On "Systematic theology" and the contested shape of a discipline

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Abstract

This essay takes up questions about how systematic theology can understand itself in light of critical questions about the functioning of the label. In face of concerns about the exclusionary functioning of the term, the essay develops a set of philosophical distinctions that may help theologians to understand the shape of their discipline. The picture that emerges is of a discipline that is constituted by shifting constellations of historical precedents rather than rigid boundaries; that moves through epistemic justice for the sake of discovering truth, which furthers the pursuit of wider forms of justice; and that functions hermeneutically rather than analytically or critically in its understanding of language.

Keywords

systematic theology; critical theory; identity; truth; justice

Introduction

Cultural trajectories centuries in the making have led questions about human identities and differences to emerge as decisive concerns of our moment. The modern period generally emerged from recognition of difference, as forms of thought and association were sought that could hold together communities that were informed by incommensurable visions of the good; but our moment is shaped by a series of reactions and counter-reactions that rests on the notion that modern conceptions of difference are insufficient. A first wave of feminist thought challenged conceptions that did not encompass much more than differences between property-owning men; a later wave reacted against a feminist vision that did not extend beyond the experiences of economically secure white women. Similar

patterns have played out in consideration of realities like race and sexuality. Struggles to identify and affirm ever finer degrees of difference have been significant drivers of recent social and intellectual change. The result is that our cultural moment has, as one of its hallmarks, fumbling attempts to think through ever sharper and more expansive versions of the question that has marked modernity as a whole: how sociality and cooperation are possible in face of irreducible forms of difference.

The challenges that mark our moment are, however, not only a product of expanding conceptions of human difference, but also of decreasing confidence in deliberative and evaluative vocabularies that have otherwise shaped public reasoning. Attempts to bring forms of difference to visibility have often been accompanied by critiques of extant grammars on the assumption that past occlusion of a particular form of life results not from, say, careless but not malicious inattentiveness, but rather from strategies of exclusion that stamp themselves on our language. The grammar that is used in reflecting on questions of difference has been identified as a key site of inquiry, as have fundamental values that have been central to struggles for recognition. These struggles have been shaped by principles that are rooted in earlier modern consideration of the possibilities of pluralist societies: freedom of individual self-determination, the equal dignity of all, the centrality of tolerance. But contemporary grappling with questions of difference is, in some cases at least, shaped by the notion that these values have been folded into structures that would preserve them as the privileges of a select few, and that a more fundamental revaluation of values is required. The result is that attention to questions of difference and confidence in extant grammars and values have crossed like two lines on a graph, the one ascending and the other descending. As we attempt to think together about identity and difference, we find ourselves like those who confront a building project without tools ready to hand. In contrast to our early modern forebears, we find that we lack not only a common vision of the good, but also shared terms for consideration of various goods.

The study of systematic theology, no less than other contemporary ventures, faces the task of reckoning with the difficult tension between increased attention to the varying axes of human difference – race, gender, class, sexuality, and so on – and decreased confidence in our deliberative

vocabulary. The task has a particular urgency for scholars within the discipline because one of the questions raised by intersectional inquiry is whether the notion of "systematic theology" is defensible at all. To critics, the label serves less as the name of a coherent discipline and more as a socio-political tool through which one group secures a false privilege for its work and an arbitrary denigration of others. The tool works by deploying a modifier that is at least implicitly valorising – to designate a project "systematic" is to suggest something rigorous and comprehensive – but is really an encoding of the flawed values of a misguided tradition. The notion "systematic" claims a false privilege for work that reflects Enlightenment aspirations to comprehensive mastery from a standpoint sufficiently elevated above the whole to see how it fits together. Work that is more local or tradition bound as is at least somewhat typical of African American theologies, or conscious of its own perspective like feminist or queer theology, is denigrated through denial of the status of systematic.[1] The notion of systematic theology becomes indefensible because it encodes the pretence and affects the exclusions that have shaped Western life for centuries.

The aim of this essay is to ask how practitioners of systematic theology should understand their discipline under the conditions of contemporary inquiry. What it means to engage in systematic theology in view of critiques of the label's functioning is not at all clear. My aim is to contribute to the self-understanding of the discipline by charting its location in relation to a set of fundamental conceptual distinctions. The distinctions emerge from philosophical reflection on a range of topics that bear on the self-understanding of a discipline – how descriptive labels like "systematic theology" function at all; how truth and justice are related within the bounds of intellectual inquiry; how language within a particular discipline is to be understood. My hope is that taking up a perspective within philosophical inquiry rather than within systematic theology itself or critiques of its functioning can help to chart terrain on which practitioners and critics of systematic theology may meet. The self-understanding of a discipline develops sometimes through self-examination on its own terms,

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1   See, for instance, the introduction to Anthony B. Pinn and Katie G. Canon, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

sometimes through critiques on other terms, and sometimes through mediating sets of terms that allow opposing perspectives to meet. My hope is that distinctions that are rooted in philosophical inquiry may help to clarify what it can mean to speak of systematic theology today.

