bible and then quoting the Bible in support of these ideas. The second type is paradox, or double-truth. Contradictory ideas are held in philosophy and theology, where each is held to be true in its own area, as two kinds of truth. The third type is the double realm theory, where reality is divided into two areas, one having an explanation in philosophy (science) with a natural source of knowledge, and the other having a theological explanation with a supernatural source of knowledge, but the truth in one area is not held to contradict the truth in the other area. The contrast between second and third types seems to be, though van der Walt does not put it this way, between dividing truth into two parts and dividing reality into two parts each with their own type of knowledge but not contradicting each other. This third type is intended to yield two areas of knowledge, nature and grace, and two ways of knowing, reason and faith, yet free from conflict with each other.

Human nature is interpreted according to this nature and grace division. Besides a human nature in the natural realm God created an added supernatural form and perfection, called grace, which is

necessary for man to attain his real end. Sin caused the loss of this added gift, so that man is not able to reach his intended end. Yet this loss still left his human nature, which includes reason, able to function on its own level.

This nature/grace scheme means that Aquinas treats grace as something extra added on at creation. For van der Walt, on the contrary, one can only speak of grace after the fall, as a favor shown by God to man, and which is not opposite to nature but opposite to the wrath of God.

Here we can pause to think of the problem introduced by the Federal Vision theology, which wants to bring in something similar to Thomism by alleging a grace-component to creation. This lets them bring the nature/grace idea into their doctrine of justification, which requires man to be brought into and kept in the clerical-ecclesiastical channels of grace. Thus we see the continuing influence of the Thomist mentality, even among those who see themselves as entirely outside that tradition.

This nature/grace scheme also means, according to van der Walt, that reason is made the highest authority in the domain of nature, with the authority of the Bible then restricted to the other domain, that of faith, church and theology. Also, he says that it creates confusion between an ontic structure of a human being and a religious direction. He does not say enough about this to make the distinction clear. The problem is not his explanation of ontic (being) structure, but that whenever he introduces religious direction or religious relationship, things become vague.

There is also the further result for Thomism that this nature/grace scheme brings in dualism. What he means here is dualism in philosophical theory. This creates an inevitable tension in the philosophy which will break out somewhere. He mentions that the “paradoxical scholars” (he evidently means a type of neo-Thomist that he will bring up in his last chapter) are able to point this out. As a result of this dualism no proper synthesis of the pagan and Christian elements (he says “religious motives”) is possible and the Christian and non-Christian poles “drift further and further apart and eventually once more (as in the beginning) antithetically stand opposite one another. (pp. 30-31, referring to analysis by E. A. Venter). Van der Walt does not explain his terminology of “religious motives.” (Perhaps they are the same as Dooyeweerd’s Ground-motives.)

Finally, van der Walt says that the heathen philosophy in the nature side of the nature/grace division invades the grace side causing that to be Aristotelised as well.

Aquinas’ idea of law “keeps together, determines and explains” his philosophy and theology in this period. This “idea of law boils down to the following: The laws exist (1) before creation (as archetypes) in the mind of God, (2) they were created by God into the cosmos, and (3) the human mind can contain them after abstracting them from creation.” (pp. 35-36) It is not clear to me what van der Walt means by “law” as distinct from metaphysical ideas such as “form”, “essence” or “universal”. He does speak of the “primary religious-normative direction of Aquinas’ philosophy.” (p. 36) While this fits with van der Walt’s neocalvinism, he does not explain clearly the difference between the law idea and the usual metaphysical terms, and why his religious-normative perspective is the correct characterization of Aquinas.

Van der Walt begins by complaining that Aquinas does not make a clear distinction between God and his law, and adds that he makes God into a kind of law and “God becomes a law unto Himself.” (p. 40) Aquinas begins from Aristotle’s idea of God.

First, Aquinas’ natural idea of God ... is fraught with the thoughts of how Aristotle described his deity as the first (non caused) cause, the first (unmoved) mover of all non-transcendent things One is simply amazed at that fact that Aquinas could think that two such diverging and conflicting ideas on god/God — a pagan and a biblical one — could be reconcilable. (p. 40)

God is pure act (pure actuality) with no unrealized potential and is unchangeable. Matter on the other hand is pure potential, and thus pure matter does not exist, being only the limiting concept on the end of a continuum from pure actuality (God) and things that have varying degrees of actuality and potentiality, and are composed. God is also pure form, and van der Walt says “‘Form’ to Aquinas is none other than law.” (p. 41) To show this van der Walt says law “has the character of being enforced, of laying down boundaries.” and he quotes Aquinas that: “the form has the character of a term.”, “form is that which determines”, “It is the function of a form to limit.” But there are other determinations and limits than legal ones, so it does not seem to me that van der Walt has established his point. But he concludes, “So if God is pure form, He is also pure law.”

