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## Simon Hewitt, NEGATIVE THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS: ONLY THE SPLENDOR OF LIGHT

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perhaps Toepel's contribution (Chapter 11) to the book can provide relevant insight.

I have underscored these two essays to give readers a deeper sense of the kinds of topics covered in this volume. While none of the essays within this volume is likely to provide the final word on any of the many significant issues related to human dignity, the volume succeeds in providing conversation partners concerning this most important topic.

*Negative Theology and Philosophical Analysis: Only the Splendour of Light*, by Simon Hewitt. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. Pp. xxiv + 191. \$109.99 (hardcover).

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In this book Simon Hewitt aims to intervene on treatments of apophaticism in contemporary analytic theology and philosophy of religion. Apophaticism in Christian tradition is a view that holds that "God lies beyond the reaches of language" and further "denies the applicability to God of expressions designating creaturely features" (6). Mainstream analytic theology and philosophy of religion have for the most part rejected strongly apophatic doctrines of divine transcendence and ineffability for three main reasons: first, it seems incoherent to say truly of God that we can't say anything truly of God; second, it seems impious or audacious for theologians to hold that the God-talk of ordinary worshippers lacks the meaning or reference that they suppose it has; third, even if it can be made coherent or we can save the appearances of ordinary spiritual practice, it would imply a radical theological skepticism Christians should seek to avoid. But despite this predominant negativity about negative theology, Hewitt also recognizes that there has been a recent surge of analytic philosophical interest in reconstructing and defending negative theology against the objections of incoherence, impiety, and skepticism.

Nevertheless, Hewitt departs from both the analytic detractors and defenders of apophaticism, claiming that both have alike failed to properly understand it due to serious errors in their theology and underlying philosophy of language. The required corrective, he thinks, lies in the intellectual tradition of "grammatical Thomism," that synthesis of Aquinas and the later Wittgenstein variously developed by Brian Davies, Fergus Kerr, and Herbert McCabe. That tradition is little known and seldom seriously engaged by analytic philosophical theologians, and Hewitt's study is well worth reading if only to remedy that neglect. Even so, many of his analyses



are problematic, and the results of the intervention he seeks are accordingly mixed. In general, Hewitt seems to me to move too quickly across a range of theological and philosophical difficulties for apophaticism.

After a brief introduction and characterization of the apophaticist's theses of divine transcendence and ineffability (including an unfortunately Whiggish history that misconstrues Christian apophaticism as a unified tradition that reached its zenith in Aquinas's formulation), Hewitt endeavors in the next two chapters to show where the analytic detractors and defenders alike go wrong. Chapter 2 deals in short order with all three objections to apophaticism mentioned above. Against the incoherence objection, Hewitt claims that it misunderstands the ineffability thesis as including reflexive predicates of indescribability in its list of the predications that fail to apply to God, whereas apophaticism claims only that there is "some interesting class of predicates *P*" which fail to apply to God, with predicates of indescribability not being among them (22–25). But this seems to considerably weaken the ineffability claim, because it now leaves up for grabs which predicates are the "interesting" sort and what reasons there might be for embracing an Aristotelian "real definition" that serves up the relevant inapplicable predicates. Similarly, in response to the impiety objection, Hewitt dispenses with it by saying that "we religious folk do not on a day by day basis make any metaphysical claims about God" (27), a claim that is belied by his own subsequent treatment of "devotional" language, as we shall see below. Finally, he bites the bullet regarding the non-referential character of God-talk—since he holds that the reference of "God" cannot be fixed either by definite description or ostension (32). But this denial too turns on the implausible and insufficiently defended claim that we require concepts or experiences of the divine essence in order to successfully refer to God. Still, Hewitt rejects the idea that reference failure results in any radical skepticism about revealed Christian doctrines, because "God" can remain meaningful even when it is not used as a name with a designative function.

