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Christian Philosophy and Philosophy's Perennial Problems

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Abstract: I join Paul Moser, William Hasker, and Graham Oppy in that part of their discussion which concerns philosophy's perennial problems. I argue that in their challenge to Moser's project, for the most part, Hasker and Oppy draw from the extensive range of such questions, while avoiding the obvious, namely, philosophy's "big questions." I argue that it is the latter which, in an important sense, contextualize and serve as prolegomena for the Good News of God in Christ. However, this only occurs for a properly Christian philosophy, when through biblical answers many of these questions come to closure. On the other hand, when philosophy insists on non-closure and writes the rules of knowing such that what Scripture says about these questions does not count as knowledge, it keeps at bay what Moser calls "God's inquiry in Christ."

Hasker and Oppy have concluded that Moser's "Christ-Shaped Philosophy" is, at best, not "philosophy" properly understood. More specifically, Hasker is willing to accommodate Moser's project as "philosophical" only if it is clearly distinguished from "philosophy" defined by its professionals.¹ Hasker closes his second reply to Moser:

There are, indeed, two "wisdoms" and also two "philosophies," and it is important to be clear about the distinctions between them.²

In addition, Oppy understands Moser's project as what is "more properly classified as *dogmatic theology*."³ This divide is especially evident in the manner in

¹ William Hasker, "'Two Wisdoms,' Two 'Philosophies': A Rejoinder to Moser," p. 1. All papers cited in this paper are available at <http://bit.ly/ChristShapedPhilosophyProject>.

² Ibid., pp. 2 and 5.

³ Graham Oppy, "Moser, Ambiguity, and Christ-Shaped Philosophy," p. 5.

which these esteemed thinkers characterize philosophy's problems. On the one hand, we have Moser's more negative account:

Philosophical questions naturally prompt philosophical questions about philosophical questions, and this launches a regress of higher-order, or at least, related, questions, with no end to philosophical discussion. Hence, the questions of philosophy are notoriously perennial.⁴

And, on the other hand, we get Hasker's favorable review of the same as a counter to Moser,

But while many have viewed the perennial nature of philosophical questions as a positive, and indeed endearing, characteristic of the discipline, for Moser's version of Christian philosophy it is an evil that needs to be overcome.⁵

Similarly, Oppy contrasts his own view of philosophy with Moser's in the following manner:

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.⁶

In sympathy with Hasker and Oppy, it is clear that there is an extensive range of questions which may be called "philosophical." And to ward off concerns, I will state at the outset that the history and content of philosophy as it deals with all these questions is both valuable and worthy of Christian engagement as a discipline. In some qualified sense, I think, even Moser himself would admit as much. On the other hand (to take Moser's side), as a

⁴ Paul K. Moser, "Christ-Shaped Philosophy: Wisdom and Spirit United," p. 12.

⁵ William Hasker, "Paul Moser's Christian Philosophy," p. 3.

⁶ Graham Oppy, "Moser, Ambiguity, and Christ-Shaped Philosophy," p. 2.

Christian I have long believed that philosophy as “the love of wisdom” is, properly speaking, *the love of Christ* (that is, there is one wisdom, one philosophy).

To support my view, I could note, for example, the apostle Paul’s statement that the Greeks seek wisdom (recall here Whitehead’s characterization of philosophy as “a series of footnotes to Plato”) *but* “we preach Christ crucified...[who is] the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:22-24). There is a contrast here. Admittedly, it appears at first that Paul supports Hasker’s “two wisdoms.” But surely what Paul finds objectionable is not the pursuit of wisdom itself. Nor is he suggesting that there are two wisdoms rather than one. Instead, the problem seems to be that the Greeks sought this wisdom *in themselves* (let’s say, their own reason or resources) apart from Christ and Scripture. An exact parallel to these wisdom-seeking Greeks is found in Paul’s characterization of Jews who sought righteousness in themselves: “For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness for everyone who believes” (Rom. 10:3-4). Notably, in terms of what God offers in Christ — the only true righteousness — there are not two forms of righteousness but one. And, no doubt there was a respected, scholarly tradition (a discipline, if you will) in first-century Judaism associated with this Jewish quest to establish their own righteousness. But, as was true of Paul’s wisdom-seeking Greeks, these righteousness-seeking Jews were missing the true end of what they sought, which is Jesus Christ.

