

SOCRATIC CLUB RESPONSE: "Why Philosophy and Theology Need Each Other"

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Thank you, Dr. Pitstick, for your very engaging and astute address, and my thanks to all of you for the opportunity to participate in the discussion this evening on a topic about which I feel very strongly. In fact, I believe my response will perhaps be more a rephrasing or reshaping of some of your own points rather than a counter to them. This is likely because of our shared conviction that there is something *integral* to the inter-relation between philosophy and theology. At the same time, if your journey has been at all like my own, this conviction has not come easily, nor does it rest effortlessly, for many of us born *at or before* that critical time in history of the Second Vatican Council – and still for too many Christians of all branches today – we have been indoctrinated in the belief that to pursue faith philosophically is heresy, or at least, worthy of pity by those **whose certainty** in "revelation" or "tradition" exempt them from the need of philosophy ... or science ... or psychology, for that matter.

Even now, when I have occasion to spend time with my beloved friend and mentor, David Burrell, and he introduces me to others as a "philosophical

theologian” – which he inevitably does – I internally (and sometimes admittedly externally) cringe. I wonder if this is not so much because I fear that with this label I will now have to appear very intellectual and won’t be able to pull it off, or whether it is really because I have never fully come to terms with this pairing of philosophy and theology, as if it is somehow denegrating to my rational faculty to be theological or, on the other hand, dis-passionate to my faith to be philosophical!

But truth be told, it is the rigorous and unending pursuit to ground my faith philosophically that *fuels*, not only my **theological passion**, but also my desire to actively participate in my community of faith, and to actively continue to engage my faith tradition -- despite my dissent from certain policies or leadership styles, and this extends to my desire to ignite that theological passion in others. Your own assertion that philosophy aids theology in its goal of “faith seeking understanding” articulates this for me very well. One of your points that particularly caught my attention is that in Christian preaching, the philosophical disciplines of rhetoric, logic and argumentation are implicitly employed, and this corresponds to my own conclusion about the relationship between philosophy and theology: that is, that philosophy challenges theology to be “linguistically”

and – perhaps -- even “conceptually” honest. This includes everything that is touched by theology, whether it be doctrine or practice.

What do I mean by “linguistic honesty” in theology? I am thinking here particularly of certain specifically religious concepts that tend to be conventionally – and rather conveniently -- *exempted* from the demands of intellectual validation, such as “revelation,” “grace,” and “faith.” I noted that in your own reflections on the distinction between philosophy and theology you seemed to struggle, too, with these concepts. In fact, I confess I was initially a bit tense when you asserted that “philosophy seeks after the best of human wisdom **we can get**, and theology seeks after the best of divine wisdom **we are given.**” Of course I am aware that this distinction is well established in Christian tradition, and it can even be derived from Aquinas’ first question in his great *Summa*. However, being so formed in Aquinas myself -- at least in our post Vatican II retrieval of Aquinas through such great thinkers as Lonergan, Rahner, et al – I recoiled at the implication that philosophy entails *active* engagement of wisdom on our part, whereas theology is our *rather passive* reception of something supernaturally out of our reach. This seems to flow, too, from a concept of faith as simply, “belief without proof” and a concept of revelation as “supernatural knowledge outside of the possibility of human intellection.”

Regardless of how well accepted these definitions or conceptions of faith and revelation might be in Christian tradition, the underlying presumption that humanity -- after all made in God's image according to the very source of Revelation: Scripture -- is relegated to a passive receptivity of God's self-communication seems incongruent, and I worried where this line of thinking could possibly take us in the end. Actually, this uneasiness began with your definition of the Christian God as "transcendent, all-powerful, all-knowing and all-good." This concept of God from a Christian standpoint is not only lacking, but somewhat dangerous in that it may in fact lead us in the Gnostic direction that the first Christian councils attempted to steer clear of, that is, a God who stands over, above and against, puny creation, and in particular, the sinful and limited human creature. Is this the God revelation has disclosed? Is this the Creator God of Genesis, or the "I AM" of Exodus? Or the triune God, that is, Father-Son and Holy Spirit, Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier -- of the Creed? NO; it is not, indeed not!

Surprisingly it is, in large part, my philosophical training that raised my ire here, and not the experiences of hearing sermons or praying on my knees at mass in my early youth that has ultimately formed me, or my father's insistence that my catechism come straight from "*the Baltimore*" and not that new-fangled

UNgodly stuff that the Church was now teaching since Vatican II. These so-called traditional avenues might have actually allowed me to unreflectively settle for the conveniently transcendent, disconnected, puppet-master of a God so many well-intentioned Christians seem to cling to.

Instead, it is my philosophical training that forces me to question the type of transcendence we are attributing to the God of faith. And what type of faith are we attributing to tradition? Philosophy calls us to linguistic integrity – or at least it should – by drawing out the underlying implications and presuppositions of our faith statements and practices. As Aquinas leads us through the implications of a God whose transcendent existence is the same as God's essence, and who as such is unlimited by every creaturely category, including time and space, is therefore always everywhere in all things. This is a God who does not, in fact, stand over and against creation, but rather as fully actualized source is profoundly, immediately and intimately present to creation, even and especially sinful human creatures – A God who, by instilling in us an inherent potency and drive to seek and to attain our divine end, is constantly drawing us into our own fullness of being. Omniscience and omnipotence be damned -- it is God's IMMANENCE that defines the God of Christian faith.

So what of divine wisdom – if God is so immanently disclosed in the movement of all things towards their Source and End? Is it in opposition to human intellection, really, or apart from human wisdom? And here is where philosophy and theology may indeed intersect – a point you made in your conclusion which I was so happy to find did NOT go at all in the direction it seemed to start out. Revelation, as it turns out, IS “given” to us, but not “without” us. The reason *philosophy* needs theology, as you mentioned, is to give it ultimate context. I wholeheartedly agree! Revelation provides that context, but revelation is given, not in the abstract, not to individuals for their private consumption, but to community, to a people who together in all their diversity and messiness, are never passive **for long**, but actively engaged in questioning their own identity, meaning, existence, relationships and ultimate reality. Revelation is NOT given as “a given” – not given with much clarity, that is, seemingly not well-organized at times, not given as a set of facts and figures, but rather given as a challenge and as a call to embark on a journey, whose happy conclusion is foreshadowed from the first pages but which is not traversed without the greatest difficulty. The story of Job sums this up very well. When God appears as a blustering whirlwind of hot air after Job calls out in his suffering, Job has “had it” with the conventional notions of God as an omniscient,

omnipotent puppet master. He states: “I know you can do all things, and you know things too wonderful for me to fathom,” But then he continues, and this is the important part: “Before, I knew you only through hearsay, but now my eye has seen you.” To “see” is a common metaphor for knowing. As Aquinas – the great philosopher-theologian – puts it, “the Blessed see God, and in seeing God, possess God as PRESENT, ... and possessing God, they enjoy God as the ultimate fulfillment of desire. Divine wisdom is not knowledge about anything, supernatural or otherwise, but rather knowing – being one with the ONE KNOWN. Just as you pointed out that St. John the Theologian, the beloved disciple, knew God. Thank you again, Dr. Pitstick, for your wonderful reflections.