

Athens and Jerusalem: The Relationship of Philosophy and Theology

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Introduction

What is the relationship of philosophy and theology? This question appears simple, but the appearance is deceptive. The answer to this question can't be given without answers to two more basic questions: what is philosophy, and what is theology? And the answers to these questions can't be found without answers to controversial methodological questions. In this short paper, I will begin with the methodological questions and try to make my way forward from there to reach an answer not to the question with which I began—what is the relationship between philosophy and theology?—but to a question much easier to answer: what *should* the relationship between philosophy and theology be?

The methodological questions

To answer even the question about what the relationship between philosophy and theology should be, we first have to answer the questions “what is philosophy?” and “what is theology?” But what is the right methodology for answering those questions?

If we ask the analogous question about a religion or a political worldview, it is clear that we can answer the question either by determining what the adherents to that religion or worldview believe and practice, or by determining what the content of the religion or worldview, considered just in itself, consists in. That is, we can answer the question “What is it?” for a religion or worldview by proceeding either sociologically or doctrinally. So, for example, if we want to know what Marxism is, we can investigate what Marxists at various times and in various cultures have believed and done, or we can somehow try to determine a doctrinal content for Marxism itself. Investigating Marxism taken sociologically requires considering what individual Russian Marxists or Chinese Marxists, among others, have held as Marxist beliefs and practices. On the other hand, taking Marxism doctrinally involves somehow investigating the very ideas constitutive of Marxism. And similar things can be said about Buddhism, for example. The question “What is Buddhism?” will get different answers depending on whether we are proceeding sociologically or doctrinally. On the first of these answers, it may be true that Buddhism is compatible with Confucianism; and, on the second, it may be false.

The same methodological divide applies in the case of the questions about what philosophy and theology are. We can take a discipline, such as philosophy or theology, in either a sociological sense or a doctrinal sense. Taking it in a sociological sense is a matter of characterizing its ideas and practices as they are understood by individual adherents of that discipline at various times and places. Taking it doctrinally is a matter of considering, on one approach or another, the essence of the discipline itself apart from what its adherents take it to be.

Of course, the distinction at issue here presupposes that there is something constitutive of philosophy and of theology, something essential to each of them, apart from the ideas and practices of the participants in those disciplines. And some people will reject this presupposition. They will want to define any academic discipline, like any worldview, only in terms of the beliefs and practices common to its adherents in any given time and place. On their way of thinking about a discipline or a worldview, there is no distinction between the sociological and the doctrinal understanding of the discipline or worldview. On this view, theology or philosophy is nothing more than whatever those in power in theology or philosophy say that it is.

It is not hard to think of stories about the two disciplines that make it tempting to accept this view. But nonetheless it is clearly not correct. There may be border cases where it is hard to tell the difference between academic disciplines, just as there is with regard to worldviews. But in general it is evident that there is some kind of essence or character to an academic discipline, just as there is to a worldview. If someone thought that Ronald Reagan's economics was Marxist, he would just be confused. Analogously, if a chemist thought his research counted as philosophy, he would be equally confused. There is some kind of essence to an academic discipline such as philosophy or theology or chemistry. When the chemist is engaged in chemical experiments, he is doing chemistry, not philosophy. And, analogously, when a philosopher is discussing philosophical arguments, even if it is about chemical theories, he is engaged in philosophy, not chemistry.

So, a discipline, like a worldview or a religion, can be considered doctrinally as well as sociologically.

Of course, there will generally be some recognizable degree of similarity between a particular discipline taken in a doctrinal sense and that same discipline taken in a sociological sense. Taken sociologically, Marxism consists in the beliefs and practices of those self-avowed Marxists in positions of power in the Marxist political realm at various times and places. But we do expect that those beliefs and practices have a great deal of overlap, at least, with the beliefs and practices constitutive of Marxism taken doctrinally.

