

Why Philosophy Matters (or Should Matter) to Christians
By Michael R. Jones

The word “philosophy” means “love of wisdom” which means a “philosopher” is a “lover of wisdom.” While some think it refers to people who drone on endlessly about things that no one else cares much about, such an attitude is a reflection upon how vapid and superficial society is. Philosophers are people who have spent much time thinking about questions that relate to the meaning of life, something to which many people fail to give a second thought. To many, life is simply something to be lived, not contemplated, and those people miss out on the true joy of life because they do not stop to consider whether their life is lived to the fullest. Instead, they simply follow the crowd and live the way everyone else in society says that they should and live for what society says they should live for. Philosophers, however, and I do believe that anyone can be a philosopher, seek to go deeper than mere existence and ask questions that relate to the whys and wherefores of life.

Consider the questions that philosophers seek to answer: What does it mean to exist, to be? Do I exist as a body and a mind, or am I just the product of material substances interacting? What freedom do I have in the choices that I make? Are my choices free, predetermined, or both in that I have freedom to choose only within certain parameters? Am I mortal or immortal and what happens to the immaterial part of my being, assuming there is one, when I die? Is there a God and why should I believe or not believe in God, a god, or gods? How do I know what is right and what is wrong and on what basis do I make such decisions and judgments? What is really real? Is it only what I experience with my senses or what I can think with my mind? Or is it both, or neither? How can I even know anything to begin with? Am I born with some knowledge and then acquire more, or does knowledge exist with me, only needing training to be brought out and refined? How do I gain knowledge? Is reason, experience, or some other-worldly source the guide and touchstone for what is true and not true? What am I to enjoy with my sense and is it right or wrong to enjoy anything? What is art? What is my basis for determining what is art and what is not? Is history part of a pattern? If so, who controls it, does it have a purpose, or does it flow along at the mercy of kings, nations, and nature? When do I conform to the law and when should I choose not to conform? Who has the right to dictate standard for morality and life?

Philosophers don't necessarily think that they will find all the answers to these questions, they may only find part of the answer and they may not be satisfied with, or even like, the conclusions they reach, but in thinking and reaching even a partial conclusion, they have gone further toward understanding life than most people do, who fail to think or contemplate at all. Philosophers are committed to finding the truth with regard to these questions and issues and believe that in finding answers life will have meaning. This separates them from many who choose (because it is a choice) not to think beyond their next meal, their next paycheck, or next week's television specials. To the philosopher, such a life, a life without meaning, is merely existence; life is not being truly lived. Philosophers search for truth and then that truth guides them in living their life and they have confidence that they are living a life of substance and meaning.

In light of this, I have to confess that I, too, am a philosopher. I have long pondered the meaning to many of these questions. As a child I remember standing in the mirror many times looking at myself square in the eye and thinking, "I am me." Then, of course, I had to wonder what that means. Who is "me"? I have always been looking for true truth, or as my son puts it, what is "really real." In the third grade I wanted to know who figured out the times tables and why they work out the way they do. In algebra class, while everyone else was asking about easier ways to factor polynomials, I was wondering, not how it works, but why it works. And I still puzzle over how we can truly know if it works everywhere in the universe and while I think I know the answer, but it still fascinates me. In English class I wanted to know why words and sounds have meaning and why are they so powerful or so weak. Why do some words move me when others don't? And of course, in church, I had many, many questions, that my fundamentalist brethren just couldn't answer sufficiently. I was deemed, strange, weird, and sometimes, heretical, once I was told I needed to be saved so the Holy Spirit could straighten me right up. When others were afraid to question, I was not. I believed then as I do now, that the truth will stand up to scrutiny and if it does not, then it doesn't deserve to be called "truth."

