




BOOK SYMPOSIUM

## Analytic theology and the academic study of religion: response to critics

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### Abstract

I respond to challenges posed by Andrew Dole, Joanna Leidenhag, Kevin Schilbrack, and Sameer Yadav. Key topics include: whether the engagement between analytic theology and the academic study of religion really is mutually beneficial, distinguishing analytic theology from science-engaged theology, restrictive methodological naturalism, and whether I misconstrue analytic theology's 'characteristic damage'.

**Keywords:** analytic theology; religion; religious studies; secular; inquiry; university

### Introduction

*Analytic Theology and the Academic Study of Religion* aims to hold together three very different audiences: analytic theologians and philosophers of religion, other academic theologians, and scholars of religion. My respondents all have varying degrees of sympathy for analytic theology, for other forms of academic theology, and for the study of religion. They are therefore a good proxy for this ideal audience, and I am grateful for the care with which they have engaged my work. Before turning to their responses, I would first like to present three overall principles that structured my argument in the book, because the same principles also structure my replies to each respondent.

First, the book is primarily a *defence* of analytic theology, along two different fronts. On the one hand, many contemporary theologians are highly skeptical of analytic theology, and do not regard it as proper theology at all. Against these theological critics, I argue that analytic theology is actually a valuable form of theological inquiry, and that it is not vulnerable to common theological charges like idolatry or 'ontotheology'. On the other hand, prominent theorists of religion assert that, in principle, theology cannot ever be a genuine academic discipline with a legitimate place in the contemporary academy. Against these critics, I argue that analytic theology cannot be excluded from the academy on methodological grounds.

Second, although the book is a defence of analytic theology, it is not an *unqualified* defence. I argue that analytic theology should become more robustly theological, even as I also argue that analytic theologians should enter into a constructive, mutually beneficial dialogue with scholars of religion and critical theorists. Different readers will have different views about whether I strike the right balance between defending and criticizing

analytic theology. 'Hard-core' analytic theologians might regard my defence as rather lukewarm, whereas those who are more critical of analytic theology will say that I do not criticize it forcefully enough. There is no single, objectively correct way to strike this balance, but my overall goal is clear: I want to move everyone, from all sides, closer together. This goal requires a comparatively irenic tone.

Third, my defence of analytic theology is not only a qualified defense; it is also a *modest* defense. I do not argue – and do not myself believe – that analytic theology is the best form of theological inquiry, and I recognize that there are many important questions that analytic theology is ill-suited to answer. In my experience, people tend to find my modest aims somewhat frustrating. They really, really want me to say that analytic theology is better than other forms of theology, or to insist that the only questions that really matter are the questions that are typically addressed by analytic theology. They want me to take this line because it is much easier to refute. Be that as it may, this uncompromising line is not my own. At the same time, however, I do want to insist that even though my aims are modest, the opponents I address are real. Many, perhaps most, theologians really do reject analytic theology out of hand, and many, perhaps most, scholars of religion really do deny that any form of constructive theology belongs in the secular academy. These theologians and scholars of religion are the targets of my defence. Responding to their charges is genuinely challenging, and, in my view, genuinely important.

With these principles in mind, I now respond to Andrew Dole, Joanna Leidenhag, Kevin Schilbrack, and Sameer Yadav.

### Response to Andrew Dole

Andrew Dole identifies two overarching aims of *Analytic Theology and the Academic Study of Religion*: first, 'to defend analytic theology as a legitimate form of theology', and second, 'to argue for its inclusion within the academic study of religion'. I endorse Dole's formulation of these aims, provided that the second is understood in a sufficiently limited way. I argue only that the academic study of religion *can* include analytic theology. My targets are those scholars who insist that all forms of theology must be excluded from the study of religion in principle, or even excluded from the secular academy altogether. My limited aims establish specific conditions for success. With respect to the second aim, I succeed just in case I am able to show that the academic study of religion *can* include analytic theology without violating any important intellectual standards. Happily, Dole agrees that I do succeed.

