

Philosophy

Philosophy is the study of the unseen, not through revelation, but through the eye of the mind and the rules of thought, of logic. It is the study of knowledge itself and of the natures of all things.

THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH

Paralleling — and building upon — the stupendous confidence we have when we believe that the creator of all things is Our Father, is a philosophy which seeks truth, plain and simple, and expects, perhaps little by little, to find it. By truth, we mean a correspondence between reality itself and the mind's understanding of reality. Furthermore, because our minds are made in the image of the Creator's Mind, and because He calls us to sonship and gives us His indwelling Spirit, believers are certain that our minds can find the truth: if not the whole truth immediately, at least an ever-increasing measure of it, through all our honest investigations.

Therefore, Christians love philosophy — the word means love of wisdom — and freely use the great gift of reason, even using thought systems such as Aristotelian logic, which were first developed among pagans. This is possible because truth is one and because the truth is written within the world and can be discovered by natural reason.

Philosophy was born in human intellectual experience outside the Christian and probably also outside the Jewish world, though some say that the Jews were known to Greek travelers. In any case, it was born in a cultural setting that was not formed by revelation and is therefore considered independent of revelation. Nevertheless, as new depths of unbelief continue to develop in our own times, it seems unlikely that even philosophy can survive the impending chaos without the undergirding of faith.

CONSTRUCTIVISM

Many disciplines, while calling themselves philosophy, actually deny the search for truth. They begin reasonably enough, with the observation that the thoughts of mortal men are full of weakness and confusion. The understatement! But they go

on to conclude, under a variety of guises, that truth is impossible to discover and is even a meaningless concept. Instead of truth, such philosophers (sophists really) pursue a variety of personal intellectual constructs, and then insist that the only meaningful measure of intellectual value is in whether these constructs are self-consistent. Euclid, a mathematician, composed a work on geometry in which a lattice of theorems is built upon a brief list of axioms, and such a construct would be their ideal of some philosophers. The order of the world should be set forth as it is best and most clearly understood, and as long as the construction is not contradictory, or as long as it seems that it would work in a practical or economic sense, that is considered sufficient. For such philosophers, truth is not a meaningful concept since each person experiences the world so differently, and therefore the correspondence between any set of ideas and any varied experience will always differ.

This is all thoroughly contradictory: how can anyone claim that truth really is a meaningless concept? Note that such a man would be saying: it is true that truth is a meaningless concept. Thus from the outset, he has violated the principle of non-contradiction. As far as “what works”, well, surely this is a poor excuse for philosophy, or even thought. Obviously, in this short life, power and money work best in so many ways that pragmatic evaluations tend to yield despair for the poor and a motley collection of solipsisms (totally personal and irrational philosophies) for the rich and clever.

For the anti-culture which doubts the availability of truth, therefore, philosophy is eventually (though not at once) reduced to generating some sort of immediately useful world-view. “Truth” is no longer the topic. The relatively modern term “constructivism” denoting the decision to construct reality rather than discover it, is perhaps the best umbrella for all the philosophical positions that arise from the decision to deny objective truth. It is not an idea with a future but means backing yourself into a cave.

NOMINALISM

There is an older denial of philosophy, however, and it has such a long history and such a close relationship with the natural sciences that it needs to be named. It is nominalism, which simply means the assertion that things don't have "natures" they only have the names we decide to give them because, for reasons within ourselves (not within the objects) we group and name them a certain way.

In traditional philosophy, there are considered to be four "causes" or four ways to speak of the truth about things:

- the material cause -- such as the wood of which a chair is made
- the efficient cause -- such as the carpenter who makes the chair
- the formal cause -- the pattern of a small platform set upon legs
- and the final cause -- the reason for the existence of a chair -- so we can sit down.

In the natural sciences, we have limited our forms of evidence to things related to the material and efficient causes, leaving the formal and final causes out. Never mind "why" flowers are beautiful; that's not science. Beauty has to do with a final cause; science is not concerned about it.

Never mind even trying to define "flower" as if it were a reality outside our minds. We call something a flower for our convenience, says the nominalist, not because the world itself has a category called: flower. Note: there is also then, no category of "people" in the world; the Nominalist uses the word "people" for whatever he chooses -- dogs, whales, maybe the mentally challenged, maybe not.

The decision to leave formal and final causes out of science may be wise; it may not. But the increasing inclination to apply the limits of the natural sciences to all of thought, has been very harmful to faith. It's really the center of the apparent quarrel between religion and science. Things do have purposes; above all, men have purposes and indeed we respond to a purpose in the center of our being.

Since such universal purposes depend on natures -- human nature alone responds to purpose -- the elimination of the formal cause from common thinking is foundationally harmful.