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Martin Westerholm

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Analytic theology and contemporary inquiry

Martin Westerholm

Systematic Theology, Institute for Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Contemporary theology appears to be in a transitional phase that brings with it a search for forms of thought that can support theology’s ongoing work. As a result in part of the institutional alliances that it has formed, analytic theology has emerged as perhaps the most concerted attempt to develop a new form of theological inquiry. Critical evaluation of this form of inquiry is an important task for theologians today. This article takes up this task by attempting to develop a picture of a constellation of principles that shape analytic work, and to suggest that this constellation leaves analytic work best suited to functioning not as an independent or self-sufficient program, but rather as a circumscribed element that is anchored in wider forms of reflection.

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I

Contemporary theology appears to be in something of a transitional phase. Twentieth-century thought was marked by distinctive features that shape the major works of systematic theology published up until the century’s end; but the new wave of systematic theologies that has appeared in recent years signals something of a turn away from these features. Sarah Coakley’s emphasis on prayer and desire reframes the terms on which the theology of revelation is understood; Katherine Sonderegger’s emphasis on the oneness of God departs from twentieth-century commitments to the centrality of trinitarian thought; John Webster’s emphasis on the conceptual priority of creation, though not worked out in a full systematics, represents a turn away from the christocentrism of the modern tradition. The commitments regarding revelation, Trinity, and Christology that marked much twentieth-century theology have their roots in modern forms of idealism, and tended to characterize works that remained in conversation with the German tradition. The turn away from these commitments reflects a move away from the idealist horizon of modern German thought, and a search for alternative horizons that can sustain contemporary work.

Among the most concerted attempts to form conceptual alliances capable of sustaining contemporary theology is the distinctively analytic work that has emerged in recent years. The ‘theological turn’ through which thinkers schooled in analytic philosophy have taken up constructive engagement with Christian doctrine has been called the
The most significant development in academic theology in decades.\(^2\) The turn began with unabashedly Christian work in the philosophy of religion that is credited with ‘revitalizing’ the discipline through a ‘desecularizing’ move that left the field functioning in a Christian vein in a way that has not been the case since the Middle Ages.\(^3\) The growing prominence of analytic thought within theology today is then a result of the way that, flush from apparent victory, analytically inclined philosophers have taken an interest in positive doctrinal construction, and have imparted their conceptual tools to a widening circle of theologians. To hear these philosophers tell it, the move towards theology emerged from a measure of frustration. Convinced that theologians suffered from a ‘continental captivity’ that left them struggling to extract resources from hermeneutical and deconstructive forms of thought, philosophers of religion decided to ‘fix theology by doing it themselves’\(^4\). They sought to address questions of Christian doctrine in a ‘counterrevolution’ that reverses the dominant movement of the last century. ‘Forty years ago, theologians were abandoning theology to take up philosophy because of loss of faith. Now philosophers are taking up theology because of the intensity of their faith’.\(^5\) Advocates of this movement suggest that theology has received new life from the conceptual sophistication that analytic thinkers have brought to dogmatic questions.

The apparent impact of analytic theology has, however, not meant that it has won easy acceptance within the theological mainstream. The results of the ‘theological turn’ in analytic thought ‘haven’t, in general, been warmly received by theologians’.\(^6\) ‘Other theologians are skeptical – to say that they are dubious that any good could come out of Notre Dame is to put it mildly’.\(^7\) David Bentley Hart gives characteristically colourful voice to this scepticism in claiming that analytic theology indulges the illusion that it has purged itself of unexamined presuppositions all the while depending on arbitrary dogmas and functioning finally ‘as an excellent vehicle for avoiding thinking intelligently at all’.\(^8\) Analytic thinkers take Hart’s comments to confirm that their tradition ‘seems invisible’ to most theologians even though it ‘dominates’ English-speaking philosophy and represents an alternative to philosophical trajectories that provide ‘little other than resistance to the work of any theology committed to the truth of doctrine’.\(^9\)

The aim of this article is to ask how far theology can be done in an analytic mode. This question is crucial to theological reception of analytic work. It is important not only because it furnishes an occasion for reflecting on foundational questions regarding the nature and use of theological concepts, but also because the institutional conditions that shape contemporary theology make attention to the reception of analytic thought a matter of some importance. Analytic theology has acquired significant institutional and financial backing in recent years; the investment made in it by the Templeton Foundation, for instance, far outstrips the resources available to any other contemporary research program. Apart from critical scrutiny of its theological merits, there is some danger that it will become normalized through a movement rooted in contingent institutional factors apart from demonstration of its intrinsic worth. This is a matter to which it is important for theologians to attend, for theology has always been exposed to distortion rooted in accidents of circumstance (the way that certain questions have become de rigeur since theological work came to be concentrated in modern universities provides a ready example), and critical attention to possible sources of distortion is thus one task of its practitioners. Insofar as institutional support of analytic forms of
thought is one possible source today, the reception of analytic theology is an important question for contemporary theologians.

What follows, then, is an inquiry into how far theology can be done in an analytic mode. I aim to probe the logic and limits of influential instances of analytic work in an effort to suggest that, while it is an important element within the theological task, it may be poorly suited to functioning as a free-standing enterprise in a way that would warrant the perpetuation of a distinctively analytic approach to theology as a whole. This is the case because it appears to rest on presuppositions that generate a drift into abstraction through which ideal objects of inquiry are substituted for real. I intend to suggest that a theology that is able to resist this drift must allow its analytic work to be circumscribed and controlled by wider forms of thought. The ambiguity that surrounds just what analytic theology is entails that this suggestion is a provisional contribution to a conversation in motion rather than a binding set of conclusions. The final aim of this article is to further dialogue between analytic and non-analytic voices in an effort to generate clarity on both sides about what analytic theology is, and where its strengths and vulnerabilities truly lie.

II

It is important that we begin by acknowledging the difficulties that accompany engagement with analytic theology because the nature of this form of thought remains unclear. Intra-mural discussions amongst analytic theologians often circle around the difficulties of defining the discipline; discussion between these theologians and their wider interlocutors is impeded because no clear account of their discipline is available. Analytic theologians frequently acknowledge the existence of the difficulty and then brush it by; but a cogent account of this form of thought is of considerable importance in facilitating scrutiny of the theological merits of analytic work. Three different attempts at explanation are typical amongst analytic theologians today. A few comments about each will be useful in framing an engagement with their project.

(1) A glance at a first attempt at explanation should help us to see that important questions regarding the integrity of analytic thought are bound up with the question of definition. The terms for these questions are set by the way that theologically inclined elements of analytic thought have taught us to be alert to internal tensions within particular positions. Influential iterations of analytic thought have sought to develop their self-understanding by distinguishing themselves from movements that are taken to be marked by self-contradiction, foundationalism and positivism most prominently; but it is important for us that work that is influenced by these iterations is itself not immune from questions about its internal consistency. The point might be made by considering the account of analytic thought that is developed by Michael Rae. In a widely cited set of comments, Rae proposes that analytic theology is best taken to be characterized by its ‘rhetorical style’ because concrete definitions fail. He goes on to point to five features that mark this style; these features include emphasis on precision and clarity, on the priority of primitive concepts and of notions that can be formalized, and rejection of rhetorical and stylistic tropes whose semantic content outstrips their propositional content. This characterization has been formative for other work; but it appears in some ways to struggle to balance its accounts. It deflates the value of the rhetorical and presents clear definitions as the currency in which
good work trades; but when it comes to discharge its debts in giving an account of itself, it suggests that is unable to pay in the currency of clear definition, and proposes instead to settle accounts in the deflated coin of the rhetorical. Readers are left to wonder how they are to assess the value of a school that devalues the only currency in which its self-understanding may be paid up. Theologians might well ask why they ought to reckon seriously with a movement that defines itself in terms of features that it itself depreciates. If rhetoric and style are conceptually inconsequential, why attend to a movement that is distinguished primarily by its style? I shall return later to broader comments about the dangers that attend movements that define themselves primarily by their style. We might note for now that critics have pointed out that inability to define oneself is a philosophical mark of shame, and the embarrassment would seem particularly acute where insistence on clear definition is a hallmark of the school in question.

