

## **Defending the Handmaid: How Theology Needs Philosophy**

Richard G. Howe, Ph.D.

### **Prolegomena**

#### How Norman Geisler Helped Me in the Direction of My Life

I was led to Christ in high school by Christian friends of mine. I grew spiritually about as much as one might expect a teenager to grow, becoming involved with my youth group at church and pursuing my interesting in drumming. After graduation, I headed to the community college to study music. I tell people that I learned enough music to annoy everyone around me. When it came time to consider senior college, Christian friends of mine told me that one could go to college and study the Bible. This sounded like a tremendous prospect to me, so off I went. I attended my denomination's flagship Christian college in my state. It was my first encounter with theological liberalism. My church had not prepared me to wrestle with issues like Higher Criticism. As a result, I lost my faith in college. Looking back on that experience, I saw a range of responses among my friends who were confronted with the same intellectual challenges. Some of my friends with whom I had prayed in high school mockingly "asked Jesus to come out of their hearts" and repudiated their Christianity altogether. Others embraced the skepticism of the critical methods and settled for a more mainstream liberal Christianity. Neither of these options seemed possible for me. I was not capable of completely abandoning my faith, as shipwrecked as it was. But neither was I comfortable with any sort of liberal theology. Others of my friends tried to amputate their intellect from their faith and reject any attempt to come to terms with the challenges and questions posed by critical thinking. That, too, was not appealing to me. I knew that I could not embrace a faith that would not stand up to reason. With this, I lived in dissonance for over a year.

The short version of the story has me being intellectually rescued by a handful of apologists. Through their books and lectures, God brought into my life people like Josh McDowell, R. C. Sproul, and Norman Geisler. To this mix was added the insights and maturity of older brothers who had since come to the Lord. Being back on track, I began to consider the continued direction of my education. A short stint at a local seminary was quite disappointing through no fault of the seminary. Something seemed to be missing, despite the fact that this local seminary was among the best in the world. What was missing was something only later I was able to figure out.

The opportunity then presented itself to study at Dallas Theological Seminary. Not only was this exactly what I thought I wanted as far as the theological orientation was concerned, but studying at DTS also afforded me the opportunity to study under one of my heroes, Norman Geisler. I took every opportunity to take classes under him and followed him to his debates in the area. He even had me over to his home for a dinner once. (Something I realized years later was a habit of his in discipling budding apologists.) But just as with the earlier seminary experience, there was something missing in my studies. My increasing unrest eventuated in me finally working full time and taking no classes at all. It was hard to notice at the time what was wrong. In most other respects, DTS was all one could ask from a theological school. I was gradually beginning to realize that my interests were aimed along the path of apologetics. Since I had taken the few courses in apologetics that were offered, I lost interest in continuing on a degree path.

While I was floundering around not getting anywhere, Geisler gave me some of the most important and life-directing counsel I have ever had. Instead of trying to associate with one of the handful of apologetics ministries around (which I thought would scratch my apologetics itch) Geisler suggested that I return to the university and pursue a degree in philosophy. Perhaps today his counsel would have been different. Today he undoubtedly would have suggested any one of a number of fine seminaries that offer training (and even degrees) in apologetics. But the 80s were different. There were not the choices there are today. What is more, Geisler understood (as many apologists came to understand later) the crucial role that philosophy plays in Christian apologetics. The details from this point are not important. Let it suffice to say that pursuing the MA and PhD (both at state universities) was the best decision I could have made at the time. It was a decision I would have never thought to make were it not for Geisler's wise counsel. I owe him a great debt for this. Not only was I able to have a ministry in apologetics and hold faculty positions because of my training from him and others, but one of those faculty positions was with Geisler himself!

What I have come to believe about philosophy and the role it plays in the service of theology is what this chapter is about. The handmaid metaphor has been used in various ways by different writers. What I have in mind is how it has sometimes been understood in the context of philosophy's relationship to theology. It has been often said that theology is the "queen of the sciences." An extended version of the saying is that theology is the "queen of the sciences and philosophy is her handmaid" (or sometimes, handmaiden). The idea here is that since God is

Supreme Being and theology is knowledge about God, then theology is supreme knowledge. Being the apex of knowledge, it was known as the queen of the sciences (where 'science' is roughly equivalent to 'knowledge'). It was the purpose of the handmaid to service the queen in whatever capacity was needed. Taking that imagery, I am interested in (at least) defending the fact that philosophy has much to offer the "queen" as she goes about her duties. As I see it, philosophy is indispensable to theology in a number of ways. But it has become clear to me that not everyone shares such a view of philosophy's purpose or usefulness.

### Studying Philosophy

My experiences as a student of philosophy proved illustrative of the attitudes I would continue to encounter in my apologetics ministry. While I was in graduate school there was nothing like seeing the responses of people when I told them that I was working on a graduate degree in philosophy. Most people had one of two reactions. Some would moan and recount their horrific experiences in some hopelessly obscure and certainly useless class with a philosophy professor who clearly had lost touch with what it meant to be a normal human being. This reaction motivated me early on in my studies to aim to avoid ever causing my students to react in such a way. I wanted to make sure that I not only helped my students to negotiate the difficult terrain of philosophy but also to try to make the trek an enjoyable experience as well. Certainly I was not the first philosophy professor to aim to make philosophy enjoyable and relevant. Indeed, I had wondered sometimes whether any of those who had such a reaction had had any of the professors I had had. Many of my philosophy teachers made the otherwise arduous task of trying to grasp difficult philosophical concepts an enjoyable and meaningful endeavor.

But it was the second reaction that pointed to a more serious issue related to the whole discipline of philosophy. This reaction was one of polite puzzlement as to exactly what one would do with a degree in philosophy. I must confess that I quickly tired of the inquiry, perhaps as a defensive reaction. I was even tempted to turn the tables on the inquirer. Upon telling me that he was majoring in pre-med, I wanted to pshaw, "what are going to do with that?" I realize, however, that it is not his fault. I must admit that it is not obvious what use there is of attending oneself to philosophy. But it gets worse.

### Isn't Philosophy an Enemy?

Perhaps many do not see any value in earning a philosophy degree or even any value for philosophy itself. Some might regard philosophy as potentially dangerous. I sometimes

encounter such attitudes when the topic of philosophy comes up with my fellow Christians. Common are the blank stares from those who are not exactly sure what philosophy is, or the looks of either indifference or bewilderment as to what philosophy might have to do with anything important for the Christian. In addition, there are those looks of suspicion arising from what was perceived as something that not only had nothing to offer the healthy Christian life, but was almost certainly the cause many of the very problems with which Christians have to contend all the time in our culture. They regard philosophy as the enemy of faith. After all (they might argue) is this not exactly what Paul was warning in Col. 2:8? He tells us to "beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ."<sup>1</sup> What else might one make of Paul's admonition?

One must ask whether Paul is even using the term 'philosophy' in the same way we use it today as a formal discipline of study. Was Paul warning the Colossians about Plato, Aristotle, and by extension other philosophers since his day? It does not seem likely that he was. Before I say why I think this, let us assume for the sake of argument that he was. Let us assume that Paul was trying to warn the Colossians that philosophy posed a grave danger of potentially driving a wedge between them (and, by extension, us) and Christ; between them and a healthy Christian experience. If such a danger exists (as I think that it certainly does with respect to some philosophy,) does this mean that Christians should have nothing to do with philosophy? Perhaps the Tertullian's famous "what has Athens to do with Jerusalem" adage comes to mind.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> The Church Father Tertullian said "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes from 'the porch of Solomon,' who had himself taught that 'the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart.' Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel! With our faith, we desire no further belief. For this is our palmary faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides." [Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics*. Translated by the Rev. Peter Holmes, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings Of The Fathers Down to A.D. 325*. Edited by The Rev. Alexander Roberts, D.D., And James Donaldson, LL.D. American Reprint of *The Edinburgh Edition* printed July, 1975 Volume 3: *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, from AGES Software, Albany, Oregon, 1996, 1997, Chap. 7, p. 443.]

