

The Role of Philosophy in Worldview

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In order to become aware of reality, according to Socrates, you must first “Know thyself.” According to Donald Palmer’s book, *Does the Center Hold?*, however, the process of knowing oneself is much more complex than that simple statement. It must take into account a myriad of influences, experiences and interactions. This knowledge of self in relation to how one considers his surroundings is the fundamental characteristic of philosophy. Furthermore, philosophy itself is important because it is essentially the theorizing and logical articulation of one’s worldview, which encompasses one’s opinion of everything and how each aspect relates to each other aspect. On a basic level, philosophical questions deal with man’s relation to man (including both self and others), the world, and God. Within this framework, an individual’s ontology, epistemology, and axiology come through.

Man’s relation to himself and others is usually the starting point for people seeking answers to philosophical questions. Even Socrates considered the relation fundamental. The question itself is epistemological in nature, seeking knowledge of the self. In a Christian worldview, knowing ourselves would mean knowing our sinful nature. In a secular worldview, however, knowing yourself gives mankind a blank slate (epitomized in the theory of John Locke), allowing him to build himself up however he wishes. Solid ontological questions about self and others usually end up affirming people’s being rather than negating it. Theories like David Hume’s that questioned the reality of self (94) and reduced people to merely a bundle of perceptions fall apart when one considers the simple fact that Hume existed as a person (or, furthermore, that you now exist to consider the fact that Hume existed). The very fact that you exist, questioning the reality of yourself and others confirms that you are not simply the

perceptions of another person, making the question of whether you are real ridiculous.

Axiological questions concerning mankind bring the concept of morals and ethics into consideration. What is the right way and wrong way to treat a person? *Is* there right and wrong or are such concepts only matters of personal opinion? In the Christian view, there is right and wrong, based on God's law. God has set moral standards and states in Leviticus 19:9 that you are to "Love your neighbor as yourself." In the Postmodern world of today, however, mankind has declared that there is no ultimate right and wrong; it is only a matter of personal opinion.

Man's relation to the world around him is also a philosophical concern. Philosophers have long entertained themselves with questions and theories as to the reality of the world and whether what we experience as the world is in our mind or outside of ourselves. Epistemologically, the major categories of thought concerning the world were Rationalism and Empiricism. Rationalism states that the world exists independent of observation. Our perception of the world is merely our categorizing the *a priori* material we experience (39). In other words, the world exists independent of man's mind. Empiricism, on the other hand, states that the world exists through our observation of it through our senses. This argument bases itself on *a posteriori* knowledge (40). Ontological questions about the world abound. The existence of paradoxes and optical illusions have led philosophers to question whether what they see and experience in the world around them actually exists or if it only *appears* to be how they see it. Plato's famous Cave Analogy presents the idea that all we experience in the world is merely a shadow, a vague representation of true forms. Axiological questions concerning the world do not pertain to morals, like they do when concerned with people, but rather to beauty. To call something beautiful or ugly is to make an axiological argument. The idiom, "beauty is in the eye of the

beholder,” states an axiological stance, which many people maintain today. The contradictory stance to this position states that – much like absolute truth – absolute beauty exists.

Finally, man’s relation to God has been the major concern with many philosophical positions. Epistemological arguments as to whether we can, in fact, know God have led to heated debate. Pietists hold that our attempts to know God confine him to our mind’s framework, making Him less God. So, essentially, we cannot know Him. As Christians, we hold that God has revealed Himself through His word and the world (special and general revelation) and we *can* know Him. Concerning ontological questions about God’s existence, Palmer (though convicted otherwise, given “reasons of the heart”) concludes that logically, there is no way to reason to the existence of God, since “reason,” in the sense of a specific order of thought, is far “too confining” (209). On the other hand, the Ontological Argument for God’s existence declares that by the very definition of God, He logically must exist (162-163). Axiological questions about God would either define Him as the ultimate source of beauty and right, or reject Him as such completely. In His very being, God *is* beauty and *is* justice, love, and right. Declaring Him as such would be making an axiological statement.

As Christians, it is necessary for us to consider such philosophical questions in order that we might both come to a better understanding of our own worldview and be able to address others’ differing worldviews in our witness. Even Paul engaged in philosophical study by using his knowledge of the Athenians’ pantheistic worldview and their “unknown god” to introduce the gospel to them in Acts 17:23. Similarly, if we are to engage in responsible witnessing, we are called to be aware of unbelievers’ views and speak to them with that awareness.

Works Cited

The English Standard Version Study Bible. Crossway Bibles: Wheaton, IL, 2008. Print.