

# LECTURE 2: APOLOGETICS AND PHILOSOPHY

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## Relation of apologetics to philosophy

cf. Gordon Clark, *From Thales to Dewey: A History of Philosophy* (1957); Milton D. Hunnax, *Chronological and Thematic Charts of Philosophies and Philosophers* (1986); an excellent survey of the important world views from a Christian perspective is James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door* (1976); Sire discusses Christian Theism, Deism, Naturalism, Nihilism, Christian and Atheistic Existentialism, Eastern Pantheistic Monism, and the New Consciousness (New Age); an excellent text comparing philosophy to worldviews is Ronald H. Nash, *Life's Ultimate Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy* (1999); another more recent survey and comparison of worldviews is Kenneth R. Samples, *A World of Difference: Putting Christian Truth-Claims to the Worldview Test* (2007)

## Definition of philosophy

The word *philosophy* comes from the two Greek words *phileo* (love) and *sophia* (wisdom), thus it means “the love of wisdom.” Philosophy is the study of life and the world as a whole; it examines and criticizes assumptions and ideas, and seeks to construct a unified view of the world and our experience.

There are three primary areas of study in philosophy:

### 1) Metaphysics, the study of reality and existence

Typical questions:

- What is the nature of being? (ontology)
- What is the nature of the universe? (cosmology)
- What is the nature of man, in terms of human personality or consciousness? (psychology)
- What is the nature of God if such a being exists? (theology)

### 2) Epistemology, the study of knowledge and how it is obtained

An important part of epistemology is logic, the study of validity and invalidity and of truth and falsity and the relation of ideas to each other

Typical questions:

- Is it possible to obtain knowledge?
- What is the source of knowledge?

- What is the instrument of receiving knowledge?
- What is the test for truth?
- How can one proceed from one truth to another?
- What are the limits of knowledge?
- Is epistemology more ultimate or prior to all other philosophical questions?

### 3) Axiology, the study of values

An important part of axiology is ethics, the study of human obligation: morals, right and wrong, good and evil

Typical questions:

- What are values?
- Are values rooted in reality or only in the mind of the observer?
- What are the criteria by which value is judged?
- What are the important values which are to be desired in life?
- How can the important values be realized in our experience?

The thrust of philosophy and its subdivisions, and its usefulness for students, have been well explained in this excerpt from a local college catalog:

Philosophy, often called the mother of the sciences, is the oldest academic discipline. Such fields as physics and politics have their origins in it, but the study of philosophy itself will endure as long as human beings seek understanding. Philosophy can be described as the application of reason to the most general and fundamental questions of human concern, in order to give them the best justified possible answers. The questions that have occupied philosophy across its history can be located in three categories. First, there are questions about the nature of reality—ourselves and the world in which we find ourselves. Second, philosophy considers questions about how we should live, including questions about moral choice, about the place of the individual in the community, and about what is valuable or worthwhile. A third kind of question concerns what it is possible to know, and what constitutes good reasoning and secure justification. Despite these categories, many philosophers seek a comprehensive and unified vision of the world and our place in it. Even those philosophers who are skeptical of such grand designs typically answer one kind of question— “Do people have minds over and above their bodies (or their brains)?” —by considering another— “How could I know about another person’s mind?” In fact, the question of how we know pervades philosophy.

For the discipline of philosophy, its history—especially the work of its great figures—is unusually important. Philosophy’s peculiarly reflective and self-critical approach to these questions originated with the philosophers of ancient Greece, and developed in a dialogue that has extended across the centuries in the Western philosophical tradition. Philosophy is a living subject as well, pressing now as much as ever for answers to its central questions. Therefore the Department’s curriculum also presents the best contemporary thinking, upon a foundation of established works from the past.

Students find that courses in the Philosophy Department develop an unusual range of intellectual abilities. Philosophy texts demand careful reading. They enrich the student’s knowledge of the historical period or cultural milieu in which they originated. Philosophical

writing, as the department teaches it, is precise and carefully structured. It involves constructing sustained arguments, and analyzing and criticizing the arguments of others. In these courses, students participate extensively in discussion and sometimes make oral presentations. Again, the premium is on care and cogency. Some philosophy courses are similar to mathematics courses in their abstract character and in their use of symbolic representations. Finally, philosophy courses acquaint students with great works, universally recognized to be among the finest products of human thought.

