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Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology

Edited by Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. 326 pp., hb. £ 59.00, pb. £ 25.00;
ISBN: 978-0-19-920356-7/ 978-0-19-960042-7.

According to Michael Rea's introductory essay, this volume represents 'an attempt to begin a much-needed interdisciplinary conversation about the value of analytic philosophical approaches to theological topics.' Rea summarizes what he takes to be the distinctive ambitions and rhetorical style of analytic *philosophy*, which leads to the following definition of analytic *theology*: 'the activity of approaching theological topics with the ambitions of an analytic philosopher and in a style that conforms to the prescriptions that are distinctive of analytic philosophical discourse.' The volume as a whole serves as a justification and exemplification of analytic theology, rounded off with some 'correctives' from three scholars standing (mostly) outside the analytic tradition.

Having defined the topic of the book, Rea addresses two objections to the *ambitions* of analytic theology (that it is committed to there being 'absolute truths' about God and to a discredited foundationalism) and four objections to its *style* (each of which is a variation on the idea that this style hinders rather than assists the proper goals of theology). Rea closes with preview summaries of the main essays, relating each to the overall aims of the volume.

The main chapters are gathered into four parts. Part I is a full-throated defense of analytic theology. Oliver Crisp's 'On Analytic Theology' argues that analytic theology has both *procedural* elements (it constitutes 'a particular analytic style of pursuing theology') and *substantive* elements, such as the presumption that there are identifiable theological truths. Crisp's burden is to show that the project of analytic theology is a worthy one with several *prima facie* virtues; moreover, it is not a revisionist approach but merely one promising way of adopting the ancient task of 'faith seeking understanding'. William Abraham continues the defense by arguing that analytic theology can be assimilated to the well-established category of systematic theology: it is no more than 'systematic theology attuned to the deployment of the skills, resources, and virtues of analytic philosophy.' Abraham then illustrates his point with a preliminary exploration of the doctrine of God and the doctrine of grace from the standpoint of analytic theology.

In the third chapter Randall Rauser takes the tack that the best defense is a good offense (and in more than one sense): he contends that modern theology, afflicted as it is by a corrosive theological skepticism, has become a breeding ground for ‘bullshit’ (as defined and expounded in Harry Frankfurt’s famous essay). Rauser suggests that a good portion of academic discourse—the sincerity of the participants notwithstanding—is quite literally *nonsense*, having no discernible meaning that can be evaluated as to its truth or falsehood. He takes particular aim at the theologies of Sally McFague and Jürgen Moltmann. It’s hard to disagree with Rauser that if these are representative of non-analytic theology then analytic theology deserves—at the very least—a place at the table. If ‘bullshit’ theology is the disease, analytic theology sure looks like the cure.

Part II presents four historical perspectives on analytic theology, partly to counter the misconception that its practitioners are insensitive to theological traditions. John Lamont surveys the conception of faith in the Greek fathers and suggests that it can be illuminated and defended using contemporary philosophical analyses of testimonial knowledge. Andrew Chignell’s ‘As Kant has Shown...’ calls into question the widespread presumption in modern theology that reflection ‘in a traditional realist mode about substantive theological topics’ is untenable in the shadow of Kant’s critical philosophy. Rather than challenging Kant’s epistemology head-on, Chignell provocatively argues that on one plausible reading Kant himself can be seen as engaging in a form of analytic theology (albeit one of a rather skeptical bent). Andrew Dole then does for Schleiermacher what Chignell does for Kant: Schleiermacher’s theological anti-realism, while it would impose rather severe constraints, wouldn’t *completely* rule out all metaphysical inquiry by analytic theologians. Although these two chapters serve their purpose of clarifying the commitments of analytic theology and establishing its historical credentials, in light of the realist proclivities of the contributors one cannot help but wonder how much value there is in trying to pull Kant and Schleiermacher into the tent. If these guys can be assimilated to the cause, who couldn’t?

Nicholas Wolterstorff rounds off the historical chapters with an insightful account of how philosophical theology was made possible (*again*, one should add) by certain developments in analytic philosophy in the latter half of the twentieth century, namely, the collapse of logical positivism and classical foundationalism, and the subsequent flowering of ‘epistemological pluralism’. Wolterstorff’s analysis is all the more compelling in that he wasn’t merely an eyewitness of these developments; he was also one of the key participants.

Part III offers four essays ‘on the data for theology’. Thomas McCall compares the classical view of Scripture (‘The Bible *is* the Word of God’) with the Barthian view (‘The Bible *becomes* the Word of God’) and points out a number of serious problems faced by the latter. McCall argues provocatively that the very tenets Barth was concerned to uphold—the freedom and sovereignty of God, and the analogy of the written Word to the incarnate Word—are better preserved by the classical view than the neo-orthodox view. His irenic conclusion is that despite such criticisms analytic theologians will benefit from engagement with Barth.

Thomas Crisp's essay explores the epistemology of belief in the divine inspiration of the Scriptures. He argues for a 'testimonial' model for justified Christian belief in the Bible as an alternative both to Richard Swinburne's 'natural theology' model and to Alvin Plantinga's 'internal instigation of the Holy Spirit' model. One concern with Crisp's model is that 'justified' here turns out to be a pretty modest epistemic property: the Christian's belief in the Bible is as 'justified' as Crisp's childhood belief in Santa Claus. What does that imply about the quality of the 'data' for analytic theology?

