

Review

Geoffrey Holsclaw. *Transcending Subjects: Augustine, Hegel, and Theology. Challenges in Contemporary Theology*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016. ISBN 978-1-119-16300-8 (pbk). ISBN 978-1-119-16308-4 (hbk). Pp. xii + 256. Hardcover £65.00, €81.30. Ebook £24.99, €30.99.

One of the most frequently asked questions in Hegelian studies is whether Hegel's idea of God is immanent or transcendent. Answering this question is especially challenging because Hegel appears to have rejected both Augustinian divine transcendence and Spinozian divine immanence in favour of some more ambiguous mixture. This ambiguity can appear all the more puzzling in light of Hegel's political philosophy. In *Transcending Subjects: Augustine, Hegel, and Theology*, Geoffrey Holsclaw attempts to solve this puzzle by contrasting the political theologies of Hegel and Augustine. He argues that Hegel produces a political theology of 'self-transcending immanence' while Augustine produces a political theology of 'self-immanentizing transcendence'. Self-transcending immanence can be regarded as the activity of exceeding categories within the immanent domain of subjective thought, while self-immanentizing transcendence can be regarded as the activity of entering into these categories from the transcendent domain of objective being. Holsclaw places Hegel in the position of self-transcending immanence, Augustine in the position of self-immanentizing transcendence, and sides with Augustine to criticize Hegel for failing to transcend the domain of subjective thought. In his view, 'Hegel claims that transcendence destroys freedom and Augustine claims that transcendence is the only means to freedom' so that, 'Augustine gives a better explanation of and therefore funds a better practice for freedom' (8–9). Holsclaw thus advocates an Augustinian political theology for the purpose of protecting the Christian belief in divine transcendence and preserving the ideal of political freedom.

Holsclaw develops a dialectical narrative of opposed positions which is meant to be resolved by the 'plausibility and suitability of Augustine's position over Hegel's' (10). He divides his study into two parts and six chapters: in each part, the initial chapters critique two opposed interpretations; the subsequent chapters examine the relation of transcendence to immanence; and the final chapters explore whether this relation frustrates or fulfils the ideal of freedom for political liberalism.

Hegel's self-transcending immanence, in the first part, is placed in opposition to Augustine's self-immanentizing transcendence, in the second part, for the purpose of superseding immanence into transcendence. This primary supersession movement is mirrored by a series of supporting supersession movements: Robert Pippin's 'substance without change' is opposed to Slavoj Žižek's 'change without substance', for the purpose of superseding both substance and change into Augustinian subjectivity; and John Milbank's post-liberal 'ontology of peace' is opposed to Eric Gregory's liberal 'ontology of love', for the purpose of superseding both positions in the service of liberalism. The cumulative result of all of these supersession movements is meant to support the supersession of the immanent position of Hegel by the transcendent position of Augustinian political theology.

The primary problem with Holsclaw's dialectical procedure results from its uncritical appeal to a transcendent source for the supersession of opposites. Rather than critically annulling each opposed position, he often resorts to simply describing the inadequacy of positions in light of the privileged ideal of Augustinian transcendence. This ideal of transcendence appears to have been presupposed from the beginning as the canonical standard by which every opposed position can be judged. While such a rhetorical strategy may seem sufficient for the purposes of Augustinian apologetics, it undoubtedly leaves the critical question unaddressed: how is it possible to think of the dialectical supersession of immanent opposites into any mixture of opposites that totally transcends all thought? If it truly transcends thought, then we can never legitimately think of any supersession of opposites into it. Dismissals of Kantian philosophy cannot alleviate the pressing pain of critical doubt. Neither can the brilliant novae of Augustinian illumination help to answer our sceptical suspicions. If we cannot think through this dialectical supersession, then we can hardly expect to be converted. Yet if we cannot be converted, then the rhetoric of dialectical supersession must ultimately prove to be less than persuasive. Holsclaw summarizes the work of many of the leading lights of contemporary theology for the purpose of rhetorically re-situating their work within his own dialectical narrative of conversion. Since, however, this dialectic ultimately neglects to answer these critical doubts, it may only appear persuasive to those who have already been converted to his own position.

Holsclaw's dialectic has moreover not been directly derived from Augustine, but from the more recent writings of William Desmond. Desmond, in *Hegel's God: A Counterfeit Double?* (Desmond 2003: 2–7), has outlined three types of transcendence: the first type of transcendence (T1) is the transcendence of the external objects of the objective world; the second type of transcendence (T2) is the transcendence of the internal objects of subjective thought; and the third type of transcendence (T3) is the transcendence of both the objective world (T1) and

subjective thought (T2) (3, 237). T3 is designed to prevent any possible reduction of divine transcendence to T2 within the domain of subjective thought. Holsclaw deploys Desmond's third type of transcendence in the guise of Augustinian self-immanentizing transcendence: where Hegelian self-transcending immanence internalizes transcendence as the negative 'other' of consciousness within the immanence of T1 and T2, Augustinian self-immanentizing transcendence instead suspends this very immanence from its creative source in a totally transcendent God who has uniquely made himself immanent through the mystery of the incarnation (44, 185). Holsclaw thus translates Desmond's opposition between the second and third types of transcendence into his own opposition between Hegelian self-transcending immanence and Augustinian self-immanentizing transcendence.

