

Ensign, Before July 1949

"Being and Some Philosophers," by Etienne Gilson, xi + 219 pp., Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto 1949, \$3.50.

The work presents to a wider public the lectures given at the Mediaeval Institute in 1946. If to settle recondite points scholars will also want the somewhat similar "L'Être et l'Essence" (Paris, 1948), everyone more at home in English will be grateful for the opportunity to assimilate the massive argument along the line of least resistance.

What is meant by "being"? The very question is misleading. A geometer has to be able to define "circle," but he need not care whether our powers of observation and our instruments of measurement are capable of determining whether or not there is a single circle. But can the meaning of "being" be of that type? Can "being" be meant without a "existing" being meant? Further, to move to a profounder level, can questions about the meaning of "being" be settled by straight-forward argument? For it would seem that any principles invoked in argument would presuppose some determinate meaning of "being" and so only beg the question.

Prof. Gilson's critical reflection on the issue is through history. The implications of supposing the meaning of "being" to be like the meaning of "circle" or of "man" are displayed in three cycles. First come the affinities of Parmenides, Plato, Plotinus, Marius Victorinus, pseudo-Dionysius, Eriugena, and Eckhart; in a second chapter are Aristotle, Averroes, and Siger of Brabant; in a third Avicenna, Scotus, and Suarez. The complete break-down of this position appears in the violent oscillations of the series: Wolff, Hume, Kant, Hegel, and Kirkegaard.

In a fifth chapter the position of St. Thomas Aquinas is presented as the solution to the problems raised. The work closes with a discussion of cognitional questions from a logical and grammatical rather than a psychological viewpoint.

Extremely valuable for the brilliant series of historical insights it offers, the book has a much deeper significance. Against the apparent fact that metaphysics has been tried and been found wanting, M. Gilson sets the historical fact that, while a large number of philosophers have tried to think "being" and bungled, one has seen that "being" has to be not conceived but affirmed and he has been rather neglected.

Along with this special relevance to the thought of our day, the work makes a serious contribution to the method of philosophy. Aristotle had employed the dialectic of opinions. Aquinas had affirmed that while conclusions depend upon principles, and principles upon grasp of the relations of their terms, still judgment on the validity of the initial terms ~~was~~ is a matter of wisdom. At least for those who can learn a lesson from the experiments conducted by history, M. Gilson has provided a technique for developing that ultimate wisdom. In this respect the present work complements his "Unity of Philosophic Experience." But since once may be chance, and twice may be coincidence, let us ask for a third performance. Modern wisdom has room for development and, though M. Gilson likes neither the name nor the thing, so also has critical realism.

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