David Bradshaw. *Divine Energies and Divine Action: Exploring the Essence-Energies Distinction*. IOTA Publications, 2023. xvii+226 pp. $26.95 (paper); $9.95 (e-book).

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As the title suggests, David Bradshaw's new book – *Divine Energies and Divine Action: Exploring the Essence-Energies Distinction* – promises a sustained analysis of a critical theological distinction, one which is foundational to the development of Eastern Christian thought. The distinction between the divine essence and the divine energies is not only of central importance to the history of Christian thought, but it is equally important to our current reflections on the divine – bearing, as it does, on how we conceive of God's relation to us and the world. Theologically, the essence-energies distinction carves a middle way between divine transcendence and divine immanence, while maintaining both. It provides a framework for religious epistemology (how God is knowable to us) as well as profound considerations on the nature of participation in the divine. As Bradshaw explains: "The divine essence is God as he is in himself, unknowable not only to man but to any created intellect; the energies are God as he manifests himself and gives himself to be shared by creatures" (27). Nevertheless, the essence-energies distinction has remained ill-defined and difficult to apprehend. In this light, Bradshaw's work is of great interest. His newest book is a worthy successor to his previously published monograph, *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom* (Cambridge, 2004), which is by any measure a watershed moment in the contemporary study of the essence-energies distinction. His current work builds on this foundation (though it is not necessary that one first read the previous monograph) by expanding on his analysis and responding to critics of his work. His latest book, then, comes highly recommended.

A few words should be said about the structure of the book and Bradshaw's scholarly approach. The book is a collection of eight essays, most of which were previously published elsewhere. As a collection of essays written over time (rather than a monograph), the reader can follow the development of Bradshaw's thought. The first chapter summarizes the central conclusions of his previous book (*Aristotle East and West*), while the end provides a response to critics, as well as an updated account of his view on the essence-energies distinction. Bradshaw is one of the preeminent intellectuals in this area, and he proves to be an exceptionally competent guide. Bradshaw's role is neither as a theologian nor as an apologist – but considering that the essence-energies distinction is a fundamental tenet of Eastern Christian thought, it might be tempting to classify Bradshaw (who is an Eastern Orthodox Christian) as an apologist. He denies this charge – which, he notes, is implied by one of his critics (166) – and says he is a philosopher whose "interest lies in how western philosophy and Christian theology have interacted with one another, as well as how this interaction has shaped subsequent western thought" (166). Bradshaw's claim is supported by a careful

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reading of his work. He is foremost a philosopher and intellectual historian, firmly rooted in the ancient texts of Plato and Aristotle, the Latin West (such as Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus), and the Greek East (such as the Cappadocians, John of Damascus, Gregory Palamas, etc.), as well as biblical scholarship. In this, he does not become an apologist for the Greek East against the Latin West – as he says in the conclusion: "the essence-energies distinction is not the unique property of Orthodoxy but belongs to the common inheritance of all Christians" (204).

The first chapter introduces the discussion and provides an overview of the history of the essence-energies distinction. For this reason, I will spend a bit more time outlining some of the main points, since these themes are touchstones for the rest of the book, and it will show the breadth of Bradshaw's engagement with the topic. One of the most influential figures in this history is St. Palamas (1296-1359), whose writings Bradshaw says can be understood as "the culmination of the Greek patristic tradition … representing the best and most cogent way of understanding the relation of God to the world" (1). It is in Palamas that we get a full-throated account of the divine essence and divine energies. But he has been virtually unknown among philosophers in the west, dismissed as "outside the patristic mainstream" (27). This omission, Bradshaw maintains, is because the supporters of his work have "failed to place his thought within the history of western philosophy … and they have failed to explain it directly in relation to its biblical sources" (2). Overcoming these failures, and placing Palamas within the patristic mainstream, is what motivates the chapter's discussion and much of the book.

To understand the historical development of the essence-energies distinction (and thereby locating Palamas in this context), Bradshaw traces the concept of "energies" (*energeiai*) from the ancient Greeks to St. Paul, through several Christian writers such as the Cappadocian Fathers, St. Maximus the Confessor, and others. Bradshaw notes that Aristotle was the first to coin the term *energeia*, which he came to use in two different senses: for both activity and actuality. Aristotle distinguishes *energeia* from motion/change in that the latter "is ordered toward some extrinsic end," while "an *energeia* is its own end" (3). These different senses of activity and actuality coincide with respect to (for example) thought, living, flourishing, but most interestingly, in the Prime Mover "whose substance (οὐσία) is *energeia*" (3-4). This activity/actuality of the Prime Mover is further identified with thinking itself, as pure intellect/energy, which implies that the Prime Mover is intelligible to us. Bradshaw contrasts this with Plato's account of the Good, which Plato famously says in the *Republic* is "beyond being" (509b). The comparison between the Prime Mover and the Good is a comparison between two different first principles – Aristotle's first principle is knowable, while Plato's is ultimately unknowable. Both approaches were later harmonized by Plotinus, who maintained that Plato's Good (or the One) is the true source of all, while Aristotle's Prime Mover (or pure energy or intellect) arises from the Good as the first hypostasis. In this way, Plotinus balances the apophatic and kataphatic approaches to the divine, identifying *energeia* with the intelligible outpouring of the otherwise unknowable source (which proved to be influential in later Christian reflection).

