

# ANALYTIC THEOLOGY

*New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*

Edited by  
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# Introduction<sup>†</sup>

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In recent decades, philosophers of religion in the so-called ‘analytic tradition’ have gradually turned their attention toward the explication of core doctrines in Christian theology. The result has been a growing body of philosophical work on topics that have traditionally been the provenance of systematic theologians. Despite this theological turn, however, the results haven’t, in general, been warmly received by theologians. This is in large part due to the fact that many theologians seem to have very different ideas from analytic philosophers about how theology (and philosophy) ought to be done, and about the value of analytic approaches to theological topics.

Whereas philosophy in the English-speaking world is dominated by analytic approaches to its problems and projects, theology has been dominated by alternative approaches. For reasons that I shall try to sketch below, many would say that the current state in theology is not mere historical accident, but is, rather, how things *ought* to be. Others, however, would say precisely the opposite: that theology as a discipline has been beguiled and taken captive by ‘continental’ approaches, and that the effects on the discipline have been largely deleterious.<sup>1</sup>

The methodological divide between systematic theologians and analytic philosophers of religion is ripe for exploration. It is of obvious theoretical importance to both disciplines, but it also has practical import. The climate in theology departments for analytic theologians is much like the climate in English-speaking philosophy departments for continental philosophers: often chilly.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the methodological divide is surely the most significant

<sup>†</sup> I would like to thank Michael Bergmann, Jeff Brower, Andrew Chignell, Oliver Crisp, John Lamont, Michael Murray, Merold Westphal, and Nicholas Wolterstorff for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter. Also, both Oliver and I would like to thank Alex Arnold for help preparing the index for this volume, and the Institute for Scholarship in the Liberal Arts in the College of Arts and Letters at the University of Notre Dame for funding that made Alex’s work possible.

<sup>1</sup> The idea that theology has been taken captive is made explicit in R. R. Reno, ‘Theology’s Continental Captivity’, *First Things*, 162 (2006), 26–33.

<sup>2</sup> Often, but not always. In some philosophy departments, continental dominates; and in a few—like the philosophy department at the University of Notre Dame—both continental and analytic are strongly represented, and relations among their practitioners are generally quite positive. But this is the exception rather than the rule. From all I can tell, the same is true—except with continental approaches in the dominant position—in the field of theology.

obstacle to fruitful interdisciplinary dialogue. The problem isn't just that academics with different methodological perspectives have trouble conversing with one another. Rather, it is that, by and large, the established figures in both disciplines don't even view mutual conversation as worth pursuing. They ignore one another. They (implicitly or explicitly) encourage their students to ignore one another. They allow their methodological preferences to play a very large role in their judgments about hiring and about the quality of papers they referee for professional journals. And the divide only grows deeper. No doubt many (on both sides) will think that all of this is perfectly legitimate. Maybe it is, but that is beside the point; its legitimacy shouldn't just be taken for granted. It is an open and interesting question whether theology can sensibly be done in the analytic mode.

The present volume represents an attempt to begin a much-needed interdisciplinary conversation about the value of analytic philosophical approaches to theological topics. It is a largely one-sided attempt insofar as most of the essays herein are at least sympathetic toward, if not defensive of, the enterprise we are calling *analytic theology*. But we have aimed to provide some balance by including a few essays that offer more critical perspectives on analytic theology. Also in the service of balance, I shall attempt in the present essay to summarize and explain what seem to be some of the most important objections against analytic theology.

I shall begin by trying to explain what I mean by the terms 'analytic philosophy' and 'analytic theology'. The contributors to this volume do not have a precise or even entirely uniform vision of what analytic theology amounts to (though there is certainly broad agreement on what it would involve). But this, I think, is to be expected in light of the fact that the nature of analytic philosophy also eludes precise and uniform characterization.

Next, I shall present what is essentially an analytic theologian's perspective on the most salient objections against the enterprise of analytic theology. I do this for the following reason. Much has been written in both philosophy and theology that can plausibly be invoked in defense of broadly non-analytic approaches to theological topics. Here I'm thinking, for example, of work by Don Cupitt, John Hick, George Lindbeck, Jean-Luc Marion, D. Z. Phillips, and Merold Westphal—to name just a few, very diverse thinkers whose writings either point toward defects in analytic approaches, or seem in other ways to speak in favor of going a different way.<sup>3</sup> But the methodological

<sup>3</sup> I don't mean to suggest that these figures are intentionally trying to discredit analytic philosophy or theology. Some are, no doubt; but others might simply be following a different path (as Merold Westphal put it to me in correspondence). In Ch. 13 e.g. Westphal recommends a hermeneutical phenomenological alternative to analytic theology, but without declaring analytic theology to be defective. Still, his work does provide reasons which deserve to be taken seriously for favoring his alternative path; and so his work (like the work of these other figures) might sensibly be *appropriated* by critics who *do* want to discredit analytic theology, even if he himself is unwilling to go that far.

import of a lot of this work has gone largely unappreciated by those interested in analytic theology. Part of the problem is that many (though hardly all) of the arguments that would speak against analytic theology are couched in a rhetorical style that analytic philosophers and theologians (henceforth, ‘analytics’) will find objectionably opaque. But it is also because the arguments in this literature often depend upon claims and attitudes which are handed down from figures largely dismissed by analytics and which many analytics find to be inaccurate, insufficiently motivated, or wholly unintelligible. The result is that the critics are largely preaching to the choir—and this despite the fact that, in my opinion anyway, some of their arguments and objections deserve serious engagement.

My own efforts, then, will be directed at articulating in my own terms what the main objections seem to be. I hope to express them in ways that will resonate with those who embrace them, while at the same time helping analytics to appreciate their force more fully. I also hope that, to the extent that I miss the mark in characterizing the objections, critics of analytic theology will take what I say here as an open invitation to clarify, and to replace inadvertent caricature with real substance. I shall not attempt to respond to the objections here. Some responses will come in the chapters that follow, and in the closing section I comment briefly upon those. But the main purpose of this introduction is just to open up dialogue on the issues discussed herein, not to provide a defense of my own perspective.

## ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY AND ANALYTIC THEOLOGY

It is commonplace now to express skepticism about the usefulness of trying to distinguish between analytic and non-analytic philosophy, in no small part because the label is misleading: quite a lot of analytic philosophy has little or nothing to do with conceptual analysis. Nevertheless, the term is still in regular use, and people seem to have a fairly good idea about what sort of thing it refers to, even if they can’t define it very well. Roughly (and I think that ‘rough’ is the best that we can do here), it refers to an approach to philosophical problems that is characterized by a particular rhetorical style, some common ambitions, an evolving technical vocabulary, and a tendency to pursue projects in dialogue with a certain evolving body of literature. Obviously it would be impossible to try to specify in detail the relevant literature and technical vocabulary. The point is just that these factors play a role in determining whether a piece of work falls within the analytic

tradition. But the rhetorical style and ambitions of analytic philosophy are somewhat easier to characterize.

The ambitions seem generally to be to these: (i) to identify the scope and limits of our powers to obtain knowledge of the world, and (ii) to provide such true explanatory theories as we can in areas of inquiry (metaphysics, morals, and the like) that fall outside the scope of the natural sciences. The first ambition overlaps the ambitions of many non-analytic philosophers, the difference lying partly in the mode of pursuit, but also partly in expectations about the outcome. Many in the analytic tradition have sought to explain how knowledge of a certain kind, or knowledge in general, is possible—often with an eye to refuting skeptics and showing that we in fact possess such knowledge. This project might be loosely (and, many of us would say, inaccurately) described as a quest for the ‘foundations’ of knowledge—a quest that, thus described, obviously takes for granted the *existence* of foundations. This, the non-analytic philosophers will say, is the part of the attempt to identify the scope and limits of our powers to obtain knowledge that is distinctive of the analytic tradition, and it is the part that needs to be given up. On the other hand, many others in the analytic tradition have pursued more critical projects, aiming to show that knowledge of a certain kind is problematic, or impossible, or, at any rate, unobtainable by humans under current epistemic circumstances. Projects of this sort are pursued by analytic and non-analytic philosophers alike. The difference between Bas van Fraassen’s critique of metaphysics or of the ‘false hopes of traditional epistemology’ on the one hand, and those offered by folks like Jean-François Lyotard or Jean-Luc Marion on the other lies not so much in the overall aim or thesis as in the style of argument, the choice of targets and conversation partners, and the suppositions and vocabulary that are taken for granted.<sup>4</sup>

The second ambition includes the quest for ‘local’ explanations of particular phenomena—morality, causation, and composition, for example. It also includes the quest for some sort of ‘global’ explanation that identifies fundamental entities and properties and helps to provide an account of human

<sup>4</sup> Compare van Fraassen, ‘The False Hopes of Traditional Epistemology’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 60 (2000), 253–80 and *The Empirical Stance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) on the one hand, and, on the other hand, Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, tr. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), and Marion, *God Without Being*, tr. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); ‘Metaphysics and Phenomenology: A Relief for Theology’, tr. Thomas A. Carlson, *Critical Inquiry*, 20 (1994), 572–59; and ‘The Idea of God’, pp. 265–304 in D. Garber and M. Ayers (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, i (Cambridge: CUP, 1998). This isn’t, of course, to minimize differences between the overall agendas of these philosophers, but just to identify a certain affinity in their views about ‘traditional’ epistemology.

cognitive structures and their abilities to interact with and theoretically process facts about the fundamental objects and properties. Accomplishing the latter goal would amount to providing the ontological underpinnings of a final epistemological theory. Thus, the ambitions of analytic philosophy are intimately connected; and so skepticism about our ability to fulfill one of them will inevitably translate into skepticism about our ability to fulfill (completely) the other.

