

# Can Analytic Theology be Phenomenological?

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**ABSTRACT:** The present essay is concerned with the question of whether analytic theology can be properly phenomenological. Both analytic theology and phenomenology are defined by reference to leading practitioners of both, and responses are given to objections to both approaches. The critique of analytic theology recently proposed by Martin Westerholm is considered, as well the objections to phenomenology brought forth by Tom Sparrow. The compatibility of analytic theology and phenomenology is argued on the basis of the definitions provided. Four brief arguments are given for establishing why an analytic theologian might consider adopting a phenomenological method. The essay concludes with a demonstration of a properly phenomenological analytic-theological treatment of the question of the relationship between Scripture and ecclesial tradition in dialog with the canonical *sola scriptura* of Kevin Vanhoozer and John Peckham.

Analytic theology is a burgeoning movement in theological research. At the same time, it has been recently subjected to serious critique by those skeptical of its value. Some persons are unclear as to whether it constitutes a legitimate and independent form of genuinely theological inquiry. Phenomenology, on the other hand, is at this point a well-established tradition of philosophical research with a rich history of its own. But it also has its detractors who maintain that certain critical problems with its method and stated purpose remain unanswered and unresolved. The two would appear to have little to do with one another, and many theologians or philosophers who are active in one field could seem unsympathetic to or even unfamiliar with the other. It is precisely in these conditions of unfamiliarity and possible mutual suspicion that the present essay is intended as: (i) introducing these antecedently very different forms of research; (ii) defending these forms of research against objections recently brought against them, objections which thinkers from either camp might themselves bring against the other upon first acquaintance; (iii) arguing for their antecedent compatibility; (iv) providing arguments in favor of their “marriage”; and (v) briefly sketching the potential fruitfulness of their synthesis for theology.

The argument will proceed in the following order. First, it will be necessary to define both analytic theology and phenomenology. Then, the compatibility of the two modes of reasoning will be established on the basis of the following argument: the practitioners of analytic theology themselves define their project in such a way as to permit this marriage of traditions. Afterwards, four arguments will be given for adopting a phenomenological method in analytic theology. In order to justify this point, it will be necessary to address the objections to phenomenology which have been brought forth by authors in the so-called “speculative realist” movement in recent continental philosophy. Finally, the essay will conclude with some proposals regarding the manner in which analytic theology can be practiced in a phenomenological mode, specifically with respect to the question of the relation between Scripture and ecclesial Tradition.

## 1. What is Analytic Theology?

The first point to make about analytic theology is that it is not obvious what analytic theology is supposed to be. This tradition, although it has been in existence for some time now, has not yet achieved a clear self-definition. For some, this fact constitutes a serious objection against its viability and coherence as a mode of theology (Westerholm 2019). Nevertheless, it is possible to propose a definition on the basis of what analytic theologians themselves say about what they are trying to do. Most typically, analytic theologians define their activity in terms of style or approach, rather than in terms of a concrete method or particular doctrinal commitments.

### 1.1 Defining analytic theology: Rea, McCall, Crisp, and Abraham

In the introduction to the influential volume titled *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, Michael C. Rea writes that even the contributors to the book “do not have a precise or even entirely uniform vision of what analytic theology amounts to” (Rea 2009, 2). Nevertheless, he proposes his own definition for consideration:

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 the 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. (7; emphasis added)

What are the “ambitions and style” of the analytic philosopher? As for the ambitions of analytic philosophy, Rea considers that there generally two:

- (i) To identify the scope and limits of our powers to obtain knowledge of the world.
- (ii) To provide such true explanatory theories as we can in areas of inquiry (metaphysics, morals, and the like) that fall outside of the scope of the natural sciences. (4)

As for the principles of analytic philosophical style, Rea lists five of them (5-6):

- (1) Write as if philosophical positions and conclusions can be adequately formulated in sentences that can be formulated and logically manipulated.
- (2) Prioritize precision, clarity, and logical coherence.
- (3) Avoid substantive (non-decorative) use of metaphor and other tropes whose semantic content outstrips their propositional content.
- (4) Work as much as possible with well-understood primitive concepts, and concepts that can be analyzed in terms of those.
- (5) Treat conceptual analysis (insofar as it is possible) as a source of evidence.

According to Michael Rea, then, if a theologian engages in the theological task with these analytic-philosophical ambitions and stylistic guidelines in mind, he or she is doing analytic theology.

On the other hand, Rea notes that “there is no substantial thesis that separates analytic philosophers as such from their rivals” (6). Analytic philosophy is not defined in terms of specific theoretical commitments such as metaphysical realism or anything of the sort. If analytic philosophy per se does not require adherence to any particular philosophical doctrine, then it would seem that analytic theology would similarly support the “ecumenical” participation of thinkers with a wide variety of convictions. In fact, this is precisely what some analytic theologians maintain. For example, in response to objections that analytic theology seems to presuppose an understanding of religious language as univocal, or that it is really just natural theology, or that it is nothing other than an apologetic for conservative theology, or that it presupposes “substance metaphysics” in defiance of the arguments of Kant, Thomas H. McCall responds that there is nothing about analytic theology as such that commits the theologian to any of these positions (McCall 2015, 24ff.). For McCall as for Rea, analytic theology is more a matter of *style and ambition* than of specific theoretical or doctrinal commitments.

A similar characterization is offered by Oliver Crisp, who writes:

The ‘analytic’ component to analytic theology, like contemporary analytic philosophy, involves the use of certain tools like logic to make sense of theological issues, where metaphysical concerns are central. And like analytic philosophy, analytic theology will prize intellectual virtues like clarity, parsimony of expression, and argumentative rigour. It will also, where appropriate, seek to deal with complex doctrinal concerns by dividing them into more manageable units, or focusing on providing a clear expression of particular theological terms that inform particular doctrines in important respects, for example, ‘substance’, ‘perichoresis’, or ‘person’. In fact, analytic theology is about redeploying tools already in the service of philosophy to a theological end. (Crisp 2009, 37-38)

And William J. Abraham:

Analytic theology can be usefully defined as follows: it is systematic theology attuned to the deployment of the skills, resources, and virtues of analytic philosophy. It is the articulation of the central themes of Christian teaching illuminated by the best insights of analytic philosophy. (Abraham 2009, 54-55)

These characterizations of analytic theology as theology done in the mode of analytic philosophy are compatible with the definition which has been developed thus far. It is therefore possible to provide a working definition of analytic theology: it is simply theology done in a noticeably analytic philosophical way, with the ambitions and in the style characteristic of analytic philosophy, irrespective of the specific doctrinal or philosophical commitments of the theologian engaging it.