Students who major in the department's program undertake, and succeed in, a variety of endeavors upon graduating. Those who wish to do graduate work are well prepared for it. Others pursue professional programs in such fields as law, divinity, business, public administration, and even medicine and public health. Without further education, many philosophy graduates add their own energy and good sense to the abilities developed in them by the study of philosophy, and find rewarding positions in government, in business, in the arts, and in journalism. Virtually any career which requires clear thinking, intellectual creativity, good command of language, and a perspective on competing values and systems of belief, provides opportunities for a graduate in philosophy. But equally important is the value of an education that develops a reflective understanding of ourselves, and of our experience of the world and of others. (*University of Puget Sound 1992-1993 Bulletin*, pp. 141-142)

## Philosophical questions for apologetics to answer

### Metaphysical questions:

- What is the nature of ultimate reality?
- Can the existence of God be proved?
- What is the value of the theistic proofs?
- Can the created nature of the universe be proved?
- How is the created universe related to God?
- What is the nature of the universe?
- What is the nature of man?
- What is natural law? Can miracle be defended?
- What is sin? How does it relate to man's will?
- How can both God and evil exist?

### Epistemological questions:

- What is knowledge?
- What is truth?
- What is the test for truth?
- How do our ideas refer to reality?
- What is the source of knowledge?
- Are our sense perceptions and mental operations trustworthy?
- What kind of certainty is arrived at by deduction? By induction?
- Are there such things as innate truths? Can they be proved?
- Can ultimate reality be known? If so, how?

- What is faith? What is faith's relation to reason?
- What is the effect of sin on man's ability to know?
- Is there common ground between believer and unbeliever?
- What method should a believer use when dealing with an unbeliever?
- Can Christianity, either in whole or in part, be proved to be rational? To be the most, or only, rational world view?

#### Axiological questions:

- What are values?
- Are values rooted in objective reality?
- Is there any absolute standard or criterion of value?
- Are there any legitimate relative values?
- Is there an ethical hierarchy?
- Is sin ever not avoidable in a given situation?
- What is man's *summum bonum*?
- Can cultural norms be morally neutral?
- What is the relation of aesthetics to Christianity?

## Definitions of knowledge

Before discussing the various schools of apologetics, it is necessary to discuss what is meant by knowledge. And before that can be done, it must be determined what knowledge itself is. This is the subject of epistemology, the philosophic study of knowledge and knowing. Epistemology is the most basic topic of all philosophy, since all other areas of knowledge must of necessity be based on one's understanding of what it is to know, and what basis knowledge can have.

Different writers define knowledge differently. However, certain terms have fairly agreed upon meanings.

## Knowledge

Ultimately knowledge is that which is known to be true for legitimate reason, and is indeed true. Christians believe that the only absolute knowledge is that which is revealed by God. Knowledge also includes those truths that can be logically deduced from revealed truth. As was stated by the Westminster divines:

"The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men." (WCF 1.6)

Absolute knowledge must be *a priori*; that is, it must be accepted as having to be true. It must be the truth as is known by God and revealed to us. This knowledge is so certain that people are to be loyal to

it even when their own sense perception and the united testimony of the world seem to go against it. This kind of knowledge is the result of God's sovereign election and the resulting work of the Holy Spirit.

"We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture, and the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole, (which is to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God; yet, notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth, and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts." (WCF 1.5)

## Opinion

What most people commonly call knowledge can more properly be called opinion. Opinion represents the beliefs people have based on their experience or observation. It is basically *a posteriori*; that is, it is conclusions reached after examining individual examples. While absolute knowledge is deductive, inductive conclusions are not absolute, since it is impossible to observe all possible relevant examples, and since no observation is perfectly precise.

Conclusions formed from inductive observations are necessarily tentative. They might be changed when more evidence becomes available. For example, since science is basically inductive, its conclusions are properly stated as scientific opinion, not scientific knowledge. The scientific method, involving hypothesis, experiment, observation, and theory, produces many practical benefits and useful ways of organizing our thinking about the world. However, it should be remembered that what has been called scientific knowledge has radically changed over the history of science.

There is a distinction between knowledge and opinion, even when the opinion is true. It is possible to come to a true conclusion by fallible means. It certainly is common that people believe something that is true for the wrong reasons.

The idea of probability is difficult to apply to knowledge. Many say that, while scientific knowledge is not absolute, it at least is probably true. However, probability is hard to determine when the absolute truth is unknown. Of course, we must live in the practical world, and we order our daily lives and make innumerable decisions on the basis of our understanding of probabilities.

## Belief

Belief is a flexible term, which can include both knowledge and opinion. The Bible speaks of belief or faith as the firm conviction of the truth of God and his Word. On the other hand belief may be based on observation or induction, which may or may not be true, or it may be simply based on fancy or wishful thinking.

## The attainment of knowledge

There have been in the history of philosophy four primary theories of how knowledge is attained. Each provides a system built on the basis of presuppositions. All knowledge ultimately is based on presuppositions. In order to analyze or dispute claims of knowledge, scientific or otherwise, one must be aware of the presuppositions supposed by those who claim that knowledge. These four schools provide radical differences in presuppositions, and in the resulting conclusions.