The same point holds as regards academic disciplines. Taken sociologically, chemistry consists in the beliefs and practices of chemists in positions of academic power. But we do expect that those beliefs and practices have significant similarity to the beliefs and practices of chemistry taken in a doctrinal sense. So, unless the adherents of a particular discipline are hopelessly confused about what they take their discipline to be, there will be considerable overlap between the ideas and practices associated with that discipline taken sociologically and the ideas and practices of the discipline taken doctrinally.

Considerable overlap isn't identity, however. And the difference can matter. Those in positions of academic power can take the beliefs and practices they favor to be identical to the beliefs and practices of their discipline doctrinally understood. This identification on their part can then become a way of preserving their power and their preferences in the profession. In philosophy, for example, the question, "But is it philosophy?" can be not so much a question about the boundaries of the discipline taken doctrinally as it is a rejection of any approach not already favored by the elite in power. In that case, the genus within which the question "But is it philosophy?" falls is not philosophy but rather politics, or maybe even just bullying.

In such cases, the right response to any variation on the question "But is it philosophy?" is not philosophical either but just pushing back. In response to an indignant challenge such as, "Is it possible to do metaphysics after Kant?", the right answer is "ab esse ad posse valet consequentia." There is a valid inference from what is to what can be. Insofar as the philosopher being challenged *was* doing metaphysics, it *is possible* to do metaphysics after Kant.

So if we take philosophy or theology in a sociological sense, then those who count as philosophers or theologians are among the group whose beliefs and practices define the discipline. What philosophy or theology is is therefore a function of what those philosophers or theologians themselves believe and do. In that case, the right response to the challenge "But is it philosophy?" is this: "well, I'm a philosopher, and this is what I believe and do as a philosopher." And, of course, an analogous point holds as regards theology. Taken sociologically, philosophy and theology are a function of what philosophers and theologians believe and do in their role as philosophers and theologians; and it is determined to a considerable degree by what the practitioners of those disciplines at any given time are willing to support and defend in public.

That is why, if we approach the question, "What *should* the relation between philosophy and theology be?" in a sociological manner, there will be different answers to the question depending on what particular philosophers and theologians believe and do. In the heyday of logical positivism, the answer to the question would have been "Nothing". If analytic theology continues to prosper, the answer will be very different. On this methodological approach to the question "What should the relation between philosophy and theology be?", the answer is, in effect, "Whatever *we* – we who are philosophers or theologians—want it to be."

This conclusion may be enough for most atheists and even some theists to feel sure that taking the question sociologically is the wrong methodology for finding an acceptable answer to it. From their point of view, the only right methodology for dealing with this question is to approach it by considering both disciplines doctrinally.

So suppose that, for the sake of argument, we resolve the methodological issue in favor of those who want to take philosophy and theology doctrinally. Then before we can find an answer to the question, "What should the relation between philosophy and theology be?", we need to ask what each discipline is, doctrinally considered.

Reason alone

If we take philosophy and theology doctrinally, then one way in which the distinction between theology and philosophy can be formulated is in terms of reason. And, of course, this is the way in which the distinction between philosophy and theology used to be made. Philosophy was thought to take its premises from reason alone, whereas theology was supposed to be willing to take some of its premises from religious authority, from revealed texts or from creeds or from some other magisterial source. On this understanding of the difference between philosophy and theology, it seems that because philosophy takes its premises from reason alone, it is shareable by everybody. And because theology takes its premises from authority of some sort, it seems that it will be acceptable only to people who share some particularity, of religious identification or church membership or something else of the sort. On this view, then, philosophy is universal and impartial; theology is particular and partisan.

This is an Enlightenment sort of view of the disciplines. The Enlightenment thought that all reputable learning is a *universal or generically human* enterprise based on reason alone. This belief is part of the view now generally called 'modernism'. In philosophy as in science, modernists have thought, we should put aside all our particularities—of gender, race, nationality, religion, and social class—and enter impartially into the project of learning just as the generic human beings we are.

For the modernist, since theology is mired in particularity, theology falls seriously short of the ideal. So, on modernist views, theology and philosophy do not mix. The combination of theology and philosophy will not be a generically human enterprise, able to be engaged in by everybody regardless of their particularities. Bringing theology into connection with philosophy just wrecks the philosophy.

