

# **As Much As Possible: Essentially Contested Concepts and Analytic Theology; A Response to William J. Abraham**

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Who would have thought that you could introduce a discussion of philosophical theology with a story about a nun apparently turning pee into gasoline? But that is precisely what William J. Abraham (2013) does in “Turning Philosophical Water into Theological Wine,” a fascinating discussion of analytic theology as a nascent discipline and its proper definition in the midst of significant differences.

According to Abraham, analytic theology is a discipline whose time has come, an extension of the pioneering work done in analytic philosophy of religion in the mid-twentieth century, and a natural outflow of recent developments in systematic theology. Thus, “the time is ripe to press on and engage in substantive work in analytic theology” (Abraham 2013, 14 )

But Abraham is also well aware that many have significant reservations about the attempt to wed analytic philosophy and systematic theology, listing no less than eight objections some might shout before the minister pronounces them husband and wife. And, although he does not address the first seven in any great depth, he recognizes them as “formidable objections” that need to be addressed over the course of the next decade or so (6).

In the course of this paper, I would like to explore Abraham’s understanding of analytic theology, particularly his appeal to “essentially contested concepts” as an argument for developing a more inclusive definition of this discipline. Then we’ll consider the implications of this move for understanding the nature of analytic theology, before returning to the other possible objections to this marriage.

## **An Essentially Contested Definition**

After surveying seven key objections to analytic theology, Abraham focuses his attention on the eighth, a concern about whether the standard definition of analytic theology is unnecessarily restrictive.

Abraham begins his discussion with Mike Rea’s definition of analytic theology, which Abraham identifies as “one of the best initial accounts of analytic theology that is currently available” (Abraham 2013, 6). And, although Abraham’s discussion has implications for Rea’s entire definition, he focuses specifically on Rea’s fourth prescription regarding the style of analytic thought.

P4. Work as much as possible with well understood primitive concepts and concepts that can be analyzed in terms of those (Rea 2009, 5).

Abraham agrees that this is a constituent element of much analytic philosophy. But, although Abraham recognizes that such a principle is often appropriate, he is clearly unhappy with making this a normative requirement for all strands of analytic theology.

His basic concern with this prescription is that it is too limiting. And he means this in two related ways. On the one hand, it limits our understanding of analytic theology as a discipline because it equates all analytic theology with the approach characterized by Alvin Plantinga, neglecting the stream of analytic theology more in line with the thought of Basil Mitchell. Although both would be considered analytic philosophers of religion, they represent two distinct streams with differing methodologies, histories, and emphases. And he argues that although P4 works as a definition of Plantingian Analytic Theology, it fails to capture the distinctive emphases of Mitchellian Analytic Theology. Thus, the prescription fails in a purely descriptive sense in that it does not capture adequately the breadth of analytic theology as a discipline.

But Abraham has more in mind when he talks about the constraints of P4. His real concern is that it requires the theologian to “operate within a tight set of closed concepts”(7) Instead of confining ourselves in this way, he calls for us to “open up the canon of clarity and allow for greater diversity on the kind of concepts that we may deem essential” (9). Only in this way can we “loosen the grip” of narrow constraints on analytic theology (10). The concern, then, is not just that P4 excludes one branch of analytic theology, but that it places constraints on the theologian that Abraham finds unacceptable.

But this raises the question of why exactly Abraham finds P4 so constraining, especially since P4 itself allows for the possibility of a broader range of concepts. Rea’s definition only maintains that analytic theology should work with primitive concepts “as much as possible,” thus signifying that there may be situations in which other concepts must play a foundational role. If P4 already allows conceptual diversity at the core of analytic theology, why does Abraham feel the need to loosen its grip?

It’s possible that Abraham reads “as much as possible” to be mere rhetoric, disguising the fact that in practice Plantingian Analytic Theology allows only primitive concepts to play a foundational role in analytic thought. But let’s assume a more generous reading, one that recognizes that this phrase creates a genuine possibility for conceptual diversity. If that is the case, then P4 is not as restrictive as it might appear at first glance. So the constraint of P4 can’t be that it simply *precludes* conceptual diversity.

The alternate possibility is that Abraham thinks the definition *prioritizes* primitive concepts in a way that he finds unacceptable. In other words, P4 can be read as requiring analytic theologians to work with primitive concepts whenever possible, only turning to other concepts when no primitive concepts are available. So maybe the concern isn’t that non-primitive concepts are off limits entirely, but

that their use has been unnecessarily restricted. On this reading, Abraham's proposal is to ease the restriction and allow non-primitive concepts to play a more foundational role in analytic theology.

