



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Does the Orthodox tradition have anything to contribute to analytic theology?

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### Abstract

A prominent challenge to analytic theology charges that its methodology leads to idolatry. This article explores a response to this challenge that draws upon the Eastern Orthodox apophatic tradition. Apophatic approaches, which emphasize how little we can truthfully say or know about God, are not exclusive to Orthodox Christianity. But these views take a unique form within the tradition insofar as they accord a prominent role to the distinction between God's essence and God's energies. The divine essence is *what it is to be* God, what God is as such, what God is at God's core. In contrast, the divine energies are properties, modes, or activities of God not included in the divine essence but intimately related to it. Proponents of the distinction have claimed that it can help theorists to navigate the Christian tradition's cataphatic and apophatic commitments, which don't always sit comfortably together. This article argues that there are ways of crafting the essence/energy distinction that can also help to address the 'Idolatry Argument' against analytic theology.

**Keywords:** apophaticism; energies; essence; grounding; idolatry; orthodox

I begin this article with an admission. While an Orthodox Christian, I have long been wary of the apophaticism embedded within the tradition, treating it as something not to be embraced but to be worked around. My wariness has several sources.

For one thing, I have not found it clearly operative in the church's worship. With the exception of one sentence in which God is said to be ineffable and unknowable, the text of the Divine Liturgy does not portray God as radically transcendent. Rather, it confidently predicates all manner of characteristics of God. Among other things, God is described as 'one in essence and undivided' and Christ as the only begotten of the Father. The emphasis is almost entirely on the immanence not the transcendence of God. As someone drawn to the view that our theorizing about God should be heavily informed by our liturgical practices, it has sometimes been difficult for me to see why apophaticism should figure so prominently in the Eastern tradition's philosophical theology.

In addition, I've worried that the tradition's commitment to apophaticism lacks a satisfactory rationale. The most prominent rationale appeals to a theological datum: God is transcendent, radically different from anything in the created order. In their efforts to make sense of this datum, Orthodox thinkers such as Maximos the Confessor claim that God 'transcends ... being itself', while Gregory Palamas asserts that 'God's essence is entirely unnamable since it is also completely incomprehensible'.<sup>1</sup> But these pronouncements can seem excessive. It is almost as if, when the tradition attempted to characterize God's

transcendence, neo-Platonic ways of thinking took over, compelling it to say things that are at best deeply puzzling, or worse, incoherent. But without commitment to these ways of thinking, which are embraced by few philosophers today, it remains an open question whether the tradition has a satisfactory philosophical rationale for endorsing apophaticism.

Which brings me to a third point of hesitation: it's natural to worry that, were a robustly apophatic approach correct, philosophical theology would lack a subject matter. Yes, we could talk about the limits of our thought and language when it comes to the divine being. And perhaps we could continue to intelligibly say what God is not. But we would have rather little to discuss otherwise. We could not think through and critically consider a whole range of fascinating issues about who God is – at least if we were not to fall into incoherence or have any idea of what we were talking about. I find the prospect of being barred from such theorizing deflating. Not only do I find it deflating, I've also worried that there is little difference between robust apophaticism and a type of religious scepticism according to which we cannot know anything positive and informative about who God is. Religious scepticism of this variety, however, has no appeal to me.

It is for reasons such as these that I've long been wary of the apophaticism embedded in the Orthodox tradition. Yet I've also been uneasy with the prospect of simply dismissing it. Apophaticism is too prominent in the tradition to do that. The task that faces someone with scruples such as mine, then, is to try to understand apophaticism as it takes shape in the tradition in order to appreciate what is valuable about it. My suspicion is that there is much valuable about it, and I confess that the more I've reflected on apophaticism as it takes shape within the Orthodox tradition, the more sympathetic I've found myself with the view – or at least with some of the impulses for embracing it. This sympathy isn't comfort. I wouldn't say that I'm *comfortable* with apophaticism, let alone enthusiastic about it. I don't know yet whether the view is sufficiently motivated. And I don't know whether the approach can be worked out satisfactorily. But I'm interested to see whether it can be.

While there are a variety of reasons why I'd like to see whether the approach can be worked out, here is one on which I wish to focus in this discussion. Critics of analytic philosophy have long expressed the worry that there is something about its very method or style that is inimical to, or fits poorly with, doing philosophical theology well. According to the critics, to do philosophical theology well involves theorizing in a way that fully recognizes the gap between Creator and creature. But to do that means taking the apophatic tradition with much more seriousness than the methods of analytic philosophical theology (or, simply 'analytic theology') would appear to allow. I'll articulate this worry more fully in the next section. For now I wish only to note that the Orthodox tradition has a unique way of articulating and developing its apophaticism. The tradition appeals to the distinction between the divine essence and the divine energies – a distinction that has only recently begun to be worked out with the sort of care and rigor that would enable us to see whether it withstands scrutiny, helps illuminate topics in analytic theology, and can aid in responding to worries that the critics of analytic theology have raised.<sup>2</sup> My aim here is to make a start on these issues.

I'll do that by engaging in three tasks. The first is to present a line of argument that articulates why we should be uneasy with analytic theology as it is currently practised. The second task is to formulate an apophatic view that incorporates the essence/energy distinction in a way that not only avoids important objections but also renders it attractive. The third task is to ask whether employing this distinction is genuinely helpful for addressing the uneasiness some have with analytic theology. If the answer to this last question is yes, as I'll argue, then that would yield an interesting conclusion. For we would have reason to hold that the dominant approach to thinking about God in Eastern Orthodox theology can contribute in fruitful ways to the enterprise of analytic theology. In that case, there would

be special reasons for its practitioners to take an interest in apophaticism as it is developed in the Orthodox tradition.