Before moving on to elaborate what this non-referentialist analysis of "God" involves and why we ought to endorse it, Hewitt attempts in Chapter 3 to clear the ground of rival accounts, fixing on two potential alternatives to the grammatical Thomism he will go on to offer. The first is Jonathan Jacobs's account of ineffability, according to which there are no fundamentally true propositions about the way God is intrinsically. While there are many available truths about God to be known, all of them are non-fundamental, being made true in a way that fails to "carve nature at the joints." Hewitt's objections are that this picture supposes God has joints to carve, which would violate a doctrine of simplicity, and further that truths about God qua Trinity would have to be regarded as non-fundamental, making Jacobs a kind of modalist (42–45). Both objections betray a serious misreading of Jacobs's views by conflating fundamentality as a feature of metaphysical structure with fundamentality as a feature of propositional structure that might or might not be made true by

metaphysical structure. Jacobs applies the fundamental/non-fundamental distinction to the propositional side of the truth-making relation between reality and its representation, which is entirely compatible with denying that the reality itself (including divine reality) admits of more or less metaphysically fundamental structures. While finding much more affinity with Lebens's approach to God-talk as a form of illuminating falsehood, Hewitt holds out for regarding apophatic claims about God to be true, even while regarding "God" as a non-referring term.

This approach requires Hewitt to reject an underlying "referentialist" picture of language, which is the task of Chapter 4. On referentialism, the primary purpose and essence of language is to refer, and this is often allied to a "head-first" picture of the intentionality of language as explained with reference to mental states (57). Following Putnam and Burge, he rejects the head-first picture in favor of a semantic externalism and a division of linguistic labor according to which our linguistic social-practices are responsively correlated to the features of the external world that they are about without the need of any mentalistic explanation for the mind/world relation. He denies, however, that either a division of linguistic labor or a semantic externalism can help to ensure that "God" is a referring term. Still, this is only a problem for God-talk if the primary purpose of such talk is to refer, whereas Hewitt insists that we look to linguistic functions apart from reference to understand God-talk, gesturing at pragmatist and inferentialist programs to identify such non-referring purposes (69–70). We do not find, however, any treatments of the criticisms of semantic externalism such as McDowell's, or the more specific criticisms lodged against its application to God-talk. I have, for example, urged against both cataphatic versions of semantic externalism such as Kevin Hector's as well as apophatic accounts such as Victor Preller's (Yadav, *The Problem of Perception and the Experience of God* (Fortress Press, 2015), 215–270). Preller, it should be said, is arguably the most sophisticated and creative recent philosophical defender of grammatical Thomist apophaticism. Curiously, though, his account is entirely absent from this volume.

Hewitt offers his own constructive account of grammatical Thomism to identify the relevant non-referring function of "God" in chapters 5–6, followed by some implications for the epistemic and practical significance of theological language in Chapter 7. If "God" is not a name that picks out an individual, and if its use is not referential, then how is it to be properly analyzed? Hewitt's central claim is that the meaning of "God" consists in the inferential roles that flow from the use of the word in the canonical sentence "God exists." The word "God" in that sentence is used "to speak of the Creator of all that is (other than that Creator himself)" (73), and it has as its assertability conditions simply "that there is something rather than nothing at all" (76). Insofar as we have no generic sortal that could give the "real definition" or kind-essence of this ultimate explainer of creation, all of the inferential relations that flow from it fail to say anything positive about whatever it is. Nevertheless, we are told, it is not

the case that "the subject matter of our understanding is itself linguistic" (85). So it seems that despite the earlier rejection of referentialism, our talk about God does indeed serve to refer us to God, just God qua uncreated explainer of a contingent creation, rather than qua whatever God is intrinsically (91). The only alternative to this is to hold that the subject-matter of God-talk is precisely linguistic (consisting in some non-referring inferential relations of creaturely language) or else that its subject matter is non-linguistic but consists strictly in the created character of the world itself. Either way God-talk on Hewitt's account would ironically turn out to be an idolatrous way of talking about creatures. But if we opt instead for unproblematic reference to God qua Creator, it is difficult to know what to make of Hewitt's rejection of the referential function of "God." That rejection seems to turn on the requirement of a "real definition" of God, but we are never offered a systematic argument for supposing that we cannot refer to something apart from possession of its "real definition," and Hewitt seems to make this requirement a condition for the applicability of any sortal whatever to God, even while he has himself already individuated God via God's being a particular sort of thing, namely an uncreated explainer of a contingent creation. Nor are we treated to any systematic exposition or defense of divine simplicity that metaphysically motivates his semantics of ineffability.