But it is hard to know who would now whole-heartedly endorse this way of identifying philosophy and theology. On the contrary, we have learned to be skeptical of the whole Enlightenment view that seemed to support it.

Post-modernism, of course, rejects the entire modernist picture. On the view of post-modernists, all learning, even scientific research, is done in the context of culture and politics; none of it is universal, impartial, or generically human. For post-modernists, it is only pretense to present any scholarship as impartial or generically human in character; all of it is done from the vantage point of one human particularity or another. There is no such thing as universal, impartial reason. All reason is particularist and perspectival. For post-modernists, contrary to modernist advertisement, the academy has not engaged in pure reason of a generically human sort. Rather, under the guise of pure reason, it has largely reflected the particularity of Eurocentric white males.

So, from the point of view of post-modernists, philosophy can differ from theology only in hiding from itself that it is as particularist as theology is. On this postmodernity perspective, philosophy and theology both begin with authoritative teaching of a particularist kind. They just pick different particularities as their starting points.

The on-going debate over post-modernism has brought to the fore the relativism lurking not far below the surface of most ordinary forms of post-modernism. That relativism appears to have implications that many adherents of post-modernism would like to repudiate, including, for example, a conservative social agenda. But whatever the right resolution of the debate over post-modernism may be, for one reason or another, many contemporary philosophers, especially in the analytic tradition, have not been inclined to adopt a post-modern attitude.

Nonetheless, what post-modernism has made everyone self-conscious about is the way in which claims to rely only on universal and impartial reason are unrealistic. All human learning and reasoning have to begin somewhere, with some set of assumptions; and those assumptions are typically drawn from authority of one sort or another. In fact, philosophers are now increasingly interested in the fact that much of what we think we know comes from the testimony of others. Human cognition, like many other human activities, is a social matter and relies on the activity of a community; it isn't the work of any one individual in isolation. The transfer of information and perspectives through authority and testimony is crucial to human knowledge.

It is true that the theology of the Abrahamic religions takes putatively revealed texts as authoritative and philosophy does not. But different communities within philosophy differ in the authorities they are willing to accept, too, as the continuing divide between continental and analytic philosophy illustrates. For that matter, obviously, theology itself is divided with regard to the religious authorities it is willing to recognize. So it is not the case that within either philosophy or theology there is one set of authorities universally accepted by all those who take themselves to be working within the discipline. Although post-modernists might not be right in their willingness to accept diverse authorities as equally valid, they are surely right in their claims that everyone begins with some authorities, some testimony accepted on trust, some unexamined set of presuppositions.

So if we are looking for the difference between philosophy and theology doctrinally considered, it is not any longer promising to see the difference as a matter of philosophy's employing reason alone and theology's being bound to authority. Consequently, it also is not helpful to think about the relation between philosophy and theology in terms of this supposed difference between them.

Theos and Sophia

How are we to think of philosophy and theology, doctrinally considered, then? In my own view, the names of the disciplines give us a more promising way to think about each of them and so also a more profitable way to think about the relation between them.

The name ‘philosophy’ in its etymology means something like *the love of wisdom*. The name ‘theology’ in its etymology means something like *the word with regard to God*.¹

Now wisdom is well-suited to be thought of as an abstract universal. In this respect, it is like redness or love. In its own nature, it is what it is and nothing else. It isn’t a substance, it doesn’t have any particular dimensions, it can’t exert causal power or receive the effects of anything else’s causal action. In short, none of the Aristotelian categories apply to it except that one in which it itself belongs. In this respect, wisdom is different from a wise person, say, or a loving person or a red thing. Any of these things falls into an Aristotelian category too, but all the other categories apply to it as well. A red thing will have a certain dimension, and it will have certain causal powers that it can exercise, and so on. A red thing, a loving person, a wise person are concrete particulars. Wisdom, which philosophy seeks, is not.

