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Michael Gorman, 'A Contemporary Introduction to Thomistic Metaphysics'

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[See table of contents](#)

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Michael Gorman. *A Contemporary Introduction to Thomistic Metaphysics*. Catholic University of America Press 2024. 272 pp. \$34.95 USD (Paperback 9780813237336); \$34.95 USD (eBook 9780813237343).

Explaining metaphysics, says Gorman, is a bit like explaining baseball: "... no matter where you start, you wish you had started somewhere else, because it seems as if everything presupposes everything else" (15). True enough. But when we explain baseball, we need to say one thing before anything else: the object of the game is to score more runs than your opponent. I think Gorman would agree that there is also an object to the 'game' of metaphysics: to understand being as being. But just as little-leaguers don't begin by swinging for the fences, neither should metaphysicians. The sub-object of the game is to reach first base, because there's no way you'll reach home without crossing first.

Gorman's "first base" is "substance". If we start with this "central kind or category of being" (15), we are in a better position to explore other kinds of being including accident, time, relation, God, and so on. Given the average college student, "substance" is not a bad place to begin, which is precisely why Gorman has written this book. He primarily intends it for those with no background in metaphysics or philosophy, which is a safe assumption these days. There was a time when practically *all* students had logic, the philosophy of nature, and other propaedeutic courses prior to metaphysics. Some argue that these must still be mastered before moving on to metaphysics. Gorman is not one of them. Anyone willing and able to ask fundamental questions is ready to pick up a bat and play the game of metaphysics. Indeed, philosophy itself "is important no matter what you study, because answers to philosophical questions are presupposed by every field of study" (7). Since, Gorman suggests, philosophy begins anew with each person, a proper line of inquiry should respect the natural human inclination to seek answers to fundamental questions rather than to impose a rigid hierarchical ordering of the sciences at the outset. To extend the analogy, it is possible to learn how to run the bases before learning how to bat or even knowing that there is such a thing as a batter. For this reason, Gorman, though not eschewing an ordered approach to metaphysics, intends each chapter to be self-standing, particularly if instructors need accessible material to supplement primary texts.

After beginning with a chapter on substance, Gorman proceeds to examine change, parts, and causes before turning to universality, particularly, possibility, and necessity. He then treats the grander topics of the entirety of reality, God, and the Christian issue of Christ's two natures and the



nature of the Eucharist. As the title suggests, Aristotle and Aquinas play significant roles in the examination of being, but Gorman's book is anything but a direct exposition of their texts. He offers reading suggestions at the end of each chapter, but he avoids rehashing arcane academic debates, no matter how important or interesting.

A case in point is his cursory mention of a debate central to Thomistic metaphysics: namely, whether it is necessary to demonstrate that reality includes non-physical objects in addition to physical ones before we can say we have a sufficient grasp of being as being. Scholars of Aquinas's metaphysics will immediately recall a famous exchange between John Wippel and Joseph Owens, but Gorman confidently and commendably sidelines the issue for the purposes of this book. Nevertheless, he does risk over-skirting this issue, as I will explain at the end of this review.

Gorman is aware of an enormous challenge facing anyone who wants to write a book like this today, and that is striking a "balance" between saying something "mainstream" and something "interesting" (xiii). A way he keeps it interesting is by deftly presenting viewpoints that differ from his own. In his classic, *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics*, for example, Joseph Owens kept contrasting views to a minimum, limiting them to footnotes to keep his prose as lean as possible. At the other extreme, Michael J. Loux and Thomas M. Crisp, in *Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*, present a variety of viewpoints without any underlying cohesive throughline. Gorman's book "aims ... to allow the reader to grapple with a range of views, while also making clear which views it thinks best" (2). At the same time, when engaging contemporary metaphysics, Gorman confessedly limits his discussion to the "so-called analytic strand of philosophy," though he does not fully explain why.

Gorman defines the "central" kind of being at the heart of metaphysics in the following way:

... we can say that a substance is an independent, unified thing, like a cat. A cat is independent, meaning that it is not dependent on anything else in the particular way that, for example, the cat's weight is dependent on the cat, and unable to exist apart from it. And a cat is unified, meaning that it is not a mere collection, like a pile of trash, but instead a single tight unity (15).

Gorman relies on useful, everyday examples to expound the idea of substance, all aimed at showing that the term, in its deepest sense, designates "whatever is most basic" (23). He explains,

It's hard to avoid the thought that *something* must be most basic and, for that reason, not

dependent on other things,” and “if ‘basic’ things are independent of others, then substances are independent,” for “if you want to know what *a* basic thing is, you have to be asking about *a* being, and therefore you have to be talking about something unified (23).

He thus formulates a handy recapitulation of “substance” in line with the Thomistic tradition and paves the way to introducing the concepts of “nature” and “essence” while avoiding the clutter they cause if excessive attention is paid to the ways in which they both mean and do not mean “substance.” In truth, introductory students are often sidetracked by the nuances in meaning between “substance,” “nature,” and “essence,” and Gorman has good reason to spare them of the confusion that will derail them from the more fundamental questions regarding “substance.”

Also refreshing is Gorman’s decision to forgo analyses of the corresponding Aristotelian texts that can be equally confusing. Some scholars may be dismayed by Gorman’s assessment that Aristotle got “seventy percent of philosophy seventy percent right” (3), but they should nonetheless be encouraged by his reliance on the Stagyrte’s expositions of matter, form, the categories, predication, and causality. They accord with common sense, and Gorman takes advantage of that. The latter is particularly useful in that it helps us to understand how substances act upon other substances and are thus causes in the sense of efficient or agent causes. Gorman elegantly explains that,

once a causal process has happened, the result is a substance that is actual in certain ways: as a result of the agent’s having acted for a certain end, the result is the substance that now has a certain form and matter that make it exist in this or that way, substantial or accidental as the case may be (111).

Nevertheless, there is something more that Gorman could have adopted from Aristotle when it comes to his characterization of theology. Broadly speaking, Gorman seems to suggest that, in some sense, theology only arises with revelation: “Without revelation, theology doesn’t even exist in the first place” (227). That’s not to say that God cannot be studied from a philosophical point of view; Gorman clearly thinks he can and must. Rather, Gorman seems to eschew the contribution Christian revelation and theology can make to metaphysics *qua* philosophy. His colleague at the Catholic University of America, Robert Sokolowski, is an example of someone who allows for this possibility. In other words, Gorman emphasizes the contribution metaphysics can make to understanding the mysteries of Christ’s two natures and of Eucharistic transubstantiation, but it may also be the case that the revelation of those mysteries can, in turn, help us perceive distinctions

between substance and nature, and substance and accidents, for example. Similarly, Aristotle, though not privy to divine revelation, suggests, in an elusive but influential passage in Book VI of the *Metaphysics*, that the study of divine things may help us to perceive more clearly what substance is more generally. In any case, to assert that theology doesn't exist without revelation is, at least, misleading.

In the end, however, this is of little consequence, for the book is accessible, comprehensive, lucid, and versatile. My hope was to find something in it that I could use with my students. Having read it, I can't help but recommend that they read the whole thing, and more than once.

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