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Existential and Phenomenological Conceptions of the Relationship Between Philosophy and Theology

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Living in the Existential Margins: Reflections on the Relationship Between Philosophy and Theology

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Abstract: In this essay, I outline my view of an epistemic distinction between philosophy and theology along the lines of different evidential authorities operating in the two disciplines. I then go on to suggest that this epistemic view allows for a recognition of different discursive loyalties. In distinction from what I term “Plantinga-type” views, I contend that my broadly postmodern Thomistic account is preferable because of the way in which it better reflects the existential reality of a plurality of loyalties in our lived existence. In this way, I offer a defense of an existential relationship of philosophy to theology that serves as increased warrant for the epistemic account.

Keywords: Philosophy and theology; Philosophy of religion; Plantinga; Epistemology, Christian philosophy

1 Introduction: on authorities . . . epistemic or otherwise

I have written quite a bit, and will likely write quite a bit more, on the relationship of philosophy and theology.¹ In my previous work, I have defended what might best be called an *epistemic conception* of this relationship. In this essay I hope to clarify this account on a few fronts and develop it a bit further in relation to its existential importance.

My basic view is that philosophy and theology should be differentiated along the lines of divergent epistemic appeals to evidence that is taken as immediately legitimate within philosophy and theology, respectively. Specifically, theology can and should appeal to evidence that is not immediately available to philosophy because it is located within determinate communities defined by revelational authorities. Exactly *how* such authority is manifest is less important than *that* it is authoritative due to its foundational status within the confessional community itself. Accordingly, such theological authority might be invested in a text (e.g., the Bible, the Qu’ran, or the Vedas, etc.), an institution (e.g., the church, the priesthood, or the rabbinic tradition, etc.), or an experience/practice (mystical, liturgical, or otherwise). Due to the constitutive role that such evidential authorities play within the particular historical religious community, theology, as I understand it, is not best understood as a generic discourse, but as always confessionally specific: *Christian* theology, *Jewish* theology, *Islamic* theology, etc. In this way, the evidence that is considered, in principle, as straightaway legitimate within Christian theology would not all be similarly legitimate within

¹ For example, see Simmons, “The Strategies of Christian Philosophy”; “Introduction: Why This? Why Now?”; “Continental Philosophy of Religion in a Kenotic Tone”; “Continental Philosophy”; “Cheaper than a Corvette”; “Personally Speaking”; “Prophetic Philosophy of Religion”; “On Shared Hopes for (Mashup) Philosophy of Religion.”

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Islamic theology, etc. As such, there is no easily articulated and epistemically defined stable discursive referent, “academic theology,” to which one could appeal in general without the confessionally specific qualifier. Alternatively, philosophy should appeal to evidence that is, I contend, in principle accessible to all members of the professional philosophical community. I should note, though, that saying philosophical evidence is available to all members of the philosophical community does not mean that it is accepted immediately (i.e. without further argument) *as* evidence by all members—so even though it is available in *principle* to all philosophers, it might not be understood as such in *practice*.

I want to make clear that my account of the epistemic distinction between philosophy and theology is meant to be normatively aspirational rather than rigidly descriptive of some sort of necessary state of affairs. That is, I do not care very much about who is “in” or “out” in relation to philosophy or theology understood as fixed ontological objects, but rather care about what I think ought to guide disciplinary self-description in ways that maximize the health of the discourses given where they find themselves internal to their contingent social histories and development. As such, there is no natural state of affairs that would prescribe “what it is to be a philosopher,” as it were. Instead, there are only ever contingent histories that make possible being “called” a philosopher or a theologian within a specific socio-cultural context. As such, my account offers what I think is the best way of making sense of philosophy and theology given where we find ourselves today. I am entirely open to the possibility that things might change in the future such that the discourses might need rethought or reframed accordingly.