1. Lights or boxes

Quite apart from the acute pressures of our particular moment, there is perennial significance in inquiry into the self-understanding of systematic theology because the contours of the discipline have never stood above contestation. Historically, capital "S" and "T" "Systematic Theologies", understood provisionally as integrated treatments of the articles of Christian faith, have taken a sufficiently broad range of forms that, in the words of a leading contemporary practitioner, systematic theology cannot be understood as a "fixed or unchanging entity in Christian tradition".[2] Contemporary work, too, is pluriform. We are in the midst of a remarkable wave of multivolume Systematic Theologies. Some adopt a fairly traditional *loci* approach and work on the basis of its usual sources;[3] some are structured by doctrinal *loci* but incorporate scientific and interreligious perspectives in new ways;[4] some dispense with *loci* as structuring principles and present themselves as more free-flowing explorations of the content and involvements of faith.[5] Even the narrow group of works that represents "Systematic Theology" in its most precise delimitation is heteronomous. It is formative of the question that we face that the term has also come

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2   Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay "On the Trinity"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 40–1.

3   The two volumes of Katherine Sonderegger's systematic theology represent an outstanding example. See *Systematic Theology: Volume 1, The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015); *Systematic Theology: Volume 2, The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity: Processions and Persons* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2021).

4   Veli-Matti Karkkäinen understands his recently completed five-volume systematics as a new venture in the history of Christian thought because of the perspectives that it integrates (see in particular *Christ and Reconciliation. A Constructive Christian Theology for a Pluralistic World, Volume 1* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013)). Douglas Ottati's ongoing project is informed by a similarly dialogical aim. See *Theology for Liberal Protestants: God the Creator* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

5   Sarah Coakley and Graham Ward are both developing systematic theologies that are not straightforwardly structured by dogmatic loci. See Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, and Ward, *How the Light Gets In: Ethical Life I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); *Another Kind of Normal: Ethical Life II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

to be used more widely to refer to a whole range of inquiries that touch on questions regarding Christian doctrine. Treatments of individual doctrines, figures who wrote on doctrines, the nature of doctrine itself, and a range of other projects have come to be lumped together under the broad notion of "systematic theology". A fairly broad consensus could perhaps be rallied around the suggestion that systematic theology is the discipline that is concerned with the articulation of Christian beliefs; but questions regarding the nature of belief, the sources from which it derives its content, and the modes in which it speaks of its objects produce sufficiently diverse answers that agreement regarding anything more than the broad suggestion is unlikely.

It is important in interpreting the significance of these ambiguities that they are hardly unique to systematic theology and have as much to do with the sociological conditions of contemporary inquiry as with any deficit in disciplinary self-understanding. A glance at work in analytic philosophy, continental philosophy of religion, queer theory, literature studies, and a host of other disciplines suggests that few today possess a crystalline sense of where their disciplines begin and end. A measure of disciplinary ambiguity across much of the contemporary university is likely inevitable given that more people from more backgrounds are working at more universities in more parts of the world than ever before. In itself, disciplinary ambiguity need not be seen as especially troubling. After all, the richest works are often those that pursues their objects without undue concern for disciplinary boundaries. To what genre do Augustine's *City of God* or Barth's *Epistle to the Romans* belong? Lack of a clear definition of systematic theology need not constrict work in the discipline; but it is also crucial to the health of a sphere of inquiry that it be able to engage in critical self-examination when its identity is put into question. Given the criticisms of systematic theology that have been offered by those who see it as an instrument of exclusion, it is important that theologians not rest content with the kind of ambiguity that marks contemporary inquiry generally and do what they can to provide an account of their field.

I propose to take a first step towards this end by asking not about the definition of systematic theology itself, but rather about what we are looking for when we seek a definition. The kind of success that we seek in trying to define systematic theology, and the kinds of criticisms that a definition is

exposed to, will depend on the type of definition that we take ourselves to be able to offer. The point might be made by way of differing images that are associated with differing conceptions of definition.

The first conception that is important for us suggests that definition is a matter of establishing clear boundaries within a framework of classification. According to this image, terms like "systematic theology", or "human", or "table" establish categories that function like rigid boxes, and the task of a definition is to identify the concrete limits of a particular box. We define "systematic theology" or "human" for the sake of determining at what point things either begin or cease to be one or the other, and allowing ourselves to specify the set of entities that can be classified under the term. This classificatory conception has a long history: it made sense for Aristotle, for whom science is a matter of deductions that hinge on accurate classification in clearly delimited categories. To grasp the mortality of Socrates as a matter of knowledge rather than opinion is, for Aristotle, to grasp that Socrates is correctly classified as a human and may therefore be understood to share in human properties like "mortality" as a matter of necessity and not contingency. This classificatory conception has sufficient intuitive force that its influence endured into the modern period and continues to be felt in some forms of analytic thought today. The theological significance of emphasis on classification ought not to be short-changed: for Luther, theology exists to instruct in the art of distinguishing and correctly classifying instances of law and gospel.