Aquinas considers God identical to his intellect: “the divine essence which is the intelligible species by which the divine intellect understands, is absolutely identical with God and is also absolutely identical with his intellect.” He says that the will also is the divine substance, that “God’s will ... is His very essence.” Van der Walt concludes from this: “So the will of God also is connected with his being (law).” Further, noting that Aquinas says that God is the universal good, and claiming that “Aquinas identifies the universal and the law,” van der Walt also concludes in this way that for Aquinas the nature of God is law.

Aquinas considers that God’s essence is the exemplar of all things. “The form through which God produces the creatures is an intelligible form in Him.” God has “the proper form of a plant, ... the proper form of an animal and so forth.” “God embraces in Himself all creatures ... in a simple mode.” These proper forms of things in God are called exemplars by Aquinas. God, however, being a simple being, has them in a different manner. Since God contains in that way all things, God knows everything by knowing his own nature. In this way God also knows future things. Van der Walt concludes from this that as God is confused with his own laws (exemplars) he “is not above the law but is subject to the law. He therefore has to act according to this law in His providence and election.” (p. 45) This is one of the areas where he thinks Thomism was taken into Reformed thought, resulting in the theology of the Synod of Dordt, which van der Walt doesn’t like.

In a further comment on this van der Walt says:

No wonder that Aquinas’ contemporaries and the succeeding generations rebelled violently against such determinism, which abolishes human responsibility. Ockham, for instance, later says that it is unacceptable to think that God who made everything — including laws

— may be made subject to His own laws. However, in reaction to the determinism of Aquinas, he lapses into an arbitrary (voluntarist) concept of God. (p. 45)

Van de Walt does not explain what he means here. “Arbitrary” means having to do with the will, willful. And voluntarist means the same thing. Taken strictly, it means that God’s will is a will kind of thing. As a philosophical term voluntarism means a free, unconditioned will.¹ Oakham holds that God is free, that nothing external determines his will. Neither does he posit a cosmic order internal to God that determines God’s will, and by that he avoids the very thing that van der Walt is objecting to. So what option is left for van der Walt to prefer: a conditioning of God by the creature? He adds: “Reformational philosophy stresses that the law is not *in* God (Aquinas). But neither does the law exist *apart* from God (Ockham).” But neither did Ockham think that. (For an explanation of Ockham’s ideas about law within God’s *potentia ordinata*, see: Francis Oakley, *Omnipotence, Covenant, & Order: An Excursion in the History of Ideas from Abelard to Leibniz* http://contra-mundum.org/index_htm_files/Oakley_NaturalLawRights.pdf)

For Aquinas there is a single existing reality, which must be divided into parts, God and the world. But, van der Walt says, “if God and creation are taken together in one concept of existence, then one cannot maintain a distinction between them.” (p. 39) This “one concept of existence” isn’t easy to understand, without clarification. This single reality is arranged in a hierarchy from God who is pure being on down to the theoretical nothingness of pure matter. The closer things are to God the more they are like his divine nature, being less limited and having more of the goodness of universal being. Everything in this series is the form for something lower in the series, except for the matter at the bottom which cannot be the form for anything. As he has already identified form with law, van der Walt notes that this hierarchy of being with each the form for the next lower thing is a hierarchy of law.

There is another order to this, the order of knowing: the forms exist in God before the things, God creates the forms into the things, and the intellect of man abstracts the forms from the things into the intellect.

Aquinas’ idea of a single order of existence created a tension between God’s immanence and transcendence. God is present in the universe, but is also above the universe. Aquinas tried to maintain a balance by using the uniting idea of law, and the diversifying idea of analogy.

Creatures can exhibit *likeness* to God since they received from God what causes them to resemble Him, namely the exemplars. However, they *differ* from God since they are not like God, pure law. (p. 69)

Because of this difference nothing is said of God and of created things in a univocal way (identical meaning). Terms are used analogically.

Van der Walt objects to this order of existence being applied to both God and creature, as it inevitably mixes the divine and the created, and all knowledge depends on the divine and the created

1 In a faculty psychology, voluntarism means that the faculty of the will is supreme over the intellect and other faculties. In ethics voluntarism means divine command ethics, where God’s will, directly or indirectly is the source of moral obligation.

being the same in some way, in that the forms are in both. He says that his own type of philosophy refuses to apply this order of existence to God. What he does not explain is what his philosophy does instead.