## 1.2 Critique of the definition: Westerholm

Martin Westerholm (2019) has recently brought forth a number of objections against analytic theology, specifically in the matter of its self-definition. They are the following:

- (1) The self-definition of analytic theology in terms of a “rhetorical style” for doing theology is somehow inappropriate, given the fact that analytic theology supposedly “deflates the value of the rhetorical and presents clear definitions as the currency in which good work trades; but when it comes to discharge its debts in giving an account of itself, it suggests that it is unable to pay in the currency of clear definition, and proposes instead to settle accounts in the deflated coin of the rhetorical. . . . Theologians might well ask why they ought to reckon seriously with a movement that defines itself in terms of features that it itself depreciates. If rhetoric and style are conceptually inconsequential, why attend to a movement that is distinguished primarily by its style?” (Westerholm 2019, 232-33)
- (2) Against the claim that analytic theology is “marked by deploying the conceptual tools of analytic philosophy for theological ends,” as Crisp proposed, Westerholm maintains that there is apparently no such entity as analytic philosophy: “Contemporaries suggest that analytic philosophy is in a ‘state of crisis’, if not wholly ‘defunct’, precisely because it does not represent anything coherent” (233). If it is not possible to define analytic philosophy with any clarity, it would seem that the nature of analytic theology is not made any clearer when it is defined in terms of analytic philosophy.
- (3) The powerful emphasis placed upon “clarity” as a theoretical ideal within analytic theology runs the risk of degenerating the approach into an ideology. In the first place, Westerholm follows Aristotle in maintaining that “the wise person seeks the kind of clarity that is appropriate within a particular field. It is only by leaving a measure of wisdom behind that one can take clarity to define a particular approach without first considering the fit between the approach and the object. A kind of ideology is operative where thinkers proceed as if they possess a measure of clarity that may be deployed without prior consideration of its propriety in relation to a particular object” (234-35). In the second place, “clarity is not only always the clarity of a particular object, but also always clarity for a particular subject. What is clear to the analytic thinker is very different from what is clear to readers of Origen or Theresa of Avila” (235). For this reason, the rejection of non-analytic theology as “unclear” can be ideological insofar as the rejection is taken as objective whereas really it is subjective. “The idea that a particular field can be demarcated by its concern for clarity appears to rest in some part at least on arbitrarily privileging its standards for clarity over others.” (235)

These objections are recent and serious, and many phenomenologists might themselves object to analytic theology in similar ways. For this reason, they are worthy of some response.

*Ad* (1): This argument appears on closer inspection to be sophistic. Analytic theology eschews the exaggerated use of rhetorical flourish where it is deemed unnecessary for achieving a clear conception of the theological subject matter to be discussed and investigated. But it is not inappropriate to define analytic theology as a “style” if that it is in fact what it is.

Quite to the contrary, analytic precision and rigor would seem to demand that one name a thing precisely what it is, as concisely and directly as possible. And if analytic theology is indeed a style of theologizing, then it is not unanalytic or otherwise inappropriate to call it such.

*Ad (2):* It may well be that there is nothing more to the notion of analytic philosophy than a certain “family resemblance” among some practitioners of philosophy (Glock 2008). There are certainly no theoretical or doctrinal or methodological commitments common to all analytic philosophers. At best, analytic philosophers have managed to achieve a measure of clarity in demonstrating the consequences of various ideas. Alasdair MacIntyre claims that “the progress of analytic philosophy . . . in establishing . . . that there are *no* grounds for belief in universal necessary principles—outside purely formal enquiries—except relative to some set of assumptions” has made it such that “analytic philosophy has become a discipline—or a subdiscipline?—whose competence has been restricted to the study of inferences” (MacIntyre 2013, 310). Even so, family resemblances are real, and analytic theology can clearly and without controversy be defined historically as having arisen out of a “theological turn” in analytic philosophy of religion (Westerholm 2019, 230-31; McCall 2015, 11ff.; Rea 2009, 1). If one is sufficiently familiar with the notion of analytic philosophy, with all the ambiguities and uncertainties involved in defining this object, it suffices to be told that analytic theology is theology done in the style of analytic philosophy. And even if there is no single set of “tools” deployed by all analytic philosophers, it is enough for present purposes to say that analytic theology makes use of tools utilized by some within analytic philosophy.

*Ad (3):* The point about the ideological danger of establishing a certain notion of “clarity” as a defining theoretical virtue is a good one and should be granted. More generally, one can say that much of the “unclarity” of continental philosophy to some trained in analytic philosophy is sooner a matter of unfamiliarity with the “dialect” in which it is written than in the purportedly objective unclarity of continental thought itself. (The same point can be made with respect to medieval scholastic philosophy, various forms of Indian philosophy, and so on.) The following passage from Jean-Luc Marion is perfectly clear if one is familiar with phenomenology:

No givenness without reduction, no reduction that does not lead to a givenness. Now, the reduction eliminates all transcendence, that is to say, the intentional ecstasy of consciousness toward its objective, which alone allows knowledge of it, but also incertitude, error, illusion, and so on; thus the givenness of the given, on the express condition that it is already reduced, reduced to the pure given, becomes absolutely indubitable. Doubt can only be instilled in a not-yet-reduced perception, where one takes equally and confusedly for granted that which is not truly given and that which the reduction has brought back to a given without remainder, without shadow, without aura. (Marion 2002, 18)

Apart from a familiarity with phenomenological notions of reduction, transcendence, and givenness, however, the passage is impenetrably opaque. This is because it uses otherwise familiar English words in a very strict technical sense, connecting them in ways that are not reflective of their usage in ordinary language. A similar point could be made with respect to other such passages of analytic philosophy presupposing a certain familiarity with the operative notions belonging to any particular subfield of analytic philosophical inquiry.

This being said, there is still such a thing as (un)clarity, and it is possible to write about the same thing with greater or lesser clarity. Many who practice analytic theology are of the opinion

that it is possible to engage in the “shared task of theology” (Crisp 2017, 160, 2019, 22) with greater clarity than has previously been done. Whether or not they have succeeded is a matter that can only be settled by engaging with their arguments and proposals, whatever one says about the establishment of a certain notion of clarity as a theoretical ideal.<sup>1</sup>

### 1.3 Analytic theology defined

It is therefore possible to define analytic theology: *it is theology done with the ambitions and in the style of analytic philosophy*. “Analytic” theology demands nothing more than this. The next question to be asked is: Can analytic theology be phenomenological? In order to provide an answer, it will first be necessary to put forth a satisfactory definition of “phenomenology.”

## 2. What is Phenomenology?

The first point to make about phenomenology is that it is not obvious what phenomenology is supposed to be. This tradition, although it has been in existence for some time now, has not yet achieved a clear self-definition. For some, this fact constitutes a serious objection against its viability and coherence as a mode of philosophy (Sparrow 2014). Nevertheless, it is possible to propose a definition on the basis of what phenomenologists say about what they are trying to do. Simply stated, phenomenology is the study of what appears (*ta phainomena*) that proceeds by a particular method called the phenomenological reduction.

### 2.1 Defining phenomenology: Sokolowski, Zahavi, and Merleau-Ponty<sup>2</sup>

According to Robert Sokolowski, “Phenomenology is the study of human experience and of the way things present themselves to us in and through such experience” (2000, 2). And Dan Zahavi: “Strictly speaking, phenomenology means the science or study of the phenomena” (2016, 9). Right away, one schooled in the analytic philosophical tradition would understand this as the study of “mere appearances,” of the way things “seem” rather than the way they “are.” But this would be a mistake. This misinterpretation represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the notion of “phenomenon.” Phenomenology rejects the distinction between appearance and being. More specifically, it rejects the “representational” notion of consciousness according to which appearances are related to things in virtue of being “projections” produced by the brain as a result of invisible, external causal processes (Zahavi

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<sup>1</sup>A reviewer suggested the further possible objection that analytic theology is in fact nothing other than philosophical theology, being concerned with the existence of God, the origin of the universe, the soul, and so on, rather than being properly theological in the sense of being concerned with revelation. This hypothetical objection would seem to arise out of an unfamiliarity with actual analytic philosophical literature. There would be too many counterexamples to enumerate here. For example, volume 7 of the *Journal of Analytic Theology*, published in 2019, is almost entirely concerned with the Chalcedonian definition of the two natures of Christ in addition to containing articles about the social ontology of the Church, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the perspicuity of Scripture, and so on. One could point to Arcadi 2018 on the Eucharist, Turner, Jr. 2018 on the Resurrection, and Wessling 2020 on divine love, as well as Oliver Crisp’s numerous treatments of various issues in Reformed theology. See for example Crisp 2019.