(2) Comments on a second attempt to define analytic theology permit us to set the difficulty of defining the school within a wider philosophical context. Confronted by the problem of definition, analytical theologians sometimes default to the claim that analytic theology is marked by deploying the conceptual tools of analytic philosophy for theological ends. The assumption underwriting this move seems to be that, while definition is not easily found within the theological sphere, analytic theology may borrow a measure of self-understanding from the philosophical sphere by claiming that it is simply the theological application of a particular set of philosophical tools. The difficulty is that attention to the philosophical sphere does not offer assurance that, in borrowing from analytic philosophy, analytic theologians are taking up a defined and delineated set of tools. A substantial consensus has gathered around the notion that a coherent entity called analytic philosophy is an ‘illusion’. Contemporaries suggest that analytic philosophy is in a ‘state of crisis’, if not wholly ‘defunct’, precisely because it does not represent anything coherent. In an oft-cited set of comments, Brian Leiter writes that:

It is time to pronounce the ‘bogeyman’ of analytic philosophy laid to rest: so-called ‘analytic’ philosophers now include quietists and naturalists; old-fashioned metaphysical philosophers and twentieth-century linguistic philosophers; historians of philosophy and philosophers who show little interest in the history of the field. Given the methodological and substantive pluralism of Anglophone philosophy, ‘analytic’ philosophy survives, if at all, as a certain style that emphasizes ‘logic’, ‘rigor’, and ‘argument’ – a stylistic commitment that does little to demarcate it, of course, from Kant, Hegel, Descartes, or Aristotle.

Leiter’s characterization is suggestive but tendentious. We need not endorse them uncritically; that there is a genuine question here becomes clear when we consider attempts to define analytic thought within the philosophical sphere. The most commonly cited definition in philosophical literature is Michael Dummett’s claim that analytic thought is marked by following Frege in supposing, ‘first, that a philosophical account of thought can be attained through a philosophical account of language, and, secondly, that a comprehensive account can only be so attained; but critics point out that, on these terms, neither the work of Bertrand Russell nor the majority of the philosophy done after 1960 or so would count as analytic. Beyond attempts at a concrete definition of this kind, philosophers are willing to characterize the movement by way of a broad ethos – Robert Brandom speaks of a neat credo running ‘faith in
reasoned argument, hope for reasoned agreement, and clarity of reasoned expression (and the greatest of these is clarity)\textsuperscript{22} – but critics again point out that those attributes cut across different movements so that, on these terms, it would make more sense to speak of an analytic approach to phenomenology or hermeneutics than of a distinctive analytic philosophy.\textsuperscript{23} A clear conception of analytic thought that eases difficulties within the theological sphere is not to be found amongst the philosophers. Reference to ‘ethos’ and ‘style’ again emerge as determinative.

(3) It is important as we turn to a third set of comments that we avoid hasty conclusions on the basis of the lack of definition amongst philosophers. Alongside cries of ‘crisis’, contemporary philosophers are getting on with projects that they are happy enough to call analytic without worrying overly much about the integrity of the label. It might be that willingness to allow analytic theology to function as a nebulous set of practices is prudent in order to avoid closing off the fruit that this form of thought might yield. A measure of patience seems appropriate, for the sun has scarcely risen on theological appropriation of analytic procedures, and inherited wisdom has it that the owl of Minerva takes flight only at dusk; but it is then crucial that patience is not the same as quiescence, and further concerns might be raised that suggest that it is important for theologians to push analytic thinkers to become clear about the shape of their practices and norms. Bluntly put, the concern revolves around the possibility that, absent an account of this kind, analytic theology might come to operate as a self-reinforcing ideology. Scholarship dating back to the 1950s has recognized that the analytic tradition’s concern for the careful delimitation and control of the meaning of language means that it is particularly susceptible to deformation into ideology.\textsuperscript{24} The point has been taken up in a suggestive work by Stanley Rosen, who argues that the inability of analytic thought to define itself is not benign, but rather reflects a troubling situation in which the analytic tradition has broken apart under the pressure of internal self-contradictions and has come to mask the difficulty through rhetorical appeals to ‘scientific’ procedures that function finally as ideology.\textsuperscript{25}

Rosen does not expand on this comment, but a version of his concern might be developed through brief comments on a third attempt to define analytic theology. This attempt consists in a shorthand appeal to clarity as the defining concern of the school. Appeals of this kind are widespread; analytic theologians are most frequently to be found gesturing to the notion that their school is constituted by concern for clarity; but two points might be raised in response. The first is that appeal to clarity cannot define a discipline because the coherence of the appeal depends on a prior account of a discipline and its object. The notion of clarity is contentless and undefined until the nature of a discipline and object is specified, for clarity means different things and is measured by different standards in different contexts. The clarity of a mathematical proof is different from the clarity of a poem; Aristotle thus establishes the principle that an account of a field and a particular object must precede, and not follow from, an appeal to clarity, for the wise person seeks the kind of clarity that is appropriate within a particular field. It is only by leaving a measure of wisdom behind that one can take clarity to define a particular approach without first considering the fit between the approach and the object. A kind of ideology is operative where thinkers proceed as if
they possess a measure of clarity that may be deployed without prior consideration of its propriety in relation to a particular object.

The second point to be made is that appeal to clarity cannot be determinative because it is finally self-referential, and, in its self-referentiality, it is again open to deformation into ideology. The difficulty here is that clarity is not only always the clarity of a particular object, but also always clarity for a particular subject. What is clear to the analytic thinker is very different from what is clear to readers of Origen or Theresa of Avila, to say nothing of the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker. What one takes to be clear is a function of the forms of thought to which one is habituated. To say that a piece of work is clear is to say as much about its relation to one’s own training as about the piece taken somehow in itself; and to claim that a particular discipline is defined by clarity is, on one level, to say little more than that it succeeds in producing work that stands in close proximity to self-chosen precedents, and, on another level, to risk a form of ideology that supposes that the precedents that inform one particular discipline ought to be permitted to determine another. In the hands of critically inclined thinkers, appeal to clarity has admitted of easy deconstruction into a bid for power that rests on conflating the conventional and the natural, or the habitual and the normative. The idea that a particular field can be demarcated by its concern for clarity appears to rest in some part at least on arbitrarily privileging its standards for clarity over others.

We might conclude this glance at the question of definition by observing that ideological deformation threatens where a form of thought that defines itself by appeal to clarity is promoted apart from an account of the fit between the practices and norms that shape its understanding of clarity and a particular field and its object. This deformation is, at this point, no more than a threat. It is to be expected that a discipline that remains in its infancy lacks the self-understanding of full maturity. Given how short-sighted thirteenth-century reactions against theological appropriations of Aristotle’s work appear today, we are wise to allow a measure of breathing room to new attempts to appropriate tools that can aid theological work. Following this recognition, the consideration of the definition of analytic theology that I have offered here is crucial in qualifying the conclusions that I develop. Given the ambiguous character of analytic theology itself, the conclusions towards which I move are intended as indications of areas for further reflection rather than definitive words regarding insuperable difficulties with the analytic program. The analytic program is too fugacious to sustain a direct hit; the shell simply passes through a shifting vapour; but it is important that analytic thinkers not settle into this ambiguity as a way of warding off criticism, but rather concede that honest account of the state of the discipline requires the acknowledgement that it is in danger of functioning ideologically so long as it explains itself by no more than appeal to clarity or style. An analytic form of theology will have secured itself against this danger when it has developed a twofold account: a clear description of its practices and norms, on one side, and a clear description of the fit between these practices and norms and the object of theology, on the other. So long as these descriptions are not forthcoming, theologians may justly suspect that analytic theology is held together in part at least by adherence to an arbitrarily chosen set of precedents. If analytic theology wishes to present itself and the institutional alliances that it has formed as healthy contributors
to contemporary dialogue, then it is incumbent upon it to meet its own standards in giving a clear account of its nature and norms.

