

**Farrel, Dominic. ed. *Traditions of Natural Law in Medieval Philosophy*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2023. pp. 229. ISBN: 978-0-8132-3538-7.**

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In a pluralistic age of moral uncertainty, the notion of a universal natural law accessible to human reason remains both vital and contested. *Traditions of Natural Law in Medieval Philosophy* is a scholarly collection that convincingly reaffirms the enduring significance of natural law by exploring its medieval formulations across the three Abrahamic faiths. This volume is not a mere historical survey; it is a thematically unified inquiry into how medieval Jewish, Islamic, and Christian thinkers grappled with the relationship between reason, morality, and divine law. The result is a rich and philosophically rigorous volume that advances the contemporary discourse on natural law in a manner that also serves the Catholic Church's intellectual mission.

Farrell's introduction deftly frames the volume's unifying concern: the tension between the universal claims of natural law and the particularities of religious traditions. As he observes, "the purported universality of natural law is in tension with the tradition-boundedness of any theory thereof. This suggests that natural law cannot be worked out through a mere process of discovery but only through an ongoing dialectical engagement between rival traditions" (p. 12). Accordingly, the volume brings together experts who illustrate how different medieval traditions – Jewish, Islamic, Byzantine, and Latin Christian – approached the idea of a law inherent in human nature. By juxtaposing these perspectives, the collection itself models the "ongoing dialectical engagement" it advocates, showing that our understanding of natural law is deepened in conversation across confessional boundaries. A notable theological coherence is achieved by this focus on a common question, even as each tradition's distinctive framework is given its due.

Part I, "Natural Law in the Religious Traditions of Medieval Philosophy," opens with Jonathan Jacobs's examination of medieval Jewish thought. Strikingly, as Jacobs notes, "there is so little discussion of natural law in [medieval Jewish] thought" (p. 25). However, this lacuna is "not a defect," for "there are rich and extensive resources for moral thought in the Jewish tradition" (p. 25). In other words, Jewish thinkers did not need the terminology of *lex naturae* to articulate enduring moral truths grounded in Scripture and tradition. The volume thus begins by broadening the horizon of natural law beyond Latin Christendom, making clear that the ethical substratum signified by that term can be found across religious cultures. This sets a tone of inclusivity and depth: natural law, properly understood, is not the exclusive province of the scholastics but a theme with resonances in all the children of Abraham.

The second chapter, by Anver M. Emon, turns to the Islamic tradition and navigates between theology (*kalām*) and jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) to uncover analogues of natural law in medieval Islam. Emon shows that classical Muslim jurists, operating within a rigorously religious legal system, still found space to reason about law in the absence of explicit scriptural

directives. In this relative “space of play,” jurists “articulated competing theories of natural law that, while starting from distinct theological/ontological first principles, ultimately reached the same conclusion on natural law” (p. 50). The conclusion was that certain ethical truths and legal norms are discernible by human reason even apart from divine command. This chapter offers considerable philosophical depth by revealing how concepts akin to natural law emerged organically within an Islamic worldview, confirming that the idea of an intrinsic moral order was by no means foreign to Muslim thought. For Catholic readers, such comparative insight underscores the possibility of a rational common ground with Islam on ethical questions — an outcome very much in line with the Church’s commitment to interreligious dialogue and the search for shared moral principles.

Christiaan Kappes follows with a study of Byzantine Christian (Eastern Orthodox) perspectives, demonstrating that medieval Greek theologians, no less than their Latin counterparts, affirmed a form of natural law even if they wrote no dedicated treatises on the topic. As Kappes argues, Byzantine authors did “develop a common, systematic theory of natural law” (p. 12), chiefly by incorporating maxims of Roman law and Stoic ethics as shorthand for universal moral norms. Through this convention, they expressed a “deeply held belief that natural law constitutes the foundation of ethics and civil law and is summed up in the Decalogue” (p. 12). In the Christian East, the law “written on the heart” (cf. Romans 2:15) was understood as harmonious with the revealed law of Scripture. The Byzantine case study adds a further layer of richness to the volume’s tapestry, showing how Hellenistic philosophy and patristic theology were woven together to uphold the notion of an objective moral law. By including the often-neglected Greek East, the volume again serves the Church’s intellectual mission, bridging Eastern and Western Christian heritage and reaffirming that the natural law concept has truly catholic (universal) scope.

Part II of the book, “Scholastic Theories of Natural Law,” narrows the focus to medieval Latin Christianity, where natural law theory reached a high watermark of development. Thomas Aquinas, the “Common Doctor” of Catholic thought, stands at the pivot of this section. Farrell presents Aquinas as synthesizing the breadth of earlier traditions while squarely addressing the central theological problem: Can human reason, independently of revelation, authoritatively discern what fulfills our ultimate end, and if so, is living by reason alone sufficient for salvation? Aquinas’s answer, as carefully explained, is nuanced. On the one hand, reason’s capacity to discover moral truth is affirmed. On the other hand, he insists on the necessity of divine grace, and, in Farrell’s words, “gives a qualified yes to the first question but answers no to the second” (p. 13). By insisting that we need grace for our ultimate end, he “appears to render natural law otiose,” yet Aquinas shows that the natural law “is still necessary and plays two important functions” within his theological framework (p. 13). This delicate balance between nature and grace exemplifies the profundity of Aquinas’s theory and anchors the volume’s theological perspective: the natural law, while universal in scope, finds its full meaning only in relation to humanity’s supernatural end, a view at the heart of Catholic theology.

