

Is Christian Philosophy the Best Philosophy?

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“What hath Athens to do with Jerusalem?” Tertullian famously asked: why should the church have regard for philosophy? But reading Josef Pieper’s *Leisure The Basis of Culture*, it seems like the question could profitably be reversed: what hath Jerusalem to do with Athens? How should philosophy see itself in relation to theology and religion? Do philosophy and the liberal arts require religion if they are to flourish? Must philosophers and students really be religious in order to philosophize and study well? Not only would that be an unpopular position today, it would also exclude many renowned thinkers from the class of philosophers and liberal arts scholars. In fact, Pieper’s claim is that philosophy can only flourish in relationship to a religious tradition but that the philosophers need not be religious themselves (and that the philosophy does not have to have a specifically religious content to be philosophy). However, Pieper says that the best philosophy will operate in the religious context of the Christian tradition.

Vital Philosophy

Pieper speaks of philosophy as having the capacity to be *vital*, *vigorous*, and *true*—not necessarily at the same time (Pieper, 135). Vitality is primary: is the philosophy living? The metaphor is apt. Living things have some principle of growth inside them, and hence some principle of movement whether upward or outward (or, for that matter, down like roots into the earth). Philosophical questions prompt our imaginations to move up and out, beyond the “workaday world” of ends which we wish to achieve and deliberation about the means by which we may achieve them (Pieper, 79-81).

This movement is most often occasioned by what Pieper calls a shock: “And when such a shock is experienced, man senses the non-finality of this world of daily care; he transcends it, takes a step beyond it” (Pieper, 81). This shock

does not have to be the kind we ordinarily think of as traumatic—a blow to the head, a death in the family, or even someone walking up behind you and tapping you on the shoulder. It might be better to think of it using another apt term from Pieper: wonder. This is the kind of shock which Chesterton says we receive from fairy tales, which re-enchant the world by reminding us that things might be different. “They make rivers run with wine only to make us remember, for one wild moment, that they run with water” (Chesterton, 51). Robert Capon’s description of the man-onion confrontation in *The Supper of the Lamb* is another such moment of wonder, from which he concludes that “Man’s real work is to look at the things of the world and to love them for what they are” (Capon, 19). These other authors are pointing in their own way at what Pieper sees as a crucial element of philosophy: that it begins by looking at the real things of the world and asking questions which arise from that careful and attentive vision.

There is a key difference, however, between the philosophizing which Pieper describes and the attention which Chesterton and Capon give to the things of the world. For Pieper, philosophy both looks at reality *and* asks questions about it, questions which have a transcendent scope: “. . . the distinctive mark of a philosophical question is that it cannot be put, or weighed, or answered (in so far as an answer is possible at all) without bringing into play ‘God and the world’, without implied reference to all that is” (Pieper, 106). At this point, Pieper is not addressing Christian theology. When he says “God and the world”, he has not given it a specific doctrinal content; in this sense, “God” is the name he gives to the highest order being, which by its nature relates to everything else which exists (Pieper, 95). In this sense, philosophy must be at least theistic.

Even in the most elementary philosophy, philosophy which is not especially vigorous or true, the sense of wonder which drives the philosopher to search for a Divine perspective. The philosophical search for answers which address “God and the world” means that the ultimate and unreachable end of philosophy is “wisdom as possessed by God” (Pieper, 123). This end is unreachable because the philosopher is not God, and only God can comprehend things in their essence. But it is the thing which philosophy strives for, and so philosophy is more precisely understood as the ongoing search, the constant movement toward an answer without arrival; like T.S. Eliot, “We shall not cease from exploration” (Eliot, line 239). Even though philosophy is an unending search, it ends not in despair but in awe. The mystery of the universe, which was first apprehended through wonder, “means that a reality cannot be comprehended *because* its light is ever-flowing, unfathomable, and inexhaustible” (Pieper, 115).¹ Philosophy does not arrive at complete answers because there is too much reality for us to explore on our own. And because we do not know completely, we continue to wonder: “It is only someone who *does not yet* know fully who ‘wonders’ ”

¹One of the first times I experienced this sensation was looking at one of the photos from the Hubble Space Telescope in which every point of light is not a *star* but an *entire galaxy*. It is still the reason that I have a special fondness for the Andromeda galaxy, which is the only object outside the Milky Way visible to the naked eye (provided, of course, that you are far away enough from light pollution—but now I am just grumbling).