<sup>2</sup>It is controversial whether there is anything like a single notion of “phenomenology” that survives from Husserl to the present day. But the authors cited here speak as if there is such a continuity, even in the face of so many radical differences among phenomenologists, and their perspective will be taken for granted in what follows.

2016, 20ff.; cf. Sokolowski 2000, 9ff.) Quite to the contrary, as Heidegger says, “*phainomenon* means what shows itself, the self-showing, the manifest” (*Being and Time* §7; Heidegger 1996, 25). On the other hand, phenomenology affirms that consciousness is defined by the property of “intentionality,” which is to say that “every act of consciousness we perform, every experience that we have, is intentional: it is essentially ‘consciousness of’ or an ‘experience of something or other’” (Sokolowski 2000, 8). For this reason, Sokolowski says about perception: “[T]he thing we perceive is the real thing and there is no other” (1974, 184). And elsewhere: “For phenomenology, there are no ‘mere’ appearances, and nothing is ‘just’ an appearance. Appearances are real; they belong to being” (2000, 15). This does not entail that a person is always seeing exactly what he or she believes he or she is seeing. The seeing is one thing and the judgment about what one sees is another. Sometimes things appear as what they are not: sometimes a coiled rope looks like a snake. But *there is no mediating entity between consciousness and being*, even if there is something between judgment and being. For that reason, phenomenology as a study of appearances seeks to obtain genuine knowledge on the basis of a conviction that things are precisely as they appear—that is, once its distinctive method has been properly implemented.

At the same time, it would seem that the study of things as apparent is more involved than one might initially have thought. The evolution of the thought of Edmund Husserl over time bears witness to the fact that the investigation of things as apparent-to-consciousness implies further ancillary inquiries into the transcendental structures of consciousness themselves (Zahavi 2003; Moran 2005). Moreover, the students of Husserl—most notably Martin Heidegger—took phenomenology in directions that were somewhat different than the focuses and intentions of their master (Moran 2000). For this reason, even some time after the publication of Husserl’s most important works, Maurice Merleau-Ponty could make note in the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception* of the intrinsically diverse and even apparently contradictory nature of phenomenology as a philosophical movement:

What is phenomenology? It may seem strange that we must continue to ask this question half a century after Husserl’s first works. Nonetheless, it is far from being resolved. [1.] Phenomenology is the study of essences, and it holds that all problems amount to defining essences, such as the essence of perception or the essence of consciousness. [This would seem to imply an aspect of apriorism, abstraction, and timelessness.] And yet phenomenology is also a philosophy that places essences back within existence and thinks that the only way to understand man and the world is by beginning from their “facticity.” [2.] Although it is a transcendental philosophy that suspends the affirmations of the natural attitude in order to understand them, it is also a philosophy for which the world is always “already there” prior to reflection—like an inalienable presence—and whose entire effort is to rediscover this naïve contact with the world in order finally to raise it to a philosophical status. [3.] It is the goal of a philosophy that aspires to be an “exact science,” but it is also an account of “lived” space, “lived” time, and the “lived” world. [4.] It is the attempt to provide a direct description of our experience such as it is, and without any consideration of its psychological genesis or of the causal explanations that the scientist, historian, or sociologist might offer of that experience; and yet in his final works Husserl mentions a “genetic phenomenology,” and even a “constructive phenomenology.” (2014, lxx)

Thus, there is far more to the practice of phenomenology than one might have initially thought, and this is because the appearance of things to consciousness is a very complex and intricate reality which must be investigated from a number of different angles. For example, there is a difference between “static phenomenology,” which is concerned with the phenomenological investigation of the appearance of something—e.g., physical objects or various states of consciousness—and “genetic phenomenology,” which is concerned with the origins and formation of particular forms of consciousness (e.g., the origins of geometry; Zahavi 2003, 94; cf. Husserl 1970a, §9). Nevertheless, it will suffice for present purposes to provide a very general and simple characterization of phenomenology as a method for philosophy with the qualification that matters are more complicated than can be adequately treated here.<sup>3</sup>

Phenomenology studies the phenomena by means of a method called the phenomenological reduction. This method presupposes a distinction between two attitudes which it is possible for a human person to have towards the world, namely the “natural” and the “phenomenological” or “transcendental.” The reduction is a means by which one accedes from the former attitude to the latter. Robert Sokolowski describes the difference between the two as follows:

The *natural attitude* is the focus we have when we are involved in our original, world-directed stance, when we intend things, situations, facts, and any other kinds of objects. The natural attitude is, we might say, the default perspective, the one we start off from, the one we are in originally. We do not move into it from anything more basic. The *phenomenological attitude*, on the other hand, is the focus we have when we reflect upon the natural attitude and all the intentionalities that occur within it. It is within the phenomenological attitude that we carry out philosophical analyses. (2000, 42)

The natural attitude consists in a kind of preoccupation with objects. For example, in the natural attitude one might be focused upon the text one is reading and treat it as an object with an existence and a meaning independent of one’s own consciousness—it is “simply there for me,” as Husserl says (*Ideas* I, §27; Husserl 2014, 48). And so also with all other objects with which one might be preoccupied from within the natural attitude. This “just-thereness” of the objects of consciousness is the general thesis of the natural attitude (*Ideas* I, §30; Husserl 2014, 52). From within the phenomenological attitude, however, one might focus upon one’s act of reading and everything that is contained within it, on both the “object” and the “subject” side of the act,<sup>4</sup> as well as upon what makes it possible (e.g., the fact that one has been taught by others to read). *The phenomenological reduction is the means by which one is led away from the concerns of the natural attitude and back to consciousness itself as the arena of the disclosure of being.* Once one has attained to the phenomenological attitude, the task is then to describe the act of consciousness. For example, from within the phenomenological attitude, one can become aware of the fact that the text one reads is not an intrinsically meaningful and intelligible object, but rather that

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<sup>3</sup> The curious reader is invited to consult the volumes by Sokolowski (1974, 2000), Zahavi (2003, 2016), and Moran (2000, 2005) for more detailed presentations of these matters.

<sup>4</sup> Strictly speaking, in phenomenology the distinction between subject and object is somewhat blurred insofar as both are “contained” or “included” within the act of consciousness. But phenomenologists such as Sokolowski and Zahavi nevertheless talk about the subject- and object-side of consciousness as distinct focuses of phenomenological reflection, so there is nothing improper about using this sort of language here with this qualification being made.



it becomes meaningful in the act of reading and that hermeneutical decisions on one's part inform the meaning the text has for its reader. For example, if one did not know the language in which the text was written, or if one had never been taught to read, its meaning would not be intelligible, although one might still be capable of recognizing it as a text if one were raised in a textual culture.