Yet, that *Deus non est in genere* should alert us to the limits of classification as a paradigm for definition. Recent philosophical work has highlighted how much of our capacity to navigate the world and communicate with each other is lost from view when we identify knowledge with deductive certainties that rest on accurate classification.[6] One alternative paradigm suggests that definitions of terms like "systematic theology" do not designate fixed boxes into which a determinate set of items fit, but something more like circles of light that ripple out from clusters of precedents, intersecting at differing points with ripples radiating out from other clusters, and shedding light on phenomena that possess some similarity to central

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6   See, e.g., Robert Brandom, *Between Saying and Doing: Towards an Analytic Pragmatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

elements. On these terms, just as the sky may shape a core sense of what is blue, and the capacity of the term "blue" to illuminate other phenomena ripples outwards and touches on a range of similar shades and hues, diminishing eventually as blue fades into purples and black, so particular instances shape a sense of what systematic theology is, and a range of allied phenomena may then be illuminated by the term until we been drawn sufficiently into the gravitational pull of some other cluster that the term loses its power to illuminate. Here, emphasis on clear edges and normative judgments about what "counts" as an instance of a thing is replaced with acknowledgement that a great many of our terms name spheres that are surrounded by overlapping zones of ambiguity, and with concern to build up shared understandings by using the names at our disposal with as much descriptive precision as possible.

The first question that I wish to ask in considering how systematic theology should understand itself in light of contemporary critiques is whether we are best served to think of the definition that we seek in terms of fixed boxes or rippling circles. The imagery is crude; it corresponds broadly to distinctions between essentialist and pragmatic, or classificatory and hermeneutic, or normative and natural forms of thought, though the terms are unlikely to help apart from further explanation. Yet, despite its limitations, the sketch of opposing images is important because it indicates different ways in which we might seek to help theology understand itself. Critiques of systematic theology as a category of exclusion trade on the box-like conception of classificatory frameworks; but this framework may inject unneeded tension into discussion by trading on a misleading conception of the term's functioning. A few points of commentary might be useful in drawing out the suggestion.

(1) As a starting-point, reflection on models of definition is useful because, confronted by freighted questions about what falls outside the boundaries of systematic theology, my own inclination is to suggest that systematic theology is not the sort of thing that has clear limits, and clarification of the question is required if we are not to fall into needless disillusionment when a search for boundaries inevitably fails. Consideration of what systematic theology is apart from imagery of boxes allows us to see that the worth of the term is not measured by its capacity to denote a sphere of operation that is unshaded by any penumbra of uncertainty, for it may do entirely

good service even if the realities that it denotes exist in ranging degrees of entanglement with other forms of thought. We might, for instance, say that the term "systematic theology" is useful in naming the intent and content of, say, Thomas's *Summa*, Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre*, and a range of allied enterprises that exist in varying shades of similarity to them. All of these works will overlap with concepts or concerns from other fields – it is, for instance, impossible to imagine either Thomas's or Schleiermacher's work without the philosophical worlds in which they are immersed – and will vary in the degree to which they attend explicitly to their own context; but, unless we are not hampered by the way that we think of definition, this need not seem especially troublesome. It may be a truism that all work is located, and is thus contextual in some sense, but there remain differences in the degree to which location is explicitly thematised or implicitly influential, and it is useful enough to have terms like "systematic" and "contextual" theology for naming that difference without insisting on a fixed sense of the boundaries between them. Our store of descriptive resources is richer for leaving space for fluid depictions of one work as a piece of systematic theology that is attentive to contextual concerns, or another as piece of contextual theology that is shaped by systematic interests. Retaining flexibility in the sphere in which differing terms overlap is, moreover, crucial because it allows people to take up the terms in new ways, show how a variation on previous notions allows new potential to come to light, and in so doing expand a contemporary sense of what a thing can be. It is important for the health of a discipline that it can sustain meaningful reflection on its objects and procedures; but this reflection tends to become tedious and self-defeating when it is framed as a matter of establishing or policing boundaries, for there is no clear reason for thinking that boundaries exist. So long as we are not hampered by the way that we think about definition, this reality may be seen as expanding our descriptive capacities rather than reflecting some deficit in the state of the discipline.

(2) Differing conceptions of definition are also important because they bring with them differing understandings of the political freight of speech. Critical work has suggested that, particularly around questions of difference, a violence that is intrinsic to language comes to the surface because it becomes plain that speaking involves fixing the identities

of things, locating them in schemes of inclusion and exclusion, and positioning them to receive particular predicates as matters of logical necessity. The political freight that accompanies this picture is central to an anti-essentialist reaction that insists that difference goes all the way down; but it is crucial that it derives much of its force from a classificatory vision of language that is not itself a fate inscribed in stone. Both the essentialist and the anti-essentialist visions represent important standpoints that allow us to identify and navigate different aspects of our experience, but neither is in itself adequate. Essentialist conceptions helpfully pick out the beginnings of knowledge in attention to repetitions and similarities; but attention to these realities is better understood to involve locating a thing in overlapping networks of similarities and differences than classifying it under a particular category. I may call a particular work an instance of "systematic theology" in order to provide a point of reference for comprehension in relations of similarity to a set of known phenomena; but we will not have moved far towards understanding until we begin to explore distinctives that are rooted in its differences from these other things, and likely reflect similarities to phenomena that are ranged under other terms. Confronted by a freighted opposition between essentialist and anti-essentialist forms of thought, we are best served by bypassing the alternatives, and working to clarify that understanding a thing involves not filing it in a delineated category, but rather identifying its own distinctive niche in overlapping networks of similarity and difference.