His famous synecdoche is taken by most as a repudiation of philosophy as such. Such an interpretation is common even if possibly mistaken. Historian David C. Lindberg comments, "[Tertullian's] often-quoted warning against curiosity ... is regularly interpreted as an expression of the opinion that the Christian requires no knowledge beyond that which biblical revelation furnishes. Not only is this a caricature of Tertullian's true position, but it is also not representative of patristic attitudes (although this has proved no obstacle to its wide dissemination)." [David

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I take a cue from a physician friend of mine back home. As a specialist in infectious diseases sounds the alarm about the dangers of such diseases. Some of them being quite dangerous to health and even life itself, they are not to be trifled with. Instead, they should be avoided at all costs. But notice that my physician friend did not himself avoid such diseases at all costs. Indeed, he spent quite a bit of time, effort, and resources in mastering the knowledge of these diseases. He did this for two important reasons. He wanted to be able to help others from getting infected by these diseases and he wanted to help cure those who were already infected. As such, the thing that would put others of us in the greatest danger is if no one ever sought to understand and combat these diseases. Ignorance is not bliss when it comes to these kinds of dangers.

By analogy, even if Paul was warning us that philosophy posed a great danger to our Christian life and spiritual health, it does not follow that Christians should avoid trying to understand philosophy. At the very least, it would seem that some Christians need to understand philosophy enough either to help other Christians avoid being "infected" or, having already been infected, to help them be "cured." As C. S. Lewis observed, "Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered."<sup>3</sup> Thus, even if Paul's words are to be taken as an admonition to avoid philosophy, there remains the need for some to delve into its subject matter.

But such a reason for studying philosophy hardly comes up to the level that interests me here. I shall not be arguing merely that philosophy is something that certain Christians are allowed to study as a means of "protecting" others in the Body of Christ. I certainly think that such a task is necessary and important. But I also think that philosophy not only has something good to offer, but that it has something necessary for the doing of theology in the first place. This

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C. Lindberg, "The Medieval Church Encounters the Classical Tradition: Saint Augustine, Roger Bacon, and the Handmaiden Metaphor" in *When Science and Christianity Meet* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 11] Taken at face value, Tertullian's comment seems to prove too much. Given that the distinction between philosophy and science is a fairly modern one, to take his words as a repudiation of philosophy (as understood in Tertullian's day) is to take him rejecting all of science as well. I have found few Christians, even among those who are suspicious of philosophy (in its contemporary definition) who advocate a rejection of science broadly considered.

<sup>3</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (London: William Collins Sons, 1939), 28 as cited in Wayne Martindale and Jerry Root, eds. *The Quotable Lewis* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1989), 473.

being my aim, I need to deal with Paul's words more carefully to see if my agenda is compatible with Paul's.

I think it is unlikely that Paul was thinking of philosophy as the discipline we understand it to be today. After all, the distinction between philosophy and other academic disciplines (like science, for example) is a relatively modern one. In ancient Greece, as in Paul's day, knowledge was knowledge. To be sure, thinkers understood that different subject-matters contained different content and required different methods of inquiry and tools of analysis. An inquiry into and analysis of ethics was different from an inquiry into and an analysis of mathematics.<sup>4</sup> But all such inquiries yielded knowledge in the general sense of the term. As such, it is unlikely that Paul was even talking about philosophy as it is narrowly considered today. Instead the context suggest that Paul was warning the Colossians about an insidious legalism that threatened their liberty in Christ; "the philosophy which is vain deceit."<sup>5</sup> In the context, Paul was warning that such a legalism had an outward form of piety but was useless in developing an inward character and righteousness.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Regarding ethics, Aristotle said that his discussion "will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject-matter admits of; for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions ... for it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits: it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician demonstrative proofs." [Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 3, 1094<sup>b</sup> 12, 24, trans. W. D. Ross (and J. O. Urmson) in J. L. Ackril, ed. *A New Aristotle Reader* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 364.

<sup>5</sup> Regarding the grammar of Col. 2:8, Henry Alford notes, "The absence of the article before *κενή* shows the *καί* to be expegetical, and the same thing to be meant by the two." This suggests the translation as I have it above, viz., "the philosophy which is vain deceit." Alford continues, "This being so, it may be better to give the *τῆς* the possessive sense, the better to mark that it is not all philosophy which the Apostle is here blaming." [Henry Alford, *Alford's Greek Testament: An Exegetical and Critical Commentary*, vol. 3, *Galatians - Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Guardian Press, 1976), 218.] Alford goes on to observe, "The *φιλοσοφ.* is not necessarily *Greek* ... As De W. observes, Josephus calls the doctrine of the Jewish sects philosophy: Antt. xviii, 2, 1." [Alford, 218] The citation to Josephus is incorrect. It should be 1, 2 instead of 2, 1. Josephus says, "The Jews had for a great while three sects of philosophy peculiar to themselves; the sect of the Essens [sic], and the sect of the Sadducees, and the third sort of opinions called Pharisees." [William Whiston, trans. *Josephus: Complete Works* "Antiquities of the Jews," (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1960), XVIII, 1, 1, p. 376] The De W. mentioned is Wilhelm Martin Leberecht de Wette (1780-1849). Alford's reference is to de Wette's *Exegetisches Handbuch: Eph., Phil., Col., Philem.*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Leipzig 1847).

<sup>6</sup> A. S. Peake makes the same argument that Paul is not repudiating philosophy. He argues, "The second noun [deceit] is explanatory of the first, as is shown by the absence of the article and preposition before it and the lack of any indication that Paul had two evils to attack. The meaning is 'his philosophy, which is vain deceit.' The word has, of course, no reference to Greek philosophy, and probably none to the allegorical method of Scripture exegesis that the false teachers may have employed. Philo uses it of the law of Judaism, and Josephus of the three Jewish sects. Here, no doubt, it means just the false teaching that threatened to undermine the faith of the Church. There is no condemnation of philosophy in itself, but simply of the empty but plausible sham that went by that name

As such, not only would I deny that Jerusalem has nothing to do with Athens (to revert to Tertullian's synecdoche), I contend that Jerusalem has much indeed to do with Athens (as does Athens with Jerusalem). In fact, Jerusalem and Athens are inseparably bound together. This is not to say that they are co-extensive or that there is no distinction at all to be made. Nor is it to say that Athens is necessarily more important than Jerusalem. It is to say that one cannot do theology well without utilizing tools and data that are philosophical at the core.<sup>7</sup>

#### Illustrating the Need: A Case Study of *The Dake Annotated Reference Bible*

Whenever I visit a Christian bookstore for the first time, I immediately go to the Bible department to see if the store sells *The Dake Annotated Reference Bible* by Finis Jennings Dake.<sup>8</sup> I have been amazed at how often I have found it. I am amazed that a store that is ostensibly Christian would sell a Bible with study notes and commentary that departs so far from an historic, orthodox understanding of the nature of God. For example, Dake teaches that "God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are all present where there are beings with whom they have dealings; but they are not omnibody, that is, their bodies are not omnipresent. All three go from place to place bodily as other beings in the universe do."<sup>9</sup> All three "persons" of the Trinity have bodies with which they move around the universe. As such, God cannot be omnipresent. More startling is Dake's teaching that

