

WILLIAM HASKER

CHRIST AND THE SHAPE OF PHILOSOPHY:
A REJOINDER TO MOSER

The sharpest disagreement between Professor Moser and me concerns my description of his views on Christian philosophy, so I will begin with that. I should say that if he does not in fact hold some of the views I attributed to him that's a good thing, and I regret my misinterpretation of his position. But it is not the case, as Moser implies, that I attributed those views to him without any evidence. On the contrary: the evidence comes from his own words, many of which were quoted by me in my original article.¹ So I need to set the record straight.

One point of contention is my reference to “Moser’s extremely casual and even dismissive attitude towards the history of philosophy.” I reached this conclusion because of his examples of “interpretive minutiae” in the history of philosophy which should be seen as distractions, equivalent to the “endless genealogies” decried by Paul in I Timothy. His examples are questions about the conceptual development of the theory of forms in Plato’s dialogues, and questions about multiple theories of primary substance in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. Now, it is beyond question that Platonic, and Platonic-inspired, theories about forms and universals have been extremely influential in the course of the development of Christian philosophical and theological thought, and the same is true of Aristotle’s doctrine of substance. Many of us (including me) are forced to deal with these matters in terms of the canned, textbook versions of Plato and Aristotle, but historical scholars will

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¹ I should state here that my assertions about Moser’s views are based on the two articles referenced in my paper. My section on Moser constitutes a bit over one-third of a fairly short paper; I neither claim nor attempt to comment on his views in all of the writings in which he has discussed Christian philosophy.

probe the original texts in detail, looking for even minor variations as well as for evidences of development. If topics such as these, in spite of their great intrinsic and historical significance, are not worthy of serious scholarly scrutiny, I concluded that the history of philosophy is being given scant respect. Now we are told that this is not the case, and that is encouraging. However, I remain seriously perplexed over Moser's choice of examples. Apparently he really believes that the study of Plato on forms and Aristotle on substance "will make no contribution to the history of philosophy done from a Christian perspective." He writes, "These are areas of ongoing meticulous philosophical scholarship (and I myself must confess to having contributed many years ago), but no one has suggested that they contribute, or even will likely contribute, to the actual mission of the church of Jesus."² But if Plato on forms, and Aristotle on substance, are not worthy of serious scrutiny, shouldn't the historian of philosophy take up some more serious occupation (as Moser himself apparently has done)?

In my paper I implied that the effect of Moser's position is to "dismiss philosophical discussion as inherently diversionary, and to do so by placing it in competition with a Christian's obedience to God and to Christ." Moser insists that he has "given no evidence to support this false allegation," but I disagree. The evidence is found in his contrast of the "discussion mode" of doing philosophy with the "obedience mode" which he champions.³ It is simply a fact that much of our work as philosophers consists in discussion, both oral and written, of various philosophical questions. Very often this discussion fails to arrive at generally agreed conclusions; instead, the same topics continue to be in dispute more or less indefinitely, or else drop out of sight for a time only to reappear in a different form. This situation is genuinely frustrating: we should like to be able to settle the point under debate and move on to other matters. Experience shows, however, that this often does not happen. Still, there are compensations for this frustrating situation. The perennial nature of some philosophical questions shows something about the depth of the issues involved; it also, no doubt, shows something about our

² "Jesus and Philosophy: On the Questions we Ask," 278. No doubt those of us who are tempted to devote major philosophical effort to the "metaphysics of celestial time-travel for angels" have been properly admonished! I don't myself see, however, why the metaphysical nature of angels could not be a suitable topic for Christian philosophers—provided, that is, that we think we have sufficient philosophical resources to contribute something significant on the subject. Most Christian philosophers today, in contrast to those of the middle ages, tend to think that we lack such resources.

³ *Ibid.*, 273–79.

human cognitive limitations. Furthermore, by coming back to the same topics from a different angle we sometimes can gain a deeper insight into the nature of the issues, even if agreement is not reached. In any case, anyone who wants to be a philosopher really needs to make peace somehow with this continuing lack of consensus. Moser, however, sees all of this as deplorable, as a bad thing that we need to leave behind us.

The contrast between Jesus and Socrates . . . points to two different modes of being human: an *obedience mode* and a *discussion mode*. An obedience mode responds to an authority by *submission of the will* to the authority's commands. A discussion mode responds with *talk* about questions, options, claims, and arguments. . . .

