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A priori proofs of God's existence in 17th-century Scholastics

Review

IGOR AGOSTINI, *La démonstration de l'existence de Dieu. Les conclusions des cinq voies de saint Thomas d'Aquin et la preuve a priori dans le thomisme du XVII^e siècle*, The Age of Descartes / Descartes et son temps 1, Brepols, Turnhout 2016, 704 pp.

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Agostini's book presents itself as “a homage to the great Dominican theology of the 17th century” and intends to prove that the theological reflection of the members of this order was no less “polymorphous” than we know now to have been the case for that of the “Thomists” of the time [26; 15-17, and *passim*]. To this end, Agostini considers the attitude of quite a few well-known and less well-known Dominicans of this century towards Aquinas, who after the Council of Trent had notoriously been taken as the ultimate authority in the field. More specifically, the book investigates the commentaries on the *Summa Theologiæ* I, q. 2, a. 2 and 3 – where Aquinas presented his famous five arguments in favour of God's existence – based on the claim that these commentaries were at the time “if not the principal, then certainly a privileged channel of theological speculation” [14].

Agostini shows that there were two main difficulties addressed by the commentators in question: namely, whether these *a posteriori* arguments are conclusive [29-244] and whether Aquinas was there ruling out the very possibility of an *a priori* proof of the same claim [283-647]. The book is accordingly structured in two parts, which address these two questions in strict chronological order by considering some dozens of commentaries on the *Summa*. Agostini proves that, far from being merely complementary to one another, these two are in fact closely intertwined issues. He convincingly shows that a self-sufficient *a priori* proof of God's existence – of the sort advocated by Anselm – was indeed hardly ever an issue for virtually any of these many commentators, not even for the ones more influenced by Suárez. It was not so even for Suárez himself, in fact, who presented his argument as *proxime a priori, quamvis remote... etiam a posteriori*. The dispute, Agostini argues, was rather about whether Aquinas's arguments established the existence of God *qua*, say, “unmoved mover”, or whether they did no more than demonstrate the existence of *an* “unmoved mover” which only a further, *a priori* argument could establish to be God (thus making it possible eventually to conclude to its existence – *qua* immobile mover and, hence, *qua* God).

The question of whether human beings in our present state possess some insight into the nature of God became, therefore, especially pressing, it being commonly agreed that *a priori* proofs rest on some knowledge of this kind. Accordingly, Agostini devotes to this topic a very useful interlude linking the two parts of his work [245-81] in which he considers the legacy of Aquinas's claim – in works other than the *Summa Theologiæ* – that any *a priori* demonstration of God's existence is precluded for human beings insofar

as we lack an insight into God's essence. Agostini argues that the first crucial step towards admitting some, albeit partial, access to God's essence had already been made by Dominicans of the first generations after Aquinas, such as Hervaeus Natalis and Durandus of Saint-Pourçain, and this largely as a result of Tempier's 1277 condemnation. At the same time, Agostini makes a forceful case that it was Suárez who first proposed integrating the *a posteriori* proofs of God's existence with an *a priori* step. In a *tour de force* appendix Agostini contends that this was indeed neither Henry of Ghent's nor Scotus's position, despite the numerous views to the contrary expressed in the literature [87-108]. This perceptive and nuanced study of the continuities and innovations in Scholastic reflections about how to prove God's existence is a most praiseworthy feature of the book. Agostini builds on this both in order to reconstruct the genesis of received interpretations and to qualify and challenge a few of them in the light of how an author had been construed by his first readers.