Even so, he raises questions about the positive case I make for including analytic theology in the academic study of religion. Although my aim is mostly defensive, I do argue that analytic theology has something positive to contribute to the academic study of religion. Engaging with analytic theology can help scholars of religion better understand the normative core of Christian doctrines, and the ways in which theological elites reason. Analytic theologians can also model for scholars of religion 'what it looks like to engage in open-minded scholarly inquiry' into whether key Christian doctrines are coherent and plausible (240). Once again, happily, Dole agrees that my positive case also succeeds: I am, he says, 'entirely correct'. It's just that, according to Dole, my positive case does not amount to much.

The positive case I offer is more significant than Dole allows. In my experience, outside of certain philosophy classrooms, nearly everyone assumes that it is impossible to engage in reasoned arguments about whether theological claims are true, good, or just. Incorporating such arguments into the academic study of religion would be a major, and much needed, addition, one that is not at all trivial. Dole also overlooks some of the other ways in which I argue that analytic theology can make a positive contribution to the

academic study of religion. In Chapter 13, I argue that analytic theology is well positioned to supplement the 'epistemology of power' that currently reigns supreme among scholars of religion with an 'epistemology of truth' that takes propositional attitudes like believing and intending seriously. And in Chapter 14, I call for a new 'comparative analytic theology' that would add novel forms of comparative inquiry to the study of religions.

But Dole is correct that these positive remarks are not extensively developed. That is because my real aim is defensive, as noted above. When my targets deny that analytic theology has anything at all to offer to the study of religion, establishing even a modest positive case is still an important result. Dole also points out that there are many important dimensions of Christianity other than its doctrines, and insists that even some questions about its doctrines would be better addressed by forms of inquiry other than analytic theology. I agree. I do not argue that analytic theology is the only way, or the best way, to study Christianity. In fact, I explicitly repudiate that view throughout the book (5, 29, 75, 82, 99, 299).

My argument is not one-sided. Analytic theology can certainly benefit from engaging with forms of critical inquiry that are common in the academic study of religion but uncommon in analytic theology. Once again, Dole thinks that my positive case is too limited, and that I do not say enough about what those benefits actually are. But I do have plenty to say about this issue in the section entitled 'What Can Analytic Theologians Learn from Critical Inquiry' (259–263). Dole cites various passages from that section, but does not find them sufficiently developed or persuasive. I suspect that this fact simply shows his own current distance from the milieu of analytic theology. This section is aimed squarely at analytic theologians. With some notable exceptions, mainstream analytic theologians are not even remotely close to accepting that they have anything to learn from genealogical criticism or critical inquiry. So even though my calls for engagement with critical theory may seem minimal to Dole, they will not seem minimal to my analytic interlocutors.

Finally, Dole wants to know 'what analytic theology *aims* to accomplish', and 'what it is *for*'. I doubt that I have an answer that will satisfy him. What is scholastic theology *for*? What does Radical Orthodoxy *aim* to accomplish? Probably not just one thing. With respect to scholastic theology, one might say that it aims at deriving and systematizing what we can know about God, drawing on methodological principles and arguments taken from Aristotle. But one could also say that scholastic theology aims at increasing our love of God and neighbour by perfecting our cognitive faculties so that in this life we can attain an inchoate taste of the beatific vision. Radical Orthodoxy aims at blurring the line between the sacred and the secular, but it is also an intervention into Anglican ecclesiology. And so on.

Insofar as it is *theology*, then, analytic theology aims to understand God and all things in relation to God to the limited degree that such understanding is possible in this life, in our fallen state. Insofar as it is *Christian*, it does so by paying particular attention to God's revelation in Christ, as well as to the creeds, communities, and traditions that treat this revelation as normative. Insofar as it is *analytic*, it draws on analytic philosophy in so doing. (Note that it is precisely this very *theological* understanding of analytic theology that I argue is consistent with academic inquiry in the secular academy.)

Because it draws on analytic philosophy, analytic theology is well-placed to pursue lines of inquiry that are tractable to analytic philosophical methods and habits of mind. Not all lines of inquiry are tractable in this way. (Dole mentions several that are not.) Paradigmatically tractable lines of inquiry include questions about the meaning, coherence, and truth of Christian doctrines. But even though such questions are paradigmatic, analytic theology is not *confined* to addressing them, because neither Christian theology nor analytic philosophy can be confined to the study of doctrines or propositional assertions.

