Janet Soskice. *Naming God: Addressing the Divine in Philosophy, Theology and Scripture*. Cambridge University Press, 2023. pp 256. $39.99 (hbk).

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Janet Soskice's *Naming God* aims to affirm the identity of the God of Abraham with the God of the philosophers. This identity, she fears, is often denied or neglected, and at grave cost. As an example of such denial, Soskice quotes Gordon Kaufmann, who fulminates against the 'arbitrary imperial potentate' of natural theology. However, the failure to connect the God of the philosophers with the God of Abraham is a problem intellectually because the philosophical project of inquiry about God presupposes the connection: the reflections even of uncommitted philosophers of religion are supposed to be relevant to the teachings of specific religious traditions. Soskice also urges that it is a problem spiritually, for lost within the invective of a Kaufman is the very God who saves: distorted, despised and rejected.[1]

Soskice's diagnosis is that the Early Moderns took a wrong turn. The primary villain here is John Locke, though René Descartes sometimes shares in the dishonour.[2] The core complaint is that the Early Moderns focused their reflections on the divine attributes: objective features of the way God is, accessible through reason alone. This displaced an earlier tradition of reflection on the divine names: ways in which humans worship God through language, often rooted in revelation (3). As the title of her book suggests, Soskice wants to recover this latter tradition.

But why worry about the displacement? There is at least the suggestion that the uprooting of philosophical reflection from revelation is spiritually desiccating. Soskice is further concerned that this move might imperil the understanding and appreciation of prior theological practice. But worst of all seems to be the shared influence of these two problems on a certain kind of contemporary theologian who perceives modern philosophy of religion as spiritually dry, and assumes that older traditions are equally dry, and so rejects the riches of the divine names approach to reflection on God. Picking apart this line of thought is one of Soskice's central tasks.

We begin with Philo and Moses. The idea that God might fruitfully be thought of as Being Itself, Soskice laments, is much disputed. She reminds us that, in the Septuagint known as Scripture to Paul and Philo, God declares to Moses '*eigo eimi ho on*', I am he who is (21). Thus the association between God and being – absolute, unqualified existence – lies at the heart of the Biblical narrative, and indeed it is the story of Moses and the Burning Bush to which Philo and many others return when considering what God is and how he may be known and named.

[1] Kaufmann is set up as a stalking horse in the first part of Chapter 2, pp. 9-12.
[2] See the discussion of Locke on page 86, though the use of 'villain' is hyperbole on my part. Soskice attributes the view that Descartes is the source of the problem to Jean Luc-Marion on page 2.

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Soskice also argues that the first intimations of the classical divine 'attributes' are found in Philo, present precisely where his fidelity to the Torah takes him farthest from the philosophical presuppositions of his day. The God who is utterly sovereign, whom Kaufmann reviles as an imperial potentate, is the LORD God of Genesis and Exodus, not the Demiurge of Plato's *Timaeus* nor the Unmoved Mover of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (49). Soskice further notes that many of the starker negative appellations which would be taken up by later Neoplatonists are attested first in Philo: 'unutterable', for instance, as well as 'unnameable' (45). Because God is the sovereign Biblical creator, he is utterly unlike any of the creatures for which our names are taken, and so none of our names fit him. Yet he grants us names so that we may call upon him (56). This tension, between the poverty of our own conceptual resources and the compensatory generosity of God, is a central motif of the book.

Over time the idea of God as a sovereign creator developed into the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo,* especially in the hands of Christian theologians, which affirmed still more stridently the departure from earlier Greek natural theology (see Chapter 3). God created neither out of pre-existing matter nor by the necessary emanation of his own substance, but all things in their entirety depend for their existence upon his gracious will. This teaching, as Soskice aptly notes, is a Biblical response to Greek philosophy, and it would be the foundation of what we now think of as the classical divine attributes. God is named eternal, since time is his creation;[3] God is named almighty, since wind and waves obey him, and freely he has made all things.

That, roughly, is Soskice's answer to those who scoff (or rage) at the God of the Philosophers. As expected, she proposes to amend the errors of the Early Moderns through a return to the tradition of the divine names. Eternal, almighty, *ipsum esse subsistens*: all these should be reclaimed as the gifts of revelation. But Soskice's point is not merely that natural theology is bad and revelation good, although evidently she values the integration of philosophical reflection with both divine revelation and human devotional response. Reprising her dominant motif, she is concerned that the divine attributes approach ignores the limits of our knowledge.