(3) If we are to turn from imagery of boxes to imagery of rippling circles, where might we say that questions like race and gender, sometimes thought to be excluded from systematic theology a priori, fit within the discipline? My own inclination is to suggest that it is difficult to say in the abstract because the answer is something like "just about anywhere". Treatments of gender and race "in relation to God", or treatments of doctrinal notions that rely on tools borrowed from reflection on these themes, may straightforwardly be illuminated by calling them "systematic theology". In face of works that consider doctrines of reconciliation in dialogue with contemporary questions regarding race, or doctrines of the church in dialogue with contemporary questions regarding gender, it is useful, in trying to locate their distinctive niches, to be able to describe them as works of both systematic and contextual theology. Questions regarding race and

gender can crop up in a range of locations in the rippling network of realities that are described as "systematic theology". And it is, once again, crucial that we hold a sense of what "systematic theology" can entail with sufficient flexibility that space is left for people to take up the term in new ways, show how the new use brings meaningful illumination to a question at hand, and, in so doing, expand a sense of what the discipline can entail. The possibility of expanding a sense of what a term can entail is particularly important in thinking about the central elements that are most formative of a collective sense of what "systematic theology" is. I have referred to influential works of what I have called capital "S" "T" "Systematic Theology" as constituting a central sense of what the discipline entails, and it is crucial that enterprises of this kind too are open to reimagining that make questions of race or gender central. It is among the signal accomplishments of Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre* that it shows that a Systematic Theology can be undertaken from the standpoint of a kind of religious experience; I take it that it is entirely possible – and is, indeed, likely[7] – that a Systematic Theology will be undertaken from the standpoint of questions regarding race or gender. In light of this recognition, we can perhaps sum up a glance at a first set of conceptual coordinates by suggesting that reflection on systematic theology is usefully informed by imagery of rippling circles rather than fixed boxes because doing so allows us to see the fluidity with which questions of gender and race can crop up in different locations in theological work, including a determinative centre, apart from the construction of a binary question about "counting" or "not counting" as an instance of "systematic theology".

2. Truth and justice

As a first matter, I have suggested that, so long as we are not hampered by a conception of what definition is, we should be positioned to see that "systematic theology" need not be understood as a label of exclusion, and inquiry into race, gender or other dimensions of human difference may fit entirely comfortably within its bound. This answer is central to wrestling with the self-understanding of systematic theology on one level; but there is another level on which answers are more contentious. On this level, the question involves stepping back from the content of what theologians say,

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7   Sarah Coakley's *God, Sexuality and the Self* takes steps in this direction.

and inquiring into the dynamics of the people who are doing the saying. How is theology affected by the composition of the people who take it up? Can its work be trusted if it is undertaken by a group that is not representative of the range of human voices and experiences? Who decides which texts will serve as formative examples of the genre? By whom are those texts written?

We can mark out a space for thinking about these questions by inquiring into the relation of truth and justice. The polarity is fundamental: Reinhold Niebuhr is right to suggest that pursuit of these ideals, the one the goal of our attempts to grasp what is, the other the end of our attempts to apprehend and work towards what ought to be, illuminates the limits of life in time.[8] Influential strands of Anglo-American thought in particular would suggest that the true and the just, inquiry into what is and concern for what ought to be, are to be held apart, the "is" and the "ought" kept in splendid isolation from each other; but it is useful to take the two together as points of orientation for reflection on systematic theology because doing so positions us to ask how far the truth-seeking work of the theological tradition is tainted by imbalances in the composition of people who took up the work, and how far concern for values like equal representation, understood as a fundamental element of justice, should shape the truth-seeking work of theology today.

I propose to begin from the suggestion that truth-seeking is fundamental to the work of theology, and ought to enjoy a logical primacy in ordering this work. The reason is not only that an intellectual discipline derives its legitimacy from inquiry into truth, but also that theology, like other disciplines, best serves as a justice-seeking discipline by being a truth-seeking discipline. This latter suggestion rests on the notion that it is a feature of our moral lives that we seek out justice by seeking out truth, for arguments about justice take place as arguments about the veracity of opposing truth claims. Two questions, framed in the parable of the Good Samaritan, are formative of the pursuit of justice: who is the neighbour to whom am I bound by ties of obligation, and what do my obligations to the neighbour entail? Differing accounts of justice develop by offering

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8   Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man, Volume II: Human Destiny* (London: Nisbet, 1943), 253.

differing answers to these questions. Are my neighbours the members of my *polis*? Sharers in a social contract? The universal community of humanity generally? The weak and suffering in particular? The members of one race but not another? Are my obligations to them best understood in terms of fulfilment of my social role? Proportional practices of distribution and retribution? Due attention to rights and duties? Self-sacrificing acts of love? We pursue justice by seeking to learn and act in accordance with true answers to these questions. As a starting point, theology is best understood to have truth-seeking as its end not only because it is an intellectual discipline that, like others, has its *raison d'être* as an inquiry into truth, but also because theology best serves the pursuit of justice through attention to this role.

