The Archetypal/Ectypal distinction and Clarkian epistemology

by Daniel H. Chew

The distinction between archetypal and ectypal knowledge as promoted by the 17th century Reformed theologian Franciscus Junius is vital in Reformed scholastic thought. In this short article, I would like to interact with it as it is presented in Willem J. Van Asselt's article in the Westminster Theological Journal of 2002[1], and tie that in with Clarkian epistemology. It is my opinion that there is no necessary conflict between the two, contrary to Dr. R. Scott Clark's opinion that the denial of the archetypal/ectypal distinction is foundational to Clark's epistemology and his denial of the Well-Meant Offer[2].

In this article therefore, I would first present the archetypal/ectypal distinction as presented by Van Asselt, and evaluate how that can tie in with Clarkian epistemology. Lastly, I would interact with some of Scott Clark's criticism on the subject and show that it does not apply to Gordon Clark either in his epistemology or his denial of the Well-Meant Offer.

Junius' archetypal/ectypal distinction

The archetypal/ ectypal distinction is basic to our understanding of the Creator/creature distinction. That which is archetypal is that which is properly predicated of God. According to Junius and Van Asselt, the term *archetypos* was used by the Church Fathers to indicate "a *thelogia exemplaris* of divine and immutable character." [3] Archetypal theology is "theology in its proper sense being the same as the infinite wisdom of God concerning himself and his works as they are necessary to him and ordered by him in a perpetual relationship according to his infinite reasons."[4] Ectypal theology however is "the wisdom creatures in their way have concerning God, and about the things that are ordered towards God, communicated by him."[5] This distinction was stated to have come through the medieval theologian Dunn Scotus's commentary on the *Sententiae*[6]. According to Junius and Van Asselt, due to the disparateness of

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[1] Willem J. van Asselt, "The Fundamental Meaning of Theology: Archetypal and Ectypal Theology in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Thought", *WTJ* 64 (2002)319-35

[2] R. Scott Clark, "Janus, the Well-Meant Offer of the Gospel and Westminster Theology", in David VanDrunen (ed.), *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine: Systematic Theology at the Westminster Seminaries, Essays in Honor of Robert B. Strimple* (Phillisburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004), 152

[3] Van Asselt, 322

[4] *Ibid.*

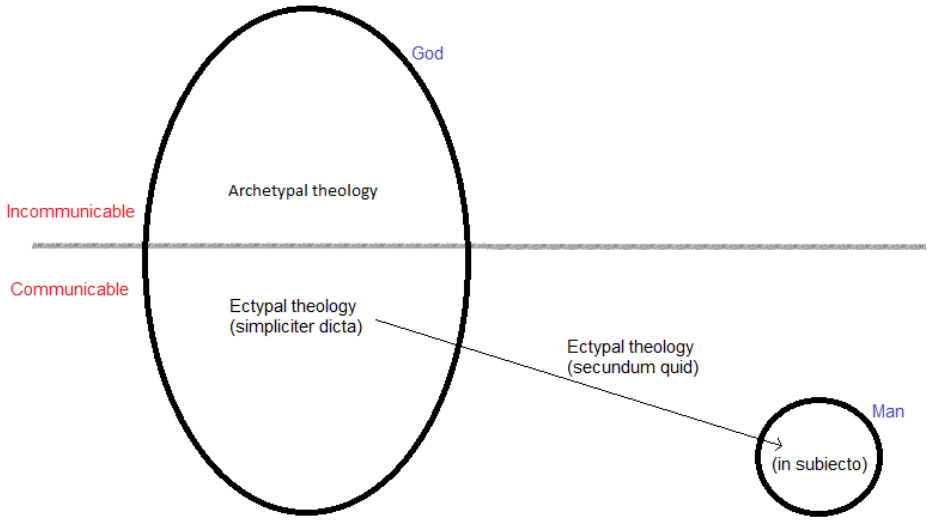
[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Ibid.*

these two types of truths, it is “impossible to subsume them under one common chapter or sort of truth.”[7]