The phenomenological reduction is done in two steps. First, there is the *epoché*, which involves the suspension of the general thesis of the natural attitude, i.e. the just-thereness and independence of the world relative to consciousness. This does not mean denying or doubting the existence of the world, but only the suspension or bracketing of the existence of the world independently of consciousness, much as one could suspend one's belief in any particular thesis without thereby denying it or negating one's conviction of its truth (*Ideas* I, §31; Husserl 2014, 54-55). The suspension of the conviction of the mind-independent existence of the external world also entails the suspension of "all sciences related to this natural world" (*Ideas* I, §32; Husserl 2014, 56).<sup>5</sup> With the general thesis of the natural attitude having been put into brackets, one's focus is redirected to "lived experience as experienced" (Simmons and Benson 2013, 22). It is by setting to the side the conviction that the world is "just there," as well as any scientific explanations which might wrongly be taken as providing a total description of the natures of things,<sup>6</sup> that one can focus upon being precisely as phenomenon, i.e. as that which shows itself from itself. At this point one can begin the second step of the reduction, called the reduction proper, in which one focuses upon the act of consciousness in its richness—upon the object precisely as it appears to consciousness, as well as upon oneself as the "dative of disclosure" to whom the object reveals itself (Sokolowski 2000, ch. 4). This is the way in which one sets aside dogmas and presuppositions in order to return "to the things themselves."

The purpose of acceding to the phenomenological attitude is to attain to knowledge of the essence of a particular form of consciousness as such. This is the sense in which phenomenology is "the study of essences" (Merleau-Ponty 2014, lxx). The grasp of an essence of a thing is called "eidetic intuition" (from *eidōs*; Sokolowski 2000, 177, 1974, ch. 3; Zahavi 2016, 45ff.). It is done in three steps (Sokolowski 2000, 178-79). First, one grasps that a number of things resemble one another with respect to their qualities. Second, one comes to discover that these things resemble one another not in virtue of possessing similar qualities, but because it is one and the same quality that is shared by all of them, which is called the "empirical universal." Third, through a process of "imaginative variation," one imagines the thing in a number of situations, undergoing a series of changes. At this point it is possible that one comes across a quality without which the thing in question could no longer be what it is, or alternatively one discovers a quality which the thing would possess in every conceivable situation (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 70). Then one will have attained to the intuition of the essence or *eidōs* of the thing. Of course, this is a fallible process and it is possible to be mistaken (Sokolowski 2000, 182). As Merleau-Ponty recognized, it is possible to believe that one has come across an essence when really one has only come across the limits of the applicability of a word or concept (1964, 75). But Sokolowski insists that even though the process is fallible, mistakes can be corrected by "talking with others about them, by imagining counterexamples,

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<sup>5</sup> This is because the sciences are typically taken to provide a description of the world which is accurate independently of consciousness. Once the consciousness-independence of the world is suspended, the scientific image of the world is also set aside.

<sup>6</sup> Husserl (*Basic Problems of Phenomenology* §8; Husserl 2006, 12) identifies the "experiential sciences" such as physics and psychology with the natural attitude.

and most of all by seeing how our eidetic proposals conform to the empirical universals we had identified before we reached the eidetic” (2000, 183). Finally, it is possible to engage in imaginative variation so as to attain to an eidetic intuition of not only ordinary objects—philosophers and human beings more generally engage in this practice all the time—but also of experiences and acts of consciousness as such.

## 2.2. Critique of the definition: Sparrow

Tom Sparrow (2014) has forcefully argued that “The End of Phenomenology” is nigh. He gives the following familiar arguments against the movement:

- (1) The suspension of the general thesis of the natural attitude involved in the *epoché* means that phenomenology does not actually succeed at making visible a “thing in itself” but only a “thing for us” or an “in itself for us” (80). In this way, phenomenology fails to surpass the restriction to the phenomenal implicit in prior Kantian philosophy. “Phenomenology does not get us to the noumenal, it instead keeps us chained to the phenomenal, where we have been all along” (1). And later: “Phenomenology forsakes metaphysical realism in favor of a timid ‘realism’ of phenomena that is nothing more than a modified version of idealism, Kantianism by another name. . . . Phenomenology, if it means anything, is simply not a method that can commit itself to the human-independent reality of bodies, objects, qualities, properties, material, or events.” (12-13)
- (2) Husserl often spoke of the *epoché* as the suspension of all transcendencies whatsoever, an entire renunciation of the supposition of the existence of the empirical world, so as to redirect one’s focus to the realm of pure experience.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, phenomenologists make statements about metaphysical (and theological)<sup>8</sup> realities which are not strictly speaking given in pure experience and which are “not legitimated by phenomenological evidence. Phenomenologically speaking, they are illegitimate precisely because phenomenology is supposed to be neutral on the existence of the things of the world” (2). Because the *epoché* “prevents [the phenomenologist] from making any judgment about the existence of things,” it therefore “cannot be metaphysically realist. . . [P]henomenology cannot justify commitments to what is not disclosed phenomenologically.” (2-3)
- (3) Husserl intended phenomenology to be a “rigorous science,” and yet there is no consensus as to the precise nature of the phenomenological method, nor do all phenomenologists agree with these Husserlian aspirations to scientificity. For that reason, it is not clear who does or does not count as a phenomenologist (4-5). “[P]henomenology has become so diffuse that its methodology seems no longer relevant to its practice.” (12)

These objections are age-old and not unknown to those familiar with phenomenology and its history. And yet because they are the sort of objections which might arise naturally in the mind of an analytic theologian considering phenomenology as a possible method of research, even

<sup>7</sup> See for example Husserl, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology* §14; Husserl 2006, 35ff.

<sup>8</sup> See Janicaud 2000. See also Benson and Wirzba 2010 and Simmons and Benson 2013.

if given the restrictions of the present context it is impossible to respond to them in an entirely satisfactory manner, they merit some kind of reply.

*Ad (1):* The phenomenological reduction and especially the *epoché* is supposed to be bridge by which one passes from the natural attitude to the phenomenological or transcendental attitude. And one especially important aspect of the phenomenological attitude is that one has set aside all prior commitments to a purportedly exhaustive scientific description of things in order that one may focus on their own, originary, pre-scientific-theoretical mode of self-presentation to consciousness. Scientific description is always abstractive and limited in comparison to the richness of ordinary consciousness (Merleau-Ponty 2014, lxxii). At best it identifies various observable states of things that accompany certain forms of consciousness. The purpose of suspending ontological concerns and commitments in the *epoché* was to free oneself from the dogmatic presuppositions of a naturalistic worldview, regardless of what one makes of the metaphysical implications of the language of Husserl in this regard.<sup>9</sup> But the same result can be achieved if one adopts two particular notions about the relationship between being and appearance. First, one must grant that consciousness is the arena of the disclosure of being, i.e. that being per se is disclosable-to-consciousness. This means that there is no being-in-itself which is in principle noumenal and closed off to consciousness.<sup>10</sup> Second, although in the natural attitude one is primarily concerned with particular objects, the truth of the matter is that what appears is consciousness is all of being as a whole, both “external” objects and oneself in one’s bodily and psychological conditions. One sees not only a red book, but a blurry red book on a table in the afternoon light from within one’s library as one thinks about dinner plans made for the weekend, and so on. What appears is first and foremost the whole of being, which includes oneself and one’s present states and powers of perception and habits of interpretation and personal history and so on, whereas particular beings make their own contribution to the appearance of the whole in their own specific ways. Once one has adopted this understanding, according to which consciousness becomes “the theater of all being” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 55), including oneself in the totality of that which appears, one has attained to the phenomenological attitude: “The thing is left as that which is merely relative to consciousness. In this new perspective, the thing is a moment to consciousness” (Sokolowski 1974, 190). It is thus possible to accede to the phenomenological attitude without suspending ontological commitments but rather by intensifying them, by affirming the complete correspondence between givenness-to-consciousness and being and by taking the whole of being as that which appears first and foremost. The “in itself for us” overlaps entirely with the “in itself.”

