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## ATSAKYMAS MANO KRITIKUI G. VYŠNIAUSKUI

A Reply to My Critic – Vyšniauskas

### SUMMARY

By emphasizing two points from a recent monograph on Aquinas and evil, I attempt to reply to the critique of Gintautas Vyšniauskas who reviewed my *Aquinas and the Cry of Rachel*. First, Aquinas' philosophical thoughts on evil are soberly earthbound. Though an afterlife and a resurrection are philosophical possibilities, they are not philosophically demonstrable truths. Aquinas will not stretch the truth for religious gain. He leaves philosophers to stop, pause and dream. Second, his philosophical psychology of the human as an intellector of analogical being possesses resources to explain a persistent disposition of personalist philosophers in the evil debate, e.g., McCord Adams, Stump, Hick, Dostoevsky, Camus, Flew, and Maritain, to overvalue the human person. In the human mind, being can become intensely associated with certain things, such that they acquire a value out of all proportion to the philosophical truth. The high dignity that personalists claim for the human is actually a theological truth. Again, Aquinas is shown not to be pushing a theological agenda.

CONCLUSION. Aquinas' thoughts on the afterlife, resurrection, and the play of the notion of being in human psychology, show that he is no ideologue. In other words, they show that in his philosophizing we find "a free search for truth, an atmosphere of risk and endless questions, an effort to begin from *arche*, not a real passion for thought."

### SANTRAUKA

Atsakydamas į Gintauro Vyšniausko kritiką, išsakytą mano paskutinės monografijos *Akviniėtis ir Rachelės rauda* apžvalgoje, noriu pabrėžti du dalykus. Pirma, filosofinės Akviniečio mintys apie blogį yra blaviai žemiškos. Nors pomirtinis gyvenimas ir prisikėlimas iš mirusiųjų yra filosofinės galimybės, tačiau jos nėra filosofišškai įrodomos tiesos. Akviniėtis neperžengia tiesos ribų religijos naudai. Filosofams jis pataria čia

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: gamtinis ir antgamtinis žmogaus likimas, būties sąvoka, apgaulingas, personalistinė teodicėja.

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sustoti, atspūsti ir pasvajoti. Antra, jo filosofinė žmogaus kaip analoginę būtį suvokiančios būtybės psichologija gali atsakyti į klausimą, kodėl personalistinės filosofijos šalininkai, pavyzdžiui, McCordas Adamsas, Stumpas, Hickas, Dostojevskis, Camus, Flew ir Maritainas debatuose dėl blogio žmogaus asmeniui nuolatos priskiria pernelyg didelę vertę. Žmogaus protas gali susieti būtį su tam tikrais daiktais taip, kad jie įgytų filosofinei tiesai neproporcingą vertę. Toji aukšta vertė, kurią personalistinės filosofijos atstovai priskiria žmogui, iš tiesų yra teologinė tiesa. Primenu, kad jau parodžiau, jog Akviniėtis čia užsiima filosofija, o ne teologija.

IŠVADA. Akviniėčio mintys apie pomirtinį gyvenimą, prisikėlimą iš mirusiųjų ir būties analoginės sąvokos žaismė žmogaus psichikoje rodo, kad jis nėra ideologas. Kitaip tariant, jos rodo, kad jo filosofijoje mes randame „laisvą tiesos ieškojimą, nusiteikimo rizikuoti ir nuolatinio klausinėjimo atmosferą, pastangas pradėti nuo *arche*, netikrą mąstymo aistrą.“

I wish to thank Dr. Gintautas Vysniauskas for taking the time to read my *Aquinas and the Cry of Rachel* and for making to effort to write his review.<sup>1</sup> His review is a violent one and requires my response. To begin, the review contains some significant inaccuracies. For example, Vysniauskas claims that theology, not philosophy, rules my thought; that my aim is a one adequate theodicy; that God wills evils like murder; that only the expert in Thomistic metaphysics has value; that I distort the Biblical Rachel by picturing her as a sad and angry believer rather than as the discoverer of the one true theodicy – atheism. Moreover, the reviewer never considers, but simply dismisses as “miracles” and “sophisms,” the arguments given for God as the cause of creaturely free choices and for God’s innocence in the case of those choices that are evil. Vyšniauskas’ strong words lack strong reasons.

