

BOOK SYMPOSIUM

The characteristic damage of analytic theology: a response to William Wood

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Abstract

In *Analytic Theology and the Academic Study of Religion* William Wood argues that the discipline of analytic theology (AT) can make a distinctively valuable contribution to the mainstream academic study of religion. He deftly navigates the intellectual public relations work required to secure mutual appreciation across these domains of scholarly discourse. In evaluating the characteristic goods of AT, Wood also seeks to recognize and address what Laruen Winner calls ‘characteristic damage’ or deformation in the practice of AT, which he identifies with its apparent inadequacies in addressing ‘history, mystery, and practice’ in the study of religion and theology. I argue that Wood’s diagnosis fails to recognize how AT’s characteristic damage emerges from its monomaniacal fixation on the epistemic value of theological theorizing to the exclusion of disciplined attention to other kinds of value. While at one point he engages a previously published version of this critique (as an explanation for AT’s neglect of liberation theology), he mischaracterizes my argument in that paper in ways that lead him to miss its relevance to the objections from history, mystery, and practice. These objections can be met, I suggest, but only by significant reform to AT as currently practised.

Analytic theology (hereafter, AT) has been known to raise many a suspicious eyebrow among scholars working in non-analytic theology (hereafter, non-AT) and non-theological religious studies (hereafter RS). As someone trained in non-AT who also holds significant scholarly interests in both AT and RS, I have sometimes thought that what AT needs, if it is to be successfully mainstreamed in the academy alongside non-AT and RS, is a public relations expert. But as AT has continued to mature, it has become clear that the situation is more complicated than that. If one academic group wishes to improve public relations with others, this presupposes that the group in question takes its own interests to be somehow served by securing a better reputation among those others. But many proponents of AT will probably judge that they need not care about what scholars in non-AT or RS think about them.

Why should they? After all, AT in its current practice has representatives and advocates in some of the most prestigious academic institutions in the world, ample funding for its various research agendas, a steady pipeline of graduate students furthering those agendas, and a rich ecology of conferences and publication outlets. Moreover, the dim view of AT on the part of RS and non-AT is arguably mutual: there may well be a significant consensus among RS and non-AT scholars that AT is positivistic, tone-deaf, and socially and politically uncritical, but many AT scholars likewise regard non-AT and RS as hopelessly

mired in obfuscating postmodern philosophy and largely incapable of evaluating evidence and making clear and cogent arguments. And while one continues to find among RS a strong antipathy towards all theology *per se* as a pseudo-academic enterprise rather than as an academically respectable investigation of religious phenomena, one equally finds among AT a general dismissiveness towards much of mainstream RS as beholden to rationally unjustified (and unjustifiable) dogmas of naturalism or secular liberalism. AT at present, therefore, is not really situated in a position of unwanted exclusion for which it stands in need of improved public relations. Instead, it is continuing along a trajectory towards a settled disciplinary segregationism.

It is in the context of this segregationist settlement of mutual indifference born out of tension and occasionally flaring into hostility that William Wood boldly makes a case for a more pluralistic form of mutual appreciation and conversation. He argues – more thoroughly, competently, and (to me at least) compellingly than anyone before him – that what AT needs in order to remain a healthy and thriving part of a wider academic community is not a turf war or isolationist self-satisfaction but diplomacy. Wood himself is the best kind of diplomat – he is genuinely multilingual across AT, non-AT, and RS discourses, and demonstrates a cultivated familiarity with scholarly literatures across those domains. He is thus well positioned to identify and translate the norms and practices of AT that demonstrate its academic legitimacy and value for non-AT and RS. More than this, he also manifests the intellectual charity and humility required to subject AT to critical scrutiny in light of the norms and practices of non-AT and RS, suggesting many appropriate reforms and directions for the future of AT as a legitimate and valued conversation partner alongside non-AT and RS.

