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# On the Moral and Spiritual Contours of the Philosophical Life: Extending Plantinga’s “Advice to Christian Philosophers”<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** In what follows, I briefly reflect on one particular aspect of Alvin Plantinga’s now seminal 1983 address “Advice to Christian Philosophers,” the call for the Christian philosophical community to exhibit more intellectual courage. I consider what I take to be the proper moral and spiritual seedbed required to yield the fruit of intellectual courage called for by Plantinga. In particular, I explore several intellectual character traits that can hinder (intellectual vainglory, cowardice) as well as aid (intellectual humility) the cultivation of intellectual courage in the Christian philosophical community.

In his 1983 address “Advice to Christian Philosophers,” Al Plantinga encouraged the Christian philosophical community to exhibit more autonomy, integrity, and Christian courage. I’d like to take a just a few minutes tonight to briefly reflect on the last of these qualities, in particular *intellectual* courage, and its relevance to us as individuals and as an academic society. More specifically, I’d like to look at several intellectual character traits that both *hinder* as well as *help* in the cultivation of intellectual courage.

As many of us know all too well, the life lived within the halls of the academy is marked not only by great joy and rich accomplishment, but also by many potential dangers, toils and snares. Yet I’m convinced that the philosophical life can be an ongoing occasion for spiritual transformation. If we let it, the philosophical life lived in submission to Christ and to one another can aid in the uprooting of vice and the cultivation of virtue.

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<sup>1</sup> Ross D. Inman, “On the Moral and Spiritual Contours of the Philosophical Life: Extending Plantinga’s ‘Advice to Christian Philosophers’” (Address given to the National Annual Evangelical Philosophical Society Meeting Reception, Providence RI, November 15, 2017).

Let me try to unpack some of these dangers, toils, and snares as well as their correctives by way of a personal confession. I myself feel the very powerful pull in academic life toward the vice of intellectual vainglory, the *excessive* desire to be well-regarded by one's intellectual peers. Intellectual vainglory is an *inordinate* preoccupation with intellectual image; the intellectually vain person remains unfulfilled unless they're well-thought-of by their wider social and intellectual community.

The temptation to vainglory in an intellectual context is, of course, both ancient and modern. St. Augustine tells us in his *Confessions*: "I wanted to distinguish myself as an orator for a damnable and conceited purpose, namely, delight in human vanity."<sup>2</sup> And Al Plantinga candidly states:

We philosophers are brought up to practice our craft in a sort of individualistic, competitive, even egotistical style; there is enormous interest among philosophers in ranking each other with respect to dialectical and philosophical ability, deciding who is really terrific, who is pretty good, who is OK, who is really lousy and so on. Your worth, at any rate *qua* philosopher, tends to depend on your ranking, as if your main job is to try to achieve as high a ranking as possible.<sup>3</sup>

The person who is a slave to peer recognition is often willing to turn a blind eye to truth, simply for the sake being seen to be in line with the intellectual status-quo.

As C.S. Lewis describes so well, we naturally crave the fellowship of the inner ring, and we greatly fear to be found outside of it. There are, of course, a host of inner rings throughout the philosophical guild, whether in graduate school or among professional societies like the American Philosophical Association (APA), the Society of Christian Philosophers (SCP), and the Evangelical Philosophical Society (EPS).

One particularly well-defined inner ring within the halls of academia, one that I've personally found enticing during graduate school and the few years beyond, concerns the quality and the length of one's CV. The sheer number and quality of publications attached to one's name keeps one safely within the inner ring. Thus, there is a very strong temptation to carry out one's intellectual

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<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), III.7.

<sup>3</sup> Alvin Plantinga, "A Christian Life Partly Lived," in *Philosophers Who Believe: The Spiritual Journeys of 11 Leading Thinkers*, ed. Kelly James Clark (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 79.

work *solely* for the sake of the peer applause that comes with professional success.

Other inner rings rally around currently fashionable views in social/political philosophy (e.g., sexual orientation, gender identity, and the nature of marriage), metaphysics (e.g. philosophical naturalism), or the philosophy of mind (e.g. physicalism).

Given our current cultural moment, evangelical Christian philosophers should expect to increasingly find themselves on the outside of a very many of these inner rings, whether they be found in non-Christian or even explicitly Christian circles, in the APA or the SCP. We must watch and pray lest our proper love to be well-regarded by our academic peers be twisted into intellectual vainglory.