But I cannot specify in advance exactly what lines of inquiry are tractable in the relevant sense, and so I cannot say any more about exactly what analytic theology is *for*.

But I can say this: if analytic theology is meant to be *theology*, and not just Christian philosophy of religion, analytic theologians must be attentive to the history of the Christian tradition, and to the pre-modern ways of reading and thinking that inform that tradition. They should also be attentive to the very different intellectual landscape of contemporary (non-analytic) theology. Dole wonders why I make this claim, and accuses me of ‘throwing analytic theologians under the bus’, by requiring that they move beyond their narrow disciplinary training. But would-be *theologians* who do not attend to the history of the Christian tradition are not theologians at all, whatever else they might be. So in making this claim, I am not throwing analytic theologians under the bus, as Dole would have it, but asking them to live up to their self-chosen moniker.<sup>1</sup>

### Response to Joanna Leidenhag

Joanna Leidenhag wants to know how I would demarcate analytic theology from science-engaged theology. Science-engaged theology – understood as a semi-cohesive, public-facing ‘movement’ – emerged onto the theological scene after *Analytic Theology and the Academic Study of Religion* had already appeared in print, and I do not discuss science-engaged theology in the book. So I should say at the outset that I have no expertise in science-engaged theology, though I am sympathetic to much of what Leidenhag says about it in her response. Like analytic theology, science-engaged theology is a relatively recent intellectual movement. Like analytic theology, science-engaged theology has been financially supported by various Templeton trusts. Moreover, and probably not unrelatedly, some of the same scholars have been involved in both analytic theology and science-engaged theology, including Leidenhag herself. So what is the difference between the two?

As Leidenhag recognizes, I do not believe that we can give an ‘essential definition’ of analytic theology – that is, a definition that purports to capture all and only genuine cases of analytic theology. And I do say that we can best understand what analytic theology is by looking at some of its paradigm cases. If we cannot really define analytic theology, and if some paradigmatic analytic theologians are also science-engaged, then perhaps we will struggle to distinguish analytic theology from science-engaged theology. Or so Leidenhag suggests.

I confess that I do not really see the problem. It seems easy enough to distinguish analytic theology from science-engaged theology to a reasonable degree of precision. Indeed, Leidenhag herself does so perfectly well. For my part, although I am skeptical of purportedly essential definitions, I do commend several minimal definitions of analytic theology that I find helpful, and even offer one of my own: analytic theology is ‘theology – usually constructive, systematic, Christian theology – that uses the tools and methods of analytic philosophy’ (50). Suppose we want a parallel definition of science-engaged theology. We can simply draw on Leidenhag’s own formulations and say that science engaged theology uses ‘the tools and methods of the natural sciences’ instead of ‘the tools and methods of analytic philosophy’. This minimal definition does all we need.

The distinction between analytic theology and science-engaged theology becomes even sharper when we include Leidenhag’s own description of what science-engaged theologians actually do. Whenever possible, science-engaged theologians ‘adopt the methodology [of] psychologists, or biologists, or computer scientists’, and ‘seek to partner with scientists trained in empirical methodologies, in order to formulate a hypothesis, design a suitable test, and interpret the results’. When that isn’t possible, the science-engaged theologian ‘looks around for empirical studies that have already been published by scientists, which

she takes as a sufficiently close approximation of the kinds of studies the theologian herself would have liked to do'.

None of this sounds even remotely like typical instances of analytic theology, because analytic theology is not typically the product of empirical studies, experiments, or working partnerships with scientists. Across a broad range of cases, then, it should be quite easy to distinguish science-engaged theology, so described, from analytic theology. To be sure, a single instance of analytic theology might draw on both analytic philosophy and also the natural sciences, and the same scholar – like Leidenhag herself – might at different times practise both analytic theology and science-engaged theology. Will we call the resulting work analytic theology, science-engaged theology, or both, or neither? It depends. This conclusion is simply a consequence of the fact that we cannot (in my view) provide an essential definition of analytic theology. The way we classify any single instance of academic work will depend on a host of contextual factors that cannot be specified in advance.

