

Ad Hector

Oliver D. Crisp
Fuller Theological Seminary

After all, it is folly to think that, by philosophical reasoning, one can prove that any particular scheme of ontology ... is correct. What we can hope for is a vision (hopefully coherent) of the fundamental structure of the world, a vision that will compete with other visions.

- D. M. Armstrong

By dogma in the strict sense is understood a truth immediately (formally) revealed by God which has been proposed by the Teaching Authority of the Church to be believed as such.

- Ludwig Ott

In his recent monograph, *Theology without Metaphysics*, Kevin Hector (2011) argues, amongst other things, that contemporary Christian theology is beset by two problems. These are *essentialism* (roughly, the idea that entities have essences, or natures and are property-bearers) and *correspondentism* (roughly, the notion that our language 'latches' onto reality just in case it corresponds to some feature of reality). This paper focuses primarily on the first of these concerns. After some introductory remarks about the nature of Hector's project, I will offer some reasons for thinking he has not provided sufficient reason for the rejection of essentialism, and that his own position presupposes some version of essentialism.

Constructivism, Theology, and Hector's Project

Hector takes aim at the sort of constructivism that informs much contemporary post-Kantian theology. According to the constructivist, human concepts and language about the world are constituents of conceptual schemes or frameworks that stand between the inquirer and the world. Our understanding of the world is mediated to us by means of these conceptual schemes. There are several different species of constructivism. One of the strongest of these is a hypothesis about whether there is a mind-independent reality. Those who take it in this way move in the direction of idealism. But constructivism can also be understood as a claim about whether we have access to some mind-independent reality. Thus the constructivist might maintain that we human inquirers have no mind-independent access to the world; that we must access the world via our conceptual schemes; and that any purported access to the world independent of my

mind and my conceptual scheme, or independent of some mind and some conceptual scheme, is a mirage. But this does not require the claim that there is no mind-independent world. It only requires the claim that we have no access to such a world if it exists, and that all we do have access to is mediated via our conceptual schemes. Whether there is some reality beyond this we cannot tell. So it appears that this sort of view lends itself to a strong skeptical thesis about a mind independent world. But one need not take constructivism in this direction. A more modest version of constructivism maintains that there is a world independent of my mind to which I do not have unmediated access independent of my conceptual scheme about the world. Quite how one can know there is a world independent of my conceptual scheme if my experience of the world is entirely dependent on my conceptual scheme is an interesting question. But let that pass.

A more promising way of understanding constructivism without idealism is as a view about intrinsic properties. On this rendering, the central claim being made is that there are no intrinsic properties of non-mental, non-abstract things that are sortal properties – that is, a property that sort entities into particular kinds of thing, like human, horse, hound, and so on. An intrinsic property is a property had by an entity independent of any relation it bears to other contingently existing things. So a sortal property that is intrinsic might be, “being human.” An entity is human independent of any other entities that exist and independent of any relations it bears to those entities. (Hence, on this view, if there were only one human in the world, s/he would still be human.)¹

Although he does not name it as such, it is clear that Hector wants to address constructivism in theology. Ironically, he finds that the constructivist shares with non-constructivist metaphysics the two assumptions of essentialism and correspondentism. For the constructivist claims that our concepts cannot get at any putative deity precisely because a deity would transcend our conceptual schemes. Were we to identify God with some cluster of ideas in our conceptual scheme we would not be referring to God at all, but rather to an idol of our own making. Hence, on this way of thinking, all talk about God collapses into idolatry, or into something worse: an attempted power play in which we seek to use our conceptual constructs to force our own views upon others.

What is the answer to this problem? Many theologians have sought to offer accounts of theological language that concede to the constructivist the claim that humans beings are, in effect, *worldmakers*. On this assumption, systematic theology is understood as an imaginative attempt to conceive of the divine. This sort of view is evident in the work of contemporary theologians like Sally McFague and the late Gordon Kaufman. Another response is what Hector calls theological apophaticism. On this way of thinking, because God is beyond our conceptions of him, we cannot predicate anything of God. He is said to be beyond being, or the ground of being – not one amongst other created beings about which we have notions in our conceptual schemes. Both of these responses presume some sort of constructivism. Hector offers a third alternative. In his view we should reject essentialism and

¹ This is discussed Rea (2002, 11).

correspondentism. In fact, we should set to one side the sort of metaphysical project that presumes constructivism, and adopt a non-metaphysical account of these problems. By “non-metaphysical” I think he means something like “non-constructivist.” Although he regards his own position as being non- or even anti-metaphysical, he makes clear at the beginning of the book that metaphysics does deal with questions other than the ones with which he is concerned. He also concedes at the outset that his own efforts might be taken as a species of revisionist metaphysics (Hector 2011, 2-3). So it seems more appropriate to think of his central thesis as an alternative to purely constructivist philosophical theology, but not a non-metaphysical alternative, strictly speaking. It is more a theological alternative that utilizes different metaphysical assumptions and a different approach than the constructivists. (Even claims to be doing “anti-metaphysics” look to me like metaphysical claims akin to saying atheism is a species of non- or anti-theology.)