God has a personal spirit body (Dan. 7:9-14; 10:5-19); shape (Jn. 5:37); form (Phil. 2:5-7); image and likeness of a man (Gen. 1:26; 9:6; Ezek. 1:26-28; 1 Cor. 11:7; Jas. 3:9). He has bodily parts such as, back parts (Ex. 33:23), heart (Gen. 6:6; 8:21), hands and fingers (Ps. 8:3-6; Heb. 1:10; Rev. 5:1-7), mouth (Num. 12:8), lips and tongue (Isa. 30:27), feet (Ezek. 1:27; Ex. 24:10), eyes (Ps. 11:4; 18:24; 33:18), ears (Ps. 18:6), hair, head, face, arms (Dan. 7:9-14; 10:5-19; Rev. 5:1-7; 22:4-6), and other bodily parts.<sup>10</sup>

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at Colossae." [A. S. Peake, "The Epistle to the Colossians" in W. Robertson Nicoll, ed., *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, vol. 3, "Second Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians" (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1974), 521-522.]

<sup>7</sup> I cannot resist pointing out that the very argument about whether and how theology and philosophy relate is itself a philosophical discussion. To claim that philosophy has nothing to do with theology (as some might take Paul and Tertullian to be saying) or to say that philosophy and theology are intimately related (as I shall be arguing) is to say something philosophical.

<sup>8</sup> Finis Jennings Dake, *The Dake Annotated Reference Bible* (Lawrenceville: Dake Bible Sales, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> Dake, *Annotated*, in the "Complete Concordance and Cyclopedic Index," p. 81.

<sup>10</sup> Dake, *Annotated*, (New Testament), p. 97.

When I speak on this subject and show a slide with this quote, I ask my audience what else is startling about this quote. I then transition to a slide where Dake's words are removed, leaving behind the numerous Bible citations. A look at the verses will show that, indeed, the verses seem to say (taken in one sense) what Dake quotes them to say. The texts indeed describe God with these bodily parts. I suspect that if Dake himself were in the audience, he would protest that I was the one who was failing to take these verses seriously. If the text says that God has eyes or strong arms (Dake might argue), then it means that God has eyes and strong arms.<sup>11</sup> No doubt most readers will laugh that something as simple as a figure of speech would escape Dake's notice. After all, surely even he does not believe that God has wings (Ruth 2:12) or feathers (Ps. 91:4) or that Jesus is literally bread (John 6:32) or is literally a vine (John 15:1). Perhaps Dake is an extreme case. But I submit that adjudicating literal descriptions of God from figures of speech is not as straightforward as it might appear.

When discussing this topic with a friend of mine, I appealed to Genesis 3 to set up my concerns. The text tells us that Adam and Eve "heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day." (v. 8) I asked my friend (knowing his answer already) if he believed that God had legs, since it was impossible for God to walk without them.<sup>12</sup> He responded that he did not. I asked him why and he responded that he believed that God was a spirit and that the Genesis passage was a figure of speech. I pressed him how he knew this. He appealed to John 4:24 where Jesus told the woman at the well that "God is Spirit." My question to him was how he knew that the Genesis passage was a figure of speech and that the John passage was literal. Perhaps God was figuratively a spirit and literally had legs. My point was

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<sup>11</sup> Dake denies that God's bodily parts are physical, claiming, instead, that they are spiritual. I will leave it up to the reader to judge exactly what spiritual hair is. Whatever one concludes, such a judgment cannot be made without doing philosophy. This is so because to try to distinguish the metaphysical makeup of things and to try to distinguish between material and immaterial substances, is to do philosophy.

<sup>12</sup> Some may suggest that this event was a theophany, i.e., an appearance of Christ before his incarnation in the New Testament. Without delving into whether such events occurred in the Old Testament (and, if so, without discussing whether this event in Genesis 3 could be an example) it remains that an appeal to a theophany cannot account for every physical description of God in the Old Testament. This would certainly be the case with the above cited verses describing God's wings and feathers.



that it is not always obvious what is and what is not a figure of speech and that sometimes further appeals to scriptural texts cannot settle the matter.<sup>13</sup>

No doubt at this point the reader is expecting me to launch into my argument that only philosophy can settle the matter. I am reminded of the joke about the children's Sunday School class where the teacher asks the children what is gray, has a furry tail, and hides acorns for the winter. The children, realizing that they are in Sunday School and remembering to what the discussion always comes back, decides that the answer must be "Jesus." I have had a similar experience in my graduate courses. Having queried my students about how we know certain things to be true, they enthusiastically exclaim "Philosophy!" Since seemingly (in their eyes) the point of the discussion was philosophy and how critical it was to theology, then the answer I must be looking for is "philosophy." This is not my position. I am not arguing that all such thinking can only be settled if and when one works the thinking back to something philosophical. Instead, what I will argue is this. Consider what Isa. 55:12 tells us. "For you shall go out with joy, and be led out with peace; the mountains and the hills shall break forth into singing before you, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands." If the prophet tells us that trees shall clap their hands, we know that he is speaking poetically; employing the figure of speech known as metaphor. We know this because we know that trees do not literally have hands. We know that trees do not literally have hands because of our experience with trees. We know that trees have a specific nature such that hands are not part of what it is to be a tree. It does not take any study of philosophy to know this. Even a child can understand that trees do not literally have hands.

So, where (if anywhere) does the philosophy come in? I think in some ways, philosophy parallels other disciplines in this respect. Suppose that, after having discovered that trees lack hands, one wanted to delve deeper into the physical nature of the tree. A deep enough analysis of the physical aspects of the tree will take on into the science of botany. Going deeper still might take one into the science of chemistry (to understand, for example, the process of photosynthesis). One could take the analysis even deeper to the science of physics. As such, what

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<sup>13</sup> One often hears the expression that "Scripture interprets Scripture" sometimes incorrectly labeled as the "analogy of faith." For a brief but helpful discussion of the principle, see Thomas A. Howe, "The Analogy of Faith: Does Scripture Interpret Scripture?" *Christian Research Journal* 29, no. 2 (2006): 50-51. The article is available for download at <<http://www.equip.org/articles/the-analogy-of-faith>>, accessed 01/14/14.

at one level might be knowable merely from empirical observation (trees do not have hands), will at deeper levels take one into various branches of the sciences (botany, chemistry, physics). By parallel, what at one level might be knowable from empirical observation (trees do not have hands), will at deeper levels take one to various branches of philosophy (natural objects such as trees have natures or essences (metaphysics); these natural objects can be known in certain ways (epistemology); these natural objects cannot account for their own existence and so must be caused by God (philosophy of nature); and more).

### **What Is Philosophy?**

I have been talking quite a bit around philosophy, freely using the term without too much explanation of what philosophy even is. Before going into specifics, I would like to illustrate one aspect of philosophy, viz., philosophy as a critical thinking tool. Afterwards, I will visit some specific doctrines of a philosophical nature that have direct bearing on important theological concerns to make my case that theology indeed needs philosophy.