Bradshaw then turns to the New Testament and St. Paul's use of *energeia*, noting that scholars have not paid sufficient attention to Paul's nuance. First, Paul uses *energeia* to refer only to spiritual beings (God, Satan, or demons), which Bradshaw notes was a striking departure from the norm, so much so that it established a precedent among Christian writers. Second, Paul uses *energeisthai* not in the middle form, as is now widely thought, but only in the passive form. Thus, *energeisthai* would be understood as either "to be acted upon" or "to be made effective, to be energized" (11). The Church Fathers uniformly hold to the

passive interpretation of Paul, but this way of reading him was lost by the time of the Reformation. The importance of this should be underscored, for the passive usage of *energeisthai* highlights Paul's synergistic ontology. That is, God works in us (his energies), yet not against human free agency; rather, both coincide. Thus, divine energy is at work in us to transform us, to enable us; yet at the same time our actions are our own, as we are given the capacity to act through God's work in us. In fact, it is through God's work in Paul that he becomes free (as Bradshaw suggests that Colossians 1:29 should be read) (12). Bradshaw points out that adherents of *sola fide* cannot adopt the passive reading in, for example, Galatians 5:6, for doing so would be inconsistent with *sola fide*.

Bradshaw then turns to the development of the essence-energies distinction in later Christian thought. He mainly focuses on the Cappadocian Fathers (St Basil the Great, St Gregory of Nyssa, St Gregory Nazianzus), who took the biblical theophanies as providing evidence of this distinction – for example, the burning bush in Exodus 3. They also identified different expressions of divine energies, some of which are intended for our *participation* in the divine (reflecting Paul's synergistic ontology), which in the Greek patristic tradition is the process known as *theōsis* or deification – which is "an ongoing and progressively growing participation in the divine energies" (19). It is through this participation in the divine that we can know God, not through inference or feeling, but as "knowledge that comes through sharing actively in the work of another, thereby coming to know the other as the author of that work" (20). Rather than losing our individuality in this participation with the divine, as would be the case with Plotinus's account, the essence-energies distinction of the Cappadocians requires our personhood as essential to the activity (following Pauline synergistic ontology).

Finally, Bradshaw ends the chapter by comparing these results with Augustine and Aquinas, as well as highlighting some advantages the Greek patristic account has over traditional western theology. According to Bradshaw, Augustine's understanding of God is essentially only one side of Plotinus' account, namely, the identification of God with Truth/Intellect. Accordingly, the divine essence is in principle knowable to us through the intellect; in this, Augustine does not make use of the apophatic approach, wherein God's essence is entirely beyond our intellectual capacities. Thus, in the afterlife the blessed in heaven will enjoy "a direct vision of the divine essence" (23). On this matter, Aquinas follows Augustine (and Aristotle) and maintains that God's essence is intrinsically knowable, even though our current state in this life prevents us from having this knowledge – nevertheless, our *telos* is to know the divine essence, and this is achievable as a pure act of intellect (24). Bradshaw ends the discussion by raising questions about the doctrine of divine simplicity, and he argues that the philosophical problems with divine simplicity are not present with the essence-energies distinction.

In chapters two through five, Bradshaw develops these themes, both in breadth of research and philosophical engagement. Chapter 2 continues with his analysis of *energeia* and *energein* as these occur in Paul's writings. He begins by framing the discussion through Palamas, who "attempted to defend the possibility of a real participation in the divine life without implying or endorsing pantheism" (27). Bradshaw then examines the passages in the New Testament that contain *energeia* and *energein*, and continues his analysis of the middle and passive forms. His analysis includes the works of patristic authors, such as St. Justin Martyr, St. Clement of Alexandria, St. John Chrysostom, St. Dionysius the Areopagite, and St. Maximus the Confessor.

Chapter 3 focuses on divine glory in the Old Testament. The topic of divine glory, Bradshaw notes, "has been met by a seeming conspiracy of neglect among philosophers"

(57). Beginning with Augustine, he compares the western tradition to the Cappadocian Fathers, and he argues that their account does justice to the divine glory in a way that Augustine's does not. This is because the Cappadocian Fathers consider the divine glory through their view of the divine energies, which presents richer opportunities for thinking about God. Bradshaw notes that Scripture gives two ways of participation in the divine life: sharing in divine glory and divine energy. But divine glory is virtually absent in western theological discussion, because (following Augustine) the divine glory either is assumed to be created, or to be another name for the divine being (78). The same absence holds for western discussions of the divine energies. This is largely due to the loss of the apophatic approach to knowledge of God, which has been influenced by the Augustinian view of divine simplicity – but "once the Augustinian-Thomistic understanding of divine simplicity goes, then the constraints it imposed upon western theology and biblical exegesis must go along with it" (79).

