

## FRIARS' BOOKSHELF



PIETRO DELLA VECCHIA - ST. DOMINIC AND THE DEVIL

### MINING THE MEDIEVALS

Jan Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought: From Philip the Chancellor (ca. 1225) to Francisco Suarez*. Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2012.

**T**he project of an intellectual historian bears striking similarities to a miner's quest for gold. The raw material that lies before both men is vast—a mountain of minerals for the one, a mountain of manuscripts for the other. In each case, the task of sorting and sifting waste from wealth is a meticulous process.

Moreover, miner and scholar share the same dream: to discover a single vein of gold that runs rich and deep through their respective mountains. As much for the educator as for the excavator, success

means finding gold in the depths and bringing valuable resources to light.

It did not take Jan Aertsen long to find what he was looking for. Just two years after completing his dissertation, the Dutch-born philosopher declared that he intended to spend his academic career exploring the scholastic doctrine of the transcendentals.

True to his word, Aertsen has spent the last thirty years following this vein deep into the mountain of medieval philosophy, regularly unearthing precious stones in the form of scholarly articles and monographs. Among these treasures, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought* stands out as a work of pure gold.

The scholastics of the Middle Ages understood the transcendentals to be those characteristics or traits (like *one*, *true*, and *good*) that must be true of every being simply because it is a being—characteristics or traits that are not limited to just one of Aristotle’s ten categories. Thus, we can speak of “one time,” “one person,” and “one relationship,” or again of a “good amount,” a “good action,” and a “good place” because *one* and *good* apply to everything, across the board.

Aertsen’s book traces the development of transcendentalism from its distant anticipations in Latin and Arabic Neo-Platonism, through its official beginnings in Philip the Chancellor, to its apex in Francisco Suarez, and beyond. The book’s 700 pages offer a magisterial account of more than 350 years of scholastic reflection.

Since a work of such monumental scope defies detailed analysis, a reviewer must set more modest goals. Rather than burrow into the obscurities of the text, what follows is a panoramic perspective on Aertsen’s project—a sketch of the book’s aim, argument, and achievement.

#### AERTSEN’S AIM

**B**eyond providing a much-needed and nearly exhaustive treatment of its topic, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental*

*Thought* seems to have two overarching goals. The first of these is stated explicitly. The second remains implicit, but becomes clearer as the work progresses.

In the book's preface, Aertsen makes the provocative claim that there is "an intrinsic connection between medieval philosophy and transcendental thought" (xix). This thesis—first suggested in an earlier monograph—elicited comments and criticisms that only a full history of transcendental reflection in the Middle Ages could answer. Thus, Aertsen's new book aims to prove that "the theory of the transcendentals is essential for insight into the properly *philosophical* dimension of medieval thought" (xix) while at the same time respecting the expansive diversity that exists between scholastic thinkers.

The significance of this thesis does not reside solely in its novelty. Aertsen's claim plunges him into an ongoing debate about the nature of medieval philosophy itself. It pits him against the likes of Etienne Gilson, Norman Kretzmann, and Alain de Libera, who hold that philosophy in the Middle Ages was revelation-driven, logic-driven, or ethics-driven, respectively. Aertsen, however, insists that the doctrine of the transcendentals stands much closer to the heart of medieval philosophy than any of these divergent positions. What is more, he maintains that it runs like a common vein through all three of them. Thus, Aertsen pushes for a new paradigm: *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought*.