Bringing analytic theology into conversation with the Orthodox tradition presents challenges. The primary challenge facing analytic theologians is that (as just noted) the dominant Orthodox approach is heavily influenced by neo-Platonist modes of philosophical inquiry, which are largely foreign to practitioners of analytic theology. Taking these modes of inquiry seriously would require analytic theologians to take a large step into alien philosophical territory, inhabiting a foreign mindset, appreciating the tradition's concerns and ways of treating issues, and translating its claims into more familiar idioms. Conversely, seriously engaging with analytic theology would probably require representatives of the dominant Orthodox approach to distance themselves from some of its prominent tendencies, such as embracing claims about God that are of dubious coherence (or failing to explain why these claims are unproblematic).<sup>3</sup> Even if these things were to happen, the results might not be productive. Exposure to the Orthodox tradition might lead analytic theologians to conclude that we're poorly positioned to coherently theorize about God. We must simply live with the antinomies. The question that interests me, however, is whether the Orthodox tradition can contribute to the project of analytic theology as it's presently practised. It is not whether the tradition can or should revolutionize or subvert analytic theology, calling into question its primary assumptions and methodological commitments (about which I'll have more to say in a moment).

Let me enter a pair of caveats. I'll be operating at a fairly high level of abstraction in this essay. I will sometimes only sketch answers to questions that deserve much fuller replies. And you'll see that my engagement with particular historical figures within the Orthodox tradition is fairly minimal. Rather than try to explicate Maximus the Confessor's or Gregory of Palamas's apophaticism, I want to draw upon their work in order to pursue some larger conceptual issues with which anyone interested in the apophatic tradition must wrestle – though I welcome further discussion about the extent to which the proposal I develop fits with what these figures are trying to say. There is a further respect in which my discussion is incomplete. Orthodox apophaticism is fundamentally practical in orientation. Kallistos Ware captures this idea when he writes that while 'destructive in outward form, the apophatic approach is affirmative in its final effects: it helps us to reach out, beyond all statements positive or negative, beyond all language and all thought, toward an immediate experience of the living God'.<sup>4</sup> Though I find this depiction of religious experience fascinating, I'll only briefly touch upon the issue of whether apophaticism facilitates or makes sense of such experience.

### The idolatry argument

Religious traditions operate with ideals and 'anti-ideals'. In his book *The Good and the Good Book*, Samuel Fleischacker notes that the animating anti-ideal of the Jewish tradition is *idolatry*.<sup>5</sup> More than anything else, it is idolatry that we are to avoid in our lives, including our theorizing. The Jewish tradition is not alone in this regard; the Christian tradition has also shared this aversion (even if its aversion is less emphatic). The worry about analytic theology I want to consider is whether there is something about its very approach to theorizing that makes its practitioners prone to developing idolatrous views about God.

Why would one think such a thing true? In the Introduction to his co-edited volume *Analytic Theology*, Michael Rea (himself an advocate of analytic theology) addresses the issue.<sup>6</sup> Writing that there is probably no precise way to specify the commitments of analytic theology, Rea notes that the approach has been heavily influenced by analytic philosophy. And the latter is 'an approach to philosophical problems that is characterized by a particular rhetorical style, some common ambitions, an evolving technical vocabulary, and a tendency

to pursue projects in dialogue with a certain evolving body of literature'.<sup>7</sup> Some of these ambitions are captured in the following pair of methodological directives:

Avoid substantive (non-decorative) use of metaphor and other tropes whose semantic content outstrips their propositional content;

And:

Treat conceptual analysis (insofar as it is possible) as a source of evidence.<sup>8</sup>

It is this last commitment, Rea suggests, that lies behind the 'common complaint' that the outputs of metaphysical theorizing about God in the analytic tradition is, or is prone to be, idolatrous.

Rea presents the argument as follows. God falls under a variety of concepts. For example, according to the Christian tradition, God falls under the concepts PERFECT BEING, OMNISCIENT, TRIUNE, CREATOR OF THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH, and so on. Theorizing about God via conceptual analysis, in which we treat such analysis as a primary source of evidence when constructing theories, involves attributing properties to God based on our intuitions about how best to analyse, or unpack, these concepts. But theorizing about God via conceptual analysis requires that we privilege some ways of thinking about God over others – elevating, say, the concept PERFECT BEING over others such as CREATOR OF THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH and REDEEMER OF HUMANITY. Theorizing in this way also requires taking a stand on the extent to which relevant concepts apply (e.g., wholly or partially) and the ways in which they apply (e.g., literally or metaphorically) to God. The assumptions that determine these things are not only highly contentious; they also risk being illegitimate insofar as they are mistaken or misguided, incorporating blind-spots, prejudices, and biased cultural commitments. So, if we treat conceptual analysis as a primary source of evidence about God, as analytical theology does, we run the genuine risk of allowing illegitimate influences to shape our theorizing about God, fashioning a being in our own image.<sup>9</sup> For example, when analysing God's love, we might depict a being who resembles a benevolent twenty-first-century westerner, dispensing benefits and burdens with an eye toward maximizing the good. But that, arguably, borders on idolatry, broadly understood. And if idolatry functions as an anti-ideal, something to be avoided at nearly all costs, then it makes sense why we should be leery of the way analytic theologians approach theorizing about God.

What I'll call the 'Idolatry Argument' is both distinctive and interesting because it is an 'in-house', religiously motivated argument for being suspicious of analytic theology. Rea indicates that while analytic theologians have paid virtually no attention to the argument, they ought to. I am inclined to agree, especially if the argument can be further motivated and shored up in certain respects. I'll gesture at how that might be done in the final section of this article. For now, let me extend the argument in a couple ways.