On the other hand, it is clear that the God with regard to whom theology seeks the word cannot be construed as an abstract universal. On the view of all the Abrahamic monotheisms, God is characterized by mind and will. But nothing that is an abstract universal could have mind and will. In fact, the God of the major monotheisms is omniscient and omnipotent; but no abstract universal can know anything at all or do anything at all. So whatever the God of theology is, he is not like wisdom in being an abstract universal. Rather, in virtue of being characterized by mind and will, God is more nearly a person (in our sense of the word ‘person’) than he is an abstract universal. The wisdom philosophy seeks is impersonal. A philosopher can seek wisdom, but wisdom can’t seek him. A philosopher can love wisdom, but wisdom can’t love him back. The God of the major monotheisms, however, can seek a theologian and love her before she seeks or loves him.

In my view, the difference between theology and philosophy lies most centrally in this difference in what they seek. It makes a great difference to one’s method of seeking and one’s view of the nature of depth-in-understanding whether what one is seeking is an abstract universal such as wisdom or something with a mind and a will.

So far I have been using clumsy locutions in order to skirt both the doctrine of simplicity, common to the major monotheisms, and Christianity’s doctrine of the Trinity. For the sake of clarity in what follows, I am going to adopt a less clumsy way of speaking and talk of God as a concrete particular who is a person. Even on the doctrine of the Trinity, there is only one mind and one will in God. And anything with one mind and one will is a person, in our sense of the word ‘person’. It takes more work to see why speaking of God as a concrete particular does not violate the doctrine of simplicity, but I will return to this issue before I finish.

With this caveat in place, we can think of philosophy as the pursuit of an abstract universal, namely, wisdom, and theology as the study of a concrete particular who is a person, namely, God.

¹ I have picked this clumsy rendering of the etymological sense of ‘theology’ in an attempt to preserve the amphiboly of the expression. The *word* in question can be either the output of reason with respect to God or the Logos, who is the second person of the Trinity.

Epistemology and metaphysics

This difference between philosophy and theology makes a huge difference to reflection on the nature of philosophy and theology and on the way in which they ought to be related to each other.

Consider, to begin with, just one part of philosophy, namely, epistemology.

As one philosopher puts it, "one virtually universal presupposition [of contemporary epistemology] is that knowledge is true belief, but not mere true belief" (Klein 1999a). The true beliefs in question are propositional beliefs appropriately related to facts;² belief itself is generally taken just as an attitude toward a proposition, or a propositional attitude, as philosophers say. And so it is axiomatic in philosophy that all (or virtually all³) knowledge is knowledge *that* something or other is the case. Some philosophers have gone so far as to argue that even knowing how to do something is reducible to knowledge *that* of some sort.⁴

There are, of course, sentences that contain verbs of believing but that do not apparently make ascriptions of propositional attitudes. 'I believe you' is one common example; 'I believe in God' is a more complicated and controversial example. But many philosophers think that even such sentences "can always be analyzed as propositional attitude ascriptions" (Oppy 1999). 'I believe you' can be analyzed as 'I believe *p* because you tell me that *p*.' 'I believe in God' can be analyzed as 'I believe that God exists.' or perhaps 'I believe that God exists and is good and trustworthy.' On this view, then, whatever else knowledge may require, it is at least a matter of having a certain attitude toward a proposition.

It is not just attitudes toward propositions that are central to knowledge on the philosophical approach; it is also the discerning of patterns among propositions. One genus of theories of knowledge that has been prominent in modern epistemology is foundationalism. Foundationalism comes in different species, but they all share a certain account of the structure of knowledge. Some propositions are known on the basis of appropriate inference from other propositions, but there are also propositions that are foundational or properly basic for a knower; these are known but not known on the basis of other propositions. Knowledge is, then, a matter of believing a proposition that is true and properly basic for a knower or a proposition derived by the knower in an appropriate way from a properly basic belief.

Clearly, on an account of knowledge of this sort, knowledge belongs to the pattern-processing arts. That is because, with the possible exception of properly

² See Klein (1999b). For a powerful dissenting view that nonetheless remains within the tradition that all knowledge is knowledge *that*, see Williamson (2000, 27–33).