Characterizing the rhetorical style is a bit more complicated. Making no claim either to completeness or universality, the analytic style might roughly be characterized as a style paradigmatic instances of which are distinguished by conformity (more or less) to the following prescriptions:

- P1. Write as if philosophical positions and conclusions can be adequately formulated in sentences that can be formalized and logically manipulated.<sup>5</sup>
- P2. Prioritize precision, clarity, and logical coherence.<sup>6</sup>
- P3. Avoid substantive (non-decorative) use of metaphor and other tropes whose semantic content outstrips their propositional content.<sup>7</sup>
- P4. Work as much as possible with well-understood primitive concepts, and concepts that can be analyzed in terms of those.

<sup>5</sup> I don't mean to suggest that it's part of analytic philosophy always to carry out the formalizations or to lay entirely bare the logical relations among one's claims. But analytic philosophers generally think that, absent special circumstances, something is very amiss if a philosophical view is expressed in such a way that it has no clear logical consequences.

<sup>6</sup> In correspondence, Nicholas Wolterstorff pointed out to me that one obvious distinctive feature of analytic philosophy is the heavy use of counterexamples, including bizarrely imaginative ones. I take this to be one of the primary manifestations of the prioritization of precision. As for prioritization of clarity, this claim can seem ironic in light of the fact that quite a lot of analytic philosophy is very difficult even for specialists, and totally inaccessible to non-specialists. But the idea that analytic philosophers prize clarity has, I think, less to do with prizing accessibility to non-specialists (or even to specialists) and more to do with the fact that analytic philosophers place a high premium on spelling out hidden assumptions, on scrupulously trying to lay bare whatever evidence one has (or lacks) for the claims that one is making, and on taking care to confine one's vocabulary to ordinary language, well-understood primitive concepts, and technical jargon definable in terms of these.

<sup>7</sup> There is controversy in the literature on metaphor over the question whether and to what extent metaphors have determinate propositional content. Here I am taking it for granted that metaphors often, even if not always, have cognitive significance that outstrips whatever propositional content they might have. See e.g. David Cooper, *Metaphor* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) and Josef Stern, *Metaphor in Context* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), both of which defend, in different ways, the view that the cognitive significance of a metaphor is not to be identified with whatever propositional content it might have. Also, I do not mean to deny that metaphors get used in analytic theorizing to put forward models, or to otherwise 'support' various kinds of (literal) theoretical claims. But in such cases, I think, it is the models or the supportive claims that play the more substantive role. (For defense of the view that metaphors can be 'reality depicting' and can 'support metaphysical claims' in both religion and science, see Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), esp. chs. 7 and 8.)

P5. Treat conceptual analysis (insofar as it is possible) as a source of evidence.

More might be added, of course. But my 'official' list stops at P5 because most of what else I would add wouldn't really count as prescriptions that *divide* analytic from continental philosophers. P1–P5 are contentious, however. By my lights, they are prescriptions that non-analytic philosophers either reject as unimportant or actively aim to violate, and for principled reasons.

On the surface, these prescriptions might seem to be just stilted expressions of fairly commonsensical virtues that we all (even postmodern philosophers) aim to inculcate in our undergraduates: reason coherently; write clearly; say what you mean and mean what you say; try to express your ideas in terms that your audience will understand; try not to express your arguments and conclusions in overly 'poetic' language; understand the terms that you're employing and rely on your understanding of those terms to draw out the implications of what you say and what you presuppose; and so on. Thus construed, it is hard to imagine how anyone could sensibly object.

In fact, however, each of the prescriptions (or the presumption that each can be followed when treating some philosophical or theological topic) expresses or presupposes views that can very reasonably be questioned. And I think that it is precisely the deep-seated reservations that many non-analytic philosophers have about the views underlying these prescriptions that explains a lot of the current hostility toward analytic approaches to theological topics. (The third section of this chapter, 'Against the Analytic Style' is devoted to unpacking this last remark in some detail.)

I have gone on for a bit now about what analytic philosophy is. Hopefully it is also becoming clear what analytic philosophy is *not*. Nothing in my characterization of analytic philosophy has wedded it to a particular theory of truth. Nor have I saddled it with commitment to a particular epistemological theory. Contrary to what various critics of analytic philosophy have suggested, there are analytic philosophers aplenty who reject (for example) the correspondence theory of truth; there are also analytic philosophers who reject foundationalism. Analytic philosophers are not, as such, committed to belief in propositions (at least not where propositions are considered to be abstract entities that stand in the *is expressed by* relation to sentences). Nor are they committed to any brand of metaphysical realism or moral or metaphysical absolutism.<sup>8</sup> In fact, so far as I can tell, there is no substantive philosophical thesis that separates analytic philosophers as such from their rivals.

<sup>8</sup> Some seem to think that the grand explanatory ambitions of analytic philosophy commit it to a brand of realism, or at least to 'absolute metaphysical truth'. But this is manifestly false. If metaphysical realism is false, then that fact will be part of the 'grand explanation' that we're all striving for. If there is no absolute truth (whatever exactly that means), then there won't be a



To be sure, analytic philosophers typically write as if certain meta-philosophical theses are true—in particular, whatever theses underlie the prescriptions sketched above. Moreover, it is reasonable to think that both foundationalism of a certain kind and metaphysical realism lurk in the background of a lot of analytic theorizing (more on foundationalism in the next section below). But my point here is that analytic philosophy as such carries no *commitment* to these theses. It is easy enough to imagine an analytic philosopher objecting to any one of them, and doing so more or less in the analytic style and in the service of some of what I have called the ambitions of the analytic philosophical tradition. It is, I think, a failure to recognize this fact that has led to so many of the embarrassing caricatures of analytic philosophy in the contemporary literature.

So much, then, for analytic philosophy. What about analytic theology? As I see it, analytic theology is just 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. It will also involve, more or less, pursuing those topics in a way that engages the literature that is constitutive of the analytic tradition, employing some of the technical jargon from that tradition, and so on. But, in the end, it is the style and the ambitions that are most central. For this reason, analytic theology as an enterprise stands or falls with the viability of its ambitions and with the practical value of trying to do theology in a way that conforms to the prescriptions that characterize analytic philosophical writing.

## AGAINST ANALYTIC AMBITIONS

In the opening paragraph of Louis Berkhof's *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology*—chosen for discussion here almost entirely at random from among several older systematic theologies on my shelf—the aim of the systematic theologian is characterized as follows:

There was little or no attempt in the first two centuries of the Christian era to present the whole body of doctrinal truth, gathered from the Word of God, in a systematic way. Yet the urge of the human mind to see the truth as much as possible as a whole could not long be suppressed. Man is endowed with reason, and the human reason cannot rest satisfied with a mere collection of separate truths, but wants to see them in

unique 'grand explanatory theory', but analytic philosophy can proceed from different perspectives and starting points just as it always has. These two points seem not to be sufficiently appreciated by those who would criticize analytic philosophy.

their mutual relationship, in order that it may have a clearer understanding of them. . . . God certainly sees the truth as a whole, and it is the duty of the theologian to think the truths of God after Him. There should be a constant endeavor to see the truth as God sees it, even though it is perfectly evident that the ideal is beyond the grasp of man in his present condition.<sup>9</sup>

Berkhof's characterization represents an entirely common, traditional view of the task of the systematic theologian. These words might just as easily express the collective ambition of many who are engaged in the analytic theological enterprise. Of course, much that will qualify as analytic theology—for example, projects that aim to revise our concept of God in light of reason rather than scripture—falls outside the scope of Berkhof's vision. Nevertheless, we all can recognize in his remark about the 'theologian's duty' an ambition distinctly in keeping with the analytic tradition and decidedly contrary to what critics of the tradition will recognize as a proper or sensible goal for a theologian.

One point of contention here will be the idea that we can, even in principle, have access to 'the truth as God sees it'—i.e. absolute, perfectly objective truth. Objections to this idea come from two quarters. Some say that there simply is no such thing as 'the truth as God sees it'—that (in the words of Don Cupitt) 'reality [is] a mere bunch of disparate and changing interpretations, a shifting loosely-held coalition of points of view in continual debate with each other'.<sup>10</sup> Others are prepared to grant the existence of such a perspective but vehemently deny that we can occupy it.<sup>11</sup> These claims are familiar territory, widely discussed both within and without the analytic tradition. I won't comment further on them here except to note the obvious: both are in tension with analytic ambitions, and so both will be sources of objection to analytic theology.

