

Oliver D. Crisp, James M. Arcadi, and Jordan Wessling. *The Nature and Promise of Analytic Theology*. Brill Research Perspectives in Theology. Leiden: Brill, 2019. vi + 104 pp. \$84.00 (paper).

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Analytic theology is commonly described as carrying out the theological task by employing the tools and methods of analytic philosophy. Upon first encountering this description, one might be inclined to think it sufficiently prosaic as to render it entirely immune to interest. As this volume brilliantly illustrates, that could not be further from the truth.

This collaborative effort by three of analytic theology's most impressive scholars accessibly explicates the aims, aspirations, and amenability of analytic theology to the broader theological community. And while some theologians have reacted strongly against the project (often, though perhaps not always, due to misunderstandings), others have enthusiastically embraced its prescriptions. Whatever one's attitude regarding the merit of analytic theology, though, there is no doubt that this book definitively demonstrates its staying power and momentous significance.

As the title suggests, Crisp, Arcadi, and Wessling set out two primary goals for themselves: (1) to illuminate what can be said about the *nature* of analytic theology (i.e., insofar as it can be said to have one), and (2) to model, or direct readers to, the *promise* of analytic theology as a dialogue partner in all things theological.

In fulfilling the latter aim, the authors provide a fairly lengthy bibliography (i.e., just short of forty pages) with works falling within the domain of analytic theology. Moreover, they divide the bibliography into sections which convey the range of areas on which works of analytic theology have been conducted, including theological method, scripture and revelation, theological anthropology, disability, Christology, atonement, Trinity, sin, various divine attributes, pneumatology, ecclesiology, eschatology, sanctification, and even sections on Jewish and Islamic analytic theology. And as lengthy as the bibliography is, it only scratches the surface of the full breadth of analytic work continually pouring forth from journals and presses these days.

In addition to the bibliography, the authors draw our attention to two indicators of promise in analytic theology: its development of new theological models and its reframing of current theological discussions in ways which enable us to better understand them. As an example of a new theological model, the authors point to the Constitution View of the Trinity according to which one can helpfully think of the Godhead as analogous to Aristotelian hylomorphic (i.e., form and matter) compounds.

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On such a view, the divine essence stands in for the *matter* while each divine person corresponds to a different *form* of that essence. As a result, if one is willing to entertain the idea that the Trinity might be analogous in some sense to a single bit of matter functioning simultaneously in three different ways (e.g., as a lump, a statue, and a pillar), then the traditional logical problem of the Trinity ceases to have any bite. Now, this is not the place to debate the merits or demerits of such a model. What is worth emphasizing, however, is that the Constitution View is a new and helpful model that contributes substantially to contemporary systematic theology. And it is this sort of theological model that stands as a golden example of what analytic theology done well offers.

When turning to the analytic theology of the incarnation, the authors claim that “[u]nlike the doctrine of the Trinity, analytic theology contributions to the incarnation have not generated a new species of model of the incarnation” (61). While the authors *were* correct in this claim at the time of writing the volume—and chose instead to point to illuminating reframings of the incarnation in the fine work of Thomas Flint and Thomas Morris—more recent analytic work on the incarnation has indeed resulted in a new kind of model that many might find theologically more satisfactory than those already on offer. The work I have in mind is that of Jc Beall whose monograph, *The Contradictory Christ*, lays out the conceptual framework for a paraconsistent understanding of the Christology of Chalcedon.¹ According to such a view, Christ is a contradictory being in the sense that a contradiction is true of him (e.g., the contradictory proposition *that Christ is and is not mutable*). Defending such a view requires reflecting on the relationship between logic and that which it represents as well as the implications of allowing some (perhaps only a few) contradictory beings into one’s ontology. Admittedly, Beall’s model has proved controversial; however, and despite this, such a model offers a robust appreciation for divine mystery that might satisfy the critical gaze of many theologians. It should, then, be included alongside the Constitution View of the Trinity as an example of analytic theology’s promise.

