

IN MEMORIAM

JAN A. AERTSEN

In the night of January 7th to 8th 2016 we lost Jan Aertsen.

Jan Adrianus Aertsen, born on September 7th 1938 in Amsterdam, was since 1984 a professor at the Vrije Universiteit at his home town, where he had also defended his PhD title. From 1993 to 2004 he was a professor at the Cologne University and director of Thomas Institut. He held up for many years with his patient and tough fight against the cancer. Not only that he did not surrender to the illness, but he did in the meantime succeed to bring to conclusion his masterwork *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought. From Philip the Chancellor (ca. 1225) to Francisco Suárez* (Leiden: Brill 2012) that crowned his exceptional contribution to the studies of Western Medieval philosophy. Without any doubt could we say that with his books, numerous articles and editorships Jan changed the paradigm in our conception and definition about the medieval philosophy from the beginning of 8th century to the epoch of Descartes and Spinoza. The beginning of this process is set by the English translated edition of his study – based on his doctoral thesis – *Nature and Creature. Thomas Aquinas's Way of Thought* (Leiden: Brill 1988), published in Dutch four years afore. His approach and his interpretation found their definite consolidation in *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals. The Case of Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill 1996).

The scholastic theory of the transcendentals was of course known yet before his analyses. The scholars of the generation before him were giving that theory a place among the main conceptions in Medieval philosophy, and especially in regard to Thomas Aquinas. Jan however proved that this theory is not just one among several important ideas, but the main one: the pivotal axis that gives structure to all the rest. The transcendentals (*transcendentia, transcendentalia*) are the corner stone of the scholastic metaphysics, conceived as ontology. The transcendentals – *ens, unum, bonum, verum* etc. – are the main properties of the being given in all its forms that provide to metaphysics the possibility to function as a demonstrative science. Gnoseologically transcendentals assume the function of the first definitions

that the human intellect gives to each of its subject-matters; they are, hence, the first foundations of every intellection and conceptual knowledge. They are, furthermore, the philosophical approach to the transcendent being, and thus they provide the foundation of the philosophical notion of God. The transcendentals are, finally, the instrument reconciling Aristotelian and Platonic themes in the Latin philosophy.

It is Aertsen's merit to have demonstrated that the scholastic philosophy makes part of a "theological synthesis", within which the philosophical way of thinking regains its autonomy as knowledge distinct from the knowledge of the Revelation and, respectively, as directed towards natural phenomena. Moreover, shows Aertsen, the theory of the transcendentals and its ramifications, even in the later confuting theories, is the actual and autonomous contribution of the epoch to the Western philosophical thought.

After the mid-90s Jan's research interest was oriented towards the study of various representative figures of the transcendentals theory and their specificities in High and Late Scholasticism. The results of this work formed his 'Meisterwerk', his last study that showed the many creative ways in which the transcendentals theory was developed up until 17th century.

Jan Aertsen had a connection to Bulgaria, in particular with the Bulgarian school for Medieval philosophy studies. He published three articles in the Bulgarian journal *Archiv für mittelalterliche Philosophie und Kultur*. This is just the visible result of an intense collaboration that brought him personally to Bulgaria. Nothing (and there was some!) could shake his determination to collaborate in two events of great importance in Bulgaria. The second one, organized by the Sofia University and Thomas-Institut Köln, was the big congress *Die Dionysius-Rezeption imMittelalter* (1999) which gave to the Bulgarian school for Medieval studies its definitive recognition. But it was the first of those both events that played a decisive role.

It was in 1995 that Jan, stoically enduring transportation hardships and Balkan heat, took part in the first meeting of the Bulgarian medieval scholars with some of the leading, as well as some of the then-young scholars of Thomas-Institute. It was held in Blagoevgrad where not only the beginning of our systematical work was laid; moreover, it was there that Jan noticed and defined the characteristic of the Bulgarian medieval studies. He said, "Guys, what you could do is translate among the traditions [the Latin

and the Byzantine ones]. Push it there.” And so we pushed. But it is clear now that this “push” wouldn’t have ever succeeded if it were not the unconditional help given to us by the Thomas-Institute, i.e. by its structure, its members, and – of course – by its director.

The personal merits of Jan Aertsen for the development of the medieval philosophy have global dimensions. Besides the changes that he brought to its form and content with his own studies, he brought also an active support for the academic institutionalizing and structuring of the medieval philosophy. It is not a case that he was a welcome guest professor in all Europe, as well as throughout the United States. Jan was one of the most energetic members of the Société Internationale pour l’Étude de la Philosophie Médiévale (SIEPM) and as its vice-president (1997-2007) he organized, in collaboration with Andreas Speer, the indisputably most brilliant to the present moment world congress of SIEPM in Erfurt 1997. He was one of the determinant founders of the Gesellschaft für Philosophie des Mittelalters und der Renaissance (GPMR). He brought to life the journal *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie médiévales* and its book series, he founded Thomas Institute in Utrecht... And so much more.

Jan was doing all that with his exceptional academic and personal allure, being always fascinated by the talent and the beauty of science. Jan never forgot his self-irony and his unceasing sense of humour that wiped out the distance imposed by his tremendous scholarly authority. He was a beloved teacher and mentor of an entire generation of medieval scholars and his pupils are today the craftsmen that shape the face of medieval philosophy, following in Jan Aertsen’s footsteps.

May he rest in peace and his legacy be remembered.

G.K.