

# REVIEWS

**ARISTOTELIAN APORETIC ONTOLOGY IN ISLAMIC AND CHRISTIAN THINKERS**, by Edward Booth O.P. *Cambridge studies in medieval life and thought, Third series, vol 20. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983. pp xxvi + 314 £35.00*

The appearance of this study of the fortunes of the Aristotelian philosophy of being is timely. The Leonine Commission, entrusted with the critical editing of the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, is soon to publish his exposition of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* from its Washington section. Edward Booth, who works with the Commission in Grottaferrata, has profited by that improved text in bringing into focus a fundamental tension within Aristotle's philosophy. Of course, the *interest of the study is wider: the theme is pursued through early peripatetic, Neoplatonist, Greek and Latin Christian, Arabic and Jewish thought, before reaching the thirteenth-century Dominican syntheses of St. Albert and St. Thomas.*

A tension is set up by Aristotle's willingness to live with the problems made by his criticism of Plato's theory of forms and so to teach through an experience of the problematic element at the core of his philosophy of being. Aristotle sometimes talks Plato's language of 'form' and 'participation', but this is read as an ironical distancing from the master than as a point of reconciliation: material things, on Aristotle's view, are independent from each other and from any world of forms in which they might share; they are constituted in their individual being by forms which are intrinsic to their substantial reality. However, the *aporia* pursued here is not that of noetic, the inevitably universal character of the knowledge of what is irreducibly individual in itself, where the abstracted essence takes on the semblance of Plato's form; it is that of ontology, in which the multiplicity of individuals is at odds with the common essence by which their place in the real order is secured. On the other hand, since universal knowledge

should entail universal principles of being, Aristotle is understood to be seeking a correspondence between the noetic and ontological.

Aristotle's treatment of this theme of individual and universal in the *Metaphysics* and the *Organon* betrays at times a hesitation in identifying the essence with its individual realisation, something which is shown to have embarrassed system-makers such as Alexander of Aphrodisias, who simply expounded the containment of individuals within a universal in terms of predication. With the Neoplatonists the embarrassment is seen to have been met differently: Plotinus's hierarchy of being gave priority to what was superior and simpler; Porphyry carried further the assimilation to Plato, aligning the mental construction of genera-species-individual with the structure of reality itself and explaining individuation in a naïve way through characterizing notes; Proclus included more of Aristotle, but his corporeal world of individuals participated incorporeally in forms on which their being and understanding depended.

Much of the interest of this book lies in the development of Christian thought in which Neoplatonism persisted and yet was revised in the line of radical Aristotelianism. Thus both tendencies are discovered in Boethius's account of *universalia ante res* and *post res*. The Pseudo-Dionysius is seen as restoring the Aristotelian unity of being, life and thought and dissolving Proclus's emanationism, through his monotheism; he saves the integrity of the individual without sacrificing that of the species. The *Liber de causis* similarly insists on a single communication of being by the first cause of all, a monotheist rethinking of

Proclean material. In the Islamic and Jewish tradition a comparable radical Aristotelianism is discerned, a reshaping of Neoplatonist thought by believers in one God. Ibn Sina is presented as resolving the basic ambiguity by distinguishing the logical and physical and by making a nature in itself indifferent to universality and individuality. As the author neatly puts it, 'By being ontologically void, essence so conceived has the priority which radical Aristotelianism gave to the individual, and Neoplatonism to the universal' (p. 118). Even so, a rare hesitation on the relation of universal and individual discloses his embarrassment over the aporetic. Ibn Rushd carries the peripatetic reshaping further, identifying the structures of logic and reality. The rediscovery of the great commentary on the *Posterior Analytics* has brought to light texts in which he insists that proof cannot be concerned with individuals, bearing as it does on the universals in things with none of the indeterminacy of Ibn Sina's account. The aporetic survives in his tentativeness over the structural relationship of individual and universal in regard to the *Metaphysics*, where the Aristotelian sources are more richly exploited. Maimonides, without the systematic metaphysics of the Islamic thinkers, still tries to relate peripatetic themes to the Old Testament revelation.

