

**Michael C. Rea. *Essays in Analytic Theology, Volume 1.* vii – 227pp. *Essays in Analytic Theology, Volume 2.* vii – 215pp. Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. \$130.00 sold together (hbk), \$85.00 sold individually (hbk).**

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Michael C. Rea—one of the founders of the Analytic Theology movement, a co-editor of the initial manifesto volume *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2009), a co-editor of the series Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology in which these two current volumes are included, and finally a co-editor of the *Journal of Analytic Theology* in which this review appears—needs no introduction to this particular reading audience! However, given the inherently interdisciplinary nature of Analytic Theology, it is important to note that in regard to his education and primary academic appointment Rea is a “philosopher” rather than a “theologian.” This professional designation does not of course prevent him from making important contributions that are both philosophical and theological in nature, but it does arguably position him more on the philosophical than the theological side of the joint enterprise.

The two volumes of *Essays in Analytic Theology* compile what Rea considers “the most substantial work in analytic theology that I have completed between 2003 and 2019” (Vol. 2, 1). The first volume “contains chapters focused, broadly speaking, on the nature of God; [the] second volume contains chapters focused more on doctrines about humanity, the human condition, and how humans relate to God” (ibid.). Most of the essays have been previously published, but both volumes include material that appears here for the first time. Given Rea’s crucial and even foundational relationship to the project of Analytic Theology, these essays function simultaneously as personal contributions to philosophical theology *and* as models or exemplars of what Analytic Theology is (or should be) and how it approaches the various doctrinal loci treated therein.

With those opening comments in place, let me make some general observations before moving to consider the contents of each volume in more detail, although given the range of topics covered, my treatment will be selective and mostly descriptive rather than critical. First, for the most part Rea writes clearly and winsomely, usually striking an irenic tone even with those with whom he disagrees and expressing himself in a manner that is rigorous but still accessible to non-professionals. Second, these essays display commendable engagement with theologians, such as Hans Frei, Elisabeth Johnson, Kevin Hector, Kevin Vanhoozer, and N. T. Wright; and with Continental rather than just Anglo-American philosophers, such as Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Marion, and John Caputo. Indeed, a major benefit of the volumes is the breadth of figures engaged with, and not just the range of

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doctrines treated. These essays thus provide important counterexamples to the view that Analytic Theologians are not interested in non-analytic material. Third, while Rea's references demonstrate historical breadth and competency, for the most part these chapters deal with contemporary debates, often intervening in ongoing controversies and making his own constructive contribution. Fourth, while it seems clear enough that Rea belongs to broadly Reformed Evangelical Protestant Christianity, his specific ecclesial location and allegiance is left undeclared. Fifth and finally, as these volumes are collected essays they do not necessarily express Rea's current position on a given topic, and some of chapters contain new postscripts to clarify where he now stands on a particular issue. But one may also see some continuing tensions—or perhaps unresolved developments—in Rea's thought, such as (for example) on the implications of divine transcendence and thus what may be known of God rationally as contrasted with what requires special revelation for us to affirm.

Turning directly to the volumes themselves, in Part I of Volume 1 ("Metatheology") the three chapters deal respectively with the topics of realism in both theology and metaphysics, whether theology can be done without either idolatry or violence, and how Christian Scripture can be construed as a source of both authority and truth. Rea defends theological realism against Peter Byrne and metaphysical realism against Bas van Fraassen. Likewise, against postmodern and apophatic critiques, largely but not exclusively in critical dialogue with Kevin Hector's *Theology without Metaphysics: God, Language and the Spirit of Recognition* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), Rea argues that theological discourse is not *necessarily* idolatrous or violent while conceding that many forms of it may well fit those unhappy descriptions: more specifically, "*cataphatic* theology can be done without idolatry or violence" (Vol. 1, 50, emphasis added). The chapter on Scripture is notable for its overt Evangelical Protestant assumptions and interlocutors fused with analytic philosophy of language and epistemology. While Rea ultimately defends a fairly conservative understanding of the inerrancy and authority of Scripture, he then locates the real issue as one of interpretation and meaning, observing that the "claim that the Bible is perfectly reliable in whatever it says will imply that whatever it says is true; but it implies nothing at all about what the Bible actually says" (Vol. 1, 77).