One can, of course, challenge both of these suppositions while remaining in the analytic mode. As I said earlier, analytic theology as such carries no commitment to substantive theories about truth or epistemology. But those who do challenge these suppositions will not think that any sort of *robust* theology can be developed in the analytic mode. It is in this way, then, that the

<sup>9</sup> *Systematic Theology: New Combined Edition* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1932/1996), 15.

<sup>10</sup> Don Cupitt, 'Anti-Realist Faith', repr. in his *Is Nothing Sacred? The Non-Realist Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1987), 34.

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. Merold Westphal's 'Appropriating Post-Modernism', *ARC: The Journal of the Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University*, 25 (1997), 73–84, and 'Overcoming Onto-Theology', pp. 146–69 in J. D. Caputo and M. J. Scanlon (eds.), *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1999), both of which are reprinted in Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-Theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001). See also Westphal's 'Father Abraham and His Feuding Sons', pp. 148–75 in *Overcoming Onto-Theology*, and 'Taking Plantinga Seriously: Advice to Christian Philosophers', *Faith and Philosophy*, 19 (2002), 173–81.

objections just mentioned count against analytic theology: they are objections against what we might call a *non-minimalist* conception of analytic theology.

I do not, however, think that these claims are the *main* source of objection to analytic ambitions. The arguments simply aren't good enough. Like many philosophical arguments, those that motivate denials of the existence and accessibility of absolute truths work much better as rationalizations for positions already held than as positive stimuli to conversion. Thus, I think that the best explanation for the nearly wholesale rejection of analytic ambitions on the part of theologians lies not so much in their success or failure in assessing a certain range of arguments, but rather in a more or less collectively held *positive vision* about the proper aims of theology that is antecedently at odds with the goals of the analytic theologian. Let me now make an effort at unpacking and justifying this claim.

Merold Westphal notes that, '[i]n postmodern contexts, onto-theology is one of the seven deadly sins' ('Overcoming Onto-Theology' (1999), 13). As I understand it, onto-theology involves primarily two tendencies. First, it treats God primarily as an explanatory posit, so that (as Westphal puts it), 'God's *raison d'être* has become to make it possible for human reason to give ultimate explanations' (ibid. 11). Second, it involves theorizing about God in a way that presupposes that reason is a reliable tool for arriving at *clear* knowledge of God, so that reasoning about God can ultimately remove divine mystery.<sup>12</sup> To put it in other terms, the view of the onto-theologian is that we can (and sometimes do) believe *exactly the truths about God*, undistorted by our own human circumstances, that God himself believes.<sup>13</sup> Now, it is easy enough to see that if the God's-eye point of view is wholly inaccessible (or, worse, non-existent), the hope of the onto-theologian is a non-starter. Moreover, I suspect that most analytic theologians nowadays will think that, in any case, the suppositions of the paradigmatic onto-theologian are narrow-minded and optimistic at best. Mystery is inevitable, and God is clearly much more than a mere explanatory posit. Still, those who are theologizing with analytic ambitions typically and naturally find explanatory roles for God to play, and they will typically share the supposition that we can arrive at *clear* knowledge of God, even if that knowledge is not *complete* and some mysteries remain.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Correspondence with Westphal and attention to his work have helped me to sharpen my understanding of onto-theology; but if misunderstandings linger, they are my fault and not his.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. 'Overcoming Onto-Theology', pp. 6 ff., and 'Taking Plantinga Seriously', pp. 177 ff. In the latter article, Westphal seems to suggest that belief in *propositions* somehow promotes or encourages onto-theology thus construed. But I do not find that suggestion plausible. One can have substantially the same view of our cognitive powers without believing in propositions; and one can believe in propositions while also affirming that God is utterly mysterious, that no proposition is absolutely true, and so on.

<sup>14</sup> Typically, but not inevitably. See below, pp. 19–21 on the relation between analytic theology and apophatic theology.

Thus, analytic theology shares affinities with onto-theology, even if the two enterprises are not to be identified.

But Westphal and others speak as if the very aspiration to onto-theology is not just a little misguided, but bad, dangerous, inimical to the life of faith, and so on. Why would it be so? In 'Overcoming Onto-Theology', Westphal tells us that, according to Heidegger,

the goal of theology 'is never a valid system of theological propositions' but rather 'concrete Christian existence itself'. . . [B]ecause its goal is the *praxis* of the believer as a distinctive mode of existence, '*theology in its essence is a practical science*.' Unlike onto-theology, theology properly understood is 'innately homiletical'. . . It is as if Heidegger is saying, I have found it necessary to deny theory in order to make room for practice. (16; emphasis in original)

In glossing the meaning of this last remark, Westphal refers us to the story of Cupid and Psyche as (in his view) it is retold in Wagner's *Lohengrin* and C. S. Lewis's *Till We Have Faces*. In each of these tales, a certain kind of loving relationship is undermined by a woman's desire to possess forbidden knowledge about her lover—knowledge which will give her a kind of control over her beloved, or (as Westphal puts it), will put him 'at her disposal'. He writes:

[In each of these stories] the challenge of faith is the same: the believer is called upon to sustain a beautiful and loving relationship through trust in a lover about whom she remains significantly (though not totally) in the dark and who, though he gives himself to her freely, is not at her disposal. The relationship is destroyed when the beloved . . . insists on Enlightenment, on dissipating the darkness of mystery with the light of human knowledge, on walking by sight and not by faith.

To be able to resist this temptation, faith must deny theory, or, to be more precise, the primacy of insight. For such faith, Plato's divided line and Hegel's modern vision thereof as the movement 'beyond faith' to knowledge are not the ascent from that which is inferior . . . to that which is superior . . . ; they are rather the withdrawal from the site at which alone is possible a loving, trusting relation with a God before whom one might sing and dance . . .

This love, this trust, this relationship—these are the practice for the sake of which it was necessary to deny theory. This is not to abolish theology. It is to see that theology's task is to serve this life of faith, not the ideals of knowledge as defined by the philosophical traditions. ('Overcoming Onto-Theology', 27)

On Westphal's view, then, the duty of the theologian is emphatically *not* to 'think God's thoughts after Him' (*pace* Berkhof) but rather to serve the life of faith. In order to do this, however, it must always respect the transcendence of God and refrain from the temptation to try to 'put God at our disposal'—i.e. to try to see God with clear intellectual vision, believing about God the absolute truths that God believes about himself. And, again, the issue isn't

just that we are *unable* to attain such a clear vision. Rather, the point is that the *effort* both implicitly denies the transcendence that theology ought to respect and aims at a goal that, if accomplished, would undermine the life of faith and would thus work at cross purposes with the true goal of theology. If this is correct, then much of what would count as analytic theology is fundamentally misguided, predicated upon a wrong view about what is in keeping with the goals of theology. And if we take seriously the animadversions against the existence or accessibility-in-principle of 'absolute truth', then analytic theology (conceived in a non-minimalist way) is also predicated upon a false view about what is even *possible* for theology. This, then, is our first substantive objection against analytic theology.<sup>15</sup>

Westphal's vision of the goals of theology is articulated in a way that, so far as I can tell, is fully consistent with traditional, creedally orthodox Christian belief. But it is important to bear in mind that substantially the same vision can and does arise out of very different points of view as well. In his essay, 'A Remarkable Consensus', for example, Michael Dummett laments what he takes to be a general loss of faith among Catholic theologians—a loss reflected in what Thomas Sheehan refers to as the 'liberal consensus':<sup>16</sup>

In Roman Catholic seminaries . . . it is now common teaching that Jesus of Nazareth did not assert any of the messianic claims that the Gospels attribute to him and that he died without believing that he was the Christ or the Son of God, not to mention the founder of a new religion.

Nor did Jesus know that his mother, Mary, had remained a virgin in the very act of conceiving him. . . . Most likely Mary told Jesus what she herself knew of his origins: that he had a natural father and was born not in Bethlehem but in Nazareth, indeed without the ministrations of angels, shepherds, and late-arriving wise men bearing gifts. She could have told her son the traditional nativity story only if she had managed to read, long before they were written, the inspiring but unhistorical Christmas legends that first appeared in the gospels of Matthew and Luke fifty years after her son had died.

Moreover, according to the consensus, although Jesus had a reputation as a faith healer during his life, it is likely that he performed very few such 'miracles', perhaps only two. (Probably he never walked on water.) ('A Remarkable Consensus', 428–9)

It is no doubt an overstatement to say that these claims are really a matter of *consensus* among theologians (Catholic or otherwise). But it is probably not

<sup>15</sup> The respect for divine transcendence and the corresponding preference for apophatic modes of discourse that motivates this objection also motivates objections against the analytic style. See below, the section 'Against the Analytic Style'.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Sheehan, Review of Hans Kung's *Eternal Life*, *New York Review of Books*, 31 (14 June 1984), quoted in Michael Dummett, 'A Remarkable Consensus', *New Blackfriars*, 68 (1987), 424–31.

far off the mark to say that such claims are widely endorsed by contemporary theologians. The point, in any case, is that exactly the same sort of positive vision for theology that Westphal articulates—one according to which theology's task is primarily practical, aimed at bolstering the life of faith rather than providing a true explanatory theory—will as naturally arise out of a theological perspective like this one as out of Westphal's or any of a variety of other perspectives.

