

BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Author's Note for Symposium on *A Hidden Wisdom*

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Abstract

In this brief note, I provide a concise overview of my book *A Hidden Wisdom*, and I highlight one aspect of each of the contributions that warrants further exploration.

Keywords: apophatic union; Henry of Ghent; Marguerite Porete; medieval contemplatives; philosophy as a way of life

First and foremost, I owe Richard Cross, Michael Rea, Thomas Williams, and Mark Wynn tremendous thanks for their thoughtful responses to my recent book – what a wonderful model of incisive engagement and charitable interaction they offer! I also want to thank them for their patience in waiting for this symposium to appear in print; I contracted meningitis shortly after receiving their collected comments (a clear case of correlation rather than causation) and am still recovering from its physical and cognitive effects. In that vein, I also need to thank Andrew Arlig for his assistance in putting together these all-too-brief remarks and to offer my colleagues a heartfelt apology for not being able to give their contributions the careful attention and detailed responses they each deserve. In what follows, I give a brief overview of the book, and I highlight one aspect of each of the contributions that seems ripe for further exploration – not just by me, but by philosophers and theologians more generally.

My main goal in writing *A Hidden Wisdom* was to argue that the medieval contemplative movements of the Rome-based Christian tradition are significant for their philosophical as well as theological insights. In casting a net wider than just the newly emerging universities of the thirteenth–fifteenth centuries, I also wanted to show that women – who famously occupy a prominent place in these contemplative movements as ‘mystics’ but less famously as authors, readers, and disseminators of its literature – had insightful and influential things to say about a number of philosophical topics of perennial interest. I wanted to keep the book short and accessible enough to draw people into the discussion, and so rather than attempt comprehensive coverage of any of these rich topics, I tried to present what the medieval contemplatives had to say about them as a sort of ‘tasting menu’, meant to whet the intellectual appetite. Thus, after a chapter setting out my methodology and how it applies to common contemporary philosophical definitions of ‘mystical experience’, the rest of the book examines medieval contemplative views on five topics of particular interest: self-knowledge, reason and its relation to our final end, the will and love, the nature of persons, and immortality and the afterlife. (Hence, the ‘grocery-list’ subtitle of the book.)

One of the most exciting aspects of the comments by Cross, Rea, Williams, and Wynn is how they each pick up, amplify and/or challenge, and expand on one of the different aspects of the book. Medieval contemplative thought seems to me clearly informed and influenced by scholastic disputations, for instance, but *A Hidden Wisdom* doesn't undertake the project of providing texts or arguments that would back up specific claims. In his comments, Richard Cross begins this task, offering a brief but enticing series of arguments for Marguerite Porete's influence on the important Paris master of theology Henry of Ghent and – here Cross makes an entirely new proposal, as far as I am aware – for Henry's subsequent influence on Angela of Foligno. The current evidence is largely circumstantial, but the connections Cross draws offer provocative possibilities and demonstrate how future 'inter-traditional' study can enhance our understanding of the medieval philosophical and theological landscape.

Both Thomas Williams and Michael Rea focus on what I labelled the 'apophatic' strand of contemplative thought, but to almost opposite ends. Medieval proponents of apophatic union take our final end to utterly transcend human ways of speaking or knowing – sometimes, even of being itself. Although the exception rather than the rule in the thirteenth–fifteenth centuries, for various reasons, this is the model of mystical union that has most captured the attention of contemporary scholars. In his comments, Williams drives home just how strange it is that the apophatic tradition has persisted at all, given what he sees as its profound incompatibility with orthodox Christian understandings of the doctrine of creation, the Incarnation, and the Trinity. I share William's worry about the compatibility of the Incarnation with strict apophaticism and its transcendence of the physical: its scepticism, if not outright antagonism, towards embodiment seems to undermine the very 'point' of a God made flesh.

Rea is also wary of the standard way in which the apophatic goal of 'annihilation' has been understood, and for several of the same reasons: he drives home the point that on the face of it the traditional apophatic model of mystical union is logically incoherent, whether we read claims about self-loss and annihilation in an ontological or phenomenological sense.¹ Rather than dismiss apophaticism out of hand, however, Rea offers another way of reading its claims, epitomized most strikingly in Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls*. A direct challenge to the way I have interpreted Porete (and other medieval apophatic texts, such as the *Cloud of Unknowing*), Rea's proposal is a persuasive mix of rational reconstruction and patient, sympathetic attention to the text. It has forced me to reconsider my reading of Porete, and in future work I will be looking to see if this more embodiment-friendly form of apophaticism is compatible with other medieval texts as well.

Finally, Mark Wynn picks up on one of the most important meta-goals of the book: demonstrating the continued relevance of the medieval contemplative tradition. In his comments, Wynn makes a compelling case for how the medieval contemplatives discussed in *A Hidden Wisdom* open up fresh perspectives for anyone interested in articulating a viable Christian philosophy. Pierre Hadot's well-known distinction between philosophy understood as a body of principles and doctrines (theory) and philosophy understood as 'a way of life' (*praxis*) can be read as favouring the subordination of theory to *praxis*, Wynn observes. Yet, he goes on to argue, the medieval contemplatives discussed in my book offer us a way to weave emotions and embodied experience more broadly into the fabric of theory itself. As Wynn puts it: '[O]ur affective, imagination-informed reckoning with the sensory detail of the life of the human Christ, and other human lives, can in principle play the sort of role that theoretical forms of philosophical enquiry have . . . aspired to play, of attending to what is normatively and metaphysically basic.'

There is much in Wynn's remarks to ponder and pursue, as is the case with Rea's and Williams's and Cross's. I am humbled – in the best medieval sense – by the generosity and

care with which my respondents have approached their work, and I deeply regret that I am not currently in a position to return the favour in a manner that does them better justice. Fortunately, the generative nature of their contributions is sure to inspire further work, which I await with enthusiasm.

Note

1. Note from Andrew Arlig: Rea asserts that both the ontological and the phenomenological understandings of 'annihilation' are logically incoherent and asks, rhetorically it seems, why we would want to saddle our thinkers with obviously false positions. Well, here is one reason to take at least some apophaticists at face value. If we turn to the corresponding mystical tradition in the Islamic world, we see several authors allowing for the possibility that the realm of the truly real is one that fails to obey finite, human reason's basic rules (including the Law of Non-contradiction!). Ibn Tufayl, for instance, notes that 'same' and 'different' are predicates that get their sense by abstracting from our experience of material objects (after all, they are the beings that are first known by us). Why should we automatically expect that immaterial objects behave according to the same rules? In his rightfully famous *Deliverance from Error*, Al-Ghazali presents a dilemma to (human) reason, which is effectively the one that Aristotle famously arrives at in *Metaphysics* Γ: you cannot *prove* that the Law of Contradiction is true, since any demonstrative proof makes use of this very rule. To be sure, both of these Islamic thinkers eventually back away from an ontological notion of 'annihilation', but not necessarily because the laws of identity have been violated. Rather, their basic motivation is one that Rea also notes: there is a fundamental gap between Creator and Creation, one that can never be bridged precisely because this would violate the unicity of God. Still, we might want to allow for the fact that at least some thinkers did see this divide as porous. The Christian already allows the Divine to become a creature. Why, then, is it absolutely off the table that a creature can become Divine?