According to Junius and Van Asselt, archetypal theology, being God’s uncreated knowledge of Himself, is not to be investigated into but adored.[8] Junius split ectypal theology into two types: what he calls *theologia simpliciter dicta* and *theologia secundum quid*. The former refers to the “whole wisdom concerning divine things communicable to creatures in respect of the communicator,” while the latter refers to “wisdom concerning divine things communicable to creatures in respect to themselves.”[9] Therefore, God has archetypal theology which is incommunicable to creatures, while God has His own ectypal theology (*theologia simpliciter dicta*) which is communicable to creatures. When this *theologia simpliciter dicta* is formulated to us creatures (“God’s accommodation of himself to a form which finite creatures are capable of grasping”), it becomes *thelogia secundum quid*.[10] That *theologia simpliciter dicta* is communicable does not mean it can be grasped by creatures in se, as the form of this theology is not in a form that we can grasp (*theologia in subiectis*). Junius then further split ectypal theology (in *subiecto*) into three different forms of theology: the theology of union (Christ’s theology in his human nature), the theology of vision (to the saints in heaven) and the theology of revelation (to the saints as pilgrims on earth).

All of this could be perhaps best shown in a chart.



[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*, 327

[9] Junius, *De Vera Thelogica*. As quoted in Van Asselt, 327

[10] Van Asselt, 329

Ectypal theology *secundum quid* therefore is God's energies to us-ward. Creaturely theology is always ectypal and therefore analogous to God's archetypal theology, being qualitatively different from God's knowledge.

The archetypal/ectypal distinction and Clarkian epistemology

The epistemology of Gordon H. Clark is one that deals seriously with the issue of revelation. Clark is concerned that our knowledge is indeed a true reflection of reality. Since God determines truth through revelation (WCF Chapt I, Section VI cf Jn. 17:17, 2 Tim. 3:16-17), what we know to be true must come about by God's revelation. General revelation, while it is useful, is not self-interpreting (WCF Chapt 1, Section 1, Rom. 1:19-23) and therefore is not reliable for true knowledge. The font of true knowledge therefore comes from Scripture and Scripture alone.[11]

The archetypal/ectypal distinction does not pose a problem for Clarkian epistemology. While historically Clark has denied that there is a qualitative difference between God's knowledge and Man's knowledge, such is true even in Reformed scholasticism if we are limiting ourselves to ectypal theology. For surely in the scheme put forward by Junius and Van Asselt we can see that there is a univocal point of contact between *theologia simpliciter dicta* with God (God's ectypal theology) and *theologia in subiectis* (our theology about God). Yes, we can never comprehend the *theologia simplicter dicta* in form (only *theologia secundum quid*) because it has not been accommodated to us creatures yet, but that is different from saying that we cannot know its content which is similar to the *theologia secundum quid*.

So ontologically, there is a qualitative difference between God's archetypal knowledge and our ectypal knowledge, yet the qualitative difference does not exist between God's ectypal knowledge (*theologia simplicita dicta*) and our ectypal knowledge, which is not qualitatively different but quantitatively different.

It is debatable whether Gordon Clark, being a philosopher, understood the archetypal/ectypal distinction and knowingly rejected it. His interests lie elsewhere and to fault him for seemingly rejecting a fine though important theological distinction which he most probably does not understand is not an action done in good faith. Clark was more interested in defending Christian knowledge as true because God revealed it to be true, and as such the focus on more on ectypal theology rather than God's archetypal theology, something which as Junius mentioned is to be adored not investigated, so what's the point of investigating the uninvestigable?

Clarkian epistemology therefore can easily accommodate the traditional Reformed teaching on the archetypal/ectypal distinction. In fact, since it starts off by stating that apart from God's revelation, we cannot have true knowledge of anything, the distinction

[11] W. Gary Crampton, *The Scripturalism of Gordon H. Clark* (Unicoi, Tennessee: Trinity Foundation, 1999), 15

fits Clarkian epistemology better than Van Tillian epistemology, which still allows for Man to be able to know something for certain through Science done by Fallen Man.[12]

With this, let us look into Scott Clark's objection to Gordon Clark and others based upon the archetypal/ectypal distinction.

The battle of two Clarks: Use of the archetypal/ectypal distinction

In this chapter by R. Scott Clark, he takes aim at both Gordon Clark and Herman Hoeksema (and by extension the entire PRCA – Protestant Reformed Churches of America). I have no intention of defending the PRCA and if the criticism utilizing the archetypal/ectypal distinction fits them, that would not be an issue.

