

Andrzej Wiercinski. *Inspired Metaphysics? Gustav Siewerth's Hermeneutic Reading of the Onto-Theological Tradition*. Toronto: The Hermeneutic Press, 2003.

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## Preview

Mark Wenzinger reviews Andrzej Wiercinski's book *Inspired Metaphysics? Gustav Siewerth's Hermeneutic Reading of the Onto-Theological Tradition*.

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The writings of the German philosopher and educator Gustav Siewerth (1903-1963) continue to remain virtually unknown outside of very restricted philosophical and theological circles in North America and Europe. That such is the case is indeed unfortunate, given the importance of Siewerth's efforts to clarify the meaning of difference on the basis of his hermeneutic reading of Thomas Aquinas undertaken in light of the philosophy of Hegel and Heidegger. Few tasks, after all, remain more central for contemporary continental philosophy than the effort to think difference; and no issue is better suited to bridge the abyss that seems to obtain between most contemporary Thomist and most contemporary post-Heideggerian philosophers and academics.

Given the importance of Siewerth's thought for a hermeneutically motivated exploration of the meaning both of Being and of difference, the efforts of Andrzej Wierciński on Siewerth's behalf are both timely and eminently worthy of note. *Inspired Metaphysics* is actually the second of a series of volumes currently being published by the International Institute for Hermeneutics, of which Wierciński is the founder. *Inspired Metaphysics* is both timely and worthy of note not least of all because it furthermore prepares the reader directly to enter into the mature Siewerth's inquiry into the meaning of Being and difference by way of the recently published German-English edition of Siewerth's treatise of 1958, *Das Sein als Gleichnis Gottes*. This latter text has in fact appeared for the very first time in English translation also thanks to the efforts of Andrzej Wierciński, who is the editor and translator of the bi-lingual edition of *Das Sein als Gleichnis Gottes* recently published by Verlag Gustav Siewerth Gesellschaft this past October of 2005 under the title *Philosophizing with Gustav Siewerth: A New German Edition with Facing Translation of Das Sein als Gleichnis Gottes/Being as Likeness of God*. The original German text is comparable to Aquinas's *De ente et essentia* and *De potentia Dei* with respect both to its brevity and to its density. Wierciński's careful translation, along with the extensive critical apparatus he provides, renders Siewerth's rich but difficult text much easier to access. Even so, the reader who would embark upon *Das Sein* in its new German-English edition would do well first to prepare herself for the journey by means of a careful reading of *Inspired Metaphysics*. The bilingual edition of *Das Sein* and *Inspired Metaphysics*, although published under different imprints, merits being taken as a "natural whole" in which each text most fully discloses itself only through the mediation of its other.

Why should thinkers in the continental tradition pay attention to Wierciński's hermeneutic reading of Thomas Aquinas and Gustav Siewerth? Wierciński's voice needs to be heard because much of the valorization of difference carried out within the context of contemporary continental philosophy

is articulated in ignorance of the highly nuanced reflection to be found in both ancient and medieval thought concerning this issue. In like manner, Wierciński's voice needs to be heard because some thinkers within the contemporary Thomist tradition at least seem to prefer to think with Saint Thomas in a manner that abstracts almost entirely from the situated character of Thomistic thought. In so doing, such Thomists seem to remain content to consign to futility the entirety of the modern and post-modern continental philosophical tradition. But in taking such a stance, one runs the risk of failing to recognize that the Thomistic "metaphysics of *esse*" is itself very much an effort to think difference. Notwithstanding the negative judgment of John Caputo relative to the possibility of the hermeneutic task when it is a question of Thomistic and (post) Heideggerian thought, Thomas's achievements relative to the thinking of difference in fact still remain both to question and to be questioned by (post-) Heideggerian efforts toward the same end.

That which Wierciński sees far more clearly than most is thus that contemporary continental thought could benefit both itself and the Thomistic tradition by engaging in a respectful dialogue with Thomism. Much of continental "post-modern" philosophy stands in great need of being disabused of its prejudiced notion that ancient and medieval philosophy is simply onto-theology that seeks only to valorize "presence" by suppressing absence and alterity, all in order to secure a foundation of mastery and control over the totality of the contexts in which human life is lived. The contemporary continental tradition for its part therefore needs to balance its hermeneutic of suspicion with a hermeneutic of sympathy and charity, if it is not itself to succumb entirely to the temptation to totalize *différance* in a way that devalorizes the ontological singularity of the individual human person. In short, Wierciński's retrieval of Gustav Siewerth's effort to think difference deserves to be engaged by any thinker who wants to think with the whole of the Western tradition in a hermeneutically motivated manner. Gaining access to and appreciation for his thought, however, requires a familiarity with both the Thomistic and continental traditions that at least approximates Siewerth's own. Since few are the persons who have such a familiarity with both traditions, it is virtually imperative for most of us that we receive the assistance of a highly competent guide such as Wierciński if we are to appreciate the respective strengths and weaknesses of Siewerth's approach to "thinking difference."