(Pieper, 118). This is the way that wonder is both “*fons et origo*” of philosophy (Pieper 116).

Theology Contrasted with Philosophy

Unlike philosophy, theology is the arena where certain answers are made available. In Pieper’s treatment, one way to distinguish theology from philosophy is by looking at where they begin. While philosophy “begins from the bottom, questioning things that are met with in everyday life”, theology deals with revelation which is “essentially prior to experience and to experience assimilated into thought. . . .” (Pieper, 130).

Thus far, everything under discussion has come from the essay “The Philosophical Act.” Here it might be helpful to turn, just for a moment, to the other essay—“Leisure The Basis of Culture”—where we find Pieper discussing the way in which leisure may be recovered. He makes a distinction between two modes of thought which he identifies as *ratio* and *intellectus*. *Ratio* is the outward reaching, working, grasping, comprehending faculty of the mind; *intellectus* is the receptive, passive, contemplative faculty which is capable of receiving knowledge as a gift (Pieper, 28, 34). Often this gift is received after long hard work, but “in any case, the effort is not the cause; it is the condition” (Pieper, 35). However, one might receive the gift prior to the work of *ratio* instead of after it, and this would be “grace in the strict sense of the word” (Pieper, 35). It seems to me that a helpful way of distinguishing philosophy from theology is the order in which the mental faculties are engaged. Theology begins with the grace of revelation, with *intellectus*, and proceeds to engage the *ratio*; philosophy exercises both *ratio* and *intellectus*, but it begins by reaching out to the world as it is. There is not a strict correlation between the faculties and the disciplines, but the analogy seems illuminating.

Theology has access to the “wisdom as possessed by God” in a way that is impossible to philosophy, and in a way which defines its relationship to philosophy. Theology is first, because it provides an initial interpretation of the world which philosophy can confront.

>Theology is always prior to philosophy, and not merely in a temporal sense, but with respect to inner origin and their relationship in that origin. Philosophical inquiry starts with a given interpretation of reality and of the world as a whole; and in that sense, philosophy is intimately connected, not to say bound, to theology (Pieper, 130).

Theology also encourages the hopeful wonder which drives philosophy by offering some of the answers which philosophy seeks (though it is important to remember that philosophy’s possession is in the search, not in the arrival). >It is in the field of theology, and quite independently of experience and previously to it, that the object of man’s desire—“wisdom as possessed by God”—becomes visible, and it is this aim which supplies the impulse and guides the course of philosophical

inquiry in its loving search as it moves through the world of experience. (Act, 130-131)

Theology's unique relationship to Divine wisdom distinguishes it from philosophy, but both studies are also united by that wisdom. The theologian can say different things than the philosopher can, and he knows differently, but they are both trying to talk about the spiritual realm which transcends the workaday world. Because the theologian receives divine revelation as a gift, the theologian also is the defender of a particular tradition. His job is not to doubt or question that tradition, but to understand, defend, clarify, and present it. He does not know the same way that the philosopher knows: "In his distinctive capacity as the guardian and interpreter of tradition, the theologian does not, as such, possess the knowledge of being characteristic of the genuine philosopher" (Pieper, 131). The theologian can make statements about the whole of reality, statements like "the world is created by the Logos", but his ability to make that statement does not necessarily imply his ability to also speak about the things of this world (Pieper, 131). The theologian is analogous to a scientist who knows Newton's law of universal gravitation but has never studied the way that the equation was discovered. He knows this integrating statement and he can work with it, but his knowledge of the conclusion does not mean that he understands how it could be reached.

So far, we have encountered two types of thinkers: the philosopher simply, who "reflects" on the world as it is and derives knowledge from that reflection; and the theologian, who can make a statement about the whole and whose job is to "defend and clarify" that statement. When the simple philosopher interacts with the theologian, he has the capacity to become something more: a grand philosopher who reflects on the world in light of theological revelation and derives knowledge that would otherwise have been hidden.