III

Given the nebulous character of analytic theology, how might we go about engaging with it? The set of possible approaches to and conclusions regarding this form of thought is constricted by its ambiguity; we can at most offer provisional conclusions regarding a dialogue in motion. A helpful point at which to join this dialogue is presented by Kevin Diller’s recent attempt to bring Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga together in a treatment of theology’s ‘epistemological dilemma’. Diller’s text is useful because it presents its treatment of Barth and Plantinga as a ‘test case’ of the potential for exchange between theologians and analytic thinkers. Observing the results of the test permits us to identify key spheres in which questions might be asked regarding the analytic project. My aim in taking up this dialogue with Diller is to suggest that his attempt to bring Barth and Plantinga together requires distortions in a presentation of Barth that point us to key questions that can orient our inquiry. In particular, Diller helps us to begin to diagnose a drift towards abstraction that issues from reliance on a particular understanding of conceptual ‘givenness’.

Diller’s point of departure is the notion that fruitful dialogue between classical and analytic forms of thought is possible because, in decisive respects, Barth and Plantinga stand in ‘essential agreement’. Fleshing out this proposal a little, Diller explains that the two share core commitments that provide a ‘unified response’ to theology’s ‘epistemological dilemma’. We are told that this dilemma consists in the fact that ‘Christian theologians are required to adopt a high view of theological knowledge while also maintaining a low view of the unaided capacities of the human knower to secure such knowledge’. Barth and Plantinga are then shown to be united because both understand this dilemma to find its solution in revelation, and both refuse to step outside of the sphere of revelation in attempts to ground theological inquiry outside of the activity of God. Both are, in short, ‘theo-foundationalists’, which is to say that both understand revelation as the sole basis of the knowledge of God, and critique the notion that theology should ground its appeal to revelation in more general principles.

As a broad set of observations, these claims are fair enough; but it is important that the problem that Diller introduces is fairly general, and leads to discussions of divine revelation and human reasoning that are marked by a corresponding lack of specificity. Diller supposes that theology’s epistemological dilemma consists in tension between a high view of theological knowledge and a low view of human capacity; but this is neither an issue by which theologians have been especially troubled, nor one that philosophical critics have pushed with any force. It is resolved with no real difficulty through appeal to revelation – a low view of human capacity is, it turns out, no dilemma at all if recourse to revelation is ready to hand. Diller sets up the problem in such a way that invocation of the sheer fact of revelation is sufficient for a resolution apart from consideration of the character of revelation and the kind of reasoning that revelation engenders. This is significant because it is in thinking about the nature of revelation and of theological reasoning that we encounter important differences between Plantinga and Barth.
Some care is called for in turning, first, to Plantinga’s account of revelation, for Plantinga approaches the topic with a polemical rather than a dogmatic aim. Plantinga seeks not to guide by the Church by providing a faithful description of revelation in its historical actuality, but rather to counter the notion that Christian belief is irrational by constructing a hypothetical account of what revelation could be like in order to give Christian claims epistemic warrant. He seeks to show how Christian belief ‘could have’ warrant by offering a ‘model’ of revelation, understood as a description of ‘a possible state of affairs’ that, if true, would give warrant to Christian faith. In developing a ‘model’ of this kind, Plantinga claims that he is describing an ‘ideal faith’, and that he has no stake in claiming that this ideal faith is ever actualized. To introduce a distinction that will be significant for us later, Plantinga gives an account of the conceptually ideal rather than the historically real. A conceptual construct is offered in place of dogmatic description of God’s acts in history.

The ‘model’ through which Plantinga depicts revelation involves two elements, one that is intended to establish how theistic belief generally might have warrant, and another that is intended to show how the full panoply of particularly Christian beliefs might be warranted. On one side, Plantinga argues that theistic belief generally is warranted if human beings are equipped with a ‘sensus divinitas’, an ‘innate’ faculty that delivers knowledge of God in an ‘immediate’ and ‘spontaneous’ way apart from the mediation of perception and argument. On the other side, Plantinga claims that the conceptual content of Christian faith in particular – affirmations of the reality of the Trinity, of the two natures of Christ, and so on – is warranted if the Holy Spirit works inside believers to produce belief in the content of Scripture in an ‘intuitive and immediate’ way that can no more be questioned than one’s sense that one had eggs for breakfast. The common feature of both elements is an account of revelation that centres around the notion of intuitive immediacy. Plantinga wishes to suggest that it is entirely reasonable to hold Christian beliefs as epistemically ‘basic’, that is, as beliefs that are primary data in a believer’s noetic life apart from any dependence on argument or conceptually mediated experience. To do so, he constructs a model that stresses the immediacy of revelation to the believer.

It is Plantinga’s emphasis on the unmediated givenness of the knowledge of God that is important for us. Though it is developed in a hypothetical model of revelation, it reflects the framework that shapes his actual use of theological concepts. It is the connection between an understanding of the mode of givenness of revelation and the way that we reason theologically that I wish to develop. The important point for us at present is that Plantinga’s account of the immediate, intuitive givenness of revelation is coupled with an emphasis on immediacy in the way that speech about God gives its meaning. This latter emphasis comes to the fore through Plantinga’s opposition to the notion that some qualification of the meaning or reach of human concepts in relation to God is required. Plantinga describes this notion as ‘a piece of sheer confusion’, and deploys a straightforward line of reasoning against it throughout his corpus. In his earlier book, *Does God have a Nature?*, he writes:

> our concept of wisdom applies to a being if that being is wise; so a being to whom this concept did not apply would not be wise. If, therefore, our concepts do not apply to God,
then our concepts of being love, almighty, wise, creator and Redeemer do not apply to him, in which case he is not loving, almighty, wise, a creator or a Redeemer. 

In his recent *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, he writes that ‘if our concepts don’t apply to God, then we can’t in fact believe that God is the creator of heaven and earth: for, of course, we could do that only if our concept creator of heaven and earth did in fact apply to God’. For Plantinga, the cogency of Christian belief hinges on the notion that our language gives revealed knowledge of God with an immediacy that corresponds to the immediacy of revelation itself. Terms must be transparent mediums of understanding if the immediacy of revelation itself is to hold; thus, their usual senses are wholly uninterrupted in speech about God, and theological reasoning may proceed through analysis and extension of those senses. Plantinga establishes a pattern that has become common amongst analytic thinkers by beginning his work with critiques of notions like divine simplicity and timelessness that require qualifications of the degree to which creaturely language and logic apply to God.

At this point, then, we can see that Plantinga’s model of revelation hinges on the notion of an intuitive immediacy that allows Christian belief to be presented as properly ‘basic’, and comes then to correspond to a vision of theological reasoning as involving the analysis of terms that are taken to ‘apply’ to God in unqualified ways. The notion of givenness as a description of revelation and of the nature of theological concepts is central to Diller’s depiction of Plantinga; the question for us is whether Diller can sustain a picture of ‘essential agreement’ between Plantinga and Barth by showing that these same notions are operative in Barth. Diller concedes that his picture would be compromised if Barth qualifies the givenness of the knowledge of God in revelation; he works hard to eliminate the appearance of any such qualification in Barth’s work; but doing so requires him to introduce substantial distortion into his presentation of Barth. These distortions point us in the direction of an important set of critical questions.

