



A Little Book for New Philosophers: Why and How to Study Philosophy

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Crumbs of Comfort for the Would-Be Philosopher

Philosophy students share a common plight with their art and music counterparts: their parents often worry about how their children will support themselves with such an impractical degree. As you consider pursuing philosophy you will get questions like, “What kind of a job can you get with a philosophy degree?” or, “Unless you eventually become a philosophy professor, what can you *do* with philosophy?” This concern isn’t a new one. The crusty old Latin dictum *philosophia panem non torrit* – “philosophy doesn’t bake bread” – expresses the same sentiment, wryly but boldly.

Sustaining oneself economically is no small thing. Caring parents are right to hope that their children will eventually achieve financial independence. Yet complaints and jokes about impoverished philosophers may reveal a profoundly pragmatic, yes, *philosophy* of education: learning is merely a means to join the workforce or to make money. But this is a narrow and short-sighted perspective that stands opposed to the more robust, classical understanding that the good, the true, and the beautiful ought to be pursued for their own sake. A proper education will take the wisdom of the past more seriously than preparing for standardized tests in the present. It will teach students *how* to think, not simply *what* to think. And it will evoke serious thought about the good life and the shaping of character. The embodiment of wisdom in human form, Jesus of Nazareth, insists that we live not only by physical bread, but by God’s spiritually-sustaining, satisfying words (Mt 4:4). In a very real sense, we are what we eat.

Beyond this, perhaps we could offer a few crumbs of comfort for the as-yet unconvinced about philosophy’s value.

Philosophy is mind-sharpening. Serious students of philosophy can attest to the value of a rigorously exercised mind. Through disciplined philosophical training, the mind – which is different from the brain – becomes both sharpened and more supple. But the brain can still get in on the action. Neuroscientists have observed that persons with, say, obsessive-compulsive disorder can choose to create new thought patterns and actions that actually result in diminishing the disorder’s effects – quite evident in before and after brain scans. Likewise, pursuing intellectually stimulating disciplines like philosophy will strengthen and oil the workings of the mind and create new neural pathways in the process. The mind is like a muscle, J. P. Moreland reminds us, and the more we exercise it, the more adept we become at using it. Philosophy can facilitate clearer thinking about concepts and justification of positions.

Philosophy helps us see that ideas have consequences. The tools of philosophy – things like

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“Paul Copan’s short book addresses the questions of why and how to do philosophy within the framework of a Christian worldview. It is directed primarily toward that growing host of laypersons who find themselves interested in intellectual issues and thus drawn to philosophy. It is directed secondarily toward that diminishing group of Christians who remain suspicious of the value of philosophy and still need to be convinced that this discipline can deepen their faith and equip them to serve God more effectively. The book also contains healthy reminders for philosophical veterans of pitfalls, priorities and challenges of doing philosophical work as Christians. Paul Copan, a personal friend for many years, exemplifies the virtues that he says Christian philosophers should develop; his walk matches his talk. His reflections on this subject are convicting and humbling, making his book a worthwhile read.”

— William Lane Craig,
research professor of
philosophy, Talbot School of
Theology, professor of
philosophy, Houston Baptist
University

appropriating the laws of logic, detecting fallacies, and working through arguments – can help rescue us from a multitude of intellectual sins: lazy thinking, faddishness, superficiality, and blindness to powerful ideologies or other idols of modern thought and their pernicious consequences.

Human history has been shaped by many potent philosophical ideas – sometimes with devastating results, as with Marxism and social Darwinism. Historian Paul Johnson estimates that over 100 million people were killed or starved to death in the twentieth century – the tragic result of implementing philosophies that were formulated and developed in the paneled halls of the academy. Studying and assessing history-shaping worldviews – whether destructive or beneficial – is no insignificant matter.

Philosophy expands our horizons. Studying philosophy enhances our thinking about a range of topics and disciplines: law, economics, politics, history, theology, and science. The theoreticians and practitioners of science, for example, would do well to remember just how much their discipline depends on philosophical assumptions that they often take for granted: that the external world exists, that our sense perception is generally reliable, that the universe has a certain rational structure and follows certain patterns (scientific laws), that the universe can be studied and understood by human minds, and that inescapable logical laws enable us to theorize, make inferences, and draw conclusions about the world.

Philosophy can help isolate bad or sloppy thinking. It’s not just some Christians who belittle philosophy. Many in our culture’s new high priesthood – the scientific community – have embraced an anti-philosophy philosophy. Physicist Stephen Hawking has proclaimed that “philosophy is dead”; physics must come to our rescue and provide full answers to questions about where we’ve come from and who we are. Similarly, biologist Richard Lewontin adopts an absolute, untestable materialism without argument – no matter how arbitrary it seems to the uninitiated. This isn’t science. As Del Ratzsch defines it, science is the objective study of the natural world and its phenomena, the concepts and explanations it uses don’t normally depart from the natural world. Rather, this is *scientism* – the arbitrary and self-contradictory belief that science alone gives us knowledge.

The statements of Hawking and Lewontin are sheer bluster and confusion. For all of their “philosophobia,” as Nicholas Rescher calls it, they’re doing their own amateur philosophizing. Taking philosophical positions is unavoidable, and the list of scientists waxing philosophical without realizing it – or worse, denying that they have a philosophy at all – is long. Rather than pitting philosophy and science against each other, we would do well to return to the old understanding of science as “natural philosophy.” Rightly did C. S. Lewis prophesy about these naysayers: “Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered.”

Philosophy can strengthen our theology. Though we will define philosophy in more detail a



Paul Copan (PhD, Marquette University) is the Pledger Family Chair of Philosophy and Ethics at Palm Beach Atlantic University. His books include *The Gospel in the Marketplace of Ideas*, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics*, *Creation Out of Nothing*, *Did God Really Command Genocide?* and *Holy War in the Bible*. He previously served with Ravi Zacharias International Ministries and taught at Trinity International University in Deerfield, Illinois.

little later, we can say here that philosophy and theology are not, at their root, all that distinguishable. The main difference is that theology's specific focus is God – what Alister McGrath calls *discourse about God*. The tools of philosophy – themselves a gift from God – can and should be applied to the knowledge of God. So we say *No!* to the false, though common, assumption that philosophy must begin *from below* – that is, with unaided human reason operating independently of God's empowering Spirit.

Since the rise of the discipline of the philosophy of religion in the second half of the twentieth century, many trained philosophers have been doing creative, cutting-edge work in the realm of Christian theology – the incarnation, the Trinity, divine foreknowledge, human freedom, providence, original sin, the inspiration of Scripture, and biblical interpretation. Indeed, philosophers of religion have made a remarkable contribution to systematic theology, helping make it more robust, intellectually rigorous, and conceptually precise. This specific discipline is called *analytic theology*. Seminaries with good philosophy programs will undoubtedly help sharpen their theology, biblical studies, and counseling/psychology departments. This cross-fertilization of ideas will contribute to a better integrated, well-rounded learning environment. Although it's Christ, not philosophy, who holds all things together, a Christ-centered philosophy program is a great good that will prove to be a resourceful handmaiden at any theological institution.

– Taken from chapter one, “Philosophy and Baking Bread”