There is much more to say about the specifics of my view, but since I have articulated the details elsewhere, here I want simply to lay out a basic outline for readers who may not be familiar with my previous work. After providing such an outline, I will turn to what I take to be the existential benefits of this view as opposed to what I consider to be the most prominent alternative conception on offer in the contemporary philosophical debates: the collection of views that I will refer to as “Plantinga-type.” My basic thesis is that Plantinga-type views end up misunderstanding the dynamic lived realities of conflicting discursive loyalties. I will suggest that the epistemic account I defend allows both for a robust dialogical engagement across discourses and disciplines without being hegemonic about a priority of one discourse in relation to another, and also for an appreciation of the existential dynamics of complicated embodied relationships that require a reevaluation of our loyalties in different contexts and in light of different audiences.

2 Thomas and Anselm: a contemporary restatement of a classical disagreement

There are all sorts of reasons that make evidence more or less compelling—prior beliefs, experiential backgrounds, cultural commitments, etc. Nonetheless, the appeals to reason and experience that should guide philosophical inquiry neither exclude perspectival differences in knowers, nor do they erase the insights of standpoint epistemology, more broadly. Indeed, what makes philosophical discourse distinctive from theological discourse is the way in which its evidential appeals are actually able to cut across the various perspectival standpoints of the participants in the discourse such that an argument’s strength is not taken to be affected by one’s own perspective (though living according to its conclusions might be). In contrast, even though theology might often make significant use of philosophical research, it has at its disposal evidential sources that require some additional specificity about one’s location in a confessional community. In light of this general framework, I understand my epistemic view to be a postmodern appropriation of the Thomistic account of the relation of philosophy (as grounded in general revelation available to all members of the philosophical profession) and theology (as grounded in special revelation available only to members of confessionally determinate religious traditions). In this way, I don’t actually think I am offering anything radical or new, but simply a contemporary defense of a very old view.²

² I have detailed the history of the various approaches to the relation of philosophy and theology (as concerns the notion of “Christian philosophy”) elsewhere, see Simmons, “Introduction: Why This? Why Now?”

Such meta-philosophical considerations regarding the epistemic, and specifically evidential, criteria for disciplinary demarcation are important because they disclose what I will refer to as rival *discursive loyalties* operative in theology and philosophy. The most common area in contemporary philosophy where such loyalties get intertwined is in the area of “Christian philosophy.” Famously Alvin Plantinga, and others associated with “Reformed Epistemology,” have suggested that a Christian philosopher’s loyalties should be first to the Christian community and only secondarily to the philosophical community (and I take it that this general framework would apply for other religious traditions as well).³ As just a few examples of how this priority of loyalties gets worked out, consider Plantinga’s claim that, the Christian philosophical community has its own agenda; it need not and should not automatically take its projects from the list of those currently in favor at the leading contemporary centers of philosophy. . . . the Christian philosophical community has a right to its perspectives; it is under no obligation first to show that this perspective is plausible with respect to what is taken for granted by all philosophers, or most philosophers, or the leading philosophers of our day.⁴

Although Plantinga presents his view as a matter of simply defending the “epistemic rights” of Christian philosophers to be philosophically innovative relative to questions grounded in their own religious commitments, which by itself is not theoretically problematic, the practical results can be a bit more troubling.

In prioritizing Christian commitments to philosophical commitments, *within the practice of philosophy*, Plantinga destabilizes the practice of philosophy itself such that it can easily become simply a subset of Christian theological practice. Accordingly, the distinction between philosophy and theology becomes quite blurry—even to the point of being no longer existent in some cases. For example, Nicholas Wolterstorff goes so far as to suggest that analytic philosophers, in general, are no longer concerned about maintaining any clear distinction between the two discourses at all:

It is my impression that continental philosophers remain very much concerned to preserve and protect the distinctness of philosophy as an academic discipline, a *Wissenschaft*. Kant’s anxiety is alive and well: given the progress of the ‘positive’ sciences, what is left for philosophy to do? That anxiety has largely disappeared from present-day analytic philosophy. ‘Is it philosophy or is it theology?’ What difference does it make, now that analytic philosophers no longer believe that for some piece of discourse to be a specimen of philosophy, the writer must base all his arguments on public philosophical reason? Call it what you will.⁵

