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# Emmanuel Falque, and George Hughes (Trans.), "The Book of Experience: From Anselm of Canterbury to Bernard of Clairvaux"

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**Emmanuel Falque.** *The Book of Experience: From Anselm of Canterbury to Bernard of Clairvaux.* Trans. George Hughes. Bloomsbury 2024. 272 pp. \$167.95 USD (Hardcover 9781350386495).

First published in 2017, *The Book of Experience: From Anselm of Canterbury to Bernard of Clairvaux* completes Falque's trilogy on Medieval philosophy and theology, whose previous volumes are *Saint Bonaventure and the Entrance of God Into Theology: The Breviloquium as a Summa Theologica* (2000) and *God, the Flesh, and the Other: From Irenaeus to Duns Scotus* (2008). What these books share, Falque says, is 'their framework' which is 'the quest for a "common visibility"' (225). This current book fixes what was missing in the first two, Falque says: experience, which is a mainstay of phenomenological research (10). Although dealing with what are commonly considered theologians, Falque states clearly that the book 'first of all has a perspective that is unashamedly *philosophical*' (x). What he aims to do in *The Book of Experience*, which is similar to what he did in the preceding volumes in this triptych, is to take a contemporary phenomenological approach to Medieval thinkers; to 'show how we can find at the heart of the medieval tradition what has probably been most sought after in contemporary philosophy, at least in the world of phenomenology, namely "experience as such"' (x). He argues that phenomenology must focus more on experience, and especially experience as practical and lived (following Merleau-Ponty) as opposed to just theorized (following Husserl and Heidegger). Experience, for Falque, is to go through, and thus to be transformed by, an event or encounter, a point he addresses by looking at both Latin and German root words. As he has aimed to do elsewhere, Falque brings hermeneutics and phenomenology together, seeing them as indelibly connected. In conjunction with figures from 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century monastic life, he understands experience (phenomenology) as a text to be read and interpreted (hermeneutics).

Falque has a penchant for trilogies and triptychs: he has three trilogies already—with more planned—and usually lays out his books with three parts that each contain three chapters. *The Book of Experience* follows this same pattern to a tee. Part 1 is titled 'The Theophanic Argument or *Experience in Thought: Anselm of Canterbury*'. The Abbot of Bec is known primarily for his ontological argument, but Falque contends that we should see him first as a monk, and 'interpretation of the argument must then be *liturgical* before it is ontological or gnoseological' (35). What interests Falque in his reading of Anselm is on the experiential nature of his reception of the argument, that is, how God manifested Godself to Anselm. 'The true reality is not that of the existence of some kind or other of divine Being, but of its possible experience, in one's thoughts certainly, ... also in the reality of our experience' (15, translation modified). As such, since God comes to mind and manifests to us, Falque sees Anselm's argument as theophanic more than ontological. It is the force of what appears to Anselm, and how it appears to him, that outweighs philosophical or theological reasoning. Falque finds in Anselm that what things lack most 'is phenomenality rather than their supposed reality', and thus Anselm can be read as putting forth phenomenological analyses focussing on manner and mode rather than being, therefore highlighting the classic phenomenological distinction between 'how' and 'what'.



Part 2 is ‘Hermeneutics and Phenomenology or the *Experience of the World*: Hugh and Richard of Saint-Victor’. Falque says that in these figures, we have a shift in focus from ‘thought’ (in Anselm) to ‘world’. With the Victorines, reading was understood ‘as a condition of life, a considering of the deciphering of creatures rather than of the parchment of the Scriptures’ (75, translation modified). What is of key emphasis here is the connection between reading and living: there is a certain ‘mode of reading’ which courses through our whole life, such that ‘to read’ and ‘to live’ are the same (77). The attendant change in this way of reading was that ‘God is not simply “above us” (*supra nos*) (mystical theology), but “in us” (*in nos*) (illuminative theology), and also “outside us” (*extra nos*) (symbolic theology)’ (85). What Hugh and Richard teach us is that God can be found in the world, and so we must come to read and interpret the world to find God’s presence there.

The third part of the book is titled ‘Affectivity and Spirituality or *Experience in Affects*: Aelred of Rievaulx and Bernard of Clairvaux’ and is based on the premise that ‘we go into the world only *in* and *through* our affect’ (131). Counteracting the idealism of Husserl, and moving beyond Heidegger’s deconstruction of onto-theology, Falque focusses on the importance of affect in phenomenology, which was popular in the 1920s with figures like Edith Stein, Max Scheler, and Hannah Arendt, and is finding a resurgence today. However, Falque argues that this emphasis on affect goes back to these two Cistercians of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. In Aelred and Bernard, a new emphasis is placed on the awareness one has of their own living. Additionally, thought also becomes a mode of affect. But, in Falque’s reading, affect is also a language: ‘As far as Bernard is concerned, there is a *language of affect* that is also the language of the body’ (157). Key, of course, beginning in the 1960s, with Merleau-Ponty’s focus on the body in phenomenology and Tomkins’ development of affect theory, these continue to be major topics of focus today. We again see here the importance that Falque places on doing hermeneutics and phenomenology together.

One of Falque’s main arguments, here and in other works, is that hermeneutics and phenomenology must always be held together: ‘a hermeneutic *is* phenomenological or it *is nothing*’ (85, translation modified). The movement through this book, and its 3 parts with different thinkers and approaches, goes from the meditating subject who receives God, to the interpreting subject who reads God in the book of the world, to the experiencing subject where love is language (156). In the Epilogue, Falque writes that ‘the *Book of Experience* has transformed our triple experience—of “thought,” “world,” and “affect”—in that this God who is so “great” that one cannot think of him (Anselm) allows himself at the same time to be “deciphered” in the book of the world through the Trinity (Hugh and Richard) and “felt” in ourselves to the point of affecting us (Aelred and Bernard)’ (203-4). Living and interpreting go hand in hand.

One of my biggest complaints about *The Book of Experience* was the translation. The book was translated by George Hughes, who has translated several of Falque’s other works, and although he has done a great service in making Falque’s works available in English, and although overall he had done a good job, there are a number of bothersome things in the translation. A few times Hughes wrote “Emmanuel Kant”, perhaps to look like Falque’s name (Hughes has done this in other translations of Falque’s, too); some texts are referenced from Project Gutenberg and other

online sources rather than print sources; there are multiple mistranslations/typos (e.g., ‘phenomenology’ instead of ‘phenomenological’, ‘*haeccity*’ instead of ‘*haecceity*’, ‘Book of Revelations’ instead of ‘Book of Revelation’) and not conveying emphasis with italics; and there are lots of translator notes, some of which are repeated word-for-word. Some of these are minor inconveniences, but some of them rather change the meaning of what Falque aims to convey.

Overall, *The Book of Experience* is an interesting and engaging read. The book is geared towards academics, but it should be read by those in a few different fields: it can definitely be read by those focussed on Medieval philosophy and theology, but it can also be seen as a resource for all those working in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and affect theory, as Falque shows the innovation and origination of many of these ideas in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century monastics. What is admirable about Falque, in this work and in the previous two volumes of this triptych on Medieval philosophy, is his desire to mine the past to shed helpful life on contemporary discussions.

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