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Replies to Moser and Di Ceglie

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Abstract: Helpful comments from Paul Moser and Roberto Di Ceglie suggest--to me--a need for sharpening my previous response. I try to do this here. I see a *prima facie* tension between three claims that Moser makes for “Christ-shaped philosophy”: (1) “Christ-shaped philosophy is distinctive in virtue of its content”; (2) “Christ-shaped mathematics” is not distinctive in virtue of its content; (3) “Christ-shaped philosophy” is a model for “Christ-shaped mathematics”. I do not yet see how Moser proposes to resolve this *prima facie* tension.

I am grateful to Paul Moser and Roberto Di Ceglie for their careful responses to my comments on Moser’s ‘Christ-Shaped Philosophy’. I shall discuss their responses in turn, after first offering a more general observation about the aim of my previous comments, which I evidently failed to make sufficiently transparent.

I found—and still find—the exact nature of Moser’s proposal unclear. He tells us that “Christ-shaped philosophy” is to be a model for other disciplines: “Christ-shaped mathematics”, “Christ-shaped physics”, “Christ-shaped chemistry”, “Christ-shaped biology”, and the like. However, his claims about “Christ-shaped philosophy” seemed to me to be ambiguous between claims about the *content* of philosophy and claims about proper *modes of engagement* in philosophical inquiry. I objected that it is absurd to suppose that, e.g., “Christ-shaped mathematics” would have a distinctive content; and hence suggested that, if “Christ-shaped philosophy” is to be a model for Christ-shaped mathematics, it can only be that “Christ-shaped philosophy” is a matter of mode of engagement. I also emphasised the point that what goes for other disciplines also goes for almost all of the sub-disciplines of philosophy: it is no less absurd to suppose that “Christ-shaped logic” or “Christ-shaped philosophy of language” has a distinctive content; even “Christ-shaped philosophy” must mostly be a matter of mode of engagement. Of course, when philosophy takes, say, Christology as its subject matter, it *might* be “Christ-shaped” in content: but that’s clearly a special case (and surely depends upon whether or not you suppose that Christian doctrine is largely true).

Perhaps the point can be sharpened. Moser seems to commit himself to all of the following claims:

- (a) “Christ-shaped philosophy” is distinctive primarily in virtue of its content.
- (b) “Christ-shaped mathematics” is distinctive primarily in virtue of something other than its content.
- (c) “Christ-shaped philosophy” provides a model for “Christ-shaped mathematics”.

But, at least *prima facie*, (a)-(c) form an inconsistent set of claims. The question is: How does Moser propose to deal with this apparent contradiction?

1. Moser

In the first two parts of his response, Moser affirms (a), (b), and (c). “Christ-shaped philosophy” affirms—and so entails—that Jesus is Lord; “Christ-shaped mathematics” does not affirm—and so does not entail—that Jesus is Lord; “Christ-shaped philosophy” is a model for other disciplines (such as physics, chemistry and biology). Unfortunately, this does not help me to see how he proposes to deal with the *prima facie* contradiction noted above. True enough, when it comes to discussing modelling, Moser writes: “In offering Christian philosophy as a model for other disciplines, the paper offers [a] portrait of how Christian theorists conduct themselves as extending to disciplines beyond philosophy”. But that seems to be entirely a matter of *mode of engagement* that has no bearing at all on the content of other disciplines! So I am as much in the dark as I was to begin with.

In the third part of his response, Moser takes me to task for writing: “[T]he ‘Christ-shaped Philosophy’ that [Moser] advocates has no interest in understanding alternative views, or in comparing the costs and benefits of adopting alternative views.” Moser says that there is a category mistake here: strictly speaking, a philosophy cannot have interests, or understanding. I grant that, strictly speaking, this is a category mistake; but, in the context that this sentence is placed, it seems to me to be fairly easy to find a charitable reading. Something like this: *Someone who took the dictates of Moser’s ‘Christ-shaped Philosophy’ to heart would have no interest in understanding alternative views, or in comparing the costs and benefits of adopting alternative views.* (It should also be noted that there is a wider context to this remark: not everything that Moser wrote in his original piece fits with the claim that there is something wrong with trying to understand other points of view (“from the inside”). But, at the very least, it is worth reflecting further on his claims about the ‘misleading’, ‘obstructive’ and ‘diversionary’ dangers posed by “non-Christ-shaped philosophies”—cf. the comments in my previous contribution.)

In the fourth, and final part of his response—given special emphasis in his *Abstract*—Moser quotes me again: “Understanding and truth just are the proper goals of philosophy: we engage in philosophical inquiry when we

do not know where the truth lies, or where we feel that our understanding is weak ...”, and then complains that I cannot mean what I say, since it is another category mistake to suppose that the proper goals of philosophy are no different from the proper goals of the natural sciences. I doubt that anyone will be surprised to learn that I *agree* with Moser that it would be an error to suppose that the proper goals of philosophy are no different from the proper goals of the natural sciences. But look at the part of my sentence that Moser omits: “... and where we do not have any other ready means for attaining the truth or advancing our understanding”. The point of the omitted part of my sentence is precisely to draw attention to the fact that we do not need to engage in philosophical inquiry if we can instead engage in physical inquiry, or chemical inquiry, or biological inquiry, or the like! Let me say this in other words: We engage in philosophical inquiry when we do not know where the truth lies, or where we feel our understanding is weak, *concerning matters that are proper to philosophy*. As far as I can see, the complaint that Moser makes here touches nothing of substance in my original discussion.