But there is no reason to believe that analytic theology and science-engaged theology are so similar that, *most of the time*, we will struggle to distinguish them. And in those cases when we do struggle to distinguish them, I can only say: sometimes disciplinary boundaries are blurry. If it turns out that sometimes there is considerable overlap between analytic theology and science-engaged theology, then that is fine with me.

Later in her reply, however, Leidenhag offers another account of science-engaged theology. Here, science-engaged theology is not theology that draws on the empirical sciences, as before, but an 'intellectual disposition that all theologians share', a disposition 'to use whatever tool is most suited for investigating the specific theological claim that is being made'. On this account, science-engaged theology takes priority over analytic theology, because 'science-engaged theologians may not always be analytic, [but] analytic theologians should always be science-engaged'.

I admire Leidenhag's *chutzpah*, but this move does not work. If science-engaged theology is just the disposition to match our intellectual tools to our intellectual projects, then it is trivially true that analytic theologians – indeed, all theologians – should be science-engaged, because 'science-engaged theology' is just another label for responsible inquiry. (The label *scientia*-engaged theology might work here, but not *science*-engaged theology – at least not in the sense of 'science' assumed by Leidenhag in the rest of her piece.) As a friendly amendment, I would propose instead that analytic theology and science-engaged theology are both different ways of satisfying the higher-level methodological maxim that we should match our intellectual tools to our intellectual projects. Sometimes our projects call for analytic philosophy, and sometimes they call for empirical experimentation. We look to analytic theology for the former and science-engaged theology for the latter.

Finally, after pushing me to demarcate analytic theology from science-engaged theology, Leidenhag demands that I tell her which one is better. She quotes my own statement that 'analytic theology is not the only way, or always the best way, to try to understand God' but then immediately writes: 'I've only got one life to live, and I want to learn to know and love God better; should I be an analytic theologian, a science-engaged theologian, and/or some other type of theologian?'

Of course I cannot answer this question. Leidenhag should practise analytic theology when she wants to investigate theological questions that are especially tractable to analytic philosophy, and she should practise science-engaged theology when she wants to investigate theological questions that are especially tractable to the empirical sciences. Analytic theology does not offer a privileged vehicle for salvation. Nor is it an inherently superior way to foster the knowledge and love of God. The same must be said for science-engaged theology, and for every other method of theological inquiry.

## Response to Kevin Schilbrack

I am grateful to Kevin Schilbrack for engaging one of the central arguments of the book, the argument that methodological naturalism is not a necessary condition of all legitimate academic inquiry. From that argument, it follows that theological inquiry cannot in principle be excluded from the secular academy when it fails to comply with methodological naturalism. In my own terminology, Schilbrack is a self-avowed *restrictive* methodological naturalist, someone who believes that all legitimate academic inquiry must be methodologically naturalistic. By contrast, in Chapter 11 (indirectly) and Chapter 12 (directly), I reject restrictive methodological naturalism (RMN), though I affirm the value of methodological naturalism (MN) for many forms of inquiry.

Schilbrack is a particularly challenging opponent for me because our views overlap considerably – as he recognizes – and because his ‘expansive’ version of methodological naturalism allows much existing analytic theology. Schilbrack is also willing to countenance limited forms of metaphysical inquiry, although perhaps not those forms that characterize much contemporary analytic metaphysics. (He explicitly endorses only ‘the John Dewey style of empirical study of the generic traits of the world’ and the ‘investigation of logically necessary existential claims’.) Schilbrack asks: why *shouldn’t* analytic theologians be methodological naturalists, in his expanded sense of naturalism? It’s a fair question. Here is my reply: there are no advantages to restrictive methodological naturalism beyond the advantages already enjoyed by my own normative account of legitimate academic inquiry, and restrictive methodological naturalism comes with severe costs that my own account does not.

