

Bonaventure on Forms^{*}

di

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F. van Buren's book, *Aristotle and the Ontology of St. Bonaventure*, is a revised version of a PhD dissertation submitted at the University of Munich in 2020 and defended in 2021 (cf. p. ix). Van Buren intends to demonstrate that Bonaventure was an Aristotelian, especially in his theory of form, thereby renewing the thesis advanced by Fernand van Steenberghen and supporting it with a more extensive reference to the texts¹. In so doing, van Buren claims to add a significant bit to our knowledge of Bonaventure's thought. While I do share her claim that any effort to explain Bonaventure's philosophy is a worthwhile undertaking, I have a few objections against some of the results expounded in the book. To substantiate my criticisms, I will first offer a reconstruction of the six chapters of the book.

After an introduction (pp. 1-15), where van Buren argues that her historiographical claims are new, the first chapter (*Historical Background*, pp. 15-49) summarizes the theory of forms among Neoplatonist philosophers, including Victorinus, Augustine, Proclus, and pseudo-Dionysius². From this summary of the Neoplatonic views about forms, van Buren infers the idea that it is markedly Neoplatonic to present God as «being», since (pseudo-)Dionysius does so (cf. p. 34). In other words, the idea of a «metaphysics of the Exodus», as Gilson put it, would have Neoplatonic roots. The final section of the chapter (pp.

^{*} A discussion of F. van Buren, *Aristotle and the Ontology of St. Bonaventure*, Leuven University Press, Leuven 2023.

¹ F. van Steenberghen, *Aristote en Occident. Les origines de l'aristotélisme parisien*, Éditions de l'Institut supérieur de philosophie, Louvain 1946.

² This latter is always introduced as 'Dionysius'. Unless van Buren intended to claim that the author of the treatise *De divinis nominibus* was indeed the Areopagite converted to Christianity by saint Paul (cf. *Acts*, 17, 22) – a claim that would certainly merit some discussion, were it at all possible to argue in its favour –, I hardly see why the anonymous goes by the name of 'Dionysius' in the book. In the *Index* (and only there), van Buren correctly writes 'pseudo-Dionysius'.

36-49) is more philosophically rewarding. Van Buren asks whether the label ‘Aristotelian’ could be applied to Bonaventure. She criticizes scholars who claim that Bonaventure was not Aristotelian because he subscribed to the claim that there is a plurality of substantial forms. She observes that it is not clear that Bonaventure was a supporter of the plurality of forms, but she believes that he was (cf. p. 37, n. 112), and adds that it is not clear that Aristotle maintained that there is only a substantial form since it could be argued that the intellect survives the death of the human being. In other words, van Buren argues, it is not ‘anti-Aristotelian’ to maintain, as Bonaventure does, that there are several substantial forms. This conclusion has an important philosophical pay-off and could be developed further.

The second chapter is dedicated to *The Theory of Forms in Thomas Aquinas* (pp. 51-72). Van Buren has sympathy for J. F. Wippel’s interpretation of the participation of created forms to God’s *esse*:

To entertain now a third interpretation, John F. Wippel considers that Geiger and Fabro’s positions may be brought into harmony with one another. He agrees with Fabro on the point that there must be a composition of *esse* and *essentia* to account for limited instantiations of *esse* in creatures, the *esse* which then participates in God’s *esse*, i.e. transcendental-analogical participation. However, Wippel also grants to Geiger that participation by similitude ensures the limitations which account for the essences of creatures, in the sense that each creature imitates God’s essence (his *esse*) in a particular way, i.e. through its essence as a limitation of God’s being. Thus, with respect to Aquinas’ notion of participation between cause and effect, Wippel maintains that both “transcendental-analogical participation” and “participation by similitude or formal hierarchy” may be found in Aquinas’ philosophy. However, according to Wippel, Aquinas’ theory of participation stresses the former over the latter because the former more clearly shows the causal relationship of creatures to God (p. 63).