The three chapters in Part II of Volume 1, which each fall under the section title "The Attributes of God," interestingly focus on topics other than the conventional ones of omnipotence, omniscience, immutability, eternity, and simplicity in order to engage with some characteristic postliberal, postmodern, and feminist concerns, especially in regard to gender (both human and divine) and divine transcendence. Thus Chapter 5, "Gender as a Divine Attribute," argues against 'genderism,' which Rea defines as the thesis that "gender is a divine attribute (i.e. God has gender) and God is either *more* masculine than feminine, or vice versa." Against such genderism, Rea argues that "*gender is a divine attribute only if God belongs equally to both genders*" (both citations, Vol. 1, 102, with emphasis in the originals). However, he then acknowledges that it may be more accurate to say that "if gender is extrinsic, either God has no gender, or God belongs equally to both genders" (Vol. 1, 111)—that is, now considering the possibility that God is simply beyond or without gender altogether. While there is much of interest in this chapter, Rea makes especially telling points against those who, while granting that genderism is metaphysically false, argue that God still *ought* or even *wants* to be described in predominantly masculine terms.

Part III of Volume 1 ("The Trinity") consists of four chapters which deal with current debates regarding psychological and social models of the Trinity, relative identity proposals, and Rea's own preferred option of material constitution. Chapter 7, simply titled "The Trinity," was originally published in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, eds., Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea (Oxford University Press, 2009) and is thus fairly even-handed, providing

a clear introduction to standard models—e.g. the “Latin / Western” or psychological model and the “Greek / Eastern” or social model (while acknowledging that these familiar ecclesial / geographic associations are now strongly contested)—before defending what Rea calls the “constitution model” in dialogue with relative identity theorists. Leaving aside the problematic historical associations noted above, the primary contemporary adherents of the psychological model that Rea engages with are Trenton Merricks and Brian Leftow; contemporary adherents of the social model are Richard Swinburne and the co-authored work of J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig; and drawing on the earlier work of G. E. M. Anscombe, Peter Geach, and A. P. Martinich, the main contemporary adherent of relative identity is Peter van Inwagen. Rea’s constitution model draws on what he calls a weak doctrine of relative identity to defend the Aristotelian idea that (as he explains in more detail in the co-authored Chapter 10 with Jeffrey Brower, “Material Constitution and the Trinity”) “it is possible for an object *a* and an object *b* to be ‘one in number’—that is, numerically the same—without being strictly identical” (Vol. 1, 201–2). Rea’s standard example is a mass of marble that is simultaneously an architectural pillar and an ornamental statue, and thus “numerically the same substance, one material object, but distinct matter-form compounds” (Vol. 1, 160).

I will return to Rea’s defense of his own Trinitarian model below, but I found the subsequent chapter, “Polytheism and Christian Belief,” less satisfactory as a charitable treatment of social trinitarianism. Notable for a surprising sustained engagement with ancient Egyptian religion, in particular New Kingdom Amun-Re theology, Rea argues that contemporary Christian defenders of a social model of the Trinity are as guilty of polytheism as the worshippers of Amun-Re and other Egyptian deities. This chapter was puzzling to me for several reasons, not least because Rea begins by asserting that “Christians are monotheists; but they believe in three full divine beings”—an already problematic claim!—and then describes specifically social trinitarians as those who commonly defend the thesis that “the Christian commitment to monotheism is *not* a commitment to the claim that there is only one divine being [already rejected by Rea above?], but rather a commitment to the claim that *all divine beings*—all gods, in the ordinary sense of the term—*stand in a particular relation to one or more of the members of the holy Trinity*” (both citations, Vol. 1, 170, with emphasis in the originals). He thus concludes at the end of the essay that “on the social Trinitarian’s understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not manifestations of a single divine reality” (Vol. 1, 181)—hence the charge of polytheism.

