

Mark R. Wynn, *Spiritual Traditions and the Virtues: Living Between Heaven and Earth*, Oxford University Press, 2020, 254pp.

This perceptive and engaging work proposes a new approach to philosophical theology. Rather than beginning with the metaphysics or epistemology of religion, Wynn proposes to begin with the nature of spiritual goods and the ways in which they are pursued, understood, and handed on within spiritual traditions. Wynn advances his discussion while relying heavily on Aquinas's Thomistic notion of infused virtue. The result is a fresh take on the "hybrid" nature of spiritual goods, which order human beings to both God and the world. There are certainly some serious objections to the positions offered in this book, but the proposals are consistently insightful and interesting.

In this review, I will focus on two key spiritual goods discussed by Wynn: (i) spiritual progress and (ii) faith. Wynn discusses many other important topics in his book, including the relationship between religious and secular morality; the transformation of perceptual experience through religious commitment; the religious, moral, and aesthetic value of bodily gesture; the modes of theological development within traditions; and the causes of entrenched disagreements within philosophical theology. Unfortunately, I do not have space to engage all these topics.

In chapter 3, Wynn argues that metaphysical accounts of the spiritual life (e.g., that of Aquinas) fail to place any very tight constraints on the way in which the spiritual life will appear to a practitioner. Thus, there can be central features of an experiential account (e.g., that of John of the Cross) that could not have been anticipated from the metaphysical account alone. (96)

Wynn gives two main arguments for this view. The first argument concerns the possibility of knowing created effects through God as their cause. Wynn contends that Aquinas's metaphysical view precludes knowledge of effects through God, whereas John of the Cross's experiential account suggests that the "awakened" person experiences knowing all things "in God." (73) Wynn concludes from these contrasts that, "Given simply a knowledge of Thomas's metaphysics, we would have no reason to anticipate that we can experience things 'in God'. Indeed, given what Aquinas says about the impossibility of the perspective of the *propter quid* in the domain of philosophical thought about God, we might well conclude that such an experience is, to say no more, not to be expected." (74)

Pace Wynn, I think Aquinas's metaphysics *does* lead us to expect experience like that described by John of the Cross. This can be seen through Aquinas's discussion of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, particularly the gifts of understanding and wisdom. Concerning understanding, Aquinas writes:

[T]he sight of God is twofold. One is perfect, whereby God's Essence is seen: the other is imperfect, whereby, though we see not what God is, yet we see what He is not; and whereby, the more perfectly do we know God in this life, the more we understand that He surpasses all that the mind comprehends. Each of these visions of God belongs to the gift of understanding; the first, to the gift of understanding in its state of perfection, as possessed in heaven; the second, to the gift of understanding in its state of inchoation, as possessed by wayfarers.¹

On Aquinas's view, the vision enabled by the gift of understanding is indirect: he says that understanding gives a vision of what God is not. But this sort of vision is intelligible. Consider, for example, how reason might simply "see" that nothing is red all over and green all over. Or consider how we might "see" a friend within a silhouette portrait. Furthermore, such indirect vision concerning

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 8, a. 7, c.

what God is not could ground Aristotelian, scientific inferences concerning God's attributes.² To reason and know in this way would be to know effects by their cause.

Concerning wisdom, the key worry for Wynn's view is that Aquinas is explicit that the gift of wisdom enables a person to judge all things by the highest cause, which is God. Aquinas takes his basic account of wisdom from Aristotle, who says that it belongs to wisdom to consider the highest cause, which cause then enables the wise person to make judgments about other causes and to set all things in order.³ Aquinas, then, thinks that wisdom involves (i) knowledge of the highest cause and (ii) judgment of other things through the highest cause. But Aquinas also thinks that, through the Holy Spirit's gift of wisdom, human beings can come to be wise *simply*, and so to know God in a way that enables them to judge everything else.⁴ Thus, Aquinas's metaphysical account of understanding and wisdom leads us to expect the spiritually mature person to experience all things "in God."

Wynn's second argument for the irreducibility of experiential accounts is based on the experience of rupture in the spiritual life. Wynn points out that, according to John of the Cross, spiritual development contains two periods of intense spiritual aridity, called the "night of the senses" and the second the "night of the spirit," respectively. Each night has an "active" phase, in which the spiritual practitioner actively attempts to purify himself of disordered desires, and a "passive" phase, when God takes over the work of purifying the soul, and the person suffers a generalized break down of thought, desire, and action.

