

[1938. Review of *The Philosophy of St. Bonaventure*, by Etienne Gilson. *Westminster Theological Journal* Nov.]

Etienne Gilson: *The Philosophy of St. Bonaventure*. Translated by I. Trethowan and F. J. Sheed. London: Sheed and Ward. 1938. xiii, 551. 18s.

As a preface to the review proper, the policies of some publishers should be mentioned with disapproval. In the past few years foreign works have been translated and published, damaged by the omission of valuable material. The present volume omits from the notes all but "textual references and a minimum of essential explanatory matter" (p. 497). The French original also has a bibliography completely omitted from this edition. No valid excuse can be offered for this procedure; books of this type are not popular fiction and those who read them in English are as much interested in the details as are those who read them in French.

The first eighty-six pages of this book give the historical setting of St. Bonaventura's work: his life, his position as a disciple of St. Francis and as a general of the order, and the philosophic problem as he saw it under these conditions. The literary style of this chapter is that of typically Romish piety, and corresponds with the painting and sculpture found around St. Sulpice. The chapter culminates in the repetition of the story of St. Francis' receiving the stigmata (p. 69); none the less this mystic experience gives direction to the philosophic activity. The world to the uninitiated seems to be so many trees and rocks, but to St. Francis, after he has seen what God is like, the world is just so many symbols of God. "When he washed his hands he was careful not to let any drop of water fall in a place where it would be in danger of being trampled under foot, for water is the figure of Holy Penitence . . ." (p. 72).

The Romish church has now for some time been engaged in a great effort to regain a position of respect and influence in the intellectual life of our age. Its scholars have made notable contributions to anthropology, political science, and philosophy. The author of the present volume, M. Etienne Gilson, is not the least important of these scholars. His several volumes on medieval subjects have gained for him a world-wide and well-deserved reputation. The middle section of his present production, from chapter VII to the middle of chapter XII, constitutes an achievement in the field of pure scholarship. In this section we find medieval science, not at its worst, but, what is more distressing, at its best. Only great patience could continue the research on the theory of sensation to arrive at the conclusion (p. 351), that while sight and touch will continue to exist after our resurrection and, perhaps, hearing, smell and taste perish at death. At

the opening of chapter VII, Gilson notes that many who had followed Bonaventura so far abandon him here. This is not surprising; nor need one deny that St. Bonaventura considered essential to his system many details which today cannot be accepted. But it would be sad, from the reviewer's viewpoint, if the fortunes of Augustinianism rise and fall with the body of Bonaventura's peculiarities. For example, "there is an exact correspondence between the order and the reciprocal relations of the elements which constitute these two trinities [of the soul and the Godhead]. Just as the Father engenders the eternal knowledge of the Word Who expresses Him, and as the Word is in turn united with the Father by the Holy Spirit, so memory or thought, big with the ideas which it encloses, engenders the knowledge of the intellect or word, and love is born from both as the bond which unites them (pp. 223 f.). Possibly the fact that analogies between the soul and the Godhead are found in St. Augustine himself makes this particular correspondence essential to the system; but what of another example? In reading the book of nature and in reading the Scriptures (p. 229), must one who wishes to appropriate the genius of Augustinianism acknowledge four meanings in his texts: the immediate or literal, the allegorical, the tropological, and the analogical? Still less are we compelled to accept his physics and psychology.

Aside from the triumph of pure historical scholarship, for which Gilson deserves every credit, the value of the book lies in chapters II-VI and XII-XV. Perhaps the basic thought which controls the development of Bonaventura's system, and is admirably stated by the author in chapter II, is the necessary co-operation of faith and reason in every act of knowledge. For Thomas Aquinas, while philosophy is subordinate to theology, it was none the less self-sufficient in its own sphere. For Bonaventura, on the other hand, human reason unaided by faith or revelation, while it may have been competent before the fall, is in our present sinful condition unable to fulfil its original function. Purely rational knowledge of God is not merely limited, but it is false, "for the completion necessarily lacking is fatal to the validity of the fragment that remains" (p. 104). A philosopher who demonstrated the unity of God does not really know God's unity until he knows the Trinity (p. 107). Reason without faith may come to a knowledge of first principles, but since God is the object of philosophy, it cannot construct a philosophy. True philosophy, therefore, must consider the world, not as containing in itself its own sufficient reason, but in the light of revelation as depending on God. To defend this position, that is, to support the contention that the same thing in the same sense is both an object of knowledge and

of belief — which is clearly impossible in the case of the definition of a circle — Bonaventura distinguishes between a *concept*, which may be clear and valuable even though incomplete, and an *idea*, which is not the reconstitution of an object from fragments in experience, but is a global representation originating within us (p. 106). When an object known, like God, exceeds the limits of the human mind, the concept can accurately represent a part, but the idea is a confused representation marking in us the place of an intuition of which we are deprived. The reduction of Bonaventura's figurative language in the last two sentences to accurate expression would require considerable ingenuity. The rôle of the concept is not clear; but the idea figures largely in the evidence for God's existence.