To that end, Abraham appeals to W. B. Gallie's proposal regarding essentially contested concepts (ECCs). According to Gallie, an ECC is not just a concept about which there is significant debate, which would include a rather large number of concepts! The key term is "essentially." In other words, there is something inherent in concepts like *art*, *democracy*, *social justice*, and *religion* that produce debate and prevent their ultimate resolution. As Gallie explains, these "are concepts which are essentially contested, concepts the proper use of which inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users" (Gallie 1956, 169). And the debates are "endless" precisely because ECCs resist conceptual analysis. Or, more properly, they are amenable to several incommensurable analyses that appear to be equally well justified. And, although Abraham does not make the conclusion explicit, it seems clear that he thinks ECCs are significant enough for theology that P4 needs to be expanded to include them among the concepts prioritized by analytic theology.

Allowing greater conceptual diversity at the foundation of analytic theology also has stylistic implications. Clear and precise propositions work best when dealing with primitive concepts. To speak adequately about ECCs, the theologian needs a more diverse array of tools, including metaphor, poetry, and story, genres that are not commonly associated with analytic thought. Indeed, affirming a foundational role for ECCs would mean revising not only P4, but also Rea's third prescription for analytic theology, which requires analytics to avoid the "substantive (non-decorative) use of metaphor and other tropes whose semantic content outstrips their propositional content" (Rea 2009, 5). But ECCs by their very nature outstrip the adequacy of any particular set of propositions. So, to speak adequately of them, we must use a broader range of literary genres.

Unfortunately, although Abraham introduces ECCs into the discussion, he does not directly develop the idea or explain how they function in his argument. This leaves several key questions unanswered.

First, does Abraham agree that ECCs inherently produce incommensurable interpretations as I have suggested? Although I think that is the best reading of Gallie's argument, Abraham's discussion of canonicity as an example of the needed conceptual diversity suggests otherwise. According to Abraham, canonicity has routinely been misunderstood as denoting "a criterion of truth and falsehood" (11). Significantly, he does not present the disparate interpretations as something produced by the concept of canonicity itself, one of the incommensurable interpretations spawned by the pure fecundity of this concept. Instead, he argues that this interpretation stems from a simple failure to appreciate the historic context of the concept. And he proceeds to offer a rather clear reconstruction of the historical idea that a canon is just an authoritative list, of which the biblical canon is

one important example.<sup>1</sup>

If he intends this to serve as an example of an ECC, then, it would seem that he does not think ECCs should be viewed as concepts that spawn multiple incommensurable and well-justified interpretations. Instead, he seems to present ECCs as merely *contested* rather than inherently *contestable*.<sup>2</sup> But if ECCs are merely contested concepts whose meaning can be clarified through careful analysis using more primitive concepts, then it is not clear why P4 needs to be revised. If, on the other hand, ECCs are not amenable to such analysis, then it's not clear how Abraham's discussion of the proper meaning of canonicity qualifies as an example of an ECC.

This latter possibility, that Abraham does think ECCs inherently produce incommensurable interpretations, raises another unanswered question: What is the nature of this incommensurability? Is it merely a function of human finitude and/or fallenness such that an exhaustive (e.g. divine) knowledge of the concept would demonstrate either the truthfulness of one perspective, a new definition unavailable to the human mind, or a higher synthesis into which all human perspectives could be resolved? Or is there a deeper incommensurability such that even an exhaustive knowledge of the concept could not resolve? Since this latter option raises questions I'd rather not pursue here, I'll set it aside for now. But the former suggests that ECCs are either amenable to analysis through primitive concepts or they are themselves primitive concepts, even though it may take a mind far greater and more perfect than our own to see how this is so. If this is the case, then P4 could still be retained as an ideal, with the "as much as possible" clause affirming the ultimate inadequacy of human efforts in that direction.

The other option, of course, is to say that ECCs do produce humanly incommensurable interpretations and that we should just expand P4 to include such ECCs in the spectrum of foundational concepts. The concern here is the temptation to move too quickly to identifying some contested concept as an ECC, thus preventing the opportunity to analyze the concept more deeply and produce needed clarity. Here the "as much as possible" clause of P4 serves to prevent the kind of intellectual laziness that plagues so much theological discourse.

All of this calls for further explanation of what qualifies as an ECC, how such concepts relate to P4, and how all of this relates to our definition of analytic theology as a discipline. The latter issue is where I'd like to turn now.