Scott Clark however thinks that Gordon Clark denies the archetypal/ectypal distinction. As mentioned, that is not a judgment of good faith since it is unclear that [Gordon] Clark even knew enough about it to reject it. The whole idea that our knowledge is qualitatively the same but quantitatively different to God's theology is not altogether wrong if it is predicated of God's ectypal theology (*theologia simpliciter dicta*). After all, God knows that "A" is "A" too (*theologia secundum quid*) and He knows the concept that "A"="A" too whatever the form may be (*thelogia simpliciter dicta*). And since both theologies archetypal and ectypal can be predicated with God, whatever God's archetypal theology is does not contradict God's ectypal theology, as God's ectypal theology is a communicable image of His archetypal theology.

So just because [Gordon] Clark understood Deut. 29:29 to teach that "certain things are hidden only because they are unrevealed"[13] does not therefore imply a denial of "*finitum non capax infiniti*."[14] It is a matter of bad faith to say that therefore [Gordon] Clark thinks that our theology is "partly ectypal and partly archetypal,"[15] as if Gordon Clark even thought about such categories or knew what they meant.

On the issue of the well-meant offer, suffice it is to say for noow that my problem has never been that the offer is universal and is to be made to sinners. The problem has always been that the Well-Meant offer speaks of God's desires of what does not come to pass, and make God into the eternally frustrated deity. To speak of God's desires in this way is to speak of God's decretal will, for a will of precept has no element of emotion let alone desire and well meaning.

Scott Clark in this instance regrettably seems to read only [John] Murray's report and assumes that whatever he says is the truth. Quoting Murray, Clark states that "the real

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[12] Cornelius Van Til, *In Defense of the Faith Volume 1: The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture* (Ripon, California: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1967), 68

[13] Scott Clark, in VanDrunen (ed.), 153

[14] *Ibid. finitum non capax infiniti* roughly translates as "The finite is not capable of infinity."

[15] *Ibid.*

point in dispute in connection with the well-meant offer of the gospel is whether it can properly be said that God desires the salvation of all men."[16] Yet the minority report published in the OPC 15th General Assembly shows that Murray's report is misleading. As the framers of the minority report say, the real point of the debate was never

> … the fact that "God freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation through Jesus Christ" (Conf. of Faith, Chapt. on God's Covenant with Man). It is not the gospel offer as God's revealed Word that is in dispute, but the element within the Divine will that prompts and grounds the offer. Nor is it even in dispute that God desires the salvation of sinners and proclaims to sinners, viewed simply as such, his desire for their salvation.[17]

Rather, the debate was over whether:

1. Whether the term "desire" is employed after the manner of man or whether it is to be understood literally as implying an emotion in God.
2. Whether God desires the repentance and salvation of the reprobate sinner qua reprobate or whether God's desire refers to the connection between the repentance and the salvation of sinners, qua sinners.
3. Whether God's desires are to be views [sic] by us as standing unreconciled with his decrees[18]

Murray has misrepresented the issue as if Gordon Clark and his OPC supporters have ever denied the universal offer of the Gospel. Rather, we refuse to impute unmet decretal desires to God while Murray desires to do so in the name of "mystery". When Scott Clark thereby proclaim that those who promote the well-meant offer "are not saying that God decretively wills to save and reprobate the same people,"[19] that may be his idea of what he himself means by the Well-meant offer, but from the historical documents of the OPC 15th General Assembly, it is clear that that is not what the Well-

[16] Scott Clark, in VanDrunen (ed.), 177

[17] OPC 15th General Assembly, *Minority Report on the Free Offer of the Gospel*. Accessed at http://www.opc.org/GA/free_offer.html. (accessed Dec 21, 2010)

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] Scott Clark, in VanDrunen (ed.), 177

meant offer historically meant as defined by Murray (and Ned B. Stonehouse). After all, if this is all the well-meant offer really teaches, one is hard pressed to see why they would oppose the minority report seeing that the minority report does not disagree "that God desires the salvation of sinners and proclaims to sinners, viewed simply as such, his desire for their salvation."

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be seen that the archetypal/ectypal distinction can and should be integrated with Clarkian epistemology. Scott Clark's use of the archetypal/ectypal distinction, while illuminating, bears no relevance at all either to Clarkian epistemology or to Clark's denial of the Well-Meant Offer. It may be of relevance to Hoeksema's views, but that has nothing to do with Clark's personal views on the subject. After all, just because Hoeksema wrote a book detailing the Clark/ Van Til controversy[20] does not mean therefore that they share the same views even on the topic of controversy.

[20] Herman Hoeksema, *The Clark-Van Til Controversy* (Uncoi, Tennessee: Trinity Foundation, 1995)