Dedicated as it is precisely to this end, *Inspired Metaphysics*, serves as a valuable introduction not only to the thought of Siewerth in particular, but also to the hermeneutic manner of reading both the Thomistic and continental traditions in general. Not the least of the book's many merits is its exposition of the unfortunate manner in which Siewerth himself, seeking to distinguish Thomistic metaphysics from that which Heidegger took to be onto-theology, failed in hermeneutical charity by being content to demonize Scotistic

metaphysics as the source of Western philosophy's alleged forgetfulness of Being. In like manner, as Wierciński points out, much of contemporary Catholic theology likewise fails hermeneutically by uncritically accepting Heidegger's equation of metaphysics with onto-theology and an alleged valorization of "presence," a term that is in fact highly equivocal and that need not at all be understood as Heidegger himself understood it. Contemporary Catholic theology therefore needs to find its own way back to a hermeneutically sensitive appropriation of Scholastic thought, which would involve first, the effort to recognize Thomism and Scotism as mutually complementary, rather than mutually exclusive, manners of philosophical and theological thinking, and second, the effort to recognize the continuity as well as the discontinuity that obtains between the Scholastic and continental traditions. Philosophers, in their turn, could help their theological colleagues by also seeking to better appreciate the complementary character of Scholasticism and continental philosophy in a manner that both continues and improves upon the effort made by a thinker such as Siewerth toward this end. The goal of *Inspired Metaphysics* is precisely to make philosopher and theologian alike better capable of engaging in the ongoing conversation that ought never to cease both within and between the Scholastic and continental traditions.

An introduction provides the Ariadne's thread that unifies the book as a whole. Treating of hermeneutic method with respect both to medieval philosophy in general and Thomism in particular, in order to show the way toward his own reading of Siewerth within the hermeneutically reduced sphere in which suspicion and sympathy are simultaneously distinguished and related, Wierciński's *Inspired Metaphysics* works to provide the reader both with an introduction to Siewerth's response to Heidegger's *Seinsfrage* and with an indication of the possibilities that open up before us when we read Aquinas in a more resolutely hermeneutic manner than that of which Siewerth himself was capable. As Wierciński points out, it was Siewerth's personal relationship with Heidegger that inspired him to inquire into the possibility of there being real continuity between the Thomistic and the Heideggerian understandings of Being. Siewerth recognized in the metaphysics of Thomas that which he so admired in Heidegger's understanding of Being: the determining role played by difference interior to Being, which makes possible all at once both the unity of Being *per se* and the diversity that obtains within the transcendental of that same unity. Siewerth understood Thomistic metaphysics as an "identity-system" in which Being is understood as an eminent or analogically excessive "identity of identity and difference." Siewerth accordingly understands Hegel's concept to be similar to Thomistic *esse*, even as *esse* shows itself to be ever more dissimilar to the dialectical identity of identity and difference that *esse* itself exceeds in order to render the dialectical process effectively possible.

In the end, Siewerth himself despaired of relating the Thomistic and

Heideggerian understandings of Being by way of an analogical understanding of the Hegelian dialectic of identity and difference. As Wierciński would remind the reader however, we do Siewerth no greater service than by reading Siewerth himself in such a resolutely hermeneutic manner as to facilitate the conversation he himself could not sustain, and this precisely in order to stimulate the renewal of ontology to which Siewerth himself sought to contribute by his attempt at a hermeneutic reading of the tradition in its entirety.

The first half of *Inspired Metaphysics* is dedicated to a hermeneutic reading of the medieval and continental traditions, by means of which Wierciński seeks (1) to show how philosophical thinking is only possible only as dialogical thinking and (2) to show how dialogical thinking itself is possible only as effectively situated within Being. Not the least of Wierciński's contributions to the facilitating of dialogue both between philosophy and theology and between the medieval and continental traditions is his recognition of the baneful effect of Siewerth's reductive and misleading critique of the ontology of Duns Scotus as thought that valorizes conceptually unitary "presence" at the expense of ontological difference and that therefore initiates Western philosophy's forgetfulness of Being.