The second objection pertains to a perceived link between the adoption of postmodern approaches to theology and the rejection of *foundationalism*. This is a complicated matter to discuss, however, because there seems to be a great deal of confusion among theologians and some postmodern philosophers about what foundationalism actually is. The problem (and I am hardly the first to point this out) is that many writers seem to confuse what most of us would call 'classical foundationalism' (roughly, the view that a belief is justified only if it is self evident, incorrigible, evident to the senses, or deducible from premises that satisfy at least one of those three conditions) with foundationalism *simpliciter*.<sup>17</sup> Classical foundationalism is almost universally rejected nowadays. Other kinds of foundationalism, on the other hand, are thriving. But many of the writers I have in mind seem to think that the death of classical foundationalism was nothing more or less than the death of foundationalism *simpliciter*. This is far from the truth.

Matters are further complicated by the fact that relatively few writers distinguish between *doxastic foundationalism* and what might be called *source foundationalism*. Doxastic foundationalism is the (entirely commonsensical, even if not universally held) view that some of our beliefs are *properly basic*. Basic beliefs are those that are not based on other beliefs. Properly basic

<sup>17</sup> Stanley Grenz and John Franke write: 'In its broadest sense, foundationalism is merely the acknowledgment of the seemingly obvious observation that not all beliefs we hold . . . are on the same level, but that some beliefs . . . anchor others. . . . In philosophical circles, however, "foundationalism" refers to a much stronger epistemological stance than is entailed in this observation about how beliefs intersect. At the heart of the foundationalist agenda is the desire to overcome the uncertainty generated by our human liability to error and the inevitable disagreements that follow. Foundationalists are convinced that the only way to solve this problem is to find some means of grounding the entire edifice of human knowledge on invincible certainty' (*Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 2001), 29–30). But as anyone acquainted with the contemporary literature in epistemology is aware, this characterization is simply false. Grenz and Franke cite W. Jay Wood (*Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 84) as their source for the characterization; but Wood does not characterize *foundationalism* as they do. Rather, as one might expect, he applies a description like the one given by Grenz and Franke to *classical* (or, what he calls *strong*) foundationalism (Wood, pp. 84–5). The characterization of classical foundationalism that I have given is the one found in Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (eds.), *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

beliefs are those that are rationally or justifiably held in the basic way. Perceptual beliefs, for example, are usually thought to be justifiably based on experiences rather than beliefs. Thus, they are typically considered to be examples of properly basic beliefs. Source foundationalism, on the other hand, is the view that some of our sources of evidence are privileged in the sense that (a) they can rationally be trusted in the absence of evidence of their reliability, and (b) it is irrational to rely on other sources of evidence unless they are somehow ‘certified’ by the privileged sources.<sup>18</sup> Classical empiricism and rationalism are both examples of source foundationalism. Distinguishing between these two brands of foundationalism is important, because doing so will help us to get a sense for what the connection between postmodernism and non-foundationalism is supposed to be.

Pick up any of a variety of postmodernish texts inveighing against foundationalism, and you will find something like the following story. The modern period was dominated by an obsession with certainty and a quest for indubitable, incorrigible foundations for knowledge. Rational beliefs were supposed to be just those beliefs that were part of the indubitable and incorrigible foundation, together with those that were deducible from the former. But, alas, subsequent work in philosophy demonstrated that the quest was in vain, that foundations of this sort are not to be had. Thus, foundationalism is no longer viable.

The story about what follows from the alleged death of foundationalism (both historically and logically) is variously told, but at least two consequences seem to be fairly widely heralded. First, it is said that we must give up on the idea that there are universal standards of rationality, and we must see facts about rationality and ‘the deliverances of reason’ as being in some way dependent upon historical and cultural factors. Second, it is said that the death of foundationalism has now put us into what Lyotard characterizes as the ‘postmodern condition’—namely, a state of ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’ (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. xxiv). A metanarrative, as I understand it, is a grand story aimed at the ‘legitimation’ of some broad field of inquiry (e.g. empirical science). It is, in other words, an account that aims to show—once and for all, as it were—that a certain mode of inquiry is reliably truth-aimed.

<sup>18</sup> Rejecting source foundationalism, then, will be a matter of rejecting at least one of the two components that I have just identified. Note, however, that those who reject source foundationalism might still *treat* various sources of evidence as basic, in the sense that (a) they rely on those sources in the absence of evidence for their reliability, and (b) they treat other sources as in need of certification by the sources they privilege. Doing this does not count as accepting source foundationalism because it does not involve the belief that doing otherwise is irrational, nor does it necessarily even involve beliefs about the reliability of the sources that one in fact treats as basic.

But why should these consequences be taken as somehow natural or inevitable consequences of the death of foundationalism? And what have they to do with analytic ambitions? Regarding the first question, I suggest that the details might be filled in as follows. Remember that the modern quest for secure foundations for knowledge also included a quest for what Roderick Chisholm would call a *criterion* of knowledge: a mark possessed by all and only beliefs that count as knowledge (or, alternatively, by all and only beliefs that belong in the foundation).<sup>19</sup> For Descartes, the mark was ‘clarity and distinctness’: beliefs that possess the mark are foundational; beliefs that don’t are justified only if they are derivable from foundational beliefs. Notoriously, however, Descartes faced real problems providing a defense (or, one might say, a *legitimation*) of his criterion. The criterion could be circularly defended, or simply accepted without any defense; but it is hard to see any way of ‘getting behind’ it, so to speak, and defending it without relying on it or on some other, similarly indefensible criterion. Thus, if one is persuaded that circular defenses are wholly unacceptable, the prospects for this part of the Cartesian project look dim.

Of course, the claim that we can find and provide a non-circular defense of a criterion of knowledge is no part of doxastic foundationalism as such. But it is easy to see why one might think that the failure of Descartes’ quest points to a general problem with finding criteria for knowledge. And it is easy to see how skepticism about criteria would translate into incredulity toward meta-narratives. If we can’t find criteria, then, ultimately, we can’t demonstrate the reliability of *any* of our putative sources of knowledge (reason, sense perception, religious experience, etc.). Thus, any grand story we tell in defense of some mode of inquiry will ultimately rely on suppositions about our sources that we can’t defend. Metanarratives, one and all, will be nothing more than castles in the air.

This spells trouble for source foundationalisms like empiricism and rationalism. If we can’t legitimate any of our sources then it’s hard to see how we could have any basis for privileging one over the others as empiricists and rationalists have traditionally wanted to do. For exactly the same reason, it spells trouble for the prospects of *defending* an alleged universal standard of rationality. Source foundationalisms offer, at least implicitly, such standards. But so too does coherentism—very roughly, the view that beliefs are justified by virtue of their coherence with other beliefs we hold. Thus, all of these views will have to be tossed out as indefensible, and we will have to move to a position according to which decisions about which sources to trust and which

<sup>19</sup> See Chisholm, *Foundations of Knowing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), esp. ch. 1.



standards of rationality to adopt are simply ungrounded pragmatic choices.<sup>20</sup> In moving to this sort of position, it is not inevitable that we give up on universal standards of rationality. There *being* such a standard is consistent with our not being able to *defend* any particular standard. But to avoid giving up on universal standards, we must take a very optimistic view either of our ability to hit on the correct standard by accident (evolutionary or otherwise) or by divine design.<sup>21</sup>

I have been moving quickly here, and painting with a broad brush; but I think that something like what I have just said is a reasonable reconstruction of how many thinkers manage to move from the failure of classical foundationalism to some of the postmodern distinctives that might otherwise seem rather remote from it. But now how does all of this hook up with a decision to reject analytic approaches to problems in philosophy and theology?

I said earlier that source foundationalisms lurk in the background of a great deal of analytic philosophical theorizing. Philosophical naturalism has dominated the contemporary philosophical landscape and, though I do not myself think that it is a version of source foundationalism, there is no denying that many naturalists have characterized it as such.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, many of the research projects undertaken by analytic philosophers can be characterized as contributions to large-scale efforts to work out the explanatory/theoretical consequences of adherence to some particular brand of source foundationalism. Crudely, we can think of many projects as trying to help answer questions like, ‘Suppose the methods of science and those methods alone are the only sources of knowledge that need not be certified by other sources. How then should we think about consciousness?’ Likewise in theology. Again crudely, one might think that many projects in systematic theology (traditionally construed) are aimed at answering questions like, ‘Suppose Reason and the Bible are sources of knowledge that need not be certified by other sources. How then should we think about the metaphysics of the incarnation?’ But for those who have given up on source foundationalisms, these sorts of projects can seem rather pointless. Different communities will rationally adopt different standards of evidence and rationality; and so they

<sup>20</sup> This is a position I have defended elsewhere. See ch. 1 of my *World Without Design: The Ontological Consequences of Naturalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002). Note, however, that in saying that it is via *pragmatic choices* that we determine which sources to trust and which standards of rationality to adopt, I do not mean to suggest that our trust in those sources or our adoption of those standards is *merely* pragmatically (as opposed to epistemically) rational. This is discussed *ibid.*, esp. chs. 1 and 3.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 1, for further discussion of this point.