The reconstruction of the debate between C. Fabro and L.-B. Geiger on the notion of participation in Aquinas (pp. 59-65) is praiseworthy³, but I am not entirely convinced that Fabro’s idea that participation

³ I note in passing that J. Brower, *Aquinas’ Ontology of the Material World. Change, Hylomorphism, and Material Object*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014, is not referenced in this chapter.

in creatures is limited to participation to God's *esse* is a correct interpretation of Aquinas, as van Buren suggests (cf. p. 63: «Fabro (rightly) considers Geiger's position to be a threat to Aquinas' claim that there is a real distinction between essence and existence»).

The third chapter (*The Controversy: Bonaventure and Aristotle*, pp. 73-94) reconstructs Bonaventure's attitude towards Aristotle and discusses also the *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, where the Franciscan thinker took a more staunchly anti-Aristotelian stance, according to many scholars⁴. Van Buren makes her point in a convincing way. She observes that many of the arguments against the eternity of the world presuppose Aristotle's philosophy, and that Bonaventure could argue that Aristotle does not prove that the world is created in time in the *Physics* because the origin of the world in time is a metaphysical topic. In other words, Bonaventure's claim that it is possible to philosophically prove that the world had a beginning in time is not in itself evidence that Bonaventure was anti-Aristotelian, as it has been argued in the past. While her arguments are compelling in showing that the qualification of Bonaventure as an anti-Aristotelian can be deconstructed, van Buren does not demonstrate that the Franciscan philosopher was indeed an Aristotelian.

The following three chapters are the best section of the book: in the fourth chapter (*An Aristotelian Account of Universals*, pp. 95-131), van Buren offers an analysis of Bonaventure's commentary on the *Sentences* (book II) and concludes that the Franciscan thinker had an Aristotelian understanding of universals, since he maintained that there are no extra-mentally existent uninstantiated universals, *qua* particular forms. In other words, there is not form of Socrates, if Socrates is not instantiated. But van Buren also stresses that the universals *qua* universal forms have extra-mental 'being' (*esse*). On p. 92, van Buren advances the hypothesis that «at least at the point of writing this question, Bonaventure did not think that the position found in the *Liber de causis* was Aristotle's position». The observation certainly deserves more research on the topic, but the arguments advanced by van Buren are convincing. She writes that «it seems [...] that Bonaventure throughout the *Commentary on the Sentences* is reluctant to use the *Liber de causis*, and almost always when he does

⁴ Had the chapter been proofread one more time, we would not have had note 219 which is almost identical to note 13 (F. van Buren, *Aristotle and the Ontology*, cit., pp. 74, and 12).

cite it, it is cited as a negative position» (p. 92). According to van Buren,

the supposed critique of Aristotle's rejection of Platonic forms [cf. Hex. VI, 2-7, quoted in note 294] is not really targeting the fact that Aristotle rejects Platonic forms generally, but that he rejects the transcendent forms of virtues, which Bonaventure considers need to exist in God himself. Plato perhaps comes closer because although he does not posit the forms in God, at least they are "transcendent." However, above in the Commentary on the Sentences, Bonaventure rather explicitly rejects Platonic forms as being in any way like divine exemplars, precisely because, although they are transcendent, they are not in God – and instead speaks positively of Aristotle, praising him precisely for rejecting the forms of Plato (pp. 92-93).

In the following pages, van Buren fleshes out Bonaventure's doctrine about «seminal reasons». She claims that Aquinas had rejected «seminal reasons», and that Augustine presented them as programs for the development of forms that are implicit in the beings created by God. Bonaventure takes a stance different from either of them: in his opinion, «seminal reasons» are identical to natural forms, i.e., to forms that immanent in the individuals. Van Buren offers an excellent reconstruction of Bonaventure's discussion of the formation of Eve from Adam's rib:

A rib [...] is certainly not made by nature to generate a woman, i.e. does not have the natural form to do so – if it did, we would see this phenomenon of ribs generating women occurring in nature. But we don't. Thus, Bonaventure concludes: "[I]f it is asked, whether woman was made from the rib [of Adam] according to seminal reasons, the response is no, because the rib, with respect to such a way of producing and with respect to such body ... does not have in itself anything except the potency of submission," i.e. a potency by which, if other intermediate causes (such as God) come along, one thing may become another (p. 109)⁵.

