

Fran O'Rourke, Reports for award of DLitt on published work

Preliminary Report

Prof O'Rourke's academic career is impressive on a number of levels...

Undoubtedly, Prof O'Rourke has "published a substantial body of work, of the highest order of scholarship over a sustained period of time" in philosophy. The publications on this list range over a 25-year period. The publications are wide-ranging thematically and in historical extent (ranging over the whole history of philosophy from Plato to Heidegger), but nonetheless have a clear unity and coherence. Prof O'Rourke's writings on the problem of being for philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Pseudo-Dionysius, Aquinas and Heidegger are thorough, of impeccable scholarship and philosophically insightful. These qualities are very much in evidence in the essays collected in his recent publication *Aristotelian Interpretations*. These essays demonstrate not only a thorough knowledge and understanding of the Aristotelian corpus, but also a philosophical sense for the continued relevance of Aristotle in contemporary philosophical debates. The range of Prof O'Rourke's work is very impressive. Along with the question of being, issues of poetry and literature are a recurrent theme in his work and this has informed his interest in the writings of Joyce. Joyce's indebtedness to Aquinas and Aristotle is well known, but few philosophers have taken on the task of investigating these connections. Prof O'Rourke does so both in *Allwisest Stagyrite* and in the final essay of *Aristotelian Interpretations* and in doing so brings a high degree of philosophical scholarship to Joyce studies.

It is also the case that Prof O'Rourke has "added new knowledge of significance" in most of his writings of which I would highlight two: his work on Aristotle and on Aquinas. On the latter, he has carefully shown the lines of indebtedness of Aquinas to Pseudo-Dionysius and in doing so has contributed to the increased realization among scholars of the need to explore the Platonic lineage in Aquinas. With respect to Aristotle, he has not only developed lively and well-grounded interpretations of Aristotle's work, he has also persuasively shown the relevance of the Greek philosopher to contemporary debates. He has done this without falling into any form of nostalgic anachronism, showing clearly where Aristotle's work is no longer relevant while demonstrating above all else that Aristotle's basic intuition into the wondrousness of nature is relevant philosophically today more than ever.

The many endorsements and review of his work which Prof O'Rourke has listed, from such internationally renowned authorities as Alasdair MacIntyre, Malcolm Schofield, Enrico Berti and Werner Beierwaltes give sufficient indication of the "international importance" of his work has gained and his "international distinction as an authority in the field". Prof O'Rourke has an

outstanding international reputation in the area of metaphysics. He is well-known and well-respected. He has merited this recognition over many years of careful scholarship.

Prof O'Rourke has placed quality over quantity with respect to his publications. There is not one of his publications which I would not be happy to recommend to students as authoritative and philosophically stimulating.

Second Stage: First Examiner

I make this recommendation on the basis not only of his international reputation but also of all the material you have forwarded to me, a consistent body of original and innovative work on important themes in the philosophical, theological, and literary traditions, the range of which is truly impressive--from Plato and Aristotle, through Dionysius and Aquinas, to Heidegger and Joyce. This alone demonstrates the quality of O'Rourke's scholarship: a life-long commitment to learning, the willingness to take a reasonable risk by following out the threads of one's scholarly life (with two Doctoral dissertations, to boot), and the ability not only to bridge different thought streams oftend regarded as incompatible – particularly at the time of writing the initial dissertation (as in the case of Dionysius and Aquinas) but also to move into areas beyond one's original comfort zones. I note these works for the record: Three books: *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), Reprint Notre Dame University Press, 2005. *Aristotelian Interpretations* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2016). *Joyce, Aristotle, and Aquinas* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2022). And a further 16 articles some of which will be published in a collected edition entitled *Aquinas and the Platonist Tradition* by the Athens Academy.

In my view, such a case speaks for itself, but for the sake of this recommendation, I will take these works in the order outlined above.

First, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*, a revised version of a doctoral dissertation directed by the famous scholar Gerard Verbeke, is a magisterial work in itself that fits into and directly influences the growing realization over the past thirty years and more that Neoplatonism, especially in the form of the Corpus Dionysiacum (and the *Divine Names* in particular), has an immediate resonance in the Mediaeval Christian tradition, not just in Aquinas' *Commentary on the Divine Names* but in the whole of Aquinas' metaphysics. O'Rourke provides an indispensable guide to both Dionysius and Aquinas with sympathy for both thinkers in their own right and yet a critical appreciation of the achievements of Aquinas in particular, a dual sympathy and appreciation really quite new at the time. As O'Rourke indicates in the Preface, his aim is “to show that, in the encounter of Aquinas with Dionysius, there emerges an integral and comprehensive vision of existence, a vision embracing the finite and the infinite, depicting the universe in its procession

from, and return to, the Absolute and according to each grade of reality, including man, its place in the hierarchy of Being” (xiv–xv). This he does superbly and soundly over the four major parts of the book: First, Knowledge of God in Dionysius and in Dionysian elements in Aquinas; Second, Transcendence of Being and the Good; Third, Transcendent Causality and Existence; and Fourth, Creative Diffusion and the Good. Throughout the work, O’Rourke provides a useful guide for navigating crucial issues in both Dionysius and Aquinas such as negative theology; Aquinas’ *triplex via* in naming God, by comparison with *Divine Names* 7, 3; *esse commune* and *virtus essendi*, or the greater intensity of being; creation in Dionysius; procession and return in Aquinas; *Bonum Diffusivum Sui* – part of O’Rourke’s heritage from Werner Beierwaltes and his stay in Munich, no doubt; and so on.

Even where I disagree with O’Rourke, his judgments are nonetheless appropriate and provocative. One example is his emphasis on the increasing intensity of existence at each stage in the hierarchy of beings, a scale of richness and indigence dependent on procession from God of creation as a descending scale of perfection. For Aquinas and Dionysius, he observes, this does not occur “as for Plotinus and Proclus, by the lessening of God’s causality within creatures, since he is immediately and directly actual within all” (p. 261). I think that this is mistaken, but I know scholars – good scholars – who hold such a view and it is not immediately apparent to me how one might reply to it.

Even more important to my mind, however, is this: O’Rourke shows how to read the differences between Dionysius and Aquinas but in ways which nonetheless allow us to read them together, despite these differences, with mutual illumination. For example, in the case of Dionysius, the Good is primary beyond ousia, as it appears in Plato, *Republic* 6, 509b-c, and beyond both *ousia* and participial being (*on*) as it is in Plotinus. Being is the primary perfection of finite reality (as in Proclus), the primary participation in God, an affirmative path to Divinity but also ultimately a hindrance. Being is, therefore, for Dionysius finally a restriction to our knowledge of God (p. 56).

For Aquinas, by contrast, Being takes on a transcendent value. God as *Ipsium Esse Subsistens* is simultaneously radically unknown in Himself, yet also *Esse* is an intimate feature of all experience in the analogous knowledge of God’s existence and God’s relation to creatures. *Esse* thus becomes the principle or act of intelligibility within beings which can be perceived only as proportionate to the capacity of creatures. In other words, He Who Is (*Qui est*) is the most appropriate name of God, said not merely *causaliter* but rather as denominating the very Being of God, in whom existence and essence are identical.

Here O'Rourke believes, and I agree with him, that Aquinas gets something really important correct about Dionysius and the entire Platonic tradition, namely, the primacy of infinitival *Esse* or *Einai* and its fundamental complementarity with the Good. I do not agree with the whole of his formulation but I do agree with the following: "Aquinas makes his own Dionysius' notion of Being but deepens it in the light of Dionysius' notion of goodness adopting the primacy of the Good asserted by Dionysius, while restoring it to the implicit meaning of Being, which, on deeper reflection, is appreciated as primary" (pp. 275–276). This, I believe, is the correct philosophical conclusion to be drawn from such a comparison between these two great figures. In other words, I find this book compelling thirty years after its initial appearance. And so the endorsement of Alasdair MacIntyre ("This is one of the two or three most important books on Aquinas published in the last fifty years") does not surprise me on the Aquinas side of the comparison.