In Chapter 11, I argue that legitimate academic inquiry must abide by six methodological maxims. Summarily: when we engage in academic argument, we are obliged to support our claims with reasons and evidence, and to respond with reasons and evidence when our claims are appropriately challenged; furthermore, we should try to support our claims with reasons and evidence that are maximally accessible to others. Schilbrack does not raise any specific objections to my framework for academic argument, but still prefers his own version of restrictive methodological naturalism. He clearly wants to rule out crude appeals to the supernatural. In the language of internet atheists, call these appeals ‘Goddidit’ arguments. (How was the Spanish Armada defeated? Goddidit!) Presumably Schilbrack thinks that restrictive methodological naturalism is the best way to exclude these crude appeals from the academy.

I also want to exclude such crude appeals, but in my own framework for academic inquiry, the problem with appealing to ‘supernatural’ entities and events in academic arguments is that such appeals are rarely accessible to the scholarly community and therefore carry little evidential value. Good arguments cannot be supported by bad evidence. When explanatory appeals to the supernatural are well-grounded by accessible reasons and evidence, however, I allow that in principle they could be legitimate. Schilbrack does not.

To try to determine how sharp this difference is, let us consider a specific case. As an example of something that his expansive methodological naturalism would still rule out, Schilbrack mentions ‘ensoulment’ as ‘an explanation of mind’. Suppose I want to consider whether some strong version of substance dualism is plausible. Further suppose – contra Schilbrack – that I want to consider whether ensoulment is actually a good explanation for mind. What’s the problem?

To soften the ground, let me first note that even though substance dualism is a minority position among philosophers of mind, it is not treated as absolutely beyond the pale, and even the opponents of substance dualism agree that its adherents are doing real academic work. If anything, substance dualism is currently enjoying a mini-renaissance in the philosophy of mind.<sup>2</sup> There is a tension here: prima facie, academic work that is treated as

legitimate by relevant specialists should not be treated as illegitimate by non-specialists, and so we should be wary about adopting universally binding methodological rules like RMN that would exclude such work. I think Schilbrack should be more bothered by this tension than he seems to be.

Schilbrack's expansive methodological naturalism clearly allows us to talk *about* supernatural events and entities, and he allows inquiry into the supernatural that falls under the mode of the conditional. So in my hypothetical inquiry into substance dualism, I could legitimately say things like 'here are some reasons why people have affirmed substance dualism, and here are some reasons others have disagreed'. Presumably, given his own views about normative inquiry, Schilbrack would also allow me to assess those reasons and come to a conclusion like, 'actually, substance dualism is not vulnerable to some of the main objections lodged against it'. But then what is the difference between that conclusion, and the further conclusion, 'As far as I can tell, substance dualism is very well supported and could even be true'? And if I can legitimately reason my way to *that* conclusion, why can't I take the further step of investigating whether substance dualism can explain human mindedness?

Suppose, then, that I want to argue in my own voice, as it were, to the conclusion that some strong form of substance dualism – call it 'ensoulment' – provides the best explanation of human mindedness. The relevant argument form is a straightforward instance of inference to the best explanation (IBE), which is a completely ordinary form of argument in every academic discipline. I first identify some phenomena that (I argue) cannot adequately be explained by rival theories of mind, but that are well explained by ensoulment, and I then conclude that ensoulment is the best explanation of human mindedness.

Would Schilbrack allow this argument? Suppose the answer is yes. After all, the *method* of inquiry seems naturalistic in the relevant sense, even though the inquiry's conclusion is not. But note that this example just is a case of using 'ensoulment' as an explanation for mind, the very thing that Schilbrack wants to rule out. Let us push this line of argument one step further. Suppose I am convinced that some other scholar has already established via argument that ensoulment provides the best explanation for human mindedness. May I then start a new line of inquiry that assumes ensoulment is true, based on that other scholar's work, and then appeal to ensoulment to explain, say, the faculty of mathematical intuition? This case provides an even clearer example of using a 'supernatural' entity – the soul – in an explanation.