All of this is of the utmost importance to me because I cannot live without knowing that the way I am living is in line with what is truthful, that is, I must live a life with meaning. If there is a God to whom I must give an account, then that will certainly govern my behavior. But if there is not, or if he really doesn't care, then my life will be lived differently and my focus may be on different things. The search for meaning in life must begin with a search for truth or life is

lived haphazardly and one will simply flitter through life with no purpose and thus no meaning. Thus the search for truth and the meaning that is related to the truth I discover is at the heart of philosophy and, I think, at the heart of the Christian journey. Many of the questions in the list above speak to this search. I have also wondered whether what I do has meaning or value in life or, after I became a Christian, beyond this life. The other questions in the list above fall under this scope. To me, what life is and what's real about it (truth) and how it is to be lived in light of that reality and truth (meaning) is necessary to live a life that is truly satisfying.

Being raised as a fundamentalist Christian, I was taught to shun philosophy. "Most of those guys are lost, and a lot of them are homosexual" I was told (I have since discovered that some of them were and are, but not a lot of them and certainly not most of them). Many of them have committed quite a bit of thought, not to mention ink and paper, to the questions listed above that are so meaningful to life. And many of them, even the pagans, have come up with answers that sound startlingly like truths revealed by God in Scripture. If indeed all truth is God's truth, which it is, then a Christian should embrace truth wherever it is found. (This notion of "All truth is God's truth" is tricky and is often used to justify many things that it shouldn't, but as I have stated it, it is true. All truth must be God's truth because it is impossible to think of any truth that would be contrary to God's truth. Consider that if a truth were contrary to God's truth you would have a logical contradiction which means that is impossible. It is inconceivable that God would create a world in which it would be possible for something to be true and false at the same time in the same way; that would be a violation of the very laws of logic that God himself has created).

What then should be Christianity's relationship to philosophy? On the one hand, and this should not even have to be said, Christianity must not accept every answer to these questions given by pagan philosophers wholesale. While someone may speak to these issues and provide answers to these questions, this does not mean that they are right. One will sometimes find propositions expressed as truth that do not agree with what special revelation puts forth as truth. Although these propositions may be expressed as "truths," that alone does not make them true; it takes more than simply expressing something as true in order to make it true. In fact, the "truths" of pagan philosophers will sometimes contradict each other. Every supposed "truth" must be measured against the reality that God has created or revealed.

On the other hand, Christianity should not be afraid to examine the propositions and conclusions of the philosophers, however pagan they be, and accept as truth those things that are found to be true. Christianity also should not shun philosophical terminology or method in their search for truth and meaning.

Christianity, instead of fearing philosophy, must embrace it with the stated appropriate cautions. Christianity must understand that everyone is, or can be, a philosopher if they think about these questions and seek answers to them and must also concede that all of these questions are answered, or at least touched on by the Scriptures. Instead of warning their children against going to college and against reading non-Christian writers, Christians should teach their children the truth of God's revelation and then teach them how to interact with information coming from non-Christian sources. They should also teach them how to evaluate, analyze, and critique what they are being told, what they read, etc. This important because they must have a sound and solid Christian worldview to be able to stand their ground and not be "tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming" to borrow Paul's thoughts in Eph. 4 or as he says in 2 Cor. 10:5, "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."

Note the number of times that the words, "thinking," "thought," "reasoning," "mind" and other related words occur in the NT, particularly in Paul's writings. Clearly Paul understands that the real battle for Christians will be one where the mind and our thoughts are a key to winning one to and for Christ. Real Christian discipleship involves taking our Christian journey to the next level, not just spiritually, but intellectually as well. Only then can we love God with all our minds as well as with all our heart, soul and strength (Matt. 22:37-38).

Instead of isolating ourselves and surrendering the right to interact with the world and to assess what others put forth as truth, Christianity in general and Christians in particular should be on the offensive to understand what others are saying, to interact with it, and to embrace it if indeed it is true and consistent with Christian revelation. Christianity (and Christians) claims to have, to know, and to live by the truth of God. So we should not be fearful of what a bunch of dead pagans have to say.