It seems to me that the topic could have been handled more directly and simply. Existence is not a predicate, as Kant pointed out. When we say that God exists, and when we say that man exists we are not predicating the same thing of both as we are not predicating at all. To say that God exists is not to add something additional to the meaning of the word 'God'. Nor by saying that something exists are we implying that it is located in some order of being where everything is distributed according to how it participates in being. The philosophical problem, then, does not come from speaking of existence, but as of having a theory of existence that implies some arrangement of qualities as making up existence. Of course this excludes the whole Thomist system, for then pure being would not be pure act, having all forms and being the universal good, and created being would not be in some lower part of a hierarchy having only some forms. In the Thomist system to say that something exists is to say that it has some amount of forms or exemplars, and thus is the same as saying something about its nature.

This shows how the definitions of the terminology in a philosophical system can create a commitment to the system, as within Thomism "being" involves a location in the hierarchy of forms. I had a teacher who was a zealous Thomist. He would denounce presuppositional methods in philosophy, and called presuppositionalists "rank fideists". Yet he would not hold a philosophical discussion unless the other person accepted this Thomist terminology with its definitions. At that point the opponent had committed himself to the Thomist metaphysics. This suggests how difficult it must have been for someone educated in the medieval Thomist system, and only acquainted with philosophical vocabulary in a Thomist sense, to think their way out of it.

Van der Walt takes up the problems of anthropology and knowledge in Aquinas' thought. He objects to Aquinas' doctrine of creationism in the origin of each individual person. Aquinas thought that body of the person arose naturally, from the father, but that at some point before birth God created and added a soul to each person. This soul was supernatural and immortal. It would persist after the death of the body. Van der Walt thinks that people only become immortal at the resurrection. He does not explain if and how there can be consciousness between death and the resurrection as depicted in the Bible.

He also objects to Aquinas' idea of sin. For Aquinas sin is yielding to the lower bodily passions instead of being governed by the intellect. Christ, according to Aquinas, came to change man's love of bodily things to love of spiritual things. Van der Walt considers this dualism of the body and the spiritual to be completely un-Biblical and thus a corruption of Christianity.

Aquinas doctrine of knowledge requires getting forms from things into the intellect through empirical experience. For this to happen he posited a complicated process through several mental entities which he hypothesized to exist. Van der Walt seems to think that describing the whole process is sufficient to critique it.

Van der Walt has a chapter on providence which involves going deeper into points already discussed here, and also of exploring the idea of the origin of evil. Evil poses a problem because everything that exists does so because it has some forms (exemplars) of being, and each is a part of the universal good. But to be a lesser being, one that is not the universal good, is to lack some of these forms. Evil then seems to be the inevitable result of creation, that is making things which are lacking in some of the good.

Van der Walt's final chapters involve a discussion of how Thomism has influenced Christian thought, and also how Christians have reacted against it to various degrees. He then goes on to a discussion of neo-Thomist views, though we don't get a grasp of any of these views as a whole.

To sum up, the following are the main points of van der Walt's objection to the synthesis philosophy in Aquinas.

The pagan ideas that Aquinas brought into his synthesis which are incompatible with Christianity are:

1. Reason is the supreme authority in the area of nature.
2. There is one reality divided into a transcendent part (deity) and a non-transcendent part (cosmos).
3. God can be analyzed scientifically as part of a hierarchy of being.
4. God is immutable (the unmoved mover of everything).
5. Aquinas understands the nature of God in terms of faculties.
6. God knows everything by knowing his own nature, as the Aristotelian unmoved mover thinks only of himself.
7. Being and the existence of evil are involved in each other.

The non-Christian ideas which Aquinas created in this synthesis which are incompatible with Christianity are:

1. Grace as something added on to nature, a perfection. (Whereas "Grace, properly understood, is the remission of sins by which God restores people into fellowship with God.")
2. God contains everything in creation.
3. God's knowledge of the world through exemplars determines future events, and results in determinism, in contrast to a Biblical theology of personal relations.
4. The fall brought about the loss of the supernatural grace part of man's being, but his nature otherwise is largely untainted.
5. Human nature includes a soul that is immortal by its nature.
6. There is a dualism between the bodily and the spiritual.

The book is a useful aid for someone coming to terms with Thomism, as it shows the things that Reformed thinkers have found objectionable in it. At the same time I can see Thomists objecting that van der Walt's way of presenting Thomas Aquinas is not their way. Then there are those for whom Thomism, the official philosophy of the Roman church, is Christianity, and so much the worse for the Bible if it is different. It is clear, though, that van der Walt wants to claim the Reformed tradition as his own, but doesn't like its confessional tradition. The reader must keep in mind that this book is coming from the direction of neocalvinism, or "Reformational philosophy".