Response to Michael Rea

For several years now, Michael Rea has been working to foster a fruitful discussion between theologians and analytic philosophers, and his article review nicely exemplifies those efforts. Rea recognises that he and I agree on several key points, the most important of which is that 'cataphatic theology can be done without idolatry or violence'. He wonders, though, whether *Theology without Metaphysics* succeeds in providing a model for such theology, since he thinks it is liable to several objections. By addressing them, I hope to demonstrate that my model is indeed viable, though I would be surprised if this were sufficient to persuade Professor Rea to adopt it. As I see it, more than one model, including Professor Rea's, may do justice to the relevant phenomena; here I want to argue, against Rea's criticisms, that mine does too.

Professor Rea's first objection is that even if a concept's meaning may change when applied to a particular object, as I have claimed, it does not follow that the object has not been fitted into a predetermined category, for the simple reason that one can see a concept as properly applicable to an object just insofar as the latter fits into the concept as previously understood. In response to this objection, I would argue the following: (a) a concept is 'predetermined', in my sense, if its meaning is fixed in advance, to such an extent that it cannot do justice to the particular way it might apply to particular objects; (b) what is necessary for a concept to be applicable to an object is determinacy, but not all determinacy is 'predetermination'; and (c) the relevant determinacy can also be explained, as on my model, in terms of normative trajectories which continually change in order to register the particularity of the objects to which they are applied. My model meets the applicability condition, accordingly, without requiring 'predetermination'.

Professor Rea's second objection is that my account is liable to, and perhaps even invites, sceptical worries, for it makes the propriety of theological concept use dependent upon the 'contingent historical fact' of whether it carries on a normative trajectory which stretches back to Jesus. I understand the worry, but would argue that this is a feature of my model, rather than a defect, for insofar as theological language is meant to follow Christ, it should matter whether, as a matter of historical fact, it actually does so. This is one reason why Christian theologians from the very beginning have tried

80

to ascertain whether current beliefs and practices stand in continuity with Jesus and his earliest followers. Hence, while Professor Rea is right that my model renders historical continuity essential, I fail to see why this should count against it.

In a third set of worries, Professor Rea argues that my model of language falls into a series of dilemmas. The first arises from situations in which a concept is first used, when its use apparently does not carry on a series of precedents; Rea contends that such uses must either be 'violent', or else that my elaborate claims about precedents and normative trajectories are finally irrelevant to avoiding such 'violence'. In this connection, it might be worthwhile to consider the book's account of how concepts are first introduced (cf. pp. 69–72), but the decisive point is simply this: what finally matters is not whether a given concept use carries on a series of precedents, but whether it accounts for the particularity of the object to which it is applied. If an inaugural use can do this, as seems likely, then the crucial issue is whether subsequent uses can do so, too; this is just what my model of normative trajectories carried on by a series of uses, each of which contributes to that trajectory, is meant to explain.

Rea poses another dilemma against my claim that would-be concept-users must judge whether a particular use would go on in the same way as precedent uses. If these judgements are supposed to be explicit, Rea reasons, and if they themselves involve the use of concepts, then each use of a concept depends upon an infinite regress of judgements. If they are supposed to be implicit, on the other hand, then it is not clear how one could count as *intending* to use a concept, much less as *recognisably* doing so. In response, I would argue – in agreement with many contemporary philosophers – that one can intend to do something even if one has not consciously decided to do it; right now, for instance, I am trying to spell words correctly even though I am not thinking about doing so. Likewise, one can recognise someone as carrying on a practice even if one does not explicitly judge whether he or she is doing so; I can thus recognise someone as trying to spell a particular word correctly by seeing a mis-spelling as a mistake – or, failing a mis-spelling, simply by seeing their letters as spelling a particular word. It seems to me, then, that the threatened dilemma can be safely avoided.

Professor Rea's fourth criticism likewise concerns my claims about 'recognisability', and involves yet another dilemma: either there must be fixed standards by which to determine what is rightly recognisable as going on in the same way as precedent uses of a concept, Rea argues, or any would-be use can be made to count as such. Assuming that the latter is unacceptable, Rea contends that my model ends up requiring fixed standards, which is to say that it requires predetermination of precisely the sort I mean to avoid.

In response, I would agree that there must be some standard by which to determine whether a candidate concept use goes on in the same way as the relevant precedents, but as I argue in the book, such standards need not be fixed in advance. So, to borrow one of the book's key examples, in common law jurisprudence there is a standard by which to assess particular cases, yet this standard emerges as a normative trajectory implicit in precedent judgements, and is continually being shaped by new judgements. It seems plausible, then, that the relevant standards need not be fixed in advance or 'predetermined'.

Professor Rea worries, finally, that my concept of concepts has so little in common with that of apophatic theologians that I may simply be talking past them rather than rendering their concept optional. My response is fairly straightforward: it is clear that all involved are talking about *language*, and especially about predication, reference, truth, etc. I have no doubt that we would agree in the vast majority of cases about the objects to which the concept 'language' properly applies, which is precisely what my model of concept use requires. Here as elsewhere, then, I am not persuaded that my claims are liable to Professor Rea's objections; as such, I see no reason to think that my model of theological language is not a viable way of achieving our shared goal.

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