Hoffman, Tobias, Jörn Müller, and Matthias Perkams (eds.)


The organization and cohesion of this volume is impressive. Its primary purpose is to investigate the nature of Thomas Aquinas’s appropriation of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter EN) in the angelic doctor’s commentary *Sententia libri Ethicorum* (hereafter SLE). To do so, the editors state that the following questions must be addressed.

1. What are Aquinas’s goals in commenting on the EN? Does he simply want to offer an adequate reading of the text or is he after the “truth of the matter”? Is the SLE philosophical or theological in nature – or neither?
2. How good an interpreter of the EN is Aquinas – that is, how Aristotelian are his interpretations in terms of historical accuracy? Does he try to integrate Aristotle’s views into a different theological or philosophical framework (e.g., Stoicism or Neoplatonism)?
3. How does he fare in comparison with earlier medieval interpreters of the EN, especially with Albert the Great’s *Super Ethica*?
4. How does his treatment of the EN in the SLE differ from his treatment of the EN in his systematic theological writings? What accounts for these differences?
5. In which areas does Aquinas develop insights from Aristotle’s ethics in a new direction? Does he do so intentionally or not?
6. Does he offer convincing and fruitful clarifications of key issues from the EN? Does he offer persuasive solutions to problems the EN raises?
7. To what extent does the topic under discussion contribute to a Thomistic “moral philosophy” that might be of interest to contemporary virtue ethicists (p. 8)?

The contributors to the volume engage one or more of these questions through chapters concentrating on the topics of happiness, virtue in general, particular virtues (i.e. courage, justice, and prudence), incontinence, friendship, and pleasure. Each essay that engages these questions is to have three parts: an informed summary of Aristotle’s position, a detailed description of Aquinas’s treatment of the position in his commentary and other works, and an assessment of the philosophical implications of Aquinas’s account. The essays by and large fulfill these tasks.

Additionally, there are also three contributions that focus “more generally on the historical accuracy of Aquinas as a commentator on the EN” (Terence...
Irwin), on the original method and structure employed in his ethics (Michael Pakaluk), and on the reception of Aquinas’s approach in contemporary virtue ethics (Candace Vogler)” (p. 9).

In the introductory chapter, the editors briefly summarize the results of this joint-investigation. The results are that, contrary to the influential view of Henry Jaffa (1953), Aquinas neither distorts the text of Aristotle nor introduces a hidden theological agenda. Although he sometimes offers criticisms, identifies unstated implications, and seeks to clarify or improve Aristotle’s text. Aquinas’s most significant departures from Aristotle are reserved for his work other than SLE.

What follows is a very brief summary of the aim of each chapter. In Chapter 2, T.H. Irwin advocates that historians of philosophy should not limit themselves to questions about an author’s intentions but consider an author’s achievements by investigating the philosophical implications of an author’s work. He argues that Aquinas’s commentary on EN deserves the attention of historians on that score. Irwin then examines Aquinas’s SLE on the topics of the desiring and the non-rational part of the soul, happiness as complete, the role of the will in responsibility for action, and the meaning of kalon in EN. Irwin concludes that for the latter three topics SLE provides attractive lines of interpretation.

In Chapter 3, Michael Pakaluk addresses structure and method in Aquinas’s appropriation of Aristotelian ethical theory through focusing on Aquinas’s use in St II-II of the cardinal virtues to organize ethical theory and address certain unresolved puzzles in Aristotle’s work regarding relations of fundamentality and dependence between virtues, the definition of virtue, and virtue individuation. The result is a recognizably Aristotelian system that is more theoretically complete yet metaphysically controversial. Aquinas’s project is not Aristotle’s engagement in political prudence. Instead it situates Aristotle’s ethics in a larger philosophical framework built on Aristotelian principles.

In Chapter 4, Jörn Müller argues that Aquinas, departing from his teacher Albert’s exclusivist interpretation of Aristotle on happiness, follows an inclusivist interpretation. Through his interpretation of Aristotle’s criteria for happiness, Aquinas stretches the EN to accommodate his own account of two-fold happiness (imperfect in this life and perfect in the next). He is justified in doing so because of that account’s theoretical fruitfulness.

In Chapter 5, Matthias Perkams argues that Aquinas’s view of free will is significantly different from Aristotle’s view of intellectual appetite due to Aquinas’s account of the will as a power of interior choice that follows but is not determined by practical reason and his account of particular practical reason.