Whether or not Wolterstorff is concerned about what we “call it,” the prioritization of a discursive loyalty to the confessionally specific community situates Christian philosophy as indistinguishable from Christian philosophical *theology*. For ease of reference, I will term this view of confessional philosophy that locates one’s religious loyalties as prior to one’s philosophical loyalties, “Plantinga-type.” In this way, my critique is not meant to be specific to Plantinga or Wolterstorff, as such, but instead simply to the sort of view that they, and many others, have defended in various ways. In brief, Plantinga-type views blur the line between philosophy and theology by minimizing philosophical distinctiveness in relation to theological practice—thus, philosophy becomes a matter of Christian life, rather than Christian life being considered as plausible in light of philosophical argumentation. I am not alone in suggesting that Plantinga-type Christian philosophy is best understood as theology.⁶ As such, the recent trend in Christian philosophy to identify as “analytic theology” seems entirely appropriate to me.⁷ Despite my frustration with the exclusivism regarding philosophical tradition and methodology on display in analytic theology, I applaud the honesty about the sort of work that is occurring. Whether good or bad, it is rightly designated *theology*.

If my epistemic view is generally *Thomistic*, then historically Plantinga-type views are generally, as Wolterstorff rightly recognizes, *Anselmian* in that they tend to see faith as the condition for understanding, rather than some form of embodied understanding as the lived framework in which faith then gets

³ See Plantinga, “Advice to Christian Philosophers.”

⁴ Plantinga, “Advice to Christian Philosophers,” 315.

⁵ Wolterstorff, “How Philosophical Theology Became Possible Within the Analytic Tradition of Philosophy,” 168.

⁶ See Schellenberg, “Is Plantinga-Style Christian Philosophy Really Philosophy?”

⁷ See Crisp and Rea, *Analytic Theology*.

articulated as a specific type of possibility for human epistemic, moral, and religious existence.⁸ Now, I want to note that, in many ways, Plantinga-type views are compellingly understood as simply proponents of a postmodern approach to epistemology such that we all start from somewhere in the process of inquiry. Yet, the general postmodern rejection of classical foundationalism that is characteristic of Reformed Epistemology is not really what differentiates it from other epistemic options. Instead, it is the positive suggestion that confessional starting points are equally philosophically viable. Yet, in this way, perhaps Plantinga-type views include too much such that problematic relativism looms large. Namely, on the one hand, Plantinga claims to be within his “epistemic rights” to begin *from* Christian theism, rather than arguing *for* it, and on the other hand, he raises legitimate worries about “the great pumpkin” objection.

Crucially, there is a relevant difference in affirming the inescapability of the hermeneutic circle for embodied knowers, and suggesting that we can all legitimately start doing philosophy wherever we find ourselves. Sometimes we need to change places in order to see things more clearly. When I say that philosophy should appeal to evidence that is, in principle, accessible by all members of the philosophical community, that is not to fall prey to rationalistic objectivism such that we could inhabit epistemic “views from nowhere,” but simply to point out that all philosophers are, *as philosophers*, situated in relation to the historical discourse designated as “philosophy.” It is because we all always starting from somewhere that philosophers should take seriously what it means to then think *as a philosopher*, rather than *as something else*—a theologian, a sociologist, a chemist, or whatever. This does not eliminate our embodied particularities, but simply admits, as Plantinga himself notes, that philosophy is a communal practice.⁹ Yet, when Plantinga rightly recommends that “Christian philosophers must be intimately involved in the professional life of the philosophical community at large, both because of what they can learn and because of what they can contribute,”¹⁰ he risks trying to have his cake and eat it too. If Christian philosophers are determined to insist on their epistemic rights to start with their Christian commitments, then being “intimately involved” in the philosophical community can amount to being willing to play a game only if one gets to set the rules to favor your own team.

