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# Moser, Ambiguity, and Christ-Shaped Philosophy

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***Abstract:** I argue that Moser's call for "Christ-Shaped Philosophy" suffers from some serious ambiguities. On the one hand, he fails to distinguish clearly enough between the contents of philosophical positions and the attitudes that are constitutive of philosophical engagement. On the other hand, he fails to distinguish clearly enough between the claim that Christian philosophy should be consistent with Christian doctrine, the claim that Christian philosophy should entail Christian doctrine, and whatever claims there might be that are intermediate between these two. I suggest that the most that "Christ-Shaped Philosophy" should require is that the attitudes that Christians take in their engagement with philosophy should be consistent with their Christian beliefs. I also suggest that the claim that Christian philosophy should always entail Christian doctrine is plausibly at odds with attitudes that are constitutive of philosophical engagement (in particular, with commitment to the goal of achieving genuine understanding of diverse worldviews).*

1. Moser makes remarks like the following: "A Christian philosophy must accommodate the subversive Christian message" (1); "If Christian philosophy is genuinely Christian, it should accommodate Gethsemane union with Christ" (8); "Christian philosophy must be continuous with the content of the Good News of God in Christ" (10). These remarks are ambiguous between at least the following two claims: (A) CONSISTENCY: Christian philosophy must *be consistent with* Christian doctrine; (B) ENTAILMENT: Christian philosophy must *entail* Christian doctrine.
2. The expression "Christian philosophy" is also ambiguous. On the one hand, it can be taken to refer to the distinctive content of certain philosophical theories; on the other hand, it can be taken to refer to a distinctive mode of engagement in philosophical discussion (and so to the attitudes—beliefs, desires, intentions, etc.—that are characteristic of that mode of engagement). Moser himself draws a couple of what/how distinctions—at p.9 and p.10—but fails to observe corresponding distinctions that bear on his key terminology.
3. Moser makes some claims which suggest that he thinks that Christian philosophy must ENTAIL certain kinds of claims (concerning, for example, the "vital flood of God's agape in Christ" (5)). Moreover, he says that

Christian philosophy should be “a model for other disciplines” (1), and that “if Christ is to be preeminent in everything, then he should be preeminent in philosophy, and in every other academic discipline too” (3). But it seems to me to be absurd to suppose that, for example, mathematical, or physical, or chemical, or biological theories must entail this kind of claim. If I’m studying metric space theory, then I’m studying metric space theory, and claims about the vital flood of God’s agape in Christ simply don’t enter into the content of my study. (Even if you think that these claims about the vital flood of God’s agape in Christ are NECESSARY, you will surely admit that these claims cannot be INFERRED from claims that are proper to mathematics, or physics, or chemistry, or biology. To circumvent worries, we can replace earlier talk of “entailment” with talk of “being *a priori* deducible from”.)

4. Moreover, this point about other disciplines also carries over UNCONTROVERSIALLY to most of the sub-disciplines of philosophy: logic, philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of language, philosophy of physics, philosophy of biology, (most of) epistemology, (most of) metaphysics, (most of) history of philosophy, and so on. When I am thinking about semantics for relevant logics, or the independence of the continuum hypothesis, or persistence conditions for material objects, or the possibility of knowing without knowing that I know, or the modal interpretation of quantum mechanics, or the definition of species, or the correct interpretation of Part X of Hume’s *Dialogues*, or almost *any other* philosophical questions that I think about, claims about the vital flood of God’s agape in Christ properly DO NOT enter the content of my thought. Unless we suppose that Moser thinks that Christians are forbidden to study mathematics, and physics, and chemistry, and biology, and logic, and philosophy of mathematics, and philosophy of language, and philosophy of physics, and philosophy of biology, and most of epistemology, and most of metaphysics, and most of history of philosophy, and so on, it seems to me that he CANNOT be taken to mean that Christian philosophy must ENTAIL Christian doctrine (that Christian mathematics must ENTAIL Christian doctrine, that Christian physics must ENTAIL Christian doctrine, and so on).

5. Perhaps there are some further things that Moser says that DO commit him to the claim that Christians are forbidden to study disciplines whose content properly does not overlap with Christian doctrine. Consider, for example, the following passage:

There are many ways to mislead and obstruct people regarding God. ... One such diversion occurs when a philosophy ... ignores the redemptive importance of Gethsemane union with the inward

Christ. If attention is directed away from such union, as with most philosophy, one easily can neglect the importance of such union for human redemption. A test question arises for any proposed Christian philosophy: does the philosophy uphold the importance of one's obediently dying with Christ under the guiding agent power of God? If not, the philosophy misses the mark as a Christian philosophy. (8)

Given that what goes for Christian philosophy goes for other disciplines as well, it seems that Moser *might* here be committed to the claim that disciplines whose content properly does not overlap with the Christian message are misleading, obstructive, and pose 'diversionary dangers' to would-be Christians. This strikes me as an appalling and untenable anti-intellectualism, though one that is not without precedent in the history of Christian "thought": consider, for example, Pascal's renunciation of mathematics and physics on the grounds that their pursuit is nothing more than 'worldly vanity'. Of course, it hardly needs to be added that there are alternative currents in the history of Christian thought: consider, for example, those who have supposed that, qua architect of human understanding, God rejoices in the exercise of human intellect for its own sake (in the advancement of mathematics, or physics, or philosophy, etc.).