But while I applaud this project and the generous and pluralistic spirit in which he offers it, Wood nevertheless fails to appreciate a fundamental source of disciplinary conflict between AT, non-AT, and RS, which is rooted in a more basic misalignment of the characteristic goods and characteristic deformations of these disciplines than he recognizes. This misdiagnosis leads Wood to misconstrue each of the three main objections to AT that he treats (the objections from ‘history, mystery, [and] practice’: Wood (2021), 14). Accordingly, the disciplinary reforms required for AT to attend to its own characteristic damage and contribute constructively to non-AT and RS are more substantial than Wood admits.

Wood identifies AT as a kind of academic practice, and follows Lauren Winner (2018) in characterizing all practices as exhibiting ‘characteristic deformations’ that he describes as ‘defects that are “proper” to a practice itself, which ‘tell us something about the practice; often they are corruptions of the very qualities that make the practice good in the first place’ (Wood (2021), 45). Throughout the book, Wood (rightly, to my mind) regards the characteristic good of AT, the qualities that make it a valuable form of inquiry, as its capacity for ‘making and assessing explicit propositional truth-claims in a way that goes beyond what we usually find in other humanistic disciplines’ (*ibid.*, 36). It is because practitioners of AT ‘focus so closely on truth claims’ that they ‘privilege argumentative transparency’ (*ibid.*) wherein arguments are constructed to offer true explanatory theories aimed at ‘the production of knowledge, not preaching, praxis, or moral improvement’ (*ibid.*, 296). In other words, the characteristic good of AT is a narrowly epistemic good: the assessment and rational pursuit of warranted true theological beliefs. The goodness of the practice of AT is thus that it is ‘one way we can use our God-given rational faculties to try to distinguish theological truth from theological error’ (*ibid.*, 99).

So in what way might these characteristically good features of AT become a source of corruption for the practice of AT? Here, Wood seems to me ambivalent. He points out that AT can tend towards the relative neglect of the historical, genealogical, and textual studies that we find in non-AT and its continuity with the humanities (*ibid.*, 15), that it often

transforms the transcendent and mysterious into the familiar and tractable (*ibid.*, 18), and that it typically centres on questions of doctrinal truth and incoherence that seem to be disengaged from matters of practical, social, or existential importance (*ibid.*, 34). But for him these issues with history, mystery, and practice (respectively) are not clearly defects or corruptions at all – the discontinuity of AT with the genealogical and literary approaches we find in non-AT and RS among the humanities is only because AT is more unabashedly ‘constructive’ than those disciplines (*ibid.*, 62), AT’s transformations of mystery are not ultimately worrying but instead valuable forms of theoretical modelling (*ibid.*, 45), and while not always wearing practical and existential matters on its sleeve, AT does address questions many Christians have (*ibid.*, 19), with moral and spiritual formation being an appropriately secondary and indirect goal for its primary disciplinary interest, which is offering true explanatory theories (*ibid.*, 21). So, whereas Wood acknowledges that we can find individual practitioners of AT failing to do justice to their subject matter, these are mostly localized failures not characteristic problems with AT as a discipline *per se* (*ibid.*, 14).

This seems to me to be both a descriptively and normatively inadequate analysis of AT’s characteristic damage. In a recent essay of mine that with which Wood graciously engages (Yadav, 2020), I suggest an alternative diagnosis, but Wood does not fully take on board its significance for his diplomatic aims. He correctly identifies my core claim that ‘good theology depends on values other than narrowly epistemic values like truth or warrant’ (Wood (2021), 73), as well as my criticism that ‘analytic theologians do not sufficiently reflect on the non-epistemic values that undergird their projects of inquiry’ (*ibid.*, 74). But Wood fails to recognize how a monomaniacal fixation on knowledge, truth, and warrant might constitute a characteristic deformation of AT, or how the myopia resulting from that fixation might underlie the objections from history, mystery, and practice.

