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Theology without Persons? Theological Anthropology and Kevin Hector's Therapeutic Theory of Language Use

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Abstract: Kevin Hector develops a therapeutic theory of language to assuage modern concerns about applying correspondentist/essentialist language to God. Hector proposes a norm-based theory of language use rooted in mutual recognition. This exploratory paper identifies two problems arising from Hector's failure to develop a sufficient theological anthropology that explains how a human can consistently speak of God. The broken trajectory problem demonstrates that successive acts of mutual recognition cannot guarantee continuity of meaning, and the divergent trajectories problem demonstrates that mutual recognition may not persist over time. These problems are the first step toward revising Hector's proposal by including a theological anthropology.

Important segments of modern theology are marked by an anti-metaphysical quest to separate God from the category of being. This pursuit frequently manifests as an apophatic effort to avoid constraining God within the categories of correspondentist/essentialist theories of language. Kevin Hector's *Theology Without Metaphysics* proposes a "therapeutic solution" to these concerns, offering "an account of language which begins with ordinary social practices" and culminates in a theological explanation of how Christians might possess true cataphatic claims about God that are nevertheless non-metaphysical in important respects.¹ Hector's proposal is at once brilliantly creative and problematic. In particular, Hector lacks an adequate account of what human beings are such that they can possess reliable knowledge of God. In this exploratory paper, I will seek to clearly identify where Hector's theory faces problems due to a lack of theological anthropology as the first step toward posing a revision of Hector's proposal.

¹ Kevin W. Hector, *Theology Without Metaphysics: God, Language, and the Spirit of Recognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 28, 37.

Hector's Theology and Lingering Questions

Hector seeks to circumvent ontology by offering a theory of language that does not evaluate the truthfulness of a concept based on its correspondence to the true essence of that concept's referent. Any correspondentist-essentialist account of language would (its critics fear) require us to grasp the essence of a thing in a manner that is impossible with the divine essence. In place of such correspondentist-essentialist theories of language, Hector develops a "reciprocal-recognition model" of language use, where "a candidate performance counts as going on in the same way as precedent performances if and only if it is recognizable as such by those who know how to undertake such performances."² Hector's account draws on a norm-based philosophy of language and Barthian notions of divine revelation. In order for a word or statement to communicate, it must be recognized as continuing a trajectory of precedent language use.³ This requires an act of mutual recognition – the new speaker must be recognized as speaking validly by someone with authority, while the person evaluating the new speaker must be recognized as someone holding valid authority to evaluate a pattern of language use.⁴ By subjecting oneself to such recognition, the speaker is also subjected to a certain set of norms. More precisely: "a concept just *is* a norm, in that a particular use is both normed by precedent uses and, in turn, norms subsequent uses."⁵ Hector's account becomes pointedly theological by drawing on the Barthian insight that all theological language about God must, as Hector summarizes it, enter into the "intra-triune affair" of God's talk about God.⁶ Our continuation of a given theological trajectory can yield truthful knowledge about God on two conditions: 1) Christ, who knows the Father, initiated the chain of precedent uses; and 2) Christ imparted the Spirit to the disciples as the source of help that enables one properly to speak to God through such

² Ibid., 68.

³ Ibid., 56.

⁴ Ibid., 63.

⁵ Ibid., 105.

⁶ Ibid., 126. Hector's deployment of Barth to resist concerns about the limits of God-talk on correspondentist-essentialist accounts of human language mirrors Barth's own concern to resist any theological epistemology based on the neo-Kantian view that treated ideas as rooted in particular phenomena, using this account to discredit the infinite God as a possible object of human knowing. For Barth's neo-Kantian context see: Trevor Hart, "Revelation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 38-41.

“intersubjective recognition.”⁷ The Spirit enables us to speak truthfully about God in the same manner that Christ did – no essentialism purportedly required.

I should note at the outset that I am unconcerned about the anti-metaphysical streams of modern thought that Hector addresses. Hector’s work has little therapeutic value for me. This does not mean, however, that his basic insights cannot bear theological fruit. In particular, I am interested in Hector’s social account of language because it offers a clear immanent term for any contingent predication of divine action, such as “the Spirit enables Christian knowledge of God.”⁸ Thus, my interest is in developing an account of language use based on norms. If my introduction of theological anthropology smuggles metaphysics in the back door (or the front one!), so be it. If I can avoid so-called onto-theology, all the better.

Theological Anthropology: A Person Knowing God

If speaking truthfully of God requires mutual recognition, we must ask whether one can over time re-identify someone who was once identified as using concepts following the precedent trajectory. Mutual recognition itself is insufficient to ensure a continued trajectory. To illustrate: imagine a scenario where a missionary travels to a recipient community. The recipient community comes to recognize the missionary as having authority to proclaim the gospel (hereafter G). The recipient community then accepts G such that the missionary recognizes the recipient community as speaking truthfully about G. The missionary returns home and accepts a theological reversal of central truths of G, now accepting $\neg G$. Here we might image a shift from the Protestant *solas* to a works-based prosperity gospel, or something of similar magnitude. Meanwhile, the recipient community has decided to reject elements of the foreign theology, replacing claim G with the truth claim $\neg G$, which has an older pedigree in their culture. In due course, the missionary returns to the recipient culture to discover that it already accepts his new truth claim $\neg G$, which causes the missionary to embrace the recipient culture, and them to embrace the missionary, as valid Christians. In this example, there is mutual recognition at two distinct times between the missionary and the recipient culture, but we could not reasonably affirm that the second act of mutual

⁷ See especially Hector, *Theology without Metaphysics*, 177. Here I take Hector to mean that the Spirit aids in our recognizing authorities, though I do not see a clear account of the Spirit or divine agency.