The first part of the work [29-244] provides the most thorough example of this interpretative procedure and of its merits. A great deal of these first two hundred pages of the book is indeed devoted to the analysis and legacy of Cajetan's claim that the existence of God *qua* "unmoved mover" follows *directe, quasi per accidens* from the mere existence of such an "unmoved mover", from which one is *consequenter* to infer the existence of God as such, *qua* God. As Agostini shows, Cajetan's reading of Aquinas was immediately attacked by some of the leading Dominican theologians of the 16th century, such as Javelli and Gregory of Valencia, despite finding supporters like Perez or, later on, Montagnolo and Zanardi [56-126]. Agostini provides evidence that, in the course of the 17th century, Cajetan's followers came nonetheless to adopt very different strategies for achieving this same end. The main point for the commentators up until approximately the 1630s was, in fact, to demonstrate that Aquinas's "ways" as interpreted by Cajetan still counted as "direct" proofs (at least of sorts). By contrast, later supporters of Cajetan such as Pedro de Godoy read these proofs as openly "indirect" ones, reshaping their system in order to accommodate this claim [203-21]. Expanding significantly upon Bauer's classic study of the topic,¹ Agostini documents how these debates around Cajetan's *Commentaria* issued in a more general and sophisticated reflection about the argumentative function of *Summa* I 2.2. within the economy of the treatise as a whole and, more generally, about the logical and metaphysical status and stages of a proof of God's existence. Agostini remarks that even theologians who insisted that Aquinas's "ways" worked *directe et per se*, such as Nazario, ended up endorsing most of Cajetan's solution [126-44]. Indeed, Agostini argues that the dissemination of Cajetan's reading among 17th-century theologians in the second half of the century was basically "undisputed" [202], to the point of almost being taken for granted in syntheses such as Labat's [221-29].

Armed with this massive apparatus, Agostini is able to show that there was in the Dominican tradition – and still is, for present-day interpreters – plenty of elbow room between defending at any price the argumentative autonomy of Aquinas's "ways" and calling for a "complement" to be found elsewhere in Aquinas's work(s), as maintained for instance by Maritain, Vanni Rovighi, and by many others after them.² By the same token

¹ R. BAUER, *Gotteserkenntnis und Gottesbeweise bei Kardinal Kajetan*, Pustet, Regensburg 1955.

² J. MARITAIN, *Approches de Dieu*, Alsatia, Paris s.d. [1953], especially p. 77. S. VANNI ROVIGHI, "Perenne validità delle 'cinque vie' di Tommaso", *Aquinas* III (1960), pp. 198-213; later in EAD., *Studi di filosofia medievale*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 1978, vol. II, pp. 88-106.

Agostini urges caution in reading Cajetan as making a case for an “indirect” proof of God’s existence, pointing out that this now-dominant reading (endorsed by Giacon, and by many others in his wake)³ had already been contested by Cajetan’s first followers [240-44]. The author accords such importance to using the reception of Aquinas’s philosophy to assist in the exegesis of his works that he goes so far as to affirm that “the present book is not an historical study” [20], which sounds at the same time like an over- and an understatement, especially given the book’s impressive erudition. This being the intention, though, one cannot but regret that so much of the discussion of the secondary literature is given in the footnotes.

It is unfortunately impossible to do justice here to so vast and elaborate a book. The gist of the first part of the work has already been presented. But it is in the second, longer part [283-647] that the author has given his best. Henrich’s claim that 17th-century Scholastics rarely if ever endorsed *a priori* arguments for God’s existence has already been refuted by Ceñal as regards the second half of this century.⁴ Agostini sets out to do the same for this century’s first half, thereby definitively exploding this well-established reading. Though clearly inspired by Mauro Mantovani’s research into commentaries on the *Summa Theologiae* I.2 by the theologians of the “Schools of Salamanca”,⁵ Agostini broadens nonetheless the scope of his enquiry to comprise this century’s Dominican theology in its entirety – and even beyond. The authors discussed in this second part of the book are indeed as numerous and very largely the same as in the first; but two in particular here gain special prominence: Suárez, as was to be expected, and Sante Mariale (1580ca–1640), who features *de facto* as the main, and certainly the most challenging, character in Agostini’s story. Some, *prima facie* arbitrary, choices of the previous chapters [363-97] are easily explained as intended to set the stage for Mariale, whose terms of reference happened to be exceptionally varied: the title alone of his work, *Bibliotheca interpretum ad universam Summam Theologiae Divi Thomae Aquinatis*, suffices to attest to Mariale’s encyclopaedic intentions. (Completed in 1638, the *Bibliotheca* was published only in 1660, but placed on the *Index* only two years later due to his violent polemic against the Jesuits).

