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Two Wisdoms Once More: A Reply to Aaron Preston

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Abstract: Aaron Preston has written in response to my two papers interacting with Paul Moser’s “Christ-Shaped Philosophy.” In turn I reply to Preston, defending my approach and also clearing up some misunderstandings between us.

My thanks to Aaron Preston for his thoughtful response to my contributions to the debate on “Christ-Shaped Philosophy.”¹ Preston finds disagreements between us: on some points he is correct, in other cases the disagreement is only apparent, and in still others I am not sure which is the case. This response will also allow me to say a bit more about my own positive views concerning philosophy, a theme which was not developed extensively in my interaction with Moser.

Preston’s main theme in his comment is my distinction between two kinds of “wisdom,” exemplified on the one hand by the epistle to the Philippians, and on the other by Saul Kripke’s theory of necessary truth. Preston, however, skews this distinction by considering it as the distinction between, on the one hand, traditional philosophy’s goal of a life-orienting worldview, and on the other analytic philosophy’s focus on minute topics of logical analysis. In my paper I placed Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes and Kant (all worldview proponents) together with Kripke on the side of philosophy as a discipline, in contrast with “philosophy” as practiced by Jesus and Paul. The way the latter two conducted their lives was clearly different, not

¹ Aaron Preston, “Two Wisdoms? The Unity of Truth, the Spirit of the (Academic) Disciplines, and the Norms of Academic Philosophy.” Preston is responding to my “Paul Moser’s Christian Philosophy,” and “Two Wisdoms, Two ‘Philosophies’: A Rejoinder to Moser”; all in the Christ-Shaped Philosophy series available here: <http://bit.ly/ChristShapedPhilosophyProject>.

only from the norm for professional philosophers today, but also from what was expected of philosophers in the ancient world. The wisdom of Jesus and Paul is, I take it, based on spiritual insight, religious experience, and divine revelation; the sort of reflective discussion and argumentation characteristic of philosophy is (to say the least) not prominent in what we have from them.² For this reason, I believe it is somewhat misleading to term them philosophers; what they were was something different, and indeed more important.³

Preston, however, extols traditional philosophy's aim at providing a life-guiding worldview; clearly he thinks philosophers today should expend more of their efforts in this direction. What then should we make of such accomplishments as Saul Kripke's theory of necessary truth? He affirms that "the fine-grained questions and answers of Sauline philosophy count as wisdom only as they are subsumed within a more coarse-grained theory ultimately focused on, and practically useful for, *living a flourishing human life*."⁴ Now, I agree that the ultimate aim of philosophy should be an integrated worldview that will, among other things, provide us with insight concerning the best way to live. But I want to pose a counter-question: Whether or not it is called "wisdom," is an accomplishment such as Kripke's a *good thing*, something that has intrinsic value, and is worth pursuing, even apart from its being integrated into a comprehensive worldview? (Compare: Is the painting of beautiful pictures a good thing in itself, or is it valuable only to the extent that it is ethically uplifting – for instance by illustrating stories that are morally instructive?) My own answer to this question is clear: an illuminating theory of necessary truth (for example) *is* a good thing in itself, something worth expending a good deal of time and energy over, and deserving to be celebrated if it is achieved by a colleague; this is so whether or not we see, at a given moment, how it enhances our quest for the best way to live. Preston may think otherwise; if he does, we have indeed hit on a point of disagreement.

² Paul does on occasion present us with tightly reasoned arguments. But the major premises for these arguments are derived from the revelation in Christ; general considerations of plausibility and reasonableness play only a secondary role.

³ Tedla Woldeyohannes has reminded me of Luke 2:52: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man." This text, I think, underscores the point that it is incorrect to assume that "wisdom," in the biblical sense, is the same as philosophy.

⁴ Preston, "[Two Wisdoms? The Unity of Truth, The Spirit of the \(Academic\) Disciplines, and the Norms of Academic Philosophy](#)", p. 5.

Further elaborating the notion of a worldview, Preston cites Dallas Willard's identification of four central worldview questions: What is ultimately real? What is the good life? Who is the good person? How does one become a good person? He concludes, correctly, that I would agree that these are important questions that philosophy needs to address. He wonders, however, whether I would agree "that Jesus answered these questions as surely as any philosopher has." My response is that Jesus has indeed provided such answers. And as a Christian, I believe that the answers he provided are *true* – which is more than can be said for many of the answers given to the same questions by philosophers. Unlike Willard, Preston, and Moser, I would not say that this makes Jesus a philosopher, because I think the way in which the answers are arrived at and presented is relevant to their being considered as philosophy. But perhaps that is largely a terminological matter. And on the other hand, Preston would agree with me that, for some purposes, it can be beneficial to augment the answers given by Jesus with the sort of analysis, development, and elaboration made possible by the techniques of philosophy.⁵ On this, then, there is no disagreement between us.