I cannot reply to all of these criticisms. But I would like to reply to some of them using what I consider to be Aquinas’ more original ideas on evil. My hope is that the reader will see that Aquinas has made a genuine contribution to the philosophical contemplation of evil. The breakthrough is the realization that there is no one true theodicy because

there are too many possible theodicies. The root of the irreducibility of theodicies is Aquinas’ philosophical understanding of the human person. Our best understanding of ourselves does not enable us to know for what destiny we are created. We are not so important that we can count on a heavenly destiny; and we are not so unimportant that we can dismiss the possibility of such a destiny.

First, Aquinas’ thoughts on the existence of evil are soberly earthbound, frighteningly so. They are earthbound because though our souls are incorruptible, they are naturally meant to operate only in conjunction with the body. Hence, though a resurrection of human bodies is a philosophical possibility, an afterlife is not something that can be definitively offered as some solution for suffering. As far as the philosopher can see, we may well have only this life to live. Aquinas’ understanding of the creator includes no obligation to offer human nature a resurrection as is taught by his Church.<sup>2</sup> In this respect Aquinas’ thinking has some surprising similarities to Heidegger’s. But for Aquinas philosophical discussions of human destiny will necessarily be open-ended. No philosopher should be so bold as to offer the one true theodicy.

Second, Aquinas offers some profound psychological analyzes that address, in the discussion of evil, personalists like McCord Adams, Stump, Hick, Dostoevsky, Camus, Flew, Maritain, and one could add, my reviewer, Vyšniauskas.<sup>3</sup> For the personalists any solution to the problem of evil must have some good rebounding specifically to the good of the person suffering evil. If there is a redeeming consequent good, it must be brought about first and foremost in the sufferer. In my opinion, Aquinas regards that personalist requirement as following a theological understanding of the human person in which the human person is a child of God. But for Aquinas our philosophically discernible dignity does not achieve that exalted proportion. At our natural best we are still a principle “part” of the natural world,<sup>4</sup> the “most perfect thing *in all of nature*.”<sup>5</sup> A phenomenology of our intellection reveals the basis for Aquinas’ circumspection. The intellectual grasp of the encompassing notion of being, also called the good, is at best analogical. That is, being is intellected as a sameness-in-difference.<sup>6</sup> As such, being never perfectly seats itself in the human mind so that we lose our natural status as parts and achieve the status of wholes.

It may well be that the personalist assumption about the human person as an end unto itself represents an unappreciated hangover from more religious times. In the Catholic faith, the human person through grace is supernaturally elevated to the status of a child of God. But, in my opinion, Aquinas’ philosophical psychology of the intellector of being provides better insight into the persistent

personalist assumption among philosophers and even ordinary people. The notion of being is not something only for the philosophically educated. There is a philosophical democracy here. The notion of being is alive and well in the minds of ordinary people, even if they are not conscious of it, and explains their desire to avoid contradiction, to seek for happiness, and their belief that they are free yet morally obliged to their fellows. The notion of being, however, can play tricks on the human intellector of it. One of these tricks is to create faux epiphanies of itself. Because of an association with the notion of being, something can acquire a value out of all proportion to the truth. This fauxizing happens especially when contemplating something gargantuan or diminutive.<sup>7</sup> To take the latter, the consideration of minutiae entails a vacating from consciousness of everything else, so that the minutiae are discernible. But that never means that the minutiae stand apart from being. In such a case, the minutiae can come to acquire all the preciousness of being itself. For example, consider as the small or minute, the fragility and helplessness of the child and baby. Their perceived vulnerability is a reaction to that isolation. Unlike an adult, they have not yet effected relations that establish them in existence. But even though as yet they are isolated from everything else, they are not in our awareness isolated from being. In fact, the association with being is intensified the greater their dissociation from other things. Hence, often the experience of the children as precious has everything to do with their association to being.