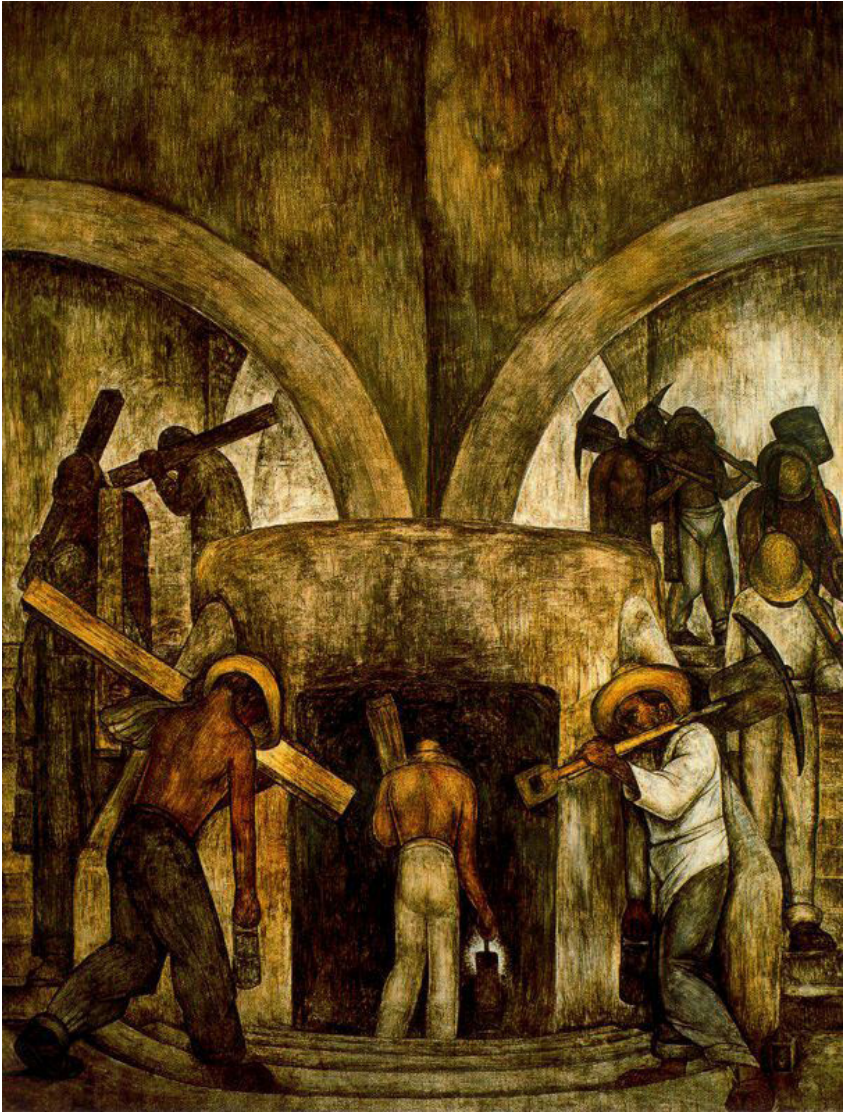
The second goal of the book, although never stated as such, reveals itself as Aertsen continually returns to the relationship between the Kantian and scholastic versions of "transcendental thought." This theme places him in often-critical dialogue with other prominent historians of medieval philosophy, such as Gottfried Martin, Kurt Flasch, and Ruedi Imbach, each of whom has argued that certain medieval thinkers foreshadowed Kant's transcendental turn. Aertsen sees this Kantian connection as forced and strives to liberate his field from the desire to find the seed of Kantian doctrine sown in the schools of the Middle Ages. Thus, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought* tells the

story of scholastic reflection on the transcendentals on its own terms.

#### AERTSEN'S ARGUMENT

The argument of the book proceeds both historically and systematically. The historical aspect governs the division of the book's chapters, and moves roughly chronologically. After introducing the concept of "transcending" in the Middle Ages (Chapter 1) and the sources for this doctrine (Chapter 2), Aertsen begins with the first systematic treatment of the transcendentals, found in Philip the Chancellor (Chapter 3). He then proceeds to cover the transcendental thought of the "Franciscan Masters" Alexander of Hales (and his students) and Bonaventure (Chapter 4), followed by Albert the Great (Chapter 5), Thomas Aquinas (Chapter 6), Henry of Ghent (Chapter 7), the "German Dominican School" in the persons of Dietrich of Freiburg and Meister Eckhart (Chapter 8), Duns Scotus (Chapter 9) and subsequent Franciscans engaged with his thought: Peter Auriol, Francis of Meyronnes, Peter Thomae, Nicholas of Bonet, and Francis of Marchia (Chapter 10); then he moves on to the Nominalists William of Ockham and John Buridan (Chapter 11), the Neoplatonists Berthold of Moosburg and Nicholas of Cusa (Chapter 12), and the Renaissance philosophers Lorenzo Valla and Pico della Mirandola (chapter 13). The heart of the study ends with Aertsen's treatment of Francisco Suarez (chapter 14), though for good measure he does consider the post-Suarezian development of "supertranscendentals" (Chapter 15) before drawing his conclusions about the importance of the transcendental way of thought for medieval philosophy (Chapter 16).