Holsclaw attempts to 'present the most favorable interpretation of Hegel' to 'allay fears' that he is merely caricaturing his opponent (45). Yet once he has typified Hegel's notion of infinity as the very paragon of immanence, and endorsed Desmond's counter-Hegelian notion of transcendence, he appears to have pre-emptively cast his final verdict against Hegel (8–10). Holsclaw locates the flashpoint of this conflict in the dialectic of infinity, in which the negative opposition between the spurious infinite and the finite is superseded by the 'true infinite' (*SL*: §§270–304, 108–25). Since every notion of transcendence can be paraphrased into a notion of the infinite beyond the finite, Hegel appears to have re-conceived transcendence as the 'true infinite' within an immanent sphere that remains entirely circumscribed within the bounds of human consciousness. Holsclaw thus objects that Hegel reduces the 'true infinite' to the failures of understanding (48–62). He argues that although Hegel's *Logic* 'formally begins *with* being, true thought only begins at becoming, and all this comes from nothing (ness)' (52). Since Hegel allegedly presupposes the thought of becoming as the beginning of being, and becoming is founded upon the nothingness of the failures of understanding, every dialectical supersession movement must only result in the thought of productive nothingness. This productive nothingness is thereafter meant to internalize every thought of any transcendent 'beyond' into a 'productive power' within the 'engine of a fully self-determining science' (53). Once every transcendent 'beyond' has, therefore, been internalized into this dialectical nothingness, Hegelian dialectics can be accused of annulling each and every movement towards transcendence so as to collapse any activity of self-transcendence into an ever more tightly enclosed knot of auto-annulling immanence.

Hegel's apparent ambiguity on transcendence indeed seems to expose him to Holsclaw's critique. Yet, arguably, Hegel may have never needed to answer this objection because the opposition between immanence and transcendence has already been resolved by his dialectic of infinity. For if the opposition

between the categories of immanence and transcendence that appears at the level of Spirit merely replicates the vanishing opposition between the finite and the infinite at the level of Logic, then the supersession of this negative opposition between the infinite and the finite into the true and speculative infinity can be virtually replicated for religious consciousness in the supersession of transcendence and immanence into an equally speculative transcendence. Where Holsclaw seeks to supersede immanence, Hegel seeks to preserve both transcendence and immanence in the true ‘speculative transcendence’ that corresponds to the true ‘speculative infinity’. The decisive disagreement between Hegel and Holsclaw thus concerns not merely the relation between transcendence and immanence, but—more fundamentally—the very possibility of superseding a spurious transcendence in favour of the genuinely speculative transcendence.

Holsclaw finally accuses Hegel of presupposing rather than proving his position of self-transcending immanence (90). He argues that Hegel’s pretension of a presuppositionless beginning at the start of the *Logic* surreptitiously depends upon the hidden presupposition of ‘pure knowing’ at the end of the *Phenomenology* (68–70). Since the *Logic* presupposes the *Phenomenology* and the *Phenomenology* presupposes the *Logic*, Hegel appears to be caught in a circle of reciprocally interlocking presuppositions. Hegel can, however, freely admit this kind of circularity even as he denies starting from any presupposition, for the simple reason that every presupposition—even that of pure knowing—is meant to be superseded as a vanishing moment within the self-determining circularity of system of science (*SL*: §§93–104, 46–49). Holsclaw appears to mistake the ‘pure knowing’ that concludes the *Phenomenology* for such a presupposition because he has already tacitly rejected the possibility of dialectical supersession. Since Holsclaw similarly presupposes sheer transcendence, the accusation that Hegel has presupposed rather than proven his position can easily be turned around against Holsclaw himself. If, therefore, Hegel presupposes speculative transcendence, then Holsclaw presupposes total transcendence. Hegel and Holsclaw are, however, not equally guilty of begging this question because Hegel endeavours to demonstrate his position, while Holsclaw more modestly advances an indemonstrable conversion of the spirit.

The rhetorical weakness of Holsclaw’s dialectic is especially evident in his criticisms of John Milbank. Holsclaw seeks to ‘move past certain preconceptions of Augustine’ that are represented by Milbank’s critiques of liberalism in order to move towards an alternative Augustinian political theology that he believes is more favourable towards liberalism (132). Although he diligently canvasses the main themes of Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory*, he neglects to answer its central contention of an uncompromising conflict between Augustinian theology and secular social theory.

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Transcending Subjects should be commended for opening an overdue conversation between Hegelian political philosophy and Augustinian political theology for the purpose of answering the challenges of post-Kantian liberalism. Such an Augustinian critique of Hegel promises to show how the recent return to Hegel may require just as much of a new return to Augustine. The key conflict between them may turn upon the relation between the speculative transcendence and the speculative infinite. If the infinite proves irreducible to any finitized failure of understanding, then we should nonetheless welcome the opportunity to compare Augustinian with Hegelian notions of transcendence. And if this conflict ultimately remains undecided, then Holsclaw can be credited for calling renewed attention to their importance within the political arena. The numerous contemporary themes and topics that are addressed in this book should prove rewarding for both students of theology and for dedicated researchers who share an avid interest in the emerging intersections between theology and politics. Holsclaw admirably addresses all of these weighty themes with a commendable patience, clarity, and delicacy, which can welcome conflicting schools of thought to a mutually enriching discussion about the theological dimension of politics.

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