The Idolatry Argument hinges on the assumption that conceptual analysis is a primary source of evidence on which analytic theologians rely. But it is arguably not the only such source. Thought experiments, common sense, biblical texts, and commentary are also available sources of evidence. Many of these sources are subject to the type of concern voiced above, as they also threaten to encode mistaken and obfuscating information about who God is. So, even if analytic theology were to draw upon a variety of primary sources of evidence, such as those mentioned just above, the Idolatry Argument would still have bite. And if that is correct, the argument poses a much more general challenge: *Any* approach to theorizing about God will need to rely on various putative sources of evidence, while also privileging some concepts and commitments over others. If such reliance and privileging is

fraught in the ways described above, then any approach to engaging in philosophical theology – whether phenomenological, Barthian, pragmatist, or whatever – will need to wrestle with a version of the Idolatry Argument. Might there be resources upon which theorists of different convictions could draw upon to address the fundamental concern raised by the argument? While continuing to focus on analytic theology, I explore whether the Orthodox tradition harbours such resources.

### Orthodox apophaticism

Apophatic approaches to thinking about God emphasize how little we can truthfully say or know about God. While not exclusive to the Orthodox tradition, these views take a unique form within the tradition insofar as they accord a prominent role to the distinction between God's essence and God's energies.

The divine essence is *what it is to be* God, what God is as such, what God is at God's core. In contrast, the divine energies are properties, modes, or activities of God not included in the divine essence but intimately related and 'pertaining' to it.<sup>10</sup> Candidates would include substantive positive properties often predicated of God such as *omniscience*, *omnipotence*, *omnipresence*, *triunity*, as well as God's activities such as sustaining and redeeming creation.

Employing some conceptual apparatus familiar to contemporary metaphysicians, we can state two ways, according to the dominant Orthodox approach, in which the essence and the energies are related. The first is captured by the

**Grounding Claim:** the divine energies are (fully) grounded in the divine essence.

The second is stated by the:

**Manifestation Claim:** the divine energies manifest the divine essence.<sup>11</sup>

The Grounding Claim is supposed to capture the idea that while the divine essence is not identical with the energies, the energies don't float free of the essence; the divine essence 'anchors' the energies in such a way that the latter are tethered to and explained by the former. The Manifestation Claim tells us something more about the relation between essence and energies: the divine essence is present in, or manifested by, the divine energies to some degree, perhaps in the way that a character trait or a power is expressed or manifested in someone's or something's behavior. The Manifestation Claim is backed by the intuitive idea that the energies must in some sense express what God is.

To these ontological claims, the dominant Orthodox approach adds a thesis about our cognition of God, which I'll call the

**Application Claim:** When our positive, informative concepts apply to God, as they often do, they apply to the divine energies but not to the divine essence.

Articulations of the Application Claim (or close relatives thereto) are common in the Orthodox tradition. Understood to be speaking of the divine nature, Dionysius the Areopagite writes that God 'lies beyond thought and beyond being ... it cannot be spoken of and it cannot be grasped by understanding ... It falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being.... There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it ... It is beyond assertion and denial'.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Gregory of Nyssa maintains:

The simplicity of the True Faith assumed God to be that which he is, namely incapable of being grasped by any term, or any idea, or any other device of our apprehension, remaining beyond the reach not only of the human but of the angelic and all supramundane intelligence, unthinkable, unutterable, above all expression in words, having but one name that can represent His proper nature, the single name being 'Above Every Name'.<sup>13</sup>

Gregory Palamas claims that the 'super-essential nature of God is not a subject for speech or thought or even contemplation, for it is far removed from all that exists and more than unknowable.'<sup>14</sup> These passages are just a representative sample. We could add quotations from figures such as Clement of Alexandria, Basil of Caesarea, Maximus the Confessor, and John of Damascus that state similar ideas.

Let me offer several observations about the trio of claims that constitute the dominant Orthodox approach. The first is that the Grounding and Manifestation Claims are distinctive in the sense that they are not simply an Eastern way of articulating prominent commitments already present in Western philosophical theology, whether (say) Augustinian, Thomist, or Scotist. In fact, insofar as the Thomistic tradition affirms the doctrine of divine simplicity, it must reject the Grounding and Manifestation Claims. The doctrine of divine simplicity states that God's essence is identical with God's power, which is identical with God's knowledge, which is identical with God's goodness, and so on. In contrast, the dominant Orthodox approach maintains that God's having these properties is fully grounded in the divine essence (per the Grounding Claim). Provided that the full ground of something is not identical with what it grounds, the doctrine of divine simplicity is incompatible with the dominant Orthodox approach.

Second, apophaticism comes in different degrees, being more or less thoroughgoing. The dominant Orthodox approach fits with (but does not imply) tempered apophatic views which affirm that our positive and informative concepts (or terms) apply literally to God. That is because the dominant approach allows that many of these concepts (or terms) literally apply to God insofar as they literally apply to the divine energies. So the dominant approach is compatible with a position according to which we can truthfully and literally say of God such things as God is omnipotent, omniscient, and triune, where this encodes or provides high-grade information about God. The approach simply rules out that we can say anything similar of the divine essence.<sup>15</sup> A moderate view of this sort enjoys the advantage of being able to make sense of the cataphatic pronouncements that permeate the church's worship; they concern the divine energies. I should add that in this regard the dominant approach is incompatible with Thomistic approaches, which affirm that our positive, informative concepts (and terms) must apply to God only analogically or metaphorically.

