Thomistic Metaphysics in Debate

By Rudi te Velde (Tilburg University)

ABSTRACT

There exists, at least nominally, such a thing as a thomistic metaphysics. It can be found in traditional thomistic manuals, in scholarly studies, in systematic attempts of reconstruction and retrieval. Its reality is nevertheless characterized by a great variety of interpretation and, more serious, by a lack of consensus with regard to the fundamentals. But in spite of the conflicting interpretations there is a common inspiration behind the idea of thomistic metaphysics, which can be described roughly as ‘realism’. Often in critical discussion with modern philosophy the adherents of classical metaphysical thought in the line of Thomas Aquinas use to emphasize the realistic intention of this type of metaphysics. Thomistic metaphysics wants to be first and above all a realistic philosophy, in polemical opposition to the main trends of modernity: idealism, subjectivism and agnosticism.

The precise character of this realism is object of an ongoing discussion. The most thomistic thinkers want to connect the realism to the notion of esse. Realism stands for the conviction that the human mind in its act pertains to the very being of reality. According to Thomas, ‘being’ (ens) is the formal object of the intellect. But what this exactly means and how ‘being’ as the formal object relates to ‘being’ as object of metaphysics is matter of different opinions. Closely connected to this is the issue of how we have access to being in its metaphysical sense, through a special kind of judgment, which is called ‘separatio’, or through a ‘intuition’ of being, or though a sort of ‘resolution’ of the object of physics.

In this paper I will discuss critically some of the current interpretations with regard to the foundation of metaphysics and present a sketch of an alternative view of the metaphysical abstraction.