Soskice cites Anthony Kenny as associating the word 'God' with a description (87).[4] The divine attribute approach, it is suggested, requires that the term be understood through a set of defining characteristics. Let us suppose, for argument's sake, that distinguished philosophers of religion really do have an adequate conceptual grasp on the divine attributes. The typical verger keeping the church vestments clean, however, likely does not: she may know her Psalms, but probably couldn't distinguish eternity from sempiternity. Yet the verger's use of 'God', in formal praise, intimate address, or the recollection of his promises, is surely no less successful than the philosopher's. And even to Kenny we may ask, as Basil of Caesarea did to the Arian Eunomius, 'if your knowledge has not yet been able to apprehend the nature of the insignificant ant, how can you boast yourself able to form a conception of the power of the incomprehensible God?'[5] Something is wrong with the

[3] 'Ein Geschöpf des Vaters', as sings the Marschallin of Strauss and Hoffmanstahl in *Der Rosenkavalier,* a character who makes her last departure with the prayer 'In Gottes Namen'.

[4] Between the criticism of Kenny and the general lamenting of the prevalence of the divine attributes over the divine names, readers of this journal may be heartened to learn that Soskice respectfully acknowledges some current analytic philosophers of religion, such as Richard Swinburne and Eleonore Stump (89). It is, she says, 'a worthwhile project' to defend the divine attributes, even though it is better to focus on the divine names.

[5] *Letter 16*. Gregory of Nyssa took up his brother Basil's dispute with Eunomius, as Soskice records in Chapter 7.

divine attribute discourse, then, if it so closely connects the semantics of 'God' with knowledge of God's nature.

Soskice is surely right that we should treat no detailed philosophical theology as built into the semantics of 'God', though to give Kenny his due, a bit of conceptual engineering to bring his intended philosophical question into clearer focus is entirely appropriate. On Soskice's account, 'God' is an office-holder term, much like 'mum', and living out a relationship with the office-holder suffices for its meaningful use (110). In particular, no one needs to be in a position to give a theoretical account of what the office of Godhood consists in, any more than infants need be able to grasp a theoretical account of motherhood. This is, I think, a compelling picture.

Nevertheless, there is a gap between this modest point about the semantics of 'God' and the broader apophaticism involved in Soskice's advocacy of the Divines Names approach to philosophical theology. Following Philo, Soskice tells us that God is not a being among beings and is in himself unnameable and unknowable, though graciously he has given himself to be named and known (106). The later chapters of the book discuss how Christian theologians in the divine names tradition developed this theme. Here Soskice offers elegant sketches of the controversy, introduced above, between the Cappadocians and Eunomius over the philosophy of language,[6] as well as of why Aquinas thought that some descriptions of God can be both literal and positive, though none can be univocal. Meanwhile, she deftly cites recent analytic work on names and reference.[7] Still, it is easy to suspect that something is missing.

'What we grasp when we grasp the classical attributes (One, eternal, omniscient) is not a set of recondite truths about how things are *chez God*, but a practice of unknowing, not baseless conjecture but a reasoned response to what we know of the Godness of God whom we know to be creator of all that is' (107). This quotation, I am afraid, has flummoxed me. It is 'a practice of unknowing', yet reasoned (by what principles?) from knowledge. Presumably this knowledge is knowledge of truths, but not 'recondite truths about how things are *chez God*', whatever those might be. This is, I should clarify, easily the book's worst sentence. The prose is mostly limpid. But the awkwardness here indicates a broader failure to pin down, not just how Gregory of Nyssa or Thomas Aquinas thinks language works, but how Janet Soskice thinks it works.[8] Evidently we are expected to reason from *creatio ex nihilo* as a premise, to something like the Thomistic account of divine predication as a conclusion,[9] but what the argument is exactly, and what its specific semantic premises might be, is obscure.

I do not think that promising premises are in short supply. Indeed, there is a rich range of options waiting to be explored. Take a *hyperintensional* semantics, where the semantic value of a predicate is a property.[10] We might argue that God does not instantiate the very same

[6] For an excellent guide to this controversy, I recommend Radde-Gallwitz (2009). Though I was disappointed to see it go uncited, the breadth of Soskice's sources is so impressive that it would be churlish to complain.