*Ad (2):* The reflections of the previous paragraph suffice to show that it is possible to engage in phenomenology from within a broadly realist standpoint if one adopts a certain understanding of the relationship between consciousness and being. Phenomenology does not require that one forsake any commitment to the independent existence of the things given to consciousness, but only that there is nothing about them which is in principle “hidden” or “noumenal,” i.e. that they are exactly as they show themselves to be.

*Ad (3):* As in the case of analytic theology, phenomenology might seem to be more of a style than anything else. Merleau-Ponty himself recognized that “phenomenology allows itself

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<sup>9</sup> See Zahavi (2016, 32-38; 2003, 34ff.) and Sokolowski (1974, 203-204) for discussions of the question of metaphysical neutrality and the *epoché*.

<sup>10</sup> If one accepts this premise, one could maintain that even God Himself could be known if He were to give Himself to be known in the appropriate way, e.g. in the Incarnation. It is a contingent and relative matter that God is unknowable to human beings.

to be practiced and recognized as a manner or as a style” and that “it exists as a movement, prior to having reached a full philosophical consciousness” or self-definition (2014, lxxi). Nevertheless, there are some theoretical or philosophical-doctrinal commitments apparently essential to phenomenology per se, such as the rejection of a representationalist conception of consciousness (Zahavi 2016, 20ff.). And there is also a certain methodological commitment, as Jacques Taminiaux said: “Nobody can become a phenomenologist without practicing reduction as a methodological principle for any descriptive investigation” (2004, 9). On the other hand, the function of the *epoché* and the reduction more generally is to accede to the phenomenological attitude. This can happen apart from one realizing that this is what is happening, just as Husserl recognized that Descartes was the “first philosopher who achieved a phenomenological reduction” (*Basic Problems* §16, Husserl 2006, 41). Thus, one could say that anyone who philosophizes from within the phenomenological attitude is a phenomenologist, whatever they might say about themselves and regardless of whether they are aware of what they are doing.<sup>11</sup>

### 2.3 Phenomenology defined

Phenomenology can therefore be defined as the study of what appears. It is philosophical inquiry undertaken from within a particular attitude toward things which is called “phenomenological” or “transcendental” insofar as it is a focus upon the whole conscious act rather than merely upon the object. In other words, phenomenology is philosophical inquiry into the way things are on the basis of their appearance to a subject. It is, as Sokolowski says, “the study of human experience of the ways things present themselves to us in and through such experience” (2000, 2). It operates on the basis of a certain method and presupposes a particular conception of the relationship between consciousness and being.

## 3. Can Analytic Theology be Phenomenological?

The question can now be asked whether analytic theology can be phenomenological. It would seem straightaway such a thing is possible. At the very least, it is possible if one begins with the conception of analytic theology proposed by Michael Rea, namely that it is theology done with the ambitions and in the style of analytic philosophy.

### 3.1 Phenomenology, analytic theology, and the ambitions of analytic philosophy

These ambitions are:

- (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 of the scope of the natural sciences. (Rea 2009, 4)

It seems possible that a person with these ambitions engage in phenomenology.

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<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, in the thought of Sokolowski, the phenomenological attitude is precisely the attitude from within which “we carry out philosophical analyses” (2000, 42). In this way, phenomenology becomes the self-realization of philosophy as such.

With respect to (i), phenomenology is itself profoundly concerned with the possibility and extent of human knowledge. It identifies certain ideals of knowledge, such as the self-evidence to which one attains when one's judgments are fulfilled by perception, and denies others, such as bare "feelings" of truth (Husserl 1970b, I, 19; Zahavi 2003, 31-35). Moreover, it rejects the representational understanding of consciousness precisely because it leads inevitably to skepticism (Sokolowski 2000, 9ff.; Zahavi 2016, 20ff.). The ideal case of knowledge in phenomenology is the direct perception of a thing as conforming to a judgment made about it precisely as it gives itself from within a certain horizon. Knowledge is therefore defined in terms of the presence to consciousness of the known thing in conformity with a judgment made about it. If consciousness is only ever a representation, a "movie" projected by the brain as a result of physical causes, then there is in principle no way to know whether the "movie" is "true to life" because the represented thing itself is never accessible (Schindler 2013, 6).

As for (ii), there would seem to be a *prima facie* incompatibility between analytic philosophy and phenomenology. Phenomenology does not attempt to provide "explanatory theories" but simply seeks to achieve evidence, i.e. to achieve "the successful presentation of an intelligible object, the successful presentation of something whose truth becomes manifest in the evidencing itself" (Sokolowski 2000, 160-61). The goal in phenomenology is to see what a thing is, insofar as it gives itself to be seen—more specifically, the act of consciousness as including both its subject and object in a tight correlation. As Heidegger says, "*Phenomenology's mode of treatment is descriptive*. To be more exact, description is an *accentuating articulation of what is in itself intuited*. . . . [T]he way of treating objects in phenomenology as description first of all refers only to *direct self-apprehension* of the thematic and not to indirect hypothesizing and experimenting" (1985, 78; emphasis original). Phenomenology is not speculative in the sense that it does not try to reach what is not and cannot be made present. The goal of the *epoché* is precisely to make the thing visible to consciousness precisely as it gives itself.

At this point someone might bring in the following further objection. Phenomenology is concerned with what is immanent to consciousness. All transcendencies are supposed to be set aside as a result of the *epoché*. But God is the transcendent *par excellence*: "The King of Ages, immortal, invisible" (1 Tim. 1:17), whom "no one has ever seen" (John 1:18). For this reason it would seem that "phenomenology and theology make two" (Janicaud 2000, 99ff.; cf. Deketelaere 2018) and so cannot be blended. But one may grant that God Himself does not appear and still maintain the usefulness of phenomenology for theology. Christian theology is concerned not only with God but also with all things insofar as they are related to God (Pannenberg 1991, 5; Kärkkäinen 2013, 9). For this reason, phenomenology can be useful to theology precisely with respect to the analysis of visible things, such as Scripture, tradition, intersubjectivity in the Church, and so on.<sup>12</sup>