Following Sally Haslanger (1999) and Ernest Sosa (2010), I argue that what is knowable far outstrips what is worth seeking to know for creatures with our configurations and limits. What we ought to seek to know and how we ought to seek to know it are matters that, ultimately, are normatively and rationally constrained by *eudaimonistic* considerations. Our practices and projects of knowledge-seeking are accordingly answerable not only to narrowly epistemic norms of truth and warrant, but also to the relative prudential, moral, and aesthetic value of our inquiries given some background picture of how our knowledge-seeking practices contribute to (or detract from) our flourishing. Practices of knowledge-seeking are thus *good*, all things considered, only if they are *eudaimonistically* good, and it is thus possible for particular knowledge-seeking pursuits to be good in some limited respect, *pro tanto* (e.g. good morally, good aesthetically, good epistemically) while preventing, neglecting, or obscuring our or others’ flourishing in some way that makes such pursuits nevertheless bad, all things considered.

It follows that there are rational grounds beyond the narrowly epistemic for concluding that some forms of inquiry are comparatively *better for us* to pursue than others. Since the right is grounded in the good, judging whether any given knowledge pursuit is finally permissible, forbidden, obligatory, or to be preferred relative to other knowledge pursuits in many instances requires some assessment of the wider and more complicated value profile of our knowledge-seeking projects. I then defend the claim that a distinctively Christian vision of human flourishing imposes a substantive and methodological norm of liberation on our practices of theological knowledge-seeking and conclude that theology which is narrowly *epistemically* good while manifesting neglect or indifference to a liberative norm is thus, all things considered, *bad* theology.

Wood misconstrues this position in a few ways. I do not claim, for instance, that ‘Not even knowledge about God is valuable for its own sake’ (Wood (2021), 73), but rather that

the *pro tanto* value of knowledge (which may well include its intrinsic value) is nevertheless insufficient to rationally motivate or justify our projects of knowledge-seeking.¹ Neither do I claim that liberative aims are *sufficient* for the Christian eudaimonism that guides our theological knowledge-seeking – that social or political liberation is ‘the *only* way to foster love of God and love of neighbor’ (*ibid.*, 75). I argue only that such aims are *necessary* (an elaboration of the Augustinian love ethic that the slaves of Roman North Africa would no doubt have been eager to urge on Augustine). But while I take liberative aims to be a normative constraint on all good theology as such, I do not go so far as to claim that ‘all theology must *directly* and *explicitly* serve liberative aims in order to count as good theology’ (*ibid.*; emphasis mine). I agree with Wood that it is perfectly possible for instances of good theology to ‘indirectly and implicitly serve liberative aims’ (*ibid.*). What follows from my critique is not that every work of theology needs to include an explicitly (liberationist) eudaimonistic justification, but only that every work of theology is potentially *subject* to a rational requirement to show that it is thus justified.

For just that reason, Wood is also wrong to assume that my generally eudaimonistic and particularly liberative intervention is prompted by my taking ‘much – perhaps most, perhaps even all – existing analytic theology’ to fail the relevant justificatory test (*ibid.*). I do not deny that there are possibly eudaimonistic or liberative justifications available for many or even all of the various projects of AT. I am not terribly optimistic on that score, but my point is not to determine the scope of eudaimonistic or liberative justification for AT as currently practised but rather to draw attention to the fact that AT is *manifestly insensitive* to justifications of that sort, just insofar as such a sensitivity would involve considerations beyond the narrowly epistemic. Identifying and critically evaluating the eudaimonistic value of one’s theological project, including its liberative value, are not simply desiderata at which AT aims but fails to satisfy. They are instead desiderata that AT characteristically fails to take up or acknowledge at all. Insofar as we find success in satisfying these desiderata, it is therefore a merely accidental feature of some particular practitioner’s individual sensibilities, not a comportment with any disciplinary norm of AT. And that’s the problem.

But contra Wood, this is decidedly not a problem that ‘applies with equal force to all forms of non-liberative theology’ (*ibid.*). Instead, I am indeed suggesting what he denies, that ‘analytic theology is especially bad’ in this respect (*ibid.*). In contrast with AT’s fixation on narrowly epistemic considerations, non-AT and RS are characteristically guided in their academic work by a broader kind of epistemic good than warrant or knowledge, which is best analysed as a kind of *understanding*.² Understanding is a more holistic form of intellectual achievement that we require to guide our knowledge-seeking in the most epistemically fruitful directions and towards the most epistemically valuable ends.³ The pursuit of theological and religious understanding in non-AT and RS tends to share with the humanities more generally a deep investment in critically engaging with contested norms about human flourishing as a proper part of our subject matter, including self-conscious reflection on how past and present projects of theological and religious knowledge-seeking contribute to the shaping and enacting of such norms. Non-AT and RS tend to hold this academic desideratum in common even when their attempts to satisfy it lead them to reject or dismiss liberative norms of knowledge-seeking in their disciplinary investigations.

