

BATTLE OF THOMISMS: SHERWIN AGAINST JOSEF FUCHS AND JAMES KEENAN

Bradley R. Cochran

Review of Sherwin, Michael S. O.P. *By Knowledge and By Love: Charity and Knowledge in the Moral Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*. Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005. 270 pp.

Competing traditions under the broad umbrella of Thomism is nothing new, and will likely continue indefinitely. While the aftermath of Alasdair MacIntyre's Enlightenment critique and return to the virtue theory of Aristotle and Aquinas has caused a timely and refreshing revitalization that has exploded onto the scene of Catholic moral theology, Protestant ethics, and moral philosophy, by now it has produced different interpretations of the authorities of virtue ethics. It is in the context of an interpretive dispute over the virtue theory of St. Thomas Aquinas that our author, Michael S. Sherwin, enters the fray as a new voice in the conversation. A school of thought within Catholic moral theology that Sherwin calls the "theologians of moral motivation" have appropriated Aquinas's complex Aristotelian moral theology to give added credibility to their peculiar Rahnerian notions of *option fondamentale* and transcendental freedom (xix). In particular, Josef Fuchs and James Keenan have developed the Rahnerian doctrine of transcendental freedom in a way that views the will's motion in transcendental freedom as antecedent to, or independent of, practical reasoning and objects of choice. Hence a separation is made between one's goodness (one's fundamental orientation) and one's rightness (one's concrete moral judgments and actions); one's wrongness in actions therefore may be seen as not necessarily undermining their goodness on the transcendental level (which is more important). Sherwin's book is nothing short of a penetrating polemic against theologians of moral motivation (Keenan in particular) who claim that such a distinction is implied in Aquinas's mature thought on the will and charity. The author argues that although there was indeed development in Aquinas's mature thought, nevertheless there remained in Aquinas a basic continuity on the point in question: *knowledge always has a structural priority over the will*.

Aquinas held that the intellect has a certain causal priority in the act of specification (specifying the good in particular based on a perceived notion of the good in general) while the will and its appetites for the end have priority of the intellect in the act of exercise (the intellect is moved by the will's appetites to consider the good and to choose the means for attaining this good). This does not lead to intellectual determinism, however, because the will influences our judgments, how we perceive things and whether we consider one aspect of something over another aspect. Since intellect and will seem to presuppose one another, Aquinas escapes the problematic of an infinite regress by attributing the cause of the will's and the intellect's first act to human nature and thus to God. Since voluntary action presupposes rational choice, to choose apart from knowledge of the good is actually a "form of insanity" (100). Sherwin finally shows that for Aquinas, as it is with the intellect and the will in human nature, so it is with faith and charity in the infused virtues. Faith has a similar structural priority over love while love informs all the virtues. Finally Sherwin demonstrates that if charity has its act apart from the intellect's knowledge, it ceases to be a virtue

because it no longer has a recognizable concrete form in an account of human actions—it is not “recognizably human” (224).

The strength of Sherwin’s book is surely his rigorous analysis of Aquinas’s virtue theory (building on Henri Bouillard and Max Seckler) that consequentially yields a more intelligible view of human action that leaves little wanting. His is also more faithful to the Christian tradition’s Augustinian insight that one cannot love what one does not know. The book has a helpful index and contains figures that depict the dynamics and principles of human action. A more believable interpreter of Aquinas, Sherwin’s Aquinas helps us see the folly of spoiling the proper relationship between the intellect and will and between knowledge of God and love.

Bradley R. Cochran
T h e o • p h i l o g u e
theophilogue.com