Others may be better qualified to judge the scholarly handling of the Arabic material, but the last third of the book (chapters 5 and 6) comes closer to our Dominican home ground with Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas. The Latin documentation here displays great breadth of reading and judicious selection, but unfortunately copy-editors have not been vigilant, since there are at least fifty unexplained departures, many perhaps trivial, from the printed texts of Albert and some thirty from those of Thomas. Not all of those for Albert can be explained by silent correction of the admittedly defective Borgnet edition, for the Cologne critical edition is misquoted too. Now was it well-judged to use a much emended witness to the unreliable

university manuscript tradition to correct the Turin text of Thomas's exposition of the Pseudo-Dionysius's *De Divinis nominibus*? The author also has a disconcerting way of putting together widely separated passages in his sources with points of suspension, so the reader would do well to back to the sources themselves. That being said, the discussion is often stimulating: going beyond a mere study of influences, it provides a detailed study of the assimilation of the recently translated Aristotelian material into a Platonic tradition already much modified, after Proclus, in a peripatetic sense.

The treatment of Albert opens with an account, in regard to the *Isagoge*, following Boethius of the total presence of the species in the individual and a 'logico-emanationist figure' in which the emanation of forms and logical structure are fused. The themes of emanation and *universalia ante res* are traced through the expositions of the *Metaphysics*, the *Liber de causis* (seen as its complement) and the *De devinis nominibus*. Albert's conflation of the Arabic material favours an identification of the individual logically and physically conceived.

Thomas, eventually knowing the *Liber de causis* for what it was, an adaptation of Proclus's *Elements of Theology*, was finally more alert than his teacher to the inherent tension between Aristotelian and Platonic tendencies in his sources. The seeds of the philosophy of *esse* are sought in the study of the Pseudo-Dionysius under Albert at Cologne, where Thomas first learnt that from God the *substantificator* there is a single, total communication of being, containing in itself every other formality. By what is described here as an *Aufhebung*, the radical Aristotelian critique was subsumed into the Pseudo-Dionysian and Proclean philosophy of being. As early as the *De ente et essentia*, Thomas had adopted from Ibn Rushd the identification of the universal with the individual, and from Boethius the coincidence of species with the individual, but Albert's irradiation and education of form is missing, and the assumption that

logical structures matched those of the creative constitution of being. Thomas's ontology is understood as a 'prolongation and development of Pseudo-Dionysius's Aristotelianisation of Proclus's ontology' (p.218). The discussion of participation in regard to Boethius's *De hebdomadibus* clearly rules out a sharing in *esse* as a separate form, although the dependence in being on a communication of *esse* manifests the concealed hand of Proclus, the 'Cryptoproclean'. The exposition of *De divinis nominibus*, now being critically edited in Toronto, stresses the similarities between the Pseudo-Dionysius and Aristotle. A useful comparison here with Albert's exposition (pp 227—36) shows how Thomas dispensed with the irradiation of forms in asserting the individuation of God's activity with regard to each individual and the reduction of the ideas in God to the simplicity of his being. With his recognition of the transformation of Proclus in the *Liber de causis*, Thomas was able to eliminate a multiplicity of intermediate principles of God's creative activity.

It is the rehandling of Neoplatonist material that the author sees above all as the place where Thomas was most seriously challenged to reshape the earlier tradition: the Plato-critique of Aristotle is

largely replaced by a view in which individual things depend wholly on God's universal exemplarity, participating immediately in his most characteristic act. Thomas's fusion of views from Ibn Rushd and Boethius on the identity of universals with individual things may have obscured the aporetic of the universal in the individual, kept alive by the condemnations of 1277 and a position such as that of the Pseudo-Grosseteste's *Summa philosophiae*. There is little evidence to support the view that this work is by the former Oxford Blackfriars regent, Robert Kilwardby. His influence might have been sought with more probability in the logical writings of Albert. Much of this is difficult reading and those concessions have not always been made that might aid the reader. There is, however, a thesis that deserves careful evaluation and a weighing of texts in context beyond the scope of this review. This study can be read not only as a history of forgetfulness of something that was integral to Aristotle's own thinking, but as a diagnostic of the itch that refuses to go away however cunningly the salve is blended. If it wins acceptance, it may lead us to see Thomas not so much as an 'Aristotelianiser' as a 'Dionysianiser'.

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**THE INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW** edited by Graham Stanton. *Issues in Religion and Theology* 3. SPCK and Fortress. 1983. p/b £3.50. pp. xi and 164.

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