#### **Philosophy in Action: Facts and the Relationship of Science and Religion**

The important aspect of philosophy that deals with critically assessing points of view can be illustrated by a comparison and contrast between three contemporary thinkers regarding the issue of the nature of facts, especially as to how one's understanding of facts bears on how one regards the relationship of science and religion. Stephen Jay Gould (1941-2002) was a paleontologist, evolutionary biologist, and historian of science who taught at Harvard and New York University. He displayed a concern for what he considered to be an unnecessary tension between science and religion. He wrote, "We may, I think, adopt this word and concept to express the central point of this essay and the principled resolution of supposed 'conflict' or 'warfare' between science and religion. No such conflict should exist because each subject has a legitimate magisterium, or domain of teaching authority—and these magisteria do not overlap (the principle that I would like to designate as NOMA, or 'nonoverlapping magisteria')." <sup>14</sup>

For Gould, this tension or warfare can be dissolved once we realize that the different human endeavors should remain within their proper domain. The unnecessary conflict arises, Gould argues, only because one or more of these endeavors have ventured beyond their proper

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<sup>14</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, "Nonoverlapping Magisteria," downloaded from [http://www.stephenjaygould.org/library/gould\\_noma.html](http://www.stephenjaygould.org/library/gould_noma.html), assessed 01/13/14.

boundaries and have attempted to weigh in on matters they ill-equipped to engage. Gould continues,

The net of science covers the empirical universe: what is it made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory). The net of religion extends over questions of moral meaning and value. These two magisteria do not overlap, nor do they encompass all inquiry (consider, for starters, the magisterium of art and the meaning of beauty). To cite the arch clichés, we get the age of rocks, and religion retains the rock of ages; we study how the heavens go, and they determine how to go to heaven.<sup>15</sup>

Contrast Gould's "resolution" to the supposed warfare between science and religion with that of Alister McGrath. McGrath is Professor of Theology, Ministry and Education at King's College London and Head of its Centre for Theology, Religion, and Culture. He is also Senior Research Fellow at Harris Manchester College, Oxford.<sup>16</sup> His approach to the tension that may exist between science and religion is not to confine each to its own corner of reality with no overlap as Gould did. Instead, he acknowledges that they do sometimes overlap. "There is, of course, a third option—that of 'partially overlapping magisteria' (a POMA, so to speak), reflecting a realization that science and religion offer possibilities of cross-fertilization on account of the interpenetration of their subjects and methods."<sup>17</sup> To put it plainly, McGrath sees that sometimes science and religion have things to offer each other precisely because they sometimes address the same subjects and employ the same methods. Without at this point going into details, I must say that, of the two, McGrath's certainly is the correct position. But my point here is not to defend this notion but, instead, to illustrate something different.

Richard Dawkins is the former Charles Simonyi Professor of Public Understanding of Science, Oxford University. He is author of a number of books including *The Selfish Gene*, *The Blind Watchmaker*, *The God Delusion*, and more<sup>18</sup> and is famous for being an outspoken atheist.

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<sup>15</sup> Gould, "Nonoverlapping."

<sup>16</sup> By the publication of this book (or shortly thereafter) McGrath is to assume the Andreas Idreos Professorship of Science and Religion at Oxford University. (<http://www.ianramseycentre.info/blog/new-andreas-idreos-professor-of-science-and-religion-.html>, assessed 01/14/14).

<sup>17</sup> Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine* (Downers Grove, IL: 2007), 41. As I have it here, McGrath's view is only a second option. I have saved Richard Dawkins's view for my third option.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987); *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

Dawkins's views on the nature of facts and the relationship of science and religion is quite revealing and is illustrative of a widespread, if not the prevailing, view in our culture and especially in academia. He writes, "Unlike some of his theological colleagues, Bishop Montefiore is not afraid to state that the question of whether God exists is a definite question of fact."<sup>19</sup> Dawkins is celebrating the fact that at least one religious leader in his experience regards the question of God's existence as being an objective, factual question in contradistinction to the "Christianity-is-a-way-of-life" approach. Such a rendering of Christianity is becoming more common with an increasingly popular postmodernism that seeks to retool factual questions into merely subjective ones. For Dawkins, either God does or does not exist. I believe his point is well taken. I think he is right.

But compare his additional comments. Dawkins asserts that "the presence or absence of a creative super-intelligence is unequivocally a scientific question, even if it is not in practice—or not yet—a decided one."<sup>20</sup> Regarding questions about the possibility of miracles, Dawkins insists that "there is an answer to every such question, whether or not we can discover it in practice, and it is a strictly scientific answer. The methods we should use to settle the matter, in the unlikely event that relevant evidence ever became available, would be purely and entirely scientific methods."<sup>21</sup>

Notice the subtle, but profound, shift. He goes from the issue of the existence of God being "a question of fact" to being "a scientific question." The difference is fatal. Without giving any argument for his position, Dawkins imperializes over the nature of facts and the question of God's existence and the possibility of miracles. He illicitly claims that all such questions can be answered by the methods and tools of science. While it is certainly the case that the question of whether God exists is a factual question, it does not follow from this that it is a *scientific* question. The difference is this. In the spirit of Aristotle, I would argue that the way particular questions are settled depends very largely on the type of subject-matter the questions address. How one settles questions of mathematics is different than how one settles questions of history.

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<sup>19</sup> Dawkins, *Watchmaker*, 37-38.

<sup>20</sup> Dawkins, *God Delusion*, 59-59.

<sup>21</sup> Dawkins, *God Delusion*, 59.

There is no algorithm that proves whether Abraham Lincoln had a beard or whether he suspended *habeas corpus* during the Civil War. The beauty of a sunset is not entirely reducible to the physics of the light frequencies.

Even within broad disciplines such as the sciences, the nature of the object being analyzed determines to a large degree the methods of inquiry and the tools of analysis appropriate for that subject matter. A text book on botany will consist of pictures of textures and colors of various aspects of plants. But a textbook on physics will consist almost entirely of mathematical equations and operations. What is true for physics is true for metaphysics. How one assails the issues of God's existence and the possibility of miracles must involve the methods of inquiry and of tools analysis that are suited for philosophical questions. Now Dawkins is free to insist on any methods and tools he wants. But in doing so, he owes it to his readers to defend his insistence that such philosophical questions can be thoroughly handled merely with the tools of the scientist. This he never does. Gould offered his Non-Overlapping Magisteria—a NOMA that seeks to entirely separate the different types of questions to be answered. McGrath corrects him with his Partially Overlapping Magisteria—a POMA that correctly recognizes that the different aspects of reality do, in certain places, address the same data and ask the same questions. Dawkins's imperializing over the question by trying to shoehorn philosophical issues into the narrow and inadequate methods of inquiry and of tools analysis of science constitutes a Completely Overlapping Magisterium—a COMA that blinds him from seeing how it is that philosophical issues are to be examined with the methods of inquiry and tools of analysis of philosophy.<sup>22</sup> Because of this blindness, Dawkins remains completely unaware that he is weighing in on philosophical matters such as the existence of God without acquainting himself with how that conversation has been going on in Western civilization for two thousand five hundred years.

### **What Can Philosophy Do for Theology?**

By now perhaps the reader is beginning to wonder whether I have titled my chapter incorrectly since my discussion so far has only shown what role philosophy might have for

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<sup>22</sup> At the point, a more in-depth treatment of my subject would take us into the specifics of what these methods and tools are. God willing I will deal more fully with these elements in my forthcoming book on the subject. I hope, not only in what I have said so far, but also in what I will say below when I treat some specific theological matters, that what some of these methods and tools are will become a little more clear.

apologetics. In the interest of directing things more toward my stated goal, I would now like to give some specific examples where philosophy is indispensable to theology. There are many more places where philosophy ties in to things theological than I have room to discuss in a single chapter, but I am hopeful that the few that I touch on will suffice to show how crucial sound philosophical thinking is to cherished evangelical theology.