But there is a clear mismatch between non-AT/RS’s academic interest in eudaimonistic understanding and AT’s comparative inattention or aspect-blindness to it, and this offers us a unified explanation for the typical objections to AT regarding ‘history, mystery, [and] practice’ (*ibid.*, 14). Whereas Wood seems to treat these as a heterogeneous set of understandable yet naive impressions or misplaced criticisms, they are instead legitimate complaints about the many ways in which AT’s characteristic damage manifests itself.

Space limitation forbids me from offering the requisite elaboration, but I can indicate the general direction of these objections as follows.

First, the charge that AT is insufficiently historical is not best understood in terms of the fact that ‘constructive argument is common in philosophy but less common in other humanistic disciplines’ (*ibid.*, 18). The reason that non-AT and RS seem to centre on ‘offering a rival reading of a central text’ (*ibid.*, 36) or tend to look like ‘a mixture of history and literary theory’ (*ibid.*, 194) is not that they are attempting to ‘earn the right to be constructive’ (*ibid.*, 69), still less are they reticent to ‘offer their own accounts of the meaning or truth of some Christian doctrine or claim’ defaulting instead to ‘just interpreting or exegeting other historical accounts’ (*ibid.*, 12). Rather, they are ordinarily attempting to understand and critically evaluate some dimension of a theological or religious inheritance in terms of its contribution to a wider ecology of value. This might well involve uncovering the various ways that an influential text’s truth-claims and theological arguments are (or ought to be) tied up with (e.g. instrumental for, expressive of, supported by) non-epistemic goods (including moral, practical, and aesthetic). It might also involve making explicit the ways that the resultant theological and religious understandings putatively serve or ought to serve eudaimonistic interests in the relevant truth or knowledge-claims, or reconstructing what Raymond Williams called the ‘structures of feeling’ (Williams (1983), 87) that magnetize certain theological questions, claims, or arguments as the most relevant or important objects drawing our scholarly attention.⁴ Understood this way, textual and genealogical study of this sort is clearly not mere preparation for constructive and normative work; it is constructive and normative work.

But then the objection to AT from history is not that it fails to appeal to history or engage with historical sources, but that it fails to offer any deep understanding of the interests and values being served by the theological claims of the texts and traditions to which it appeals. Because AT’s interests in theological truth-claims and arguments are so narrowly focused on knowledge and warrant, its practitioners are mostly motivated to strip-mine theological texts and traditions for the relevant chains of inferential reasoning rather than critically engaging with any wider theological understanding that ultimately makes the relevant knowledge-claims and patterns of reasoning valuable. Even Wood’s appeal to Anselm as a paragon of AT betrays the aptness of this criticism:

the *Proslogion* is meant to do more than communicate propositional truths. It is meant to help bring about an affective and volitional change in the wills of his readers, and reorient them toward God. In this sense, the *Proslogion* resembles a spiritual exercise, like those discussed by Hadot. (*ibid.*, 179)

Analytic theologians, on the other hand,

rarely attend to the literary devices and rhetorical forms he uses in his writing, however. Instead, they typically abstract a series of propositional claims from Anselm’s text in order to reconstruct what they take to be his real arguments, and then go on to assess those reconstructions. (*ibid.*, 177)

As an analogy for the difference between broadly eudaimonistic epistemic achievements and narrowly epistemic achievements in religious knowledge-seeking, imagine someone with an impressively detailed knowledge of English syntax but who is also mostly ignorant about the meanings of any words in the English lexicon. Such a person has the peculiar ability to reliably distinguish grammatical from ungrammatical configurations of words and clauses in English, even while having little to no idea about what the resulting discourse means. We would not (and should not) say that such a person ‘understands