Van Buren continues her reconstruction by noticing that Bonaventure distinguishes the *rationes seminales*/natural forms from universal forms (cf. *In Sent.* II, d. 18, a. 1, q. 3). Unlike Aquinas, who maintained that the universal forms are in the particular substances ('humani-

⁵ «Potency of submission» translates the Latin *potentia obedientiae*.

ty' can be found in Socrates or Callias), Bonaventure distinguishes 'humanity', *qua* universal form, from the 'natural form' of Socrates or Callias, because he

considers it impossible for the universal form to be in a particular thing, insofar as what is in a particular thing (i.e. in the sense of being ontologically dependent) must be particularized – if something is dependent upon Socrates, it belongs to him and is thereby particularized in him. With regard to generation, this must be the case since what is the cause of generation in a particular sensible thing must be particular itself, not universal – i.e. it must be Socrates' humanity, in a proximate sense, which causes him to grow up to be a man, not humanity in general. However, with regard to knowledge or predication, if what is in the particular sensible thing is itself particular, it is no real predicate or object of knowledge (p. 115).

While arguing against the claim that universals can be abstract from individuals (cf. p. 116 ff.), Bonaventure targets a position similar to Aquinas' and paves the way to the arguments of later Franciscan thinkers, including Ockham, who also rejected moderate realism for the same reasons. Van Buren's reconstruction could indeed bring us to rethink the relationship of Ockham to Bonaventure. But in the following pages, the distinction that van Buren draws between universal and natural forms turns out to be not an ontological distinction:

Bonaventure instead makes a distinction between the universal itself (which happens to be part of the composite) vs. the universal *qua* part of the composite – or better, we could say *qua* operative principle within the composite. This distinction, as he makes clear, is not an ontological distinction, i.e. these are not two terms distinguished as cause to effect. When it comes to our understanding these two notions philosophically, they are one thing which may be considered in two different ways, i.e. as a universal form or as a seminal reason. However, this distinction is also not merely conceptual. Bonaventure writes: «if the universal form is said properly, according to the thing which is ordered into a genus, which metaphysics considers, the seminal reason is not the universal form. If, however, the universal form is designated as a form existing (exists) according to an incomplete being in matter and indifferent and able to be produced in many, then one may call the seminal reason the universal form». [In Sent. II, d. 18, a. 1, q. 3, p. 442b]

This is to say, they are equatable only insofar as we consider the universal form as ‘existing in potency’ in some composite, i.e. qua operative principle in some composite. Thus we land at a distinction between the seminal reason and universal which is neither an ontological distinction, insofar as the seminal reason and the universal form are not really distinct, but also not a conceptual distinction, insofar as they do indeed exist in two different ways. The crux of the distinction is that the universal form really exists (*esse*) while the seminal reason has merely a contingent existence (p. 121)⁶.

The passage deserves to be quoted in full, because much of van Buren’s philosophical interpretation of Bonaventure’s theory of forms is summarized in these lines. In her opinion, there is neither an ontological, nor a conceptual distinction between universal and natural (i.e., particular) forms. Despite alluding to a «formal distinction» between the two types of form, on p. 121 n. 403 she clarifies that «[p]roperly speaking, for Bonaventure, the form must exist in itself as a universal – it is not dependent upon and immanent in sensibles to attain extra-mental existence». It is not clear to me whether universals are ‘things’ in the extra-mental world or not in this reconstruction. I think that van Buren’s mistake consists in taking *existens* in the above passage to mean ‘existing’ and not ‘popping into existence’ (as I take it to mean). According to my reading, Bonaventure is simply stating that universal forms have a ‘being’ in themselves – presumably because they are intentional object – but when they pop into existence in matter, they are incomplete with respect to their formal content (because Fuffi does not include all the differences of ‘cat’, as I do not exemplify all that it is to be human), and yet they have extra-mental being. In other words, Bonaventure’s theory of enmattered form does not appear to be much different from Aquinas’ according to this reading, and all criticisms against the conceptualist position, that van Buren expounds in her book, should be taken as a critique of a naïve