<sup>22</sup> I do not think that it is a version of source foundationalism because source foundationalism is a *view* according to which we have certain privileged sources, and naturalism, as I understand it, is not a view at all. For defense of this claim, *ibid.*, esp. chs. 2 and 3.

will naturally—and rightly—think differently from one another about theological matters. The project we *ought* to engage in, one might think, is a more conversational project—one which aims to assess each of the different ‘traditions’ by its own standards and then to bring the best in all of them into dialogue with one another. The analytic ambition of going to the sources and working out a single grand explanatory theory is myopic at best.

It is important to pause here, however, and note that there are *quite a lot* of presuppositions and questionable inferences in the movement I have traced from the failure of classical foundationalism to the abandonment of analytic ambitions. Though many of the moves I have described seem natural in one way or another, and maybe even philosophically defensible, the movement as a whole still seems to me to be far from inevitable, despite the way in which many ‘post-foundationalist’ philosophers and theologians seem to talk. But even if it is not a logically inevitable movement, there might be further motives in play.

The sorts of ‘further motives’ I have in mind are pragmatic. For instance: The majority opinion among contemporary philosophers (analytic and continental alike) seems to be that neither of the source foundationalisms—empiricism and rationalism—that have dominated the history of philosophy is especially friendly toward religious belief. There are, of course, plenty of philosophical arguments (both empirical and a priori) for the existence of God and even for particular doctrines of Christianity, like the resurrection of Jesus. Moreover, many of these arguments are still avidly defended. Even so, the arguments are widely regarded even among religious philosophers as impotent to convince the unconvinced. One response to all of this has been, effectively, a move in the direction of a new brand of source foundationalism—one that admits religious experience, or something like a special faculty for producing religious beliefs (such as Calvin’s *sensus divinitatis*), as an additional basic source of evidence.<sup>23</sup> But a natural alternative response—especially in light of the suggestion that Descartes’s failure spells trouble in general for source foundationalism—is to look with despair upon the prospects for developing a

<sup>23</sup> So-called ‘Reformed Epistemology’ is part of this trend. (See, esp., the essays in Plantinga and Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality*.) The ‘core’ of Reformed Epistemology is the view that certain kinds of religious beliefs (e.g. belief that God exists) are properly basic—i.e. that they are justifiably held in the absence of propositional evidence. Saying this implies a rejection of the traditional source foundationalisms; but, of course, it isn’t equivalent to affirming any *new* brand of source foundationalism. Indeed, it is consistent with an outright rejection of source foundationalism. Still, it seems fair to characterize it (as I have) as a step in the direction of a new brand of source foundationalism. See also Plantinga’s *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) and William P. Alston’s *Perceiving God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991). On the *sensus divinitatis* in particular, see Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, esp. pp. 170–84, and John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, bk. I, ch. iii, pp. 43–6 in *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill and tr. F. L. Battles (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press, 1960).

satisfying theology within source-foundationalist constraints, and to decide simply on pragmatic grounds to embrace a different methodological tradition altogether. As I see it, this second response arises not so much out of a cold logical inference from the demise of classical foundationalism to the rejection of analytic ambitions, but just out of a sense that one has seen the breach in the hull, as it were, and ought therefore to abandon ship.

Summing up, I have discussed two main objections to analytic ambitions. First, those ambitions seem to presuppose a false view about what theology can actually accomplish. Second, the grand explanatory aims of analytic theology seem to fit best within a tradition that takes some version of source foundationalism for granted; but the alleged death of classical foundationalism, together with the widely perceived tension between religious belief and the dominant source foundationalisms in the analytic tradition, provide a rather complicated impetus toward alternative modes of theorizing. In the next section, I turn to objections against the analytic *style*.

## AGAINST THE ANALYTIC STYLE

In *Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction*,<sup>24</sup> Simon Critchley argues that the original aim of philosophy was not theoretical knowledge (as, he thinks, it is today) but rather *wisdom*. Philosophy, he says, was an ‘eminently practical activity’ (p. 1), whereas now it has been relegated to the role of ‘an under-labourer to science, whose job is to clear away the rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge and scientific progress’ (p. 5). Analytic ambitions naturally place philosophy in the latter role, since it will be mostly in the sciences rather than in philosophy that we will find the details of the grand explanatory theory that analytic philosophers are collectively (more or less) working toward. The contribution made by philosophers is precisely that of clarifying, drawing out consequences, and building theories that, as Quine puts it, ‘fill out interstices of [scientific] theory and lead to further hypotheses that are testable’.<sup>25</sup> By contrast, ‘[t]he appeal of much that goes under the name of Continental philosophy’, Critchley says, ‘is that it attempts to unify or at least move closer together questions of knowledge and wisdom, of philosophical truth and existential meaning’ (p. 9).

Analytic philosophers will naturally protest that this alleged difference is *at best* an accident of history. Even if it is true that the explanatory ambitions of

<sup>24</sup> Oxford: OUP, 2001.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Naturalism, or: Living Within one’s Means’, *Dialectica*, 49 (1995), 251.

the analytic tradition push it toward scientific metaphysics rather than toward wisdom and the knowledge of how to live rightly, and even if we ignore all of the work that is being done every year in (say) applied ethics and political philosophy (to name just two among several practically oriented subfields), there is still no reason why analytic philosophers couldn't turn their collective attention away from science-related projects and toward the discovery of wisdom.

But my impression is that critics of analytic philosophy will see this response as entirely missing the point. True, the 'analytic ambitions' described above don't characterize everything that falls within the tradition; and true, there is nothing to prevent a bunch of metaphysicians from deciding one day to start writing analytic philosophical books about the meaning of life. But, the objector will say, the *prescriptions* that characterize the analytic tradition reflect the wrong set of priorities. The problem with analytic philosophy is that it prioritizes clarity and precision *at the expense of everything else*, and it ignores the fact that sometimes, in order to attain wisdom and understanding, we have to rely substantively on metaphor and other literary tropes. Analytic philosophers are unwilling to step outside the box of what is cognitively familiar—their own 'well-understood primitives', reasoning in accord with the canons of logic, and so on—for the sake of wisdom, philosophy's traditional prize.

It is easy to see how this sort of objection would resonate with theologians. Recall the Heideggerian claim, referred to earlier, that 'theology in its essence is a practical science'. Theology even more than philosophy, one might think, ought to be aimed at the pursuit of wisdom, right living, and related ideals. It ought, moreover, to be aimed at *cultivating* these things. Thus, to approach it in a way that prioritizes clarification and precision over more poetic rhetorical virtues might be seen as, again, rather myopic (or worse). Clarity and precision are nice; but poetic virtues are often better tools for inspiring and persuading. To the extent that the latter goals are part of the theological task, then, it might well seem foolish for theologians to restrict themselves to the former virtues in an effort to appear more tough-minded and 'scientific'.

As with other objections that I am discussing in this chapter, I will not attempt to respond to this one here. But I cannot resist noting that, despite the superficial attractiveness of the idea that philosophers and theologians ought to be aiming in the direction of wisdom and moral improvement, Christian philosophers as such, and theologians as well, might in fact have some reason for resisting this idea. Recently, a student from another (religious) university emailed me and asked, among other things, what philosophy books or articles I'd recommend for the purpose of helping him to grow in wisdom. My answer was that I wouldn't recommend philosophical texts for that purpose at all; rather, I'd recommend scripture. If philosophy as a

discipline (or theology) were to aim its efforts at the production of a self-contained body of wisdom, or at a general theory of right living, it would (I think) be aiming at the production of a *rival* to scripture. And that is a project that I think Christian philosophers and theologians ought to try to avoid. Indeed, to my mind, this sort of project involves just as much hubris as onto-theology is said to involve. Thus, it seems to me that the right *theoretical* task for Christian philosophers and theologians to pursue is in fact one that involves clarifying, systematizing, and model-building—precisely the sort of project that analytic philosophers are engaged in.