If Schilbrack allows this sort of appeal as well, then at the very least, he needs to revise his stated restrictions on explanatory appeals to supernatural entities, and say more about when such appeals are and are not allowed. And in that case, it is hard to see any difference at all between his version of methodological naturalism and my own framework for academic inquiry. A welcome result, from my point of view, but then why not jettison the label 'naturalism'? A naturalism that allows explanatory appeals to non-natural entities is a very expansive naturalism indeed.

Alternatively, suppose that the answer is no, and that Schilbrack does not allow us to argue to the conclusion that ensoulment is the best explanation for human mindedness, even when the proffered arguments are themselves grounded in publicly accessible reasons and evidence. Well, then, in that case, Schilbrack has ruled out certain kinds of substantive conclusions by methodological fiat, irrespective of whether those conclusions are well supported by argument, and irrespective of whether they are credible or true. Why limit inquiry in this way? What could possibly be gained? Such an attitude seems entirely contrary to the spirit of free inquiry that is at the heart of academic study.

Perhaps Schilbrack believes that, in principle, there can be no publicly accessible arguments to the conclusion that ensoulment is the best explanation for human mindedness.

If that is his position, I would first want to know why he thinks that none of the existing philosophical literature on this topic is publicly accessible. (The question is not whether he is *persuaded* by that literature, but only whether he thinks it contains publicly accessible arguments.) More to the point, if Schilbrack thinks that in principle there can be no publicly accessible arguments for ensoulment, then he bears the burden of defending that conclusion through arguments of his own. And the conclusion is a substantive, ontological, and metaphysical position. It is not the sort of conclusion that can arise from the simple application of a formal, methodological rule. We cannot arrive at the substantive conclusion ‘no publicly accessible arguments for ensoulment are possible’ by applying the methodological rule ‘don’t appeal to supernatural entities in explanations’.

In the book, I discuss a regrettably common rhetorical tactic that I call ‘ontological naturalism on the cheap’ (231–234). When scholars of religion appeal to methodological naturalism in a way that implicitly assumes ontological naturalism without explicitly defending that assumption, they are guilty of practising ontological naturalism on the cheap. I suspect that Schilbrack does not want to allow gods, souls, and other spooky things to enter into causal explanations because he holds that no such things exist. If that is the case, he should say so, and be prepared to enter into academic arguments with those of us who disagree. But that would require him to engage in substantive metaphysical arguments that go beyond the limited forms of metaphysics that he explicitly countenances.

In short, Schilbrack seems to face the following dilemma: either his expansive methodological naturalism is so expansive that it is actually coextensive with my own non-naturalist position – a result I would welcome – or, alternatively, it is not really *methodological* naturalism at all, but a disguised form of ontological naturalism.

Notwithstanding this disagreement – if indeed it is a disagreement – I am very happy to regard Schilbrack as a friend and ally with respect to other important academic questions that matter very much in the contemporary academy. I share his commitment to normative and constructive inquiry in the academic study of religion, and I recognize that in his own quarter of that field, such a commitment is highly unusual, and thus even more commendable. Theologians, analytic and otherwise, are lucky to have in Schilbrack a fellow traveller who understands the value of inquiry into ‘what is good, real, just, and beautiful’.

### Response to Sameer Yadav

Most global criticisms of analytic theology miss the mark, and can safely be ignored. (By ‘global criticisms of analytic theology’, I mean root-and-branch criticisms of analytic theology as such, as a method of inquiry, rather than criticisms of specific analytic arguments.) Sameer Yadav’s criticisms do hit the mark, squarely and with force.

Here Yadav’s criticisms of analytic theology are targeted at my own defensive account. According to Yadav, I ‘fail to recognize how a monomaniacal fixation on knowledge, truth, and warrant might constitute a characteristic deformation of [analytic theology], or how the myopia resulting from that fixation might underlie the objections from history, mystery, and practice’. Yadav develops this charge by reiterating several arguments from his 2020 piece on analytic liberation theology. According to Yadav, (i) eudaimonistic considerations ought to constrain our projects of inquiry; (ii) this eudaimonistic constraint ‘imposes a substantive and methodological norm of liberation’ on theological inquiry; and (iii) analytic theology typically fails to satisfy this liberative norm, and when it does so fail, it counts as bad theology. With great effectiveness, he then re-deploys these arguments against my defence of analytic theology: my response to the objections from history, mystery, and practice are inadequate and superficial precisely because I am unable to grasp more serious objections that spring from the eudaimonistic considerations that analytic theologians typically ignore.