Second, let me take up the three further books published or projected. But first a note about the format of these edited collections. There is a tendency in the academic world to value monographs as the gold standard above everything else. It seems to me, however, that O'Rourke's natural tendency to develop a series of related articles that will spontaneously emerge into a focused volume should be respected as first-class contributions to scholarly life. O'Rourke makes his case cogently in the Information Section you sent me—and his case is confirmed, quite spectacularly, in fact by endorsements from Alasdair MacIntyre, Malcolm Schofield, Enrico Berti, Lloyd Gerson, and Carlos Steel, the critical judgments of whom are respected, and, indeed, feared, by scholars. Carlos Steel's assessment of *Aristotelian Interpretations* bears citing in full since it seconds my approach to these collections: "This is not just another collection of scholarly articles, of which there are many, but a personal encounter with Aristotle. It starts with a wonderfully poetic evocation of the author's childhood as a budding Aristotelian; the interpretations, however, are mature and original. O'Rourke does not write for a detached scholarly audience or address dry and abstract themes. His thoughtful and reflective essays, scholarly through and through, display a rare empathy with the ancient philosopher and a sensitivity to themes of personal importance to all readers."

O'Rourke's lyrical ability to weave the autobiographical, the personal, into academic narrative and analysis is manifest from the start of the collection. But it only adds to the penetrating analyses of the subsequent work: from the cycles of life in a country childhood to Aristotle's theory of act and potency and then to the spontaneous questions of students "if such transformation is radical substantial change, or a superficial accidental modification" (p. 3). I recognize something immediate and urgent in these pages, but then so do all the other scholars noted above Casual

details link nature, hill walking and learning: “You enter a third dimension and attain a bird’s-glance, a synoptic view of the surrounding spectacle (p. 11)”

Gradually, the love of Aristotle emerges out of the wonder at ordinary and extraordinary things. Ranging from the Irish landscape and folklore to Galileo and Dryden, the book gives real insight into Aristotle that I wish I had read in my own childhood before I was taught to memorize the figures of the syllogisms: “Aristotle’s genius is to have investigated so many aspects of the real world, from diverse points of view, that he opened up varied possibilities of method and insight. Much of current Aristotelian scholarship is technical and exegetic; while this is valid we must not forget that Aristotle was concerned with real questions of the living world, and with human experience in all its amplitude. His goal was wisdom; his writings are devoted to questions of genuine value and still have much to offer. Reading the work of ancient philosophers we should aim to make its dry bones live.” (p. 21)

This aim O’Rourke succeeds in realizing in the ten subsequent essays: on wonder, philosophy, and poetry (chapters 1-2); human nature and destiny and the tension between soul-body unity, on the one hand, and the aspiration for immortality, on the other (chapter 3); Knowledge, necessity and the nature of substance ranging from individual finite things to the Unmoved Mover (Chapter 4); the metaphysics of metaphor and analogy implying the deeper unity of all reality and the human being’s dual nature--material and spiritual (Chapter 5); Aristotle’s political anthropology to be understood as rational and metaphysical rather than biological (Chapter 6).

This is followed by a series of fascinating examinations of evolution in relation to Aristotle’s metaphysics: First, against Guthrie’s view that Aristotle’s theory of substantial form is no longer tenable in a post-Darwinian age, O’Rourke makes a strong case for seeing the principles of act and potency, form and finality, the nature of causation, and the explanation of chance as providing a broader philosophical context for an adequate explanation of evolution. Hence, with certain adaptations, a theory of evolution can be fitted to an Aristotelian view of Being (Chapter 7). Second, on the question of evolutionary ethics, O’Rourke argues, against a widespread sociobiological view that morality is based inordinately upon genetics, that this elides important differences between humans and animals, eliminates purpose, ordinary experience, morality, and ultimately philosophy (Chapter 8).

Third, against typical charges that Aristotle is guilty of ethical egoism or even psychological egoism, O’Rourke argues that while altruism is not an operative concept for Aristotle, the charges of egoism are anachronistic and that if altruism is care for the other for the other’s own sake, then Aristotelian friendship is altruistic. But what we find is that the notion of a ‘naturalistic fallacy’ is

alien to Aristotle's thought: "The distance between 'is' and 'ought' is that between our raw state and the self-project we discern; the dynamism and tension is the freedom experienced as we cover that distance in reflective acts of self-attainment" (p. 27). Aristotle, therefore, can provide a helpful way to understand evolutionary altruism, a way that goes beyond and augments the perspectives of sociobiology or, at least, of its founder. "Altruism fulfils a double function for sociobiology. As well as providing a ground for ethics, it is also important that naturalistic evolutionists can assign an evolutionary role to altruistic behaviour, explaining how it serves the biological imperative of genetic transmission. Otherwise it might potentially embarrass the theory by unmasking itself as a cipher for some (possibly transcendent) value or origin of non-biological inspiration" (p. 225) (Chapter 9).

