Analytical Thomism: Traditions in Dialogue

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This volume comprises sixteen contributions by various authors on a number of important topics in the fields of analytical philosophy and Thomism. That this compendium encompasses both an optimistic outlook as well as views of a more sceptical hue with respect to dialogue between these two traditions is noteworthy. As is pointed out in the Introduction, the work of noted thinkers in the analytical and Thomistic traditions, in addition to that of emerging scholars from Europe and the United States, is included in the volume. Part of the impetus for this collection is to build on the achievement of a number of previous collaborative efforts, whose purpose was likewise to promote a meeting of minds between the two philosophical traditions; the special issues of The Monist (vol. 80, n. 4, 1997, edited by J. Haldane) and New Blackfriars (vol. 80, April, 1999, edited by F. Kerr) are of special significance in this regard.

A brief conceptual framework of the different stages registered in the historical development of Thomism – the initial phase; the second (Scholastic) phase; and the revitalization of the tradition inspired by Aeterni Patris – is outlined in the Introduction. A concise account of the gradual encounter between analytical philosophy and the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas over the course of the twentieth century is also provided. The initial concerns of some followers of early Wittgenstein and Russell, who pursued a positivist line of argument in logic and analytical thought as such, should be acknowledged in this context. The historiography of the analytical tradition (Kerr) makes
clear that this school of thought was informed, from the very beginning, by ideas and preoccupations similar to those of Aquinas, against a backdrop cut from Aristotelian cloth (Frege and Brentano). Although neither drew directly on Aquinas’s work, both Gilbert Ryle and J. L. Austin sought to reinforce the commitment to more careful analysis of the classical sources of thought in the analytical context.

Elisabeth Anscombe, Peter Geach, Anthony Kenny and Michael Dummett are outstanding figures worthy of special regard in any account of the dialogic engagement between the two traditions. While the degrees of difference between these thinkers are not negligible, their reputations rest on the promotion of closer ties in specific areas of philosophical inquiry, among which are the following: ethics, ontology, philosophical psychology and the philosophy of language.

John Haldane’s commitment to forging new lines of communication between Thomism and analytical philosophy is noteworthy, too. This Scottish philosopher has proposed a fourth renewal of Thomism, shaped by closer interaction with the methods and a number of the subjects reflected in analytical thought. In line with this proposal, this volume offers a set of contributions dealing with issues relating to metaphysics and the theory of the existent, ethics and meta-ethics, natural theory, philosophical anthropology, philosophical psychology and natural law theory.

The general framework for most of the topics addressed in this book centres on metaphysical considerations or natural theology. Among the metaphysical questions at
issue, discussion of the existent and existence is carried out at considerable length (see Pugh and Braine). Other sections of the text deal with the subject of the existence of God (Healy, Putnam and Ramsay), as well as causality, change and modality (De Anna, Oderberg and Brock). Intentionality and reference (Boulter, Cahalan and Lisska), as well as ethics and the theory of action (Davenport and Paterson), are explored in what might be referred to as a more anthropological mode.

As has already been alluded to above, optimism with regard bridging the gap between the two philosophical traditions is not the hallmark of all the contributions to this book. The papers by B. Shanley, S. Theron and J. Knasas, pointing out significant obstacles in relation to the establishment of a more cohesive link between the metaphysics of the *actus essendi* and the interpretive perspective articulated by Geach, Kenny or Haldane (Shanley and Knasas), for instance, are relevant in this regard. The rejection of any attempt to subsume it within any form of patronage, including an analytical one, which has been a defining feature of Thomism throughout its history, is also addressed (Theron).

John Haldane’s final commentary, a concise outline of the original intent and objectives underlying the work of analytical Thomism in the context of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy, deserves special attention. Haldane determines the aptness of this binominal term as a description of a mode of philosophy committed to expository clarity and conceptual rigor, as well as to precision in argumentation and the rejection of ambiguity. By contrast, were analytical philosophy to be understood as a mode of
philosophy that is hostile to metaphysics and, in general, to any affirmation of the existence of a supernatural order, it is clear that such a composite term could never be applied to Aquinas’s thought. In another section, Haldane speculates on how analytical thought ought to be conceived of: does it constitute a body of philosophical work in itself, or is it a specific philosophical method? In addition, a number of clarifications regarding the difficulty of accounting for the philosophical dimension of a line of thought derived from the work of a theologian (as is the case in Aquinas) and the analytical approach, which is philosophical by definition, are presented. In short, Haldane’s contribution is an invitation to return to communal endeavour in philosophical inquiry, which has been called into question to a certain extent by the emergence of mutually exclusive communities of experts and specialists.

Finally, the collection as a whole discloses that an equal interest in understanding or incorporating aspects stemming from the other is not shared by both traditions. Indeed, for the most part, studies that encompass the prospect of an analytical Thomism arise from the analytical school of thought; contributions to a common field of study by thinkers of a Thomistic bent are relatively rare. Hence, this volume is addressed above all to those working at the heart of the Thomistic tradition, who are concerned nonetheless with arguments and objections in relation to this promising and relatively recent area of inquiry. Whatever the limits on the potential of an analytical Thomism may be, these should be determined through thorough-going research rather than extrapolated as a function of preconceived positions.
In addition to the specific bibliography appended to each contribution, the collection includes a selected bibliography which may be useful to anyone with an interest in exploring the field of analytical Thomism in greater detail and depth.

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