The contribution of religious experience to analytic theology is taken up by Michael Sudduth, who argues, first, that natural theology is a necessary element within dogmatic theology, and second, that religious experience is essential to natural theology. Sudduth makes the important point that if religious experience is understood as *cognitive* (as in, e.g., William Alston's model) then theology based on such experience need not reduce to subjectivism or anti-metaphysical anti-realism.

Michael Murray's chapter addresses the relationship between science and religion. I suspect many readers will find unsatisfying his working definitions of 'science' and 'religion'. (Is science restricted to the judgments of *professional* scholars? Is religion restricted to the interpretation of *written* revelation?) In any event, Murray considers four models for the relationship between these two disciplines, plumping for a model of 'constructive engagement' according to which scientists and theologians can genuinely learn from each another (though Murray's examples suggest that the flow of information is somewhat one-sided). One shortcoming of the essay is that the reader is left to draw her own conclusions as to the relevance of all this for *analytic* theology (as opposed to any other kind of theology).

Part IV hands over the lectern to three friendly critics. Eleanore Stump contends that while analytic philosophy can be very effective in addressing some problems, its left-brain emphasis can lead its practitioners to overlook or trivialize the complexities of interpersonal relationships. Stump suggests that these shortcomings of analytic philosophy (and, by implication, analytic theology) can be remedied by supplementing it with *narratives*. One concrete example, she submits, would be the use of the book of Job in addressing the problem of evil.

While Stump expresses reservations about analytic philosophy's preoccupation with propositional knowledge, Merold Westphal seems altogether hostile to the idea; indeed, at points his position seems indistinguishable from relativism and anti-realism. Westphal's essay presents itself as a meditation on holiness as the *telos* of the hermeneutical task, but your humble reviewer found it almost impossible to discern what overall point Westphal was trying to make. (Or was *that* the point?) Bringing up the rear, Sarah Coakley's chapter takes analytic theologians to task for their hermeneutical mishandling of apophatic theologians: Exhibit A is William Alston's appropriation of Theresa of Ávila. Coakley's argument makes for a challenging read, and the improbability of her opening thesis—that contemporary religious epistemology, unbeknown to its pioneers, represents a turn toward the mystical feminine—is matched only by the

obscurity of the reasoning offered in its support. Frankly, it's hard to discern what role these last two essays were intended to play in the context of the volume, except perhaps to make analytic theology look all the more luminous in comparison.

Taken as a whole, this collection of essays accomplishes what its editors intended: it provides an impressive defense and showcase of theology in the analytic mode. As one who also values and practices analytic theology, I'm predisposed to approve of the book's thesis, but I also wish to sound a few notes of caution as an ally of the cause. In the first place, the tone of some contributors toward non-analytic theologians borders on the dismissive. The underlying message seems to be that the theologians have made a royal mess of things and now the philosophers need to step in and clean up. (One pictures the stereotypical movie scene in which the sharp-suited shade-wearing federal agents turn up to take over the case from the bungling local cops.) It's hard to deny that most systematic theologians would benefit enormously from a dose or two of analytic philosophy. Even so, good Christian theology needs more than analytical precision, clarity, deductive rigor, and so forth; it also requires an intimate knowledge of the source materials (primarily the scriptures), exegetical expertise, a command of historical theology, a dash of literary flair, and (I would argue) a measure of pastoral experience. Of course, such virtues almost never coincide in any one individual, but that's precisely the point: analytic theologians and non-analytic theologians need each another. It would be a great loss to all if mutual suspicion were to fuel partisanship.

This leads to a second point. Despite the attention given in this volume to the crucial question of source materials, it's concerning that analytic theologians seldom engage directly and closely with those source materials (again, one thinks primarily of the biblical text) preferring instead to speak in generalities about 'what the Bible teaches' or to use the church creeds as exegetical shortcuts. The point, to be clear, is not that analytic theologians need to be trained biblical scholars; it is only to say that there needs to be consistency between the theory and the practice of analytical theology, which too often keeps at arm's length the specifics of its source data. William Abraham's treatment of the interplay between divine grace and human freedom is a case in point: it makes no reference to any of the relevant biblical texts (e.g., John 6, Rom. 6, 1 Cor. 1, Eph. 2) and in its ingenuity ends up offering (so it appears) a form of semi-Pelagianism.

Finally, when extolling the virtues of analytic theology its practitioners can give the impression—whether intended or not—that what it offers and delivers is a clinical philosophical dissection of its subject matter, conducted with presuppositionless surgical tools from a position of dispassionate rational detachment. It's questionable whether such a stance is possible for the Christian theologian, never mind desirable. Moreover, if analytic theology is simply one mode of 'faith seeking understanding,' does it follow that only believers can engage in analytic theology? In light of such questions it might have been profitable to include some more Kierkegaardian or Kuyperian perspectives in this volume. Nevertheless, it remains an outstanding collection of essays and I have little doubt that analytic theology's stock will rise in its wake.