There is one matter about which Preston gets me seriously wrong and which needs correction. He states:

Hasker takes Moser's prophetic call for disciplinary reform to be wrongheaded insofar as it assumes that philosophy *as an academic discipline* has some special connection to, or responsibility for, spiritual wisdom. Hasker's view seems to be that philosophy is responsible for philosophical wisdom only, not spiritual wisdom.⁶

What I wrote was:

[T]here is no clear reason why the spiritual wisdom celebrated by the two Pauls . . . is more the concern of professional philosophers than it is the concern of Christian ministers, or Christian kindergarten teachers, or Christian bricklayers. The challenge to become mature in Christ is a

⁵ This is clear from his statement that "philosophical wisdom can inform and elucidate spiritual wisdom," with examples cited from Philippians.

⁶ Preston, "[Two Wisdoms? The Unity of Truth, The Spirit of the \(Academic\) Disciplines, and the Norms of Academic Philosophy](#)", p. 5.

challenge for each and every Christian believer – for professional philosophers not less or more than for others.⁷

In saying this I was emphasizing that the spiritual wisdom bequeathed to us by the apostle is of a different sort than the wisdom that results from philosophical study, and I stand by that assessment. This is completely consistent with the view that, in elaborating a philosophical worldview, a Christian philosopher does need to take account of that wisdom, just as we would hope that a minister, a kindergarten teacher, and yes, even a bricklayer would take account of it in carrying out their own diverse responsibilities.

Finally, however, we come to a more difficult topic, that of disciplinary reform. Preston supposes that I find in the philosophical profession “not only more good, but less bad, than Moser does.” In this he is correct; I do not believe, as Moser professes to believe, that all philosophy “outside the authority of Christ . . . is dangerous to human freedom and life.”⁸ Preston infers from this that I think that “the overall balance of value in the profession constitutes a *status quo* that simply does not call for reform.” Reading this, I became puzzled. I did not recall having addressed the question of disciplinary reform – and after re-reading my two previous articles in this series I found that I had said nothing at all on this subject. One reason I have not addressed it is that disciplinary reform, of the kinds advocated by Preston and Moser (not necessarily the *same* kind), does not seem at all a serious possibility. Such a reform, carried out on a wide scale, presupposes a consensus on the values and objectives of the profession that simply does not exist. Nor does there exist (and here perhaps we should be grateful) any authority that would have the power to impose such a reform against the wishes of a reluctant professoriate. To be sure, we can each of us shape our own professional practice in what we take to be the desired direction, and can encourage our students and colleagues

⁷ William Hasker, [“Two Wisdoms, Two ‘Philosophies’: A Rejoinder to Moser”](#), p. 2.

⁸ Paul Moser, [“Christ Shaped Philosophy: Wisdom and Spirit United”](#), p. 2. There is, however, some reason to doubt whether Moser really does believe this. One reason for such doubt is his participation as the editor of a journal (*American Philosophical Quarterly*) whose contents mostly consist, according to this dictum, of precisely such “dangerous” philosophy. Another reason is his citing of Socrates and Plato (both presumably “outside the authority of Christ”) as models (see his “Reply to Hasker”).

to do likewise. But it seems pretentious and overblown to dignify such small-scale efforts with the label of disciplinary reform.

What might seem more nearly within reach, however, is the reform of the practice of philosophy by *Christian* philosophers. Among our brothers and sisters who take their faith in Christ seriously, we may presume at least a modicum of agreement on fundamental beliefs and values, and this might provide the sort of fulcrum for reform efforts that is lacking in the broader profession. It could even be that the thought of something like this, at least as a possibility, lies behind the present series on Christ-Shaped Philosophy. If a sufficient number of Christian philosophers should become convinced of one of the reform proposals on offer, and should commit themselves to changing things in the recommended ways, we might indeed have something that could fairly be termed the reform of philosophy, at least for that segment of the profession.

But perhaps we should be cautious. The notion of reform invoked here speaks of deep-lying, fundamental changes. It is not enough that there are some things that are not as they should be, and that we need to work to make better. To speak of “reform” is to imply that there is something amiss with the fundamental principles of the institution being reformed – that those principles need to be replaced with others that will point in the desired direction. So before we sound the trumpet for reform, perhaps we ought to look at the best Christian philosophy that is currently available, to see whether it manifests the sorts of deficiencies that call for fundamental reform.