The first point that is significant for us concerns Diller’s handling of Barth’s theology of revelation. Diller argues that Barth stands with Plantinga in emphasizing the givenness of revelation; but doing so requires that he shift the sense of an important aspect of Barth’s work. It is axiomatic for Barth that revelation involves a simultaneous givenness and non-givenness of God. Visibility is not proper to God; thus, if God is to unveil himself by becoming perceptible through some creaturely medium – the flesh of Christ, the text of Scripture, or the preaching of the Church – he must also veil himself by ‘hiding’ the invisibility that is proper to him. Put differently, becoming immanent in revelation is an act of veiling the transcendence of the divine; revelation is thus always both a veiling and unveiling of God. This notion is foundational for Barth: it is the basis on which he can deduce the theology of the Trinity from revelation; it provides the structuring principle of the accounts of the knowledge of God and of the divine attributes in *Church Dogmatics II.1*; it constitutes the ‘dialectic of veiling and unveiling’ that is the centrepiece of Bruce McCormack’s interpretation of Barth’s dialectics. Yet Diller occludes it entirely. He presents Barth’s indications of a simultaneous givenness and non-givenness of God not as a reality that is internal to revelation itself, but rather as a distinction between an unqualified givenness of God within revelation and the utter hiddenness of God for those who are outside revelation. Revelation does not involve a simultaneous givenness and non-givenness to the believer, but rather an unqualified
givenness to those who receive the divine word, and the hiddenness of God from those who do not.

This first misconstrual of Barth’s theology of revelation then serves as the basis for distortions in Diller’s account of Barth’s understanding of theological reasoning. It is crucial for Barth that the nature of revelation set the terms for the movements of theological reasoning. Barth supposes that, because revelation involves a dialectical interplay of givenness and non-givenness, theological reasoning must shape itself in a way that corresponds to this dynamic. Theological attention must move to and fro between the givenness and the hiddenness of God in revelation without supposing that it may situate itself above both the divine and the creaturely in order to affect a synthesis of the given and the hidden. The human knower may thus say that God is gracious, for God’s self-giving is a paradigmatic act of grace; but this grace will be misunderstood if it is not coupled with affirmation of God’s holiness, for, precisely in giving himself to creatures in grace, God veils a holiness in which he is set apart from them. The claim ‘God is gracious’ will be misunderstood if it is not taken together with the claim ‘God is holy’; both must be taken together; the meaning of neither is clear on its own on the basis of conventional uses of the notion of grace or holiness. The knower is content that these words speak a mediate truth, but recognizes too that the sense of that truth must be given by God. ‘It remains true that we are invited and authorized by his revelation to name him with these words of ours in the confidence that in this way we are moving in the sphere of truth and not of falsehood so long as we are always willing to allow him to be himself the interpreter of these human words which he has placed upon our lips’.

What becomes of these dialectical patterns of thought in Diller’s account? They are of course diametrically opposed to the principles of Plantinga’s work; Diller dismisses them by arguing, first, that dialectical thinking is equivalent to apophatic thinking, second, that dialectical thinking can be dismissed because ‘the mere apophatic Barth is an option we can quickly dismiss’. An identification of the dialectical and the apophatic makes possible a rejection of the dialectical; but of course Barth understands dialectic as the alternative to apophaticism that is licensed by the nature of revelation itself. He structures much of the argumentation of the Church Dogmatics around the movement of thought that corresponds to the dialectic of revelation. His magnum opus is reduced to unintelligibility by the marginalization of his basic form of thought.

In the end, Barth presents a very different picture of revelation and theological reasoning from Plantinga’s. In constructing a hypothetical model of revelation, Plantinga describes acts of divine self-communication that occur in an immediate and intuitive apprehension of the givenness of revelation. In attempting to describe the historical actuality of revelation, Barth argues that revelation occurs through the mediation of creaturely realities, and thus involves a simultaneous givenness and non-givenness of God. These differences are then reflected in fundamentally different accounts of theological reasoning. For Plantinga, the immediate character of the knowledge of God requires that this knowledge be wholly transparent in the meaning of notions of grace, goodness, creation, and so on. For Barth, the mediate character of knowledge of God entails that this knowledge is found in dialectical movements of thought that reflect the structure of God’s act of revelation. The indirect identity of divinity and humanity in Christ is mirrored in the indirect identity between the truth of
God and our ordinary terms. The notion of grace must be taken together with the notion of holiness in a way that permits God’s own activity to teach us the meaning of these terms.

What, then, are we to make of the notion that, taken as a ‘test case’ of the relation between traditional and analytic theology, Barth and Plantinga may be seen to stand in ‘essential agreement’? A basic level of agreement between Barth and Plantinga may be identified if our question is sufficiently general that it is addressed by invoking the sheer fact of revelation; but, if we ask about the character of revelation and the patterns of thought that it engenders, then we ought to see that Barth and Plantinga occupy different worlds. The key difference concerns the degree to which the mode of the givenness of a particular reality is understood to determine the form of our reasoning about it. Because Plantinga relies on an idealized model of revelation, his understanding and analysis of concepts is abstracted from the way that they are formed. I aim to suggest that this separation between the synthesis and the analysis of concepts reflects a set of principles that operate more widely in the analytic tradition, and tends to occasion a drift into abstraction that the theological tradition has resisted by allowing the work of theological reasoning to be conditioned by the mode of divine givenness in revelation.

IV

These claims can be developed through a set of comments that put the contrast between Barth and Plantinga in a wider frame. We might wonder at this point just how far the contrast between these two figures in particular positions us to understand and assess analytic theology more generally. Three comments will allow a measured broadening of the contrast.

(1) The first point concerns the relation between Plantinga’s work and analytic theology more widely. Questions regarding the extent to which Plantinga’s notions can be taken as representative of theological work in an analytic vein are important, particularly because the internal diversity of analytic thought renders broad judgments about the discipline problematic. The constraints of a single article preclude a detailed treatment of the relation between Plantinga’s work and wider forms of analytic theology. For present purposes, I am content to engage with Plantinga as the formative figure for a major branch of analytic theology, and to accept that the results of this engagement will not touch every work that understands itself as analytic. I am interested in projects that practice something close to conceptual analysis classically understood; I am happy to grant that work of this kind does not exhaust the forms taken by analytic theology today, while stipulating only that, in a great many cases, these other projects can label themselves ‘analytic’ only by emptying the term of any real meaning. Treating Plantinga as representative in this circumscribed sense ought to be uncontroversial; after all, William Abraham suggests that analytic theology as a whole can be divided into a ‘St Basil’ stream, indebted to Basil Mitchell, and a ‘St Alvin’ stream that is decisively shaped by Plantinga, and the distinction between the two falls to no small extent along the lines that we have begun to trace here.43 Mitchell attends both to the complex modes of presence that revelation entails, and to the dependence of theological reasoning on dialectical and analogical movements that ‘owe their explanatory power of
a superfluity of meaning over and above what can be precisely defined\(^4\).\(^4\) By contrast, much analytic theology today mirrors the patterns of Plantinga’s work: proceeding through the construction of conceptual models; framing arguments in abstract conditionals (‘if Christianity is true, then it has warrant’) or probabilities that insulate analytic work from consideration of historical actuality; reliance on univocal models of theological speech, and so on. We shall glance later at the roots of some of these practices in the analytic tradition more generally; for the present, I am content to observe that the influence of the ‘St Alvin’ school of analytic theology appears to stretch more widely than alternatives, and that engagement with Plantinga should thus permit us to reach conclusions that appertain to a good deal of analytic theology today.