³ The main reason for the qualification has to do with what Bertrand Russell called 'knowledge by acquaintance'. For a discussion of knowledge by acquaintance and its relation to the knowledge of persons at issue here, see Chapter 3 of my (2010).

⁴ See, e.g., Stanley et al. (2001, 411–44); see also Stanley (2011) *Know How*. For a good survey of the recent neurobiological literature showing that knowing how and knowing *that* are discrete capacities served by different neurobiological systems, including different forms of memory, see Kandel et al. (2000, 1229–30).

basic beliefs, on this account of knowledge, knowledge is a matter of discerning the appropriate relations among propositions, especially the inferential relations between properly basic beliefs and beliefs ultimately based on them. Rules expressing appropriateness in inferential relations are a sort of pattern for discerning acceptable relations among propositions; and so, on foundationalist theories of knowledge, a knower needs to differentiate the patterns among propositions in order to relate his basic and non-basic beliefs appropriately to one another.

There are, of course, other theories of knowledge in contemporary philosophy, but most of them share with foundationalism the features to which I am drawing attention here.⁵ On most of the rival theories of the nature of knowledge, knowledge is a matter of having an attitude toward a proposition, of knowing *that*, and it typically depends on suitable pattern-processing of propositions. Furthermore, excellence in a knower will include the knower's ability to see subtle or hard to recognize patterns among propositions and to be quick in the processing of such patterns.

But, as I have argued in detail elsewhere,⁶ there is in fact a broad array of knowledge commonly had by human beings that cannot be formulated adequately or at all as knowledge *that*. Such knowledge is provided by some first-person experiences, especially those in which the qualia of the experience are among the salient parts of the knowledge. One can know facts about redness, for example, but one can also know *redness*.⁷ But it also includes some kinds of knowledge of persons.

To know a person is not a matter of knowing *that*. The explosion of research on autism has helped demonstrate that the human brain is built for a non-propositional knowledge of persons. Recent neurobiological studies have led scientists to believe that, in fully functioning human beings, the knowledge of persons has a source in the mirror neuron system. That neural system enables a person to know the actions, intentions, and emotions of another person in a way analogous in some respects to perception. Like the perception of color, for example, the knowledge of persons is direct, intuitive, and hard to translate into knowledge *that*.

Knowledge of persons is gained originally through second-person experiences, the sort of experience Martin Buber characterized in terms of I-Thou relations. Although such knowledge of persons is not reducible to knowledge *that*, it can nonetheless be made available to others who lack the second-person

⁵ Some versions of virtue epistemology might be considered exceptions to the general claim that contemporary theories of knowledge take knowledge to be a branch of the pattern-processing arts, insofar as some proponents of virtue epistemology include a motivational component in the analysis of knowledge. But even the versions of virtue epistemology which mean to model epistemology as closely as possible on virtue ethics take knowledge to be a matter of knowing *that*.

⁶ See Chapters 3 and 4 of my (2010). Some material in this section is taken from those chapters.

⁷ There is a well-known thought experiment involving a neuroscientist Mary and color perception that makes this point. The thought experiment was introduced by Frank Jackson (1982) to argue that qualia cannot be reduced to brain states; but it also shows that knowledge of qualia is not equivalent to knowledge *that* something or other is the case. For a good survey of current philosophical discussion of Jackson's thought experiment, see Peter Ludlow et al. (2004).

experiences in question. That is because such knowledge is typically transmitted to others by means of stories that re-present a real or imagined second-person experience. Philosophy concentrates on third-person accounts of the things it studies, or maybe third-person and first-person accounts. But a story is in a sense a second-person account. It shares information with others by means of the representation of second-person experiences.

Second-person experience and stories thus play a role with regard to the knowledge of persons analogous to the role played by postulates and arguments with regard to knowledge *that*. Experience and stories, on the one hand, and postulates and arguments, on the other, are devices for the acquisition and transfer of knowledge, although the kind of knowledge acquired or transferred and the sort of acquisition or transfer involved differ.