With this recognition in place, a few qualifications rooted in the complexity of understanding a truth claim like "this is my neighbour" are important. The complexity arises from the reality that "neighbourliness" in the morally thick sense of a fellow to whom I am tied by debts of obligation is not obviously an empirical property in the way that "brown-haired" is. The difficulty of understanding the truth of a claim of this kind is bound up with two significant movements of thought: the proposal, first, that the claims of justice are matters of consensus rather than truth; and the claim, secondly, that the role of consensus in forming conceptions of moral and political truth exposes claims to truth as manipulative bids for power. Suspicion of the exploitative potential of claims to truth is important in consideration of the nature and limits of a reality like "systematic theology". The point to be made in response is that belief in possibilities of truth is crucial even if it is so tempered by epistemic humility or metaphysical minimalism that truth is treated as no more than an ordering ideal. This belief is important, first, because resistance to unjust consensus has its basis in appeal to truths regarding justice that stand beyond consensus. An operative social consensus may depict me as less worthy than my follows. I counter the consensus by struggling for recognition of fundamental truths of human equality. Belief in the possibility of truth is then important, secondly, because however much appeal to possession of truth may serve as a tool of oppression, recent history makes clear that exploitative groups, movements, and figures are as happy to function by undermining faith in truth as by appealing to perceived truths. Oppression may be entrenched

either by maximising or by minimising the force of claims to truth. That "post-truth is pre-fascism" is among the lessons of our era.[9] Belief in truth, however tempered, is a crucial habit of mind for those concerned with justice.

In part as a way of holding open space for the pursuit of a form of justice that is not reducible to consensus, I wish to suggest that pursuit of truth ought to retain a place of primacy in ordering the work of systematic theology. But once this recognition is in place, it is important that we come to see that it does not entail that considerations of justice are secondary to theology's work. The necessary place of justice within the pursuit of truth may be approached by considering truth's fragility. Attempts to grasp "what is" encounter a basic difficulty in that recognition of truth often has an indefinable quality, dawning in a kind of "aha" moment whose reliability and communicability are open to question. The early modern tradition spoke of the clarity and distinctness of an idea as the mark of its truth, but notions of clarity admit of easy deconstruction, and it is not difficult to point to instances in which we think we have a clear grasp of something that turns out not to be true. If we are questioned regarding our grounds for taking something as true, we are often reduced to gesturing and stammering. "You wish to know why I think the car is red? Just look at this thing here." The forcelessness of a gesturing "this", "here" has driven a good deal of philosophical inquiry; it furnishes, for instance, the point of departure for the winding inquiries of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The most common response is to propose that it is in fact knowledge, rather than truth, that stands as the object of intellectual inquiry. For Plato, knowledge represents "truth plus an account", that is, something like truth that has been sent to finishing school and is able to step forward and present its credentials, replacing a stammering "this", "here" with articulate descriptions of grounds, methods, and procedures. Though, at first blush, we might think that truth ought to stand as the end of our inquiries, we are inheritors of a tradition that suggests that what we seek is a kind of a "truth plus", not only a grasp of what is, but also a capacity to defend the grasp to others.

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9   See Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (London: Vintage, 2017), 71.

Attention to questions of knowledge is important for us because it brings with it significant shifts in consideration of truth and justice. The point that is important for us here is that consideration of justice is central to inquiry into knowledge because knowledge has justice as one of its constitutive elements. This dynamic is clear enough in classical epistemologies, which take on different forms in part because differing conceptions of justice shape differing understandings of what counts as a good act of knowing. Plato represents a paradigmatic instance of an account of knowledge that is formed by a teleological conception of justice, insisting that knowledge arises when each thing play its proper role in the act of knowing. Kant, in turn, represents a paradigmatic instance of an account that is formed by a deontological conception of justice, insisting that the conditions of the understanding constitute rules that must be followed if apprehension of an object is to "count" as an act of knowing. For the classical tradition, knowledge is a normative category that derives its force from assessment of the degree to which the demands of vision of justice are fulfilled in act of knowing. The centrality of justice is then clearer in recent work that emphasizes not individual acts of apprehension, but rather the social structures that build up the vast majority of our knowledge.[10] Given how much of what we take to be true is derived from relations of authority and cooperative inquiry, it seems fair to conclude that "truth plus justice" is a fair formula for the bulk of what we take to count as knowledge.

The question of knowledge brings with it important turns in consideration of truth and justice. Concern for truth might seem to merit initial primacy as the goal of intellectual inquiry; but the fragility of truth might be taken to mean that justice must come first, for it entails that our task is in fact the pursuit of a knowledge that depends on justice. Once the question of knowledge is on the table, it might seem that the first task of intellectual inquiry is to ensure justice in the spaces in which inquiry is conducted; but this perspective is, in turn, hardly self-sufficient, for we are immediately forced to inquire regarding true answers to questions of justice: what, in the pursuit of truth and knowledge in particular, do I owe my neighbour? In inquiring into the work of theology, we face a context in which truth

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10   See, e.g., Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

and justice stand in complex, intertwined relation. Discussion amongst differing perspectives on race, gender, and systematic theology might helpfully proceed by thinking through the location of these realities within the spiralling relation of the true and the just. A few points of commentary might be offered.

