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A Reply to William Hasker's Objection to "Christ-Shaped Philosophy"

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Abstract: This paper responds to William Hasker's objection to my paper, "Christ-Shaped Philosophy," that "paradoxically, its view of philosophy is at the same time too high and too low...." It contends that the objection is misplaced, partly because the profession of philosophy does not determine what genuine philosophy is.

1. The Objection

Hasker proposes that "paradoxically, [Paul Moser's] view of philosophy is at the same time too high and too low...." Regarding the allegation that it is too high, he remarks: "Why is it important for him to describe both Jesus and Paul as philosophers? It seems clear that this description is meant as a way of honoring the Lord and his apostle, a way of affirming the prestige and authority which they have for Christian believers." Hasker dissents as follows: "But neither did they perform the sorts of activities characteristic of philosophers, then or now.... So why, I ask again, should we call them philosophers?"

The clear implication of Hasker's remarks is that we should not call Jesus and Paul "philosophers," because in calling them philosophers we are exalting philosophy in an improper manner. We then are promoting a view of philosophy that is, in his language, "too high." Philosophy, according to Hasker, should not pretend to reach so high as to include Jesus and Paul as philosophers.

Unfortunately, Hasker does not clarify what exactly he himself means by the slippery term "philosophy." The term is indeed slippery, almost beyond grasping. People speak blithely of one's "philosophy" for winning a football game, for teaching a college class, and even for marketing a new food product. Such talk of "philosophy" seems to be nothing more than talk of a "strategy." This is a very thin use of the term, and I would not recommend it. A hint at Hasker's use emerges from his following clause: "the value of the things

philosophers actually do – of the things in which the profession of philosophy largely consists, in the real world.” This identity statement is crucial to Hasker’s case regarding philosophy, but it leads to trouble, at least for a distinctively Christian approach to philosophy.

Courtesy of his identify statement, Hasker allows “philosophy” to be determined by “the profession of philosophy,” specifically by “the things in which the profession of philosophy largely consists, in the real world.” *Professional* philosophy, then, is the defining standard for what is to count as “philosophy.” Now, Hasker can use the term “philosophy” however he wishes, and it is not surprising when a professional philosopher invokes “the profession of philosophy” as the benchmark for what philosophy and philosophers are. I recommend, however, a more normative use of the terms “philosophy” and “philosophers” that can be *corrective* toward “the profession of philosophy” as it exists “in the real world.”

Careful reflection on “the profession of philosophy ... in the real world” reveals, with no room for serious doubt, that “the profession” is fractured and polymorphic to the point of breathtaking bewilderment, if not outright embarrassment. This lesson is an empirical matter that can be confirmed decisively by attendance at any of the national meetings of the APA and SPEP (so much the better if one’s university foots the considerable bill). An attentive person will leave the meetings, head spinning, wondering why the astonishingly different participants are all called “philosophers,” as if they had something intellectually significant in common. This person will have a renewed, legitimate version of Hasker’s question: “So why, I ask again, should we call them philosophers?” So far as I can tell, no easy answer is forthcoming, and Hasker offers no plausible hint of an answer. At any rate, few, if any, people would be satisfied this quick answer: the participants pay dues to a professional philosophy association. Such an answer would lack explanatory depth.

2. Wisdom in Philosophy

I recommend an approach to “philosophy” that has some normative teeth and fits with the etymology of the term: as a *practice*, it is the love and pursuit of *wisdom*, where wisdom is an objective reality, and not just what some “profession” says it is. As *content*, philosophy is what qualifies as a suitable product of such a practice. Professions sometimes become highly fractured and polymorphic, as in the case of the APA and SPEP, owing to various distorting political and financial goals that do not line up with wisdom at all, or even the love and pursuit thereof.

If Jesus and Paul do not model the love and pursuit of wisdom, then I do not know who does. In fact, if they do not, then nobody else does either.

Very few things are more obvious to me. The fact that Jesus and Paul did not pay dues to a “professional” society like the APA or SPEP or teach in a philosophy department should not count against their being models of the love and pursuit of wisdom. It would be odd indeed to suggest otherwise. In fact, it would be to impose a “profession” standard on them that has no essential connection to the love and pursuit of wisdom, or to philosophy as properly understood.