But – and this is the third observation – the three claims that constitute the dominant Orthodox approach do not hang together well. The problem lies with the Application Claim, which asserts that our positive, informative concepts (or terms) do not apply to the divine essence.

The glaring problem is that if this claim is taken with full seriousness – and not merely as a hyperbolic expression of our cognitive limits – there is no way to coherently state the dominant Orthodox view. To appreciate why, suppose the Grounding Claim and Manifestation Claim help us to see how the divine essence and energies are related.<sup>16</sup> If these claims are true, then they both involve successfully applying concepts to the divine essence, specifically, the notions BEING SUCH AS TO GROUND THE ENERGIES and BEING MANIFESTED IN THE ENERGIES. While these are relatively formal concepts, they are not empty or uninformative: they provide positive information about the divine essence and some of the

relations (including explanatory ones) it bears to the energies. In fact, I've suggested that the Grounding and Manifestation Claims express propositions about the divine essence that one does not find in (and are incompatible with prominent views within) the Western tradition of philosophical theology. It follows that, if the Grounding Claim and the Manifestation Claim are true, then at least two positive, informative concepts apply to the divine essence, which conflicts with the Application Claim. The dominant approach is incoherent.

When a position appears vulnerable to such charges, the natural reaction is to conclude that it has been misunderstood. And there is reason to think that this may be true in the present case. Specifically, there are grounds for holding that the Application Claim may fail to capture what the tradition is trying to get at when it has affirmed that the divine nature is 'incapable of being grasped by any term, or any idea, or any other device of our apprehension'. The most provocative alternative reading of the Application Claim of which I'm aware, due to Peter van Elswyk's work, maintains that it is best understood to be a metalinguistic thesis.<sup>17</sup> Under the metalinguistic reading, to deny that our positive, informative concepts (or terms) apply to the divine essence is simply to sincerely disapprove of, reject, or disavow the *claim* that these concepts apply to the divine essence. So understood, the Application Claim is probably best understood to have two functions. To endorse it is to thereby reject or disapprove of any claim that involves the application of positive, informative concepts to the divine essence, while also directing that everyone else is to do so as well. A happy implication of metalinguistic apophaticism is that it would insulate the dominant Orthodox approach from the charge of logical incoherence: combining the Grounding and Manifestation Claims with disapproval of applying our concepts (or terms) to the divine essence (and enjoining others to do the same) is logically coherent.

But so understood, the dominant Orthodox approach would be subject to at least the following concerns. First, the approach would be compatible with the core cataphatic commitment that a large range of our positive, informative concepts literally apply to the divine essence. For there is nothing about a metalinguistic reading of the Application Claim that rules this out. In order to eliminate such an unwelcome possibility, the dominant Orthodox approach would need to supplement itself with further substantive theses that foreclose this possibility. I can guess what these supplemental theses might be, but they would all reintroduce incoherence into the view, in which case no progress would have been made.<sup>18</sup> Second, according to metalinguistic apophaticism, proponents of the dominant approach would find themselves at once affirming the Grounding and Manifestation Claims, which explicate the approach's core commitments, while also disagreeing with, rejecting, or disavowing these very claims (and enjoining others to do so as well). Though this combination of attitudes is not logically incoherent, it is incoherent in a broader, more-difficult-to-specify sense. Metalinguistic apophaticism, then, guarantees that no one could coherently endorse the dominant Orthodox approach. Moreover, if what I said at the outset of our discussion is correct, apophatic approaches are supposed to motivate undertaking a certain 'concept-less' way of experiencing God. But the dominant Orthodox approach could not justify pursuing this path while simultaneously rejecting or disavowing the very claims invoked to motivate taking it.

The dominant Orthodox approach, I've said, comprises three claims: the Grounding, Manifestation, and Application Claims. I've contended that they do not fit well together; they yield a position that is either incoherent or could not be coherently endorsed. There may be other interpretations of the Application Claim that would avoid these (and other) problems. But I am not optimistic. The conclusion I reach is that we should look elsewhere for a view that captures the spirit of the dominant Orthodox approach while avoiding its pitfalls.

To that end, let's take a step back to reflect upon the dynamic that apophatic views take themselves to navigate. On the one hand, there is the enormous ontological gulf between Creator and creature. The existence of such a gulf is taken to have the following upshot regarding our cognition of God: given how utterly different Creator and creature are, we should expect that our cognitive resources are not up to the task of bridging the distance. That is, we should expect that, given the ontological distance between God and us, there is rather little we can think or say that is positive, informative, and literally true of what God is, given our cognitive limitations. On the other hand, God is not wholly hidden, inaccessible, or transcendent. What God is like has been revealed in history, experience, and through rational reflection. Indeed, the cataphatic pressures in the Christian tradition are especially pronounced, given its commitment to the incarnation. It is because of all this that the Christian tradition has affirmed that we can say much that is accurate, positive, and informative about God. The Orthodox tradition has elected to navigate the dynamic just described by implementing a divide-and-conquer strategy: go apophatic about the essence and cataphatic regarding the divine energies.

Yet our discussion has revealed that the dynamic in question is in fact more complicated. There are pressures to affirm that we can think and say accurate, positive, and informative things about not just God, but also the divine essence. For one thing, the creedal claims issued in Nicaea appear to pertain to the divine essence. The second and third persons of the Trinity are said to be *homoousion* – of one essence – with regard to the Father. Moreover, properties such as *unsurpassable goodness* and *unsurpassable lovingkindness* are such that, not only must God have them, but nothing other than God could have them. As such, these properties bear the marks of being essential features of God. Finally, we've seen that the tradition must make sense of the fact that, in order to coherently state its own view, it must say accurate, positive, and informative things about the divine essence – specifically, how the essence and energies are related. It follows that the tradition must honour three types of commitments: those affirming apophaticism regarding the essence, those affirming cataphaticism regarding the energies, and those acknowledging accurate, positive, and contentful claims regarding what God is. My project in what remains is to develop, in a series of steps, a moderate apophatic view designed to navigate this threefold dynamic.