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. . . . As divinely appointed Lord . . . Jesus commands humans to move, for their own good, to an obedience mode of existence relative to divine love commands. . . . Accordingly, we need to transcend a normal discussion mode, and thus philosophical discussion itself, to face with sincerity the personal inward Authority who commands what humans need: Faithful obedience and belonging to the perfectly loving Giver of life. Jesus . . . thereby cleanses the temple of philosophy, and turns over our self-promoting tables of mere philosophical discussion.⁴

If this does not place philosophical discussion in competition with a Christian's obedience to God and to Christ, I simply do not know how to read what Moser has written here.

In my paper I asserted that "If we put into practice Moser's restriction of acceptable philosophy to what is related to some particular need of the church, most of philosophy as we know it would disappear." This conclusion was based on the following words of Moser:

We must reorient philosophy to be used as a spiritual gift designed for ministry within the church of Jesus . . . Philosophers should eagerly serve the church by letting the focuses of philosophy, including its questions, be guided by what is needed to build up the church as a ministry of the Good News of Jesus. As a result, there is no place under the lordship of Jesus for lone-ranger philosophers who choose their questions apart from the needs of the church.⁵

⁴ Ibid., 273, 274.

⁵ Ibid., 276–77.

I do not of course disagree that philosophy done by Christians should serve the needs of the church; in fact I specifically affirmed this. But if Christian philosophy were limited to this that would, I think, eliminate a very large part of philosophy as it is known and practiced today. Moser, however, rejects as overly restrictive my assumption that his view would permit philosophers to pursue only “truths . . . that have become an issue at some point in time for the life of the Christian church.” Instead, he suggests that “A plausible formulation could appeal to truths that evidently will or easily would become an issue for the life of the Christian church.” This may open the door for the consideration of topics that would be ruled out by my more restrictive formulation, but it also creates a serious problem of vagueness. As for truths that *evidently will* become an issue, I suggest that we have only an extremely limited ability to anticipate the challenges that may arise for the church, beyond the very near-term future. So adding this clause may not allow very much space for exploration of topics that would be ruled out by my formulation. But what about the truths that *easily would* become such an issue? Here the problem of vagueness becomes acute. Moser’s formulation demands that we ask the question: “would become . . . *under what circumstances?*” If it is enough that a topic might become an issue for the church under some *imaginable* circumstance, it may be that rather little would be ruled out. This would diminish the implausibility of the proposal, but would also blunt its cutting edge. But if we are to stop short of this, where is the stopping-point? Moser acknowledges that his “formulation calls for refinement beyond the scope of this article,” and we must surely agree. Note, however, that philosophy is still being relegated to an instrumental role. And some significant philosophical topics would almost certainly be excluded: I think here of “serious actualism” in the philosophy of modality, or the question of the validity of the Barcan formula in quantified modal logic. (These are two of the more recondite questions pursued by Alvin Plantinga at certain points in his career.) In any case, it is clear that I interpreted Moser’s proposal as more restrictive than he intended it to be, and it is helpful to have his clarification on that point.

Yet another point of contention arises from my assertion that “I have come to see that this conflation [between two kinds of wisdom and philosophy] is the key to the entire strategy of [Moser’s] proposal for ‘Christ-shaped philosophy.’” Moser replies, “Hasker fails to justify this claim, and I can find no plausible case for it.” Now, this clearly is an interpretive proposal; it is my way of making sense of the overall contours of Moser’s views

on these topics. He certainly is within his rights to disagree with the proposal, and it becomes incumbent on me to provide a fuller justification than was given in my article. I begin by setting up the dichotomies in question, as given in my original article. The key questions are: Who is a philosopher? and, What qualifies as philosophy? I begin to answer the first question by pointing out the rather large number of persons who presently teach philosophy, attend philosophical meetings, write papers and books on philosophy, and so on. To this we add our predecessors in earlier times, as well as some others, both past and present, who are not teachers of philosophy but who we recognize as our colleagues and predecessors in the philosophical enterprise—persons such as Descartes, Spinoza, and the like.⁶ And I count as “philosophy” what the members of this group do, say, and write when they say they are engaging in philosophy. (So there is no circularity here!) This is all very rough of course, and there will be marginal and disputed cases, but for all that it is a workable classification.