Despite the admirable suggestion that Christian philosophers should not be isolated unto themselves, the temptation toward doing so such that philosophical engagement operates according to one’s own theological commitments seems inscribed within Plantinga-type approaches. The task, it seems to me, is to separate the promising postmodern epistemic insights defended by Reformed Epistemology from the problematic assumptions about confessional starting-points for philosophical inquiry that would make such assumptions available only to those affirming “Reformed” theological claims. There is a big difference between the humility required to recognize that one’s own commitments are not the only plausible ones available, on the one hand, and the temptation to insularity motivated by no longer having to make one’s views answer to a disciplinary evidence structure different from one’s theological authorities, on the other hand. Plantinga himself seems to acknowledge this temptation when he provocatively comments that contemporary Christian philosophy must avoid the threat of “triumphalism.”¹¹ As Plantinga explains, “we have become desecularized; it is now possible for Christian philosophers to work together and publish on topics that would have been beyond the pale forty years ago.”¹² Unfortunately, rather than seeing this as an opportunity for discursive hospitality as motivated from a new position of strength, Plantinga reaffirms what he takes to be the traditional philosophical culture war, as it were, by concluding that “*of course* the truth is the philosophical world . . . is for the most part hostile or indifferent to the concerns of Christian and theistic philosophers.”¹³ As I see it, it is precisely the priority of loyalties that Plantinga-type views set forth, and the blurring of disciplinary lines that follows from it, that invites such triumphalism to emerge within professional practice. Faced with Plantinga’s own admission about possible tendencies in contemporary

⁸ Plantinga sometimes defends what he terms “Augustinian Christian Philosophy” such that the “contest” between the *Civitas Dei* and the *Civitas Mundi* is highlighted (Plantinga, “Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century,” 341).

⁹ Plantinga, “Advice to Christian Philosophers,” 314.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Plantinga, “Response to Nick Wolterstorff,” 268.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

Christian philosophy, I think there are good reasons to oppose Plantinga-type approaches not only on philosophical grounds, but Christian ones as well. In particular, when we reject not only triumphalism, but the oppositional logic and loyalty prioritization that underwrite it, we might begin to model a philosophical kenosis that more robustly performs the truth of Christianity than any defense of the epistemic rights of starting from Christian theism ever could.¹⁴

By situating things as a matter of loyalty, rather than strict extra-discursive appeals, I hope to overcome some of the general misconceptions that often accompany debates about the relation of philosophy and theology. In particular, evidence is not context neutral such that theology is biased and philosophy is not. Instead, both are expressions of discursive loyalties such that neither is neutral nor objective. Philosophers and theologians, alike, are situated in contexts of meaning (hence my embrace of a general postmodern approach to epistemology), but the functioning of evidential authorities within the contexts is different (hence my critique of the way that Reformed Epistemology deploys positive confessional evidence as immediately legitimate for philosophical inquiry). I take issue, then, with Wolterstorff's suggestion that such an epistemic distinction between philosophy and theology depends on a notion of "public philosophical reason" that he finds to be characteristic of much of continental philosophy.¹⁵

My postmodern commitments to the contextualism of embodied, and we might say, affective, rationality are not threatened by the idea that all participants in a particular professional discourse should have access to the evidence offered in support of the claims made within that discourse. In this sense, I am quite sympathetic to Wolterstorff's notion of "dialogic rationality." As such, given the community-based historical contingency of all human discourse, things could be otherwise in philosophy and the disciplinary lines could be alternatively drawn, but at costs I do not believe are worth paying. Far from any sort of disciplinary essentialism, or commitment to objectivist public reason, my view is motivated precisely by a notion of philosophy and theology as thoroughly *historical* discourses. Far from minimizing the relevance of either, keeping them distinct in ways that Plantinga-type views do not, actually allows them both to function as mutually informing participants in the continuing historical conversation regarding the possible truth of religious belief and practice.

To borrow just a bit of phrasing from Stanley Hauerwas's formulation of church and state relations, we need philosophy to be philosophy and theology to be theology, in order for us all to be made better at thinking about the cultural forms, intellectual traditions, and phenomena that are often termed "religious." This is not intended as some facile suggestion that different scholars should "stay in their lane" or whatever. Instead, it is a recognition that the training and emphasis of intellectual sophistication in each of these disciplines is differently positioned. As such, being trained in philosophy, whether analytic or not, is unlikely to provide the historical, textual, linguistic, and hermeneutic facility that the best theology requires. Alternatively, being trained in theology, whether Christian or not, is unlikely to provide the logical, argumentative, and historical facility that the best philosophy requires. As such, I think that there are problems with Plantinga's claim that in many ways the best philosophical theology is being done by (analytic) philosophers:

Philosophical theology is a matter of thinking about the central doctrines of the Christian faith from a philosophical perspective; it is a matter of employing the resources of philosophy to deepen our grasp and understanding of them . . . The theologians don't seem to be doing the work in question. I therefore hope I will not be accused of interdisciplinary chauvinism if I point out that the best work in philosophical theology—in the English-speaking world and over the past quarter century—has been done not by theologians but philosophers.¹⁶

Even if it is not interdisciplinary chauvinism, this claim is still a bit reductive in relation to what philosophical theology involves as a practice with its own history. I applaud philosophers contributing to theological discourse, and I welcome theologians doing work relevant to philosophy, but at the end of

¹⁴ See Simmons, "Continental Philosophy of Religion in a Kenotic Tone."

¹⁵ Wolterstorff, "How Philosophical Theology Became Possible Within the Analytic Tradition of Philosophy," 164-165. See also my response to Wolterstorff in Simmons, "Continental Philosophy".

¹⁶ Plantinga, "Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century," 340-341.

the day, philosophy of religion and philosophical theology are certainly related discourses with much to contribute to the philosophical study of religion, but we should be wary of reductively approaching either of them in the terms of the other.

My hope is for a discursive table where hermeneutic excellence abounds and hospitality serves as the dialogical norm. Rather than claiming to operate according to one's own "rights," maybe we should begin to ask about our social responsibilities to the "rights" of others. Whenever one group thinks it can do what another group does, it can quickly become the case that the second group is no longer deemed necessary. It is for this reason that I have suggested that within the philosophical community, specifically, Plantinga-type views are "bad strategy" because they can potentially limit the participants in self-protective ways.¹⁷ When we overcome such insularity, we are better able to understand the dynamics attending to the complicated category of "religion."¹⁸ Thus, in order for philosophy, in general, and philosophy of religion, in particular, to be maximally robust, philosophers need to draw on work in not only theology, but religious studies, cognitive science, anthropology, and sociology, etc. And yet, unlike the relation to theology, rarely do the disciplinary lines get so blurry between philosophy and these other discourses.

With Wolterstorff, I think philosophy is done best when we recognize its pluralist dimensions. Yet, the best intellectual work emerges when we resist allowing one single epistemic standard to run rough-shod across all discursive communities—again, this is why I reject the notion of public philosophical reason *if* it is taken to apply to some general a-historical category like "all rational persons," but accept it as a reference to an historical practice operating as constitutive for what counts as the discourse of "philosophy" at a specific time and place. To act as if there is some epistemic standard (Christian revelation, say) that cuts across all discourses is unlikely simply to blur the boundaries of theology and philosophy, but more likely to minimize the social relevance of theology and philosophy, and the humanities more generally, in relation to STEM disciplines, which tend to fare better in relation to the rhetoric of "universality," "neutrality," and "objectivity."¹⁹ Given the broadly postmodern epistemic sympathies of Plantinga-type views, such an outcome is not only ironic, but directly at odds with their own stated project of celebrating the legitimacy of differently conceived basic beliefs. Yet, despite this irony, such unintended consequences loom large as worries to be taken seriously as implications that might follow from allowing one set of authorities to override those operating in different discursive communities.

The idea here is that if we allow too much play at the level of discursive loyalty in relation to evidential authorities, we might end up playing a dangerous game of scholarly musical chairs where there are never quite enough chairs for everyone trying to sit down at the academic table. When the music stops, someone is left standing. Alternatively, I recommend that rather than no longer caring whether we "call" something theology or philosophy, we add enough chairs to allow for both to be present in the broader academic discourse. Even though we all occupy different chairs, we can still move around the table as the music changes—hence expanding our perspectives in productive ways as philosophers learn from theologians, and theologians from neuroscientists, and sociologists from philosophers, etc. Perhaps it is due to my own pentecostal heritage, but I tend to think that covered-dish dinners are significantly more compelling than everyone simply eating the same thing (no matter how good that thing might be). Truth is rarely singularly accessed. So, scholarship should celebrate the diversity of approaches that make possible the sort of robust truth-seeking in which we all help each other get further than we could go on our own. Ultimately, I resist the blurring of the line between philosophy and theology by Plantinga-type views because I take such blurring to minimize engagement rather than to facilitate it.