### Philosophy and God

Countless books have been written explaining the arguments that demonstrate that God exists. Many of the books also demonstrate the bankruptcy of atheism at many levels. Space will not allow any discussion of the cogency of these demonstrations. Let it suffice to say that to the degree that the issue of God's existence is relevant to theology (How can it not be?) and to the degree that refuting the atheists' arguments and demonstrating by argument that God exists are philosophical undertakings, then to that degree philosophy is critical for theology.

It is not only the existence of God that is being challenged. Perhaps one might suggest that this issue is relevant only to apologetics, not to theology as such. I hope that my earlier discussion of the heresy of the *Dake Annotated Reference Bible* will suffice to show that there is the increasingly important need to defend the attributes of God as well. That discussion showed, when it comes to certain attributes of God, it is not enough to appeal to the text of Scripture. What is needed is a way to show which relevant verses are to be taken literally and which are to be taken figuratively.

But the heresies of Dake might seem far removed from evangelicalism and, as such, seemingly posing no real threat. Closer to home a battle has been quietly (and sometimes not so quietly) raging over the issue of Open Theism. Sometimes known as Neo-Theism or Free-Will Theism, Open Theism maintains that the future is "open" to God such that He cannot possibly know what choices will be made by His creatures with free will. This is, in their view, because future contingencies are unknowable. This is how Open Theists explain certain verses in the biblical text. Gregory Boyd comments, "Scripture also frequently depicts God as experiencing regret ... disappointment, frustration, and unexpected outcomes ... suggesting that the future is to this extent composed of possibilities rather than certainties. It is, I submit, more difficult to

conceive of God experiencing such things if the future is exhaustively settled in his mind than if it is in part composed of possibilities."<sup>23</sup>

It should be clear that such a view of God departs from the classical (and historically evangelical) view. But what can be said in response? In the same way regarding those verses that describe God as having bodily parts, these verses too should be taken as figures of speech. But how do we know that? Let me repeat the parallel I brought up earlier and then carry my point out a little further. When the Scriptures talk about trees clapping their hands, we know that this is poetic (i.e., figurative) language. We know this because we know the nature of a tree is such that it does not have hands. We are able to know this nature because of our empirical experiences with trees.<sup>24</sup> Obviously we cannot know God in exactly the same way. God is not an object perceptible by our empirical faculties. When it comes to knowing truths about God, there are two sources, known in theology as General Revelation and Special Revelation. The notion of 'revelation' here is that aspect of theology which deals with God making known to mankind His divine person and divine truths that would otherwise be unknown. To reveal is to unveil. Special Revelation are those truths that God has revealed through His prophets, apostles, and His Son Jesus Christ that comprises what we now know as the Bible. General Revelation are those truths about Himself that God has revealed through His creation. Rom. 1:20 tells us "since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse." Note that those attributes of God are in themselves invisible, but are nevertheless knowable by things that are visible. From our knowledge of effects (creation) we can gain an analogous knowledge of the

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<sup>23</sup> Gregory A. Boyd, "Neo-Molinism and the Infinite Intelligence of God," *Philosophia Christi* 5, No.1, (2003):192. For a critique of Open Theism see Norman L. Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man? The New "Open" View of God—Neotheism's Dangerous Drift* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997) and Norman L. Geisler and H. Wayne House (with Max Herrera), *The Battle for God: Responding to the Challenge of Neotheism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001)

<sup>24</sup> Our experiences with sensible objects enable us to know their essences. This process is known as *abstraction*. Our knowledge of essences presupposes that essences are real constituents of natural objects. These essences, often referred to as substantial forms are in distinction to those of artificial objects whose essences are ultimately accidental forms. For a discussion of essences see David S. Oderberg, *Real Essentialism* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, Routledge, 2007). For a discussion of the classical view of how essences (and other aspects of reality) are known see Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, *Man's Knowledge of Reality: An Introduction to Thomistic Epistemology* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1956).

cause (Creator). We can do this by our direct apprehension of the sensible world even if we (at the start) do not realize that the sensible world is created by God.

In our assessment of the sensible world, we can understand that anything that is true about an object is true about it either because of its essence (i.e., because it is the kind of thing it is) or not. For example, the fact that I have reason is caused by my human nature or essence. I have reason by virtue of being human. Other things might be true of me, but not because of my human nature. For example, the fact that I am in the Atlanta area is not by virtue of being human, otherwise, no one outside the Atlanta area would be human. Thus, being in the Atlanta area is not caused by my human essence. But I can explain how it is that I am in the Atlanta area. I am in the Atlanta area because I caused myself to be in the Atlanta area. Further, there might be things that are true of me, but are not caused by my essence or by me. For example, I might have a black eye that I was given by someone else in a fight. Neither being in the Atlanta area nor having a black eye is caused by my essence.

With all this, consider the fact that I exist. I do not exist by virtue of being a human being. It is not my human nature that makes me exist. Existence is not part of my essence. This is known in philosophy as the essence/existence distinction. It would seem that this distinction holds for everything in the sensible world. There is nothing in the sensible world that exists by virtue of its essence. How, then, can I account for my existence or the existence of anything else?

Before I give what I believe is the only answer to that question, let me say a brief word about existence. If you visit Venice, Italy, you will see at one of the vaporetto stops a giant illuminated glass ball. It will certainly grab your attention. If you ask "where did this glass ball come from?" you will discover that it was made in nearby Murano, which is famous for its glass factories. With this answer, you will probably be satisfied. However, if you were hearing music, you would not ask "Where did this music come from" but instead would ask "where *is* the music *coming* from?" This is so because you realize that music is music only while it is being caused to be music. As soon as the cause of the music stops causing the music, the music ceases to be. Music is an act. This is the way that medieval philosophers such as Aquinas understood existence—as an act.

Let us now return to my accounting for my own existence myself or for the existence of anything else. Since it is not of the essence of any sensible object to exist, then their existence must be being caused by something else. Remember, I am not thinking in terms of what cause



the sensible object to *come into* existence. Rather, I am thinking in terms of what is *causing* the existence at every moment that it exists. The only explanation is that, if anything exists, then something must exist whose essence *is* its existence. If anything exists, then there must be something for which the essence/existence distinction does not hold. As Thomas Aquinas so succinctly put it, "All men know this to be God."

Now, to be fair, the argument utilizing the essence/existence distinction that I have summarized is not, strictly speaking, one of Aquinas's famous five arguments for God's existence (where we find the "all men know this to be God" comment). Instead, this discussion is from his *On Being and Essence*, IV, 7. Thomists are divided over whether Aquinas gave this as an argument for the existence of God or only as an argument for there being no essence/existence distinction in the God whose existence he demonstrates by other arguments.<sup>25</sup> But if Aquinas does not use the essence/existence distinction to demonstrate God's existence, what cash value does it have for him?

