Aquinas’s Metaphysics of Law: Reading Nature and Grace through Lex
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Commentators on Thomas Aquinas have often turned to the section of his *Summa Theologiae* known as the “treatise on the Law” in order to focus upon the natural law alone. Although it possesses a remarkable integrity, the treatise on the Law is, unfortunately, rarely treated as a whole, and so other possibilities for profitable interpretation are missed. Mark Jordan has noted: “No section of the *Summa* has been abused so regularly as the discussion on law, and no abuse of it is so regular as the refusal to see the discussion whole and in place.”1

The paper represents an attempt to consider the treatise on the law “whole and in place” and finds it an unexpected resource: a microcosm of Aquinas’s *Summa* and of his metaphysics.

Here, Aquinas turns borrows the term *lex* from the practical sciences as the category within which to describe the whole sweep of God’s wise work in and with humanity, as well as God’s own wisdom. Everything, he says, can be understood as ordered according to the eternal law, which is a name for God’s own reason, and which, indeed, “is not distinct from himself,” and all created things gain their inclinations to certain acts and ends—their identity, we might say—by participation in the eternal law. Under the terms “natural law” and “human law,” he describes human participation in the divine wisdom, and under the term “Divine Law,” he describes all of God’s redemptive action for creation. It is a sweeping statement, but it is true: Aquinas describes all of reality in terms of Law, with the emphasis upon the rational orderedness of that reality. The use of *lex* here, then, one could say, is analogous to the use of the term *logos* by earlier Christian theologians, especially Justin Martyr.

When seen in this way, as a concise and unified account of all of reality, the treatise on the Law becomes a fruitful site for inquiry into Aquinas’s thought. This paper will, in a preliminary way, indicate what the treatise of the Law reveals regarding Aquinas’s doctrine of participation and the implications for the relationship between nature and grace.

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