

Review of Elliot R. Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift: Apophasis and Overcoming Theomania*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2014.
547 pages

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Preview

Elliot Wolfson's latest publication in the history of philosophy makes a formidable contribution to the contemporary discourse of apophatic theology, and it does so in two ways. Firstly, in a discourse typically focused upon the Christian tradition, Wolfson leads us expertly into somewhat less-explored territory in his engagement of seminal twentieth century Jewish thinkers Cohen, Buber, Rosenzweig, Levinas, Derrida, and Wyschogrod as well as the tradition of Kabbalah. Secondly, Wolfson takes on the discourse's prominent themes namely, 'transcendence,' 'immanence,' 'absence,' the 'gift' with a penetrating and relentless spirit of deconstructive vigilance, pushing the language of the discourse to new reaches of phenomenological probity. The core impetus of the book, the author tells us, is "the belief that a theolatrous impulse lingers in the very heart of monotheism" (xiv), and indeed that "the postmodern apophatic theologies that have dominated the marketplace of ideas within the academy [are] still guilty of theomania" (xxiv). His point is that the 'unseen,' the 'inapparent,' the 'invisibility' of God or the divine has become itself a new 'visible' or 'presence' by virtue of that very absence - or rather, by virtue of a theolatrous phenomenological focusing upon that absence.

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negation,” her immanent “atheology for the post-Holocaust landscape” (226); finally, chapter 6 summarizes Wolfson’s own gleanings from the previous chapters, and, with further engagement of Heidegger (as well as others), delivers his rigorous judgment that “the spiritual ultimatum of the hour, the epochal duty...is the need to overcome [transcendence]” altogether, in terms of both the “psychological tug to personify the impersonal” and the “pious illusion of negative theology” (228), which latter undertaking presumes to escape theolatrous language and imaginaries, but, according to Wolfson, does not.

Admittedly, Wolfson’s contribution to the discourse is not an easy read: at 260 densely-written and densely-formatted pages, accompanied by no less than 191 pages of endnotes (much, but not all, of which is referencing material) and a 72 page bibliography, Wolfson’s volume is not for the faint of heart. It should be emphasized as well that despite the book’s primary focus on the several Jewish thinkers as noted above, its analyses are heavy-laden with dozens and dozens of other voices all joining in the conversation (one gets the sense, in good Talmudic fashion, of listening in on a veritable historical pleroma of voices) . It is masterful, even daunting in its scholarship; and it is unwavering in its commitment to expose and overcome all strains of theolatrous language and imaginaries. Nevertheless, it is difficult, in this reader’s opinion, to adequately catch from the text a real sense of the ‘*fullness*’ of the “atheological immanence” for which Wolfson aims, of “the promise fulfilled in the abeyance of its fulfillment” (260), of having overcome the need to posit ‘transcendence’, yet without the nihilism which remains derivative from it (and thus still needy). Not that Wolfson’s text is nihilistic (it certainly is not so); and to be even more fair, neither does Wolfson *claim* to have fully accomplished his aim^{3/4}only to sound a wake-up call *towards* it, to which he himself, in his relentless vigilance, continues to harken. Indeed, his deep appreciation for the later Heidegger, frequently appealed to throughout the volume, provides much of the inspiration for that call; and, of course, Wolfson himself strains in his writing as much as the later Heidegger does for a new way of thinking, and he expresses his thought in passages often just as tortuous as the later Heidegger’s. Consider, for example, Wolfson’s use of the Mahayana Buddhist (Madhyamaka) tradition’s concept of ‘emptiness’ (to which he appeals no less pivotally, though overall less copiously, than to Heidegger). The book’s preface wastes no time in laying out Wolfson’s project with careful attention to Thomas Altizer’s use of Buddhism (who, in his opinion, doesn't yet push the concept of ‘emptiness’ far enough); whereas Wolfson prescribes “a more far-reaching apophasis,...a triple negativity, the emptiness of the fullness that is the fullness of the emptiness emptied of the emptiness of its emptiness” (xxvii).

His concluding appeal, too^{3/4}somewhat less labyrinthine^{3/4}is distinctly reminiscent of Buddhist descriptions of insight into the ‘suchness’ of being: with reference to the ‘gift’, Wolfson writes of the need to “be awakened to the fact that there is no gift to receive but the gift of discerning that there is no gift other than the giving that gives with no will to give and no desire to be given” (260). Thus, it might be said that while the great bulk of the text is deconstructive in its approach, it really does strain overall, phenomenologically speaking, towards the ‘vision’ of this “gift of discerning” (even if it doesn’t wholly deliver it); Wolfson’s deconstructions crucially serve him as the very vigilance of that straining.

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