But can phenomenology be reconciled with an analytic philosophical approach? In spite of what Rea says, it is clear that not all analytic philosophy consists in bare hypothesizing and the proposal of explanatory hypotheses. On the contrary, analytic philosophers sometimes engage in something quite like phenomenology, even if this takes place apart from an explicit and exclusive commitment to it as a method for philosophy. For example, in his epistemological work Alvin Plantinga engages in something resembling phenomenological description of the difference between "phenomenal experience" which is accompanied by sensuous imagery and "doxastic experience" which has to do with the way certain beliefs may strike a person as true or false (Plantinga 2000, 110-11). In this case, his goal was to describe

<sup>12</sup> Sokolowski (1993, 8) proposes a "theology of disclosure" whose purpose is to examine "structures of disclosure; it describes the forms of manifestation proper to Christian things." See also Sokolowski 2016.

two different possible forms of consciousness and on the basis of this description to propose various conditions for internal rationality. And in a recent volume on the relationship between analytic and continental philosophy, Dan Zahavi also notes some considerable points of overlap between phenomenology and analytic philosophy of mind, such as the minimal notion of self proposed by Galen Strawson as essential to conscious experience per se (Zahavi 2016b, 87-90). In the same volume, Charles Siewert (2016) argues for an approach to the philosophy of consciousness which he calls “analytic phenomenology.” It would therefore seem that even if analytic philosophy can involve the proposal of various explanatory hypotheses, it does not exclude a phenomenological method as the attempt to achieve clear perceptions of different forms of consciousness.

It is also worth noting here that the definition of analytic-philosophical ambition in terms of a practice of positing “true explanatory theories” would seem to impose upon analytic philosophy a certain method as well as corresponding theoretical conception of the relation between the mind and the world. One might think that if the analytic philosopher proposes theories instead of describing things, this could only be because the world is at least in some important way hidden from consciousness, contrary to the phenomenological position. But this would undermine the point made by Rea and others that “there is no substantial thesis that separates analytic philosophers as such from their rivals” (Rea 2009, 6). Analytic philosophy is not supposed to entail a commitment to any particular philosophical thesis about the nature of the world or its relation to the mind. An argument can therefore be given as follows for the compatibility of this analytic-philosophical ambition and the phenomenological option for description. The practice of positing “true explanatory theories” either presupposes a conception of the mind-world relation which is incompatible with phenomenology or it does not. If it does not, then there is no incompatibility between this practice and the phenomenological option for description. Perhaps “explanatory theory” is being used loosely enough to allow that a rigorously phenomenological analysis of some reality could be considered as one “theory” alongside others. And the phenomenological conception of the world as in principle transparent to consciousness would seem to fit very nicely with the analytic-philosophical ambition to obtain knowledge of that world. Phenomenology seeks precisely that form of evidence in which a judgment about a thing can be seen to correspond to the thing itself. On the other hand, it would appear difficult to motivate or justify the practice of positing “true explanatory theories” of the world if these theories could not themselves be fulfilled in an experience, i.e. if the world could not show itself in some experience as being exactly as one theorized about it. Phenomenology would therefore not only be compatible with this theoretical ambition of analytic philosophy but even provide a conception of the mind-world relation which makes possible its eventual success. But if the practice of positing “true explanatory theories” does in fact imply some conception of the mind-world relation which is incompatible with phenomenology, then—apart from the matter of whether there would be any point in “positing true explanatory theories” apart from an antecedent commitment to the transparency of the world to consciousness—it would no longer be true that analytic philosophy does not imply a commitment to any particular substantial philosophical thesis, contrary to what Rea himself admits.

Finally, it should be clear that phenomenology, much like analytic philosophy, is not intended as an alternative to natural science for explaining exactly the same things. Its scope and object of study is different. In recognizing science as intrinsically partial, abstractive, and incapable of providing a total description of things, phenomenology seeks to elucidate that “direct and primitive contact with the world” in consciousness upon which science is constructed (Merleau-Ponty 2014, lxxii). The fact that the world as it is disclosed in

consciousness is richer than its scientific description is an insight made possible through the *epoché* and the phenomenological reduction.

### 3.2 Phenomenology, analytic theology, and analytic philosophical style

Recall the stylistic principles of analytic philosophy as enumerated by Rea:

- (1) Write as if philosophical positions and conclusions can be adequately formulated in sentences that can be formulated and logically manipulated.
- (2) Prioritize precision, clarity, and logical coherence.
- (3) Avoid substantive (non-decorative) use of metaphor and other tropes whose semantic content outstrips their propositional content.
- (4) Work as much as possible with well-understood primitive concepts, and concepts that can be analyzed in terms of those.
- (5) Treat conceptual analysis (insofar as it is possible) as a source of evidence.  
(Rea 2009, 5-6)

Once more, it seems that nothing in this list excludes phenomenology as such. Phenomenologists regularly make proposals and draw conclusions on the basis of their investigations which can be formulated in sentences that could in principle be “logically manipulated,” even if phenomenology per se is not interested in this. Nothing about phenomenology demands that it be imprecise, unclear, or logically incoherent once its specific terminology is understood, whatever might be said about the relative opacity of the writing styles of some phenomenologists. Neither does phenomenology demand the substantive (non-decorative) use of metaphor, as should be clear from the very brief summary of phenomenological method provided in the previous section. Insofar as the final two conditions include qualifications about their applicability and scope (“as much as possible,” “insofar as it is possible”), it can remain a matter for later discussion the extent to which primitive concepts and conceptual analysis are appropriate in phenomenology.<sup>13</sup>

### 3.3 Phenomenology and analytic theology as compatible

For these reasons, therefore, it seems possible that analytic theology be phenomenological. There is nothing about the characteristic ambitions or style of analytic philosophy, with reference to which analytic theology defines itself, which per se excludes a phenomenological method.

It is worth noting that the argument of this section might seem to have a deconstructive aspect. Analytic philosophy and theology are normally understood as alternatives to phenomenology. If analytic theology can be phenomenological, it would seem that the borders between the two domains have been destroyed, neither possessing its original integrity. But perhaps it would be better to consider the proposal of the present essay positively and constructively as suggesting the “reconciliation” of two estranged parties on the basis of a conviction regarding the theological promise of their union.

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<sup>13</sup> The notions of “concepts” or “mental representations” such as they are taken in modern philosophy and subsequent analytic philosophy are rejected by Sokolowski 2008, ch. 10.

#### 4. Should Analytic Theology be Phenomenological?

It has now been argued that analytic theology can be phenomenological. But it is another matter whether it should be. It would be impossible to treat this question exhaustively here, since it is essentially a matter of justifying a particular philosophical approach in general.<sup>14</sup> The very brief answer to be given here to this normative question is: Yes, analytic theology should be phenomenological—if the analytic theologian is sympathetic to the philosophical commitments and concerns of phenomenology.<sup>15</sup> The essential point is the rejection of the representationalist conception of consciousness.

(i) If there is no mediating entity between consciousness and being, i.e. if it is the very nature of consciousness to be always already outside of itself in contact with being, then it would seem to follow straightaway that a method for the study of consciousness as the arena of the self-disclosure of being will prove to be of the utmost importance for philosophy. And phenomenology proposes to do exactly that through its method of the reduction, in which one's focus is redirected from some particular object to the whole of the conscious act as including both subject and object in correlation. This refocusing of attention reveals the fact that what appears is not first and foremost the particular object, but rather the whole of being, oneself included. The particular object only ever appears against the horizons of the world and the transcendental ego as the “dative of disclosure,” i.e. from within a particular perspective.<sup>16</sup> By setting aside the naïveté of the natural attitude and disclosing the actual nature of consciousness as it is lived, phenomenology thus promises to provide a way of “becoming aware of where we are in the world” (Levinas 1986, 15; cited in Simmons and Benson 2014, 60). If the analytic theologian sees the force behind the arguments against representationalism, especially the argument that it leads to skepticism, he or she could to that extent be motivated in adopting the alternative, phenomenological conception of consciousness as well as the distinctly phenomenological method of investigation.

