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Analytic Moral Theology as Christ-Shaped Philosophy

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Abstract: In this paper, I claim that analytic moral theology is an important form of Christ-shaped moral philosophy. The analytic moral theologian takes Christ to be the starting point for moral reflection, given that He is our moral and intellectual exemplar. Christ is also the end of such moral reflection, insofar as the proper aims of analytic moral theology include both the imitation of and union with Christ Himself. This type of Christ-shaped moral philosophy begins with inquiry into the character of Jesus Christ and properly ends with the application of the results of that inquiry to the personal and social lives of those who seek to follow the “outcast Galilean.” I conclude with a call for Christian moral philosophers and analytic moral theologians to imitate the pattern in philosophy of religion by producing scholarship of the highest quality and then translating that scholarship into more popular forms in service to the church and the world.

A significant body of work in philosophical theology has emerged in the past fifty years. Many engaged in this renaissance of Christian philosophy have focused on natural theological arguments for the existence of God and central Christian doctrines such as the Incarnation and the Trinity using the methods of analytic philosophy. We are now seeing the fruit of this work not only within the academy, but in the church and broader culture as well. Scholars, writers, and apologists have produced works which are accessible to non-academic audiences that are grounded in the high-level Christian scholarship produced over the past several decades.

However, relatively less has been done in the field of moral theology using these methods. In this paper, I argue that a community of Christian philosophers and theologians ought to turn their attention to the field of moral theology, employing the methods of analytic philosophy in order to deepen our understanding of the Christian moral life in general and the virtues in particular. To the extent that this is successful, we deepen our knowledge of Christ himself, given that he is *the* moral exemplar concerning his deeds but especially his character. This approach to (and application of) moral topics of

philosophical and theological import is a significant instantiation of Christ-shaped moral philosophy.

In order to understand the nature of analytic moral theology, consider first the nature of analytic theology, as characterized by Oliver Crisp:

...analytic theology, like contemporary analytic philosophy, involves the use of certain tools like logic to make sense of theological issues, where metaphysical concerns are central. And like analytic philosophy, analytic theology will prize intellectual virtues like clarity, parsimony of expression, and argumentative rigour. It will also, where appropriate, seek to deal with complex doctrinal concerns by dividing them into more manageable units, or focusing on providing a clear expression of theological terms that inform particular doctrines in important respects...analytic theology is about redeploying tools already in the service of philosophy to a theological end.¹

Analytic *moral* theology, then, involves approaching theological topics where moral concerns are central with the ambitions of an analytic philosopher, prizing particular intellectual virtues, and using the analytic style of discourse.

While many scholars are engaged in moral theology, comparably few of them make use of the methods and tools of analytic philosophy in their work in the field.² Analytic methodology is certainly not the only methodology we should employ, but much progress has been made in advancing our understanding of God via this methodology in its application to doctrines such as the Incarnation and the Trinity. Similarly, I believe that there is great potential for progress in our understanding and application of concepts in Christian moral theology if we approach the field with analytic ambitions and style. This is not to belittle or question the significance of the moral reflection that has been done and is being done by biblical scholars, theologians, or others

¹ Oliver Crisp, "On Analytic Theology," in *Analytic Theology*, Oliver Crisp and Michael Rea, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 38-39.

² There are examples of this sort of work; much has been written in an analytic vein about the theological virtue of faith, for instance. For recent work on other virtues, see Cristian Mihut, "Change of Heart: Forgiveness, Resentment, and Empathy," *Philosophia Christi* 14 (2012): 109-124; Robert C. Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007); and a special issue of the journal *Faith and Philosophy* dealing with virtues and virtue theories from a Christian perspective; see *Faith and Philosophy* 15:4 (1998). Some Roman Catholic philosophers and theologians have produced works that reflect the methodology of analytic moral theology. My hope is to encourage others—including Protestants and specifically Protestant evangelicals—to join with them in this valuable enterprise.

using non-analytic methodologies. Rather, the aim is to bring some underutilized tools to bear on Christian moral theology. Doing this can help us to clarify and increase our stock of moral knowledge, which in faithfulness to Christ should then be put into practice. This last point is essential, and accommodates “the subversive Christian message that the outcast Galilean ‘Jesus is Lord’”³ in three significant ways.

First, the Christian scholar engaging in analytic moral theology will take Christ Himself to be the starting point for as well as the end of moral inquiry. In order to understand what it means to flourish as a human being and the nature of particular virtues which constitute and contribute to such flourishing, a careful examination of the moral and intellectual virtues exemplified by Christ is essential. Christ is the end of such inquiry, because the aim of such scholarship is not mere understanding, but application to everyday life. And a faithful application of the results of this inquiry will lead not only to the imitation of Christ, but also union with Him (Philippians 2:1-11; 3:17; 1 John 2:3-6).