In contrast to this, there are those men and women who have sought and promoted spiritual wisdom of the sort found by Christians in the teachings of the New Testament. Here again we will have marginal and disputed cases, but there is all the same a roughly identifiable group of people. This group will have some overlap with the group of philosophers, but by and large the groups are distinct. (The evangelist Billy Graham was not a philosopher who had unusually large audiences at his philosophical lectures. Nor is Rick Warren’s *The Purpose Driven Life* a shining example of a philosophical treatise achieving best-seller status!)

There is no question that Moser tends to conflate both of these pairs of opposites, though he might not use the word “conflate” since he doesn’t see the distinctions as particularly significant to begin with. Consider his insistence that Jesus and Paul should be regarded as philosophers, in spite of the fact that they gave no lectures on philosophy, wrote no philosophical treatises, and did not accept pupils for instruction in philosophy. Moser points to the definition of philosophy as the “love of wisdom,” and notes that Jesus and Paul are singular examples of individuals who not only loved wisdom but actually achieved it in their lives and their thinking. Now in his article responding to me he states that “religion . . . is not philosophy, because alt-

⁶ Actually most philosophers have been engaged in teaching philosophy; the association is natural and expected. Something of an exception occurs in the early modern period, when the university chairs in philosophy were tied up by the keepers of scholasticism and the important original philosophers supported themselves in other ways.

though it intends to participate in, or cooperate with, ultimate reality, it does not undertake inquiry with the breadth characteristic of philosophy.” This is well said, and I submit that any reasonable classification done on the basis of “breadth of inquiry” will place Jesus and Paul in the category of religion rather than philosophy. Additionally, we may ask where we are to find, in the records we have of Jesus and Paul, the “personal detachment [of philosophy] that religion typically omits”? (There is not much “detachment” in the letter to the Galatians!) Nevertheless, Jesus and Paul are philosophers, for Moser, and their wisdom is the *same kind of thing* that is found in philosophy.

So the conflation is beyond dispute, but why do I say this is the key to Moser’s strategy? Well, consider again the examples in my paper: on the one hand, Paul’s letter to the Philippians, on the other, Saul Kripke’s theory of necessary truth. One of these is a prime example of spiritual wisdom; the other, of the sort of wisdom sought (and sometimes achieved) by philosophers. Now I ask: are these at bottom the *same kind* of wisdom, or are they two different (though no doubt somehow related) sorts of wisdom? For Moser, they are the same kind of wisdom, and so they come into direct competition with each other. Furthermore, given the scale of values endorsed by Christianity, Philippians stands out as *vastly* more important. “Sauline wisdom,” if we may so term it, is significant only for a small number of people who are interested in solving certain abstruse philosophical problems; Pauline wisdom, on the other hand, has to do with the very stuff of the spiritual life, and indeed with one’s eternal destiny. And this gives Moser the leverage he needs in order to pressure his Christian philosopher readers to devote themselves to spiritual wisdom and to devalue, in comparison, their aspirations to discover philosophical truth and to solve philosophical problems. Saul needs to become Paul; if he does not, he is on the wrong road—headed perhaps for Athens, but not for Damascus.

From my standpoint, this is misguided. Jesus and Paul were not philosophers, on a reasonable understanding of that term. (Even the application of Moser’s own criteria would show that they were not.) What they were is something far more important and valuable than being philosophers. But this “something more” is something not all of us are able to be or are called to be. I believe, however, that a good many men and women are best fulfilling God’s intention and purpose for our lives by being philosophers—by teaching philosophy (where jobs are available), grading student papers, attending meetings, writing philosophical papers of our own, and all the rest. All this can well be carried out within the framework of the existing philosophical

profession, which for all its faults (which I do not deny) has provided the forum, or rather multiple fora, for a good deal of outstanding philosophical work done by Christians over the past several decades. It is encouraging to find Moser saying, “I assume that there is some ‘good’ in professional philosophy that needs to be separated from ‘the bad.’” He also says, “wisdom is valuable wherever it arises, even outside the avowed people of God.” These remarks, however, stand in considerable tension with his assertion that “Philosophy outside the authority of Christ, according to Paul, is dangerous to human freedom and life.”⁷ It is clear that the majority of professional philosophers today (for instance, the majority of contributors to the *American Philosophical Quarterly*, which Moser edited) are not Christians and so presumably are philosophizing “outside the authority of Christ.” To be sure, there are some things that are dangerous that are still worth being involved in, and it could be that professional philosophy is one of those things. But that sort of reading does not seem to fit very well the original context of Moser’s citation from Paul.⁸