We could haggle forever over the exact sense of “wisdom,” but that would gain us little. Instead, we should note that Western philosophy began with the concerns of Socrates and Plato about wisdom (*sophia*). Famously, Socrates launched a discussion of wisdom as follows:

I shall call as witness to my wisdom, such as it is, the god at Delphi ... I am only too conscious that I have no claim to wisdom, great or small. So what can he mean by asserting that I am the wisest man in the world? He cannot be telling a lie; that would not be right for him.... The truth of the matter ... is pretty certainly this, that real wisdom is the property of God, and this oracle is his way of telling us that human wisdom has little or no value. It seems to me that he is not referring literally to Socrates, but has merely taken my name as an example, as if he would say to us, The wisest of you men is he who realized, like Socrates, that in respect of wisdom he is really worthless (*Apology*, 20e, 21b, 23a–b, trans. H. Tredennick; cf. *Phaedrus* 278d).

According to Socrates and Plato, wisdom leads to happiness (*Meno*, 88c) but requires a kind of human “purification” (*Phaedo*, 69c), because it provides an escape from evil (*Phaedo*, 107c–d). In the *Laws*, Plato portrays the Athenian as stating: “righteousness, temperance, and wisdom [are] our salvation, and these have their home in the living might of the gods, though some faint trace of them is also plainly to be seen dwelling here within ourselves” (10.906b, trans. A. E. Taylor).

In Plato’s formative view, wisdom belongs to God (not humans), counters evil, and contributes to human happiness and even “salvation.” Platonic salvation via wisdom includes the deliverance of the human mind/soul from the vicissitudes of change into acquaintance with the immutable and invisible constituents of reality (see *Phaedo*, 79). Plato’s view of wisdom is widely rejected by contemporary philosophers, because most Western philosophers now aim to avoid reliance on God in their philosophy. Even so, Plato offered an approach to wisdom that merits comparison with a Christian approach. If “real wisdom is the property of God,” as Plato claimed, then wisdom is theological. It would be implausible, in any case, for one to infer, by

appeal to “the profession of philosophy,” that Socrates and Plato are not philosophers, after all. In addition, one can argue that if, as seekers of wisdom, Socrates and Plato qualify as philosophers, then Jesus and Paul do, too.

The apostle Paul’s approach to wisdom differs from Plato’s, but Paul also acknowledges God as the source of human wisdom via a divine gift. Paul draws from Isaiah 29:14 that God aims to “destroy the wisdom of the wise” (1 Cor. 1:19; cf. 3:18–20) in order to undermine human boasting in humans rather than in God (1 Cor. 1:29–31; cf. 3:21). Paul holds that for a lasting good life, as an alternative to despair (cf. 2 Cor. 4:8), humans need to rely on God’s wisdom and power instead of a human alternative. Human reliance on God’s wisdom and power, however, is no casual matter; it requires dying to human anti-God ways in order to live cooperatively with God. It thus requires one’s struggling with oneself, at the deepest level.

Paul acknowledges: “My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, *so that* your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:4–5, italics added). Paul then contrasts “human” wisdom with “God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory” (1 Cor. 2:7). The key difference between the two is that God’s wisdom has the divine *power* (*dunamis*), including the power of self-giving *agapē*, to give a *lasting good life* to receptive humans, as an alternative to despair, whereas human wisdom does not. Only God’s wisdom can empower human salvation as a lasting good life anchored in good, self-giving personal relationships under God.

We can see the role of human weakness, or impotence, in relation to God’s power. Paul remarks: “we have this treasure [of salvation from God] in clay jars, *so that* it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not belong to us” (2 Cor. 4:7, italics added). The power and wisdom needed by humans, according to Paul, must come from God, because God alone has such power and wisdom. As “Christ-Shaped Philosophy” noted, Paul describes the relevant power and wisdom as follows:

We have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all *spiritual wisdom* and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. May you be made strong [=empowered] with all the strength [=power, *dunamis*] that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father (Col. 1:9–12, NRSV, italics added).

Paul’s “spiritual wisdom” is not mere knowledge that a claim is true; instead, it is directed toward “lead[ing] lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him.” It welcomes God’s power for the sake of joyfully enduring life’s difficulties with patience. This is the power to endure life while honoring and thanking God, come what may, even in circumstances of severe temptation to despair.