This analysis illustrates that some of the most striking perceptions of human dignity do not always derive from the correct source. The unwitting psychic association of the child or infant up and against being seems sufficient to generate in everyday experience a modicum of respect for these small humans. It also explains the complaints of personalists like Anthony Flew. Flew constructed the famous example of the earthly father desperately trying to find a cure for the cancer afflicting his son, while, God, our heavenly father, apparently doing nothing. The question has to be asked. From where did Flew get the idea that humans should be exempt from suffering? There is something idolatrous here that leads Flew to protest too much. The same can be said of Rachel weeping for her lost children and refusing to be consoled. But the case of Rachel shows that even a believer can be a victim to fauxizing. Unlike Vysinaukas' view on Rachel, there is no need to construe the grieving party as atheist. A more measured reaction to evil is found in the hurricane victim who is subtly taunted by the news reporter about continued faith in God. The victim turned the tables and asked the reporter, "Who do you think we are to be exempt from such catastrophes?" A correct phenomenology of grief needs the guidance of a correct metaphysical psychology. Those who suffer grief feel that they have lost everything for they have nothing else to live for. But being is the everything. So a correct understanding of the relation of being to things, especially to the thing that the sufferer has lost is crucial.

Once one becomes familiar with the dynamic, one sees that it repeats itself

over and over in human experience. It can create an endearment that stymies growth. That unfortunate result is what Scarlett O'Hara, the heroine of the American novel *Gone with the Wind*, pathetically suffered as she fought, often immorally, to resurrect her plantation of Tara that had become lost in the mists of time. At various times, all of us are Scarlett. For example, as it fades into the past, one's life and its experiences, e.g., our studies in graduate school, can take on an endearing quality such that one never engages contemporary discussion nor moves beyond the ways of one's old professors. Likewise, a people's love and respect for the land of their forefathers can be so great that it creates injustices for humans existing right now. Sometimes we have to let go. The motivation for letting go lies in the realization that what all truly love is being which is more accurately placed in people rather than ideas or land. With that personal focus we can go on to truly honor our past teachers and forefathers even if we do something different.

Finally, the dynamic can be offered to meet Emile Fackenheim's demand that philosophers face the problem of how something so uniquely evil as the Holocaust could result from people so banal as the Nazis: "And how could those who were the rule, banal ones all, place into our world a 'kingdom' of evil without precedent, far removed from banality and fated to haunt mankind forever?"<sup>8</sup> Fackenheim gives up on explaining the whole by its parts and falls back on the familiar dictum that a whole is more than the sum of its parts. But should banality be so readily dismissed? In describing the banality of Hitler himself Fackenheim says,

“Other than a low cunning, his one distinguishing mark is a devouring passion, and even that is mostly fed by a need, as petty as it is limitless, to show them – whom? – that the nobody is somebody.”<sup>9</sup> Again, cannot one see again the bewitchment of another faux epiphany of being? “The nobody” is an instance of the small and so draws an association with being in the contemplation of it. The banal are prime candidates for this tragic trick. Through the play of being, it is not incongruous that banal people invest themselves with an endearment that becomes so ferocious and idiosyncratic that they feel no bounds in others. It is ironic that the notion of being in whose intellection human dignity consists is also the very thing that can defeat the human psyche.

In conclusion, Aquinas’ mind is not trapped in a theological straight jacket. He knows the norms of philosophical thinking and is respectful of them. Building upon a philosophical tradition focused on the notion of being, Aquinas elucidates a philosophical psychology that should halt extravagant claims about ourselves. We have a dignity but not one so great that the evils we suffer become in the words of Maritain “utterly anomalous.” Like Flew, the personalists, and Rachel, Vyšniauskas has an exalted view of the human person that approaches idolatry. It is quite incumbent upon him to tell us where he got it. In the words of my mentioned hurricane victim, “Who do you think that we are to be exempt from such catastrophes?”