The first step is to hold fixed the Grounding Claim: the divine essence fully grounds the divine energies. The second step involves offering a construal of the Manifestation Claim that can accommodate both the tradition's apophatic and cataphatic commitments. The rendering I propose recruits a distinction between *manifesting something* and *being a manifestation of something*. Roughly, when *x* manifests *F*, *x*'s being *F* puts you in a position to know something positive and informative about what it is to be *x*. For example, an agent's behaviour might manifest a character trait of hers, such as courage, that positions you to grasp what it is to be courageous, provided you have reasonable mastery of the relevant concepts. In contrast, when *F* is a manifestation of *x*, *x*'s being *F* provides information about *x*, but does not itself put you in a position to know (much of) anything positive and substantive about what it is to be *x*, even when you have reasonable mastery of the relevant concepts. For example, being clear, potable, and wet is a manifestation of H<sub>2</sub>O, but water's having these features does not manifest H<sub>2</sub>O in the sense that it itself puts agents in a position to know anything informative about what it is to be water. Only acquainting yourself with the findings of chemistry can provide that.

The Manifestation Claim is neutral regarding the sense in which the divine energies manifest the divine essence, not marking the distinction just introduced. The moderate apophaticism I wish to develop reads the claim as follows:



the divine energies manifest the divine essence but only in the sense that the energies are manifestations of the divine essence.

Since the divine energies are merely manifestations of the divine essence, the fact that the essence bears this relation to the energies does not itself position us to grasp much of anything regarding what it is to be God, even though we may have reasonable mastery of the relevant concepts.

This paves the way for the third step, which is to reject the Application Claim in favour of

**Cognitive Limits:** When our concepts (or terms) apply to God, as they often do, their doing so positions us to gain little accurate, positive, and contentful information regarding the divine essence.

This thesis is compatible with a stingy view according to which rather few of our positive and informative concepts apply to the divine essence and a more liberal one according to which many of these concepts apply, though they deliver little information regarding it. Moderate apophaticism could endorse either approach in principle. As noted above, however, the dynamic that moderate apophaticism must navigate is more complicated than simply making sense of the tradition's apophatic and cataphatic commitments. It must also handle claims that appear to provide accurate, positive, and contentful information about the divine essence itself. And that seems like a challenge given the Manifestation Claim, as it is glossed above. For many of the claims that appear to pertain to the divine essence, such as claims that God is unsurpassably good, unsurpassably powerful, and triune, seem to provide a great deal of such information about the divine essence.

I want to present two compatible strategies for addressing this challenge. Neither questions the claim that there is rather little accurate, positive, and contentful information to be gained regarding what God is at God's core. Instead, each strategy holds fixed a commitment to moderate apophaticism regarding the divine essence and attempts to handle claims that militate against this commitment. Let me add that, in presenting these strategies, my aim is not to advocate for either of them or to query whether the tradition should relax its commitment to apophaticism. Neither do I assume that these are the only options available to moderate apophaticism. (At the conclusion of our discussion, I'll draw attention to another option.) I present these strategies simply as live options for moderate apophaticism.

The first strategy concedes that relatively formal claims, such as the Grounding and Manifestation Claims, provide accurate, positive, and contentful information regarding the divine essence. But it holds that other more substantive claims that may appear to concern God's essence do not. Consider claims regarding the divine perfections, such as those concerning *unsurpassable goodness*. We've seen that the properties expressed by these claims have the marks of belonging to the divine essence – among other things, these properties uniquely belong to God. The strategy under consideration holds that these perfections do not belong to the divine essence but are instead 'propria' (or 'essential accidents') of the divine essence. In his *Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Transformation of Divine Simplicity*, Andrew Radde-Gallwitz writes that this is the position embraced by Basil and Gregory of Nyssa:

Basil and Gregory's notion that a certain class of divine attributes should be viewed as propria of the divine nature constitutes a unique construal of the doctrine of divine simplicity. Propria necessarily inhere in the natures of which they are propria, and do so uniquely, such that they serve as identifying markers for those natures.

Accordingly, they make possible knowledge of those natures ... Yet, at the same time, propria do not define the essence. God's propria of goodness, wisdom, power, justice, and truth do not tell us what it is to be God. God is simultaneously known and unknown, and part of the theological task is stating clearly where the lines are drawn between them ... As such, they [propria] provide the perfect logical category for the divine attributes if one wishes to insist on both the unknowability of the divine essence and the (partial) knowledge of God as God is.<sup>19</sup>

In the terminology I've employed, the divine essence necessarily fully grounds the divine propria, which include properties such as *unsurpassable goodness*, *unsurpassable power*, and *unsurpassable lovingkindness*. While the divine propria are manifestations of the divine essence – and are uniquely possessed by God – they do not manifest the divine essence or 'tell us what it is to be God'. Otherwise put, the divine propria are divine energies not belonging to any real definition of the divine essence.

