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## Review of “Aims: A Brief Metaphysics for Today”

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## Book Review

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*Aims: A Brief Metaphysics for Today*, James W. Felt. Notre Dame, ID: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007. Pp. xii + 125. Bibliography and index. US \$20 (paper ISBN-13:978-0-268-02901-6).

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James Felt, Jesuit priest and professor emeritus of philosophy at Santa Clara University, has written before on the issues that inform this slim volume, most notably in *Making Sense of Your Freedom: Philosophy for the Perplexed* (Cornell, 1994), another slim volume, which is a wonderful book. The present volume, which seeks to cast a wider net by sketching the contours of a more comprehensive metaphysic, is equally provocative. It summarizes the findings of Felt's *Coming to Be: Toward a Thomistic-Whiteheadian Metaphysics of Becoming* (SUNY, 2001) and *Human Knowing: A Prelude to Metaphysics* (Notre Dame, 2005).

Proposing a plausible metaphysics--even in sketch--in 125 pages is an audacious enterprise, but Felt is eminently qualified to do it. *Aims* is not an easy read, but this is not because it poorly written; the style is condensed but graceful and engaging. Rather, the difficulty stems from the nature of the issues addressed, which are foundational, complex, and nuanced--in addition to being controversial. Felt explicitly presents his view of metaphysics from a definite perspective. To say that he is an "old style" Thomist would be a mistake, since he is much influenced by the thought of Bergson and Whitehead; but he does think that insights from St. Thomas and process thought can be joined together in a coherent and illuminating way.

Felt's starting point is a brief phenomenology of human experience. This reveals, he thinks, several important features of knowledge and reality. (1) Human knowers are in causal interaction with an objective, extra-mental world of which they are a part. Here Felt defends a version of realism, both ontological and epistemological, that he calls relational realism (5-7, 38-39, 46-51, 120). (2) There is a forward-looking teleology built into human experience as a basic feature--a feeling--of human consciousness. Humans have aims, including an essential one, which determine their essential character (32, 62). Essential character is a product of essential aim, not the other way around. Put in more Thomistic language, the human formal cause derives from its final one (33, 35, 68-69). (3) The teleological structure of human experience is the reflection of a like structure in the whole of the natural world, so that the former serves as a primary analogate for understanding the metaphysical basis of teleology, not only in human experience itself, but also in the world of extra-mental objects. Teleology reflects "the most fundamental structure of all natural activity" (3); "*all basic activities within nature are goal-directed*" (22). Felt realizes that he is extrapolating his teleological perspective from human experience to some sort of experience, even if not usually conscious, for everything in the world, but he does not see this as mere anthropomorphizing.

Rather, it follows from thinking of human experience as an outgrowth of the evolution of the universe, and because “*all potentiality for further existing must reside in what is already actual*” (22). Given what we find at the end, namely human experience, which is where we begin with a teleological perspective, we have to project an experiential, teleological perspective back into the entire process leading up to us. This dovetails nicely with Whitehead’s panexperientialism (67, 84-85).

For Felt, in short, there is a dynamic structure running through the entire cosmic process toward some kind of fulfillment, whether in the rational self-consciousness of human beings, or in some other sort of *telos* appropriate to other beings, that gives to each finite entity, in its essential character as a “primary being” (Felt’s translation of the Greek *ousia*), its essential aim. The task of a metaphysical teleology such as Felt proposes is to describe this structure-of-aims and to understand, if possible, its origin, that is, to inquire into the origin of the feeling of aim at the heart of human experience (76).

To do this Felt introduces some principles. I mention two that seem most relevant in a brief review. The first is that every primary being is characterized by an act of existing that has three modes: the act of existing itself (*esse*), the act of coming into being, and the consequent activity (*agere*) that flows from the act of existing (21). The most important of these modes in a teleological metaphysics is the third, wherein a primary being is regarded as essentially active, as existing by *real-izing* or actualizing itself, starting from an intrinsic essential aim proper to it. The second principle has to do with two sorts of polarity that characterize primary beings: one between potency (or possibility) and act in existing as consequent activity, an inner dynamic that runs through all finite things that have come to be and that have to act to realize themselves in accordance with their essential aim, and a second in which all acts of existing tend back toward the source from which they are received (75-76, 86, 94, 103, 123).

Where does the essential aim of a primary being come from? Felt rejects the idea that it can give itself its essential aim; primary beings cannot provide for themselves their own essential aims. They must come from without (33, 36, 44, 62, 64-65, 107, 113, 121). From where? Not from other finite primary beings through evolution or procreation (84, 91-92, 95, 102). Instead, Felt argues that all finite acts of existing flow by participation from a limitless source of existing, a pure act of existing, which he calls Alpha (78, 81), and which source is, as such, the origin of all essential aims (85, 102-103, 110, 112, 121).

Much of this is Thomistic, but the form it takes also owes much to Whitehead. For Whitehead, God experiences (feels) the world-situation of each actual entity (= primary being), both the past that prepares the way for it and the future possibilities that coming into being opens up. More generally, God feels the world as a unique matrix of possibility for an interrelated order of primary beings (85, 87). In addition, each nascent being experiences or feels God *in God’s feeling for it*, thereby acquiring its own essential aim (87-88, 99-100). There is thus bipolarity here as well: In receiving its essential aim from Alpha as source, primary beings also receive the impetus to return (in a manner reminiscent of Plotinus) to Alpha as the Omega.