I agree with Moser that it is desirable to have some informative characterization of what philosophy is. (My line that “philosophy is what philosophers do” was merely an opening gambit to set up the discussion.) If philosophy is as valuable as I think it is, surely we want to be able to give an illuminating description of what it is and what makes it valuable. Moser himself makes a good start on such a characterization, and I would agree with most of what he says on the subject. I would observe that this is a distinctively *modern* account of philosophy, in virtue of the distinction made between philosophy and the special sciences—physics, astronomy, geology, psychology, and so on. Until relatively recent times—say, the last 250 years—the study of these topics, insofar as they were studied at all, would usually have been placed under the rubric of philosophy. (We recall that the early modern scientists were “natural philosophers.”) I agree that the distinction between philosophy and the sciences is a good one to make, but this illustrates the changing understanding of philosophy, and points to the difficulties of importing our modern notions of philosophy into the ancient world.

⁷ I do not believe there is any exegetical warrant for interpreting Paul’s references to “wisdom” as comments about philosophy as such. I do not, however, disagree that there are philosophical views which are harmful and dangerous.

⁸ Tedla Woldeyohannes comments, “In *The Elusive God*, in the chapter ‘Philosophy Revamped,’ the way Moser talks about philosophy can hardly allow that wisdom is valuable wherever it arises.”

There is one point, however, on which Moser's characterization of philosophy is seriously incomplete, at least in comparison with the way in which most today would understand the notion. I believe it is widely accepted that in philosophy all questions are open to debate—at least, all questions of sufficient generality to come within philosophy's scope. So a radical skepticism, of the sort that might arise from unalloyed Cartesian doubt, is available as a philosophical option, albeit not an especially attractive one. And on the other hand, appeals to divine revelation as an authority are not acceptable within philosophy, strictly understood, since God's pronouncements are not considered to be fallible or debatable. (And of course, the revelation is available as such only to the believers in a particular religious tradition.) Accordingly, the appeal to revelational authority has long been understood as the primary line of division between philosophy and theology. (Interestingly, theology does not appear on Moser's list of disciplines that must be distinguished from philosophy.) I do believe it is useful to have a distinction between the roles and functions of philosophy and theology, even though the same person may sometimes fill both roles. This would, of course, further underscore the fact that Jesus and Paul were not philosophers, but that is as it should be.

Moser and I are not in disagreement about everything, however. As I said in my essay, I agree completely that a Christian philosopher needs to take very seriously his or her own relationship with Christ and with the work of God's kingdom. And this is very likely to have implications for the choice of one's field of study and of one's research projects. What I find dubious, however, is the attempt to delineate in advance the acceptable range of choices in these matters. This line-drawing project is bound to be difficult and contentious. In Moser's own terms, it may be difficult to find a non-arbitrary stopping-point between two extremes: on one hand, restricting Christian philosophy to what meets some particular need of the church in the present or near-term future (which he agrees is too restrictive), or on the other hand, allowing anything that might meet some possible future need, however speculative (which would allow almost anything). But why this enthusiasm for line-drawing in the first place? Is there no room, in Moser's vision of the kingdom, for knowledge that is valuable, and enjoyable, just for itself, and not because of its utilitarian consequences? Would he apply the same sort of standards to the involvement of Christians in other fields of study? Should a Christian paleontologist, before committing herself to a search for dinosaur bones, ask herself how these bones, if some are found, will advance the work

of the church? And how about music? Bach chorales, I suppose, would be welcome, but a Paganini etude is ruled out as not spiritually relevant? Frankly, this attitude strikes me as depressing! Here I would like to recall a remark quoted earlier from Robert Adams. He wrote, “The realm that philosophy is likeliest to succeed in exploring, the realm of possible ways of thinking, is full of objects of great beauty. It is worth loving for its own sake.” These “possible ways of thinking,” various philosophical constructs and systems, are beautiful to Adams, and they help to make philosophy something worth loving for its own sake. This is a very different sensibility from the one expressed by Moser, and no doubt Christian philosophy has room and need for both. What we do not need, in my estimation, is an approach which rules out in advance one in favor of the other.

