

FAITHFUL LEARNING

SERIES

PHILOSOPHY

JAMES S. SPIEGEL



PHILOSOPHY

THE FAITHFUL LEARNING SERIES

An Invitation to Academic Studies, Jay D. Green

Literature, Clifford W. Foreman

Philosophy, James S. Spiegel

Sociology, Matthew S. Vos

JAY D. GREEN, SERIES EDITOR

PHILOSOPHY

JAMES S. SPIEGEL



P U B L I S H I N G

P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

© 2014 by James S. Spiegel

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—except for brief quotations for the purpose of review or comment, without the prior permission of the publisher, P&R Publishing Company, P.O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, New Jersey 08865-0817.

Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

The quotation on the back cover is from Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, trans. John W. Rettig (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 29.6.2, quoted in Garrett J. DeWeese, *Doing Philosophy as a Christian* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 75.

ISBN: 978-1-59638-476-7 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-59638-689-1 (ePub)

ISBN: 978-1-59638-690-7 (Mobi)

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014935888

The early church father Tertullian famously asked, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”¹ The question concerns the propriety of integrating faith and reason, and particularly whether, or to what degree, the person of faith may benefit from the study of philosophy. Although the greatest theological minds in Christian history, including Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards, have recognized the usefulness of philosophical inquiry, many people today remain skeptical. And some who don’t expressly deny the potential benefits of philosophy may be deterred by the dangers of abusing a good thing. After all, as the apostle Paul admonishes, “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ” (Col. 2:8).

In this booklet, I will show why rigorous philosophical study is actually *crucial for heeding* Paul’s counsel. For only by learning how to do philosophy well can one discern which philosophical ideas are deceptive. Only through training in a wise philosophical methodology can one reliably identify foolish methods. But the benefits of philosophical studies for the Christian extend far beyond correcting bad methods. Positive insights about God, human nature, knowledge, ethics, and apologetics can be gained through philosophy, all of which are immensely beneficial in the pursuit of living out one’s faith and in human flourishing in general.

The discussion will proceed topically as I explain the insights and applications of Christian inquiry in some of the main subject areas of philosophy: epistemology, philosophy of mind, philosophy of religion, and ethics. In doing so, I will

1. Tertullian, “Prescription against Heretics,” trans. Peter Holmes, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 3:246.

explain basic concepts and terminology, since I assume that this will be many readers' first exposure to philosophy. But the discussion will be helpful for seasoned philosophers also, as I will note ways in which philosophical studies serve as a boon to biblical faith and living. Even longtime scholars can overlook or fail to appreciate fully how resources in their own discipline cash out in practically edifying ways. Finally, for all the good achieved through Christian philosophical inquiry over the years, there is much vital work that remains to be done. I will close the booklet with a review of some of these issues.

RECENT HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The last forty years have seen tremendous advances in Christian philosophy. To understand just how significant this progress has been, we will need some historical context. In the 1920s and 1930s, a philosophical movement known as *logical positivism* became all the rage. Led by scientific-minded thinkers such as Moritz Schlick, Otto Neurath, and Rudolf Carnap, the positivists shared the aim of making philosophy more empirically grounded. As with all major movements in philosophy, positivism was itself a reaction—specifically, to the highly abstract metaphysical idealism which had become popular in the West.² To bring philosophy back down to earth, the positivists decided that we needed a rigorous criterion for what could count as a meaningful claim. So they developed the doctrine of *verificationism*, which insisted that all factual statements must be empirically testable, at least in principle. Any claim that was not susceptible to such a test would be considered cognitively meaningless. This criterion ruled out as meaningless all claims about God, human souls, and the

2. After Kant, there ensued a significant idealistic movement in Germany led by Johann Fichte, Friedrich Schelling, and, most significantly, G. W. F. Hegel. In England the leading nineteenth-century idealist was F. H. Bradley, and in America it was Josiah Royce.

afterlife. Thus, the most lucid expositor of positivism, A. J. Ayer, asserted, "The labours of those who have striven to describe [a reality transcending sense experience] have all been devoted to the production of nonsense."³ Such "nonsense" would, of course, include talk of God, souls, and the afterlife.