In any case, the upshot of what I have said so far is that one objection to what I am calling the ‘analytic style’ is that it imposes constraints upon theorizing that, in the eyes of objectors anyway, actually *prevent* philosophers from doing their traditional task—namely, pursuing wisdom. It is important to note, furthermore, that the objection is really twofold. The prescriptions that favor clarity and well-understood primitives and that proscribe substantive use of metaphor partly constrain our *choice* of topics. So, in other words, part of the concern is that philosophers will miss out on the pursuit of wisdom simply by ignoring rich and messy topics in favor of ones that admit of neat, precise, and literal discussion. But the prescriptions also reflect contentious presuppositions about the nature of language and about the nature of the topics with which we deal. For one thing, they presuppose, to borrow a remark from H. H. Price, that ‘whatever can be said, can be said clearly’ (‘Clarity is Not Enough’, 40). Moreover, they presuppose that none of the objects of philosophical inquiry transcends human thought and categories in the way that God is thought to do by those in the tradition of apophatic theology.

This latter point is absolutely critical to understanding the present objection to analytic theology. As noted earlier, one might easily practice analytic theology while fully acknowledging that there are divine mysteries far beyond our ken. But enjoining theologians to avoid substantive use of tropes whose semantic content goes beyond their propositional content presupposes that we can have propositional knowledge about God, and so it presupposes that God is not *totally* mysterious. Many philosophers and theologians, however, will balk at these presuppositions; for many are inclined to think that divine transcendence places God beyond *all* human categories—so much so that it is a mistake even to say that God *exists* (for God is beyond Being in just the way in which God is beyond everything else), much less to say anything else positive about God.<sup>26</sup> Admittedly, it is not impossible to do

<sup>26</sup> See e.g. William Franke, ‘Apophysis and the Turn of Philosophy to Religion: From Neoplatonic Negative Theology to Postmodern Negation of Theology’, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 60 (2006), 61–76; Marion, *God Without Being*; Thomas Carlson, ‘Postmetaphysical Theology’, pp. 58–75 in Kevin Vanhoozer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to*

analytic theology in a way that respects the scruples of apophatic theologians. But one can't do *much* analytic theology in that way. Apophatic analytic theology is, of necessity, extremely thin. The reason is simple: if God really does transcend human categories, then the propositional content of our positive discourse about God will always be, strictly and literally speaking, false. Thus, evocative language—richly metaphorical language, for example, that can be used to convey a sort of non-propositional understanding—will be an integral part of any sensible theological project. So those who favor apophatic discourse about God will quite naturally think that the analytic style is exactly the wrong style for doing theology.<sup>27</sup>

Note too that it is not just the injunction against metaphor that the apophatic theologians will reject. The prioritization of clarity and logical rigor will naturally be rejected as well. This might seem odd: what could possibly be wrong with trying as hard as possible to be clear and coherent? But here, I think, it helps to bear in mind the reasons why we analytics not only strive for clarity, but *prioritize* it. H. H. Price is illuminating on this score:

It is true that our modern clarifiers have more to say about words and sentences than their predecessors had, and even profess sometimes to be concerned with nothing else. But they are only interested in words and sentences because words and sentences are what we think with.... No doubt the sentences which are nowadays selected for clarification are in themselves trivial, and even sometimes rather ridiculous. As Dr. Joad points out, it does seem peculiar to worry oneself overmuch about the sentence 'this is a rocking-horse covered with pink spots'.... All the same, I should like to quote against Dr. Joad what the poet says of the flower in the crannied wall. If we could really be clear about the meaning of this sentence concerning the rocking-horse, which bristles with philosophical puzzles, I do not say that 'we should know what God and man is', but I think we should be in a much better position for finding out.<sup>28</sup>

*Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003); and Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, i (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), esp. pp. 235 ff. Also illuminating on the subject of apophaticism generally are the readings and introductory essays in William Franke (ed.), *On What Cannot be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, and the Arts*, i and ii (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> So I say, anyway. But my co-editor objects that one might respond as follows (these are my words, not Oliver's; but he is the one who pressed me to consider an objection like this). An apophatic theologian will surely take issue with an analytic theologian who claims to have arrived at a definitive and comprehensive understanding of divine mysteries. But she needn't object to one who claims merely to be producing 'approximations' of the truth about God, and striving for constant, even if faltering, improvement in her approximations. If so, then an apophatic theologian could practice analytic theology after all. I am not so sure that this response is viable, though. I am inclined to think that the 'typical' apophatic theologian will think that the analytic theologian here described is not really apophatic *enough* to deserve the label.

<sup>28</sup> H. H. Price, 'Clarity is Not Enough', repr. in H. D. Lewis (ed.), *Clarity is Not Enough: Essays in Criticism of Linguistic Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1945), 31–2.

In short, Price seems to think that clarity of expression, and clear, precise thinking about what our words mean, is a route to understanding. But this is true, it seems, only if one has hope of reaching the sort of understanding that can be expressed propositionally. The apophatic theologians have given up on this ambition; and they have wholeheartedly embraced a mode of discourse that demands free and creative use of evocative language. Clarity when possible might be nice; but to prioritize it in apophatic discourse—at any rate, in apophatic discourse that aims to be robust and interesting—makes no sense whatsoever.

The twofold objection considered thus far—that the analytic style subverts the proper goals of theology by both restricting our choice of topics and encouraging us to use what may well be the wrong rhetorical tools—primarily targets prescriptions P2, P3, and P4 listed earlier.<sup>29</sup> Now I'd like to turn to two further objections, one against P1 and the other against P5.

P1 recommends that we operate under the assumption that positions and conclusions can be formulated in sentences that can be formalized and logically manipulated. One might object, however, that this prescription misconstrues the nature of philosophical and theological positions. Consider empiricism, for example. This position is notoriously problematic when thought of simply as a thesis about sources of knowledge. It is significantly less so when thought of as somehow involving attitudes, preferences, dispositions, and so on.<sup>30</sup> Though no one that I know of has said exactly this, one might easily imagine someone claiming that empiricism simply cannot be understood apart from extensive familiarity with the writings of various historical empiricists. Any attempt to distill the position down to a thesis would inevitably fail; any attempt to express it propositionally and reject it on the basis of its alleged 'logical consequences' would be wholly misguided.<sup>31</sup> And the problem would be that all such attempts are objectionably 'ahistorical'. They leave out the historical circumstances (whatever they might be—facts about particular authors and their intellectual climates, facts about what the position at various times is being defined in contrast with, and so on) that help constitute the position as whatever it is, and so they set up a mere caricature as an object of discussion or target for attack. Nobody that I am aware of has actually accused critics of empiricism of being 'ahistorical' in just

<sup>29</sup> See p. 5 above.

<sup>30</sup> For defense of this claim, see esp. van Fraassen, *Empirical Stance*, ch. 2.

<sup>31</sup> One might concede that empiricism could be propositionally *described*—say, at book length, in a way that amounted to tracing out its history and development, its contours at various times in history, and so on. But, of course, this sort of 'propositional characterization' of empiricism is not one that would facilitate projects that aim to draw out the logical consequences of empiricism, or to test it for internal coherence, or any such thing. Thanks to Sam Newlands and Jim Beilby for helpful conversation on this point.

this way; but the charge has been leveled against (for example) analytic philosophers who treat fundamental doctrines of Christianity in the way prescribed by P1. Such philosophers are often mystified by the criticism, in no small part because many of us often comment on (and thus show awareness of) the history of the relevant doctrines in the course of our philosophical treatments of them.<sup>32</sup> But the objection lingers, I think, precisely because we do not regard the history as in any meaningful sense *determinative* of the doctrines.<sup>33</sup>

Other views about the nature of philosophical and theological positions will also cause trouble for the attempt to conform to P1 in theological writing. For example, George Lindbeck has argued that doctrinal sentences (e.g. 'Jesus is the Son of God', or the sentences that comprise the Nicene Creed) are not to be regarded as expressing the propositions that they would if interpreted at face value.<sup>34</sup> Rather, they are to be seen as providing a 'grammar' for religious discourse—analogous, perhaps, to a system of uninterpreted axioms and inference rules in a formal logic. On Lindbeck's view (as I understand it), the claim that Jesus is the Son of God can be interpreted by Christians in all manner of different ways, so long as it coheres with whatever interpretations are given to other 'axiomatic' sentences, and so long as the right sorts of inferences are preserved.<sup>35</sup> If this is right, then doctrinal claims as such do not express determinate propositions, and there is no guarantee that they will do so even once they have been interpreted. On some interpretations, for example, the claim that Jesus is the Son of God might be an evocative metaphor with very minimal, if any, propositional content. As a *general* strategy for doing theology, then, P1 will be wholly off-target.

Lastly, I turn to an objection against P5. A common complaint against 'metaphysical' theorizing about God is that it is idolatrous. As I see it, the rationale behind this complaint amounts, in the end, to a rejection of the idea that conceptual analysis is to be treated as a source of evidence. Let me explain why.

<sup>32</sup> Such is the reaction of H. H. Price to this sort of objection. See 'Clarity is Not Enough', 22.

<sup>33</sup> The first clear expression of this idea that I encountered was in Beau Branson's dissertation (unpublished). I do not know whether he would endorse it exactly as I have articulated it here, however.

<sup>34</sup> *The Nature of Doctrine* (Louisville: Ky., Westminster/John Knox, 1984).