Wierciński accomplishes for Scotus what Ferdinand Alquié accomplishes for Descartes: a "metaphysical rehabilitation" that shows that Scotus and Thomas can be related to one another in a complementary rather than in a reductively oppositional and antagonistic manner. Wierciński indicates the possibilities for the renewal of ontology in a post-Heideggerian age that could arise starting with a dialogical reading of the Thomistic and Scotistic metaphysical traditions. Wierciński also helpfully points out the profound differences in interpretation that obtain within modern Thomistic metaphysics broadly considered. Chapter four of Part I of *Inspired Metaphysics* situates Siewerth's reading of Thomas in Siewerth's critique of the transcendental Thomist tradition such as it originates in Maréchal. Siewerth's lack of hermeneutical sympathy for Maréchal's effort to read Thomas in light of Kant is all the more remarkable on account of his own effort to read Thomas in light of Heidegger *via* Hegel. Siewerth's critique of Maréchal would seem to relate him intimately to other critics of transcendental Thomism such as Gilson and Maritain, and yet there are also profound differences between Siewerth's Thomas and that of his better-known and more "mainstream" Thomist contemporaries. In working properly to distinguish and to relate Thomistic and Scotistic thought, therefore, one must also work harder than did Siewerth himself to understand Siewerth's "Thomism as an identity-system" both in its relationship with and its difference from the other modern efforts made in the direction of a retrieval of Thomistic metaphysics. The reader who appreciates the efforts of Fergus Kerr and Tracey Rowland to elucidate the implications of the existence of a variety of modern schools of Thomistic thought will likewise appreciate Wierciński's efforts in this regard.

Part II of *Inspired Metaphysics* constitutes the exposition and evaluation of Siewerth's hermeneutical effort to understand Being in terms of its being the always already and effectively achieved "suspended middle" ("ideality of Being" in the earlier Siewerth and "ontological difference" in the later Siewerth) that distinguishes creatures from God, in order peacefully to relate them, by recognizing the positivity of the uncreated and created manners in which God and created things actively identify themselves in order to differentiate themselves from one another. It is the transcendental unity of Being (which shelters all at once the self-unifying activity of God that *is* God in his ontological autonomy and heterogeneity relative to the created order and the self-unifying activity of creatures by means of which each creature all at once distinguishes itself from and relates itself to God and to other creatures) that permits the positivity of ontological difference to manifest itself to reflective thought. Being, which is the identity of identity and difference in the sense just described, is thus indeed the "place" that shelters thinking and makes it possible.

Wierciński's penetrating treatment of Siewerth in dialogue with both the medieval and the continental tradition shows us that thinking is therefore indeed ordered to Being, the non-masterable identity of identity and difference that alone makes real differences possible. Thinking difference is the manner of the manifestation of Being itself for which human thoughtful speakers have the responsibility; and yet Being remains that which exceeds both derived differences and the human effort to think difference, in order to make both possible. Although Siewerth himself despaired of relating medieval and continental metaphysics, Wierciński very effectively shows how there is contained in Siewerth's understanding of the inseparability of Being and difference the possibility of thinking difference with post-modernity in a manner that is sympathetic and that nonetheless does not simply surrender human thought and human subjectivity to the violent play of some versions of post-modern *différance*.

Wierciński's hermeneutic reading of Siewerth shows that the way remains open to a thinking of Being and difference that, while being *theo-ontological* and a kind of "suspended middle" in which philosophical and theological reflection circumincessively abide in a manner that overcomes "secular reason," nonetheless acknowledges in a post-foundationalist manner the power of difference that resists every attempt to master it conceptually in order to attempt to install the reign of that which Thomas himself always refused: a metaphysics of conceptually representative "presence" that would indeed be the death of thinking and so the moral and intellectual death of humanity itself.

Wierciński thus effectively utilizes the hermeneutic method of Gadamer and the hermeneutic phenomenology of Ricoeur in order to relate the medieval and continental traditions of philosophy and theology in a manner that is all at once respectful of both, critical of both, and cognizant of the fact that neither reverence nor critique can be, philosophically speaking, the last word.

Wierciński's treatment of Siewerth has many affinities to the recent interpretive retrievals of the tradition published by Catherine Pickstock, John Milbank, and a number of the thinkers of both the "Radical Orthodoxy" and "Communio" schools of philosophical-theological inquiry. The reader interested in the project of a truly constructive critique of "secular reason," such as is currently being carried out by Milbank, Pickstock, et al., therefore needs to get to know the work of Andrzej Wierciński as well.

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