Furthermore, speed and accuracy are less important for excellence at the knowledge of persons than intuition, insight, and interpretative skill at understanding stories are. If speed and accuracy with regard to left-brain pattern-processing are the main excellences with regard to knowing *that*, then intuitiveness, insight, and narrative ability of the right-brain story-reading sort are the main excellences with regard to the knowledge of persons.⁸

If we think of theology and philosophy in terms of the kind of epistemology each needs to best pursue its aims, then the distinction between knowledge *that* and knowledge of persons will highlight for us one of the important differences between the two disciplines, doctrinally considered. It is one thing to focus on gaining insight into a concrete particular who is a person and another thing to concentrate on seeking a body of knowledge characterized in terms of an abstract universal such as wisdom. The difference in what is being sought carries with it a great difference in the modes of knowing, the means to that knowing, and the criteria for excellence in knowing.

This difference in goals between the two disciplines also has implications for metaphysics, for the exploration of the ultimate foundation of reality and for everything built on that understanding.

A discipline that wants to make sense of the world by seeking wisdom is likely to find its explanations of the ultimate foundation of reality in the abstract and universal, in the Form of the Good, for example. Even for those philosophers not tempted by Platonism, or those for whom the ultimate foundation of the reality has to be found in what is concrete and physical, the emphasis is likely to be on the impersonal. Those philosophers inclined to such a non-Platonist view will think, for example, that the ultimate foundation of reality consists in those elementary particles described by the finally correct version of contemporary physics and their causal interactions governed by the natural laws of that physics. On views such as this, at the ultimate foundation of all reality is only the non-personal. What is challenging for such views is the construction of the personal out of the impersonal. The mental states of persons, their free agency, their relations with each other all

⁸ For a detailed discussion of the intellectual excellence of wisdom, see ch. 11 on wisdom in my (2003).

have to be understood somehow as built out of the physically determined interactions of the non-personal.

But a discipline that wants to make sense of the world by seeking the word with regard to God will find its explanation of the ultimate foundation of reality in the particularity of a person, in the mind and will of God, for example. On this approach, persons are not reducible to anything impersonal. Rather, the ultimate foundation of reality is precisely persons, and everything that is not a person can be explained by reference to the one mind and will of God. On this approach to understanding the ultimate foundation of reality, everything that is not personal can be traced back to the person who is God.

It is, of course, true that what is personal is also a subject of study in philosophy and that the abstract and universal is also a subject of study in theology. It would be a ludicrous caricature to suggest otherwise. Philosophers find Aquinas's main theology text, *Summa theologiae*, interesting because its pattern-processing arguments about abstract universals such as the good and the true are powerful. And theologians such as Aquinas were grateful for the aid of philosophers such as Aristotle for help even with such completely theological topics as the doctrine of the Trinity. Aristotle's lore of the categories was foundational for Aquinas's interpretation of the credal formula for the three persons of the Trinity. And, on the other hand, even philosophers who reject the existence of God do not divorce knowledge of persons entirely from their work. Many topics in ethics or action theory, for example, require philosophers to rely on intuitions or inferences about persons. Even stories come into philosophy, often in the form of short, thin thought experiments or examples. And, certainly, in philosophy of religion or in philosophy of literature, there is even more to be said along these same lines.

So it is undoubtedly true that theology also includes focus on the abstract and universal, and philosophy also includes consideration of what is personal. Nonetheless, however, the basic orientations of the two disciplines is appropriately illuminated by the etymology of the names of the disciplines, in my view. Doctrinally considered, the two disciplines are given their basic orientation by this etymologically suggested difference in what they seek.

Quantum metaphysics

Thinking of the difference between the two disciplines in this way illuminates the sometimes tense relations among the different practitioners of these two disciplines. From the point of view of philosophers, it can seem that the work of theologians is simply irrelevant to the philosophical enterprise. Stories and insights about a particular person, even a divine person, might have a place in history or in literature. But philosophers seek principles, patterns, and theories. Why should they care about knowledge of persons, even the person of God if there is such a person? From the point of theologians, on the other hand, it can appear that at its best the work of philosophers is incomplete, insofar as it falls short of understanding what is truly the ultimate foundation of all reality. At its worst, it can appear to theologians

that the work of philosophers is shallow and narrow. From the point of view of theologians, it can seem that, when philosophers have done their best to seek wisdom, they have missed the deepest thing to know.