For me, these three Chapters (7–9) are the most helpful and illuminating, perhaps, of all. Some of the many modern perspectives on, or accounts of, evolution, particularly from the perspectives of sociobiology or neurobehavioral biology tend to be rather limited in conceptual apparatus, producing false binaries (such as mechanical evolution versus creation and design). A fresh look at ancient thought from Anaximander through Empedocles to Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus can bring fresh air to these relatively closed forms of thought. In this context, O'Rourke's Aristotle sheds much needed light on the importance of Aristotle's biology and its intimate relation to metaphysics and the dynamic notion of form together with important ethical perspectives, particularly in relation to *Ethica Nicomachea* Books 8–9, that have been radically misunderstood in the modern world when they might be so helpful, in fact, in broadening our view of what is theoretically and empirically possible. Aristotle does in fact postulate a theory of evolution in *Physics* II 8, complete with what appear to be, *mutatis mutandis*, random mutations 'in the seeds,' but he rejects this not because it is not possible but because it is 'blind'--and this because his view of the primacy of substantial form, as O'Rourke often emphasizes, places relative order, regularity, and intelligibility before any of the chance events that arise because of material conditions.

Fascinating to me in a special way is the final essay on Joyce and Aristotle – and Aquinas (Chapter 10). I remember reading *Portrait of the Artist* during my late adolescence and I recall the conversation on aesthetics with the vivid realization that I could not in any way have come up with such insights. O'Rourke explains to me now why this should be so – Joyce was steeped in the *Metaphysics* and *De Anima* (and Aquinas) for two months in Paris and this provided him with the mental framework of Stephen Daedalus in *Ulysses* (p. 27). Again, this for me is an eye-opener: whereas Ulysses celebrates daytime existence, in *Finnegans Wake* the shadows prevail (p. 246). "The logic of identity, of 'either/or', ruled by the law of non-contradiction, is subsumed into a unity of opposites governed by the paradox of 'both/and'. Aristotle gives way to Nicholas of Cusa, alias Micholas de

Cusack: dichotomies ‘by the coincidence of their contraries reamalgamerge in that indentity of indiscernibles’ (p. 247). This makes perfect sense to me--except that I have a rather different view of Nicholas than Joyce, the author (at least). Finally, in Chapter 6 (*Beauty: Joyce’s Thomist Aesthetics*, especially 164-199 before the rejection of a Hegelian Joyce) of *Joyce, Aristotle, and Aquinas* (2022) on *integritas*, *consonantia*, and *claritas*, I was impressed with the rigour of O’Rourke’s analysis of the two versions of the book and intrigued to discover that Joyce got many of the details wrong and that he was evidently working from memory (see also Appendix, 235 and ff.)! This third book, in fact, is an invaluable handbook to all three thinkers with penetrating and memorable analysis of passages in both Aristotle and Aquinas.

In short, what a book is this *Aristotelian Interpretations*! Not since reading Stephen R. Clark’s *Aristotle’s Man* (Oxford, 1975) or Jonathan Lear’s *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand* (Cambridge 1988) [and, of course, I must include Joseph Owens too] have I learned or appreciated so much about the Philosopher.