Recall, though, that the divine perfections are not the only candidates for belonging to the divine essence. Other candidates include properties expressed by creedal claims, such as the property expressed by the English phrase 'three persons in one essence'. The strategy under consideration reminds us that such English phrases incorporate translations of the Greek term *ousia*. And that term is ambiguous: it can mean either *substance* or *essence*. According to Radde-Gallwitz, Nyssa clearly saw that the term must mean *substance* when employed in creedal formulations. Otherwise, the creedal formulation that God is three persons but *homoousion* ('one substance') would provide highly contentful information regarding the divine essence, which sits poorly with the tradition's apophaticism.<sup>20</sup> Given a few additional assumptions, it follows that properties such as *being three persons in one substance* must also be divine propria.

In sum, the first strategy holds that some relatively formal claims provide accurate, positive, and contentful information regarding the divine essence. But other more substantive claims, such as those regarding the divine perfections and God's triune character, do not. These claims concern the divine propria, which are a subset of the divine energies. The epistemological upshot is that, while we may have little high-grade information regarding the divine essence, such information may be available regarding the divine propria.

The second strategy, which is not articulated in the tradition, differs from the first in a crucial respect: it is open to the possibility that the divine perfections and the 'creedal properties' (as we might call them) belong to the divine essence. This might seem tantamount to surrendering apophaticism regarding the divine essence. But the strategy provides reasons to think it is not. The key is to mark a distinction between something's *fundamental* essence and its *non-fundamental* essence. The basic idea is that essences exhibit structural relations, with some essence facts holding in virtue of others. More formally:

[p] belongs to the *fundamental essence* of x just in case [p] belongs to x's essence and there is no [q] ( $\neq$  [p]) such that [q] belongs to x's essence and [p] belongs to x's essence at least partly because [q] belongs to x's essence.<sup>21</sup>

Any fact that belongs to x's essence but does not belong to x's fundamental essence is part of x's non-fundamental essence. A fundamental essence fact identifies an entity's fundamental essence as such; all other essence facts are non-fundamental ones.<sup>22</sup>

The distinction can be illustrated using an example from moral philosophy. Suppose it's true that the essence of the property *being wrong* includes *treating another as a mere means*, and that there is nothing else in virtue of which the latter property belongs to the essence of the former property. *Treating another as a mere means* would then be part of the fundamental

essence of *being wrong*. Suppose, however, that the essence of *being wrong* also includes *being blameworthy absent excuse*, and that this belongs to the essence of *being wrong* because *treating another as a mere means* belongs to the essence of *being wrong* (and to treat others as mere means is blameworthy absent excuse). In such a case, both properties would belong to the essence of *being wrong*: part of what it is to be wrong would be for an agent to treat another as mere means, and part of what it is to be wrong would be for an agent to be blameworthy absent excuse. But the former part of that essence would be fundamental while the latter part would not.

When applied to God, this distinction enables us to draw a tripartite distinction between God's fundamental essence, God's non-fundamental essence, and the divine energies. What God is at God's core is God's fundamental essence. According to moderate apophaticism, other divine characteristics are grounded in and manifestations of this essence. Of course this tripartite distinction will send ripple effects throughout any formulation of moderate apophaticism. The Grounding Claim must be modified to say that God's fundamental essence grounds both God's non-fundamental essence and the divine energies. The Manifestation Claim must be read to state that God's non-fundamental essence and the divine energies are both manifestations of God's fundamental essence. Finally, Cognitive Limits should be construed as the claim that there is little high-grade information to be gained regarding God's fundamental essence (though such information might be available regarding God's non-fundamental essence and the divine energies). These are not trivial alterations. But there is arguably reason to believe that this second strategy preserves the spirit of moderate apophaticism insofar as it affirms the view that there is little information to be had regarding who God is at God's core. I should emphasize that while this strategy is distinct from the first, they could be combined. Such a view would affirm that some properties are divine propria while others belong to God's non-fundamental essence.

As I mentioned earlier, my aim is not to plump for either one of these approaches. Instead, I'd like to note that there are analogues to the moderate apophatic position sketched above. Perhaps the closest is the view that Rae Langton, in her *Kantian Humility*, ascribes to Kant.<sup>23</sup> Langton's project in her book is to contend that Kant is no idealist and that the idealist-sounding things that Kant says are better interpreted to express a type of epistemic humility with regard to what is knowable regarding fundamental reality. When developing this interpretation, Langton maintains that Kant embraces three core theses, which she calls:

*Distinction*: Things in themselves are substances that have intrinsic properties; phenomena are relational properties of substances.

*Humility*: We have no knowledge of the intrinsic properties of substances.

*Receptivity*: Human knowledge depends on sensibility, and sensibility is receptive: we can have knowledge of an object only in so far as it affects us.<sup>24</sup>

Langton's project is, in part, to develop a reading of Kant according to which Kant's understanding of intrinsic and extrinsic properties rules out our having knowledge of the former or their bearers (the things in themselves). Unlike Langton's Kant, the moderate apophatic approach I've sketched does not appeal to any general claims about the intrinsic and relational properties or the nature of knowledge that would explain why we could not grasp or have knowledge of the divine essence. (And, importantly, it frames the issues in terms of essential features, not intrinsic ones.) It appeals, instead, to the epistemic implications of the ontological gulf between the divine essence and human cognizers.

Still, there are interesting parallels between the moderate apophatic approach just presented and Langton's Kant. Both views affirm that there are unknowable aspects of reality. These are the fundamental elements of reality. In the case of the Orthodox approach, what is fundamental is the (fundamental) divine essence. In the case of Langton's Kant, what is fundamental are the things in themselves. According to both the Orthodox approach and Langton's Kant, what is fundamental fully grounds what is less fundamental. The divine essence grounds the divine energies (and perhaps God's non-fundamental essence), while things in themselves ground the phenomenal entities. Finally, in both cases, we are entitled to predicate a limited number of attributes to that which is most fundamental due to the relations they must bear to what is less fundamental.