<sup>35</sup> Presumably a further constraint is that each term must be uniformly interpreted throughout the system. Thus, though Lindbeck doesn't explicitly say anything to rule out our interpreting 'Jesus is the Son of God' as having the same meaning as ' $2 + 2 = 4$ ', I take it that the demand for uniform treatment of terms *will* rule out such interpretations. For, given the uniform-treatment constraint, a mathematical interpretation of 'Jesus is the Son of God' would force at least a partially mathematical interpretation of (say) the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed; but it would be extremely difficult, at best, to provide consistent interpretations of that sort.



In *The Empirical Stance*, Bas van Fraassen raises two main objections against the enterprise of analytic metaphysics. One objection (which I won't discuss here) is that analytic metaphysicians posit objects and properties to do *explanatory* work—a practice which he regards as rationally indefensible. The other is that the practice of analytic metaphysics results in the creation of 'simulacra' which then replace, as our primary objects of discourse, the things about which we actually *meant* to be talking—the things that we actually care about when we ask philosophical questions.

One gets the impression that Van Fraassen thinks explanation via theoretical posit is what results in the creation of simulacra.<sup>36</sup> But upon further reflection it looks as if conceptual analysis is the real culprit. Thus, for example, he argues that when philosophers ask the question 'Does the world exist', what they inevitably do is to make the question rigorous with technical definitions of 'world' and related terms that map onto some but not nearly all uses of the term 'world', and then they stipulate that the world exists if, and only if, the world *as they have defined it* exists. On his view, the 'world as they have defined it' is a simulacrum (*The Empirical Stance*, 27–8). But what makes it the case that the 'world of the philosophers' is a simulacrum isn't the fact that it is *postulated*. For, after all, if the technical concept had turned out to be identical to the ordinary concept, then the postulated world would have been nothing other than the real world—not a simulacrum at all. Rather, what makes the world of the philosophers a simulacrum (if anything does) is just the fact that satisfying a philosopher's analysis of the concept world is, in general, a different thing from *being a world*. But this can be right only if there is something inherently defective about treating conceptual analysis as a source of evidence. The idea seems to be that, in trying to answer the question 'Does the world exist?', metaphysicians will *inevitably* analyze the concept of a world in a way that illegitimately privileges some aspects of the concept over others as being central, or essential. (And likewise with other concepts.) Thus the result will always be that satisfying a metaphysician's analysis of a concept is different from satisfying the concept itself. But if this is right then it is an illegitimate use of conceptual analysis rather than postulation that results in the shift from talking about things we care about to mere simulacra.

On van Fraassen's view, the same sort of shift occurs when we theologize like analytic metaphysicians. We do with God what he accuses us of doing with 'the world': we effectively introduce a new term, one which is 'intelligibly related to [the old one] taking over a carefully selected family of uses, regimenting them, and is then used to make new, logically contingent, fully intelligible assertions' (ibid. 27). But, again, the *referent* of the new term is not

<sup>36</sup> See esp. *Empirical Stance*, pp. 25 ff.

the same as the referent of the old; talk of ‘the God of the philosophers’ simply replaces talk about God. Thus, the God of analytic metaphysical discourse is a simulacrum as well—or, in theological terms, an idol.

Van Fraassen doesn’t defend this charge in any detail. Presumably he takes his earlier discussion of metaphysical discourse about ‘the world’ as providing ample evidence that the charge is apt. But the same sort of objection has been raised by others, and they do fill in some of the details. Thus, for example, Marion argues that ‘metaphysics’ is brought to an end when the quest for an ‘ultimate ground of being’ is abandoned; and he goes on to say, in effect, that the end of metaphysics spells the death of the God of the philosophers, for the God of the philosophers is posited precisely to serve as the ultimate ground (‘Metaphysics and Phenomenology’, 579). But, Marion argues, this ‘death of God’ isn’t really the death of *God*; for, by this point, ‘God is no longer at issue—but rather “God”, who by his quotation marks is stigmatized as an idol’ (ibid.). As with Van Fraassen, this looks initially to be an objection simply against explanation via theoretical posit. But the fact is that one arrives at this particular posit ultimately by way of something like conceptual analysis: unpacking our concept of God (as the sort of thing capable of serving as ultimate ground), our concept of contingent being (as something in need of a ground), and so on.

Of course, one might well point out that Marion’s point will have purchase only on those who (unlike most of us nowadays, I should think) are inclined to think of God as something whose existence is *posited* as the ‘ground of all being’. But in fact the point is broader than this. In ‘The Idea of God’, Marion claims that, by the seventeenth century, God had become ‘a term in a demonstration, and no longer the assumed goal of a journey towards him’ (p. 265). He goes on to argue that the various conceptions of God (or, as he puts it, ‘names of God’) that are presupposed in proofs of his existence such as those given by Descartes conflict to varying degrees. Thus, for example, in Descartes’s proofs, God is seen as (i) a transcendent, incomprehensible, infinite substance, (ii) a perfect being who possesses to a maximal degree all of the (same) perfections possessed by finite creatures and whose essence includes his existence, and (iii) the first cause, the ground of all being. But, Marion argues, if we make positive affirmations about God and God’s essence, as we do in conceiving of God in the second way, then we give up on our conception of him as transcendent and incomprehensible. Likewise, if we invoke the Principle of Sufficient Reason in defending the third conception, we ‘[impose] a precondition as to what is possible and what is not upon the supposedly transcendent God’ (ibid. 277). Thus, (i) and (iii) appear to conflict as well. On the other hand, Marion notes that, in the course of offering the proof of God’s existence as ground of all being, Descartes

characterized God's power as 'immense and incomprehensible power'—in line with (i), but in conflict with (ii) if the divine perfections are to be understood as the perfections of finite beings taken to a maximal degree (ibid. 276–8).

Suppose Marion is right in thinking that Descartes was having a problem maintaining consistency in the premises of his natural theological arguments. Suppose also that he is right in thinking that we have somehow moved beyond trying to show that there is a 'ground of all being'. At this point, I think that sympathizers with analytic theology will object that showing these things is a far cry from showing that the 'God of the philosophers' is a simulacrum or an idol. True enough; but to stop there, I think, would be to miss what I think is the real import (for our purposes) of what Marion, Van Fraassen, and others are trying to show. The problem in short is that God falls, analogically at least, under a variety of concepts—some philosophical, some not. God is the perfect being and the first cause; but God is also our heavenly father, the stern employer of the parable of the talents, the righteous judge, our companion in paradise, and the Ancient of Days seated on the throne of fire. Theorizing about God via conceptual analysis, as we in the analytic tradition often do, involves attributing properties to God based on our intuitions about how best to analyze these concepts. But to do that coherently, we must privilege some ways of conceiving of God over others. We must also determine the *extent* to which the relevant concept applies—whether it applies fully and literally, or only analogically; and if only analogically, then how quickly the analogy breaks down, etc. The assumptions that determine the privileging, as well as the assumptions that determine the extent to which each concept applies—not to mention the intuitions that determine the analysis of a concept like *perfect being*—will all be highly contentious. And different sets of assumptions along these lines will result in very different characterizations of God. Hence the concern about constructing 'simulacra'. The methodological worry here is, I think, genuine; and it is one that analytic theologians ought to take seriously.<sup>37</sup>

This completes my survey of what I take to be the main objections against the enterprise of analytic theology. Not all of the objections seem to me to be of equal strength; but all do seem serious and widespread enough to merit more attention in the literature—both by those who embrace them and by those who reject them. It is the hope for such further open discussion that gave birth to the present volume.

<sup>37</sup> Thanks to Daniel Howard-Snyder for raising some helpful objections to an earlier version of this paragraph.

## THE CHAPTERS

As indicated earlier, the contributors and co-editors of this volume do not share a perfectly uniform vision about the nature of analytic theology, about the shape or relative import of the ‘main’ objections against it, or even about what one ought to do (if anything) to find a place for it in the academy. Despite that, the collective vision is at least roughly homogeneous; and the chapters that follow touch in various and interesting ways upon the objections just described.

The first three chapters are aimed explicitly at the defense of analytic theology. Oliver Crisp and William J. Abraham articulate similar visions of analytic theology and then proceed to address concerns about and objections against the enterprise. According to Crisp, analytic theology is an approach that is characterized by (a) explanatory/metaphysical ambitions that prioritize explanations marked by rhetorical features like clarity and (b) a commitment to the view that there are theological truths that are accessible to human beings. He also emphasizes that analytic theology as such carries *no* commitment to the view that reason is a source of ‘fundamental knowledge’ (rather than merely a tool for exploring the relations among ideas). Abraham’s vision is similar, even if somewhat narrower: on his view, analytic theology is ‘systematic theology attuned to the deployment of the skills, resources, and virtues of analytical philosophy’. On Crisp’s view, concerns about analytic theology are likely to arise out of misconceptions about its commitments—e.g. that it is committed to a form of what I have here been calling ‘source foundationalism’, or to a particular theory of truth, or to seeing philosophy as authoritative over theology. Much of his chapter is devoted to dispelling these misconceptions. Abraham also addresses objections against analytic theology, but more of his contribution is devoted to exploring what analytic theology might actually look like.