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<sup>1</sup> Granted, Gallie's understanding of ECCs does not preclude using your view of an ECC "aggressively and defensively" against other perspectives (Gallie 1956,172). Indeed, such an aggressive/defensive posture is Gallie's fifth characteristic of an ECC. But Abraham's discussion fails to demonstrate that canonicity qualifies as an ECC rather than simply being another example of "a thoroughly confused concept" (Gallie 1956, 175). Thus, again, the mere fact that a concept has a history of disputed interpretation is not enough to qualify it as an ECC, otherwise virtually every significant concept would fall into this category. The burden of proof lies on Abraham to demonstrate that a particular concept is an ECC and that this requires an expansive definition of analytic theology.

<sup>2</sup> For this distinction see Barry Clarke (1979, 122-126).

## What Are We Talking about Again?

If we allow the kind of conceptual diversity that Abraham calls for, what implications does this have for defining analytic theology as a discipline? If we expand the definition to allow a broader range of concepts and greater stylistic diversity, are we still talking about analytic theology? If so, what criteria do we use to distinguish analytic theology from other methodologies? As Abraham himself notes, his approach would mean blurring the lines not just between different kinds of analytic theology, but “between the analytic and non-analytic traditions” (14). How are we to understand this?

Given Abraham’s appreciation for analytic theology as an intellectual pursuit, it seems unlikely that he merely wants to vitiate the differences between analytic and non-analytic approaches, even though he recognizes that his definition blurs the boundaries. From this perspective, it may be that Abraham views analytic theology as a “centered-set” discipline comprising disparate branches united around certain core characteristics.<sup>3</sup> Given the “significant differences of emphasis, epistemic commitment, standards of success, and ethos” that Abraham identifies between the Plantingian and Mitchellian strands of analytic theology, though, it’s difficult to see what remains to serve as the common core of the discipline. Although Abraham expresses appreciation of Rea’s definition of analytic theology as a starting point, his critical discussion leaves few of Rea’s prescriptions unchallenged. And, since Abraham does not offer a definition of his own, it’s difficult to see what remains of a common core to serve as a starting point for understanding the nature of analytic theology.

This leaves me wondering whether Abraham has clearly identified when he is talking about the relationship between theology and philosophy in general, and when he is addressing the specific combination of theology and *analytic* philosophy. Maybe the lines are blurred between analytic and non-analytic approaches in his discussion because he has more in view than just analytic approaches to theology.

A final question that comes to mind is whether Abraham’s argument means that we should change the definition of analytic theology or simply recognize its limits and the need for diverse methods when dealing with something as complex as systematic theology. If ECCs are a part of theology, and if ECCs fit poorly into the definition of the analytic method as commonly practiced, might it not be better to say that there are some concepts and tasks for which the analytic method is ill-suited? Everyone involved in analytic theology recognizes that it is merely one approach to theology among many. Maybe we should let analytic theology do what it does well and stop trying to stretch it beyond recognition.

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<sup>3</sup> Although the concept of a centered-set vs. a bounded-set has been developed elsewhere, I believe the initial proposal can be found in Paul Hiebert (1978, 24-29).

## Where's the Warning Label?

Before ending this discussion, I'd like to make a few quick observations on the other seven objections Abraham identifies. Abraham does an outstanding job summarizing quickly some of the primary concerns people have with the marriage between these two disciplines. And, as a theologian raised in a conservative evangelical context that is almost inherently suspicious of philosophy, I resonate with many of them. Even beyond this conservative suspicion, many of these concerns are worth reflecting on more deeply as analytic theology develops further. Nonetheless, we want to make sure that we are being fair with our expectations. And I shudder to think what would happen if many of these same standards were applied to theologians in general.

This is particularly true with the first two objections, which deal with the feasibility of analytic theology when you consider the breadth and complexity of theology as a field. Theologians routinely draw on a wide range of disciplines and apply them to a complex set of loci. So it's unrealistic to think that a philosopher could master all of the theological disciplines and interact comprehensively with the whole range of theological issues.

As a theologian, I certainly understand the desire to ensure that people engaging theological issues are adequately trained for the task. And such training at least requires a certain level of familiarity with the histories, sources, and methodologies of the theological disciplines. But let's not kid ourselves into thinking that even professional theologians have acquired any significant mastery of the many areas and disciplines involved. Instead, we all specialized in certain areas, hopefully collaborating with others to fill in the (many) gaps. Those who specialize in analytic approaches to theology are no different.

If there's a critique to be found here it's with the nature of academic specialization as it is practiced in the academy today. Too many philosophers—along with their counterparts in theology, history, biblical studies, and other disciplines—work in isolation from those specializing in other areas. Given the disciplinary breadth of theology, such academic ghettoization needs to stop.