In his concise presentation of Suárez’s *aliquomodo a priori* proof of God’s existence Agostini calls attention to the fact that Suárez’s proof does not move from God’s *essence* to God’s existence, but from a divine *attribute* established *a posteriori* to another attribute of the same being [339-55]. Once established (*a posteriori*) that there is a necessary being existing *per se*, Suárez argued that one can indeed deduce therefrom that there cannot be any other being like this being, this amounting for Suárez to establishing that God (the one God) does exist. Agostini points out that what bothered Suárez the most was indeed how to establish God’s *unicity* – an issue that had been singled out for centuries as a major difficulty of Aquinas’ “ways”. Agostini agrees with previous scholars that this piece of Suárez’s philosophy “had no real legacy... among the members of his

³ C. GIACON, *La Seconda Scolastica*, Bocca, Milano 1944-1950, 2 voll. (2nd edition: Aragno, Torino 2001).

⁴ D. HENRICH, *Der ontologische Gottesbeweis. Sein Problem und seine Geschichte in der Neuzeit*, Mohr, Tübingen 1960. R. CEÑAL, “El argumento ontológico de la existencia de Dios en la Escolástica de los siglos XVII y XVIII”, in *Homenaje a Xavier Zubiri*, Alcalá, Madrid 1970, 245-325.

⁵ Among Mantovani’s numerous studies on the subject, see at least M. MANTOVANI, *An Deus sit (Summa Theologiae 1., q. 2). Los comentarios de la “primera Escuela” de Salamanca*, Editorial San Esteban, Salamanca 2007. ID., *La discussione sull’esistenza di Dio nei teologi domenicani a Salamanca dal 1561 al 1669. Studio sui testi di Sotomayor, Mancio, Medina, Astorga, Báñez e Godoy*, LAS, Roma 2011.

order”, not even among the very few Jesuits (such as Gil) who admitted the possibility of proofs other than the traditional *a posteriori* ones [354; 363-78].

It was rather among Dominicans – and this is a major claim made by Agostini – that Suárez’s argument for God’s existence enjoyed an “unpredictable” and “what I would not hesitate to describe as an upsetting degree of dissemination” [20; 17]. It is at this point that Mariale comes in. The long chapter devoted to this rather obscure Venetian Dominican [427-90] is probably the best part of the book. Agostini succeeds, by careful work, in teasing out the manifold strands of Mariale’s argument which rests on quite a number of subtle distinctions, such as that between the *quod quid est* conceived *formaliter* or *aequivalenter*, between a *secundum se* and *quoad nos* reading of the *an sit/quid sit* divide and, finally, on a (rational) distinction between God’s existence *qua entificans* and *qua quiddificans*, where the latter is taken to count as *quasi causa virtualis* of the former. In the light of these distinctions Mariale concludes that a demonstration *a priori quoad nos* of the existence of God is indeed possible, and conclusive. Agostini points out that Mariale’s *a priori aliquomodo* demonstration can, however, only get started because we human beings lack an adequate knowledge of God’s essence, so that we cannot but treat as (rationally) distinct from one another what are in fact one and the same thing – *viz.*, God’s existence and essence [474-75]. In a complete reversal of Aquinas’s argument, Mariale claims that it is, therefore, ultimately only our finitude and consequent ignorance that puts us in a position to *prove a priori* the existence of an infinite and omniscient being. All superior intelligences, God’s included, would, by contrast, only be cognizant of this argument insofar as we mortal beings perform it; the same holds true also for the blessed [457-78; 474-75]. Although not altogether novel, this is a very intriguing feature of Mariale’s account, and a challenging philosophical thesis in its own right, which it might have been worth expanding on.