Randal Rauser’s chapter, ‘Theology as a Bull Session’, is more polemical and, to put it mildly, provocative and controversial. It aims at combating two important ‘alternatives’ to analytic theology: Sallie McFague’s ‘persuasive metaphor’ model of theology, and Jürgen Moltmann’s ‘perpetual conversation’ model. Drawing on recent philosophical analyses of—yes—the concept of *bullshit*, Rauser argues that both of these models make theological discourse out to be precisely that: idle and fruitless conversation, nothing more than mere bullshit.

In the next Part, we turn to historical perspectives on a variety of issues relevant to the viability of analytic theology. The section opens with a chapter

by John Lamont on the notion of faith in the Greek Fathers. According to Lamont, the view under discussion traces back to Clement of Alexandria, exerted influence on the Greek Fathers, anticipated ideas in Aquinas, and was later brought to completion in the work of the seventeenth-century Puritan John Owen. It is a view according to which faith is grounded in divine testimony, where testimony is construed as a basic source of rational belief separate from (and in no need of certification by) sense perception and reason. It is also a view according to which knowledge of God can be obtained by rational reflection upon truths believed on faith. Though Lamont does not discuss analytic theology directly, the significance of his chapter in light of the foregoing should be plain. Lamont is identifying a view of faith and theological reflection that rejects the traditional rationalist/empiricist dichotomy (and which in some figures seems to carry no commitment to any sort of source foundationalism as it was understood above) and yet leaves room for substantive knowledge of God by way of reason.

The next two chapters, by Andrew Chignell and Andrew Dole, focus on a pair of figures who might well be thought to be driving forces behind a great deal of contemporary opposition to analytic theology: Kant and Schleiermacher. Kant is widely regarded as having shown things that imply that the substantive theological ambitions of analytic theologians are unattainable. Likewise, Friedrich Schleiermacher has 'frequently been accused of "emptying" Christian faith of its (metaphysical) content and reducing it to a "merely individual and subjective" phenomenon' (Dole). But Chignell argues that 'Kant doesn't exactly hold what "Kant has shown"', and Dole rejects the idea that, on Schleiermacher's view, religious doctrines do not make truth claims. According to Chignell, Kant engages in substantive theology himself and wouldn't stand in clear opposition either to the project of providing analyses of religious concepts (including our concept of God), or to the application of the tools and methods of analytic metaphysics to theological topics. Dole argues that Schleiermacher would oppose the metaphysical/explanatory ambitions of analytic philosophy as a component of theology; but he provides reasons for doubting that analytic theologians ought to follow him in this.

Finally, Nicholas Wolterstorff examines how developments in the analytic tradition during the twentieth century not only made room for analytic philosophical theology, but contributed to its flourishing. Wolterstorff does not make it an explicit goal to respond to the objections against analytic theology outlined above. Nevertheless, one important feature of his chapter is that it goes some distance toward showing how several of the objections discussed thus far rest on misconceptions or caricatures of analytic philosophy as it is practiced today.

Part III examines what might be called the ‘data’ for theology. Earlier I noted that one concern about the analytic tradition is its apparent obsession with source foundationalisms. And one motive for adopting alternative approaches to theology is a certain sort of skepticism about our ability to acquire information or genuine evidence about the character and attributes of God. The chapters in this part address issues in this neighborhood.

I said earlier that some (like Merold Westphal) are concerned about approaches to theological topics that imply or take for granted the idea that God is somehow ‘at our disposal’. According to Thomas McCall, this is a concern shared by Karl Barth; and the concern partly motivates his view of scripture, according to which scripture is not ‘on its own’ (so to speak) the Word of God, but rather only ‘becomes’ the Word of God as God reveals himself to those who engage with scripture. McCall engages with this idea and argues that the concerns that motivate Barth in this direction can be addressed without giving up the classical view of scripture, according to which scripture’s status as the Word of God does not depend upon additional revelatory acts. One consequence of his view (not explicitly drawn) is that those who object to the idea that God might somehow be placed ‘at our disposal’ in certain ways need not object to the idea that divine truths can be communicated in a way that makes them fully accessible to human beings without special additional acts of revelation. If this is right, then it will go a long way toward addressing some of the concerns raised in earlier sections of this introduction.

In the next two essays, Thomas Crisp and Michael Sudduth, respectively, explore the ways in which sources other than reason and sense perception function in the formation and rational grounding of important theological beliefs. Crisp argues that belief in the inspiration of scripture is warranted for many, maybe most, Christians by what he calls ‘authoritative testimony’ rather than by natural theological arguments or the ‘internal testimony of the Holy Spirit’. And Sudduth argues that dogmatic theology—the ‘examination and systematic development of dogmas, ecclesiastically formulated and sanctioned core theological beliefs ostensibly based on scripture’—must take account of the role played by religious experience as a source of justification for theological beliefs. In the course of making their arguments, furthermore, Sudduth argues that religious experience plays a vital role in *natural* theology (the enterprise of trying to arrive at knowledge of God by way of a priori or empirical argument), and Crisp argues against the idea that natural theology warrants belief in the inspiration of scripture. Together, these two chapters help to provide a corrective to the idea that analytic theology is wedded to an overly optimistic view about the power of pure reason to provide grounds for theological beliefs.

Next Michael Murray examines the relationship between theology and science. On Murray's view, the most promising model of the interaction between theology and science is one of 'constructive engagement': theologians ought to take account of developments in science in the course of working out their theories, but likewise, religious believers at any rate ought to recognize that 'authoritative religious teaching can and does have consequences for the natural world, consequences which yield empirically testable conclusions'. Theology and science might thus be seen (by religious believers, at least) as working cooperatively toward a unified explanatory theory. Here too, then, we find a model for understanding theology that retains analytic ambitions without either embracing an objectionable rationalism or forcing theology somehow to accommodate the strictures of empiricism.

In the last part of the volume, we have placed three chapters that offer what might be thought of as 'correctives' to analytic theology. One way to offer a corrective to a theoretical enterprise is to point out methodological shortcomings. Another way is to suggest alternatives. The first way is taken by Eleonore Stump, who argues that one shortcoming of analytic philosophy is *hemianopia*: a narrow focus on left-brain processing skills. Because of this, she thinks, analytic philosophers end up ignoring important sources of information. One such source, she thinks, is narrative. On her view, narratives that relate one person's experience of another convey non-propositional information about the person (or about persons generally) that might, in principle, function evidentially in philosophical argument. This is of particular importance, obviously enough, in theology; for the Bible is a rich source of narratives relating the experiences of *God* that have been had by various people. If she is right, then an approach to theology that ignores the evidential value of narrative *as such* will be severely limited.

The second way is taken by Merold Westphal. The alternative that Westphal proposes is a theology which takes hermeneutical phenomenology, rather than analytic philosophy, as its ally. As noted earlier, one of Westphal's concerns about analytic approaches to theology is that they seem to encourage (indeed, they might seem to be fixated on) the idea that we can, with our limited human cognitive apparatus, come to know eternal, non-perspectival, objective truths about God and the world. This idea naturally attends a conception of the primary theological task as one of *theoretical understanding*—a conception which, as I have already indicated, is central to the enterprise of analytic theology. A theology which takes hermeneutical phenomenology as its philosophical ally, however, will think of the primary theological task as one of interpretation, and as one whose goal isn't so much theoretical understanding as practical wisdom—right living or, as Westphal puts it, holiness.

This, according to Westphal, is a conception of theology that fits better with, among other things, the fact of human finitude.

In the final chapter, Sarah Coakley looks at the mystical writings of St Teresa of Ávila with an eye to providing certain correctives to analytic appropriations of St Teresa's work. Earlier in this essay, I noted that one way of responding to the collapse of classical foundationalism within the analytic tradition has been to move toward a brand of source foundationalism that treats religious experience as a basic source of knowledge. In partial support of this move, analytic philosophers have turned to the writings of Christian mystics like St Teresa.<sup>38</sup> According to Coakley, however, analytic work on the writings of mystical theologians tends to be insensitive to their apophatic character, which the continental tradition understandably celebrates. Moreover, she argues, the analytic tradition has not sufficiently appreciated the way in which the 'experiential turn' in contemporary religious epistemology is, effectively, a turn toward the exploration of stereotypically feminine ways of knowing. Accordingly, it has left much of the epistemological significance of St Teresa's work unexplored. Toward filling this lacuna, Coakley considers the way in which St Teresa's work might suggest important roles for both *contemplative practice* (as opposed to isolated religious experiences) and apophatic sensibilities in the epistemology of religious belief. In this way, she closes our volume with a project whose aim is 'not so much to adjudicate between [continental and analytic] philosophical projects as to nudge creatively beyond them'.

<sup>38</sup> See esp. Alston, *Perceiving God*.