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*Inspired Metaphysics? Gustav Siewerth's Hermeneutic Reading of the Onto-Theological Tradition.* By Andrzej Wiercinski. Toronto: The Hermeneutic Press, 2003. Pp. 214. ISBN 0-9525333-3-2.

Andrzej Wiercinski has written the first English monograph on Gustav Siewerth (1903-63), the twentieth-century German thinker whom Hans Urs von Balthasar regarded as the greatest philosopher of the contemporary age. In numerous major works, in which he negotiates a precarious synthesis of Hegel, Heidegger, and Aquinas, Siewerth constructs some of the most original speculative philosophy of the contemporary period. Yet notwithstanding a significant readership in Germany, Siewerth remains largely unknown in North America.

Wiercinski's book, *Inspired Metaphysics? Gustav Siewerth's Hermeneutic Reading of the Onto-Theological Tradition*, represents the culmination of twenty years of work on Siewerth. Wiercinski presents Siewerth as an example of the hermeneutic vitality of Thomism. Criticized for his speculative departures from the texts of Aquinas, Siewerth in his relationship to Aquinas has methodo-logically much in common with Bernard Lonergan, Max Müller, Johann Baptist Lotz, and to a lesser extent, Joseph Maréchal and the young Karl Rahner. With these thinkers, Siewerth regards the dialogue with modernity as the essential task for Thomism. Yet Siewerth is critical of Thomist appropriations of Kant, as Wiercinski points out in his well-researched chapter "The Transcendental Turn in the Thomist Revival." Siewerth's emphasis on the irreducibility of being, the act of existence (*esse*) grasped by the intellect as a pure positivity, aligns him with Gilson and the existential Thomists and distances him from the "transcendental Thomists." Siewerth however does not engage in the close textual analysis characteristic of the Gilson school. He retains from his years studying under Martin Heidegger in the 1930s the method of directly engaging the matter of the text (*die Sache*), even if this requires rethinking it in new terms.

While Wiercinski appears to distance himself from Siewerth (hence the question mark in the title), the central contribution of this volume is not Wiercinski's critique but his thorough exposition of Siewerth's ontology, accompanied by numerous translated quotations from Siewerth's works. After setting the stage by introducing the idea of "hermeneutic reading" ("the situation of the interpretation, of the appropriation of the past in understanding, is always the situation of the living present," Wiercinski writes, "the text has something to say to me, something which requires my attentive response"), Wiercinski deftly guides us through Siewerth's extremely difficult speculative ontology. He argues that Siewerth cannot be understood without a knowledge of the history of medieval philosophy, German idealism, and Heidegger, and carefully illustrates the significance of each of these. Particularly helpful is the examination of Siewerth's understanding of the relationship of Scotus's metaphysics to what Heidegger calls the forgetfulness of the ontological difference between being and beings. Scotus's *univocatio entis* denies the "mediating mediation" between the Creator and creatures, precipitating both late medieval nominalism and modern idealism.

Siewerth's first attempt at interpreting Aquinas through Hegel and Heidegger was his 1930-31 doctoral dissertation, "Die Metaphysik der Erkenntnis nach Thomas von Aquin." He followed this with his 1937 *Habilitationsschrift*, "Die transzendente intellektuelle Anschauung bei Thomas von Aquin. Der Grund der Möglichkeit der Gotteserkenntnis." All but banished from the academy by the Nazis (and his revered teacher Heidegger did nothing to help), Siewerth continued his research

without an academic post. Siewerth owes much to Hegel, but, as Wiercinski shows, he does not share Hegel's idealization of being and nothingness. He substitutes a notion of "exemplary identity" for Hegel's dialectical identity. A is not not-A; rather it is imaged in not-A, as God is imaged in being. Even more essential than the appropriation of Hegel is Siewerth's more intimate connection with the later Heidegger. Siewerth singles out Heidegger and Aquinas as the only figures in the history of Western philosophy who endeavored to think being in its difference from beings. According to Siewerth, Heidegger's critique of the forgetfulness of being indicts everyone except Aquinas. That Heidegger seems to have missed this in Aquinas--Heidegger is far more interested in Scotus, Suarez, and Luther than he is in Aquinas--does not stop Siewerth from drawing this surprising connection. For Siewerth the question of what Heidegger calls "the ontological difference" is the beginning of every genuine metaphysical inquiry. Metaphysics inevitably takes one of two directions with respect to the question of being: either a monism in which the ontological difference is reduced to appearance (Platonism, conceptualism, essentialism, Scotism), or a pluralism, in which the difference is held to be irreducible (Aquinas, Heidegger). Only in the latter does the difference become a creative spur for philosophy.

