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McAleer, Graham James: Erich Przywara and Postmodern Natural Law. A History of the Metaphysics of Morals. – Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 2019. 128 S., geb. \$ 100,00 ISBN: 978-0268105938

Graham James McAleer's most recent book is, if anything, insistently and delightfully idiosyncratic. The stated goal is to "apply Przywara's conceptual framework to the development of the West's thoughtscape and its contemporary problems" (X). Erich Przywara (1889–1972) was a prolific German Jesuit theologian and philosopher who debated with Karl Barth regarding the Thomistic notion of the analogy of being. Moreover, he was an enormous influence on both Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar. Recently, due to the publication of the English translation of Przywara's *Analogia Entis* in 2014, interest in Przywara among English-speaking theologians and philosophers has been growing steadily, and this text is just one of three monographs on Przywara to appear in English since 2019. Yet, M.'s text is far less interested in exegeting Przywara's thought or providing historical commentary on it than he is in applying some basic principles from the *Analogia Entis* to a cornucopia of contemporary issues in philosophy and morality.

The central idea that M. takes from Przywara is the latter's account of the vacillations (rather than structured oscillations) of philosophical thought, which tend towards either the monism of "theopanism," whereby all creaturely flux is reduced into the actuality of the divine, or the monism of "pantheism," whereby God or the absolute is rendered coterminous with finitude alone. Both tendencies, for Przywara, fail to grasp the analogical relationship between God and creation in which God is ever at a greater dissimilarity (Lateran IV's *maior dissimilitudo*) from created being. Rather than an analogical form of thought, which is capable of retaining polar tensions, for instance, between God and world, individual and society, and the masculine and feminine, intellectual illnesses result when thought falls prey to either univocity or equivocity. M. translates this into his critique of modern tendencies towards either "angelism" or "vitalism," that is, either an anti-material spiritualism (e. g., Descartes' *res cogitans*) or a fetishization of materiality and the will (e. g., Nazism).

Again, Przywara provides the intellectual scaffolding, the style of thought, which M. then applies to a dizzying array of topics: medieval angelology (chap. 1), the question of how *anima separata* could possibly suffer from hellfire (chap. 2), Thomas Reid and Arthur Schopenhauer (chap. 3), the vitalism and homoeroticism of National Socialism (chap. 4), the value of clothing and ornamentation (chap.s 5 and 6), the relationship between natural law and positive divine law (chap. 7), and the role of "play" in an ordered society (chap. 8). Yet, these are only the general themes covered in each chap., for M. also delves into far more particular moral and political issues than one would think could be covered in such a small text. Nevertheless, M. finds the space to apply Przywara's style of thought to

all of the following, all of which were most certainly not considered by Przywara himself: robots, the difference between burkinis and bikinis, the morality of corsets, of tax havens, whether using human skin for handbags is more grotesque than Catholic relics, and how “The Middle Ages gave us James Bond” (93).

Whether or not one agrees with M.’s evaluation of these issues, which are so many and so diverse that likely few will concede all the points, the value of the book lies far less in its particular conclusions than in its overall performance. The key word for the entire text is “decapitation,” which is M.’s creative way of rendering Przywara’s analysis of how matter and spirit, the world and God, are rent apart rather than held in a tensile polarity. For instance, burkinis, according to M., are a double form of decapitation: on the side of the garments themselves they signal a form of “angelism” due to the wholesale obscuring of the flesh, and on the side of the (in this case, French) brands that are marketing them they signal a “vitalism” due to its unmooring from brand and national identity in favor of profits, no matter the cost: “The burkini is divine law without reserve (idea and univocity), and M&S [a retail brand] is unrestrained appetite for profit (vitalism and equivocity).” (75) The claims that M. makes on these issues usually occur in a page or two, which is not enough space to provide a wholly convincing argument. But again, that is not the point of the text. And even when the reader remains unconvinced about the particular issue at hand, the broader style of thought becomes more and more compelling as the text unfolds.

The moral logic that M. utilizes to adjudicate these issues is something like the following: both a voluntaristic conservatism and a celestial moral idealism result in anti-human outcomes. Instead, M. advocates for a “postmodern” moral imagination that appeals to both natural and divine givens, convinced as he is that the latter supports and reinforces the former (a Thomistic axiom if there ever was one). Przywara’s *in-über* provides M. with the language to discuss how positive divine law is both “in and beyond” the natural law, just as the Logos is “in and beyond” his incarnate flesh and the divine nature is “in and beyond” creation. It is a work of Christian humanism, as M. repeats throughout, which stands in the tradition of Newman (a major influence on Przywara).

Though “decapitation” is indeed the major theme of the text, this is by no means a bleak or dour book. Rather, the critique of decapitation, whether it is to the benefit of the head or the body, is at the service of his positive construal of a flourishing society, which for him is “ludic and tolerant” (104). There is a rather joyous note to the text, especially in chap. 8 and the conclusion, whereby the playfulness and particularity of human cultures are seen to be instrumental to the enactment of the natural law. The natural law, as M. sees it, does not flatten out cultural differences, but rather funds them. Using Johan Huizinga, M. highlights the interplay between theurgy and philosophy, liturgy and law, in order to insist that the playfulness and regionalism of cultural expressions do not endanger the natural law: “Put differently, natural law is not biologicistic, a priori, and mechanical, or totalizing, because it is about gesture, games, and civilization. It is about inclinations but not naturalistic drives (vitalism), and it is about rules but not deductions from a narrow set of a priori principles (angelism).” (105)

As mentioned, this book will not introduce readers to Przywara’s own thought at any depth, as it distills the genius of the *Analogia Entis* into a few methodological decisions and stylistic forms of thought. And there are a few costs to the speed of M.’s observations, such as naming an undifferentiated Augustinianism as the main cause of modern angelism, rather than provided a more nuanced account of types and styles of Augustinian thought (which would include Thomas and

Przywara as well). Nevertheless, the various shortcuts and somewhat hasty conclusions are part of the book's charm, and given the depth of the insights, M. cannot be accused of dilettantism. It should be widely read, and while it will be of particular interest to philosophers, ethicists, and theologians, all who read this book will be challenged to think more creatively and integratively themselves.

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