6. It seems to me that the MOST that Moser should want to claim is that there is a distinctive *mode of engagement* in philosophical discussion that is *consistent with* Christian doctrine. Just as one might suppose that the God who died on the cross in Christ rejoices in one's exercise of one's intellect in the pursuit of mathematics, or physics, or chemistry, so, too, one might suppose that the God who died on the cross in Christ rejoices in one's exercise of one's intellect in the pursuit of philosophy (in logic, or philosophy of mathematics, or philosophy of language, or philosophy of physics, or philosophy of biology, or epistemology, or metaphysics, or history of philosophy, or whatever). True enough, there will likely be *other* areas of one's life in which there is more *vivid* expression of one's Christian attitudes; but this fact does not undermine the claim that one's engagement with philosophy *is* an expression of one's Christian attitudes.

7. Perhaps it might be objected that my discussion to this point has operated with an insufficiently thick conception of philosophy. In particular, one might wish to think of a philosophy as an expression of a worldview—a comprehensive set of attitudes encompassing both theory and practice. Moreover, from this standpoint, one might object that the 'disciplines' of philosophy mentioned earlier are 'merely academic', 'impersonal', insufficiently 'confessional', and so on (10). However, this objection seems to me, yet again, to trade on ambiguity. The discipline of philosophy—like the disciplines of mathematics, chemistry, biology, and so forth—are part of

the common intellectual heritage of all people, irrespective of their religious and philosophical *commitments*. Philosophers typically have philosophies (worldviews); but the discipline of philosophy has all possible philosophies as its proper subject matter. So—perhaps—there is a sense in which philosophy itself is ‘impersonal’; but it does not follow from this that the contribution that individual philosophers make to philosophy must be ‘impersonal’, not ‘confessional’, and so forth. Moreover, on the other hand, there are significant values that are proper to the conduct of the discipline of philosophy itself, such as the value of working out what a view is committed to *before* you turn to criticise it.

8. Philosophers often live in ways that embody commitment to significant values: concern for truth, fairness, justice, welfare, freedom of speech, respect, toleration, and so forth. A significant dimension of the assessment of philosophers is their worth as persons—but this assessment might sometimes float free from the worth of their contribution to philosophy. (It is, after all, part of philosophical folklore that ethics professors are the least moral class of philosophers!) Moreover, of course, philosophers who profess commitments to certain values but who do not embody those values in their lives are, where not weak-willed, simply hypocritical. In particular, then, those philosophers who claim to have taken on board the Christian Good News would be hypocritical in failing to embody the relevant values, except insofar as they are weak-willed. So, it seems, if there are significant values embedded in the acceptance of the Christian Good News, and if those values can be appropriately modelled in philosophical engagement, then Christian philosophers who did not model those values in their philosophical engagement would be either hypocritical or weak-willed.

9. Of course, a highly significant question that now opens up is whether there *are* any significant values embedded in the acceptance of the Christian Good News that can be appropriately modelled in philosophical engagement. While it can hardly be denied that there are values embedded in the acceptance of the Christian Good News that can be appropriately modelled in *theological* engagement—or in *missionary* activity—it is plainly controversial whether there are exclusively Christian values that are proper to philosophical engagement (and, as we have already noted, there are ways of construing the Christian Good News on which it embeds values that are positively inimical to philosophical engagement).

10. In particular, if you think that there is something wrong with trying to understand other points of view, then, I think, you hold values that are inimical to genuine philosophical engagement. Moser writes: “If ... one pursues philosophy just to understand ... rather than from and for the glory of God in Christ, one is not doing robust Christian philosophy” (10) and

(approvingly) “Philosophy outside the authority of Christ, according to Paul, is dangerous to human freedom and life” (2). I suspect, therefore, that Moser himself holds values that are inimical to genuine philosophical engagement. The “Christ-Shaped Philosophy” that he advocates has no interest in understanding alternative views, or in comparing the costs and benefits of adopting alternative views. On that account, it seems to me that it is more properly classified as *dogmatic theology*. (Moser actually writes: “ ... just to understand, acquire truth, or show off one’s intellectual skills, rather than ...” (10, quoted just above). Of course, I agree that merely showing off one’s intellectual skills is not a proper motive for philosophy, let alone for Christian philosophy. But understanding and truth just are the proper goals of philosophy: we engage in philosophical inquiry when we do not know where the truth lies, or where we feel that our understanding is weak, and where we do not have any other ready means for attaining the truth or advancing our understanding.)

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