

**CHRISTIAN ANSWERS TO HARD QUESTIONS**

**CHRISTIANITY  
AND THE ROLE OF  
PHILOSOPHY**

**K. SCOTT OLIPHINT**



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

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K. SCOTT OLIPHINT



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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**

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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?

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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