Maritain, Heidegger, and Deely: Interpretations of Aquinas
on the Apprehension of Being
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In his recent work, *Intentionality and Semiotics: A Story of Mutual Fecundation* (2007), John Deely argues that Heidegger rather than Maritain “is a better guide to understanding St. Thomas” in regard to “ens primum cognitum.” According to Deely, contrary to Maritain’s Neothomistic interpretation of the apprehension of being as the categorical being founded upon substantial things (and which is manifested through the concept as quo as opposed to quod), Heidegger recognizes “the prior ‘unity of Being as over against the multiplicity of categories applicable to things,’ the grasp of being prior to its division into ens reale vs. ens rationis” (34). Deely bases his synthesis of Aquinas and Heidegger in large part upon his semiotic theory. This paper examines the grounds for Deely’s reading of Aquinas on the apprehension of being and suggests that his semiotic analysis exposes a number of significant aspects of the intentional relation between the knowing subject and “objective” being or Being that is apprehended; this is true particularly insofar as Deely’s account specifies the determinate roles of the internal sense powers and in turn the quo and in quo species or signs that act as the intentional vehicles that transmit or communicate being/Being. At the same time, however, I argue that Deely follows Heidegger too closely in assuming the ontological priority of Zuhandenheit over Vorhandenheit. In following Maritain, I argue that although there is a certain priority of the intentional “unity of Being” that occurs within a pre-theoretical, semiotic nexus, this apprehension is temporal and practical rather than metaphysical and speculative. Here Maritain’s distinction between extensive eidetic visualization and intensive eidetic visualization is pertinent. For the ontological loss of being assumed by Heidegger’s critique of abstractive or theoretical thinking as mere presence (or present-at-hand) is legitimate only in terms of extensive eidetic visualization or ideation. But, as Maritain argues, the husk of being is only stripped away through an intensive eidetic visualization that penetrates to the core of the metaphysical intuition of being. Moreover, such an eidetic visualization is perfected through the requisite, operative habitus of the metaphysician that is confirmed through rational analysis.