(2) The second point to be made concerns Plantinga’s relation to the broader theological tradition. We have seen that Plantinga’s work stands at important remove from Barth’s, but this might not tell us much, for Barth might not represent the most happy ‘test case’ of agreement between Plantinga and the broader tradition. After all, Plantinga understands his model of revelation in part as a development of putatively Thomist and Calvinist accounts of an innate ‘sense of divinity’, a notion for which Barth has, of course, no patience. It might be, then, that while comparison of Plantinga and Barth does not yield substantial agreement, Plantinga’s work might find more natural points of contact in pre-Barthian thought.

What might we find if we probe Plantinga’s relation to the work of figures like Aquinas and Calvin? Plantinga’s own indications suggest that the terrain is more favorable here; John Jenkins has suggested that there are important parallels between Plantinga and Aquinas in particular, for he claims that Thomas understands the knowledge of God that is given by the Holy Spirit to be marked by the intuitive immediacy that Plantinga emphasizes.\(^4\) Jenkins cites Thomas’ reference to ‘certain judgment of truth without any discursive thought through simply intuition’; but it is significant that this reference is to the intuitive character of God’s own knowledge, and that the wider structure of Thomas’s work is shaped by a basic distinction between the intuitive character of divine knowledge and the discursive character of human knowledge.\(^4\) Thomas argues that, in this life, knowledge of God occurs properly through the indirect mediation of sensible objects, not only because of the nature of human knowers, but also as a corollary of the fundamental fittingness of the revelation of the invisible God through the visible form of Christ’s humanity.\(^4\) This christological dynamic is critical. In taking up an important set of topics that reside in this sphere, Lydia Schumacher has recently pointed out that, whereas Plantinga strips revelation of christological and trinitarian specificity by bypassing its mediate character, Thomas’ emphasis on mediacy leaves room for a theology of revelation to be qualified by christological and trinitarian affirmations.\(^4\) Crucially, Thomas maintains his distinctness from Plantinga in retaining a christological emphasis on the mediate character of human knowledge of God in his account of the functioning of theological language. This account conforms to the rule that knowledge of God occurs through the mediation of creaturely realities that are not identical with God. In the case of theological language, Thomas argues that the notion of analogy specifies the right difference in relation of theological terms to the truth of God.\(^4\)

As a starting point, we can see that Thomas is closer to Barth in opposing a model of the knowledge of God resting on a notion of immediacy than he is to Plantinga. It is
then significant for us both that Thomas bequeaths strong distinctions between the discursive and the intuitive to Calvin’s Reformed tradition, and that Thomas and the Reformed tradition are joined in drawing from Augustine in emphasizing the mediate character of the knowledge of God. Augustine establishes principles from which Thomas in particular draws by insisting that the mediate character of revelation is a crucial corollary of the equality of the divine Son and the divine Father. Whereas Arian readers of Scripture supposed that the Son is less than the Father because he makes himself visible in the incarnation while the Father maintains the invisibility that is proper to divinity, Augustine insists that Christ’s divinity remains hidden in the incarnation, and that knowledge of God occurs indirectly through the mediation of a creaturely servant form. Augustine takes Moses’ encounter with God as paradigmatic of the mediate vision that is proper to creaturely life: to know God is to perceive God’s ‘back’ from the shelter of a rock, which is, for Augustine, to say that it is to see Christ’s human flesh from the vantage point of a faith rooted in the Church, and to trust in a divinity that remains behind the creaturely veil.

In brief sum, we can see that the distinctions that we encountered between Plantinga and Barth run more widely between Plantinga on one side and Augustine and Aquinas on the other. In contrast to Plantinga’s work, Augustine, Aquinas, and Barth stand together in attending to the concrete character of revelation and allowing that character to condition their understanding of theological language and reasoning. It is significant that, whatever is to be said about differences generated by theological appropriations of Plato, Aristotle, and Kant, these differences do not extend to distinctions between Augustine, Aquinas, and Barth on the notion that there is a mediate quality to theological knowledge that conditions the function of language in theological analysis. These thinkers are united on this point because basic christological affirmations are at stake: God is invisible; affirmation of the divinity of the divine Son requires affirmation of his invisibility; affirmation of his invisibility requires affirmation of the indirect givenness of his divinity through the visible veil of Christ’s humanity; affirmation of this Christological indirectness is normative for our understanding of theological speech, for an indirectness that is not set aside in Christ can hardly be set aside in our understanding of theological language, as if contemporary speech were a finer medium of revelation than Christ. Differing movements are emphasized by these differing thinkers as the entailments of the indirectness of revelation: Augustine emphasizes a spiritual movement upwards from the visible form of creaturely signs; Aquinas emphasizes movements of analogical reasoning; Barth emphasizes movements of dialectical reasoning. But in no case is a christologically mandated indirectness and a subsequent need to move beyond the immediate surface of the meaning of our signs set aside. The agreement amongst these thinkers on this topic suggests that, while there is, a priori, no reason to be more suspicious of theological uses of analytic philosophy than of uses of Plato, Aristotle, or Kant, there are grounds for concern a posteriori insofar as influential analytic voices set aside christological principles that have otherwise united theologians of differing philosophical orientations.
(3) A third comment might be made in order to indicate a point in the theological tradition that does resemble Plantinga’s work. We have seen that Plantinga stands at some remove from Augustine, Thomas, and Barth; but a brief return to Barth might help us to situate some of the currents associated with analytic thought. The notion that is important for us here is that, on Barth’s terms, Plantinga’s work finds its closest analogue in nineteenth-century neo-Protestantism. The claim might seem far-fetched, for the ‘theofoundationalism’ that Diller associates with Plantinga would seem to enjoy considerable distance from the anthropocentrism that Barth is taken to have rejected in nineteenth-century thought. But in Barth’s more patient moments, he moved past the hasty claim that neo-Protestantism was simply anthropocentric, and suggested instead that the shortcomings of this tradition are rooted in the theology of revelation. In his lengthy work on nineteenth-century Protestant theology, Barth concedes that his neo-Protestant forebears often had as much to say about revelation as he does, but he argues that their work remains problematic because they present revelation as a given that is transmitted in a moment of immediacy or union between the divine and the human. For Barth, nineteenth-century theology as a whole consists in a vacillation between a Schleiermacherian understanding of revelation as a subjective synthesis of divine and human in experience, and a Hegelian account of revelation as an objective synthesis in which divine and human are united in the movements of reason. On either model, a theological framework that is qualified by the mediate character of revelation gives way to a theology of immediacy in which the difference between the divine and the creaturely is effaced.

Barth goes on in his Church Dogmatics to suggest that theologies of immediacy represent a point at which liberal and conservative theologies reconverge after appearing to set off in differing directions. For Barth, theological liberalism and conservatism are manifestations of the same errors: failure to reckon with the mediate character of revelation, and a fall into an idolatry in which particular creaturely realities – religious experience, perhaps, or the text of Scripture – are directly identified with the divine. On Barth’s terms, this is an error in which Plantinga stands alongside Schleiermacher and Hegel – and, we have seen, over against Augustine and Aquinas as well. Pointing to this parallel might seem needlessly tendentious, but recognition of important similarities between Plantinga and nineteenth-century thought is crucial in positioning us to identify a set of questions that ought to be posed to analytic thinkers. I aim in the final section of this essay to suggest that the association between Plantinga and nineteenth-century is not accidental, but rather reflects tendencies that show up in important elements in analytic thought, and that raise questions that theologians do well to consider in appropriating the tools associated with this form of reflection.