So, analytic theology’s vitality and potential for theological innovation (within reasonable constraints) certainly comes across as substantial. But one might nevertheless worry that the examples of theology done well just suggested do not obviously belong to the analytic theology camp. For suppose there were no such thing as analytic theology. If that were the case, then clearly one could not reasonably credit analytic theology with the theological promise suggested above. What then is analytic theology’s *nature*? That is, what are the well-defined borders—or perhaps necessary and sufficient conditions—of analytic theology beyond which one finds all and only the non-analytic?

In response to this question, Crisp, Arcadi, and Wessling begin their discussion as would be expected: with a review of Michael Rea’s prescriptions for analytic philosophy from the original *Analytic Theology: New Essays* volume.²

¹ Jc Beall, *The Contradictory Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

² Michael Rea, “Introduction”, in *Analytic Theology: New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1-30.

In their commentary on these prescriptions, the authors offer several helpful comments worth noting here. First, concerning Rea's (P2)—“prioritize precision, clarity, and logical coherence” (5)—the authors caution those who might be offended by such a prescription. Rather than see (P2)'s inclusion as implying the *lack* of precision, clarity, and logical coherence in other methods, the idea is just that analytic philosophers are unusually proactive in identifying and displaying their assumptions in their arguments in a ‘distinctive’ way (9). (P2) should not, then, be taken as a claim that analytics are *better at or unique* in prizing these things. It's just that they do prize them in a way that can be readily recognized. Second, the authors emphasize, as Rea himself does, that these prescriptions are more akin to rules of thumb than necessary and sufficient conditions of analytic method. But as such, and as the authors openly admit, these prescriptions cannot get at the *nature* of analytic theology except in some loose sense.

The authors then discuss the idea of analytic theology as a sort of intellectual culture to which one belongs when one learns a particular jargon and literature, acquires a generally recognized group of conversation partners, and approximates one's methodological approach to the one described by Rea. Explaining analytic theology in this way allows for some flexibility regarding group membership, which honors the diversity within the group while simultaneously recognizing certain family resemblances that loosely define it and enabling us to identify its members.

Tying these two strands together, the authors arrive at their preferred, fuller characterization of what analytic theology is. It is a research program; that is, a set of assumed methodological dispositions and aspirations *brought to* theology that have given rise to an intellectual culture (15). Moreover, analytic theologians aspire to identify the scope and limits of human knowledge of God and develop true theories of the divine, commitments that are explained by widely shared assumptions that theology is truth-apt, truth-aimed, and that theologians should be realists about the divine.

These widely shared assumptions bound up with the notion of objective truth in theology are, to my mind, crucial to understanding reactions to analytic theology. There are at least two ways in which a theologian might object to such commitments. The first is to see the assumption of theological realism as requiring too much as it would plausibly rule out analytic practitioners from pursuing live theological positions (e.g., the theological systems of Gordon Kaufman or Ludwig Feuerbach). The authors respond to this by conceding that realism is not *strictly speaking* a necessary assumption of analytic theology. The second objection to these commitments, however, denies none of these truth-related commitments as such. Rather, the second objection I have in mind rejects the idea that the *goal* of theology should be truth-acquisition (i.e., as opposed to spiritual formation or God's glory). The authors do not seem to address this objection, so allow me to spell it out briefly.

Not every good that some activity brings about is something at which practitioners of that activity should aim. For instance, it is plausible that many activities in which we engage (e.g., sporting events, conversations with friends, and reading) bring about some form of pleasure that in and of itself seems to be a good. But we can readily see that there is something *off* if those who participate in such activities do so *because* they seek to acquire pleasure. Having a good conversation

with a friend brings us pleasure, but we do not engage in the activity of friendly conversation *for the pleasure*. We engage in it ideally because of our love for the friend. So, even if such an activity is pleasure-aimed, it is wrong to pursue it *because* of the pleasure we hope to acquire.

The truth-aimed nature of theology might be similar. That is, theologians might be happy to claim that theology is truth-aimed, but they might resist the further claim that one ought to engage in theology *because* of the truth one hopes to acquire. And that controversial claim is all but explicitly made by our authors at one point (i.e., assuming we should take the primary aim of an activity as our primary reason for engaging in it): “[Theology’s] *primary aim* is truth...to the extent that we can get at the truth of the matter” (16). I worry that this claim by the authors is too strong without further defense. One might think that union with God, for instance, is the primary aim of theology, not truth. If so, one will likely acquire and aim at truth in one’s pursuit of God, but like the case of conversing with one’s friends, to do theology primarily *because* of one’s desire for truth rather than one’s desire for union with God (i.e., even if acquisition of truth necessarily accompanies pursuit of union with God) seems off.