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> John F. X. Knasas, *Aquinas and the Cry of Rachel: Thomistic Reflections on the Problem of Evil* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013). Vyšniauskas’ review “Dar Viena Bandydas Patobulinti Teodicėja: Tomistinis

Blogio Problemos Apmaštymas” can be found in LOGOS 78 (2014): 217–22.

<sup>2</sup> At *Summa Contra Gentiles* IV, 79, Aquinas argues for a resurrection, a reunion of the separated soul and the body, on the basis that “nothing

unnatural is perpetual." That the nature that Aquinas is presuming is a nature theologically considered within a special and undue divine providence, see Knasas, *Aquinas and the Cry of Rachel*, 84. For the view that Aquinas' resurrection argument is a strict philosophical demonstration, see Montague Brown, "Aquinas on the Resurrection of the Body," *The Thomist* 56 (1992), 165–207. Aquinas' *The Literal Exposition on Job: A Scriptural Commentary concerning Providence* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989) is also worth mentioning. Aquinas describes the resurrection as a work of "grace" for "hope" of which "plausible reasons" are forthcoming. (p. 229) Also, the position of Job's interlocutors that God's providence is confined to this life is not described as philosophical error but an error against the "truth of the faith." (pp. 471 and 214) On the other hand, Job foresaw the resurrection through a "spirit of faith." (p. 269) Aquinas has God castigating both Job and his interlocutors for claiming a certitude that neither has. Job's error is to think that he can prove the resurrection when in fact it is a truth of faith. The interlocutors, as mentioned, erroneously limit god's providence to only this life. Hence, "But since human wisdom is not sufficient to comprehend the truth of divine providence, it was necessary that the debate just mentioned by determined by divine authorities." (p. 415)

<sup>3</sup> For an expression of the personalist sentiment, consider Maritain's remark placed on the lips of the Biblical Rachel wailing for her murdered children: "Tell her this thing was necessary in order that every degree of being should be filled, and she will answer that she cares not one whit for the machine of the world, – let them give back her child!" Jacques Maritain, *St. Thomas and the Problem of Evil* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1942), 9. For a discussion of the above listed personalists, see Knasas, *Aquinas and the Cry of Rachel*, Ch. 6.

<sup>4</sup> See Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, 112. In this chapter Aquinas is arguing that Divine providence governs rational creatures for their own sake. This is the personalist claim, but as Aquinas' fifth argument notes, the conclusion is only one of "fittingness" (*convenienter*).

<sup>5</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, 29, 3.

<sup>6</sup> The "sameness-in-difference" way of speaking about being derives from Aquinas' teaching that being is a non-generic notion. See his *Quaestiones de Veritate*, I, 1 and XXI, 1. Characteristic of a genus is that the differences of the species are intellectually extrinsic to the genus. Elsewhere in *Summa Contra Gentiles* I, 25, he gives the reason: the differences would be twice in the definition of the species. However, with the notion of being, the differences cannot be placed extrinsic without consigning them to non-being with a resultant monism. Hence, unlike a genus, being intellectually includes its differences and so remains appreciated through them, a sameness-in-difference. Aquinas' thinking gives the notion of being (the *ratio entis*) an unspeakable richness that in turn is the basis for denominating being as the good (the *ratio boni*). For a presentation of neo-Thomist discussion of the notion of being, see John F. X. Knasas, *Being and Some Twentieth-Century Thomists* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), Ch. 5.

<sup>7</sup> My basis in Aquinas for what I am calling "faux-izing" is *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, 38. The chapter argues that there is a knowledge of God commonly possessed by most men. Even though these men know God, they confuse that knowledge with the heavens (my "gargantuan") and with the elements (my "diminutive"). For further elaboration and for the implicit presence of Aquinas' metaphysics in the minds of men, see Knasas, *Aquinas and the Cry of Rachel*, 31–41.

<sup>8</sup> Emil Fackenheim, "The Holocaust and Philosophy," *The Journal of Philosophy* 82 (1985): 513.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 512–13.