Second, the praxis which results from the Christ-shaped moral reflection characteristic of analytic moral theology should be the fruit of intentionally making connections between scholarly reflection and “real life.” There is potential for the Christian scholar to instantiate both hypocrisy and pride as a result of her theoretical accomplishments, but the proper response is to safeguard one’s integrity and seek humility, not to abandon theoretical reflection. The analytic moral theologian ought to make connections between her scholarship and her own daily life, not only to avoid hypocrisy and pride, but also to produce scholarship that will be useful to the body of Christ for dealing with issues concerning morality and character in everyday life. A rich understanding of the character of Christ can be very fruitful in terms of the moral formation of those who are His disciples.

Third, academic work in analytic philosophy of religion has been translated into popular and semi-popular works in apologetics; the same is needed in the discipline of analytic moral theology for the sake of the church and the world. There is a proliferation of non-Christian accounts of virtue ethics at the level of normative theory and some treatments of particular virtues at both the scholarly and popular levels. More Christian treatments are still needed, especially of particular virtues. We need explicitly Christian accounts of virtues such as compassion, humility, and patience that are philosophically defensible, theologically grounded, and conducive to moral/spiritual growth. More work remains to be done at the theoretical level as well. And while great

³ Paul Moser, “Christ-Shaped Philosophy: Wisdom and Spirit United,” p. 1.

strides have been made in some areas of applied ethics (especially bioethics and business ethics), more of this is still needed.

This kind of work in Christian analytic moral theology also has explanatory value related to a Christian account of the nature of the good life. Such moral reflection has an apologetic function insofar as an account of human flourishing at the individual and social levels that is theoretically defensible and practically fruitful can serve as evidence for the truth of Christianity. A demonstration of the coherence and cogence of Christian morality is apologetically useful, and offers several lines of discussion related to ethics and human fulfillment that are sometimes missing in apologetic dialogue.

Moreover, the *application* of such work to the lives of followers of Christ (including but not limited to the analytic moral theologian) can function as a moral apologetic—an apologetic of character—which is all-too-often missing. As my pastor recently put it, what if, when people talked about Christians, it was not uncommon for them to say, “They are the ones who are compassionate, kind, humble, patient, and loving”?⁴ The arguments matter, but the character of the arguer matters as well. As we study and produce work in analytic moral theology, then, an observation from Adriaan Peperzak is relevant:

Because the personal elements of a concrete life penetrate theological scholarship, the reading of theological texts must always be accompanied by attention to the spiritual tone that can be heard in them...Only a scholarly theology that is rooted in spirituality can realize the desired unity of faith and thought.⁵

As a Christian scholar, I must attend to my own life of faith, and seek a unity of my scholarship and my spiritual formation. Each must inform the other, so that the character of the scholar, and those who study the work of the scholar, are by virtue of that work developed in ways that more fully reflect the character of Christ. One implication of this is that the tone of one’s writing, speaking, and teaching must not be strident, a trait which is too common in current dialogues related to these issues.

Analytic moral theology as I’ve characterized it here has an important function related to Christian spiritual formation. In my view, and generally speaking, there is an insufficient focus on moral formation within some elements of the contemporary spiritual formation movement. Much of the

⁴ Jake Lee, Northridge Church, Richmond, KY; 10/21/2012.

⁵ Adriaan Peperzak, *Reason in Faith: On the Relevance of Christian Spirituality for Philosophy* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999), 142-143.

work done in this area (or at least the mindset of those who read it) tends to focus on certain kinds of experiences of God that can be had via the spiritual disciplines such as fasting, contemplative prayer, and meditation. The moral formation of the follower of Christ often receives insufficient attention. It is true that the disciplines, such as meditation on Scripture, can foster growth in moral and intellectual virtue, and I believe it is proper, given the role of God in our moral and intellectual growth, to focus our attention on spiritual practices which open our lives to divine grace and transformative power. Nevertheless, I cannot help but wonder whether we have de-moralized Christian spirituality. In my own experience, it has never occurred to many followers of Christ that they might *intentionally engage in certain actions for the sake of moral development*. We must rectify this, as being a disciple of Christ entails that we work at becoming more like Christ. And this essentially includes the exemplification of His character (2 Peter 1:3-11).⁶ Focusing one's attention on a virtue, thinking about how it might be exemplified in one's life, and considering the applications this might have for issues in personal and social ethics can be very helpful for character formation, spiritual growth, and contributing to the common good, if those reflections are put into practice (Philippians 4:8-9). This leads us to the conclusion of this paper.

If a community of Christian scholars focusing on questions of morality, virtue, and character imitate the pattern in philosophy of religion (concerning questions regarding the nature and existence of God) by producing scholarship of the highest quality and then translating it into popular and semi-popular forms, this could help significantly advance the kingdom of God. A project of this nature would exemplify Christ-shaped philosophy with its distinctive focus upon the role of divine power if the scholar and those who study her work place themselves “under corrective and redemptive inquiry by God in Christ.”⁷

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⁶ On this, see Michael W. Austin and R. Douglas Geivett, eds., *Being Good: Christian Virtues for Everyday Life* (Eerdmans, 2012). This collection of essays is devoted to understanding particular Christian virtues and offers practical advice in cultivating them.

⁷ Moser, 1. I would also like to thank Danny Simpson for his helpful comments on a previous version of this paper.