(1) In considering the interplay of truth and justice, it is important to be clear regarding the logical primacy of truth in the work of theology because doing so helps us to specify the kind of justice that we are looking for. In attending to theological inquiry, we seek the justice that makes possible reliable apprehension of truth. Consideration of this form of justice requires some critical attention to how far entrenched conceptions of the just serve the ends of theological inquiry. The point might be made by way of a contrast between regnant modern conceptions of justice, which privilege values like freedom and equality, and the forms of justice required for theological truth seeking. On one side, dominant modern conceptions of justice are non-teleological, which is to say that, rather than promoting one particular good, they privilege individual freedom to identify and pursue goods. By contrast, the form of justice that is required for theological inquiry is distinctively teleological because it has reliable apprehension of truth as a determinate end. As a truth-seeking discipline, theology has a concrete goal in the way that liberal conceptions of justice do not. That differing assumptions regarding justice may emerge can be illustrated by way of a point of perennial difficulty: the freedom of expression. This freedom is central to regnant visions of justice. It is a root article of liberal faith, expressed most clearly by John Stuart Mill, that free expression not only sustains pluralistic public spaces, but also promotes the pursuit of truth because truth is bred by maximizing space for creative variation in forms of expression. The difficulty is that hard experience suggests that freedom of creative variation takes at least as much as it gives. Human capacity to apprehend and express truth is fragile; flooding the epistemic field with a maximal number of forms of expression often renders its formation more, rather than less, difficult. The point is clear from the explicit "flood the zone with shit" strategies of those who wish to obscure the truth,[11] and

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11　Trump advisor Steve Bannon famously expressed his strategy of creating an artificial epistemic crisis in which all claims to truth would be suspect by saying that accurate media reporting, and not the political opposition, is the true enemy, and the way to

is also familiar from debates regarding pornography. Rights to produce and disseminate pornography are defended as instances of free expression; but critics point out that pornography warps the spaces of sexual relations in ways that make it difficult for elements of truth to come to expression. Paul speaks in Romans 1 of the suppression of truth by injustice; in some instances at least, freedom of expression fuels injustice that suppress truth. The fraught relation between free expression and the formation of capacities for truth-telling illustrates that grappling with the kind of justice that sustains theological inquiry requires scrutiny of the fit between regnant values and the distinctively teleological sphere in which theology operates. The kind of "epistemic justice" that is required to sustain inquiry into truth may diverge markedly from wider principles.

(2) Theology is not unique in representing a teleologically oriented enterprise, but it does possess distinctives that call for attention to the peculiar dynamics associated with truth, justice, and knowledge within its sphere. As a starting point, theologies of justification have epistemological force in specifying some of the particularities of the form of justice that is generative of theological knowledge. This justice is, as a starting point at least, the *dikaiosune* that is received as a gift of grace; and this, in turn, entails that theological knowledge itself is best understood in terms of a "being known by God". A full account of how this reality is to be understood and translated into rigorous intellectual inquiry is not possible here; but we might note that one consequence is the creation of space in which theologians may be both aghast at the structural injustices that pervade their field, and hopeful that their work may yet succeed, for the ensnarement of human activity in pervasive corruption should not be news to them. From a theological perspective, the coming to visibility of systematic injustice across lines of race and gender illuminates new aspects of the corruption of sin, and new causes for repentance and active response – after all, God's work of justification has the pursuit of justice as its human correlate – but freedom from the taint of injustice could be held as a condition of successful theological speech only where wider structures of understanding have gone rather seriously wrong. The deferral of eschatological consummation

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deal with it is to "flood the zone with shit". See, e.g., https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/1/16/20991816/impeachment-trial-trump-bannon-misinformation, [Accessed: 29 May, 2023].

does not entail that theological knowledge *tout court* is on hold. Luther's *simul* is instructive in reconciling a fundamental difficulty that arises in consideration of justice and truth-telling: what it means to hold both that the theological tradition is entangled with histories of imbalance, injustice, and oppression, and that much of what it passes down can be held as true and developed in contemporary work that aims to speak truth.

(3) The distinctive features of theological knowledge and the distinctive challenges of sustaining dialogue regarding systematic theology suggest that a shift from normative to descriptive epistemological work may be salutary. Normative epistemologies aim to identify conditions that permit distinctions to be drawn between what does and does not count as knowledge; but, for all of their importance in an age of climate scepticism and anti-vaccination movements, they tend to breed polemic rather than dialogue, and to fit awkwardly in spheres in which the conditions of knowledge are not open to rigorous control. Normative epistemologies are more sure-footed in delimiting knowledge of chemistry than of poetry; like philosophy, theology is sometimes pushed towards engaging idealised abstractions when a kind of science-envy causes it to adopt the proceduralism of modern visions of method as the form of justice that is generative of theological knowledge. One alternative is to shift from inquiry into the conditions of knowledge to description of actual processes of knowing. Concrete attention to how one learned and has lived with the things that one takes to be true is often a first step towards normative epistemological inquiry; but there may be benefits to lingering over it somewhat longer and allowing it to be more central to completed reflection. Movements of theological *ressourcement* have borne some fruit through descriptive accounts of actual movements of knowledge deployed by others, and, in face of questions regarding theology, gender, and race, honest attention to the formation of knowledge holds out some hope both of positioning us to spot where our conceptions are tainted by injustice, and of furnishing a framework for dialogue. Movements involved in inter-religious Scriptural reasoning aim to model dialogue that rests not on weighing how far conceptions arising across lines of difference may be counted as knowledge, but rather on attention to and engagement with the actual movements of others' thinking. If a justice that gives to others what

they are due is indeed ingredient in knowledge, then this descriptive work may be more productive of knowledge than normative inquiry.