At any rate, when the relations between the disciplines are considered sociologically, then this is the way they sometimes look. But what about when the disciplines are considered doctrinally? Or, to put the question in the form I proposed to consider: when the disciplines are considered doctrinally, with the characterization of them that I have just argued for, what *should* the relations between them be?

The answer to this question depends, obviously, on what one takes the right view of the ultimate foundation of reality to be.

Now one might suppose that if there is a God, the view of philosophy had by many theologians is right; but if there isn't a God, then the view of theology had by many philosophers is right. One might suppose, that is, that one or another discipline has to trump the other; and which one trumps depends on whether or not there is a God.

But this supposition would be mistaken, in my view. In the first place, even for those skeptical about the existence of God, theology can be understood as a highly sophisticated thought experiment, which lays out for philosophy what a world is like in which persons are the irreducible foundation of reality. As such, it is obviously useful to philosophy in myriad ways.⁹ But, secondly, and more importantly for my purposes, the supposition is mistaken even if the skeptics are wrong. Even if there is a God, philosophy and theology are complementary to each other, and neither trumps the other. Both disciplines are needed to understand the nature of reality, even if there is a God, provided that God is simple.

Simplicity is standardly accepted as one of the divine attributes by virtually all Christian thinkers in the Patristic and medieval periods, as well as by major philosophers and theologians in the Jewish and Islamic traditions. It is one of the most difficult divine attributes to understand but also one of the most important, and it makes a difference to the discussion of the relations between philosophy and theology.

Aquinas's discussion of divine simplicity is the best and most helpful I know. His view is sometimes interpreted as implying that God is being itself, or *esse* alone (to put the point in Latin). On this interpretation of Aquinas's view of divine simplicity, contrary to what I have been claiming in characterizing theology, it is false to say of God that God is a concrete particular, a being – an *id quod est* (a “that which is”). But, in my view, this is an interpretation of Aquinas's view that is not compatible with the texts.¹⁰ Rather, on Aquinas's view of divine simplicity, we cannot know the *quid est* of God. That is, we cannot know what kind of thing God is, even when it comes to the distinction between an abstract universal and a concrete particular. So, for example, Aquinas says,

⁹ For further explanation of this claim, see the first section of my (2010).

¹⁰ I have argued for this claim in detail elsewhere. See my (2012); see also my (forthcoming).

With regard to what God himself is (*secundum rem*), God himself is neither universal nor particular.¹¹

On Aquinas's view, God's nature is such that there is something false about conceiving of it either as *esse* alone or as *id quod est* alone. For this reason, Aquinas thinks, we have to exercise care in the way we frame our claims about God. It is acceptable to say that God is *esse*, being itself, provided that we understand that this claim does not rule out the claim that God is *id quod est*, an entity, a concrete particular. Aquinas puts the point this way:

Those material creatures that are whole and subsistent are composite. But the form in them is not some complete subsisting thing. Rather, the form is that by means of which some thing *is*. For this reason, all the names imposed by us to signify some complete subsisting thing signify in the concrete, as is appropriate for composite things. But those names that are imposed to signify simple forms signify something not as subsisting but rather as that by means of which something is, as for example 'whiteness' signifies that by means of which something is white. Therefore because God is both simple and subsistent, we attribute to God both abstract names—to signify God's simplicity—and concrete names—to signify God's completeness and concreteness. Nonetheless, each kind of name falls short of God's mode [of being], just as our intellect does not know God as he is, in this life.¹²

One way to think about the doctrine of simplicity as Aquinas understands it, then, is as the expression of a kind of quantum metaphysics.

What kind of thing is it which has to be understood both as a wave and as a particle? We do not know. That is, we do not know the *quid est* of light. The ultimate foundation of *physical* reality includes light; and quantum physics, which is our best attempt at understanding the kind of thing light is, requires alternately attributing to light incompatible characteristics.