### Rationalism

There are two ways the term *rationalism* is used. In general the term means to base one's knowledge on only what one observes and reasons about; knowledge is not to be accepted merely on the basis of authority. However, technically, the word is much more restrictive. True, a consistent rationalist does not trust authority, but also he does not trust even his own observation; in fact, he does not trust his senses at all. The only dependable knowledge is that which originates from self-evident presuppositions and that can be developed by logical deduction from those presuppositions.

Sometimes this type of knowledge is considered to be *a priori*, it is either presupposed or is based on logical deductions from presupposed knowledge. Plato is the greatest ancient philosopher who favored this approach to knowledge. Augustine tended to follow Plato.

A famous rationalist was René Descartes, who based all knowledge on the foundational proposition, which he considered to be self-evident and incontrovertible, that “*Cogito ergo sum*” (“I think, therefore I am”). From this truth he followed Anselm and by logical deduction proved the existence of God, and from there branched out to other knowledge. Immanuel Kant and Georg W. F. Hegel both distrusted the senses as accurate conveyers of knowledge.

### Empiricism

Empiricists are people who base knowledge on sensory perception. They believe that we can truly know the external world as it is through our senses. They are convinced that the observations they make of nature or of the results of experiments are accurate and true. These perceptions can be categorized and patterns detected. From these patterns scientists can formulate hypotheses and laws. The resulting laws are considered as knowledge, even though they may be falsified later. Knowledge in this sense is not absolute, but is probable.

Empirical knowledge is *a posteriori*, knowledge that is derived from induction, based on observation of individual examples. Aristotle believed in the empirical acquisition of knowledge. Thomas Aquinas adopted this approach. The British philosophers John Locke, George Berkeley, and David Hume were forerunners of modern empiricists such as William James and John Dewey, and of modern secular science.

Many Christian apologists employ empirical arguments to demonstrate the truth of Christianity. This approach is called Evidentialism. The apologetic approach that denies the validity of empirical arguments is called Presuppositionalism.

## Skepticism

If we know nothing except that which comes to us through our senses, if our senses do not give us absolutely reliable data or complete information, and if the actual world is in constant flux, then actually, we can know nothing. This is the conclusion of skepticism. The Greek philosopher Zeno refuted the empiricism of his contemporaries, and concluded that no knowledge is possible. This idea was picked up by the Sophists. More recently many followers of empiricism have come to realize that they can know nothing in itself, only their own sensations and thoughts; they are isolated from the world by an impassible barrier.

The extreme form of this skepticism is solipsism—all we can know is what we ourselves are thinking. This actually is the logical conclusion of any philosophy that bases knowledge on anything or anyone that is changeable. Modern existentialism is a reaction to this philosophy; truth is to be found not in an absolute being, but in oneself.

## Dogmatism

Dogmatism asserts that truth is obtainable. The philosophy of dogmatism is that which assumes the axiomatic truth of some revelation, and bases its knowledge on that revelation. It does not accept this revelation because of empirical or other justification; dogmatists believe that empiricism leads only to skepticism. Rather, dogmatism judges all other propositions by the revelation. All knowledge is either contained in the revelation or can be deduced logically from that revelation. Beliefs arrived at by any other way are considered as opinion and not knowledge.

Dogmatism is often accused of being circular reasoning—we believe the Bible is God’s Word because the Bible says it is God’s Word. In a way this is true. However, the consistency of the Bible’s teachings and the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit are the motivating factors in Christianity. It might be asked how Christian dogmatism can argue against other self-consistent dogmatic systems, such as Mormonism or Islam. Dogmatists would reply that there is no basis from which to argue with a consistent dogmatist with a different set of axioms. However, they believe that these other systems contain logical contradictions and inconsistencies which we can exploit. Dogmatists would recommend the preaching of the Word, prayer, and a Christian testimony as God’s means to win the elect from other dogmatic religions.

The situation is different when arguing with empiricists. Dogmatists are permitted to assume the validity of empirical evidences for the sake of argument. This is called *argumentum ad hominem* (“arguing to the man”). It takes on the assumptions of one’s opponent for the purpose of demonstrating to him that even according to his own presuppositions his non-Christian beliefs are false, and that his own standards of proof should lead him to embrace Christian doctrines. A Christian dogmatist might say something like this: “I don’t believe we should base our faith on modern scientific

opinion, but you do. If you do accept the conclusions of scientific investigation, then you should agree with the Bible when it talks about the creation of the universe out of nothing, and the beginning of time, or when it states that life itself and its various forms were designed by God; modern science shows that atheistic materialism has no reasonable explanation for these phenomena—its speculations are extremely improbable. So how can you go on maintaining these beliefs?” In this way presuppositionalists can consistently use evidential arguments.