In place of this way of dealing with the problems posed by metaphysical language about God, Hector proposes we take a leaf out of Wittgenstein’s book, and try some philosophical therapy.² We need to see that our metaphysical language presents us with a picture of the world, rather than with a means of getting at the world. And we need to recognize that this picture is *optional*. It is not the only way of proceeding. Like Wittgenstein, Hector counsels us to take ordinary practices and experience as explanatorily primitive. We should work from them to certain trajectories and precedents that we inherit and pass on to others, and that inform our view of the truth-status of a given proposition. “The strategy, simply stated, is to explain that which metaphysics purports to explain – what reality is like and what it means to be in touch with reality – by means of something non-metaphysical, thereby deflating these notions and demonstrating that one need not appeal to metaphysics in order to do them justice” (Hector 2011, 31).

The theological application of this account requires two things. First, what we might call a *tradition of practices*, that is, a tradition of performing certain practices that are passed on from Christ to his disciples, and thence to the Church. The second Hector calls, *pneumatological pragmatics* (Hector 2011, 53). The idea here is that the Holy Spirit indwells the Church and appropriates certain concepts that are given meaning in a particular context that has a certain trajectory, rendering them capable of bearing theological meaning. One example (mine, not Hector’s) might be the concept of a commemorative meal; the trajectory of passing on the practice of such a meal; and the pneumatic appropriation of that so that the meal conveys theological meaning about the atonement and Christ’s continuing sacramental presence in the church. Thus “the Spirit of Christ enters into ordinary discursive practices in order to appropriate human concepts, to judge and fulfill their meaning, to enable one to refer to God, and to provide the possibility of speaking truly of God” (Hector 2011, 39).

² “Hence, an account is ‘therapeutic,’ in the current sense, if it deals with theoretical problems not by trying to solve them as they stand, but by identifying and contesting the presuppositions which made them seem like problems in the first place” (Hector 2011, 29).

Regarding Essentialism

This brings us to the question of essentialism. Let us presume, with Hector, that ordinary practices and experiences should be explanatorily primitive. On this basis, Hector reasons that concepts carry on a normative trajectory of meaning established by precedents in particular circumstances determined by application to ordinary objects. So, for example, the meaning of the concept “Eucharistic meal” derives from precedents going back to the Last Supper and the sacramental appropriation of the ordinary elements of bread and wine, passed on by Christ to his appointed legates. The fit between these ordinary objects and the theological concepts associated with them is recognized retrospectively (in the case of the Eucharist, after Christ’s death and resurrection). Hector writes that the Holy Spirit is mediated through the practice of mutual recognition with respect to the use of certain concepts. Indeed, “one’s use of a concept counts as following Christ just in case it goes on in the same way as precedent uses which have been recognized as doing so, in a chain of mutual recognition that stretches back to Christ and his disciples” (Hector 2011, 101). Concept use is, therefore, “continually being rewritten” (101); concepts do not have fixed, unalterable meanings and are not containers of determinate content. They derive their meaning from context and usage, which may change and evolve over time. Thus, in our example of the Eucharist meal, the meaning of this concept develops from its dominical institution and transmission to the church via the apostles, and develops in different ways through the normative trajectory of meaning established in its use in the churches, giving rise to different (but related) understandings of what the Eucharistic meal entails.

This is a “deflationary” account of theological concept-use because it derives concepts from practices and ordinary objects. It overcomes the constructivist worries about human language being able to refer to God because the Holy Spirit’s presence is mediated via the “practice of mutual recognition” (101). Hence, the Spirit appropriates certain concepts for theological use.

There is much that is appealing about such an account. For one thing, it meets the theological constructivist on his own ground, showing that God can use human concepts by adopting them, and mediating his presence through the practice of mutual recognition. Thus a congregation mutually recognizes that the celebration of the Eucharistic meal is beginning when the members of the congregation hear the minister intoning the *sursum corda*. As John Calvin said, God accommodates himself to human limitations, lisping to us in Scripture (and in the liturgy?) as a nursemaid lisps to the child in her arms. God is not conformed to some pre-existing conception of him, on this way of thinking. Rather, our ordinary practices and objects are used as the means by which God communicates himself to us.

But there are counterexamples to Hector’s view. I have deliberately used the concept of a Eucharistic meal to illustrate Hector’s account because it does track something of the way in which the theological meaning of a particular ordinary practice is recognized retrospectively in a particular ecclesial community going back to Christ. What is more, the meaning of this meal changes and develops in important respects over time within the developing branches of this community. But there are

plenty of examples of theological doctrines that do not work in this way. Let us take two that are central and defining for Christian theology: the Trinity and the Incarnation.

Consider the Trinity. Christians affirm that God is both one in nature and three in persons. This is taken to be an implication of Scripture made plain in the catholic creeds. Can we track this back to Christ? Possibly, depending on what you make of certain NT Christological claims. But it is not inconsistent to maintain that Christ is God Incarnate and that a doctrine of the Trinity was a later development out of this dogmatic core. On this view, the Church reflected upon Christ's life and work under the direction of the Holy Spirit, eventually coming to understand that bare monotheism did not adequately describe the deity. This seems consistent with Hector's claim that concepts (in this case, dogma) are understood retrospectively, in a trajectory and community of interpretation that can be traced back to Christ and his apostles. But it is not clear that this dogma develops or changes in significant ways once the catholic Church canonizes it. In fact, it looks like the concept of the Trinity has a determinate content that does not change over time precisely because it is dogma. And I take it that dogma has a definite shape and status in the life of the Church as doctrine that is defined as *de fide*, or as a necessary constituent of the faith.