English'. Similarly, AT is remarkably capable at theorizing and modelling theological truth-claims and their putative warrants while being characteristically impoverished in the capacity to identify, theorize, or model the moral, practical, or aesthetic significance of those claims. What then should we say about scholarly work that ably evaluates the putative truth of theological propositions, without being likewise capable of identifying or critically assessing any claimants' eudaimonistic interests in the truth of those propositions? As with our syntactically competent but semantically ignorant student of English, we should say that such a student of theology fails to exhibit a genuine understanding of their subject matter. It is just this sort of impoverishment of holistic understanding that earns AT its reputation for 'inadvertent superficiality' (*ibid.*, 45). Likewise, it is this cultivated avoidance of disciplined inquiry about why, how, and to whom theological truth-claims matter that motivates an 'objection from abstraction' (*ibid.*, 16).

Treatments of divine transcendence, mystery, and ontotheology likewise figure into the more holistic understanding of why and how theological reasoning matters that is characteristic of RS and non-AT. Here too, therefore, practitioners of AT tend to miss the point just insofar as they maintain single-minded focus on giving true explanatory theories aimed at knowledge or warrant. Wood takes AT to countenance mystery in one sense and not another. On the one hand, constraints of finitude on all human understanding are also implicit in the efforts of analytic theologians to theoretically model how things are with God, since all such modelling is necessarily predicated on our selective interests and limited data as theorists (*ibid.*, 20). But on the other hand, AT is characteristically 'modern' in its 'suspicion of mystery and paradox' (*ibid.*, 295). But both of these stances narrowly construe mystery in terms of a knowledge gap and hence as an obstacle for AT, whether an insuperable obstacle of cognitive finitude constraining our theorizing or a superable obstacle of nescience to be solved or dissolved by reasoning. Christians (along with many religious others), on the other hand, have traditionally emphasized that God's transcendence of creatures and all creaturely understanding is not primarily to be understood as an obstacle to our theological theorizing, but as an object of what Wood in another place calls 'rigorous appreciation' (not just 'emotive expressions of taste' but attitudes that 'feature reasoned arguments and interpretations' (*ibid.*, 271). Spelling out the form of that appreciation and its impact on theological reasoning is obviously beyond the scope of this brief article, but the key point is that appreciating any sort of regulative role that mystery might play for theology requires breaking the fixation on truth or knowledge norms as the sole ground of theological reasoning.

It is for that reason telling that Wood's strategy for dissolving worries about 'conceptual idolatry' in AT is to *divide* belief content from attitude. His claim is that because practitioners of AT by and large adhere to a minimalistic thesis of divine uniqueness and ultimacy, they avoid 'ontotheological' *beliefs* and because they can also maintain worshipful stances of wonder, praise, reverence towards God, they also avoid an 'ontotheological *attitude*'. It follows that AT is 'no more vulnerable to worries about idolatry . . . than any other form of theology' (*ibid.*, 299). But what goes missing here is the claim of critics that an exclusive focus on the role of divine transcendence and mystery in giving true explanatory theories about God yields forms of reasoning and interpretation that fail to merit the wonder, praise, and reverence of the worshipful attitude, as opposed to making such attitudes mere 'emotive expressions of taste' (*ibid.*, 271). This fitting attitude of worship woven into theological reasoning is arguably precisely something that we find performed in Anselm and Aquinas (as Wood himself ably shows)⁵ but neither prized nor so much as attempted in most contemporary AT.⁶ It is therefore no wonder that AT has been flat-footed in understanding theologies of transcendence and ineffability: it has characteristically lacked the theoretical resources or interests to understand how such theologies function within traditions of reasoning shaped by a rigorous appreciation of divine mystery.⁷