One of the perils of intellectual vainglory is that it's the seedbed for further vices that are detrimental to the flourishing intellectual life under Christ. Take the vice of intellectual cowardice. The person who exhibits intellectual cowardice shrinks back from pursuing valuable intellectual goods (like truth, knowledge, wisdom, or understanding) out of fear of detriment to one's social status. What makes intellectual cowardice so deadly for intellectual flourishing is that it tends to manifest itself in the form of *resistance to intellectual reproof and examination*. And, of course, the failure to open oneself up to intellectual correction (perhaps out of deep pride or arrogance) inevitably stunts proper intellectual growth.

Intellectual humility and courage serve as virtuous correctives to both intellectual vainglory and cowardice. Very roughly, intellectual humility is the stable disposition to *acknowledge* and *own* one's cognitive limitations; an enduring readiness to live out one's epistemic dependence on others for the flourishing intellectual life.

The Christian philosopher who (by the grace of God) cloths themselves with intellectual humility operates out of a deep awareness and confidence in who they *are*, and who they're *not*; where their source of identity and significance *is* found, and where it's *not*. They're gripped by the fact that in Christ they have "died to the elemental spirits of the world," which includes much of the prideful intellectual posturing and grandstanding that's often rendered a virtue in the wider philosophical guild.

On the contrary, the follower of Christ is gripped by the core truth that their life is first and foremost "hidden with Christ in God," and that their posture toward their peers is not one of grandstanding, or unhealthy competition or comparison; rather it's a posture of other-centeredness, marked by love, humility, meekness, and gratitude, gratitude that we have the great

privilege to labor alongside one another, ultimately for the glory of God and the display of the beauty, truth, and goodness of His gospel.

Thus, the intellectually humble person lives out their intellectual existence from a posture of *openness*, to both the success as well as the reproof of their intellectual peers; a posture that naturally brings with it a freedom from arrogance and an unhealthy devotion to be well-regarded by others. For the humble, Philippians 2:3 is a guiding maxim in the intellectual life: “Do *nothing* from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” For the humble, the collaborative pursuit of a deeper *understanding of reality* is far more valuable than keeping up with intellectual appearances.

By my lights, intellectual humility is the indispensable seedbed for the kind of intellectual courage called for by Plantinga in his “Advice to Christian Philosophers.” The intellectually courageous person exhibits a willingness to suffer a potential loss for the sake of some greater intellectual good, like truth, knowledge, understanding, or wisdom.

With respect to our own contemporary academic context, this kind of intellectual courage in the face of potential harm—potential harm to our professional reputation or wider academic respectability—can only be displayed when we love intellectual goods more than the favorable applause of our academic peers. If we fail to value truth over the length of our CVs, our professional advancement, or how we’re perceived by the wider academic guild, we’ll no doubt risk little in the face of opposition.

Let me close with a brief application of what intellectual courage might look like in one’s current academic context. While I was still in graduate school, a friend once wisely reminded me of Proverbs 14:4: “Where there are no oxen, the manger is clean, but abundant crops come by the strength of the ox.” Applying this verse to the all-too-painful and vulnerable process of cutting one’s philosophical teeth in graduate school, he said, “In order to see some philosophical payoff you might have to put up with a bit of crap in your manger.” I’ve carried this sound bit of wisdom with me throughout my young philosophical career. Indeed, it still rings true this very day. A clean ‘philosophical manger’ might mean that you’ve never put yourself out there, you’ve never risked your perceived social status among your intellectual peers for the sake of a greater intellectual good. Perhaps, out of fear of peer disapproval and ridicule, you never actively contribute in your graduate seminars, you’ve never submitted a paper to present at an upcoming conference, or you’ve never subjected your ideas to the critical examination of your peers.

As in life in general, there are certain laws of return in the intellectual life that you can count on: if you never courageously put yourself out there, you'll likely never grow as a philosopher. Of course, this posture of intellectual courage requires intellectual humility and a settled confidence in who one is in Christ. So, let me encourage us as a society to do our work first and foremost from a steady confidence in our unshakable union with Christ. When properly cultivated, this stable confidence ought to organically yield *a posture of humble openness to others*, an openness that frees us to joyfully work and risk alongside one another, and to give and receive correction with gratitude and humility.

As individual members of the EPS, let us make it our chief aim to continue to draw our deepest significance from our core identity in Christ. Then, *and only then I believe*, can we ever reasonably hope to carry out Plantinga's vision of a Christian academic community marked by robust intellectual courage. Only by becoming increasingly secure in who we are in Christ can we expect to collectively grow into an academic community that lays aside the vices of intellectual vainglory and cowardice, and that puts on the intellectual humility that naturally yields the fruit of intellectual courage.

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