I stand by my treatment of the objections from history, mystery, and practice, but Yadav is correct that when I present those objections, I do not go far enough, and that I overlook deeper and more fundamental criticisms. In my defence, the chapter 'Three Theological Objections: History, Mystery, Practice' is part of the book's extended introduction. This introductory chapter is not meant as my final word or full response to the questions it raises, but points toward subsequent chapters, where I do move closer to Yadav's own position, though certainly not as close as he would like. (See especially the section 'What Can Analytic Theologians Learn from Critical Inquiry' in Chapter 13.) Contra Yadav, the chapter on history, mystery, and practice does not present my account of analytic theology's 'characteristic deformations'. Instead, that account is presented in Chapter 4, where it is explicitly tied to the analytic method in ways that seem quite similar to Yadav's own critique. I write:

Many of analytic theology's characteristic virtues are also those of analytic philosophy: a concern for linguistic precision, logical rigor, and linear argument, along with a strong commitment to transparent writing. These are genuine virtues, and they are much needed in theology and the study of religion. But it is also easy to see how these same virtues could become deformed. To a hammer, everything looks like a nail. The standard analytic machinery can quickly transform the mysterious and transcendent into the familiar and tractable in a way that misconstrues just how alien and unfamiliar many theological topics really are (45).

Still, I agree that the book would have been better if Chapter 2 had included a more extensive engagement with the eudaimonistic and critical-genealogical considerations that Yadav highlights.

Yadav has also convinced me that I need to think more carefully about the charge that analytic theology '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'. I need to think more carefully about that charge because I am not entirely sure what I should say in response. Here is a sketch rather than an argument: Let the phrase 'the ideological underpinnings of the Christian tradition' stand in for Yadav's phrase 'the interests and values being served by the theological claims of the texts and traditions to which analytic theology appeals'. These two claims are different: (a) analytic theologians should attend to the ideological underpinnings of the Christian tradition; versus (b) every instance of analytic theology must include explicit reflection on the ideological underpinnings of the Christian tradition. I am inclined to think that (a), or something near enough to (a), is both true and part of what it means to be a responsible scholar of the humanities in the twenty-first century. I doubt very much that (b) is true.

Some of Yadav's criticisms simply restate – in more vituperative language – positions that I explicitly endorse. Those criticisms in fact form part of my own call for analytic theologians to learn from the wider religious studies academy. For example, I certainly agree that analytic theologians should not display 'a monomaniacal fixation on knowledge, truth, and warrant', and I also worry that too many analytic theologians are happy 'to strip-mine theological texts and traditions for the relevant chains of inferential reasoning'. That is why I argue that analytic theologians should be more attentive to history, mystery, and practice; to pre-modern ways of reading and thinking (51, 177), and to contemporary critical theory. If Yadav and I disagree here, it is not because I deny that analytic theologians often display 'a monomaniacal fixation on knowledge, truth, and warrant'. We disagree (if we do) because I also hold that the analytic focus on knowledge, truth, and warrant is both intrinsically valuable and pragmatically useful as a corrective to the characteristic defects of other forms of academic theology and the study of religion. Those other forms of inquiry

do not attend enough to ‘knowledge, truth, and warrant’. The problem is the ‘monomaniacal fixation’ part, not the ‘knowledge, truth, and warrant’ part.

Similarly, I am not sure why Yadav thinks that I myself – as opposed to my analytic targets – ‘narrowly construe mystery in terms of a knowledge gap’ or as ‘an obstacle to our theological theorizing’ instead of as an object of ‘rigorous appreciation’. I focus on the epistemological dimensions of divine transcendence precisely because too many of my analytic interlocutors do not regard divine transcendence as a constraint on their own theorizing. Yadav believes that divine transcendence is more than an epistemic obstacle and so do I, but before I can convince my analytic colleagues of that, I first need to convince them that divine transcendence actually does limit what they can know about God. Likewise, from the other direction, I need to convince determined opponents of analytic theology that divine transcendence does not simply vitiate all analytic theorizing.

