

Response to Marc Cortez

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I am extremely grateful to Marc Cortez for his vigorous response to my lecture (Cortez 2013). My paper reviews a lot of territory and I marvel at the economical and fair-minded manner in which Cortez has covered most of the topics I mention. This is no mean achievement for the original lecture was a cross between an after-dinner speech, an occasional narrative, and a serious network of argument. Cortez has also identified the crucial point of disagreement, a matter I consider to be pivotal in any serious engagement with one's interlocutor. I take the core issue to be whether we should expand the nature and content of analytic theology to include resources that are currently under-developed within analytic philosophy or stick to a more constrained account of analytic theology and recognize the relevant limitations within the content of theology. So the issue before us is not the place of Continental philosophy in theology.¹ While I am generous in encouraging theologians to use whatever philosophical resources they find helpful and believe that various aspects of Continental philosophy can be extremely valuable,² my focus is the nature and scope of analytic theology. Let me work my way towards that issue by registering where I think there has been misunderstanding, noting *en passant* where we are in strong agreement, and drawing attention to where I think Cortez has failed to register my concerns.

First, contrary to what Cortez contends I do give my own definition of analytic theology. So let me repeat it here. "By analytic theology I mean here systematic theology attuned to the skills, resources, and virtues of analytic philosophy, broadly conceived."³ In speaking of systematic theology both the noun and qualifying adjective matter. The subject matter of theology is God; and Christian theology proper is systematic in the sense that it requires attention to a specific, inter-related network of topics and loci. Whether this definition is a bounded-set definition or not can be set aside here. My point is that I have no difficulty

¹ It is important that analytic philosophers and theologians not overestimate the role of Continental philosophy in contemporary theology. There is a tendency to exaggerate the role of Continental philosophy and theology in explaining the lack of clarity and rigor in contemporary theology. Continental philosophy when done well, for example in phenomenology, has its own canons of clarity and rigor. Moreover, if one scans the landscape of theology one might argue that contemporary work is much more concerned implicitly with issues in political philosophy than in Continental philosophy. Consider, for example, the nature of Liberation theology which can be highly suspicious of forms of existentialism and post-modernity, reading them informally in the aftermath of Marx and Gramsci as forms of escapism from historical reality.

² I have found conversations with and the lectures of Cyril O'Regan exceptionally illuminating both in terms of the reading of the history of philosophy and the illumination of theological themes.

³ I provide the same definition in my (2009, 54).

embracing the results that may arise from the more precisionist account of analytic philosophy common now in analytic philosophy and analytic theology. Quite the contrary, I think there are some issues where we absolutely need the help of our precisionist colleagues. The long-standing debate about the coherence of the doctrine of the Trinity immediately comes to mind. How far and where Cortez's vision of analytic theology will bear fruit is a contingent issue; I am sure the fruit will be forthcoming and may even be abundant. The bigger issue is whether we should limit analytic theology to this version, shoe-horning genuine alternatives within analytic philosophy and thus within analytic theology into this Procrustean bed.

Second, I have no doubt that there will be ways to run the reception of Michael Rea's P4 principle ("Work as much as possible with well understood primitive concepts and concepts that can be understood in terms of these"); the "as much as possible" can be explored not as a restrictive axiom but more as a default position (Rea 2009, 5). I am sure that many analytic theologians will be happy with this. However, Cortez is correct to note that I am not at all happy with this either as a historical or normative account of the analytic tradition. The problem on my end is that the expansion I am seeking in a way depends in part on the failure of the default position on specific issues, say, on the concept of divine action; so I am somewhat parasitic on the default position as a historical precursor to my own sensibilities. However, this is nothing new in philosophy; we generally find our way forward out of much-visited dead ends. I think that even the weaker default interpretation of P4 is a limiting condition that should be eschewed.

The reference to both historical and normative work in analytic philosophy explains the careful role I assign to the place of essentially contested concepts in my argument as a whole. Here I was not as clear as I might have been. I do not use the idea of essentially contested concepts as a prelude to my argument on canon but as a way of seeing how far precisionists will take seriously my worry about the limits of their enterprise. I use it as a test case, as a kind of semantic canary in the philosophical mine. If it is ignored or killed off then I think we are in trouble. I find that few analytic philosophers even know of essentially contested concepts. Happily, Cortez is an exception, yet I remain puzzled. I may be wrong here, but Cortez's own efforts to assimilate my arguments about canon to an instantiation of an essentially contested concept leave me wondering if he has actually taken the full measure of Gallie's original semantic and epistemological proposals (Gallie 1956). I nowhere treat canon as an essentially contested concept. The material on canon is quite distinct in both placement and content from the reference to essentially contested concepts. Formally it would appear that Cortez would like to treat essentially contested concepts as primitive or as amenable to analysis through primitive concepts. He is rightly cautious; he may well succeed in this, but I am skeptical at this point; and I think that the very move to stick with the project is what has gone wrong. Moreover, I am persuaded Gallie himself shows why this kind of project goes wrong with respect to certain crucial concepts in our language and why it also masks certain epistemological assumptions that should be challenged. Hence the various challenges posed to my deployment of the idea of essentially contested concepts are simply beside the point. My central question can be posed without

reference to essentially contested concepts, namely, are analytic theologians prepared to face head-on the challenge to a precisionist account of the movement from a body of literature that stresses the non-precisionist nature of a host of crucial concepts?⁴