V

I propose to develop these notions by turning from predominantly theological material to philosophical questions in an effort to draw out the significance of the material that we have encountered thus far. To this point, I have tried to gain a foothold in engaging with analytic theology by following Kevin Diller in taking the relation between Barth and Plantinga as a test case of the relation between analytic and non-analytic forms of thought. I take this test case to be helpful because it allows us to identify key questions
that ought to be posed regarding theological deployment of analytic thought. We have seen that Plantinga diverges from a range of voices in the theological tradition in bypassing the mediate character of revelation and employing a framework of thought that emphasizes the immediate givenness of the knowledge of God. My aim at this point is to turn to consider the analytic tradition more generally in an effort to show that this divergence is not an idiosyncrasy of Plantinga’s work, but rather a reflection of principles that are operative in some forms of analytic thought at least, and that have significant consequences for its theological possibilities.

I propose to treat these notions through the brief development of three claims. The first is that analytic thought encounters one of its signal questions in the relation between its conclusions and empirical actuality. The second is that analytic approaches to this question tend to be shaped by idealist suppositions regarding the relation of thought and being, the rational and the real. The third is that reliance on these suppositions can generate a drift into abstraction through which analytic work replaces real objects of inquiry with ideal. I develop these claims in part as a synthesis of concerns that have been voiced in philosophical literature about the integrity of the analytic program. Synthesis of this philosophical material positions us to make sense of the fact that, in important respects, Plantinga’s work appears to find its closest theological parallel in nineteenth-century neo-Protestantism. It should be added that effecting a synthesis of this kind in brief compass requires ranging somewhat widely through differing texts, and developing an account that is, in some respects, more impressionistic than tightly argumentative; but it remains the case that my aim is to contribute to a dialogue rather than speak a decisive word. As a contribution to a dialogue, the account provides an interpretation of a set of core commitments that shape analytic work. If nothing else, it may provide a point in relation to which other attempts to clarify the analytic program can orient themselves.

(1) The first point that I wish to take up concerns the relation between analytic work and empirical actuality. This question is central to critical engagements with analytic philosophy today. One way to understand it is through its roots in the tendency of analytic thinkers to separate their work from consideration of experience and the synthesis of concepts. This separation is a hallmark of analytic thought in its historical development. Whereas Kant supposed that the analysis of concepts cannot be detached from accounts of experience and synthesis because the conditions of the formation of concepts must govern their later analysis (and so the reason’s fundamental error can be diagnosed as a failure to permit the conditions of objective cognition to govern its work of analysis), G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell thought Kantian accounts of experience and synthesis unduly psychologistic, and sought to recover elements of a pre-Kantian empiricism in claiming that the act of knowing makes no difference to the object known. These thinkers inaugurated a pattern that came to full flowering in the work of the positivists in using appeals to ‘givenness’ to justify separating the analysis of concepts from consideration of experience and the formation of concepts. Concepts were to be considered apart from attention to ‘the behaviour of physical, or even mental, objects’ and ‘questions of empirical fact’. Though defenders of analytic theology in particular often depict their work by setting it over against positivism, and by suggesting that the passing away of the positivist verification principle furnished the condition for the emergence of a theologically engaged form of analytic thought,
they do not question that foundational aim of separating analytical consideration of the content and consequences of concepts from consideration of experience and the formation of concepts. \(^{56}\)

It should be straightforward enough for us to see that, having enacted a separation of this kind, analytic thinkers open space for questions about the relation between their claims and the actual. There are again a number of different routes that might be taken into these questions; perhaps the most expedient runs through analytic inquiries into the ontological status of non-actual states of affairs. The question of this status is rooted in the susceptibility of imaginary, or counterfactual, or merely possible states of affairs to modes of questioning that seem to presuppose their reality. What does it mean that logical analysis of claims about non-actual states of affairs – claims like ‘Sherlock Holmes lives at 221b Baker Street’, which, it would seem, cannot be true because there is nothing to which they can correspond – appears to yield meaningful results? This question received little attention from the British empiricists, whose commitment to the primacy of experience meant that analytic exercises were approached with a sense of the real already established; but analytic work has amongst its formative decisions a promotion of logic to the position of first philosophy for the sake of developing a ‘purified empiricism’ in which logical considerations perform the work that earlier empiricists had performed through ‘psychological hypotheses’ regarding the mind and its relation to experience: defining, classifying, and limiting knowledge. \(^{57}\) Where logic is elevated to primacy in this way, the susceptibility of the imaginary and counterfactual to meaningful analysis has led to revisionary proposals regarding the bounds of the real. Analytic thinkers have argued that unicorns have being and that the past continues to exist; their wider inquiries into the cogency and consistency of human knowledge have led to the claims that possible worlds are real, that tables and chairs are not, and that Descartes’ *cogito* argument functions existentially rather than logically because, whatever the existential tension, there is nothing logically contradictory about holding together the claims ‘I think’ and ‘I do not exist’. \(^{58}\) These positions drive a wedge between analytically and empirically rooted conceptions of the real – experience, after all, suggests that tables and chairs are at least more real than unicorns and possible worlds. This wedge causes analytic thinkers to acknowledge that their work involves retreating to a specialist’s ‘ontology room’ in which claims are developed that have no relation to what those same claims would mean in the ‘ordinary business of life’. \(^{59}\)

We can see, then, that analytic work opens the door to questions about its relation to empirical actuality by developing accounts of the real that are set apart from the understandings that are shaped by life’s ‘ordinary business’. Returning to Ayer’s earlier formulation, we might ask how claims developed through analytic work relate to the ‘factual … behaviour of physical, or even mental, objects’ encountered in everyday life? \(^{60}\) Is the work developed in the analytic thinker’s philosophy rooms intended to retain a principled independence from empirical actuality, perhaps in order to fulfil the longstanding analytic aim of retaining the principled independence of philosophy from the work of the other sciences? If so, how is a discipline like theology, which has its proper object in the actual God who acts in space and time, to orient itself in relation to analytic work? Theological investment in speaking of the God who is renders the relation of analytic work to the actual a crucial question for theological appropriations of analytic thought.
We can help ourselves to grasp the freight of the question by recognizing that concerns of this kind apply not only to analytic work, but also more broadly to other forms of thought that make logic first philosophy. They date back, in one form, to criticisms of Plato’s form of idealism, and, in another, have more proximate roots in critical responses to Hegel’s work. Hegel anticipated the analytic tradition (or, rather, analytic thinkers did not leave Hegel so far behind as they supposed) in elevating logic to the position of first philosophy, and was confronted by Romantic critics who argued that the apparent necessities generated by logic are artificial constructs that hover above and never quite connect with the contingencies of history and experience. Similar concerns regarding a gap between conceptual construct and empirical actuality have recurring repeatedly amongst critics of the analytic tradition. A right wing of the Vienna Circle supposed that analytic thought was in danger of so insulating itself that it could only to deploy a coherence theory of truth in relation to an ideal language, rather than considering our actual language in terms of its correspondence to what is. Work by W.V.O. Quine and Wilfrid Sellars marks a significant transition point in twentieth-century philosophy in its identification of differing idealizing tendencies, whether an idealized distinction between the analytic and the synthetic or an illicit elision of the empirical and the conceptual. Amongst contemporary thinkers, Sellars’ descendants in the Pittsburgh school have been joined by Bas van Fraassen and Peter Unger in suggesting that analytic work has come to deal with ‘idealised simulacra’ and ‘empty ideas’ that bear no relation to what is. These worries recur with sufficient frequency that we must at the least recognize that, whereas early modern empiricism found one of its central questions in the relation between objects of external experience and inner mental representations, modern analytic philosophy finds a crucial question in the relation between its deliverances and the actual.