This objection might be dealt with in the same way as the first one; namely, by simply denying that the assumption of truth-acquisition as the primary goal of theology is a strict requirement of analytic theology, even if it is typical. After all, as the authors themselves say in concluding the section on analytic theology’s nature, “approaches to disciplines are closer to fluid social realities than they are natural kinds” (19). Thus, making such a commitment constitutive of being an analytic theologian would be unreasonable given the sort of method it is.

The second section on analytic theology as declarative theology looks to the 14th century to find historical examples of theologians working out and defending their theological method much in the same way that we find in contemporary analytic thought. The reason for including such a section is to add legitimacy to analytic theology, for if there is a historical predecessor that is recognized as theologically respectable and saliently like analytic theology, then we have some reason to treat both approaches similarly.

So, what is declarative theology? It is an approach to theology, spelled out notably by Peter Aureoli and others, in which theologians attempt to strengthen the faith of their fellow Christians by (i) clarifying terms, (ii) defeating defeaters for propositions of the faith, (iii) providing analogical examples to illuminate components of the faith, or (iv) providing arguments in support of those claims already believed by faith.

There is very little with which I could reasonably take issue in this section. I do wish, however, that the authors had spent a little more time spelling out the notion of a *defeater* for their readers. The basic idea, as given, is that defeaters are arguments whose conclusions contradict, or undermine in some way, the propositions believed by the faithful. But strictly speaking, defeaters in the contemporary discussion are more commonly treated as propositions that are evidence against the beliefs of the faithful (i.e., in this context) or propositions that undermine the *connection* between one’s evidence and the propositions one takes it to be evidence for. These two types of defeaters are known as rebutting and undercutting defeaters, respectively, and there are more types of defeaters besides. In particular, and important for the

purposes of declarative theology, there are defeaters (propositions) that undermine one's epistemic self-trust; i.e., the degree of trust one attributes to oneself in collecting and evaluating one's evidence. In contemporary discussions, this latter type of defeater is too often ignored despite its role in undermining the beliefs of the faithful. It would be good, consequently, if such defeaters were more widely acknowledged and discussed.

The remaining section of the book—"Analytic Theology as Systematic Theology"—deals with a family of objections to analytic theology, each articulating in its own way that analytic theology is either *not* theology or *degenerate* in some way. It begins by articulating the SHARED TASK of theology via an appeal to common aspects of the theological systems of three influential systematic thinkers: John Webster, Brian Gerrish, and Gordon Kaufman. That task is (at least) this: "Commitment to an intellectual undertaking that involves...explicating the conceptual content of the Christian tradition....using particular religious texts that are part of the Christian tradition...as sources for theological judgments" (38). As the authors make undoubtedly clear, analytic theology can and typically does engage in this SHARED TASK. Consequently, analytic theology can be, and often is, systematic theology.

Since this argument is so easy to make, the authors acknowledge that some readers might remain skeptical. Has the objection that analytic theology is not *real* systematic theology been fully understood? In brief, yes. The authors do understand the objection, and they go on to discuss variations of it inspired by such imminent theologians as Thomas Weinandy, Rowan Williams, and Robert Jenson. Given space limitations, all I will say is that this section is excellent and, like any good analytic work, repays meticulous study.

In the end, there is little more one could ask the authors to do in challenging those discontented with analytic theology. For those worried it is a *new* movement and for that reason to be held with suspicion, the authors point to declarative theology as a legitimate predecessor. For those wishing there were space for mystery, the authors deftly describe where that space might lie. For those concerned about defining the movement, the authors spell out a very plausible option of analytic theology as a research program. And for those holding out until analytic theology's promise can be discerned, the authors lay bare the fruit of the program. It is, then, a triumph of a volume that each of us would do well to return to on occasion.