⁶ Van Buren’s translation is questionable. Instead of «which metaphysics considers», I think it would have been better to translate «that the metaphysician has to consider». The translation of *existens* is also open to debate. On the meaning of *existere* in XIII century Latin philosophy, I take the liberty to refer to L. Gili-G. Pezzini, *In se ipso existens. A Linguistic Analysis of a Much-Misread Passage in Aquinas’ Commentary on Aristotle’s Perihermeneias*, in V. Buffon-D. Piché (eds.), *Non est excellentior status: Vaquer à la philosophie médiévale: Études offerts en hommage à Claude Lafleur*, Brepols, Turnhout 2023, pp. 367-377.

position, namely the one that does not consider that the objects of knowledge have to be universal and yet the extra-mental reality only includes individuals.

While chapter 4 is ambiguous about the ontological status of forms, in the fifth chapter (*Forms as Caused by God*, pp. 133-155) van Buren makes clear that universals *qua* universal forms do exist in God *qua* Exemplary Cause. While exemplarism is a Neoplatonic element, van Buren observes, the claim that the universal forms do not exist *qua* separate forms would be 'Aristotelian'. In van Buren's reconstruction, they exist not as intentional objects of God's mind, but they are in God as in their Exemplary Cause. While these statements are not wrong, they are not very new either. In the sixth chapter (*Forms in the Natural World*, pp. 157-191), van Buren concludes that the forms exist only in the natural world, thereby contradicting what she had said in ch. 3, where she argued that the forms *qua* universal have some being, independently of their instantiations, and contrary to what Aquinas wrote.

There is a short *Conclusion* (pp. 193-197), a bibliography, and an index of names.

Despite the general thesis that Bonaventure was an Aristotelian, there is no conceptual description of historiographical categories such as 'Aristotelianism' and 'Augustinism', which appear to be used according to a meaning so wide and comprehensive to potentially accommodate most philosophers of the Western tradition. Against the supporters of an 'Augustinian' or 'Platonizing' Bonaventure, van Steenberghen wrote:

What all these authors (Veuthey, etc.) understand by the "Augustinian spirit" is none other than the Christian spirit, which emphasizes the superiority of divine Revelation to reason, of Christian doctrine to that of philosophy, and of sacred to human sciences. This is found in Thomas just as well as in St. Bonaventure. It is not specifically Augustinian⁷.

Van Buren's book is not much different in that she maintains that Bonaventure is an Aristotelian since he often quotes Aristotle and believes in the existence of enmattered forms.

⁷ A. Forest-F. van Steenberghen-M. de Gandillac, *Le mouvement doctrinal du IX^e au XIV^e siècle*, Bloud & Gay, Paris 1951, p. 204, cited in J. Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in Saint Bonaventure*, transl. by Z. Hayes O.F.M., Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago 1971, p. 130.

The issue deserves to be developed further. There are fundamentally two ways to qualify historiographical categories such as ‘Aristotelianism’ and the like. They could either be taken (a) in a nominalist fashion, i.e., whenever a philosopher self-identifies as ‘Aristotelian’, we should take them as an ‘Aristotelian’, or (b) they can be defined according to a definite set of qualifications or to an umbrella of varying qualifications, that share the common trait of a reference to Aristotle’s *corpus* as an authoritative philosophical source⁸. According to (a), if an author qualifies her/himself as ‘Aristotelian’, we could simply stipulate that the qualification is correct, without testing it against a series of commonly agreed upon features. But (b) we could also have a clear depiction of what counts as ‘Aristotelianism’, or probably allow for different versions of ‘Aristotelianism’, though within the boundaries of a constant reference to Aristotle’s *corpus*⁹. Bonaventure is obviously not an Aristotelian in a nominalist sense, since he never qualified himself as such. But it is not clear whether van Buren saw that these are the only options on the table to describe someone as an Aristotelian, and, if yes, that a description of what would count (in her opinion) as ‘Aristotelian’ was needed in order to qualify Bonaventure as such. In lieu of explanations, she sometimes retorts to platitudes while employing the category of ‘Aristotelianism’ (e.g., «[a] similar position is maintained by a thinker who we would certainly call ‘Aristotelian’: Albert the Great», p. 82). I wonder if she intended to maintain that Bonaventure’s frequent references to Aristotle are sufficient, *per* (a), to turn him into an Aristotelian. But in this case, it is no longer clear whether the historiographical category would be at all informative, since most philosophers of the Western tradition after Aristotle, from Simplicius to Ockham, from Giordano Bruno to Hegel and Heidegger, would inevitably count as Aristotelians.