Analogously, we can ask: What kind of thing is it which can be both *esse* and *id quod est*? We do not know. The idea of simplicity is that at the ultimate *metaphysical* foundation of reality is something that has to be understood as *esse*—but also as *id quod est*. We do not know what kind of thing this is either. And this conclusion is precisely what we should expect from Aquinas's insistence that we do not know the *quid est* of God.

We can gain insight into Aquinas's position here by considering that there are biblical texts claiming that God is loving—and so is an *id quod est* (a being)—and Scriptural texts claiming that God is love—and so is at least like an abstract universal.¹³ It seems, however, that it can't be right to maintain both these claims

¹¹ *ST* Ia q.13 a.9 ad 2. The translations of Aquinas's texts in this paper are mine.

¹² *ST* Ia q.13 a.1 ad 2. Cf. also *SCG* I c.30.

¹³ For an example of the first, see I John 4:10; and for an example of the second, see I John 4:8.

together. Love is abstract and universal, and an abstract universal is not a person. For that reason, it is not the sort of thing that can be loving. So it seems a category mistake to attribute loving to love.

On Aquinas's understanding of the doctrine of simplicity, however, we can make sense of both these biblical claims. Because God is simple and we do not comprehend his *quid est*, the best we can do is to adopt a kind of quantum metaphysics. Sometimes we have to characterize God with abstract terms—and so we say that God is love—and sometimes we have to characterize God with concrete terms—and so we say that God is loving.

On Aquinas's view, then, even if we do not know the *quid est* of God, we can have considerable positive knowledge about God anyway, just as we can have a significant body of knowledge about light on quantum physics. We can know that it is right to say that God is loving and also right to say that God is love.

So, if there is a God, then, on the doctrine of simplicity, the ultimate foundation of reality is best characterized and best known *both* as an abstract universal is characterized and known *and* as a concrete particular is characterized and known. If we could grasp the *quid est* of something that is properly spoken of both as *esse* and as *id quod est*, we might understand exactly how to explain what kind of thing can be characterized in these ways and what methods might best be used for coming to know it. But, as it is, on the doctrine of simplicity as Aquinas sees it, we do not comprehend God's *quid est*; and so we are limited to the kind of quantum metaphysics I have described here.¹⁴

And that is why philosophy and theology are complementary to each other, even if there is a God.

Conclusion

When the philosophical tradition that traces back to Athens was woven into the theological tradition that had its home in Jerusalem to produce the philosophical theology that came to be adopted by the major medieval theologians of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, one of the things that resulted was the doctrine of divine simplicity. If we start with the doctrine of simplicity, then we will see that it takes *both* the resources of the philosophical tradition tracing back to Athens and the theological tradition that has its home in Jerusalem to comprehend the ultimate foundation of reality. Philosophy, doctrinally understood, brings with it beliefs, practices, and traditions that help access the nature of being and to give knowledge of all that has being. Theology, doctrinally understood, brings with it beliefs, practices, and traditions that help connect human persons to the person of God and to gain comprehension of him.

So even if there is a God, the ultimate foundation of reality cannot be comprehended adequately by either theology or philosophy alone. If the God who is

¹⁴ I am grateful to David Burrell, Brian Davies, John Foley, Tim Pawl, Andrew Pinsent, and Theodore Vitali for comments on earlier versions of the material on divine simplicity.

the ultimate foundation of reality is simple, as the major monotheisms have supposed in the past, then God has to be understood both as being itself and as a being. Theology can give us access to the ultimate foundation of reality in one way, in its guise as a person, an *id quod est*. Philosophy can give us access to it in another way, in its guise as *esse*, as being itself.

Therefore, for one set of reasons or another, philosophy and theology are complementary to each other. The answer to the question I started with, then—“What *should* the relations between philosophy and theology be?” —is that, whatever the ultimate foundation of reality is, the two disciplines are indispensable to each other for the metaphysics and epistemology needed to understand our world.

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