(2) Equipped with a broad sense of the question, the next task for us involves a glance at assumptions that inform analytic conceptions of the real. I aim here to suggest that renewals of metaphysics that have fuelled analytic interest in theology have been marked by the adoption of broadly Platonic assumptions regarding the relation between the conceptual and the actual, the ideal and the real. We might take a clue to this line of thought from Hegel. I suggested a moment ago that the questions that analytic work faces regarding the relation of the conceptual and the actual have been confronted by earlier forms of thought that identified logic as first philosophy. It is helpful for us now to see that Hegel points to Plato as the one who equips philosophers to respond to concerns regarding a separation of the real and ideal by presenting the principle that is in fact the grundaxiom of philosophy itself: the rational is the real, and the real is the rational. For Hegel, philosophy may function as a truth-disclosing discipline because thought and being are related in such a way that what appears clearly and necessarily to thought is a reliable guide to the actual. This notion is formative for Hegel; it might appear to stand at considerable remove from the principles of analytic work, which is widely understood to have developed out of a reaction against Hegelian idealism; but three points are important for us here. The first is that recent historical work has suggested that the analytic tradition remained closer to idealist presuppositions than it let on. The second is that recent constructive work has suggested that self-conscious development of an otherwise implicit Hegelian understanding of the rational and the real is crucial to the cogency of the analytic project. The third is that no more than a
A brief glance is required to see that deployment of the Platonic principles that Hegel places at the root of philosophy have been operative in the revisionary accounts of the real that we encountered a moment ago. This deployment appears, for instance, in David Lewis’s modal realism, which is rooted in the claim that possible worlds are to be taken as real because of the clarity that this supposition brings to thought, and in Peter van Inwagen’s claims that tables and chairs are to be denied reality because this denial gives maximal cogency to our system of thought. Both these arguments are rooted in a willingness to take the clarity and cogency of thought as a guide to the content of being. Both develop ontological claims by attending to the consistency and cogency of systems of thought – Lewis speaks of ‘paying in the coin of ontology’ for ‘theoretical unity and economy’.66 Both are marked by broadly Platonic assumptions about the capacity of clarity in thought to serve as a guide to actuality. They are, in form, mirror images of the Platonic suggestion that the existence of eternal ideas is to be affirmed because of the cogency that the supposition grants to thought.

The relation between contemporary analytic work and the Platonic tradition should not be wholly surprising. Forms of Platonism have been native to the analytic tradition since the mathematical Platonism that marks Frege’s work. Contemporary debates about the possibilities and limits of these forms witness to the ongoing operation of Platonic assumptions in analytic work.67 However counterintuitive an association between analytic work and wider forms of idealism might seem, the association has firm roots in the analytic decision to follow earlier forms of idealism in making logic first philosophy, and it may be seen to be a natural extension of the historical roots of the analytic tradition. Two points might be made about the connection. The first concerns the notion of clarity. This notion was central for the British empiricists, who followed Descartes in taking the clarity of an idea as the measure of its truth, but who continued to rely on experience rather than clarity as a guide to the real. Its prestige was then augmented by analytic thinkers for whom it was entirely natural, once they had elevated logic to the position of first philosophy, to take a step beyond their empiricist predecessors and to take clarity of thought as a clue not only to the true, but also to the real. It is this augmented prestige that we see in the work of Lewis and van Inwagen, and in the wider flowering of an analytic form of metaphysics that stands in stark contrast to the metaphysical minimalism of the British empiricists themselves. It is a prestige that leaves contemporary analytic work standing in close proximity to the wider tradition of Platonic metaphysics, for confidence in the clarity of thought as a criterion of the real has been the perennial key to the form of metaphysics that Plato bequeathed to western thought.

The second point that is important for us concerns the notion of givenness. We have seen that this notion was deployed in the analytic tradition in order to separate the analytic from the synthetic, and that Plantinga’s deployment marks an important distinction between his work and a set of principles that unite much of the theological tradition. It is important for us now that, though appeals to givenness were intended to separate analytic thought from philosophical idealism, critics have pointed out that they appear tacitly to suppose an identification of the rational and the real that causes analytic work to drift towards idealism. This point was central to criticisms of analytic work that were raised by Wilfrid Sellars, who sought to usher analytic thought from a Humean to a Kantian phase by showing that analytic work that separates itself from
consideration of the formation of concepts must illicitly assume a form of representation that was both pre-conceptual and already conceptualized.\textsuperscript{68} To be sure, this assumption admits of differing descriptions: on one side, a realist might argue that it follows from the sensible supposition that apprehending a thing under a concept is identical with apprehending ‘it to be what it is’ because concepts constitute our relation to the world\textsuperscript{69}; on the other side, a critic might follow Sellars in describing this alignment as an illicit mixing of an unacquired ability to perceive and an acquired ability to organize givens into predicative judgments. But it is important for us that, on either account, appeal to givenness amounts to presuming the identity of the rational and the real. Critics have pointed out that the consequence of this recognition is that an appeal to givenness is the weakest foundation on which realism can rest, for apart from more concerted attention to the way that objects are presented in and concepts are formed in response to experience, the presence to mind of objects and concepts can be understood as products of mind as easily as products of the world. On Kant’s terms, thinkers who ground philosophical realism in appeals to givenness have little defense against an inversion of their position into Berkelian phenomenalism.

(3) At this point, then, we have seen, first, that key principles of analytic thought occasion questions about the relation between analytic work and the actual; secondly, that analytic thinkers tend to rely on idealist principles in addressing questions regarding the real. The third point that is significant for us is that this reliance occasions a drift into abstraction in analytic work through which ideal objects of inquiry are substituted for real. The danger of a slide of this kind is highlighted by a number of thinkers who point to the way that it issues from reliance on a notion of givenness. The actuality of this slide might be traced in a number of ways; we may content ourselves with noting moves towards abstraction that have developed on both the philosophical and theological sides of the analytic project. On the philosophical side, we can proceed through a brief glance at Bas van Fraassen’s account of the consequences of analytic proximity to earlier forms of metaphysics. Van Fraassen is amongst those who acknowledge how closely contemporary analytic work has come to mirror wider forms of idealist metaphysics; he presents the dynamic as a betrayal of the empiricist heritage of analytic thought, and argues that the result of the betrayal is an illicit replacement of actual objects of inquiry with idealized simulacra. This replacement comes about, on van Fraassen’s telling, because analytic thinkers formulate ever more precise definitions of particular entities on the assumption that advances in clarity of understanding are advances in proximity to reality, and fail to notice that, in forming ever clearer definitions apart from concrete attention to the sphere of actuality, they are in fact drifting further and further into constructed abstraction.\textsuperscript{70} Van Fraassen claims that this drift manifests itself in one form in the way that ‘the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is turned into the God of the philosophers’, and in another in the way that arguments about the existence of the world revolve around an idealized concept of world that bears no relation to the concrete sphere in which we find ourselves.\textsuperscript{71} We are left with ideas that appear ‘meaningful but empty’, and risk being reduced to engagement with the ‘empty ideas’ that Peter Unger takes to characterize analytic philosophy.
On the theological side, we may observe a drift into abstraction by revisiting notions that we encountered earlier in Plantinga’s work. In returning to Plantinga after engaging at some length with analytic thought more broadly, we are in position now to see that, as an ideal construct that is systematically separated from the sphere of empirical actuality, Plantinga’s account of revelation reflects important hallmarks of analytic thought more generally. We are given an account of what revelation could be like in order for Christian claims to have warrant; but, because the discussion dissociates itself from an account of what is, we are given no reason to think that it touches on anything more than an ‘empty idea’ on par with demonstration that, under particular conditions, belief in unicorns would be warranted. In this aspect, Plantinga’s work involves engaging with the ideal in principled detachment from the real. In another aspect, it involves imposing the ideal upon the real as its proper measure. We saw earlier that Plantinga preserves an emphasis on immediacy within the knowledge of God by making terms transparent mediums that give the knowledge of God without any interval or interruption. He dismisses dialectical or apophatic qualifications of the operation of human speech by arguing that our concepts must apply to God if God is to possess attributes at all – God is wise only if our concept of wisdom applies to God. ‘A being to whom this concept did not apply would not be wise’, Plantinga claims; this notion presents us with a substitution of the ideal for the real, not, in this case, because attention has drifted slowly from the real to the ideal, but rather because the ideal has imposed itself upon the real as its measure. The rational is made the measure of the real because what it is to be wise is circumscribed by a particular concept of the wise. What it is to be a particular thing is normed by our concept of that thing.