3. Grammar and psychology

We may progress in asking how we might understand systematic theology by shifting from perennial-seeming questions about truth and justice to distinctions that are more native to modern thought. The distinctions emerge from questions about language, meaning, and interpretation that have played a formative role over the last two centuries. They concern three differing positions, each typical of a particular tradition, that can be adopted in relation to the meaning of language. These positions bring with them contrasting depictions of the significance of the identity of intellectual inquirers. One holds that the meaning of language is stabilized by relations that are external to the position and intention of the speaker and the hearer, so that the identities of these figures is of little consequence; another devotes itself to understanding language in relation to the positions and intentions of those who use it, so that their identities are of paramount importance; a third supposes that meaning can be understood only in a fluid middle space in which factors both internal and external to the positions and relations of its users play off of each other in unpredictable and sometimes surprising ways. Just how to locate systematic theology in relation to conceptions of meaning that either marginalise or emphasise the positions of its practitioners is crucial in understanding its relation to contemporary critiques.

I propose to approach these topics through a historiography that is sufficiently compressed that it is inevitably somewhat mythologising, but it may serve to orient us because the distinctions that it brings to visibility mark out fundamental oppositions within intellectual life today. The story involves differing configurations of what we can provisionally call the psychological and the grammatical in the work of a theologian and pastor in Berlin, a mathematician in Jena, and a philologist in Basel. The story begins with Friedrich Schleiermacher's pioneering work in transforming hermeneutics from what he called an unsystematised "collection of observations" to an ordered discipline through the suggestion that understanding speech involves rigorous study in two different spheres:

the psychological and the grammatical.[12] For Schleiermacher, grasping the meaning of speech acts requires, first, exhaustive study of the subjects who are doing the speaking, their inclinations, convictions, relations, and idiosyncrasies; and, secondly, immersive inquiry regarding the linguistic world that a speaker inhabits, its grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and the possibilities of expression that the speakers' language contain. Psychology and grammar are, for him, the building blocks of meaning; but mastery of these two fields is itself not enough, for meaning is created as individual speakers, with all of their psychological quirks, wrestle with the expressive possibilities contained within their language in order to make public some aspect of thought or experience. For Schleiermacher, meaning arises in a negotiated middle between realities that are internal to subjects, and realities that are external. Hermeneutics is, for Schleiermacher, only ever a matter of art, rather than of science, because even one who develops a scientific grasp of psychology and grammar faces the work of intuiting how the two interact with each other within the contingencies of an expressive moment.

For Schleiermacher, then, understanding meaning involves attention to the psychological, the grammatical, and the ephemeral dance in which they find themselves engaged in acts of meaning making. The story in which I am interested is one in which aspects of subsequent work drifted towards sacrificing one or the other of the poles to which Schleiermacher commended attention. The first development that is important for us is the work of nineteenth-century German philosopher and mathematician Gottlob Frege, whose work is formative of the analytic philosophical tradition. Frege's work is a significant for us because he was averse to the psychological character that he took to be characteristic of classical conceptions of meaning. This character came to expression in the Augustinian notion that the meaning of words is bound up with the images that the mind creates when it hears of certain realities.[13] Frege

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12   See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism,* ed. and trans. Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 5–6.

13   Augustine speaks, for instance, of the mind understanding speech about cities and people by constructing images of them from other things they have seen. Those who have never seen anything like a city have difficulty comprehending what a city is. One of the fundamental puzzles associated with the knowledge of God is that, as an infinite spiritual substance, God does not admit of representation through an image. See, e.g.,

argued in response that meaning possesses a stability, reflected in the susceptibility of particular claims to logical analysis, that is not reducible to the accidental ways in which a hearer might create a picture of what is said.[14] For him, meaning is a function neither of psychological quantities, nor even of the negotiations of psychology and grammar, but rather of the relation between language and the world. His work represents a significant milestone in developing a de-psychologised semantics according to which meaning is not caught in a fluctuating dance of psychology and grammar, but rather fixed by the objective truth-conditions of the assertion made in the speech.[15] To grasp the meaning of a claim like "the sky is blue" is to grasp the conditions under which it would be true, a state of affairs in the world that is not reducible to events in the mind. This removal of meaning from the sphere of the psychological is decisive for much of the subsequent tradition of analytic philosophy: ongoing debates regarding meaning within this tradition are competitions between differing models of de-psychologised semantics. Proponents of truth-conditional, translational, or inferential visions of meaning share the assumption, colourfully expressed by Hilary Putnam, that "'meaning' just ain't in the head".[16] In place of Schleiermacher's balancing of the psychological and the grammatical in an account of meaning, we have a vision in which realities that belong to speakers and hearers – history, personality, social position, and son on – fade from view.

In contrast to the jettisoning of the psychological in analytic accounts of meaning stands a tradition that takes the opposite approach to bypassing the complex wrestling with meaning that Schleiermacher demands. This tradition functions not by marginalizing the psychological, but rather by inflating it, sometimes together with the sociological, as the true locus of meaning. We can approach it through the work of Friedrich Nietzsche.

Augustine, *On the Trinity*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 1991) 8.7–8.

14 See, e.g., Gottlob Frege, "On Sense and Reference", in A.W. Moore, ed., *Meaning and Reference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 23–42.

15 Frege did not himself come all the way to what has come to be called a "truth-conditional semantics". Formalisation of this theory occurred through the later work of figures like Alfred Tarski, Donald Davidson and Michael Dummett.

16 Hilary Putnam, "The meaning of 'meaning'", in *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2, *Mind, Language and Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 227.