One final point here is perhaps necessary before moving forward. An epistemic distinction between philosophy and theology in relation to discursive loyalties does not, itself, entail anything specific about one's individual/personal identity as religiously committed or not. Instead, this distinction merely bears upon one's professional identity as located in relation to the authorities operative and constitutive of the

¹⁷ Simmons, "The Strategies of Christian Philosophy."

¹⁸ Kevin Schilbrack argues that traditional philosophy of religion has been problematically marked by the tendencies of cognitivism, insularity, and narrowness (see Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions*, chapter 1).

¹⁹ See Simmons and Inabinet, "Retooling the Discourse of Objectivity"; Simmons and Scott, "How to Recover from Barbarism"; Simmons "Confidence Without Certainty."

academic discipline in which one is located. As such, it is entirely possible for a professional philosopher to write theological books, or for a theologian to write essays that are best viewed as philosophy. Thinkers such as Jean-Luc Marion, Merold Westphal, Linda Zagzebski, Sarah Coakley, Emmanuel Falque, Marilyn Adams, Jean-Louis Chrétien, and Nicholas Wolterstorff all write variously across these boundaries in very productive ways. For my own part, I also occasionally write from confessionally specific starting points, but when I do, I am always careful to distinguish that work as assuming something different in my audience than when I am writing philosophy, more traditionally understood. In such cases, I start *from* religious commitments, rather than posit them as *conditional* premises (as I take it philosophy, ideally, to require). Basically, when I write more confessionally, I begin not only with a conditional claim (if x, then y), but also with the affirmation of the antecedent (x, and so therefore y). Acknowledging this shift is important because it allows me to speak to a different audience while pursuing different aims.

Maybe this idea of speaking to different audiences is the best way to summarize things at the epistemic level. Audiences, like disciplines, are defined by determinate appeals to evidential authorities. In particular, theology speaks to one plural audience that consists of *both* the confessional community (e.g., the church) and *also* academics. Alternatively, for better or worse, philosophy, as historically defined, speaks to a more singularly conceived academic community (and the relevance to the church is a secondary concern rather than a primary audience). However, there are theologians and philosophers, and sociologists, economists, and political theorists, etc., who are able to wear different hats at different times in order to speak to more complicated audiences that do not fit neatly into any of our stable intellectual, ecclesial, disciplinary, or social categories. Nonetheless, we can all read widely and engage more openly without having to risk walking on top of each other such that philosophy of religion becomes philosophical theology in disguise.

3 The existential stakes of epistemology

Framing things in terms of discursive loyalty also allows for an appreciation of the lived dynamics of the relationship between philosophy and theology. It is here that I want to reflect on the *existential* relationship that can begin to emerge in light of the general epistemic account I have outlined above and worked out in more detail in my previous work. Whatever meta-philosophical view one holds regarding the relation of philosophy and theology, we also have to figure out how to live in light of such distinctions. Whether philosophers or theologians, we are always first and foremost existing individuals located in communities of discourse that overlap, intersect, and conflict in different ways. It is this fact that Plantinga-type views tend to obscure. Specifically, the notion that confessional loyalties are prioritized over philosophical ones is, I believe, itself grounded in a specific theological anthropology—yet this anthropology is itself an existential commitment, not merely an epistemic one. Specifically, Plantinga-type views depend on the notion not only that one's religious commitments run deeper than one's philosophical commitments, but also that they are more important due to the existential realities of religious life. In other words, assuming the truth of a specific religious tradition can then become the lens through which to read everything else. Far from a recognition of the dynamic complexities of the hermeneutic circle, which would motivate robust humility, here we find a situation in which there is no circle at all, but simply a direct line from Christian faith to all other truth-claims, which threatens to motivate triumphalism. My issue is not with the fact that such existential realities underlie the epistemic claims, but rather that the existential account fails to be adequate to existence itself. The notion of priority that Plantinga-type views assume is so pure that it does not correspond well with the dynamic messiness of embodied existence.