For Aquinas, existence as such contains all perfections of being. Existence is limited by essence. Like a balloon that limits and shapes the air that infuses it, the essence of the creature bounds the otherwise limitless fullness of the perfections of existence.<sup>26</sup> A human being contains all the perfections of existence up to and according to the limits and boundaries of human essence or nature. A tree contains all the perfections of existence up to and according to the limits and boundaries of the essence of tree. But since for God, His existence *is* His essence, He possesses all the perfections of existence without limit. This is where, for Aquinas and certain other philosophers, all the classical attributes of God are found. God is omnipotent (all powerful), omniscient (all knowing), omnipresent (all present), as well as a host of other attributes such as all loving, all wise, all good, and more. Knowing from philosophy that God must have all these attributes (because for Him there is no essence/existence distinction), we can know that when the Bible describes God in finite terms, it is speaking figuratively. The Bible does this because God is revealing Himself and His attributes in the only categories that we as finite human beings can understand. Because of this, we are not saying something less about God

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<sup>25</sup> See the Armand Mauer translation of *On Being and Essence* in *Medieval Sources in Translation I*, reprinted (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1983), 19-20, and n. 33.

<sup>26</sup> I am grateful to philosopher Max Herrera for this metaphor.

when we deny that God has eyes (even though He is described as having eyes in numerous places in the Bible such as Deut. 11:12; 2 Chron. 16:9; Ps. 34:15) than we are saying about ourselves that we affirm that we do have eyes. Instead, by denying that God has eyes, we are saying something greater about Him. What the Bible means by attributing eyes to God is analogous to what we know about ourselves regarding our own eyes. By them we know and understand reality. God knows and understands reality, but He does so analogously to the way we do, that that infinitely.

## Philosophy and the Bible

### *The Bible is True*

Evangelicals hold fast the doctrine that the Bible is true. The Bible is the only infallible guide to faith and practice; the only infallible guide to what we are to believe and how we are to live. For much of our history, to say that the Bible is true would have been to say something quite definitive and unequivocal. Seldom would someone (except perhaps a professional philosopher) question exactly what a Christian meant in saying that the Bible is true. Things in America have changed. Both in academia as well as in the general culture, how truth is understood is becoming more varied.

### Theories of Truth

A discussion of truth must start with the understanding of the difference between a theory (or view) of truth and a test for truth. Suppose someone walked into the room and said "it is raining." Then someone else queried "is that true?" to which the first one responded "yes." Whatever you are saying about the statement 'It is raining.' when you say that it is true, is your *theory* of truth. One's theory of truth is how one defines the terms 'true' and 'truth' or what one is saying about a statement when he says that it is true. This must be contrasted with a test for truth. One's test for truth is the means whereby one discovers whether a statement is true, regardless what is meant by the term 'true'. It is the difference between defining truth and discovering truth.

*Correspondence Theory of Truth.* A number of theories of truth have presented themselves, primarily among philosophers. But a few of them have found their way into biblical studies and even into popular culture. In order to contrast the failings of these theories, it is best to lead out with the correct view. In the context in which we are talking, truth should be understood as correspondence to reality. Known as the correspondence theory (or view) of truth, it says that a statement is true in as much as it corresponds to reality. Thus, the statement 'It is

raining.' would be a true statement if it is in fact raining in reality and would be a false statement if it is in fact not raining in reality.<sup>27</sup> Aristotle said it this way. "This is clear, in the first place, if we define what the true and the false are. To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true; so that he who says of anything that it is, or that it is not, will say either what is true or what is false."<sup>28</sup>

Connecting the notion of truth to reality (i.e., to "what is" in Aristotle's language) is crucial. The philosophical tradition from Aristotle through Thomas Aquinas, known by various names such as Classical Realism, Moderate Realism, Scholastic Realism, Thomistic Realism, or just plain Realism, understands the need to do philosophy against the backdrop of the real.<sup>29</sup> As Etienne Gilson observed, "A philosopher talks about things, while a professor of philosophy talks about philosophy."<sup>30</sup> With this, Gilson is not disparaging being a professor of philosophy (since he was one). Rather he was emphasizing the fact that philosophy, to be sound philosophy, must have as

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<sup>27</sup> Other philosophers holding a correspondence theory of truth would be Plato (*Sophist*, 240d; 263b); Augustine (*Soliloquia* I, 28); Thomas Aquinas (*Truth*, Question 1, Article 1); René Descartes (*Meditations on First Philosophy: Third Meditation; Objections and Replies: Fifth Set of Objections* (see John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, trans. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984): 26, 196)); John Locke (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* II, XXXII, §2-§5); Immanuel Kant (*Critique of Pure Reason*, I, Second Part, First Div., Bk. II, Chap. II, §3, 3 (see, Norman Kemp Smith's trans. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965: 220)); Bertrand Russell ("On the Nature of Truth," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (1906-1907), 28-49 as cited in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards, ed., (New York: Macmillan Publishing, Co., Inc. & The Free Press, 1967), s.v. "Correspondence Theory of Truth," p. 232); and the early Ludwig Wittgenstein (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 2.0211-2.0212, 2.21, 3.01). Those philosophers who hold the correspondence theory of truth differ as to exactly where the "correspondence" obtains. Positions include that it obtains between the proposition and external reality (naïve realism), between the proposition and the internal reality of the form of the thing in the intellect as well as the same form of the thing in external reality (moderate realism), or between the idea of reality in the mind and the thing in reality outside the mind (representationalism).

<sup>28</sup> *Metaphysics* 4.7.1011<sup>b</sup>26-29. The translator is W. D. Ross in Richard McKeon, *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), 749.

<sup>29</sup> For a succinct treatment of some of the philosophical aspects of Thomism and its bearing particularly on the question of the existence and attributes of God see Edward Feser, *The Last Superstition: A Refutation of the New Atheism* (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2008) and his *Aquinas: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneword, 2010). To assuage any concerns an evangelical might have with embracing the thought of Thomas Aquinas see Norman L. Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991). To assuage any concerns any Reformed evangelical might have with embracing the thought of Thomas Aquinas see Arvin Vos, *Aquinas, Calvin, & Contemporary Protestant Thought: A Critique of Protestant Views of the Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington: Christian University Press, 1985).

<sup>30</sup> Etienne Gilson, *Methodical Realism*, trans. by Philip Trower (Front Royal: Christendom Press, 1990), 129. This work has been reprinted as *Methodical Realism: A Handbook for Beginning Realists* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011).

its starting point reality that exists independently of the knower as opposed to that method of philosophy which starts with thought and then seeks to arrive at the real. It is the difference between starting with the real (i.e., self-evident sensible objects external to the knower) and concluding (among other things) truths about the knower verses starting with the knower and trying to conclude truths about external reality. The former is Realism. The latter is Idealism. The philosopher in this tradition begins with the self-evident experiences of sensible reality and philosophizes from there. He does not suspend judgment as to *whether* he knows reality pending the judgment of critical philosophy. Instead, knowing that he knows reality, the realist utilizes philosophy to give an account as to *how* he knows.

*Coherence Theory of Truth.* Other theories of truth present themselves. The coherence theory of truth holds that a statement is true when it coheres with or is consistent with a body of other statements. It has to do with the notion of internal consistency. Physicist Stephen W. Hawking utilizes (if only selectively) the coherence theory of truth when he says, "A scientific theory is just a mathematical model we make to describe our observations: it only exists in our minds. ... It is simply a matter of which is the more useful description."<sup>31</sup> For Hawking, when it comes to the claims of science, what makes a claim "true" is how that claim coheres with the body of other claims (in this case, mathematical) that constitutes the particular science. This allows Hawking to dismiss questions about the various models of time (that he is examining in his book) as to which one is the "real" or "true" model time.<sup>32</sup> For Hawking, the only important question is how well the mathematics works, meaning, how well does the mathematics cohere with the rest of the mathematical statements within quantum physics.<sup>33</sup> It should be evident that the coherence theory of truth does not capture what we mean when we say that a statement is true.