Nietzsche's work opens space within which meaning can be treated as a matter of the personality and position of the speaker by rejecting any notion of language corresponding to mind-independent states of affairs. For him, will-to-power alone is real. Language is not a means of representing a world that is really "out there"; rather, it is a "mobile army of metaphors" through which the will seeks to order appearances to its advantage.[17] To understand what is said is to grasp the interests that come to expression in particular speech acts. On these terms, attention to realities that are particular to subjects, above all their interests and positions, exhausts the possibilities of finding meaning. This idea extends forward from Nietzsche's work into a tradition of critical theory that seeks to understand language in terms of the interests and relations of power. Scholars within this tradition draw from a range of theories – Marxist, psychoanalytic, feminist, and so on – to understand the relations of power that come to expression not only in speech, but across the range of individual and institutional behaviours. For them, the reference that a particular speech act might make to the world is incidental, for the aim is to understand the interests that the act reflects.

Attention to critical inquiry alongside Schleiermacher's and Frege's work is useful for us in illustrating the diverging visions of language and meaning that modern thought has left us to negotiate. There is an analytic tradition that takes meaning to be stabilized by relations that are external to the positions and intentions of human subjects; a critical tradition that makes position and intention determinative; and a hermeneutic tradition, embodied in the work of figures like Gadamer, who follow Schleiermacher in understanding meaning to reside in negotiations between factors internal and external to agents. These contrasts are important for us because different visions of the nature of systematic theology, and its relation to questions of human identity, emerge depending on whether we take it to be an analytic, critical, or hermeneutical discipline. If theology is an analytic discipline, then concern for broader principles of justice may move scholars to address imbalances in representation within the field, but the meaning of theological claims is not at stake in questions in questions of identity and position. If theology is a critical discipline, then its claims are

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17   Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense", in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Guess and Ronald Speirs, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 146.

best taken to be symbolic of psychological and social arrangements, which are to be understood as the true objects of its concern. Both alternatives are well represented in the academy today: significant investment from the Templeton foundation has furthered the spread of analytic forms of theology; the prevalence of critical theories as the shared conceptual grammar for a good deal of work within the humanities has impacted theology no less than other disciplines. It is important for us that both approaches have delivered sufficient results that work on either pole may be deemed a creditable intellectual possibilities. The accusations of naivety, distortion or manipulation that advocates of the opposing positions sometimes trade is belied by the contributions that scholars on both poles have made over the last century. The question for us is how the relations of these different positions furthers the self-understanding of systematic theology.

My aim in drawing towards a close is to suggest that, if theology is to remain a discipline that concerns the relation of the divine and the human, then it is best understood as a hermeneutic discipline that seeks to balance contributions from analytic and critical work. The reason for the claim is straightforward. On one side, if theology is to remain a discipline that concerns the reality and activity of God, then it cannot go over wholly to critical study, for its interests cannot be exhausted by the identities or positions of its practitioners. Attention to identity and position may be valuable in identifying psychological or social pressure that has been exerted on theological claims, but theological speech cannot be understood solely in terms of this pressure because it reaches out towards a reality whose character and activity is capable of stabilizing registers of meaning. On the other side, if theology is to remain a discipline that understands its claims to arise from concrete human beings with whom God has established fellowship, then it cannot go over to a pure form of analytic work, for its interests cannot be exhausted by de-psychologised and decontextualised registers of meaning. Meanings that are held by truth conditions or conceptual relations usefully direct us back to referents that are not reducible to social and psychological conditions, but if we are not to understand theological claims as divine deliverances that arrive apart from any human mediation, then the formation of these claims by human realities cannot drop away. Theology can function neither as a purely

critical nor as a purely analytic discipline because its interest is in an object that stands in relation. Pushed to their fullest, critical principles cause the object to drop away, and analytic principles the relation. The imaginary that founds critical theory involves subjects who are devoid of worlds. The imaginary that informs analytic philosophy draws us towards worlds that are devoid of subjects. Theology may learn from both approaches, but if it is to keep sight both of the God who speaks and of the humans who hear, then it must understand itself as a hermeneutic discipline that balances analytic and critical conceptions in wrestling with meaning.

Conclusion

The aim of this essay has been to ask how systematic theology may understand itself in light of questions that arise from attention to human differences. The discipline shares with the contemporary world generally the challenge of addressing questions of difference without a shared grammar for doing so; but it also faces particular difficulties because one question arising from attention to human identities and relations is whether the notion of systematic theology is defensible at all. In face of this question, I have sought to help the discipline understand itself by offering neither one more definition from a perspective that is internal to the discipline, nor one more interrogation from the perspective of its critics, but rather a set of distinctions that emerge from philosophical inquiry. These distinctions are intended to furnish terms on which practitioners and critics may meet. My aim has extended to a suggestion about a threefold set of claims that may further the self-understanding of the discipline. As a first matter, systematic theology is a historically conditioned reality that should understand itself to be constituted by an ever-shifting set of precedents rather than fixed limits. As a second matter, systematic theology is an intellectual discipline seeks epistemic justice for the sake of discovering truth, which itself serves to further wider forms of justice. As a third matter, systematic theology is a hermeneutic discipline that balances the analytic and critical registers of meaning in seeking to understand the God who establishes relation with humanity. Much else would need to be said in a full account of the discipline, but my hope is that these preliminary indications may open space for constructive dialogue.

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