



Early Career Scholars in Theological Disciplines

Session 2: Wednesday, June 5, 4:15–5:45 p.m.

“Ordinary Language, Stanley Cavell, and Theology”

Location: Lamb and Scroll

Daniel Crouch, Convener

- **Katherine Ellis**, *Baylor University*
- **Andrew Whitworth**, *Baylor University*
- **Charles Regli**, *Baylor University*

Katherine Ellis, *Baylor University*, “Born Again: Stanley Cavell on Wonder and Childlike Conversion”

This paper considers connections between Stanley Cavell’s account of childhood language learning and the gospels’ description of childlike conversion. Throughout the gospels, childhood is not presented as a life stage that is underdeveloped, limited, or pejoratively infantile. Instead, the gospels point to the way in which followers of Christ are to be re-inducted, reborn as the Gospel of John puts it, into the world brimming with wonder and finitude. Entry into the Kingdom of God is not cast in terms of mastery or mining for solutions. Instead, it is to be received, relished and shared with childlike wonder. Cavell offers an account of language learning dependent on wonder. Language is not a means of mastery but is instead accompanied by strangeness and clumsy delight. Language’s boundlessness, its capacity for playful shifting and transfiguration ironically posits a boundary, a limit on what can and should be grasped. The potency and potentiality of language is not one which we can claim, wield, or control. Resisting finite projectability, or a sense of ourselves as “finished subjects,” language renders us children. The childlike wonder of words invites hopeful, new, and expansive perceptions and receptions of community, creatureliness, and God.

Andrew Whitworth, *Baylor University*, “Now is Not the Time or Place: The Lesson of Vigdis Hjorth’s *Will and Testament* for Theological Ethics”

Vigdis Hjorth’s 2016 novel *Will and Testament* tells the tragic, complicated story of a Norwegian family through the eyes of Bergljot, one of four siblings. Over the course of the novel, it becomes clear that the varying distances and tensions between Bergljot and the rest of her family are the consequence of a past, unacknowledged traumatic event. Reading *Will and Testament* with Stanley Cavell’s notion of acknowledgement in mind, the relationships between the characters demonstrate what it means to acknowledge another person and what might be the cost of failure in this regard. In this paper I want to first lay out the main conflict of the novel in a way that will both familiarize those who have not read the book, but also to distill the way in which the various characters understand the conflict differently, which will be important for my later analysis. After that, I will explore the notion of acknowledgement laid out by Stanley Cavell as a response to problems posed by skepticism. Finally, I will examine how four different characters respond to the same situation as a way of illuminating both the actions of the characters and particular aspects of what it means to acknowledge another and the implications for Christian theological ethics.

Charles Regli, *Baylor University*, “The Need to Ascend and Descend: Stanley Cavell as a Modern Aristotle”

This paper argues that Stanley Cavell offers both a challenge and opportunity to contemporary theology. In his *Claim of Reason*, Cavell challenges Christian theology by objecting to its ethical demands to pursue eternal values. Cavell depicts this desire to ascend as haunting the modern predicament, leaving it unable to rest in valuing the other. I take this challenge as an opportunity for theology to wrestle with the modern predicament. I argue, by engagement with Cavellian theologian Stephen Mulhall, that Christian theology retains eternal values but that Cavell's depiction of human language depicts how they relate to the other.