[7] It is no slight of her command of this literature among so many others to note that Soskice the feminist theologian would surely be pleased to learn that references to Ruth Barcan Marcus would have been at least as apposite as those she makes to Saul Kripke.

[8] Of course this is a subject discussed further in Soskice (1987), but my complaint is not that the argument relies on premises defended in earlier work (which would have been an entirely fair procedure on Soskice's part), but that it has not been clearly articulated at all.

[9] This is the gist of the 'Analogy and Metaphor' section on pages 104-108.

[10] For an overview, see Berto (2021). The intensional/hyperintensional contrast is usually drawn in terms of *coarseness of grain*, that is, whether we recognise distinct but necessarily coinstantiated properties. This is not quite relevant in this context, though the interactions with the doctrine of divine simplicity are interesting. The point

property of wisdom as any creature does, and so conclude that 'wise' is not univocal between 'God is wise' and 'Mother Julian is wise'. This is, roughly speaking, what Aquinas himself taught.[11] On an *intensional* semantics, the semantic value of a predicate is a function from possible worlds to sets: intuitively, 'is wise' picks out, for each possible world, the set of wise beings there. Within such a framework, we might appeal to the reference magnetism of David Lewis (1983) to reach the same conclusion as Aquinas: any set which includes both creatures and creator would be highly *unnatural*, and so not (part of) an eligible candidate for the semantic value of 'wise'.[12]

A similar point applies to the denial that God is a being among beings. On the most straightforward reading, what is at issue is whether God slots into the system of genera and species.[13] But genera and species is no longer a default organising principle of reality: set theory and predicate calculus are more obvious choices today. Here, we might point to debates about general and restricted quantification:[14] perhaps God is available to us as a value for our variables because of a gracious act of self-disclosure, and not through any power of abstraction on our part. Alternatively, we might take the recent higher-order turn: while objects fall into the range of the quantifiers of first-order logic, properties do not, falling instead into the range of second-order quantifiers.[15] Since God is neither strictly an object nor a property, he falls into the range of the quantifiers at neither order. Such a move might be seen as returning to something like the analogy of being, but how close the parallel goes, and what a 'higher-order philosophical theology' might look like in detail, are matters for another day.

So Soskice's more controversial claims are not to be dismissed, even if they remain under-defended. Exploring them further is an exciting project which could bring together scholars from across disciplinary boundaries and intellectual traditions. There is already analytic work on apophaticism,[16] but the potential for dialogue between theologians in Soskice's mode and the mainstream of contemporary theoretical philosophy is not yet fully appreciated. Besides this, Soskice's work as it stands is moving and illuminating at many points. She has successfully demonstrated that the God of the (post-classical) philosophers is indeed the God of Abraham, and those who, for instance, share William Wood's view of analytic theology as a spiritual practice[17] should welcome the vision of speculation sustained

is more that hyperintensional views deal in properties directly, without offering any reductive explanation of those properties in terms of sets, which would not work for fine-grained, necessarily coinstantiated properties.

[11] For example, in *ST* 13.5, Thomas writes: 'By the term "wise" as applied to man, we signify some perfection distinct from the man's essence, and distinct from his power and existence.' Roughly, the semantic value of 'wise' is the property of wisdom, one of the subject's many accidental properties. But 'when we apply it to God, we do not mean to signify anything distinct from his essence.' God does not exemplify that very creaturely property of wisdom, and instead the semantic value of 'wise' is the divine essence. 'Hence it is evident that this term "wise" is not applied in the same way to God and to man.' Of course, whatever is wise is thereby more like God than whatever is not, which is why the semantic relationship is one of analogy, and not mere ambiguity, though for a recent sceptical voice see Williams (2005).

[12] While the set theoretic approach to properties may be foreign to Aquinas, the idea that naturalness matters for semantics is not far off. Consider *ST* 13.5 again: 'But the distance of some creatures makes any univocal predication of them impossible, as in the case of those things which are not in the same genus. Therefore much less can anything be predicated univocally of God and creatures.'

[13] This is a point ably explained in Te Velde (2006), one of the touchstones of Soskice's Aquinas chapter.

[14] See, e.g., Rayo and Uzquiano (2006).

[15] Fritz and Jones (2024).

[16] See Hewitt (2020), for instance.

[17] See Wood (2014) and (2021).

by devotion which she both argues for and exemplifies. All may read, mark, and inwardly digest this book to their profit, and I for one am grateful that Soskice has written it.

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