The modern forgetfulness of being begins with Scotus, for whom being is exhausted in *essentia*. The Scotistic denial of the real distinction of *essentia* and *existentia*, and the related denial of the inconceivability of God in the notion of *univocatio entis*, gives birth to the essentialism of modern philosophy and the subjectivism of German idealism. Against this trend Siewerth unfurls a set of hermeneutically revised Thomistic concepts. He shows how Aquinas distinguishes being (*esse*) from beings (*entia*) on the grounds that the latter possess *essentia*, *quidditas*, which can be abstracted and conceptualized, where the former is pure nonessential act. The "existentialist" formulation of the *distinctio realis*, however, is not enough to meet the challenge of Heidegger, for both whatness (*essentia*) and thatness (*existentia*) belong to the being of substance. Siewerth argues that, in order to answer Heidegger's critique, we must retrieve Aquinas's distinction between act and subsistence: the former is the pure, nonsubstantive, dynamic energy of coming into presence; the latter is the stasis of that which has come to be. The act of being subsists in a being while remaining distinct from it. The distinction underscores Aquinas's often overlooked distinction between the being of God (*ipsum esse subsistens*) and the being of beings (*ipsum esse non-subsistens*). The being of a being is a nonsubsistent act, the event of the sheer upsurge of beings from nothingness. It cannot be abstracted into a concept. As Siewerth says, it can be thought (there is a *conceptio entis*) but not abstracted (there is no *conceptus entis*).

Neither a being nor God, the being of beings is the perfect image of God, a pure reflection of divine kenosis. It empties itself into beings and comes to realization in them. Hence it depends upon the subsistent being of God as much as beings depend upon it. By distinction, the being of God is subsistent act, that which resides in itself, infinite, eternal, self-sufficient, excluding all potency and requiring nothing else in order for it to be. As the first creation, the being of beings is horizoned by the nothingness of primordial potency; it is "complete and simple, but not subsistent." Just as the triune God is a mediation through otherness (the Father is Father by virtue of the relation to the Son, etc.), being is an identity-in-difference, an identity that realizes itself through its other. It was this Hegel-inspired Trinitarian ontology that proved so fertile for Balthasar. In the act of creation, the self-emptying Trinity images itself in that which only exists insofar as it empties itself into a being. Being is kenosis. As nonsubsistent, being is not identical with itself: it is only real insofar as it has poured itself out and allowed a being to be.

Siewerth believes that this nonsubstantive notion of being can accommodate Heidegger's

retrieval of the pre-Socratic notion of *physis*, "self-blossoming emergence," while preserving the Scholastic principle of the subsistence, eternity, and infinity of God. The First and Absolute Being remains the eternal ground of all that is; it excludes time. The being of beings is the condition of the possibility of time. The being in which all things participate, the being the horizon of which is time, to speak Heidegger's language, is not the being of God, but the first act of God, the donation of the energy of his presence in the othering by which creation becomes possible. It is the simple unlimited being of every thing that exists, "das einfache, nicht begrenzte Sein des Seienden." However near to us, it is "a profound mystery," for it includes within itself all possible conceptual determinations, while remaining "uncircumscribed" by any concept. It is the act that actualizes every thing that is, but is "captured and consumed" by none of them.

Siewerth refers to many texts of Aquinas in constructing his central points. One might question whether this metaphysics is true to Aquinas. One cannot, however, question that it is in its own right an important contribution to contemporary metaphysics. That Wiercinski has gone to such lengths to make this contribution better known forgives some of the idiosyncrasies of *Inspired Metaphysics?* Wiercinski has recently announced the publication of a translation and commentary of Siewerth's seminal treatise, *Das Sein als Gleichnis Gottes*. Let us hope that these valuable works are the first of many studies of Siewerth.

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