While positivism was fashionable in academe for a time, eventually it was judged to be untenable. For the positivist thesis implied not only that all theology is nonsensical, but also that all claims about moral values and human freedom must be deemed nonsense as well. Moreover, the verificationist criterion of cognitive meaningfulness could not be verified empirically, so the doctrine itself had to be viewed as nonsensical by its own standard!

Although positivism died a quick, welcome death as a formal philosophical movement, a hyper-empiricistic, anti-metaphysical bent remained strong on the Western philosophical scene. In the middle of the century, this culminated in two influential publications, each of which was critical of beliefs in supernatural reality. The first of these was Gilbert Ryle's book *The Concept of Mind*, a full-barreled attack on mind-body dualism or, as Ryle preferred to term it, the "Cartesian myth" about human nature. Ryle noted that people tend to think of the mind as a distinct thing, a substance all its own, called *spirit* or *soul*. According to Ryle, this is a *category mistake* in the sense that it "represents the facts of mental life as if they belonged to one logical type or category . . . when they actually belong to another."⁴ What we call *mind*, *spirit*, or *soul* is not really a distinct thing, Ryle insisted. Rather, he believed that these categories were simply ways of referring to human behavior and dispositions to act in certain ways. So, for instance, anger is not a private, interior state of one's soul but rather a tendency to, for example, make a fist, wrinkle one's brow, and raise one's

3. Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1936), 34.

4. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1949), 16.

voice. Similarly, to talk of a belief (say, that the traffic light is red) or desire (such as the craving for ice cream) is not to refer to nonphysical mental events but is just a shorthand way to refer to dispositions to speak or behave in particular ways (e.g., stopping at the intersection or uttering the statement, “I would like some ice cream”).

Thus Ryle advocated a view, inherited from his teacher Ludwig Wittgenstein, known as *philosophical behaviorism*,⁵ which would turn out to be one of several theories of mind that became popular among materialists in the second half of the twentieth century. Although the Wittgenstein-Ryle behaviorist model did not become the dominant view, Ryle’s dismissal of dualism effectively established materialism as the default position in philosophy of mind.

In 1955, a volume entitled *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* appeared, which featured articles challenging the rationality of theism. One of its contributors, renowned British atheist Antony Flew, complained that theism is problematic because it is unfalsifiable. All genuine assertions are falsifiable at least in principle, Flew insisted. But the claim that God exists cannot be falsified; therefore it really asserts nothing. Flew compared faith in God to belief in an invisible gardener, whose existence is never verified despite the use of surveillance cameras and electric fences to detect his existence. Theists are like those who would continue to believe in the invisible gardener in spite of this lack of positive evidence, which, according to Flew, is the essence of the unfalsifiability of theism and a sure sign of its irrationality. For there is “no conceivable event or series of events the occurrence of which would be admitted

5. Philosophical behaviorism is the view that such mental events as beliefs and feelings need not be explained by appealing to a nonphysical soul but are better understood as simply ways of referring to modes of behavior or dispositions to behave in certain ways. Thus, “anger” is a shorthand way of referring to a tendency to knit one’s brow or raise one’s voice, while the belief that it is raining just refers to the tendency, for example, to wear a raincoat or take an umbrella when one goes outside.

by sophisticated religious people to be a sufficient reason for conceding “There wasn’t a God after all.”⁶ Like Ryle and his philosophy of mind, Flew proposed that the rational default position on the matter of God is materialism, and he would later characterize this standpoint as “the presumption of atheism.”⁷

The materialist or, as is often preferred, *naturalist* perspective gained momentum in the philosophical community throughout the 1950s and ’60s. And in 1966 this shift was popularly documented in the *Time* magazine cover story “Is God Dead?”⁸ In the academy, the reputation of religious beliefs was steadily declining. The human soul was now commonly regarded as a “Cartesian myth,” and God was “presumed” not to exist. It’s easy to see how one could cultivate the impression that, as an academic discipline, philosophy actually *undermines* Christian belief and practice, given the apparent banishment of God and the soul from philosophical inquiry. If philosophers tell us to presume atheism and see humans as mere chunks of matter, then surely the theologians shouldn’t get involved. Let’s keep this “Athens” away from “Jerusalem”! Fortunately, the next generation of scholars featured several philosophers who recognized that the problem was not philosophy per se but rather, as the apostle Paul would put it, *hollow and deceptive* philosophy.