Here is the thing: we are always conflicted in our loyalties and our commitments. Being consistent across all our various social engagements is a fine goal, but it may be harder to achieve than we think.²⁰ Nonetheless, it is possible for existing individuals to prioritize things differently at different times in order to speak most effectively to the audience at hand. Yet, understanding these audiences and discourses as distinct enables engagement, rather than threatening it. Perhaps it will be helpful to think about this via a

²⁰ See Minister, "Apologetics After Identity."

personal example. As just a few of the loyalties that I take to be constitutive of my existential situation, I am a husband, a father, a son, a professor, an employee, a friend, a citizen, and a congregant. If I were pushed to prioritize my loyalties, I would necessarily have to begin abstracting things. Sure, I could offer some sort of ranking like God, family, students, country, etc. However, when such abstractions hit the “rough ground,” as Wittgenstein would say, of lived reality, such rankings are not as helpful as might initially be thought.²¹ My loyalty to my wife takes precedence over my loyalty to my students, but I still manage to show up to teach class and hold office hours and, in so doing, prioritize my commitments to my students in those specific times without fundamentally threatening my continuing loyalty to my wife. Yet, if my wife sends me a text message saying that there is an emergency at home, my loyalties shift such that she is more important than the class I was teaching, and yet this doesn’t mean that I abandon my loyalty to my students (even if I cancel class). Alternatively, my loyalty to my church might function differently while I am leading a small group discussion about Christian doctrine and practice than while I am leading a civic discussion on the role of religion in public life. Further, eventually it is plausible that my son will be a student of mine in one of my college courses. In that context, my loyalty to him as my son will take a back seat at particular moments to my loyalty to him as my student.

Despite these overlapping loyalties, it might be ideal if we could find some sort of framework according to which to adjudicate between priorities at specific times. Yet, any sort of criteria that we might propose would itself be grounded in, and reflective of, the specific existential loyalties that inform our identity in the first place. Even if inescapable, though, this particular existentially oriented hermeneutic circle I am advocating is not vicious because it simply is what it means to be an existing individual within embodied contexts of meaning and overlapping communities of discourse.

When Plantinga-type views suggest that we can ground ourselves in one discourse as more basic or prior to all the others, they tend to forget that this very grounding is itself an existential product of already being variously grounded and historically committed. In this sense, the famous Sartrean notion that “existence precedes essence” can be applied to the relation of philosophy to theology. It is the existential relationship of philosophy and theology as lived out in dynamic and overlapping communities, whereby our loyalties are never simple or straightforward, that gives rise to our epistemic conception of the relationship itself. Because our existential loyalties are always plural, we should hold an epistemic conception that recognizes the similar plurality of discursive loyalties in relation to different disciplines.

Nonetheless, we don’t need to see these shifting loyalties as somehow reflective of a fundamental incoherence of one’s existential identity. Instead, it just speaks to the importance of freedom and will as framed by multiple responsibilities. We can’t be everything to everyone at every minute. This is what I take to be the basic epistemic import of Jacques Derrida’s Levinasian inspired sentiment: “*Tout autre est tout autre.*”²² Decisions have to be made and they can’t be made entirely with epistemic certainty, theological guarantees, and hermeneutic comfort. Even if existence requires hard epistemic work, I believe that we are up to it. Despite lacking a clear algorithm for loyalty prioritization, we all somehow manage to figure things out—and to do so, for the most part, virtuously. Indeed, it is because we all generally have practical awareness of how to navigate these difficult waters that we understand the consequences that can follow when we fail to do so. For example, if a person always prioritizes work over family, it will likely lead to divorce, but alternatively always prioritizing family over work will likely lead to unemployment.

Our epistemic conceptions need to be able to handle the existential realities they are meant to explain. When it comes to the relation of philosophy and theology, Plantinga-type views can often assume an all too simple account of singular loyalties (the Christian community trumping the philosophical community) and false dichotomies (either the church or the secular academy). It is simply not the case that we must choose, absolutely, between our commitments to a confessionally determinate religious community and a secular professional discourse. Instead, like all our other loyalties, we should navigate things with nuance and recognize that different situations call for different priorities as we speak to different audiences.

²¹ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §107.

²² See Derrida, *The Gift of Death*.