While we have only an implicit knowledge of God's essence, all men, even idolaters, have an innate idea of God's existence. Following Anselm, Bonaventura defends the ontological argument; and Gilson tries to show that Kant's criticism does not apply to Bonaventura. In an otherwise excellent chapter, this page (129), causes difficulty, for the easiest method of defending this position against Kant, *viz.* ontologism (cf. p. 459), is definitely rejected, as required by the Romish condemnations of 1311, 1861-62, and 1887. At any rate, just as it is impossible to assert that there is no truth, it is equally impossible to assert that God, who is Truth, does not exist. Hence, God is not a conclusion to be proved, but rather the basis of further knowledge.

Further knowledge, so far as philosophy goes, because its contents are determined by their use to theology, deals with three problems only: creation, exemplarism, and the return to God by illumination. Since the first and third are so definitely theological, exemplarism is the central problem of philosophy proper. "... it must be of necessity either that things subsist for their own sakes, and are simply objects of curiosity for us [as in Aristotle], and in that case they cannot depend on the transcendent reality of the ideas; or else that exemplarism is true, and in that case things cannot in themselves constitute the end of our knowledge" (p. 141). Not as it is in us whose knowledge is a sort of addition enriching our thought, the act of knowing in God is identical with the knowing subject, because his being is totally intelligible and it is his very essence to know. God's knowledge, therefore, being identical with him, may be called a resemblance, and differs from the subject only in so far as it constitutes another Person, the Son. Now, since all things possible and actual owe their measure of reality to God, the Son contains their archetypes, *i.e.* he is the Word, the source of our knowledge of things. By means of the Son,

God engenders or *conceives* things, which, therefore, are his expressions. But, strange to say, God does not know things discursively; he does not see them as consequences deduced from a principle; he knows them individually. This is a difficult point: he knows them individually but not discursively, and there is no real plurality of ideas in God. There can be no multiplicity of ideas in God, because multiplicity depends on matter. To avoid the apparent conclusion that the ideas are vague equivalents of each other, devoid of meaning, they must designate or connote some difference. ". . . the expressions of two different things by the divine essence, considered in themselves, are really identical; but considered in relation to these things they receive a sort of multiplicity ..." (p. 152). "Things are ordered and God knows them as ordered, but there is no real order among the ideas by which God knows them" (p. 154). If God had to model his thought on things, that is, submit his thought to things, then there would be order in God's mind; but submission on God's part is avoided by denying distinctions among the ideas. God's knowledge resembles things not because he imitates them, but because he expresses them.

The three problems of philosophy previously mentioned finally reduce to the questions, whence we came and whither are we bound. Adam had a perfectly right knowledge; he knew without having learned, for empiricism is a method for fallen minds. Our aim is to recover Adam's knowledge. Adam also had a right will before God — he not only knew, he loved. The fall so infected human nature that the ancient philosophers never even suspected their miserable estate. By a free act, aided by grace, we turn to make progress toward God, mounting from sense toward the intelligible. The world, which had lost its meaning for purely human reason, is seen more and more in its true symbolical significance. But knowledge is not the highest state in this life. Our progress may be crowned with the experience of ecstasy. This is beyond the limits of intellectual operations; the state is devoid of all light and knowledge; it is a state of night, blackness, silence, ignorance, blindness; knowledge is past, blind joy remains. Ecstasy, therefore, is a purely affective condition. But because knowledge is excluded, one cannot know that the object loved is the final object. Hence beyond ecstasy is the state of beatitude, not attainable in this life. It is a total union of the soul with God, a vision of God; we see him as he really is, and therefore we see his knowledge. Although then we have all knowledge, the highest union with God is still joy, an act of will, not of intellect. Knowledge is essential, but volition is highest. Gilson defends Bonaventura against the charge of voluntarism; but certainly he cannot be credited with intellectualism. Further, the mystic experience seems to occupy an anomalous

position in Bonaventura's philosophy. In Plotinus the progress of knowledge is toward greater and greater unification, until there is reached a unity so absolute that knowledge is left behind. Because there is nothing further, because the mystic experience is the culmination of a continuous process, it possesses a certain appropriateness in Neo-Platonism. But a mystic ignorance inserted between two degrees of knowledge is very peculiarly situated.

To conclude the review an emphatic word of praise should be written on one distinguishing feature of Gilson's method. At intervals, after a section of the material has been explained, Gilson gives us a careful and penetrating comparison between Bonaventura and his more famous contemporary, Thomas Aquinas. No one is more qualified to do this than Gilson, and the Roman church may well be proud of his several accomplishments.

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