Yadav thinks that analytic theologians do not sufficiently ‘prize’ the role of wonder and worship, and as a result, they ‘lack the theoretical resources’ to understand ‘traditions of reasoning shaped by a rigorous appreciation of divine mystery’. He faults me for failing to appreciate this point.<sup>3</sup> Yet I argue, at some length, that analytic theologians can only avoid idolatry by approaching God with an attitude of worship, which I further define as an attitude of ‘adoration, reverence, awe, love, obedience, humility, and gratitude’ (137). So I both notice and explicitly try to remedy the very defect that Yadav finds in analytic theology.

Yadav thinks that I should be more critical of analytic theology than I am, and fair enough. But I would suggest that he has not sufficiently attended to those critical elements that I have included in the book. They are woven throughout the text, in nearly every chapter. The book is a defence of analytic theology, but it is by no means an unqualified defence.

Yadav also thinks that I misunderstand his 2020 piece ‘Toward an Analytic Theology of Liberation’. I am not surprised. Even now, I remain unsure about exactly what his position is, and exactly how radical it is. As a result, I am genuinely unsure about how far we disagree. The points of agreement are clear enough. I agree with Yadav that analytic liberation theology is both possible and desirable. That is, I agree that the constitutive norms of analytic theology and the methods of analytic philosophy are compatible with explicitly liberative and emancipatory theological work. I further agree with Yadav that it would be good to have more instances of analytic theology that serve liberative aims. And I certainly agree that any theology that contributes to the oppression of the poor and the downtrodden is bad theology, full-stop.

Beyond these high-level points of agreement, matters are cloudy, at least for me. According to Yadav, theology that displays ‘neglect or indifference to the liberative norm’ is ‘all things considered, *bad* theology’, regardless of whether it is also *epistemically* good. But it is not clear to me exactly what it would take for an instance of analytic theology to satisfy the liberative norm, and so it is not clear to me which instances of analytic theology do count as all-things-considered good for Yadav. I am pleased to learn that Yadav agrees that good theology need not ‘*directly and explicitly*’ serve liberative aims, but this concession immediately invites the question of what it would look like to satisfy those aims indirectly and implicitly. Instead of directly addressing this question, Yadav tends to take refuge in the modal language of possibility:

It is ‘*perfectly possible* for instances of good theology to indirectly and implicitly serve liberative aims ...’

... every work of theology is *potentially subject* to a rational requirement to show that [it satisfies those aims]

I do not deny that there are *possibly* eudaimonistic or liberative justifications available for many or even all of the various projects of AT.

Are there any *actual* cases of analytic theology that are all-things-considered good, and that are not also directly and explicitly liberative? And what would it *actually* look like for an instance of analytic theology to satisfy the liberative norm indirectly and implicitly? Yadav says that it is not his project to answer these questions. Fine – but until he does, I am unsure about the scope of his critique, and so I am unsure about how to formulate an adequate reply.

## Conclusion

I have said that *Analytic Theology and the Academic Study of Religion* succeeds just in case I can show that analytic theology is not vulnerable to common criticisms from other theologians and scholars of religion. I very much hope that the book does succeed on those terms. But in their own responses, my interlocutors have already ensured that the book has succeeded in another way: by eliciting better, more sophisticated criticism of analytic theology than has previously been the norm. In order to flourish, analytic theology needs better critics. I am grateful to Dole, Leidenhag, Schilbrack, and Yadav for showing the way.

## Notes

1. I develop this argument in Wood (2016).
2. For a guide to recent developments, see the American Philosophical Association blog post ‘Dusting Off Dualism?’ (Owen 2018) as well as Rickbaugh and Moreland (2024).
3. ‘Rigorous appreciation’ is my own term of art, and in Chapter 14, I argue that, for its adherents, analytic theology is a form of rigorous appreciation, which offers ‘a rich wellspring of attachment, enchantment, wonder, and absorption’ (271).

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