In coming to the final two books I shall limit my scope to certain details of O’Rourke’s work for the sake of brevity. I have already indicated above my overall view of *Joyce, Aristotle, and Aquinas* (2022): it is an invaluable handbook to an understanding of all three figures from an unusual and, therefore, particularly helpful perspective. In the amateur philosopher portrayed by O’Rourke who cannot systematically or more deeply explore the questions that grip him, one may come to see more clearly the philosophies of Aristotle and Aquinas and, at the same time, appreciate the different force of art that really propelled Joyce. This seems to be part of the Conclusion or Epigraph to the Joyce book. I think it is also borne out by one chapter that I found particularly interesting: Chapter 4: *Identity, Soul, and Substance*, in which O’Rourke sets out Aristotle and Aquinas’ view of the creation and emergence of the Intellectual soul, the Catholic teaching based in part upon it in Ireland, its burgeoning focus in Stephen Daedalus’ stream of consciousness, and the central dilemma of modern thought that ensues. O’Rourke cleverly employs this “steady monologue of the interiors’ (*Finnegans Wake* 119, 32–33), imbued as it is with the weight of ancient, medieval, and modern thought, as a lens through which to meditate upon one of the central problems of modern thought in literature, culture, philosophy, and religion: “Is there an abiding substantial self, underlying the flux of consciousness and its contents. The dominant modern belief is that there is not” (p. 101). This radical homelessness of the contemporary self O’Rourke traces back to Descartes, Locke, Hume in whose thought the “personal, individual, substantial self disappears” (p. 102) and through such figures as William James, Virginia Woolf, Daniel Dennett, and Richard Rorty, and back again to the endless abyss of the soul in Augustine and Heraclitus. Of course, this is not entirely original today – but it is a guide I could have used in my earlier

academic life, because it is clear-sighted, personal without being intrusive, and insightful with real substance. O'Rourke produces no procrustean resolutions, no *deus ex machina*: instead, he charts the persistent provocation of the question, positive, quasi-positive and negative in Joyce's writing. The chapter goes on to provide a magisterial treatment of *ousia* (substance/substantial reality) and *physis* (nature) in relation to *eidos* (form) and the strange word Aristotle apparently coined to refer to the determination of what something in its origin was determined to be, the "what it was to be" (*to ti ēn einai*). O'Rourke's command of this material is impeccable--as is also his treatment of the development of Trinitarian theology, as part of the story of *ousia*, including transubstantiality, prior to Joyce's own remarkably apt observation: "Entweder transubstantiality oder consubstantiality but in no case subsubstantiality" (*Ulysses* 14, 307-308) (p. 118). -- this is a kind of prolonged meditation upon the mistranslation of *ousia* as 'substance,' that is, 'something standing under,' a translation of *hypokeimenon*, not *ousia*, as O'Rourke makes clear.

This alone would be worth the price of admission, but the chapter concludes with a well-rounded assessment of Joyce's notion of self--partly in relation to Aristotle's *entelechy* (for Joyce, "Neither the Humean bundle theory nor Lockean memory identity can explain the unity amid the diversity of psychological phenomena or the permanence that underlies change" [p. 131]) together with an illuminating section entitled "Joyce's use of Michael Maher's Psychology Handbook." The short concluding paragraph is a succinct gem, summing up through Joyce's own words the dilemma explored throughout the chapter: To the suggestion that he give Bloom a rest, Joyce replied that Stephen Daedalus "has a shape that can't be changed" and that Buck Mulligan's wit "wears threadbare," whereas Bloom "is like a battery that is being recharged. He will act with all the more vigour when he does reappear."

In the words of Michael Gillespie for Florida International University: "This is a scholarly work that respects the intelligence of its readers and acknowledges the range of interpretive possibilities that can be supplemented by a greater sense of the elaborate and at times conflicted intellectual context from which Joyce's writing emerged."

This review/reference letter is already too long and so I shall be very brief about the fourth book *Aquinas and the Platonist Tradition*, which is very interesting indeed, insofar as it provides: 1) a mature balanced account of Plato and Aristotle in the thought of Aquinas from the work of many scholars over the past 30 years but particularly reflective of O'Rourke's own scholarly meditation -- with special treatments of the following: 2) of beauty from Plato, Augustine, Dionysius, to *claritas*, *integritas*, *consonantia*, and the metaphysics of beauty in Aquinas, that I would recommend to any of my students, graduate or undergraduate; 3) of the immortality of the soul in Plato and Aquinas; 4)