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<sup>31</sup> Stephen W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (Toronto: Bantam Books), 139.

<sup>32</sup> Hawking says, "So it is meaningless to ask: Which is real, 'real' or 'imaginary' time? Is it simply a matter of which is the more useful description." (p. 139).

<sup>33</sup> Those readers who are astute in seeing lurking self-referential problems might be wondering if Hawking's judgment as to whether the mathematics does or does not "work" is not borrowing from a correspondence theory of truth. This is so because one can always ask, do the mathematics really work or not? To answer that question Hawking could not appeal to whether the mathematics of this mathematics coheres, otherwise the question could then be repeated, leading him into a vacuous infinite regress.

*Pragmatic Theory of Truth.* Another theory of truth one finds is the pragmatic theory of truth. This theory is becoming a very popular view of truth in our culture with the increasing influence of postmodernism, especially with respect to religious claims. It says that something is true in as much as it works or is practical. This approach to truth is what gives rise to the notion that something can be true for one person but not true for another. To be sure, there are aspects of reality that have a subjective element to them. Brussels sprouts may taste good to one person and not good to another. Thus, it would be impossible to say absolutely that brussels sprouts taste good. However, this is not a counter-example to the correspondence theory of truth. For the person that dislikes brussels sprouts, it is objectively true that they taste bad for that person.

### Tests for Truth

Tests for truth have to do with how one discovers whether a given statement corresponds to reality. The important thing to keep in mind regarding tests for truth is that what a given test might be is dependent upon the type of thing (or that aspect of reality) about which the statement is being made. This is the mistake that Richard Dawkins's makes to which I referred earlier. It is wrong to try to test a claim about one aspect of reality by the tools and methods of a different aspect of reality. This mistake of Dawkins is one that has been made quite often down through the history of philosophy. There two degrees of making this mistake: lesser and greater. The lesser degree occurs by taking the methods of inquiry and tools of analysis for one aspect of reality and illicitly using them for another aspect of reality. This is the mistake Data made with Tasha in the *Star Trek: Next Generation* series when he tried to give his physics account of the sunset they were watching on the beach. As I commented above, the beauty of the sunset (an aesthetic issue) is something more than just an analysis of the physics of the light frequencies (a physics issue).

The greater degree occurs by taking the methods of inquiry and tools of analysis for one aspect of reality and illicitly using them for reality as a whole. This is the greater of the two mistakes because it has the most devastating consequences for ideas and truth. This is Dawkins's (and many other atheists') mistake when they illicitly try to subject the questions of God's existence and nature to the strictures of a narrow scientific reasoning.<sup>34</sup> They do not limit their

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<sup>34</sup> Known as 'scientism' (a term usually used by its opponents), it is the view that the tools and methods of the natural sciences can provide (at least in principle) all the knowledge that is possible about reality. Scientism in effect says that there is nothing real or true that cannot be assailed by the tools and methods used by natural scientists. It is generally the same philosophical view from early in the twentieth century known as Logical

ideological imperialism to religious questions. Almost no area of human experience is safe from their method.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the fact that Christians have to deal so much with the illicit application of the science on the philosophical issues such as the existence and attributes of God is largely because of the paradigm shift to the mathematicism arising from the philosophy and influence of Descartes. Gilson comments,

Metaphysical adventures are doomed to fail when their authors substitute the fundamental concepts of any particular science for those of metaphysics. Theology, logic, physics, biology, psychology, sociology, economics are fully competent to solve their own problems by their own methods; on the other hand ... as metaphysics aims at transcending all particular knowledge, no particular science is competent either to solve metaphysical problems, or to judge their metaphysical solutions.<sup>36</sup>

It is a mistake that has plagued the history of Western philosophy. But Descartes was not alone in how making this mistake can have serious implications for philosophy and philosophy's influence on other disciplines, including theology. I remember sitting in class one day with Norman Geisler. He began the class with the startling observation that Immanuel Kant had influence our lives more than Jesus Christ! Geisler then embarked upon a fascinating explanation of the philosophy of Kant and its deleterious effects it has had upon history, including the role played in the rise of theological liberalism. There can be no doubt that a thorough defense of sound evangelical theology will take one eventually in the discipline of philosophy.

### ***The Bible is Inerrant***

I saved my discussion of one other inadequate theory of truth until I broached the topic of biblical inerrancy. I was a casualty of the tide of theological liberalism that began to influence otherwise conservative denominations in America. Having lost my faith in college in the 1970s,

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Positivism exemplified by such works as A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1952). Compare, for example, these comments from Ayer the philosopher with those of Richard Dawkins the scientist (repeated here). "There is no field of experience which cannot, in principle, be brought under some form of scientific law, and no type of speculative knowledge about the world which it is, in principle, beyond the power of science to give." [Ayer, *Language*, 48]. "The presence or absence of a creative super-intelligence is unequivocally a scientific question, even if it is not in practice—or not yet—a decided one." [Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 59-59].

<sup>35</sup> Consider, for example, how common it is becoming to distill ethical issues into Darwinian terms as does Sam Harris's *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*, reprint (New York: Free Press, 2011) and to reduce all things human to human biology as does Edward O. Wilson's *On Human Nature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978).

<sup>36</sup> Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, 1982), 309-310.

it was incumbent upon me to come to terms with these theological challenges. Of utmost significance for me was the issue of the inerrancy of the Bible. But there are two ways that one can assault the integrity and inerrancy of the Bible. One way is to come right out and attribute error to the Bible. This way at least affirms the correct theory of truth in as much as it make the allegation that the claims of the Bible, at least at some points, do not correspond to reality.

Another way is a bit more subtle. This way tries to affirm that the Bible is true while denying certain claims of Scripture. This is only possible if one has an alternative theory of what it means for the Bible to be true. Such a move would give rise to theologians who wanted to affirm their fidelity to the Bible, using phrases like "biblical authority," while at the same time claiming that the Bible contained errors. Geisler was one of the first (certainly the first I had encountered) who began to sound the alarm about these subtle attacks on the truth of the Bible in his very important article "The Concept of Truth in the Inerrancy Debate."<sup>37</sup> How can one simultaneously maintain the "truth" of the Bible while attributing errors to it? It certainly cannot be with the correspondence view of truth. Instead, they proffer a functional (or intentional) theory. This theory of truth says that a statement is true in as much as it fulfills its intended purpose or function. Since (they might argue) the purpose of the Bible is to lead us to salvation, then the Bible is true when it achieves this purpose despite the fact that it might contain errors along the way.

Consider these words from Daniel P. Fuller about the mustard seed in the Gospel of Matthew.

Although the mustard seed is not the smallest of all seeds, yet Jesus referred to it as such [because] to have gone contrary to their mind on what was the smallest seed would have so diverted their attention from the knowledge that would bring salvation to their souls that they might well have failed to hear these all-important revelational truths.<sup>38</sup>

Fuller evidently concedes to the critic that Jesus was wrong about the mustard seed. But because the "truthfulness" of Jesus' words is to be found, not in any correspondence to reality, but rather to the fact that Jesus was intending to lead His hearers to salvation, then Fuller can claim that he holds the Bible to be true or authoritative and at the same time claim that the Bible has factual

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<sup>37</sup> Norman L. Geisler, "The Concept of Truth in the Inerrancy Debate," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (October-December, 1980): 327-339.