### The idolatry argument, again

I began this article by canvassing the following challenge to analytic theology: given its commitment to the idea that conceptual analysis is a primary source of evidence about God, analytic theologians run the risk of fashioning idolatrous views, broadly understood. That is because when constructing views about the divine, analytic theologians rely on the outputs of conceptual analysis (and other sources of evidence) that are prone to encode blind spots, prejudices, and deeply mistaken assumptions. The result of such theorizing, so the worry runs, is a simulacrum of the divine being, one constructed in our own image. I proposed to take this challenge seriously, exploring whether the Orthodox tradition's distinctive apophatic approach might provide resources for responding to it. The dominant Orthodox approach, I contended, is unlikely to provide such resources, since it cannot be coherently endorsed. But there is a more plausible, moderate apophatic view that may help to handle the challenge. The question before us is whether it does.

I believe the answer is a qualified 'Yes'. There is a natural interpretation of the Idolatry Argument according to which it is simply calling attention to how analytic theologians should theorize: they should approach their project with considerable caution, being careful not to confuse sources of high-grade information regarding God with other, untrustworthy ones infected with distorting influences. But according to the moderate apophatic view, this is not the situation at all. Instead, moderate apophaticism implies that *no* source of evidence will provide an ample amount of high-grade information about what God most fundamentally is. That is an implication of the gap between Creator and creature. Since no source provides such evidence, any view that analytic theologians might construct regarding what God is most fundamentally is likely to be idolatrous, as it will employ sources that fail to provide enough evidence of an appropriate sort.

In bolstering the Idolatry Argument in this way, moderate apophaticism also provides a safeguard against constructing idolatrous views. After all, it is not as if analytic theologians must construct theories regarding what God most fundamentally is despite there being compelling reasons not to. Instead, they can conform to such reasons, thereby avoiding constructing theories regarding the divine (fundamental) essence. Importantly, such avoidance needn't leave analytic theologians without a subject matter. Moderate apophaticism places no epistemic embargo on theorizing about those aspects of God not belonging to what God most fundamentally is. For instance, the view is compatible with constructing accurate, positive, informative, and perspicuous theories about the divine energies. This is welcome, as such theories could help to make sense of and deepen our understanding of what is affirmed of God in the church's worship.

But, as just noted, I believe this answer helps only partially to handle the challenge before us. Avoiding idolatrous views requires theorists having sources of evidence whose outputs are sufficiently ample and trustworthy. The response just articulated states that while such sources are not available regarding what God most fundamentally is, they may be

available regarding the divine energies. But there are grounds for pessimism as to whether such sources are actually available. After all, the outputs of any source would seem to be prone to the sorts of distorting influences named by the Idolatry Argument. More importantly, given that the energies are manifestations of the divine essence, there is reason to suspect that there will be little accurate, positive, and contentful information regarding important parts of *their* nature, in which case similar concerns arise regarding the adequacy of any theory we might construct regarding them.<sup>25</sup>

This last line of argument indicates that fully addressing the Idolatry Argument requires more work. Here is one way that moderate apophaticism might do that work. Begin by noting that theories regarding the divine being can be idolatrous to different degrees, while also acknowledging that it is difficult to construct such a theory that does not risk being idolatrous to some extent. Next, issue a concession: for the reasons given above, even the most responsible and sensitive theorizing about the divine energies risks producing theories that are idolatrous to some extent. Finally, call attention to moderate apophaticism's virtues: it positions us to craft highly informative and considerably less idolatrous theories than its competitors. Some of its most prominent rivals, for example, maintain that we can know a great deal about the divine essence and, indeed, that the beatific vision consists in contemplating it. Moderate apophaticism rejects all such claims. And that seems like a step in the right direction. In minimizing the risk of producing thoroughly idolatrous theories while also being informative, moderate apophaticism lays some claim to represent the best type of theory available given our epistemic situation vis-à-vis the divine.

Let me close by calling attention to an assumption that I've held fixed. Throughout our discussion, I've assumed that philosophical theology is in the business of crafting theories that accurately and perspicuously represent the divine being. The assumption is important, since without it, worries about idolatry would disappear. After all, the mere provision of a theory regarding God that is inaccurate and obfuscatory in important respects is not tantamount to falling into idolatry or anything like it. Rather, the descent into idolatry lies in treating those theories as accurately and perspicuously representing the divine being. It is a good question whether moderate apophaticism could query whether these theories function in this way, availing itself of the idea that our best theories regarding the divine energies are only rough approximations of the truth (and so not perspicuous) or even 'illuminating falsehoods' (and so inaccurate).<sup>26</sup> I do not see why they couldn't, although the details of such approaches would need to be worked out.

Does the Orthodox tradition have anything to contribute to analytic theology? The answer to this question, I believe, is also a qualified 'Yes'. A moderate apophatic approach that distinguishes the divine essence from the divine energies does seem poised to contribute in distinctive and potentially valuable ways to the enterprise of analytic theology. Those ways include not simply sensitizing analytic theologians to the concerns that drive apophatic approaches, but also providing resources by which theorists can fruitfully navigate the competing demands to honor the Christian tradition's apophatic and cataphatic commitments.

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## Notes

1. John of Damascus (1958, 172) and Palamas (1995, 413).
2. The most sustained treatment of the issue is Bradshaw (2023); see also Bradshaw (2004, chs. 7–10), as well as Radde-Gallowitz (2009), Jacobs (2015), Matthan Brown (2022), Pino (2022), Rooney (2023), and the essays in Athanasopoulos and Schneider (2013).