Wynn suggests that John's account of the nights is in serious tension with Aquinas's metaphysical account. For, on Wynn's reading, the transition from active to passive night in John's account should be read as a transition from the operation of acquired to infused virtues in Aquinas. But, according to Wynn, "if we had Aquinas's account alone, we might have expected the transition from the active to the passive phase [in the dark night] to be registered in experience as simply a smooth, incremental process, as the infused virtues build on and extend the acquired." (76)

There are two problems with Wynn's view of the dark night as corresponding to the transition from acquired to infused virtues. First, if the dark night is a transition from the operation of acquired to infused virtues, then we lack any explanation for why there should be *two* dark nights (i.e., of the sense and of the spirit) rather than just one. Second, Wynn's view cannot explain why each night should be experienced as having genuinely "active" and "passive" phases. Despite the fact the Aquinas thinks of the infused virtues as having God as their cause, Aquinas does not think the infused virtues perfect a person's passivity towards God. Rather, Aquinas thinks that the *gifts of the Holy Spirit* perfect a person's passivity towards God, whereas the infused virtues perfect his self-directed activity regarding creatures in the order of grace.⁵ On Aquinas's account, we would expect the infused virtues to be experienced as active, whereas we would expect the gifts to be experienced as passive. In short, where Wynn has viewed the distinction of active and passive nights through the acquired and infused virtues, the distinction of nights is more perspicuously viewed through the infused virtues and gifts.

² For example, from gift-based vision of the principle that God is not composite, a person could move towards *scientia* that nothing material is God, supposing this person could also grasp the principle that everything material is composite. For a detailed account of *scientia* in Aquinas, see John I. Jenkins, *Knowledge and Faith in Thomas Aquinas*, (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

³ See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 45, a. 1, c.

⁴ For example, Aquinas writes, "Now man obtains this judgment [of all things according to Divine rules] through the Holy Spirit, according to 1 Cor. 2:15: *The spiritual man judgeth all things*, because as stated in the same chapter (1 Cor 2:10), *the Spirit searcheth all things, yea the deep things of God*. Wherefore it is evident that wisdom is a gift of the Holy Spirit." See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 45, a. 1, c.

⁵ See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I-II, q. 68, a. 1, c.: "[I]t is manifest that human virtues perfect man according as it is natural for him to be moved by his reason in his interior and exterior actions. Consequently man needs yet higher perfections, whereby to be disposed to be moved by God. These perfections are called gifts, not only because they are infused by God, but also because by them man is disposed to become amenable to the Divine inspiration."

Again, Aquinas's metaphysical account of the gifts leads one to expect features of John of the Cross's experiential account.⁶

In chapter 6, Wynn takes up the nature of Christian faith. He begins by sketching Aquinas's account, and then he offers what he calls a "development" of that account. Wynn introduces his model of faith on analogy with a certain case, which we will call the "graveside case." (169) Suppose that Mark's great uncle was killed in the First World War. And, while Mark is uncertain, he knows that there is a reasonable chance that his uncle is buried in a mass grave outside Passchendaele. Suppose that Mark desires to honor his uncle's memory in the very place where his body lies, and suppose that Mark is nearby Passchendaele. In these circumstances, Mark visits the mass grave, and he remembers his uncle in the way required for honoring him.

Wynn makes several claims about the graveside case that he thinks apply to the case of faith. First, in both cases, there is a certain target good. Second, in both cases, success is uncertain. Third, in both cases, it is practically reasonable to pursue the target good. This reasonability is fairly evident in the graveside case, but the case of faith requires more discussion.