In the fourth part of his response, Moser also writes: ‘Christ-shaped philosophy does not settle for broad goals that are identical with the goals of the natural sciences. ... If it did settle thus, it would offer nothing distinctive. Instead, it offers a philosophical approach that goes beyond mere truth-seeking and understanding to redemption by God in Christ.’ And yet he thinks (a) that ‘Christ-shaped philosophy’ is a model for ‘Christ-shaped mathematics’ and (b) that ‘Christ-shaped mathematics’ does not have a distinctive content. Does he also hold that ‘Christ-shaped physics’ does not settle for broad goals that are identical with the goals of the natural sciences? If not, what are the ways in which he supposes that ‘Christ-shaped philosophy’ is a model for other disciplines?

2. Di Ceglie

Di Ceglie offers two responses to my comments on Moser’s project. I shall take them in reverse order.

First, Di Ceglie says that I seem to claim that philosophy must start from what everybody knows, and goes on to observe that not everyone accepts that ‘human reason can determine whether or not ... God has manifested himself to man’. Here, my answer is short: I did not say, and I do not believe, that philosophy must start from what everybody knows. Let me repeat something that I said in my original contribution: *Philosophers typically have philosophies (worldviews); but the discipline of philosophy has all possible philosophies as its proper subject matter*. I am not committed to the claim that philosophy has a starting point (though some philosophies may claim that it does); I am certainly not committed to the claim that philosophies can only begin with what everybody knows. It appears that Di Ceglie takes as a

starting point of his philosophy that God has ‘decided to contact man by acting in the interior human dimension’. I think—though it is not a starting point of my philosophy—that there is no chance that he is right about this. Disagreements—such as this one between Di Ceglie and me—are at the heart of our discipline: the twin tasks of philosophy are to understand the philosophies of others (‘from the inside’), and to figure out which is the true—or most nearly true—view. (Perhaps I should add this: I do not dispute that a philosophy ‘can start’ from Christian theism; and there is nothing in my previous comments on Moser’s ‘Christ-shaped Philosophy’ that suggests otherwise. What seems to me to be just obvious—but what it seems that Moser denies—is that a large part of any satisfactory comprehensive worldview will be utterly independent of distinctively Christian assumptions that the worldview in question embraces.)

Second, Di Ceglie suggests that, if God is the Good—‘the principle and the end of all things’—then knowledge of God ‘should enable’ philosophers to develop ‘Christ-shaped philosophies’ (in Moser’s sense). ‘In order to know God, it is necessary to take part in the good that he himself is: it is necessary to be good, to make progress from the point of view of virtue, in short, becoming better to understand more.’ Here, we need to untangle several questions. One question is whether, in general, one’s philosophical understanding is limited by one’s virtue: can only the saintly be good philosophers? Another question is whether there are particular sub-disciplines of philosophy in which understanding is limited by virtue: can only the saintly be good moral philosophers (or good political philosophers, or good philosophers of religion, or whatever)? A third question is whether, if understanding is limited by virtue (in some, or all, parts of philosophy), Christian beliefs are a help or a hindrance in respect of both virtue and understanding: does Christian belief really conduce to virtue? I think that the answers to the first two questions are evidently negative: one need only look at the vast amount of excellent philosophy produced by contemporary philosophers who are evidently not saints. (Perhaps it is worth insisting again, here, that the point is even more obvious for mathematics and contemporary mathematicians, physics and contemporary physicists, chemistry and contemporary chemists, biology and contemporary biologists, and so forth. Remember that Moser’s grand designs are not just claims for our discipline: philosophy is to be a ‘model’ for *all* of the other disciplines.) We know more than previous generations did about semantics for relevance logics, the independence of the continuum hypothesis, persistence conditions for material objects, the possibility of knowing without knowing that one knows, the modal interpretation of quantum mechanics, the definition of species, the correct interpretation of Part X of Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, and, indeed, most philosophical questions that you might care to mention—but it is debatable whether *any* of this increase in our knowledge is due to the saintliness of those who

made the relevant discoveries. My answer to the third question is also doubtless predictable: like many non-believers, I think (a) that there is much that is good in Christian teaching, but pretty much none of the good parts are *distinctively* Christian; and (b) that there is some that is bad in Christian teaching, and *some* of these bad parts are *distinctively* Christian. If we *did* think that understanding is limited by virtue (in some, or all, parts of philosophy), we could accommodate this claim within an Aristotelian conception of virtue and knowledge that owes nothing to, and incorporates nothing from, distinctively Christian philosophy.

Since some of the things that Di Ceglie suggests that he supposes otherwise, it is perhaps worth emphasising in closing that I have no objection to the thought that one might reasonably hold a distinctively Christian philosophy (worldview)—i.e. a worldview that contains a number of distinctively Christian claims. Of course, *I* think that those distinctively Christian claims are false—but that Di Ceglie and I have fundamentally different worldviews is hardly going to be news to anyone. However, I also insist—and, I think, uncontroversially—that, if our worldviews could be represented as the logical closures of sets of independent propositions—one each of p_1 and its negation, p_2 and its negation, p_3 and its negation, and so forth, where each of the p_i is logically independent from all of the others—then it would turn out that we *agree* about a great many of the p_i (in particular this is true for most, if not all, of the p_i that belong to mathematics, physics, chemistry, and biology, and even for many of the p_i that belong to philosophy). But much that *Moser* said in his original article *seems* to suggest that he disagrees with me about this.

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