There are a few more quibbles. There are omissions in the dis-

⁸ On the issue of the authority of ancient sources in the formation of the philosophical canon, cf., e.g., J. Opsomer-A. Ulacco, *Epistemic Authority in Textual Traditions: A Model and Some Examples from Ancient Philosophy*, in J. Leemans-B. Meijns-S. Boodts (eds.), *Shaping Authority*, Leuven University Press, Leuven 2016, pp. 21-46, and A. Ulacco, *Autorità epistemica e storia della filosofia: un caso dalla filosofia antica*, «Archivio di storia della cultura» 23 (2020), pp. 37-52.

⁹ In this sense, M. Rashed talks about «Aristotelismes possibles» (cf. M. Rashed, *Essentialisme. Alexandre d’Aphrodise entre logique, physique et cosmologie*, W. de Gruyter, Berlin-New York 2007, p. 6 ff.).

cussion of the secondary literature¹⁰: van Buren seems to ignore the *Habilitationsschrift* on Bonaventure by Joseph Ratzinger¹¹. On p. 7, n. 3, she writes: «In scholarship, the stronger position regarding Bonaventure's 'Aristotelian' tendencies is maintained only by Fernand van Steenberghen, whose original claim was not well received in scholarship». In 1959, however, the future pope Benedict XVI wrote: «we must admit that Van Steenberghen is correct to a great extent as regards the question of Bonaventurian Augustinianism»¹². The omission of Ratzinger's *Habilitationsschrift*¹³ is curious given the later fame of the author, and unfortunate, since Ratzinger seems to have already presented many of the arguments advanced by van Buren, though in a compressed form. Although dedicated to the theology of history as it emerges in the *Hexaëmeron*, Ratzinger's book also covers the debate about the alleged 'Aristotelianism' of Bonaventure and summarizes the

¹⁰ To her credit, van Buren quotes extensively from German, French, and Italian publications, but she does not reference the two books by Marco Arosio on Bonaventure's Aristotelianism: M. Arosio, *Aristotelismo e teologia. Da Alessandro di Hales a San Bonaventura*, Liamar, Monaco 2012; Id., *Sapienza e scienza in Bonaventura da Bagnoregio. Epistemologia teologica ed esegesi biblica*, a cura di M. Mancinelli e D. Riserbato, Cantagalli, Siena 2019. The omission is excusable, since these two posthumous books by Arosio have been published with somewhat obscure publishing houses, but it is nevertheless unfortunate, since Arosio also took a stance against the attribution of an anti-Aristotelian stance to Bonaventure as van Buren does. M. Arosio was a scholar in Bonaventure studies who untimely passed away in 2009, and whose major contributions were unpublished at the time of his death. Thanks to relatives and colleagues, much of Arosio's writings are now in print, and one can hope that his studies can now generate new debates on Bonaventure's thought. As the book also includes a chapter on Aquinas, it might have been useful to also include a reference to J. F. Wippel, *Platonism and Aristotelianism in Aquinas*, in Id., *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington DC 2007, vol. 2, pp. 272-289.

¹¹ The author is aware that there are very few essays dedicated to Bonaventure's thought, and for that reason she deliberately includes also references to the Gilson/van Steenberghen debate: cf. F. van Buren, *Aristotle and the Ontology*, cit., p. 12: «[...] the reader, I am certain, will notice that the bulk of my references to secondary sources are from, at best, the 1980s, and the scholars I am arguing against are, for the most part, dead. To forestall the worry that I am doing this on purpose, it is necessary to state that there is very little contemporary scholarship on Bonaventure concerning his understanding of forms and of their causal efficacy».