(ii) Moreover, because phenomenology proposes a return “to the things themselves” precisely by returning to their disclosure to consciousness, it therefore entails a commitment to various forms of internalism (cf. Zahavi 2003, 71). Internalisms of various sorts situate their objects of investigation within consciousness, e.g. internalism about epistemic justification situates within consciousness those factors which justify a belief. If a particular analytic theologian is sympathetic to this approach in some cases, he or she might also be motivated in adopting a phenomenological method more generally.

(iii) The argument was given in the previous section that the analytic-philosophical ambition to put forth “true explanatory theories” about various realities is strengthened and its success is made possible by the phenomenological conception of the mind-world relation. On the other hand, if one rejects the phenomenological notion that the world is transparent to the mind in principle, then it seems difficult to see the point in putting forth “explanatory theories” which could never be confirmed in some form of conscious experience or other.

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<sup>14</sup> Sokolowski 2000 contains a valuable exposition and defense of phenomenology as a way forward for philosophy. See also Sokolowski 2016 for some arguments in favor of adopting a phenomenological method in theology.

<sup>15</sup> A different answer could have been given: Yes, because what phenomenology proposes is true. But this would have been more difficult to prove by argument.

<sup>16</sup> Jean-Luc Marion famously proposes the notion of the “saturated phenomenon” which appears precisely as breaking the bounds of any horizon.



An analytic theologian could therefore be motivated in adopting a phenomenological method if (i) he or she finds herself persuaded that the representationalist conception of consciousness is mistaken and that the phenomenological alternative is superior, (ii) he or she is antecedently committed to various philosophical forms of internalism, and (iii) he or she sees the value of the phenomenological conception of the mind-world relation as making possible the success of the analytic-philosophical ambition to provide “true explanatory theories” of reality.

It is also possible to give one last argument, inspired by Husserl’s remarks in his essay “Philosophy as Rigorous Science” (Husserl 1965). All discourse or reasoning has an object in the sense that it is about something or other. For example, one reasons as follows: *The cat just ate, so that it must not be hungry anymore*. But it is possible to take oneself to be reasoning about one thing when one is in fact reasoning about something else. This is because in order to reason about something, it is necessary to take it as being something or other, i.e. to take it as being *X*. One cannot say anything about pure nothingness. It is necessary to give the proposed object of discourse some kind of content in one’s mind by interpreting it as being of some sort or other. Thus, one must decide that *this thing here* is a cat, that *what it has just done* is to eat, that eating is related to hunger in a certain way, and so on. In other words, all discourse begins with a hermeneutical judgment about what an object is. But it is possible to reason about a thing as an *X* when in fact it is not an *X* at all. And though one’s discourse or reasoning about a thing taken as *X* be as convincing and as lucid as one pleases, it nevertheless proves nothing about the thing in question unless it actually is an *X*. It is thus possible to convince oneself that one has achieved some rational knowledge about some particular thing when in fact one has done no more than to discover an appropriate way of thinking and speaking about *X*s. It is another matter altogether whether the thing itself, the proposed object of discourse, is anything like one has reasoned. Perhaps the thing in question is not really a cat, or it has not really eaten, or eating is not really so related to hunger, and so on.

This argumentation shows that knowledge of a thing requires that one begin as much as possible from the thing itself and not merely from one’s prior ideas about what the thing must be. “The true method follows the nature of the things to be investigated and not our prejudices and preconceptions” (Husserl 1965, 102). But in order to begin from the thing itself, it is necessary that the thing show itself and make itself known. Nothing can be known which is hidden. And because “showing” and “making known” take place in experience, it follows that knowledge of the thing ultimately requires that one attend to the way in which the thing discloses itself in consciousness: “Every type of object that is to be the object of a rational proposition, of a prescientific and then of a scientific cognition, must manifest itself in knowledge, thus in consciousness itself, and it must permit being brought to givenness, in accord with the sense of all knowledge” (Husserl 1965, 90). There is no knowledge which is not gained in some form of experience or other, in consciousness of some form or other. And because phenomenology is precisely “the study of human experience and of the way things present themselves to us in and through such experience” (Sokolowski 2000, 2), it follows that a genuine, rigorous, scientific knowledge of things requires a phenomenological method.

## 5. How Might Analytic Theology be Phenomenological?—A Brief Sketch

Both analytic theology and phenomenology have been defined in some detail. Responses to objections to both approaches have been offered. It has been argued that analytic theology can be phenomenological and that certain philosophical reasons can motivate the analytic theologian to adopt a phenomenological method. It now remains to provide an admittedly brief and cursory example of how analytic theology could be phenomenological. More precisely, the phenomenological method can be useful for analytic theology specifically with respect to the question of the relationship between Scripture and ecclesial Tradition.

Some recent Protestant authors such as Kevin Vanhoozer (2005, 2016) and John Peckham (2016) have proposed a form of “canonical *sola scriptura*” which includes at least the following theoretical commitments: (i) the biblical texts are intrinsically canonical in virtue of their use by God within the salvific economy as means of divine self-communication, rather than being canonical simply as a matter of their use in a specific religious community or as a consequence of their establishment as such by some ecclesial hierarchy; (ii) the tradition of the church is of value for theology only as commentary and interpretation of Scripture which must be measured against the canon for its truth and adequacy for the Christian life. This is a way of understanding the relation between Scripture and ecclesial Tradition which emphasizes the ultimacy and authority of the former over the latter. One could think that Scripture relates to Tradition in the way that the physical world supposedly relates to the theories proposed by various scientists: Scripture and the physical world are intrinsically authoritative and normative for theological-scientific research, whereas ecclesial Tradition and particular scientific theories are only valuable to the extent that they conform to and make sense of their objects. Peckham even argues against the establishment of any extrabiblical theological canon such as a traditional *regula fidei* or creed as unhelpful for theology on the following grounds: first, because it does not diminish hermeneutical diversity insofar as the interpretation of ecclesial tradition is itself a matter of controversy and disagreement; and second, because there still remains the very difficult question as to which ecclesial tradition must be put forth as a canon for theology. As an alternative to the use of tradition, Peckham proposes the grammatical-historical method for interpretation (2016, 203; see also ch. 5).

These proposals are theologically significant and embody a typically evangelical Protestant understanding of the role and authority of Scripture in theology in relation to Tradition. Scripture retains its primacy and ultimacy over Tradition as a source of theological knowledge and a basis for theological proposals, much like the physical world retains its primacy and ultimacy over the theories and explanations proposed by scientists. But Vanhoozer and Peckham are also subject to critique on phenomenological grounds. Two objections must be stated here.