Chapters 4 and 5 turn to more metaphysical reflection. The focus of Chapter 4 is on the distinction between the divine essence and the divine energies. Specifically, the aim is to understand what type of distinction Palamas intends in his discussion of the essence-energies distinction. To do this, Bradshaw explores several different senses of 'distinction' that emerged through the Scholastic periods, focusing primarily on the classification of the Thomists. First, there is a *real* distinction, which holds between two entities or an entity and its modes, and which obtains independently of the mind. Second, there is a *rational* distinction, which only obtains in virtue of thought. Third, there is a *notional* distinction, which also obtains in thought, but specifically through the convention of naming (108 – 110). To these categories a fourth is added, which comes from Scotus, called a *formal* distinction, where two things cannot exist separately but still may be defined and understood without reference to each other. This raises questions about what sort of distinction Palamas has in mind – real, rational, notional, formal? Bradshaw holds that the closest to Palamas is Scotus' formal distinction. However, rather than seeking to place the account of the divine energies in a single conceptual box, we should instead look to the breadth of divine energies, and attempt the understand them as they are – for example, some divine energies are eternal, some temporal, some contingent, necessary, and some are in fact the divine attributes (117).

Chapter 5 turns to the relation between the divine energies and the divine processions. The discussion is helpful for distinguishing between the Christian God and the Platonic view of the One. Furthermore, it expands on metaphysical issues relating to the divine attributes and characteristics. As he has done in every other chapter, he draws upon the patristics as well as biblical support. There is significant work here developing themes related to the Holy Trinity and Christology, following the thought of Maximus and others.

The sixth chapter is a new essay, and it expands the boundaries of his analysis into a neglected but important topic. The primary target of the essay is to develop the view that we can only perceive nature *as it is* through proper moral and spiritual practices. Following Plato and Aristotle, and finding an ally in contemporary feminist philosopher Margaret Little, he notes that virtue brings with it a change in perception (135-6). Bradshaw suggests that the same may be true of our perception of nature itself. Following the language of the Psalms, Bradshaw makes a beautiful and compelling case for how our moral and spiritual practices can ultimately shape our awareness of the natural world. He says, "When the Psalmist looks upon nature, he sees God arrayed in the majesty and glory of his creatures" (139). This is not a momentary vision, but is part of the ordinary way in which the Psalmist experiences nature – as a basic understanding of himself in relation to the world and his Creator. Bradshaw expands upon the Psalmist's insight using the concept of the *divine logoi* (derived from the

Stoics), which is a "refracted presence of the divine Logos" in the world, where each thing "has its own distinctive *logos* which brings it into being and constitutes its ultimate meaning and purpose" (141). Origen and Maximus develop this idea, in that all sensible reality points to God, pointing to a higher intelligible reality. According to Maximus, to perceive the *logoi* in the world one must live a true Christian life – pray, study Scripture, participate in the sacraments, practice fasting and self-denial, struggle against the passions, give alms (143). In short, the Christian practices heal the tripartite soul – the passions, the appetites, and the mind. By transforming the passions we ultimately transform our sense perceptions, which can become aware of the world as it truly is. In conclusion, Bradshaw connects this perception with the divine energies – as "the power that pervades all things" (146).

Chapter 7 provides Bradshaw's responses to critics of *Aristotle East and West*, while Chapter 8 provides an afterward. In Chapter 7, Bradshaw responds to several of his critics, some with whom he has substantive points of disagreement – these critics include Constantinos Athanasapoulos, Fr. Nikolaus Loudovikos, Nick Trakakis, John Milnak, and Fr. Antoine Lévy. In the afterword, Bradshaw engages with recently published works that discuss the essence-energies distinction: Jean-Claude Larchet's *La Théologie des Énergies Divine: Des Origines à Saint Jean Damascène* (Les Éditions du Cerf, 2010), Torstein Tollefsen's *Activity and Participation in Late Antique and Early Christian Thought* (Oxford, 2012), and Tikhon Pino's *Essence and Energies: Being and Naming God in St. Gregory Palamas* (Routledge, 2023). They raise questions concerning Bradshaw's treatment of the divine essence. In response, he uses an analogy to clarify his account – to think of the divine essence like a computer program. Thus, "understood in terms of the analogy, the begetting of the Son by the Father is the replication of the "program" which is the divine *ousia* in a distinct self-subsistent entity" (192). He uses this analogy to illustrate the salient points of his account of the divine essence and energies – the sense in which the essence and energies are identical, how the energies are distinct from the divine essence but still are truly God, how we can maintain apophaticism, and so forth. At the end he summarizes his account and looks ahead to other areas in which this work could be developed.

This outline merely touches upon the richness of Bradshaw's discussion. The scholarship is broad and interdisciplinary. His discussion is philosophically rich, historically informed, and theologically significant. The book is recommended for anyone interested in this history. There are areas where specialists will disagree – the theological differences of the Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox factor heavily in the background, and I suspect many will have responses to Bradshaw (Thomists may have the most to say). This is to be expected (and encouraged), since these historical tensions are at the heart of Bradshaw's work. But this is exactly the work with which scholars should engage, to reflect charitably on our various Christian traditions in the pursuit of truth. Overall, Bradshaw covers a lot of ground, and there is a great deal to chew on. His book comes highly recommended.