⁸ Explaining contingent predication exceeds the scope of this working paper, but a full account is available in Robert M. Doran, *The Trinity in History: A Theology of the Divine Missions – Volume I: Missions and Processions* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2012), 40-64.

recognition furthers the initial trajectory where in fact it breaks it. I will call this problem the broken trajectory problem.

The broken trajectory problem relates to the broader question of re-identification in personal identity: how can we establish continuity between an individual x at time t_1 and an individual y at time t_2 ? A solution might begin by acknowledging what Harold Noonan calls the “Only X and Y Principle.” Noonan summarizes the principle as follows:

Whether a later individual y is identical with an earlier individual x can depend only on facts about x and y and the relationships between them: it cannot depend upon facts about any individuals other than x or y .⁹

In this instance, we are particularly concerned with the issue of whether x and y are identical with respect to their status as authoritatively continuing the chain of precedent language uses that begins with Christ and is continued by the Holy Spirit. Certainly, if one is willing to embrace correspondentism, the Only X and Y Principle would fail for our example: a given speech act might be considered true whenever isomorphic with an immutable extrinsic principle. (Plato’s forms, Augustine’s eternal ideas in the mind of God, or Maximus the Confessor’s created *logoi* in conformity to the *Logos* would all serve as examples here). On this correspondentist account,¹⁰ x and y are reidentified as authoritatively continuing the chain of precedent language use insofar as G is isomorphic with some extrinsic principle. However, if we accept Hector’s methodology and seek a therapy that avoids correspondentism, then the Only X and Y principle is the best path forward: mutable extrinsic reference such as an act of mutual recognition will not ensure that x and y retain continuity.

The broken trajectory problem demonstrates that a succession of acts of mutual recognition does not ensure continuity of the trajectory of precedent language use: it is possible for mutual recognition to occur at t_1 and at t_2 while the actual speech acts occurring at these times contradict ($G \neq \neg G$). Here is a possible solution that might avoid correspondentism/essentialism: one might norm all subsequent acts of mutual recognition with the originating speech-acts of Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, this solution would in fact deny the possibility of a trajectory altogether. For example, Jesus does not, strictly speaking, provide a full-fledged doctrine of the Trinity. If subsequent acts of mutual

⁹ Harold W. Noonan, *Personal Identity*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003), 127.

¹⁰ This is the particular form of correspondentism that Hector resists. See: Hector, *Theology without Metaphysics*, 202.

recognition (say, at Nicaea) deploy concepts not used by Christ, they would on this account need to be rejected. Clearly, this is an unacceptable solution. Theological language must allow some possibility of development (and even reform!) along a trajectory.

How, then, might the Only X and Y principle apply to Hector's theory of language use? Here I must further clarify the precise nature of the problem. Noonan explains that the Only X and Y principle is developed to respond to the "best candidate" approach to reidentification. The details of the best-candidate approach need not concern us here as much as the particular problem that the approach seeks to resolve. Noonan illustrates with the tale of Theseus' boat, taken from Thomas Hobbes, which I will summarize briefly. Suppose that Theseus believes his boat needs drastic repair, so he puts his boat in dry dock and replaces each board and nail one by one with new materials over the course of a year until none of the original pieces remain. Meanwhile, Theseus's rival hoards each discarded plank and nail and rebuilds Theseus' original boat. Which boat can now be reidentified as the boat of Theseus: The new one Theseus has reconstructed, or the one assembled by the plank hoarder?¹¹

We might reformulate the problem to our current set of questions. Suppose an evangelist introduces a new Christian G at t_1 . Both are recognized as speaking truthfully of God, but the evangelist must leave before he can fully explain the orthodox theology T that logically follows from G. Therefore, he leaves a theological textbook for the new Christian. They depart from one another and seek to develop G in continuity with the precedent trajectory, continuously evaluating each of their beliefs and modifying them on the basis of other held beliefs as necessary.¹² Over time the Evangelist is convinced to modify all major theological beliefs deduced from G, modifying each to a new historical context one by one until the theological system T_E remains. Meanwhile, the new Christian gradually abandons her old beliefs and replaces them one by one with the beliefs found in the old systematic theology textbook until the theological system T_{NC} remains. Suppose that T_E and T_{NC} each contain certain propositions that are logically different from one another ($T_{NC} = \{a, b, c, \dots\}$ and $T_E = \{\sim a, \sim b, \sim c, \dots\}$), so there is genuine difference here, yet genuine continuity. If they meet again, the Evangelist and New Christian may no longer recognize one another as speaking validly of God. If this lack of recognition occurs, which is the valid system: T_E , which has gradually changed

¹¹ Noonan, *Personal Identity*, 129-30.

¹² See Hector's explanation of the practice of taking true in Hector, *Theology without Metaphysics*, 211-226.

along a trajectory believed to continue the precedent course? Or T_{NC} who has gradually adopted all of the beliefs that have since been abandoned by the authority that first recognized her as speaking truthfully?¹³ I will call this the divergent trajectory model.

Taken together, the divergent trajectory and the broken trajectory problems illustrate troubles facing Hector's proposal as currently developed. In a situation where external recognition cannot guarantee re-identification, and where correspondentist/essentialist answers are intentionally avoided, the best possible solution lies in developing a theological anthropology that explains some feature of the Christian as theologian (i.e. as one who makes statements about God) which would allow for some form of self-norming or regulation that might ensure the preservation of a precedent trajectory of meaning.

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¹³ The issue here pertains to a distinction between *idem* identity and *ipse* identity. See Kevin Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 208.