With that said and given the great disparity Hasker and Oppy so clearly underscore between the already mentioned range of philosophy’s questions and the seemingly discordant, narrowly defined, and religious nature of Moser’s project, how do we derive from all this *one* wisdom, even *one* philosophy — and (of all things!) *in Christ*? Perhaps one way to go about this is to begin with the elementary questions typical of any introduction to philosophy. These are called, of course, “the big questions”: *What is the origin of the world? From whence do we come? Why are we here? Where are we going? What about death? Is there an afterlife? Is there right and wrong? Do good and evil exist? What is truth? Can we know anything with certainty? Are we by nature good or bad (or otherwise)? Do we need to be “saved”? What is justice or “the good”? Are we free or determined in some way? Do we have certain innate, even moral, principles? What is wisdom? What is the origin of the world? Is there a God? If there is a God, why does he permit evil and suffering? Is there an essence to what it means to be human? What is happiness and how is it attained?* Of course, there are many more questions like this, but these are sufficient for my purpose.

Now let us suppose that among the extensive range of questions in philosophy we call this particular group of questions: *Subset A*. In addition, I

think we would agree that most, if not all, of these philosophical questions qualify as “perennial,” if not “positive” and “endearing” (as Hasker has it). Of course, it is obvious that there are other questions and subsets of questions in philosophy of varying degrees of importance. (Consistent with Moser, I might wish to reserve a special subset, if not a lower ranking, to accommodate trivial questions on the order of how many angels can occupy certain small spaces.) My hope, however, is that we will not get sidetracked at this point over what properly belongs to Subset A. Specifically, for example, it is obvious I have not mentioned Oppy’s questions “about semantics for relevant logics, or the independence of the continuum hypothesis, or persistence conditions for material objects,” etc. Nor have I mentioned Hasker’s reference (in one of his replies to Moser) to Plato’s theory of forms or Aristotle’s doctrine of substance.⁷ To be sure, I do not intend to imply that such questions could not conceivably belong to Subset A. My concern, rather, is to indicate that by highlighting these particular questions in a discussion of Moser’s “Christ-Shaped Philosophy,” Oppy and Hasker seem (perhaps unwittingly) to sidestep philosophy’s signature questions — that is, what is (at least to my mind) more germane to Moser’s project. Moreover, I think we would also agree (in fairness to Moser) that if we were to eliminate Subset A from all the problems of philosophy, though philosophy itself would endure, it would suffer a significant reduction both in its status and importance as a discipline.

Accordingly, in this context, if Oppy and Hasker had focused more specifically on Subset A problems, first, in his reply to them perhaps the term, “philosophy,” would not have been quite so “slippery” for Moser;⁸ and, second, Oppy and Hasker would perhaps have found it more difficult to contain Moser’s controversial yet importantly foundational announcement:

A Christian philosophy must accommodate the subversive Christian message that the outcast Galilean ‘*Jesus* is Lord’ (1 Cor. 12:3; see Acts 2:36).⁹

As my attempt at just such an accommodation and mindful of my expressed intent to unify philosophy, I offer the following:

1. If the person of Jesus Christ is God’s answer to the grand mystery (the problem of problems) of the ages should he not

⁷ William Hasker, “Paul Moser’s Christian Philosophy,” p. 4.

⁸ Paul K. Moser, “A Reply to William Hasker’s Objection to ‘Christ-Shaped Philosophy,’” p. 1.

⁹ Paul K. Moser, “Christ-Shaped Philosophy: Wisdom and Spirit United,” p. 1.

be central to Subset A problems? If *all things* in a real sense were made through him and for him and hold together by him (Jn. 1:3; Col. 1:16-17, Heb. 1:3), how can we talk metaphysics without *him*?

2. If there are biblical answers (closure) for Subset A problems, why should we not take them seriously? For example, that God created the world (Gen. 1:1), made people in his image (Gen. 1:26); that humankind fell in Adam (Rom. 5:12, 19), yet also received God's promise of a Savior (Gen. 3:15; Rom. 16:20); that this One in time was disclosed as Jesus of Nazareth (Rom. 16:20; 1 Cor. 15:1-8) — do these and many other declarations in Scripture not bring closure to many Subset A problems?