RECENT PROGRESS

Just as *Time* magazine was running its famous “Is God Dead?” cover story and the banishment of God from the academy seemed complete, the decisive reply to this movement was

6. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: MacMillan Press, 1955), 98.

7. Antony Flew, “The Presumption of Atheism,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 2, no. 1 (September 1972): 29–46.

8. *Time* 87, no. 14 (April 8, 1966).

being penned by a little-known Dutch Reformed philosopher in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Alvin Plantinga's *God and Other Minds* appeared in 1967,⁹ and it was a book that would effectively launch what is often called a "renaissance" in Christian philosophy. Plantinga met Flew and the positivists head-on, but not by complying with their mandate for empirical verification by proving theism with evidences. Instead, Plantinga challenged the reasonableness of such a mandate by showing that it was based on grave epistemological errors. Furthermore, he showed that when those errors are corrected and when one applies more sensible standards for knowledge, it turns out that it is perfectly rational to make a presumption of theism. That is, contra Flew, Plantinga argued that belief in God is *properly basic*, an intellectually valid starting point.

Plantinga's claim proved radical to the positivistic philosophical milieu of the time. But the rigor and insight of Plantinga's argument were undeniable, and his notion of the proper basicity of theistic belief began to take root. This move emboldened other Christian philosophers while irritating skeptics, and within a decade Plantinga's "Reformed epistemology" was a major item of discussion among epistemologists and philosophers of religion. The growing interest in Christian philosophy culminated in the formation of the Society of Christian Philosophers (SCP) in 1978.¹⁰ A few years later, the journal *Faith and Philosophy* was launched, and today it remains one of the premier journals in philosophy of religion.¹¹ In the early years of the SCP, one of the issues that leaders of

9. Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967).

10. You can find out more about the Society of Christian Philosophers at their website: <http://www.societyofchristianphilosophers.com/>.

11. The Evangelical Philosophical Society (EPS) (<http://www.epsociety.org/>) was also founded in the 1970s, and its journal *Philosophia Christi* has similarly emerged as a leading scholarly forum for issues in philosophy of religion. Long predating the SCP and EPS is the American Catholic Philosophical Association (<http://www.acpaweb.org/Index.htm>), founded in 1926.

“Understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore, seek not to understand that you may believe, but believe that you may understand.”

—ST. AUGUSTINE, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*

FAITHFUL LEARNING IN PHILOSOPHY

Socrates, Plato, Aristotle . . . great philosophers have a lasting impact. For them, words and ideas are power. They can turn a phrase inside out and flip an argument on its head. They can put a spin on the world. But this power may be used wrongly—and the best response is not to avoid it, but to learn how to use it rightly! In the words of the apostle Paul, “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy.” Are you ready to match wits?

James Spiegel insists that studying philosophy is not only intriguing and mind-opening, but also crucial to following Paul’s counsel. Find out how you can navigate ideas as a philosopher and distinguish between human wisdom and the wisdom of God.

The Faithful Learning series invites Christian students to dive deeper into a modern academic discipline. The authors, scholars in their fields, believe that academic disciplines are good gifts from God that, when understood rightly, will give students the potential to cultivate a deeper love for God and neighbor.

JAMES S. SPIEGEL (MA, University of Southern Mississippi; PhD, Michigan State University) is professor of philosophy and religion at Taylor University in Upland, Indiana.

Cover design: Tobias' Outerwear for Books

www.prpbooks.com

PRP
P U B L I S H I N G

CHRISTIAN LIVING / EDUCATION

ISBN: 978-1-59638-476-7

EAN



5 0 4 9 9