of the triplex via of naming God; with a very interesting *Nachleben* of figures up to Meister Eckhart, Nicholas of Cusa, Denys the Carthusian, Pico della Mirandola, Descartes, Kant, and beyond – quite a wonderful and useful range together with an always apt conclusion from Plutarch: “speech we learn from men, but silence from the gods;” 5) of unity in Aquinas’ *Commentary on the Liber de Causis*, of which Richard Taylor, no mellow commentator himself on occasion, has written: ““Fran O’Rourke’s ‘Unity in Aquinas’ Commentary on the *Liber de causis*’ is the most penetrating, thorough and insightful account of the importance of the notion of unity in this work by Aquinas in relation to the *De causis* itself and its sources in Proclus and Plotinus to appear in print to date. His account is grounded in impressive and careful analysis and research and is thoughtfully documented in notes for scholars who might wish to pursue the issues in detail.” And so on.

I have read this book for the purposes of writing this reference, but I will come back to it again and again and I will also recommend it to my students, since it is the distillation of an entire scholarly life that, in addition, provides, among other things, a comprehensive assessment of Plato, Aquinas, and Jacques Maritain; a treatment of the question of evil and its sources for the *De Malo*; and a comparative investigation into Plato’s approach to Being and Heidegger’s assessment (of which O’ Rourke is rightly if judicially critical).

I hope that my assessment will be helpful for you in your deliberations. On the basis of all the above and with special appreciation for the scholarly expertise, lyrical accessibility, and deepening maturity of O’Rourke’s vision over the past thirty years and more, I recommend wholeheartedly that the National University of Ireland award Fran O’Rourke the distinguished degree of Doctor of Letters.

Report of Second Examiner (responding to specified criteria)

That the candidate will have published a substantial body of work, of the highest order of scholarship in the field in question, over a sustained period of time.

Professor’s O’Rourke has certainly published a substantial body of work over a sustained period of time. Partly because his most distinctive work straddles two areas, namely Aristotelian scholarship and Joyce Studies, he falls into a select group whose work defies assessment relative to ‘the’ field in question. In fact, this work— although certainly not all of his work—is manifestly interdisciplinary in a way rarely seen. He brings an authentic and mature authority to bear in both areas, offering a surprising and welcome interpollinating illumination.

That the work published, in the judgment of the assessors, has added new knowledge of significance to the field in question.

On the question of the intersection of Aristotelian scholarship and Joyce Studies, the answer here is easy and positive. His work is informed, fascinating, and utterly distinctive. Moving out into other areas of ancient and medieval philosophy, the matter becomes more complex.

That the work is of international importance and that, based on the published work, the scholar can be considered to have gained, or to merit, international distinction as an authority in the field.

Here I can do no better than to cite the words of two sets of reviewers of his collected work in *Aristotelian Interpretations*: The first comes from the leading source of book reviews in Philosophy: “While he is well aware of the exegetical and philosophical work on Aristotle done by (for instance) Johan Cooper, Terence Irwin G.E.R. Lloyd, Martha Nussbaum, and Ricard Sorabji, his own approach is different, focusing mainly on what the French would call the grandes lignes of Aristotle’s philosophy or what we might call his Big Ideas. . . Such is the wonderfully humane Aristotelian vision that O’Rourke offers for our consideration.” (*Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*) Here is it noteworthy that the reviewer places Professor O’Rourke into the company of a series of scholars, all of whom incontestably qualify as world-leading. The same can be said of Malcolm Schofield (University of Cambridge), author of this assessment: “A refreshingly different collection of essays, generous in its range of reference, acute in mature philosophical judgment, and wearing great learning lightly. The volume is bookended by autobiographical reflections (in which Aristotle’s surprising presence in Irish folk tradition emerges), and by a study of his impact on James Joyce. In between O’Rourke gives us Aristotle whole: metaphysics, natural philosophy, psychology, ethics, aesthetics. This is an Aristotle who still has much to teach and intrigue us.” These remarks in my estimation capture what is distinctive about O’Rourke’s work: it is mature, informed, pulsating with scholarly excitement, and unafraid to sketch out broad, important themes in ways permitting him to chart their relevance to our philosophical condition today.

Taking all that together, in my estimation, as a corporate judgment, Professor O’Rourke has met the standards set down in these criteria.

Recommendation that degree be awarded.