Finally, Wood is throughout the volume at pains to show that AT constitutes a kind of spiritual practice, even while the aim of that practice is itself not primarily spiritual. AT, he supposes, ‘can foster wisdom, moral improvement, and love for God’ (*ibid.*, 21) while its ‘direct scholarly aim’ is ‘the production of knowledge, not preaching, praxis, or moral improvement’ (*ibid.*, 296), thus contributing to the life of the Church in ‘some more remote way’ (*ibid.*, 21). Drawing on Hadot, Wood supposes that the ‘single-minded focus on truth . . . allows analytic theology to become a spiritual practice’ (*ibid.*, 183). But if the argument I have been urging above is right, then we ought to regard AT as a *deformed* spiritual practice. We might therefore forgive non-AT scholars with characteristically eudaimonistic interests in the texts, artefacts, and forms of reasoning in Christian theology if they regard analytic theologians whose scholarly aim is ‘knowledge, not spiritual insight’ (*ibid.*, 296, fn. 28) as displaying a curious passion for murdering to dissect.⁸ Why not knowledge that *serves* spiritual insight?

Of course, there is no reason to suppose that the characteristic damage of AT is an essential or necessary feature of it (#notallanalytictheologians).⁹ There are clearly theologians (myself among them) who find in various quarters of contemporary analytic philosophy unique resources to identify and serve the eudaimonistic aims of Christian theology as well as the broader epistemic goods of theological understanding.¹⁰ AT’s characteristic damage is remediable. Moreover, its characteristic good of making and assessing explicit propositional truth-claims and privileging argumentative transparency in fact might contribute a great deal to non-AT and RS whose interests ordinarily do (or ought to) *include* the narrowly epistemic, even while also transcending it. However, it is precisely because the more established RS and non-AT discourses are more appropriately encompassing of their subject matter that AT stands more in need of self-conscious assimilation to the relevant non-AT and RS norms than the reverse.¹¹ Rather than hoping to recapture a recognized role as queen of sciences (*ibid.*, 5), it remains possible for analytic theologians to bring our characteristic goods to the table of academic theology and religious studies recalling that the one who wishes to lead ought to become servant of all.¹² Practitioners of AT ought to be profoundly grateful to Wood for endeavouring to build these disciplinary bridges between AT, non-AT, and RS, but neither should we underestimate the cost needed to make those bridges structurally sound and safe to traverse.¹³

Notes

1.

Insofar as knowledge is a valuable thing to have for its own sake, and insofar as knowing is more valuable than merely true belief, knowing what sort of flooring God might most prefer in our churches and identifying precisely some subset of mathematical truths God must know are valuable things to know. But while whatever *pro tanto* credentials such projects might have making them worthwhile from a purely *epistemic* point of view, that value is clearly too impoverished and limited to be of much use in determining whether we ought to take up such projects. (Yadav (2020), 58)

2. See Boylu (2010); Roberts and Wood (2010), 42–50.

3. I follow Duncan Pritchard in distinguishing the general value of knowledge *simpliciter* from its particularly epistemic value, but I take both sorts of value to converge on the notion of eudaimonistic understanding (Pritchard (2016), 132–134).

4. Rancière (2004), likewise analyses the aesthetic ‘sensorium’ of social regimes, which we might take to include the academic regimes of AT, non-AT, and RS.

5. The so-called ‘theological turn’ in Continental phenomenology has accordingly included a pushback on Heideggerian critiques of the Western theological tradition as ‘ontotheological’. See, for example, Jean-Luc Marion’s appeal to Anselm (Marion (2004), 150–152).

6. For an excellent example of how an analytic theologian might take a ‘fitting attitude’ approach to analysing divine attributes, see Mark Murphy’s (2021) recent analysis of divine holiness, which takes Otto’s phenomenology of the sacred as an important point of departure.

7. For an analysis of appreciative experiences of mystery as central to Christian apophatic theology, see Yadav (2016).
8. This disjunction between spiritual insight and knowledge places AT in stark contrast with the conception of philosophy in Hadot.
9. Addressing the characteristic damage of AT seems to be a key aim of Panchuk and Rea (2020).
10. For examples of analytic philosophers of religion who likewise explicitly advocate for a broader epistemic aim, see Cottingham (2007) and Griffioen (2022).
11. The characteristic goods of AT, I believe, constitute a vital organ for the academic study of theology and religion, but the established disciplines of non-AT and RS are the body into which it needs to be transplanted.
12. See Mark 9:35.
13. See Luke 14:28–30.

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