Now, there are different models of the Trinity, to be sure. But I take it that a model in this context is something like a conceptual framework that attempts to provide a coherent elaboration or description of a particular system of beliefs – in this case, certain Christian doctrines. The models of the Trinity that have been elaborated upon in the history of Christian doctrine are different perorations on the dogma of the creeds. The dogma is what is fundamental and non-negotiable. The model takes these basic creedal statements and elaborates upon them, providing a richer conceptual framework by means of which to understand what the doctrine describes. Some of these models may turn out to be incommensurate, though they seek to elaborate upon the same conceptual hard-core.

What ordinary objects or practices does this doctrine arise from? Baptism is one possibility, given the Trinitarian formula used in passages like Mt. 28:19. But it is difficult to see how the practice *gives rise* to the dogma. Nor is it the medium by means of which the Spirit is made manifest. Rather the conceptual hard-core of the doctrine appears to be *revealed*. That is, it is something that is revealed by God directly rather than mediately. For (so it seems to me) fallen human beings would never have hit upon the doctrine independently of divine revelation.

We come to the Incarnation. Like the Trinity, it is a dogma. And, like the Trinity, it has a formulation in the creeds, which seek to extrapolate what is implicit in Scripture. Granted, this means it is understood retrospectively in important respects. And, at least in ecclesiastical tradition it is recognized as apostolic teaching passed on from Christ. Certain practices do seem to reinforce this doctrine, supremely the Eucharist. But once again it is not clear how these practices give rise to the doctrine and its conceptual content. And once again it is not obvious how these practices could be the occasion of the development of the doctrine. It looks like the doctrine is required to make sense of the practice; that the concept comes before the action, so to speak. For without the presumption that Christ is something

more than a mere man, we would have nothing more than a commemorative meal. But in fact, we *presume* Christ is God Incarnate, fully God and fully human, one person subsisting in two natures, and so on. Because we think this, we treat the Eucharist as more than a commemorative meal, but as an ordinance or sacrament (depending on the ecclesial tradition to which we belong). And, as with the Trinity, there is a dogmatic core to the doctrine that is non-negotiable and does not change, though there are different models of the hypostatic union in the Christian tradition. This is not to deny the importance of reflection and doctrinal development in formulating the orthodox account of the Incarnation, any more than we denied a similar trajectory in the formation of the dogma of the Trinity. But in both cases (so I say) there would be no dogma without direct divine revelation. And revelation informs the practice associated with the dogma. In fact, there seems to be a symbiosis between liturgical praxis and doctrinal reflection when it comes to these two central and defining Christian doctrines.

But suppose Hector can accommodate these two doctrines on his way of thinking about theological concepts. Even then it is not clear how they can be understood non-metaphysically, or even non-essentially. What would it mean to say the content of the concept “the Triune God” changes across time, is not fixed, and has no definite content? Notice the concern is not that our *understanding* of this concept might develop, becoming conceptually richer, being developed along the lines of a particular model of the Trinity, and so on. The worry is that Hector’s account of the role played by community in the formation of concepts and the way in which he thinks concepts change over time and with use, fail to account for the *dogmatic conceptual hardcore* of catholic doctrine about God that does not change once canonized.

But this leads to a further observation. If we must confess that God is both one and three, that he is Triune, and that the Second Person of the Trinity is God Incarnate, and so forth, then we are predicating certain things about the divine *nature*. We are saying that God *is* Triune; that in some important and fundamental sense it is true that he is both one and yet three; that the Second Person of the Trinity is Incarnate in Christ; and so on. We cannot avoid making such claims as Christian theologians. And these claims are metaphysical in the sense that they predicate something about God, about the nature of God, and are claims we think veridical. To return to our earlier comments about constructivism, to say *God is Triune* is to assert that this is something that is intrinsically, necessarily true of God. To say that Jesus of Nazareth is God Incarnate is to predicate something intrinsic of Jesus of Nazareth. These things are not mere constructions. They are the implications of divine revelation. God does accommodate himself to human creatures in revelation. He does condescend to lisp to us as a nursemaid does to a child. He does institute certain practices that are passed on from Christ to his disciples, and they do have a certain trajectory and communal shape. But dogma is not generated by practices or by human reflection *alone*. Dogma is generated by Scripture, and codified by ecclesiastical leaders under the guidance of the Spirit. The hermeneutical universalism characteristic of theological constructivism is not overcome by practices that mediate the Spirit’s presence. It is overcome by divine revelation. And the conceptual content of these claims is not changing or developing

but fixed relative to a dogmatic hardcore. Hector himself must assume this much if he is referring to the Trinity and to God Incarnate as it has been traditionally understood in catholic Christianity.

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