Though not stated in these terms, this seems to be what Moser is after:

I confess: I do indeed fail to find that apparently perennial nature [of philosophical questions - ing] “endearing,” given my ongoing desire for cogent true answers to the relevant questions . . . we need a criterion to separate the good from the bad and the ugly.¹⁰

I would also suggest that there is an important implication here for Oppy's helpful description 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.¹¹

That is, it means that for Subset A problems with biblical answers we as Christians “know where the truth lies,” and therefore, our understanding is not “weak” in that sense, nor do we lack “ready means for attaining the truth or advancing our understanding.” Therefore, these questions are for us *personally* not live, open, and enduring — “perennial” in that

¹⁰ Paul K. Moser, “A Reply to William Hasker's Objection to ‘Christ-Shaped Philosophy,’” p. 6.

¹¹ Graham Oppy, “Moser, Ambiguity, and Christ-Shaped Philosophy,” p. 5.

sense. However, such questions may remain “perennial,” even under closure, in a formal or historical sense (just as the Gospel once disclosed was still called a “mystery” — Col. 1:26). Therefore, when people (philosophical or not) still ask Subset A questions personally as open questions, it is apparently because either (1) they have not heard God’s Word or (2) they do not receive it. Admittedly, as philosophical, the latter comes with sophisticated reasons. However that may be, traditionally, we in philosophy have venerated the handling of these questions under one or the other of these conditions.

3. Is it not true that Subset A problems brought to closure through biblical answers contextualize and serve as necessary prolegomena for the kerygma of the Good News of God in Christ? And that, on the other hand, when Subset A problems resist biblical closure, they operate in such a manner as to preempt such — that is, both the prolegomena and the kerygma — from being established as truth?
4. Furthermore, is it true that Subset A problems must be kept from biblical closure, because philosophy is not about answers but questions? That is, have we not heard philosophy in many different contexts reach closure, such as, when it says: “there is no metanarrative,” “there is no meaning in the text,” “there are no facts, only interpretations,” “there is no objective truth,” “there is no God,” “there is no logos upholding the universe,” “there is no truth in religion,” “there is only the will to power,” “there is no knowledge but what can be known on demand empirically,” “there is no approach to philosophy appropriate but reason minus revelation,” “religion is about ‘faith’ not reason,” etc.?
5. Have not Subset A problems (sans biblical answers) been used in philosophy to keep at bay God’s own perennial questions to us *personally*? (T.S. Eliott says, “O my soul, prepare to meet him who knows how to ask questions.”) This also seems to be, at least, part of Moser’s concern:

No longer can Christian philosophers do philosophy without being, themselves, under corrective and redemptive inquiry by God in Christ.¹²

In the wider dialogue of this project, Michael McFall indicates this as well:

Moser seems concerned with who is really on trial – God or us. Following Kierkegaard’s example, we are the ones on stage being judged by God – even though this is at odds with traditional classroom conversations where God is on stage and trial.¹³

I only add here that this “redemptive inquiry by God in Christ” (that which calls for Moser’s “obedience mode” in a Spirit-empowered, “Gethsemane union with Christ”) is itself — at every point — informed and guided by biblical content.

6. While contemporary secular philosophy (perhaps bearing the torch of certain wisdom-seeking Greeks in Paul’s day?) cleverly protects the non-closure of Subset A problems by making rules for what counts as knowledge (*e.g.*, only what derives from naturalism), why should we as Christians follow such a notion? Is not such thinking metaphysically questionable, biblically objectionable, and injurious to the Christian faith as knowledge?
7. Though, admittedly, a Christian philosophy as I have described it, would change our handling of Subset A problems, is there any reason why knowledge on these terms would preempt the philosophical investigations Hasker and Oppy are concerned to protect? What would be lost in a philosophy unified through Christ?

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¹² Paul K. Moser, “Christ-Shaped Philosophy: Wisdom and Spirit United,” p. 1.

¹³ Michael T. McFall, “Christian Philosophy and the Confessional Classroom,” pp. 5-

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