Wynn claims that the practical reasonability of faith depends on three factors: the likelihood of the beatific vision, the value of a life congruent with it, and the value of a life that aims at such congruence when the beatific vision does not in fact exist. Somewhat surprisingly, Wynn thinks that typical believers will take the likelihood of the beatific vision to be low.⁷ Nevertheless, Wynn thinks that committing to the Christian narrative can be rational. This is because of three reasons. First, the Christian narrative describes the greatest good it is possible for human beings to realize in this life. (173) Second, a Christian has little to lose if the narrative turns out to be false. (176ff.) Third, Wynn takes a practical commitment to be more rational to the extent that it promises greater goods if successful and lesser bads if unsuccessful. (175)

How does Wynn reconcile his account with Aquinas's view of faith as cognitive, unwavering, and certain? Wynn's strategy is to focus on the believer's *practical* commitment to the truth. The spiritual practitioner, Wynn writes, "commits themselves in practical terms to the truth of the relevant doctrine, because they commit themselves in practical terms to an end that can only obtain if the doctrine holds true." (174) On Wynn's view, faith is unwavering and certain because the practitioner is unwaveringly committed to the goods of the Christian narrative, and these goods that are possible only if that narrative is true.

I have two worries about Wynn's account of faith. First, it cannot be called a development of Aquinas's account. Second, it underestimates the costs of committing to faith.

One of the crucial elements of Aquinas's account of faith is his distinction between its formal and material objects.⁸ On Aquinas's view, demons believe the propositions of faith (material object), but they do so through their own natural powers, not through trust in God's authority (formal object).⁹ It is a central part of Aquinas's account that the believer accept the propositions of faith through trust in God. Nevertheless, it is hard to see how Wynn's account can be reconciled with Aquinas's view.

⁶ Another confirmation comes from the way Aquinas links the gift of knowledge to the beatitude of mourning (i.e., "blessed are those who mourn"), insofar as the gift of knowledge reveals how man loses God by turning to creatures as his last end. See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 9, a. 4, c.

⁷ Indeed, Wynn suggests that spiritual practitioners typically take their worldview to be likely false. He writes: "A complex world view will be expressible in a long conjunctive proposition. And the probability of this proposition being true will be the product of the probabilities of each of its conjuncts, and since the probability of each of these conjuncts will typically be less than one, the probability of the entire conjunctive proposition, so far as can be determined with any precision, will not be high. This is a reason for supposing that believers are standardly not committed to the claim that their world view is more probable than not." (207)

⁸ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 1, a. 1, c.

⁹ See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 5, a. 2.

On Wynn's account, the believer will evaluate the theological narrative as being of low likelihood, and he commits to its truth through a practical commitment to attain the goods it describes. But on Wynn's account, the believer's commitment is voluntary and meritorious precisely *because* believer desires and commits to the goods in the narrative while evaluating that narrative as unlikely using his natural capacities. Thus, Wynn's believers are epistemologically like Aquinas's demons, except that the demons take the theological narrative to be more likely than the believers do.¹⁰ Aquinas's notion of believing on trust in God's authority is absent.

Second, Wynn's account underestimates the costs of faith. Wynn contends that, should the Christian theological narrative turn out to be false, the believer should not feel "any deep-seated regret about having ordered their life to that narrative." (187) Across time and space, however, Christians have welcomed persecution and death for their faith.¹¹ Would such Christians have any grounds for "deep-seated regret" should their faith turn out to be false? It seems so. There is great "opportunity cost" in becoming Christian under conditions of persecution: by becoming Christian and inviting persecution, these Christians endanger themselves and their families and set up obstacles to accomplishing many genuine goods they might otherwise accomplish.¹²

The upshot of these worries is that the standard of rationality for faith is higher than Wynn suggests, since more is at stake. But it is also the case that the epistemic certainty of faith is higher than Wynn suggests, since faith rests on God's revealing authority.

¹⁰ Compare Wynn's comments on the differences between secular persons and believers: "[W]hat distinguishes the believer from the secular person is, we can say, their practical project: the believer aims at a spiritual good whose realization involves the truth of a given theological narrative, say that of the beatific vision, while the secular person does not aim at goods that are spiritual in this sense. And this difference need not rest on any epistemic difference; it may be that the believer and the secular person assign the same probability to the beatific vision." (194) This passage further confirms the natural basis for faith in Wynn's account, since a difference in practical projects need not involve a difference in one's deference to God as revealing authority.

¹¹ For example, see the articles on "persecution" in Oliver Nicholson, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Late Antiquity*, (Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹² For example, St. Paul writes to the Corinthians, "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable." 1 Corinthians 15:19 (DRB).