There are of course a wide range of social trinitarian positions, some of which doubtless fall under Rea’s descriptions in this essay. However, it is no part of the forms of social trinitarianism that I find most plausible to affirm that there are three divine “beings” or “gods.” It is difficult to see how such language is even recognizably orthodox. Rather, many social trinitarians would argue—in various ways, some more clearly and convincingly than others—that the single divine being or substance (*ousia*) is at least in some contexts better understood by analogy with an inter-relational society of three persons (*hypostases*) instead of by analogy with the complex inner life of an individual person (*hypostasis*). Surprisingly, Rea never uses the helpfully neutral term ‘hypostasis’ in any of these trinitarian essays but relies exclusively on the English ‘person’ in his consideration of (as Rowan Williams apparently used to put it to his students) “an entity substantial enough to hang a verb on” or what Lonergan following Augustine described as “what there are three of in God.” I cannot go into these matters in more detail here, but recommend Gijsbert van den Brink, “Social Trinitarianism: A Discussion of Some Recent Theological Criticisms,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16 (2014): 331–50, as a helpful corrective to Rea’s critique.

By contrast, I found Rea and Brower's defense of "numerical sameness without identity" (Vol 1., 205 and 216) in relation to both common material objects and the *hypostases* of the Trinity to be clear and helpful. They argue that an Aristotelian hylomorphism of matter and form (with the latter concept defined in more detail in Vol. 2 as equivalent to a nature understood in terms of fundamental powers: see 57ff) can be extended to include the Persons of the Trinity "conceived of in terms of hylomorphic compounds. Thus, we can think of the divine essence as playing the role of matter; and we can regard the properties of *being a Father*, *being a Son*, and *being a Spirit* as distinct forms instantiated by the divine essence" (Vol 1., 215). They go on to say that, if so, then "the Persons of the Trinity are *three* distinct persons but numerically one God. The key to understanding this is just to see that the right way to count Gods [!] resembles the right way to count material objects" (Vol 1., 216, original emphasis). Again, I cannot go into further detail here, but while Rea and Brower assert that a virtue of their position is that it is "clearly compatible with the view that God is an individual rather than a society" (Vol. 1, 217) it seems to me than one could combine their extended metaphysics of material constitution even with a social model of the Trinity *if* one felt that such a model was in fact required by Scripture, tradition, religious experience, and so on. My own view is that, as light behaves as both wave and particle, sometimes we want to describe the Christian God as an individual and sometimes as a society and therefore rather than ruling out either option we need to make room for both.

A fourth essay in this section on the Trinity is Chapter 9, "Relative Identity and the Doctrine of the Trinity." One of the most conceptually challenging in both volumes with its substantial use of symbolic logic, this essay is made more difficult by the frequent use of similar-looking abbreviations, for example, "RI" for "relative identity" along with "R1" for one of Peter Geach's RI theses. The difficulty of this chapter is compounded by the inadvertent substitution of the latter abbreviation for the former in the fifth line of main text from the bottom of Vol. 1, 194, where "impure R1 strategy" should read "impure RI strategy." (I am grateful to Michael Rea for confirming that this was indeed a typo.) While both volumes have several minor typographical errors, I believe the only other one relating to conceptual content is on Vol. 2, 152, in the thirteenth line of main text from the bottom, where in a discussion of two hypothetical parties X and Y, the sentence "But it [i.e. compassion] will not require that X desist from her behavior" should clearly read "Y" instead.

Moving on then to Volume 2, Part I ("Incarnation, Sin, and Atonement") opens with a very long chapter on the metaphysics of original sin, seeking to justify the traditional Western understanding not just of subsequent humans sharing in Adam's *sin* but in Adam's *guilt* as well (while not necessarily endorsing the literal story of an historical Adam). This involves much speculative and (I found) convoluted metaphysics regarding personal and corporate identity and moral responsibility, and culminates in a defense of at least some version of Alvin Plantinga's concept of Transworld Depravity (which, with the familiar abbreviation "TWD," now bears an unexpectedly evocative connection with *The Walking Dead*). Chapter 2, "Hylomorphism and the Incarnation," applies the same neo-Aristotelian metaphysics of material constitution developed by Rea and Brower in relation to the Trinity to the two natures of Christ, human and divine, and in so doing provides helpful additional insight into their trinitarian proposal (as noted above). Chapter 3, "*The Ill-Made Knight* and the Stain on the Soul," brings T. H. White's classic Arthurian novel into conversation with Eleonore Stump's work on the atonement, seeking to improve her soteriological solutions by addressing a lacuna, namely that her profound account of Christ's redemptive work leaves out the important fact that our souls can be stained by what happens to us as well as by what we ourselves do. Rea also makes the valuable point that the idea of "stain" here might best be thought of "not via