The third, fourth, and fifth objections all suggest that systematic theology as a discipline entails certain commitments that are antithetical to those of analytic philosophy, specifically the commitments to special revelation, personal transformation, and faith traditions. If analytic philosophy is indeed opposed to these in principle, then the two would definitely be unequally yoked in marriage.

It is not clear to me, though, why analytic philosophy would need to oppose any of these in principle. As Mike Rea points out, although the analytic method may not be the most apt for facilitating growth in wisdom, which is the provenance of Scripture, it is well-suited for the kind of "clarifying, systematizing, and model-building" that helps serve the greater goal of personal formation (Rea 2009, 18). And although analytic philosophy probably sits uneasily alongside the kind of confessionalism that takes an almost fideistic approach to faith traditions, there does not appear to be anything inherent to the analytic method that prevents a person from being committed to a particular tradition and using the method to analyze critically the faith commitments of that tradition as a means for

understanding, and even correcting when necessary, those faith commitments. Even special revelation seems within the purview of analytic thought as long as that revelation is viewed as coming in a form that humans can understand at least partially, conceptualize adequately, and then analyze.<sup>4</sup>

Of greater concern to me here is the practical neglect of biblical texts in much of the theology that has been shaped by the analytic method. The assumption seems to be that we can use the analytic method to clarify and critique theological formulations without consideration of the biblical texts from which they derive. Indeed, at one conference I recently attended, people debated extensively the concept of the *imago Dei* without once addressing the key biblical texts or the extensive scholarship surrounding them. Regardless of what we think of the adequacy of any theological approach that fails to pay sufficient attention to scripture, this practical neglect contributes to the sense among non-analytic theologians that analytic theology is overly abstract and biblically anemic. This doesn't mean that analytic philosophers need to become professional biblical scholars, any more than this would be required of systematic theologians. But to the extent that there's any hope for analytic theology as a joint discipline, it will need to improve its track record on engaging scripture.

With his sixth concern, Abraham moves into the territory of the analytic style that frustrates almost everyone else. I have to admit that I have occasionally found myself wanting to say *A iff B*, where *A* stands for "I will read your article" and *B* stands for "You promise not to use logical notation." And Abraham asks whether analytic theology needs to reflect more on how it will be able to communicate to the multiple audiences that theology addresses while maintaining its distinctive strategies and emphases.

To be fair, though, this problem is not unique to analytic theology. Any theologian struggles with the need to balance two distinct tasks. On the one hand, theologians need to reflect deeply and carefully on theological issues, often producing highly technical writings that are nearly inaccessible to the average Christian. But, on the other hand, if the theologian's vocation is to serve the church, then he must also strive to communicate that theological insight in ways that will be beneficial (and understandable) to the church. Analytic theology is no different.

If there's a weakness for analytic theology at this point, it is that analytically-minded theologians have often failed to put adequate time and effort into communicating the results of their research to the church. They often seem to feel that their work is done once they have constructed their technical arguments, leaving it to others to determine how best to integrate their insights into life and ministry.

Finally, Abraham comments on whether analytic theology runs the risk of promoting various intellectual vices in its adherents and those exposed to them. Although we could again point out that there is nothing inherent to the analytic method that would produce such negative consequences, such a response is likely to

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<sup>4</sup> Oliver Crisp thus argues that analytic theology entails "the presumption that there is some theological truth of the matter and that this truth of the matter can be ascertained and understood by human beings (theologians included!)" (Crisp 2009, 35).

be viewed as inadequate given the perceived actual impact of analytic thought. The problem, of course, is that methods are never neutral. Just as an incautious application of the apophatic method can lead to anti-intellectualism and an “anything goes” approach to theology, so too can an unguarded use of the analytic method produce a hyper-intellectualism that values conceptual precision and winning arguments over spiritual formation and worship. I would argue that every methodology contains within it the seeds of its own destruction. This doesn’t mean that theology should abandon analytic thought any more than it should abandon any of the other methodologies that it uses. But it does mean that analytic theologians would do well to reflect deeply on the intellectual vices that are the inevitable flipside of any set of virtues.

Where does this leave us? I find Abraham’s arguments regarding analytic theology provocative and fruitful. Though I am not convinced that we need to expand our definition beyond that offered by Mike Rea, and I’m concerned about what such an expansion would entail for our understanding of analytic theology as a discipline, I certainly agree about the limits of the analytic method for addressing the full range of conceptual issues that face contemporary philosophical theology. I just wonder if a better solution would be to recognize these inherent limits and to seek a broader range of disciplinary partners in the theological task.

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