VII

Recognition of the elision of the real and the ideal in Plantinga’s work represents a useful point from which to draw the strands of this discussion together. My aim in this article has been to contribute to the critical assessment of analytic theology. In face of the ambiguities that surround the nature of this form of thought, I have tried through engagement with Plantinga and the wider analytic tradition to develop a picture of principles that shape analytic work, and to suggest where critical questions might be posed. Three comments might be made in synthesizing the material that we have seen.

The first is that we are now in position to appreciate the force of the relation that we encountered earlier between Plantinga’s work and nineteenth-century neo-Protestantism. We saw earlier that, on Barth’s terms, Plantinga’s accounts of revelation and theological reasoning leave him standing closer to Schleiermacher and Hegel than to Augustine, Aquinas, and Barth. We can see now that Barth’s terms are illuminating for us because reckoning with the theological potential of analytic thought should include questions about the relation between analytic work and wider forms of idealism, and with the problems that this relation may raise. Chief amongst these problems is a tendency to drift into abstraction by replacing real objects of inquiry with ideal. We have seen that a move of this kind is operative in Plantinga’s work, which stands in close proximity to nineteenth-century theologies of immediacy, and lacks the resources that are required to avoid measuring the reality of the divine by the standard of human
concepts. The result appears to follow from wider analytic tendencies to separate the consideration of concepts from other forms of empirical and phenomenological inquiry.

The second point that is important for us is that we encountered an antidote to these difficulties in notions shared by Augustine, Aquinas, and Barth. We saw earlier that, though these thinkers are separated by differences between Platonic, Aristotelian, and Kantian forms of thought, they stand together in attending to revelation in its concrete actuality, acknowledging its mediate character, and allowing the mediate quality of the knowledge of God to condition theological understanding of language and logic. Reduced to summary form, they may be said to deploy an order of inquiry in which the mode of the givenness of the object is permitted to control the mode of analysis. An ordering of this kind is axiomatic for the classical tradition; it is applied to considerable critical effect in relation to a particular understanding of the givenness of objects by Immanuel Kant; but it is reversed in the analytic tradition, which elevates logic to the position of first philosophy and brackets the phenomenological and psychological considerations through which the modes of presence of differing kinds of objects are registered. The result is that, where Augustine, Aquinas, and Barth appear able to preserve a theological realism because their understanding of theological language is determined by the character of God’s being and the peculiar mode of presence that is proper to that being, the analytic tradition appears to drift towards abstraction by reversing aspects of this movement.

The third comment to be made is that identifying the procedure shared by Augustine, Aquinas, and Barth as an antidote to theological abstraction entails placing limitations on the degree to which analytic theology is permitted to function as a self-sufficient and independent form of inquiry. In seeking to contribute to the critical analysis of analytic theology, my aim is finally to suggest that this form of thought ought not to function as a free-standing program. The basic reason is that the conscious self-limitation that has marked the analytic tradition prevents it from deploying forms of thought that are crucial to preserving a well-grounded theological realism. Analytic thinkers tend to separate grammar and meaning from the phenomenological and psychological, and logical analysis from the consideration of the actual behaviour of objects, experience, and the formation of concepts. I have tried to suggest that the result is a tendency towards abstraction. If this is right, then the conclusion to be drawn is that, while analysis of our concepts and their entailments is an important moment in theological work, theology is required to draw on wider forms of thought if it is not to go astray. In particular, the analytic aspect of the theological task is properly preceded by empirical and phenomenological attention to God’s work in history, and the lessons learned about the proper modes of divine presence in time are then to be permitted to govern an account of the mode in which the truth of God is present in creaturely signs. Analytic work has a place, but it is secondary to and circumscribed by a concrete attention to the mode of God’s presence in Christ that the analytic tradition is, on its self-chosen terms, poorly positioned to take up.
Notes

14. See McCall, Invitation to Analytic Theology, 16–19.
15. A point developed at length by Prescott, Analytic Philosophy.
17. See Preston, Analytic Philosophy.
22. Brandom, Tales of the Mighty Dead, 2.
27. Diller, Epistemological Dilemma, 23.
28. Ibid., 23.
29. Ibid., 22–3.
30. Ibid., 17.
31. In a review, Rik Peels points out that Diller’s ‘dilemma’ is not really a dilemma at all because the two alternatives are not at all mutually exclusive. See Peels, “Kevin Diller. Theology’s Epistemological Dilemma,” 421–7.
32. See Plantinga, Warranted Christian Belief, 167–70.
33. Ibid., 67.
34. See Ibid., 170–7, 33–5. The relation of the sensus divinitas and perception is the most intricate of the claims mentioned here. For Plantinga’s circumspect denial that the sensus divinitas is like perception see Warranted Christian Belief, 180–2.
35. See Plantinga, Knowledge and Christian Belief, 57–69; and Warranted Christian Belief, 241–52.
37. Plantinga, Knowledge and Christian Belief, 5.
39. Ibid., 55.
40. See Barth, *CD I.1*, 162–81; cf. Barth’s essay on realism and idealism, entitled “Fate and Idea in Theology,” which gives a clear account of this dynamic (“Fate and Idea,” 25–61).
42. Diller, *Theology’s Epistemological Dilemma*, 49.
43. See Abraham, “Turning Philosophical Water into Theological Wine,” 7–9.
46. See Aquinas, *ST*, IlaIae, q. 9, art. 1; cf. Ia, q. 14, art. 7; q. 85.
47. See Aquinas, *ST*, Ia, q. 12, art. 11; IIIa, q. 1, art. 1–2.
49. See Aquinas, *ST* Ia, q. 13, art. 5.
50. See Augustine, *de Trinitate*, 1.11, 18, 21, 27–8.
52. Ibid., 1.2.
55. See here the second chapter of Ayer’s *Language, Truth and Logic* which remains usefully illustrative.
58. Well-known positions held by Meinong, Lewis, van Inwagen and others ought to be recognizable enough. On the last point regarding Descartes see Hintikka, “Cogito, Ergo Sum,” 3–32.
61. See Ernst Nebel, *Overcoming Logical Positivism from Within*.
63. See, e.g. the preface to Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, 8–11.
64. See, e.g. Hylton, “Hegel and analytic philosophy,” 445–85.
65. See Redding, *Analytic Philosophy and the Return of Hegelian Thought*, and the sizable literature that it has generated.
67. See, e.g. the discussion in Leftow’s *God and Necessity*, ch. 23, and wider discussions of ‘modal Platonism’.
68. See Sellar, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*; and Brandom’s characterization of Sellar’s project in *From Empiricism to Expressivism*, 5.
69. See Wolterstorff, “Is it Possible and Desirable to Recover from Kant?,” 16.
71. Ibid., 4.

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**Notes on contributor**

*Dr Martin Westerholm* is Senior Lecturer in Systematic Theology at the University of Gothenburg. He completed doctoral studies at the University of Aberdeen, and has held positions at the universities of St Andrews and Durham. His research ranges widely over classical and modern philosophy and theology, including work on Plato and Augustine, Kant and Barth. His
published work includes *The Ordering of the Christian Mind* (Oxford University Press, 2015) and *Reading Sacred Scripture* (co-authored with Stephen Westerholm, Eerdmans, 2016).

**ORCID**

Martin Westerholm [http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9518-2596](http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9518-2596)

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