For example, as a professional philosopher, my loyalty is to philosophy and the discipline becomes my audience. As a Christian, my loyalty is to God and the church primarily becomes my audience. I can move between these different loyalties and different audiences without compromising the distinctiveness of each. This is why I take issue with the Plantinga-type notion that a “Christian philosopher” should refer to someone doing a specific type of confessional philosophy, rather than simply being a philosopher who is a Christian. For my part, it is more inspirational to see excellent philosophers who identify as Christians, than it is to see people commit to doing something called “Christian philosophy.” I should note, here, that some of the best examples of this sort of excellent work are often those who at other times do defend Plantinga-type approaches—for example, Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, William Alston, etc. So, when I disagree with them about the epistemic distinction between philosophy and theology, I do so inspired and influenced by their example of what counts as philosophical rigor. That said, ultimately, contra Plantinga-type views, I find a generally Thomistic epistemic conception of the relationship of philosophy and theology to be compelling precisely because, on the one hand, it is able to admit of the specificity of disciplinary evidential authorities as framed in historically contingent ways. And yet it is also able, on the other hand, to admit of the multifaceted dynamics of such historical contingency.

Let me be clear that just as I have no interest in blurring the lines between my wife and my students, or my church and my nation, I similarly have no interest in blurring the lines between philosophy and theology. Maintaining such distinctions does not mean that I don’t care about which is most important, but simply that I recognize that their importance is never absolute as a lived practice (though, again, some abstracted theoretical ranking at specific times might be possible, and even necessary). Part of my being a good husband is understanding when I need to prioritize my work; and part of being a good teacher is modeling when to prioritize one’s family. Weird things are likely to happen if I begin to confuse these different loyalties, commitments, and social identities: I should not kiss my students and I should not give grades to my wife.

Accordingly, part of being a good philosopher is understanding how to work within the evidential authorities operative within philosophy as an historical discourse—not because these are static and objective, but because they are what has historically shaped where the community finds itself. As a philosopher, my discursive loyalty to philosophy should take precedence when I am attempting to do philosophy. This does not position philosophy above theology, but simply takes the philosophical audience seriously as occurring where it is and in light of the history that has brought it to this position. Given this audience specificity, philosophy, as an historical discourse defined by particular evidential authorities and discursive loyalties, is not the same thing as theology—even if both are historically intertwined and conversant in important ways. I can manage to keep these things straight without having to allow one automatically to override the other *only if* I can distinguish them from one another.

With all due respect to Wolterstorff, then, when it comes to the practice of philosophy and theology, it does matter what we “call it,” because philosophy or theology manage to be what they are as a direct result of what we decide they should be “called.” Nonetheless, different loyalties are often connected to each other in ways that are existentially and epistemically important—I can be called different things at different times (“dad,” “Dr.,” “Aaron,” etc.). Loyalty to God always implicates our loyalty to others, and loyalty to others always implicates our loyalty to God, but God is never simply reducible to the Other.²³ Similarly, the epistemic relation of philosophy to theology amounts to a recognition that inclusion is facilitated more effectively by maintaining distinctions than by erasing them.

4 Conclusion: living in the margins

By way of concluding, let me offer another metaphor that maybe gets at what I am trying to suggest. I find it difficult to read books without writing in the margins. In some cases, the marginal comments get so extensive that they could plausibly become a new series of essays commenting on the text that motivated

²³ Simmons, *God and the Other*.

them. And yet, when it comes to lived existence and the books we write about it, the situation is inverted. Existentially, the blank pages are always prior to the writing that is then printed on them. In this sense, existence is the metaphorical marginalia that precedes the eventual epistemic text that is written within such margins. Because we only ever *live in the existential margins*, we should view philosophy and theology as both necessary texts in light of what is possibly the case about existence itself.

No single book is adequate to such existential truth. No single discourse is sufficient for life. It is the space around the letters where the words stop and actions begin that forms the embodied context for any existential relationship of philosophy and theology that is, itself, worthy of our epistemic loyalty. So, although Plantinga-type views might encourage blurring the epistemic boundaries between theology and philosophy, I encourage living in the existential margins that make each epistemic discourse possible, distinctive, and necessary. In the end, life is messy, but our scholarship, whether philosophical or theological, is best able to account for such messiness when it is clear, rigorous, disciplinarily determinate, and yet interdisciplinarily engaged.

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