There is much to ponder in Felt’s book. I limit myself to three comments. The first has to do with the relation in his metaphysics between the essential aim of a primary being and what Aristotelian/Thomistic authors refer to as its substantial form. For Thomists the *telos* of a finite

being is a consequence of its substantial form; for Felt it is the reverse, since, as noted earlier, a being formal cause (its essential character) derives from its final cause (its essential aim. How can this be? It seems that in coming into existence, mode two of the act of existing, a being must have a determinate form (or essential character) in order to have an essential aim appropriate to that aim. Felt is aware of this worry (84, 89, 96, 101, 107, 133n6), but fairly addressing his response would take me too far afield.

A second comment concerns Felt's view of evolution, both cosmic and biological. To his credit, Felt takes this seriously, but not, I think, seriously enough. He resists, rightly, a naïve emergentism that has life, sentience (feeling) and self-consciousness spontaneously arising from brute matter. But he seem so concerned to preserve the ultimacy of Alpha as the source of every act of existing and every essential aim that he is led to deny that, e.g., human parents are able to produce a human child. To be sure, they provide necessary conditions, but it is always Alpha, here and elsewhere, that actualizes them. The central issue, of course, is the vexed question of whether, and if so how, finite, created beings can act on their own. Felt is aware that his position seems to leave allegedly "self-actualizing" beings virtually impotent in their relations to Alpha (84, 90-91, 95, 112-113), but his reply (that the alternative is Deism) is unconvincing.

A final comment concerns the Alpha which is also the Omega of his teleological metaphysics. On the one hand, Alpha is supposed to be pure act without any potentiality whatsoever. But on the other, It supposedly feels the world situation of every primary being. How can this be? Here Whiteheadians often distinguish between the "primordial nature" of God, which is unchanging, and God's "consequent nature," which changes in response to creaturely evolution. But Felt's Alpha is explicitly said to experience, in Alpha's primordial nature, the factuality of the whole world, including its "available possibilities" for value (87). Is Alpha affected by that experience, that feeling? Is It changed by it as the universe evolves and the nexus of possibilities change? One would think that It should be, but an Alpha of pure act leaves no room for that. This is one place (there are others) where an attempt to combine the insights of St. Thomas and Whitehead looks, at best, problematic.

Despite these reservations, I liked Felt's book. What I most admire about it is his honest, straightforward attempt to grapple with the issues that the great metaphysicians of the past--Plato, Aristotle, St. Thomas, Leibniz, Bergson, and Whitehead, among others--rightly thought were important, instead of dismissing them as nonsense (logical positivists), dissolving them (Wittgensteinians), or deconstructing them (post-modernists). He seriously explores philosophical terrain where few contemporary thinkers care to venture, for which I commend him. Felt's conclusions will likely not appeal to readers who do not share his perspective, even though he rightly argues that in doing metaphysics taking a perspective cannot be avoided (17-19). In any case, one will find in his presentation none of the opacity and obfuscation that seem to delight the followers of other world-be metaphysicians, e.g., Heideggerians. I warmly recommend it as a provocative introduction to an important subject.

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5.0 rating 1 review. In *Aims: A Brief Metaphysics for Today*, James W. Felt turns his attention to combining elements of Thomas Aquinas's metaphysics, especially its deep ontology, with Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy to arrive at a new possibility for metaphysics. In his distinctive style, Felt concisely pulls together the strands of epistemology, ontology, and teleology, synthesizing them into a new metaphysics. In *Aims: A Brief Metaphysics for Today*, James W. Felt turns his attention to combining elements of Thomas Aquinas's metaphysics, especially its deep ontology, with Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy. The *Review of Metaphysics* is a peer-reviewed academic journal of philosophy. It was established by Paul Weiss and the first issue was published in September 1947. The journal's primary sponsor is and has been The Catholic University of America, but other major universities help sustain it. The journal publishes articles on metaphysics and on the history of philosophy. It also has a large book review section and lists the abstracts of other English-based philosophy journals. Once a year, it publishes *Review*. "The notion of teleology is deeply embedded in the origins of Western philosophy as exemplified by Aristotelian philosophy. James W. Felt's book, entitled *Aims: A Brief Metaphysics for Today*, attempts to continue this tradition by constructing a teleological, or goal-oriented, or metaphysics in a succinct and easily accessible work of philosophy. Felt draws upon the work of Aristotle, and more often on that of Aquinas and Whitehead, through a method of phenomenological interpretation. . . . The *Review of Metaphysics* is devoted to the promotion of technically competent, definitive contributions to philosophical knowledge. Not associated with any school or group, not the organ of any association or institution, it is interested in persistent, resolute inquiries into root questions, regardless of the writer's affiliations. Published for over seventy years, *The Review of Metaphysics* has established itself as an unrivaled resource for the profession both in the major research libraries of the world and in the private libraries of professors, scholars, and students of philosophy.