The issue between us at this point is not easy to identify. On the one hand, Cortez perhaps thinks that failure to give priority to primitive concepts fosters laziness among theologians. But why should we think that this is the case? There are many ways to be intellectually lazy, so it is not clear why we should single out this cause as somehow privileged. My worry, on the other hand, is that the prioritizing of primitive concepts is the expression of a special kind of semantic dogmatism that inhibits better accounts of crucial concepts in our language. Challenging the omnicompetence of primitive concepts is not a matter of intellectual laziness but a matter of intellectual sensitivity and rigor. Moreover, it may take more than the adoption of P4 to bring intellectual laziness to an end in theology. My catalogue of potential objections can readily provide useful sites of inquiry for a host of causes why so much Christian theology is conceptually and epistemologically in need of repair.⁵ Hence my alternative and wider vision of analytic theology is not a license for laziness, sloppy thinking, or the like; it is a call for greater conceptual sensitivity and depth to our work. Put otherwise, I do not think there is such a thing as “the analytic method”; there is penetrating and rigorous contestation of what counts as analytic method. I want to keep the options open for future analytic theologians. For the most part (with a caveat entered below) I am not too worried about keeping the options open, for Michael Rea and other splendid leaders have made it clear that they are on board with genuine diversity.⁶

My comments on canon are meant to drive home the point that we need to look much more carefully, for example, at the changing and revolutionary history of our concepts, but I clearly failed to convey the crucial implications. Cortez, I think, begins to see what is at issue but I start to have doubts at one point of his paper when he casually but revealingly chides analytic theologians for not paying sufficient attention to the biblical texts from which theological formulations *are derived*. The topic, as he rightly registers, is a complex one but it is a massive epistemological and theological assumption to think that this should hold across the board in theology. I think that analytic theologians should challenge it root and branch; and then tackle the constructive work that needs to be done. Of course, if analytic theology is simply a handmaid to certain forms of Reformed theology (and of certain forms of Thomism), and if we carefully screen out alternative conceptions in the name of primitive concepts and other methodological desiderata, then we at least know what is at issue. Analytic philosophy is simply being plundered to shore up one confessional vision of the Christian faith. In a way my paper is a trumpet

⁴ A similar kind of worry has arisen from the Jewish side in a fine collection of essays by Howard Wettstein (2012). A neglected but crucial discussion of what is at issue can be found in Morris Weitz (1977).

⁵ Some of our problems are straightforwardly curricular in nature, but that is a topic beyond the scope of this response.

⁶ This is clearly visible in the range of contributions to be found in *Analytic Theology, New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*.

blast against this agenda. Such a trumpet blast is needed not just because this is a perception of analytic theology within some contemporary theological circles that needs to be countered but because it is a normative temptation that should be counter-balanced by those of us who do not stand in this tradition.

I can make the same point historically. Analytic theology did not begin with the publication of *Analytic Theology*. Richard Swinburne has been doing it for years; so have Basil Mitchell, John Lucas, and many others. All of my own work in theology is unintelligible if one does not know of my training in analytic philosophy.⁷ Yet this general point about the deeper history is insufficiently recognized. What we have now in play is a new and much more intentional phase of analytic theology; it is crucial that earlier less precisionist forms (as well as precisionist forms) be part of the wider narrative. The danger of a promising field being high-jacked by a narrow band of confessional scholars who turn to precisionist forms of analytic philosophy as an apologetic strategy is a real one; we need vigilance as we move into the future. My primary concern is to ensure that the full resources of analytic philosophy be in play, that the full range of theological topics receives the attention they deserve, and that the full range of confessional commitments be present. All these require precisely the more expansive vision of analytic theology I am canvassing with some aggression.

Cortez rightly mentions that there will be various ways of moving forward, so that, say, biblical scholars and analytic philosophers should settle in and sort out this or that theme or topic. He provides a splendid defense of limiting theology in various ways in dealing with my wider raft of potential objections. There is merit in this for it is often good to drill deep and stick closely to certain precise and restricted forms of evidential control. However, I am less ready than he is to let theologians off the hook at this point. I am especially concerned to keep in play the systematic nature of our work, that is, the way in which work on one locus will constrain and inform that of another and where the work as a whole needs to inform the various parts. Analytic theology cannot simply be a repackaging of philosophical theology, or of philosophy of religion, or of philosophy of theology, or of the epistemology of theology. Its most recent phase clearly involves deep dissatisfaction not with, say, moral theology, but with systematic theology. The complaint has been that theologians have too readily drawn on the confusions of the Continental tradition or on the speculations of the Process tradition and now need the resources of the analytic tradition. The target has not been, say, Biblical theology or philosophical theology but systematic theology. Given this motivation, that is, the intention to fix the work of systematic theology, analytic theology must take seriously the desiderata attendant on theology proper. Of course, we can have various monographs on this or that theme, but this is only half the story. And of course, there will be significant debate about how best to construe theology proper.⁸ Moreover, we can always find plausible excuses for failing to tackle this agenda. However, even as we can recognize a counsel of perfection for what it is, it will not

⁷ This applies even to such an unlikely candidate as the theology of evangelism, as is indicated in the very title of *The Logic of Evangelism* (Abraham, 1989).

⁸ John Webster's "Theological Theology" is well worth pondering on this topic (2005, 11-32).

do to lower the bar when the analytic theologians show up. We must come to terms with the discipline as it is across the years rather than reorganize it to fit our prior agendas.

I also agree that it is difficult to avoid the traps of academic specialization. One way to think of my lecture is to see it as a call to avoid the one trap of academic specialization that some analytic theologians might miss, namely, the limiting of their own work to one precisionist version of the profession as a default position. We cannot complain about the evil of academic specialization and then proceed to practice it ourselves within analytic theology. We need to deploy the full range of strategies that have developed within analytic philosophy and we need to cover the waterfront within theology proper.

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