3. Among more contemporary figures, the tendency is especially apparent in the influential work of Vladimir Lossky, who (when endeavouring to interpret the Church fathers) says some very perplexing things. See Lossky (1976, chs. 1–3).
4. Ware (1995, 15). Cf. Yadav (2016) and (Coakley, n.d.), as well as Jonas (2016), (2021), and Yang (2022) who address similar themes in the Jewish tradition.
5. Fleischacker (2014, 77). Fleischacker (2011, 319) writes that the ‘attack on idolatry, which is essentially self-worship, is the clue to all morality for Jews’. Like Fleischacker, I’ll work with a capacious understanding of the idolatrous in which it involves not simply wholehearted devotion to something other than God, but also devotion to God where God is understood in a deeply distorted way such that the distortions incorporate, or are generated by, false ideals.
6. Rea (2009).
7. Rea (2009, 3).
8. Rea (2009, 5–6).
9. Rea (2009, 20).
10. This is the way Palamas talks about the relation of the divine energies to the divine essence. See Palamas (1995, 404–405). As the above formulations indicate, the notion of essence in play here is of broadly Aristotelian provenance. Modal notions of essence, according to which a thing’s essence is simply that conjunctive property which includes all of that thing’s necessary properties, can make no sense of the essence/energies distinction. For there could be no separate category of features, ‘the energies’, such that God necessarily has some of them, but they fail to belong to God’s essence. Cf. Plantinga (1974). Let me add that I’m operating here with a fairly expansive understanding of the energies, one that mirrors Bradshaw’s (2004, 2023) characterizations. See, especially, Bradshaw (2023, 199).
11. In what follows, I will talk of the energies as being grounded in the divine essence. I take this to be shorthand for God’s *instantiating the energies* or God’s *having the energies* are fully grounded in the divine essence.
12. Pseudo-Dionysius (1987, 141).
13. Nyssa (1957, 99). Later, I’ll touch upon a different reading of Nyssa.
14. Quoted in Lossky (1976, 37); cf. Palamas (1995, 393). Matthan Brown (2022) contends that Palamas’s use of ‘super-essential’ signals a commitment to the claim that the concept ESSENCE applies analogically, referring to one sort of thing when it comes to God, referring to another when it comes to everything else. I do not know whether this is the best reading of Palamas and company, as there are other interpretive options available. (For example, another reading would have it that the concept ESSENCE applies literally to God but the *conceptions* that typically accompany the use of this concept do not – or apply only analogically.) I also find the rationale offered for affirming the analogy of ESSENCE thesis unpersuasive. (It is said to follow from the claim that God does not have a form in the sense that other things do. I believe this claim either to be incoherent or not imply anything about the divine essence as such.) That noted, I take the dominant Orthodox approach to be compatible with either the affirmation or denial of the analogy of ESSENCE thesis, provided that whatever ESSENCE refers to can both ground and be manifested in the divine energies (or bear relevant analogues to these relations).
15. Notably, the dominant approach is compatible with there being negative concepts, such as NOT HAVING SPATIAL DIMENSIONS, and formal concepts, such as BEING SELF-IDENTICAL, that apply to the divine essence. If they do, then some knowledge of the divine essence may be available – though it would not provide positive, substantive information regarding it.
16. Some reject the supposition (see Athanapoulos 2013). The rejection could be predicated either on the belief that there is an alternative and preferable way to specify how the essence and the energies are related or, alternatively, the conviction that there is no way to perspicuously mark how they are related. The first option leaves us in the dark, at least until we know what this other way is. The second option is no more illuminating. We need to know what the distinction comes to if it is to make any contribution to philosophical theology.
17. Van Elswyk ([forthcoming](#)); cf. Scott and Citron (2016). I say that van Elswyk’s essay ‘provides the materials for’ an alternative interpretation of the dominant Orthodox approach because the view it develops differs from the dominant Orthodox approach in two respects: first, it presents a version of apophaticism not limited to claims regarding the divine essence and, second, it develops a metalinguistic thesis to the effect that all claims regarding God, whether positive or negative, are to be rejected.
18. Van Elswyk is alive to such concerns, see §2.4 of his essay. Rather than provide these supplemental claims, might advocates of the metalinguistic approach instead relax their apophaticism, allowing that some positive, informative concepts truthfully apply to the divine essence? Yes. That would be to pursue a strategy similar to the one I develop in the remainder of this section.
19. Radde-Gallwitz (2009, 225 and 201; cp. 184, 197). See, also, Palamas’s (1995) discussion of divine accidents (406–407) in which he discusses Gregory of Nazianzen’s views. Radde-Gallwitz notes that neither Nyssa nor Basil thinks that divine propria count as either accidents or energies (222–223). But under the more expansive understanding of the divine energies with which I’m operating, they do.

20. Radde-Gallwitz (2009, xxiv, 169). The claim that properties such as *being triune* belong to the divine essence also sits uneasily with a commitment to divine simplicity regarding the divine essence, as Radde-Gallwitz (2009, 168) remarks.
21. Bengson, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau (2024, 91) introduce the distinction in the context of developing a view in metaethics. The formulation above uses square brackets to designate facts.
22. The distinction may put some readers in mind of Fine's (2012, 79) proposal to define 'constitutive' in terms of 'consequential' essence; *cp.* Rosen (2015, 196). Also see Correia's (2012, 643) distinction between 'basic nature' and 'derivative essentiality'.
23. Langton (1998). See, also, Allais (2015, ch. 10).
24. Langton (1998, 20, 22). Allais (2015) takes issue with the claim that things in themselves are substances.
25. Cuneo (n.d.) develops these points.
26. This approach is explored in Cuneo (n.d.).

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