In the first place, one could argue on phenomenological grounds for the inadequacy of the proposed distinction between the biblical canon as an object possessing a certain intelligibility and “visibility” of its own and ecclesial tradition as being only ever commentary and interpretation on Scripture. Edmund Husserl maintained in *Experience and Judgment* §4 that the evident truth of a judgment presupposes the prior and independent self-evidence or visibility of the object about which the judgment is formed (1973, 19). In order to see the truth of the judgment that the cat is white, for example, the cat must itself be visible, i.e. capable of showing itself to consciousness independently of the judgments made about it. If the cat does not show itself at all, then the truth or falsity of the judgment about the cat could not be seen.

Similarly, if ecclesial tradition is nothing but a series of judgments about the meaning of Scripture, the ability to judge truth of these judgments presupposes the antecedent and independent visibility of Scripture as their object. If the proposals of ecclesial tradition must all be measured against Scripture for their adequacy and truth, as Vanhoozer and Peckham propose, this can only be if Scripture possesses an antecedent visibility and clarity on its own, apart from any judgment made about it. But this proposal is arguably shortsighted in that it sees tradition only as a series of judgments and not also as something like a perspective taken upon an object which makes it visible. It is phenomenologically evident that a text is only intelligible from within the context of a particular tradition. For example, phenomenological philosophy is not antecedently intelligible to the person who has not been educated in its particular “dialect” and provided with a definition of its central concepts. This is at least part of the reason why some analytic theologians may complain about the persistent “unclarity” of continental thought. More generally, one cannot read a text unless one understands the language in which it was written, which is itself a mode of inhabiting a particular tradition. For example, the biblical text cannot be intelligible to the person who does not have a prior understanding of such notions as God, Israel, creation, salvation, Law, sin, righteousness, eternal life, and so on.

Gadamer (2013, 279-80) follows Heidegger (2010, 142-43) in emphasizing the importance of “prejudice” or “fore-understanding” for the understanding of any particular text. One must have some prior conception of the meaning of the words used in a text in order for the text itself to be intelligible. To refer back to Rea’s proposed ambitions of analytic philosophy: the necessity of fore-understanding is an aspect of the intrinsic limitations of human knowledge. Now, this fore-understanding is tradition. It is an inherited fore-understanding of things in virtue of which things become initially visible and intelligible for human beings. For example, when students are first taught philosophy, they are often introduced to a host of concepts and notions (such as validity and soundness, entailment, contingency, necessity, agency, determinism, indeterminism, and so on) without which the arguments and discussions presented in an introductory course could not be intelligible to them. They are taught these terms as they are understood and used by the particular professor teaching the course. This certainly does not preclude the possibility that these prior conceptions and prejudgments of meaning might be seen to be inadequate in some circumstances. Other thinkers belonging to different traditions might use these terms in some text in a way that is different from what the students were taught. The inability of the tradition they received to make sense of what is being said becomes apparent in an experience which Gadamer describes as “being pulled up short by the text” (2013, 280). It is therefore possible and sometimes necessary to make revisions to one’s traditional understanding as a result of grappling with the text. But the text is not intelligible at all without a prior tradition of some sort. If the students are not first given some understanding of the relevant terms and concepts, the texts they are reading will remain unintelligible to them.

One can think of this issue by analogy to the perception of a physical object in some space. One cannot see the object without being in some position or other relative to it. There is no “view from nowhere.” But the position in which one stands relative to the object not only helps to make it visible but also limits the visibility of the object in certain respects (cf. Elliot 2017). Parts of the object are visible and others hidden from some points of view, whereas from yet other points of view the whole object may be hidden. Depending on what it is about the object that is of interest to some person, particular points of view may be unhelpful, so that it will be necessary to move somewhere else. One is of course always concerned to see the object as it is and to allow the self-disclosure of the object to guide one’s thinking about

it. But there is no possibility of seeing the object apart from any point of view whatsoever. In the same way, tradition can be understood as something like the perspective one takes relative to some object. It makes the object visible while at the same time limiting its visibility in ways that may be detrimental to understanding. Tradition gives one a way of interpreting things so that they make sense, but it is always possible that later experience demands that one revise one's prior interpretation. It is therefore necessary to supplement Vanhoozer's and Peckham's understanding of the relation between Scripture and tradition as follows. Scripture can remain authoritative over every traditional judgment made about it insofar as the goal of every judgment is precisely to make clear what Scripture teaches. But Scripture cannot be approached or appreciated except from within the perspective offered by some tradition or other, even if these are always revisable and penultimate. It is not enough simply to say that Scripture retains its authority over the tradition of the church. The material or theological priority of Scripture has to be supplemented by a recognition of the formal or phenomenological priority of ecclesial Tradition broadly construed as that factor which makes Scripture initially visible for its reader.

In the second place, Peckham argues in favor of the grammatical-historical method as an alternative to ecclesial Tradition for the interpretation of Scripture. But this proposal does not actually manage to escape the bounds of ecclesial Tradition. In other words, he has not actually proposed an alternative to the Tradition of the Church. This is because it is an essentially and traditionally Christian thing to believe in authors and the objective meaning of texts (cf. the interaction with various non-Christian philosophers and hermeneuts in Vanhoozer 1998). For example, this is the basis of the apostolic appeal to Mosaic and prophetic testimony as a basis for the belief in Jesus as Christ. Moses himself as human author, whether rightly or wrongly, was taken to be referring to Jesus in his texts. Consider also that the spiritual or allegorical interpretation of the biblical text presupposes the existence of a sense which is intended by the Holy Spirit as its ultimate author, even if apart from the knowledge and intentions of the human authors (de Lubac 2007, ch. 7). Christian tradition from the beginning has asserted the importance of the intention of the author of a text for the understanding of its meaning. On the other hand, one could easily imagine, in an act of imaginative variation, another religious tradition which related to its texts in an entirely different manner, e.g. as though they mediate spontaneous and varying revelations with each ceremonial act of reading. In these circumstances, there would be no concern with the intention of the author but only a kind of bibliomancy. The meaning of the text would be bound entirely to the particular context in which it is read at some point in time. This is a possible religious attitude to take towards some set of holy texts. The historical-grammatical method appears therefore not to be an essential aspect of textual culture and of human-religious concern with texts. This means that Peckham's proposal is still within the bounds of ecclesial Tradition. He has not escaped the Tradition of the Church simply by proposing the historical-grammatical method of interpretation as a method for establishing the meaning of Scripture. His proposal sooner amounts to the thesis that a particular method of interpretation accords better than others with traditional ecclesial concerns *vis-à-vis* the Christian scriptural-theological task and the understanding of Scripture.

The brief argument of this section has been simultaneously analytic-theological and phenomenological. On the one hand, it was undertaken in a way that exhibits the ambitions and styles of analytic philosophy in the investigation of a theological-methodological problem. Some central theses of the canonical *sola scriptura* view of Vanhoozer and Peckham were put forth in clear and unornate language for consideration, and the logical implications of these theses were identified. On the other hand, it made use of a phenomenological method and

phenomenological insights to address the question being raised regarding the relationship between Scripture and ecclesial Tradition. It made use of basic phenomenological insights about the habitation of a tradition as a condition of the intelligibility of a text as well as of the method of imaginative variation for establishing that the grammatical-historical method is not an essential aspect of textual life for human beings. There are naturally many more things which would have to be said for a more comprehensive treatment of the issue. But it seems sufficient to establish the point that a properly analytic theology can be phenomenological.

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