imagery of a *blemish* on an otherwise pristine surface but rather via imagery of a colonizing presence” (Vol 2., 84, original emphasis). This is the first of several engagements with Stump in this second volume, as Rea returns to her in conversation with N. T. Wright on the problem of evil and biblical narratives (Chapter 5) and again in “Narrative, Liturgy, and the Hiddenness of God,” originally published in Kevin Timpe, ed., *Metaphysics and God: Essays in Honor of Eleonore Stump* (Routledge, 2009).

In addition to these two essays mentioned above, the remaining four essays in Part II (“Evil, Divine Hiddenness, and Worship”) are concerned primarily with the viability of so-called skeptical theism as a response to the evidential problem of evil (including one chapter co-authored by Michael Bergmann), and with replies to J. L. Schellenberg’s hiddenness argument that engage not only with narrative, liturgy, and worship (including an interesting previously-unpublished paper on whether angry protest against God is ever appropriate) but with a sustained consideration of divine transcendence as well. Such transcendence is indeed a theme which connects both volumes, and as noted above it seems that Rea is still wrestling with how best to understand it. Thus, Volume 1 contains a chapter that I did not previously discuss, published there for the first time, “God Beyond Being: Toward a Credible Account of Divine Transcendence,” in which Rea explores sympathetically a strongly transcendent or apophatic vision of God in relation to human cognition and language—but the main arguments of which Rea ultimately disavows. And yet in his engagement with Schellenberg, Rea is pushed to distance himself from what he perceives as Schellenberg’s overly-anthropomorphic concept of God. Likewise, Rea seems mostly happy to embrace the tradition of perfect being theology, which as he says in Volume 2, Chapter 8, “Hiddenness and Transcendence,” consists of “commitment both to the thesis that God is a perfect being and to the viability of relying on at least some of our intuitions about perfection—e.g. about what it would take for a being to be perfectly loving, or perfectly knowledgeable—as a means for arriving at further true claims about God” (Vol. 2, 179). And yet, again in reaction to Schellenberg, just several pages later Rea approvingly says that “one very plausible consequence of even a very modest doctrine of divine transcendence is that we have no revelation-independent concept of divine love” (Vol. 2, 185). And this despite the fact that in the introduction to Volume 1, Rea says, “I do not think that doctrine of divine transcendence poses any threats to the kinds of inferences that are central to perfect being theology” (12). Clearly he is still thinking through his evolving position on these vital matters.

In conclusion, I found most of these essays well worth the effort to work through. At some point Rea might want to attempt a more systematic philosophical theology, treating the various loci in coherent relation to each other rather than in a series of mostly independent essays. But those who are on board with the project of Analytic Theology will certainly find much of value here. Likewise, so will those who are more dubious of its methodological assumptions and disciplinary convictions, even if they do not have all of their concerns assuaged. Having commended Rea’s irenic and open stance toward figures and literatures with whom he is neither formally nor materially sympathetic, as a theologian rather than a philosopher I would personally like to see a more overtly ecclesial approach, rooted self-consciously in a specific historical and institutional tradition. Rea’s work here also raises the relationship between academic philosophical theology and personal spirituality. How much of our knowledge of the divine nature and its redemptive relation to us is accessible via rational intuition and logical arguments, how much depends on revelation, how much on tradition, and how much requires personal transformation and spiritual / psychological maturity resulting from prayer, worship, and moral endeavor? It is to Rea’s great credit that he considers all of these diverse avenues of our knowing the triune and incarnate Christian God.