The subsequent chapters investigate how other medieval Latin thinkers complemented or contested the Thomistic synthesis. Andrea Di Maio explores St. Bonaventure's treatment of *lex naturae* and *ius naturale*, reflecting a Franciscan emphasis on the created order's participation in divine wisdom. Riccardo Saccenti offers a comparative study of two near-contemporaries of Aquinas — the Dominican Peter of Tarentaise (later Pope Innocent V) and the Franciscan Matthew of Aquasparta — both grappling with Aristotelian philosophy to articulate natural law's foundations. Saccenti distills their view in a succinct formula: "Natural law is the knowledge that concerns the supreme principles of moral action and belongs to the practical intellect" (p. 150). This definition, rooted in the distinction between speculative and practical reason, showcases the high scholastic rigor devoted to understanding how human nature itself provides a rational basis for moral norms. Such analysis resonates with the Catholic intellectual commitment to *fides et ratio*, illuminating how faith in a God-given moral order and the work of reason mutually inform each other. The inclusion of these figures broadens the reader's appreciation for the medieval Christian discourse on natural law beyond Aquinas alone.

Perhaps the most provocative contributions in Part II are those on John Duns Scotus and Marsilius of Padua, which illustrate the limits and possibilities of natural law thinking in the later Middle Ages. Martyna Koszka's chapter on Scotus depicts a subtle but significant departure from Thomistic principles. Scotus, with his emphasis on divine omnipotence and freedom, even suggests that God "could set down different laws than those he has actually established" for creation (p. 173). Such ideas, arising from a more voluntarist theological outlook, do not abolish natural law but reframe its contingency and scope. Alessandro Mulieri's chapter on Marsilius of Padua, the 14th-century political theorist, further tests these boundaries — here natural law is treated within a starkly secular framework. Marsilius controversially argues that what we call natural law reduces to human law based on consensus, a view that flirts with moral relativism. Yet even Marsilius, upon refinement, ends up acknowledging natural law as a "dictate of right reason" rooted in a higher order, an unexpected convergence with Thomistic ideas. By including Scotus and Marsilius, the volume does not merely reiterate an official Catholic line on natural law; it bravely engages divergent medieval perspectives. This enriches the collection and prompts readers to reflect critically on how the natural law tradition, even within Christendom, was not monolithic — a historical reality that can deepen our grasp of its essential insights.

Given the breadth of material and the scholarly depth on display, it is noteworthy that the book remains remarkably cohesive. Each chapter, while self-contained in its historical focus, speaks to the overarching questions set out in the introduction. The editor has orchestrated a genuine dialogue among the contributions, so that Jewish, Muslim, and various Christian approaches appear not as isolated studies but as complementary threads in a single tapestry. The volume's internal coherence emerges from this interplay: we witness a common pursuit of moral truth under God, refracted through diverse intellectual traditions. A minor quibble is that, as with many edited collections, there is no final chapter explicitly tying all the insights together; still, Farrell's excellent introduction and the thematic unity

of the work more than compensate. The implicit conversation between chapters invites the reader to make connections and draw deeper conclusions.

In sum, *Traditions of Natural Law in Medieval Philosophy* is a noteworthy contribution to both historical scholarship and contemporary theological discourse. It exemplifies the ideal of a rational quest for truth conducted in fidelity to tradition yet open to insights from every side. The collection vividly shows, in the editor's words, how medieval theories of natural law in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity "offer valuable insights not only on ethics, law, and politics but also on how to engage with rival traditions on these issues" (p. 21). In doing so it truly does "help advance the ongoing conversation" (p. 21) about natural law — a conversation as urgent as ever in today's pluralistic society.

For scholars of philosophy, theology, and canon law, this book provides a wealth of historical knowledge and a model of thoughtful engagement with pluralism. More broadly, it serves the Church's intellectual mission by deepening our understanding of the natural moral law as a truth that, while perfected by divine revelation, extends to all people of good will. In reviving medieval wisdom for modern times, this volume reminds us that the natural law tradition, far from being a mere relic of the past, remains a living and dynamic source for dialogue between faith and reason, Church and world.

**Blaise D. Ringor**

**Zhang, Zhiqing. *The Aesthetic Thought and View of Art of Thomas Aquinas*. Singapore: Springer Nature, 2024. pp. 136. ISBN: 978-981-97-6898-1.**

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In the advent of post-modern claim on aesthetics, those which are relativistic, a call to revisit an objective criterion of beauty must come about. The occurrence of such problem on aesthetics does not only concern relative take on beauty, but one can argue that such conception on beauty is the cause of the emergence of artificial beauty brought forth by the technological advancements e.g., camera filters, photo editing, photo manipulation, AI-assisted photo enhancement and others. With the extremity of subjectivism in such condition, a rethinking of an objective take on beauty was set by this book through the aid of Aquinas' aesthetic thoughts.

The author of this book, Zhiqing Zhang, is a professor at Macau University of Science and Technology. This work is testament to his inclination to aesthetic discourse, in fact, long before this work, he already contributed several journal articles that concern the post-modern condition of aesthetics. His works vary from topics such as film industry, digital media, literature, comparative discourse on eastern and western thought. In some of his works, the thought of Thomas Aquinas was already accorded with his view on some contemporary issues on aesthetics. Such vigor in the field of aesthetics and philosophy leads Zhang towards a comprehensive survey on the aesthetic claims of Aquinas which included discourse with other philosophers – from different eras – that may affirm and negate Aquinas'