<sup>38</sup> Daniel P. Fuller, "Benjamin B. Warfield's View of Faith and History," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 11 (Spring 1968): 81-82, quoted in Geisler, "The Concept of Truth," pp. 336-337.

errors. This function or intention is that in terms of which the "truth" of the Bible is to be defined.<sup>39</sup> Going to such measures as opting for a bankrupt theory of truth can lead to ridiculous statements. Russell Dilday argued that "the authority of the Bible, however, is based not so much on the perfection and reliability of its text as it is on the truth which it declares."<sup>40</sup> Even a common sense appraisal of Dilday's comment shows that something is wrong when the Bible can lack perfection and reliability and yet proclaim truth. I would guess that even Dilday had to use a correspondence theory of truth to distinguish where the Bible seemingly lacked such perfection and reliability. It takes the correspondence theory of truth to define the other theories of truth.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> There is no reason for one to retool his theory of truth to rightly interpret these verses. Within the context Jesus was talking, the mustard seed was the smallest seed. Jesus' statement corresponded to reality. I am reminded of a joke my brother Tom pulled during a meeting we were having in someone's home. Some of us were talking in the living room while others were in the kitchen preparing sandwiches for us all. Someone stuck her head through the door and asked "Does anyone like mayonnaise?" Tom responded, "I think my uncle likes mayonnaise!" The joke played off the fact that the question in its context was asking whether anyone within our group in the current meeting liked mayonnaise. She was not asking whether anyone in the world like mayonnaise. I we had answered "no" this would have been completely consistent with the fact that there might be people somewhere in the world did like mayonnaise. No one would have accused us of saying something false and no one would have needed to opt for an erroneous theory of truth to defend our integrity.

For a treatment of alleged discrepancies and errors in the Bible, see Norman L. Geisler and Thomas Howe, *When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook on Bible Difficulties* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1992), reprinted as *The Big Book of Bible Difficulties: Clear and Concise Answers from Genesis to Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008). An abridged version was published as *Making Sense of Bible Difficulties: Clear and Concise Answers from Genesis to Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009).

<sup>40</sup> Russell H. Dilday, Jr., *The Doctrine of Biblical Authority* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1982), 86.

<sup>41</sup> For a full discussion of various hermeneutical concerns vis-à-vis biblical inerrancy, see Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus, eds. *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy & the Bible: Papers from ICBI Summit II* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books/ICBI, 1984). This is a work in a series published by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy. Other works by ICBI include (in order of publication): James Montgomery Boice, ed. *The Foundation of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978); Earl D. Radmacher, ed. *Can We Trust the Bible? Leading Theologians Speak Out on Biblical Inerrancy* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1979); Norman L. Geisler, ed. *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979); Norman L. Geisler, ed. *Biblical Errancy: An Analysis of Its Philosophical Roots* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981); ; Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest, eds, *Challenges to Inerrancy: A Theological Response* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984); John Hanna, ed. *Inerrancy and the Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984); Kenneth Kantzer , ed. *Applying the Scripture: Papers from ICBI Summit III* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, Academic, 1987). Other relevant works during that era include John Warwick Montgomery, ed. *God's Inerrant Word: An International Symposium on the Trustworthiness of Scripture* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1974); Harold Linsdell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1976) and his follow-up *The Bible in the Balance: A Further Look at the Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979). Thankfully, Geisler has revisited the issue of inerrancy in light of the newest attacks in Norman L. Geisler and William C. Roach, *Defending Inerrancy: Affirming the Accuracy of Scripture for a New Generation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011).



## Philosophy and Human Life

I should like to give one last example of the way philosophy is crucial to sound theology. In addition to the notion of function as it pertains to a theory of truth, there is another aspect of function that warrants an examination. Here, I am not thinking about a theory of truth but a "theory" of the nature of objects. I submit that there is a distinction between defining a thing functionally and defining a thing essentially. Used properly, they each have a legitimate place. Consider, for example what a spoon is. In defining a spoon, we understand it to be a thing that spoons. What it is to be a spoon is to be an object that can perform the function of a spoon. This has some interesting and important implications. If you were sitting at your breakfast table and someone came up to you and said that you were eating your breakfast cereal with a "false" spoon, you would certainly have several reactions. First, you would wonder how someone got into your house while you were eating breakfast! Second, you would probably be quite puzzled by the claim. It is not that you would disagree with him and launch into an argument defending your spoon against this skeptic. Instead, you probably would not understand exactly what he is saying about your spoon when he said it was a "false" spoon. After all, it does not seem that the categories of 'true' and 'false' apply to spoons as such. It does not make sense talk about true or false spoons. Anything that performs the function of spooning the cereal from the bowl to your mouth just *is* a spoon.

If I may interrupt myself before I finish my point about function and essence, let me make a further comment about functional definitions. I believe that one of the reasons why our defense of the Christian faith seems to fall on deaf ears is because many people have a functional view of religion. They do not see religion as making objective truth claims about reality. Instead, they see religion as something that fulfills a certain function on one's life. It gives one a sense of purpose, a sense of cohesion to one's life, a sense of being a part of a community, a sense of being a part of something bigger than oneself, a sense of being a part of something that will carry one after one dies, and more. As such, for them the categories of true and false do not seem to apply. When we say that Christianity is true, it might not be that they disagree with us as much as it might be that they are truly perplexed as to exactly what we mean. In this situation, before we can defend the claims of Christ as true, we have to help these unbelievers understand that Christianity is (among other things) making truth claims about reality. Though Christianity might have certain functions (like the ones listed above) it is not defined by these functions.

Returning to my discussion of the distinction between functional and essential definitions, consider, in contrast to the spoon, what a baby is. Here we recognize that a baby is not merely something that has functions. While it certainly does *have* functions, it is not the case that it *is* its functions. While it might be the case that we identify a thing as a human being by observing its functions, we realize that its functions are not what make it a human being. Instead, the baby is a human being because it possesses a human essence or nature—what the theologians call a soul. It has this nature even in the absences of certain functions. While it is of the nature of a human to see, being blind does not make one less than human.

The distinction between functional definitions and essential definitions might help explain (at least in part) the disconnect between those who argue pro-life and those who argue pro-choice. I suspect that many in the pro-choice community hear our claims that the unborn is a human being to be as ridiculous as someone insisting that the unrefined metal ore in the ground is already a spoon. Since we know that the unrefined metal ore in the ground will become a spoon only when it can function as a spoon, some pro-choice advocates mistakenly think that the unborn will become a human being only when it can function as a human being. They must be helped in understanding that a human being is a human being by virtue of its essence. But to talk about essence (at least in some contexts) is to talk philosophy.

### **Conclusion**

In looking at how philosophy is critical to defending the truth that God exists, to a sound hermeneutic regarding the attributes of God, to providing the tools and methods to deal with issues of theories of and tests for truth with reference to the inerrancy of the Bible, I have only scratched the surface of how I believe theology needs philosophy. While I have known philosophers (even Christian philosophers) who seem to do philosophy for its own sake, I celebrate philosophy's role as the handmaid that services the queen of the sciences, theology. I am grateful for the opportunity afforded me to pursue a career in philosophy and apologetics. It was an opportunity due largely in part to the wise counsel of Norman Geisler those many days ago in seminary. For that, I am indebted to him. Thank you, Dr. Geisler.