Vigorous Philosophy

A vital philosophy is one which grows and wonders, stretching out to "pierce the dome that encloses the bourgeois workaday world" (Pieper, 81). But philosophy can be more than vital; it can be vigorous, and it can be true. A vigorous philosophy is one which exists in some kind of relationship to a religious orthodoxy, despite what modern historians of philosophy might want to claim (Pieper, 128). Philosophy can oppose or support the tradition, but it cannot simply ignore the given interpretation.² >No one can seriously inquire into the cause of all things (and that is what happens in philosophy), and for the sake of arbitrary methodical tidiness, simultaneously exclude the existing religious tradition where it touches upon these basic themes—unless he no longer accepts the account given by tradition. (Pieper, 132-33)

²Here we might bring in everything C.S. Lewis says in the second part of *The Abolition of Man*, but time and space are limited.

It is important for philosophy to question the standard interpretations of the world.³ “To philosophize means to withdraw—not from the things of everyday life—but from the currently accepted meaning attached to them, or to question the value placed upon them.” (Pieper, 110). And in a theological context, those standard interpretations will be the religious orthodoxy of the culture in which philosophizing takes place.

The tension between philosophical questions and theological answers creates what Pieper calls a “contrapuntal relationship” (Pieper, 134). This counterpoint between philosophy and theology is what gives vigor to philosophy. Even claims which are essentially negative regarding theology (Heidegger’s or Sartre’s claims are examples Pieper gives) push the consideration of religious and theological questions. Sartre even denies that there is anything above man, which is anti-philosophical in Pieper’s sense because it denies that the vault can be pierced in the way that defines philosophy. But by pushing that claim, Sartre forces his interlocutors to confront theological questions. This makes for “vital, vigorous philosophizing” (Pieper, 135). The only religious tradition available in the West is the Christian tradition. This fact means that all good philosophy will be a counterpoint to Christian theology. Even if Christianity were not true (not a claim Pieper entertains), it is still the only full theology available. In this sense, there is a consonance between Pieper’s claim and the argument made by Christopher Dawson for the study of Christian culture: the historical fact of Christianity’s influence on the western world makes it at the very least an essential common reference point for anybody living after the birth of Christ (see Dawson, 103-109).

True Philosophy

But Pieper makes an even stronger claim for connecting philosophy to Christianity. Christianity, he says, is true. And true religion makes true philosophy possible. Philosophy could be vigorous without being ultimately true, and it could be true without being vigorous, but Christian philosophy done well is the best kind of philosophy.

It might seem like a Christian philosophy would fail to even reach the standard of vitality, because the truth claims of Christian theology would shut down inquiry and would not leave open the mystery which is essential to wonder. In fact, the claims of Christianity reinforce the philosophic sense of wonder. Pieper remarks, quoting another author, that “the distinguishing mark of the truths of Christianity is that ‘in spite of being revealed, they still remain hidden’” (Pieper, 136). While making some truths quite explicit, in many cases the truths of Christianity (for example, the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation) raise more questions and doubts than they satisfy. Because a Christian philosopher must reckon with certain truths, he finds himself constrained. Ideas, arguments

³One thinks here of the “desedimentation” endeavor at St. John’s College.

and solutions which would otherwise be plausible are impossible in the light of revelation. Christian philosophy must save all the phenomena, including the what appears in the vision of theology (Pieper, 139).

In light of this defense of Christian philosophy, another counterargument presents itself: if Christian religion is so unhelpful, what gives it a special claim to enable the best philosophy? Pieper's answer is that "the greater *truth* lies in seeing the world in its real character as a mystery, and as unfathomable. . . . And that is the claim of Christian philosophy: to be truer—in its very recognition of the mysterious character of the world" (Pieper, 137). A Christian philosopher should be more fully aware of his own ignorance than any other philosopher, because theology has exposed unexplored galaxies of thought which he could never have seen unaided. Others may philosophize seriously, but the Christian philosopher will excel in the wonder and hope which most essentially characterizes the nature of philosophy.

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