The rest of the book is devoted to the fortunes of the *a priori* proof in the second half of the 17th century, substantiating Agostini’s claim about a difference between Jesuits and Dominicans in this regard, as exemplarily illustrated by Pedro de Godoy, who also endorsed a *quoad nos* version of this argument much along Mariale’s lines⁶ [553-84]. Not all of them, to be sure. Agostini understands, for example, the aggressive objections raised by Ferre as an “operation of internal purging”, and a largely successful one at that [603; 584-611], so that in the 18th century *Summa* I 2.2 ended up being interpreted as arguing both *a posteriori* in favour of God’s existence and against any *a priori* arguments for the same claim [649-53].

This thorough juxtaposition and comparison of the ideas of Dominican theologians with those of other orders – not only the Jesuits, indeed: Zumel and Perez, for example, were Mercedarians – is especially illuminating and reveals an unexpected variety of positions among commentators who did still all firmly profess to be lecturing *ad mentem Thomae*, thereby confirming and expanding the studies of Schmutz and De Franceschi.⁷ Agostini is careful not to generalize, but he thinks that it is at least fair to say that Jesuits (the all-important exception of Suárez aside) tended to be stricter and more painstakingly

⁶ Agostini’s research integrates here nicely the classic – and still much praiseworthy – E. SCRIBANO, *L’esistenza di Dio. Storia della prova ontologica da Descartes a Kant*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1994.

⁷ See especially J. SCHMUTZ, “*Bellum scholasticum*. Thomisme et antithomisme dans les débats doctrinaux modernes”, *Revue thomiste* CVIII/1 (2008), pp. 5-56. S. H. DE FRANCESCHI, “L’empire thomiste dans les querelles doctrinales de l’âge classique. Le statut théologique de Saint Thomas d’Aquin au XVII^e siècle”, *Dix-septième siècle* 2010/2, pp. 313-34.

literal, and studiously so, in their interpretation of Aquinas, whereas at least some Dominicans progressively allowed for a more problematic approach to the texts⁸ [159-63]. Agostini beautifully illustrates this contrast, and this shift, showing that if Mazzolini had already dismissed Cajetan's followers as *quidam* and *nonnulli thomistae moderni* [69], a century and a half later Marletta could go so far as to oppose the members of his own order (*nostrantes*) to the *thomistae*, by which he meant both Jesuits and Carmelites [589; 17]. The difficulty of fitting into this latter category commentators like Mariale leads Agostini to wonder whether it makes any sense to speak of a 17th-century "Thomism". His book makes a convincing case that if, throughout the centuries, this category gradually "dissolved" [470] this was also due to an indeterminateness and to tensions within Aquinas's own works, which became even more evident as these works were made the starting point of any theological debates [18-19; 313-14, and *passim*]. In the end, Agostini suggests, the very idea of a "Thomistic orthodoxy" could well turn out to be something more "presumed" than really grounded in the texts [470; 16].

Agostini's book demands a committed and patient reader, but its 700 pages are an effort worth making. The author's careful research into a close exegetical question with wide historical, historiographical and even theoretical implications represents an imposing contribution to the field. Having brought to the fore the Dominicans' theology of the 17th century is a major merit in its own right. Everyone interested in the Early Modern (but also the Medieval and contemporary) arguments for the existence of God should be grateful to Agostini for having shown how much can be learnt from thinkers like Mariale – and, indeed, for having made these obscure thinkers better known in the first place. Agostini's mastery of the primary and secondary literature is impressive, and patently the result of many years of study. The rich apparatus of quotations makes it possible to follow step by step the author's analysis and proves him a trustworthy and insightful guide into this vast and sorely understudied domain. In this sense, the book might also be used as a sourcebook of sorts. Agostini's book is a stimulating piece, and, as its argument develops, the reader grows curious to know more about the Scholasticism of the 17th century and about its relation to the non-academic philosophy of the time. In this regard, one could hardly imagine a better and more appropriate start for a series dedicated to "The Age of Descartes". It is with curiosity, almost with impatience, that one awaits the volumes which will next appear.

⁸ In a useful appendix [634-647], Agostini also considers a further argument for God's existence defended by the Mercedarian Perez and his pupil Martín Esparza y Artieda: the argument *ab impossibili*, based on the (alleged) impossibility of denying the existence of God. This new argument too faced the fierce opposition of the Jesuits – most notably of all, of Izquierdo.