If the list of names contained in the previous paragraph overwhelms, rest assured that it's supposed to. In order to make the claim that medieval philosophy is transcendental thought, Aertsen must also make it clear that he is not unaware of the



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real diversity between medieval thinkers. To make his case, he offers a veritable *ressourcement* of scholasticism. By drawing upon medieval thinkers that even some medievalists would be

hard-pressed to recognize, Aertsen proves that he is not a naïve “essentialist” regarding medieval philosophy. He sees the vast differences that exist between these men, but insists nonetheless that the transcendental way of thought constitutes a common thread that runs deeper than such differences.

But how does he make his case? This is where the argument of the book takes on a systematic character. The transcendentals themselves are the “most common” and most fundamental of all things. So too, Aertsen argues, the transcendental way of thought is what is most common—and so most fundamental—in medieval philosophy.

Aertsen concludes that the transcendental way of thought is not only “most common” to all these thinkers, but also—and even more importantly—is “most common” *within* each of these thinkers. That is, the transcendental way of thought penetrates and is common to every field of study within medieval philosophy. As the most common of all predicates, the transcendentals exercised a powerful influence on the development of scholastic logic and analogical predication. As the first concepts of the intellect, the transcendentals became a central point of contention in the psychology and anthropology of the day. As convertible with being, the transcendentals raised serious questions about the scientific status of metaphysics. The transcendentality of the good in particular bore consequences for scholastic ethics, while transcendentality in general held profound implications for natural theology in the area of divine naming.

Thus, the book concludes that medieval philosophy is, at root, neither revelation-driven, nor logic-driven, nor ethics-driven, but rather transcendental-driven, for the transcendental way of thought runs through all the various scholastic disciplines, and is a common trait shared by scholastics thinkers despite their wide diversity of doctrine.

## AERTSEN'S ACHIEVEMENT

*Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought* will serve as the standard work on this topic for years to come. The list of thinkers Aertsen treats is practically comprehensive, and his facility and fairness in doing so shines with the luster of true scholarship. The book is a *tour de force* of scholastic sources: it gathers into a single place the hard-won results of years of historical research and it opens up a world of forgotten figures for future scholarship. The importance of the book for research and reference alone makes it a necessary acquisition for theological, philosophical, or historical libraries.

But Aertsen's *magnum opus* is more than just a research volume. With regard to its implicit aim of distinguishing the medieval mode of transcendental thought from its Kantian counterpart, the book is a stunning success. Aertsen proves beyond doubt that scholastic reflection on transcendentalism possesses a breadth and depth that demands consideration in its own right. Its value does not derive from its status as a stepping stone for further thought. In the domain of transcendentalism, scholasticism needs no Kantian crutch.

Further, Aertsen makes a good case in favor of the book's primary goal. By arguing from the perspective of commonality, he can manifest the importance of transcendental thought throughout the various fields of medieval inquiry while at the same time offering an answer to the question "what is medieval philosophy?" that is broader and more inclusive than the answers given by Gilson, Kretzmann, and de Libera. Such an argument may not be conclusive—there could be an aspect of medieval philosophy just as common as the transcendental way of thought and yet more fundamental—but it certainly has a force that demands consideration.

The book's final achievement lies in the potential it has for encouraging further scholarship. No one can be expected to cover everything, and the small lacunae in Aertsen's volume

only prove that he has not exhausted the topic. Later interpreters and defenders of Aquinas receive less attention than their Scotist counterparts, nor are they thematically treated as representing a more or less unified “school.” Similarly, the “Albertinian” school that followed Albert the Great—still active in the 16th century—goes unmentioned. These are two small areas in which future scholars might join Aertsen in the task of mining the medievals. The mountain is not empty of riches, nor is the vein exhausted of gold.

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