At this point I need to name some names. Previously I mentioned Arthur Holmes, William Alston, and Philip Quinn, all distinguished Christian philosophers who have recently passed away. Now, however, I need to name some living persons. No inferences should be drawn, however, concerning names that do not appear on my list. There are many others that could have been mentioned instead; and also, I have no doubt, many who are equally worthy whose names simply did not occur to me. With that proviso, I will mention Richard Swinburne, George Mavrodes, Linda Zagzebski, Robert Adams, Marilyn Adams, Alvin Plantinga, Steven Evans, William Wainwright, Eleonore Stump, and Nicholas Wolterstorff – all together, a baker’s dozen of exemplary Christian philosophers.

One thing these persons have in common is outstanding philosophical ability and achievements; several have been divisional presidents of the APA,

and some have been presidents of the Society of Christian Philosophers. All of them are capable in discussion, but I have not heard from any of them the sort of ego-driven, destructive criticism of an opponent so vividly characterized by Richard Davis. If the standards and practices of analytic philosophy are as corrosive as Preston thinks they are (and I do believe there is something in his complaint), these philosophers seem somehow to have risen above this influence.⁹ All of them are deeply concerned with the Christian faith as presenting a compelling, integrated, and life-guiding worldview, and they show a commitment to promulgating the insights of Christian philosophy beyond the confines of the philosophical profession.

I am not here performing an act of canonization! No doubt for all these men and women, as for each one of us, there is room and need for further growth in grace and in Christian virtue. And of course, there is no thought of infallibility; they differ among themselves on many points, and I have engaged several of them in controversy myself. But if asked for examples of philosophical excellence combined with Christian commitment, I would say without hesitation: Look at these people; they are the best we have to offer.

And now, what of reform? Should our response be along these lines: “Now that we have seen the best that contemporary Christian philosophy has to offer, we are able to see all the more clearly the deep-seated problems in everything that has been done so far. We can now discern more precisely the need for fundamental changes – changes that will make possible, for the first time in living memory, the creation of a truly Christ-shaped philosophy. Let the reforms begin!” Perhaps that is how we ought to respond. My own reaction, however, is rather different. That reaction is one of profound appreciation, and thankfulness to divine providence, for the immense progress that has been made; progress seen not only in these individuals, but in many others like them, and more generally in the amazing increase in both the numbers and the influence of Christians in the philosophical profession over the past half-century or so. From a situation where, in mainstream philosophy, Christianity and even theism were marginal and close to invisible, we are now able to say that both have a significant place, albeit a contested one, at the philosophical table. (This has been noted with displeasure by some who found

⁹ I do not mean to imply that it is only philosophers who are Christians who are able to refrain from such destructive attacks; nor do I deny that such behavior also occurs among Christians.

the earlier, more strictly secular, state of affairs more to their liking.) There remains much work to be done; there is no occasion here for triumphalism. But there is, I think, an occasion for gratitude, both to God and to those whose labors have made all this possible. (My greatest disappointment with Moser's approach is his failure to give any indication of thankfulness, or of appreciation for the labors of the leaders of contemporary Christian philosophy.¹⁰ And yet, apart from those labors, there would be no audience for his own appeals for reform.)

What then of the reform of philosophy? As regards the profession as a whole, the likelihood of serious reform is so minuscule as not to be worth much discussion. But should we seek at least the reform of philosophy as practiced by Christian philosophers? No doubt that depends in part on what sort of reform is contemplated. If the reform is to be along the lines proposed by Moser, my answer is No, for reasons given in my other papers. It is not entirely clear exactly what sort of reform Preston has in mind; perhaps he thinks we should all give up analytic philosophy and begin practicing philosophy in some other mode. My own perspective is somewhat different. It may be that, in tending the garden of philosophy, we will do well if we pull out the noxious weeds, break up the compacted soil, and make sure that the healthy plants have sufficient water and sunshine. No need, I think, to tear them out by the roots to make room for supposedly better stock.¹¹ I close by quoting a remark early in Preston's paper, in which he captures admirably the spirit of my approach: "Saul and Paul can and should co-exist because each supplies a different type of good to the world. Even if one is a greater good than the other the world is richer for having both." Exactly.

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¹⁰ In an earlier article Moser, looking for examples of philosophers whose writings manifest the "obedience mode," is able to cite only three theologians – and his own website! (See "Jesus and Philosophy: The Questions We Ask," *Faith and Philosophy* 22:3 (July 2005), p. 283, note 24.)

¹¹ In his well-known "Advice to Christian Philosophers" (*Faith and Philosophy* 1:3 (July 1984), pp. 253-71) Alvin Plantinga in effect appeals to his colleagues to give more attention to a part of the garden that is somewhat under-cultivated – that part which contains issues of special concern to the broader Christian community. Unlike Moser, he never suggests that these are the *only* issues that should be addressed by Christian philosophers.