We now have a sharp contrast between “spiritual wisdom” and mere knowledge and even any kind of “human wisdom.” Exceeding mere knowledge, spiritual wisdom *welcomes* God’s power, including the power of *agapē*, for the sake of living a lasting good life, pleasing to God (or, “worthy of the Lord”). Suppose I know that I cannot save myself if I must meet God’s standard of perfect *agapē*, because I have obvious deficiencies on this front. This knowledge of my inadequacy may be genuine knowledge, but it still could be accompanied by a defective volitional attitude of mine toward the reality in question.

Paul anchors spiritual wisdom not in an abstract principle or a Platonic Form, but instead in a personal agent who manifests God’s power without defect. He refers to “Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24) and to “Christ Jesus who became for us wisdom from God ... and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30). An immediate question concerns what particular features of the person Jesus Christ constitute his being the power and the wisdom of God.

Paul’s answer includes the following:

Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross (Phil. 2:5–8).

A key feature is the willing conformity of Jesus to God’s will, even when the result is self-sacrificial death. Paul introduces the idea of Jesus’s *humble obedience* to God to capture this feature. This obedience differs from *grudging* obedience and even *mere* obedience; it ultimately welcomes God’s perfect will, even if one is initially ambivalent and faces rigorous consequences. In his conformity to God’s will, Jesus exemplifies the power and wisdom of God as an agent humbly and reverently cooperating with God on the basis of God’s wisdom and power, including the power of self-giving *agapē*.

3. Christian Philosophy

My essay “Christ-Shaped Philosophy” offers Paul’s approach to wisdom as philosophy under Christ, which involves a distinctive kind of wisdom, namely, God’s wisdom in Christ. If philosophy is the love and pursuit of wisdom, *Christian* philosophy is the love and pursuit of God’s wisdom under divine authority in Christ, which calls for an ongoing union with Christ, including one’s belonging to God in Christ. The latter wisdom contrasts with what Paul calls “human wisdom” (1 Cor. 2:4-5). If someone finds this approach to Christian philosophy “too high,” a simple question arises: too high *for what?* The fact that this approach challenges business as usual among professional philosophers, as represented in the APA and SPEP, is no reason against this approach. On the contrary, we should expect such a challenge given the transformative and redemptive kind of divine wisdom offered by Jesus and Paul.

As indicated, Hasker finds my view of philosophy not only “too high,” but also “too low.” He objects that I have “a distressingly low opinion of the value of the things philosophers actually do – of the things in which the profession of philosophy largely consists, in the real world.” A natural question, by way of reply, is: too low for what? The key assumption is that my view is too low for “the profession of philosophy” and is “distressing” in that regard. Hasker laments that I do not concur with the many people who “have viewed the perennial nature of philosophical questions as a positive, and indeed endearing, characteristic of the discipline.” I confess: I do indeed fail to find that apparently perennial nature “endearing,” given my ongoing desire for cogent true answers to the relevant questions.

In the apostle Paul’s aforementioned perspective, we are to seek what he calls “God’s wisdom” and “spiritual wisdom,” the kind of wisdom that figures in a human life pleasing to God. This is the same Paul who announced that “whatever does not proceed from faith [in God] is sin” (Rom. 14:23, RSV). Perhaps, by Hasker’s standard, Paul’s view is “too low” regarding “the things in which the profession of philosophy largely consists.” It seems so. I have no sweeping view to offer regarding “the profession of philosophy,” given its fractured and polymorphic status. It is clear, however, that such a fractured profession does not merit praise as a whole. Taken as a whole, it is at best a morass. As a result, we need a criterion to separate the good from the bad and the ugly.

The kind of Christ-shaped philosophy offered by the apostle Paul offers the needed criterion. So far as I can see, Hasker has not offered a better criterion. A criterion of “the profession of philosophy” will lead only to trouble, as suggested. In comparison with that criterion, Christ-shaped

philosophy seems neither too high nor too low, but just about right, at least if Jesus and Paul are headed in the correct, redemptive direction.

As for Hasker's concluding biographical reflection, I do not see how it advances the discussion toward the needed criterion, to separate the good from the bad and the ugly in the profession. A Christian philosopher may perform various services to others, even to a profession of others, without thereby doing distinctively "Christian philosophy." We should not assume that all of life, even the life of a Christian philosopher, must engage in Christian philosophy. In contrast, all of Christian life should include faith and obedience toward God in Christ. Christian philosophy promotes such faith and obedience, but does not itself exhaust those two duties from God.

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