¹² J. Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in Saint Bonaventure*, transl. by Z. Hayes O.F.M., Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago 1971, p. 133.

¹³ The title does not occur in the bibliography.

opinions of Gilson¹⁴ and van Steenberghen in a few pages and includes many voices of the debate that do not figure in van Buren's book¹⁵.

While van Buren argues that her claims are original, the scholars who wrote the entry on Bonaventure for the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* make considerations that are close to hers, and aptly observe:

None of these interpretations quite captures Bonaventure's relation to these three philosophers or his own approach to the relations among reason, faith, and theology, because they implicitly employed a Thomistic model for being an Aristotelian, with the result that Bonaventure's failures derive from his not being the kind of Aristotelian Thomas Aquinas was¹⁶.

In short, this monograph is a praiseworthy addition to Bonaventure studies for the minutiae of the philosophical analyses of many texts, but its general claim appears not to be entirely convincing or new.

The book is carefully produced, as one is accustomed to expecting from Leuven University Press, but typos are not absent. Here is an example from a Latin quote: *Ex quibus sequitur triplex caecitas vel caligo, scilicet de aeternitate mundi, ut videtur dicere Aristoteles secundum omnes doctors Graecos, ut Gregorium Nyssenum, Gregorium Nanzianzenum, Damascenum, Basilium, et commentatores omnium Arabum, qui dicunt, quod Aristoteles hoc sensit, et verba sua sonare videntur. Nunquam invenies, woud ipse dicat, quod mundus habuit principium vel initium; immo regarduit Platonem, qui solus videtur posuisse, temus incepisse* (p. 82, n. 248). Other typos are on p. 91 n. 292 and on p. 93, n. 295 *seperatae* < *separatae*, on p. 93, n. 295 *congnoscitur* < *cognoscitur*, on p. 109, n. 355

¹⁴ See É. Gilson, *La philosophie de saint Bonaventure*, Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, Paris 1924.

¹⁵ Cf. J. Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in Saint Bonaventure*, cit., pp. 120-128 (first published as J. Ratzinger, *Die Geschichtstheologie des heiligen Bonaventura*, Habilitationsschrift, Ludwig-Maximilian-Universität München, Munich 1959). Ratzinger's *Habilitationsschrift* was submitted and published in an abridged version in 1959, since the section on Bonaventure's theology of revelation did not meet the approval of some members of the evaluation committee (cf. J. Ratzinger, *Milestones. Memoires 1927-1977*, translated by E. Leiva-Merikakis, Ignatius Press, Chicago 1988, p. 103 ff.). Ratzinger's unabridged work has been published much later with the title *Offenbarungsverständnis und Geschichtstheologie Bonaventuras* (*Gesammelte Schriften: Band 2*), Herder, Freiburg im Breisgau 2009.

¹⁶ T. Noone-R. E. Houser-J. Benson, *Bonaventure*, in E. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2023: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/bonaventure/> [Nov. 2, 2023].

vale < *valde*, etc. There are typos also in quotations in other languages, e.g., on p. 26, n. 49 $\acute{\iota}\delta\acute{\omega}\nu$ < $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\delta\acute{\omega}\nu$; p. 60, n. 172 «tutti» < «tutto»; p. 65, n. 189 «principle» < «principe». On p. 30 $\tau\acute{o}\ \acute{\omicron}\nu$, $\eta\ \tau\acute{o}\ \mu\grave{\eta}\ \acute{\omicron}\nu$ [«being, or not-being»], is translated as «being and not-being». References are not always correct, e.g., on p. 114, n. 376 van Buren quotes *Cat.* 3a13-15 and writes «*Cat.* V.5 3a7-21»; on p. 115, n. 378 she quotes *Cat.* 2a31-34 and yet writes «*Cat.* V.I 2a11-19», etc.

There are many philosophical gems in this monograph, and the goal I set myself in writing these pages was to detect them, so that the few imprecisions could not distract the reader's attention from the good textual analyses included in the book.

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