The mention of Adams brings me to one final point I need to make. One of the things I find most disappointing in Moser’s approach is his apparent lack of sympathy and appreciation for the work of other contemporary Christian philosophers. Here I am admittedly arguing from silence, but it is a loud and resounding silence. One will search for a long time, in his recent writings, to find places where he cites recent Christian philosophers with appreciation and approval. In his paper, “Jesus and Philosophy,” when he needs to provide examples of philosophy done in the “obedience mode,” the only examples he can find are three theologians—and Moser’s own web site!⁹ In his recent book, *The Severity of God: Religion and Philosophy Reconsidered*,¹⁰ the bibliography lists, as one would expect, numerous works by theologians and biblical scholars. In the entire six-page bibliography, however, there is only one book (Plantinga’s *God, Freedom, and Evil*) by any contemporary Christian philosopher other than Moser himself. The obvious implication is that nothing said by other Christian philosophers makes a significant contribution to the “right” way of understanding the relationship between religion and philosophy. One is led to wonder: who is really deserving of Moser’s epithet, “lone-ranger philosopher”?

My own view of the situation is much different. It is not open to dispute that the previous half-century or so has seen an enormous growth in the presence of Christians who are active in the first ranks of contemporary philosophy. From a situation where, in mainstream philosophy, Christianity and even theism were marginal and close to invisible, we are now able to say

⁹ Ibid., 283 note 24.

¹⁰ Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

that both have a significant place, albeit a contested one, at the philosophical table. (This has been noted with displeasure by some who found the earlier, more strictly secular, state of affairs more to their liking.) It is a good thing, a cause for rejoicing, that it can no longer be taken for granted that there is no rational case in favor of Christian belief. There remains much work to be done; there is no occasion here for complacency or triumphalism. But there is, I think, an occasion for gratitude, both to God and to those whose labors have made all this possible. I have mentioned Adams and Stump; for a few additional names, consider Alvin Plantinga, Marilyn Adams, Nicholas Wolterstorff, William Alston, Linda Zagzebski, Richard Swinburne . . . And there are many, many more; a full list would consume too much space, and even then I should undoubtedly omit some who deserve to be included. I believe we ought to appreciate their work, to build on and further develop their ideas, correcting their mistakes where this is necessary. The view that all or most of this work was misconceived, and that we need to start all over again to create a “Christ-Shaped philosophy,” is one I have a hard time taking seriously. (I don’t say that this is Moser’s view, only that it seems that it is.) Finally, with regard to Saul and Paul and their respective kinds of wisdom, my view is that “Saul and Paul can and should co-exist because each supplies a different type of good to the world. Even if one is a greater good than the other the world is richer for having both.”^{11, 12}

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¹¹ This excellent summary of my view was formulated by Aaron Preston, in his “Two Wisdoms? The Unity of Truth, the Spirit of the (Academic) Disciplines, and the Norms of Academic Philosophy,” available at the website cited in fn. 3 of my essay.

¹² My thanks to Tedla Woldeyohannes for his comments on this material.

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Summary

Paul Moser claims that there is no evidence for my attribution to him of certain views in my essay, "How Christian Can Philosophy Be?" Here I review the evidence presented in my essay and reconsider its import. I also reflect further on our respective views concerning philosophy, and Christian philosophy.

CHRYSTUS A KSZTAŁT FILOZOFII:
ODPOWIEDŹ MOSEROWI

Streszczenie

Paul Moser twierdzi, że brak jest podstaw dla mojego przypisania mu pewnych poglądów, co uczyniłem w eseju „Jak bardzo chrześcijańska może być filozofia” („How Christian Can Philosophy Be?”). W niniejszym artykule dokonuję przeglądu ewidencji przytoczonej w powyższym eseju oraz ponownie rozważam jej znaczenie. Przedstawiam też dalsze rozważania na temat moich oraz Mosera poglądów w zakresie filozofii oraz filozofii chrześcijańskiej.

Keywords: philosophy; religion; Christian philosophy; wisdom; Paul K. Moser; William Hasker.

Słowa kluczowe: filozofia; religia; filozofia chrześcijańska; mądrość; Paul K. Moser; William Hasker.

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