Chapter 7 aims to preserve truth conditions for the positive claims we make about God via an extension of creaturely predicates as his gloss on the standard Thomistic strategy of "analogical" predication (115). Given the availability of this strategy, however, I found it surprising and somewhat confusing for Hewitt to go on in Chapter 8 to insist on a view according to which it is strictly and literally false to regard God as a person, due to the way our concepts of creatureliness are bound up in our concepts of personhood (121, 129). Why not instead treat the clear and pervasive scriptural language of God as agent (possessed of a mind and will) as literal expressions of analogical truths about God? Chapter 9 goes on to show how the proposed grammar of God-talk enables us to bypass metaphysical puzzles about the Incarnation and Trinity, with the same basic line pressed throughout: our not knowing what God is beyond being the uncreated explainer of a contingent creation implies a non-competitive relationship between God and created being, thus leaving no puzzle in need of solving (150). But this seems too hasty a move to make. Despite our failure to know what God is intrinsically or essentially, Hewitt has already allowed that we can individuate and refer to and know God extrinsically qua ultimate explainer of a contingent creation (on pain of making the subject matter of theology either creaturely language or creation itself), and accordingly allowed that we can make literally true analogical predications of God, and finally that divine action "cannot be distinguished from God" (144). But all this plus a commitment to classical principles of bivalence and the law of the excluded middle, which Hewitt also accepts (102) entails a host of inferences about God that would have to be made

compatible with our commitments to the Incarnation and Trinity. Since it is just that sort of logical compatibility that has proved so difficult and resulted in the various metaphysical models and theories on offer, it is hard to see how a grammatical apophaticism alleviates us of the difficulties of doctrinal theorizing in the way Hewitt suggests. Either what we can know extrinsically and analogically of God supplies a norm for our theological reasoning, or it doesn't. If it does, then the apparent contradictions in what we say about the threeness-in-oneness problem or the two-natures/one-person problem will need to be faced rather than side-stepped.

Chapter 10 concludes with an application to eschatology. Here the principle of metaphysical non-competition between God and creatures is turned toward aims of human liberation from "alienating social conditions" (163). Following Denys Turner, Hewitt claims that the religion Marx criticizes—seeing it as a coping strategy tolerant of earthly economic oppression in hope of heavenly compensation—is in fact a form of idolatry. But the apophaticist, in virtue of a conception of God as non-competitor with the world, "should see Marx as pointing the way toward the social conditions in which non-idolatrous thinking about God can flourish" (163). Finally, Hewitt offers a picture of the beatific vision in which the unavailability of God to speculative or propositional thought gives way to a different sort, encountered in experience (174), and shared and communicated with our fellow beatified humans via our speculative intellects (175). There are difficulties here that Hewitt does not address, since the divine essence as radically transcendent ought to be no more available or accessible to our non-propositional experiences than our propositional understanding.

There are many worthwhile points of engagement with this book that are well worth chasing down that I have not been able to treat in such a short review. It accordingly repays close reading for those interested in reconstructing a plausible apophaticism from a Wittgensteinian-Thomist perspective, as well as those interested in pursuing rather different expressions of the negative theology tradition. While it does not in my view offer a viable normative account for many of the reasons suggested above, it is nevertheless useful in initiating a potentially fruitful conversation with analytic theologians and philosophers by introducing them to an unjustly neglected school of negative theology that sits adjacent to many of their own concerns with the semantics of theological language and the nature and limits of theological knowledge.