

CHRISTIAN ANSWERS TO HARD QUESTIONS

**CHRISTIANITY
AND THE ROLE OF
PHILOSOPHY**

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PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA



P U B L I S H I N G

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Wisdom is a most beautiful thing, and love is of the beautiful; and therefore love is also a philosopher or lover of wisdom. (Plato, Symposium, 204b)

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? (1 Cor. 1:20)

INTRODUCTION

The word *philosophy* means “love of wisdom.” Historically, philosophy has been characterized by a relentless search for wisdom, a single-minded and insatiable desire to set forth the fundamental aspects of human existence in order to guide human activity. In the words of the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, “Wisdom is to speak the truth and act in keeping with its nature.” Philosophy is concerned with the truth and with actions that are in accordance with the way things are. This requires some notion of just what “truth” is, and it requires that we know something of “the way things are.”

So what exactly is philosophy? Generally speaking, it is a theoretical activity that seeks to make sense out of the world in order to make sense of our place in it. In its activity, historically, philosophy has concerned itself with three broad categories: *metaphysics*, *epistemology*, and *ethics*.

Metaphysics asks and attempts to answer the question: “What is the nature of things in reality, and especially of *ultimate* reality?”

In asking these kinds of questions, metaphysics seeks to get to the “essence” of a thing, or to define it in a way that promotes a deeper understanding of it.

The term itself was likely first used around 70 B.C. and attributed to some of Aristotle’s works. Aristotle wrote *Physica* to deal with the things that were physical or substantial, things that pertained primarily to the senses. But he also wrote a section that he called at times “First Philosophy,” sometimes “Wisdom,” and even at times “Theology.” One of his followers entitled the work *Metaphysica*, which means “that which is beside or over or above the physical.” Metaphysics, then, deals with that which is above and beyond the physical, that which is ultimate and real.

Epistemology is a term that came into philosophical vocabulary much later. It first appeared in German in the latter part of the eighteenth century as *Erkenntnisstheorie* and then later came into English as *epistemology*. It is taken from the Greek word *episteme* and means “study of knowledge.” Philosophy’s task here is to study why, how, or *whether* we know something. Aristotle began his work on metaphysics with this statement: “All men by nature desire to know.” Here we see the interweaving of metaphysics and epistemology. Aristotle is saying something about the *nature* of man, which would have something to do with metaphysics. He is also asserting that it is a part of man’s nature to want to *know*, which touches on the area of epistemology. This discussion of epistemology together with metaphysics was typical of philosophy for most of its history.

Since the Enlightenment, however, the two disciplines have, for the most part, been separated, and metaphysics has been all but ignored. Though the discipline of metaphysics is currently making a comeback, epistemology took over the field of interest in philosophy at the time of Immanuel Kant (late eighteenth century).

Ethics—sometimes called *moral philosophy*—concerns itself with either of two primary categories. It may concern itself with so-called judgments of value, in which philosophers look at judgments of approval/disapproval, rightness/wrongness of an action, and so on. Or it may focus on so-called judgments of obligation, in which philosophers attempt to determine what it is we are obligated to do or not obligated to do in given situations or circumstances.

These three categories have constituted the bulk of philosophical activity since its inception.

Our particular interest here, however, is the *role* of philosophy. More specifically, our interest is to argue for the proper *place* of philosophy as a theoretical discipline. How might we go about such an argument? There are likely a number of ways to attempt to put philosophy in its proper place and thus to determine its proper role. Our path of choice will be to focus on the *subject matter* of philosophy in order to clarify its place and its role.

As we saw above, philosophy's subject matter is normally seen to be the three (broad) areas of metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. Thus, it sets itself the tasks of asking broad and basic questions about reality: What is the nature of a thing or of reality itself? How can we know anything, and what is that knowledge? What is the right (or wrong) action to take in this particular circumstance, or in the world?

BEFORE WE MOVE ON

- ✦ What is the chief task of philosophy?
- ✦ What questions do metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics each seek to answer?
- ✦ Given its concern with these issues, how is philosophy relevant to daily life?

“KNOW THYSELF”

A significant, perhaps predominant, part of philosophical discussion has been concerned with knowing, and with knowing the nature of things. The natural place to start with such concerns is with yourself. In knowing yourself, you know something about your *nature*, so metaphysics is a part of this knowledge. In knowing yourself, you know something about *knowing*, so epistemology is included. In knowing yourself, you would know “virtue,” as Socrates himself argued, so ethics is implied as well.

So Socrates, borrowing a phrase from the Oracle of Delphi, summarized his own approach to philosophy with the pithy command “Know Thyself.” Presumably, we can obtain knowledge of ourselves and this knowledge will have something to do with our knowledge of the world as well. To know yourself truly includes not simply that you are a human being, or that you are six feet tall, but also that you are Socrates and not Plato, that you reside in Athens, not in Sparta, and so forth.

In pursuit of self-knowledge, philosophy began to ask questions about what is good and what is not. This question was not only an ethical question; it was much more than that. It was, at root, a metaphysical question. It was a question that led one to begin to think about what might be the highest good (*summum bonum*) and how we might know it. For Plato, the highest good was Goodness itself, and good things here on Earth were partial examples of this Goodness. Those things that I do that are good, therefore, are good only because they have their reference point in the highest Goodness. Or, to put it another way, the good things that you do and the good things that I do are not simply different “goodnesses.” If that were the case, there would be no relationship between your good and my good. In order for them to be properly related, they must be examples of the one true Goodness.

While the command to “Know Thyself” might initially appear simple enough, it becomes more complicated when combined with a commitment to the “love of wisdom” (philosophy).

BEFORE WE MOVE ON

- ✦ Why is self-knowledge the obvious starting point for philosophy, and how does it relate to the three broad categories of philosophy?
- ✦ How do questions about goodness also relate to metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics?

ARE WE THERE YET?

From its earliest days to the present, philosophy has been pursuing Socrates’s mandate, “Know Thyself.” This pursuit has generated an enormous amount of discussion, argument, debate, and dialogue. The different topics of philosophy—metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics—have taken on lives of their own such that, in many cases, the question of self-knowledge is barely visible. In the end, however, that question still lies near the center of philosophy’s concern.

So after a few thousand years, how has philosophy done? Where are we now, given that some of the best and brightest minds have set themselves the task of knowing the nature of themselves and the world? Unfortunately, at least by some estimates, progress has been all too slow.

For example, one modern philosopher has boldly declared that even into the twenty-first century, after over four thousand years of discussion, no one metaphysical theory has won the philosophical day. He contrasts metaphysical theories with the body of knowledge currently available in geology, to use just one example, and notes:

A philosophy, as a worldview, must have an anchor if it is to be meaningfully discussed and assessed. If God exists, then philosophy must find its anchor by being subservient to theology. So says Dr. K. Scott Oliphint, who demonstrates that only by beginning with God and his Word can we engage in *true* philosophy.

"Oliphint's main illustration is very illuminating: when you're trying to find your way in a strange place, it is better to have a GPS than a mere road map. So philosophy (which, unlike other sciences, never seems to make real progress) needs a view from above; it needs to accept guidance from the revelation of God. Oliphint gives us some examples of how God's Word provides clarity and cogency for the philosopher's task."

—John M. Frame, Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

Written to equip and strengthen laypeople in their defense of the faith, *Christian Answers to Hard Questions* challenges contemporary opposition to Christianity with concise, practical answers.

Peter A. Lillback and Steven T. Huff, Series Editors

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