

Philosophy after Christ

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Consider the words of Justin Martyr written in the middle of the second century after the birth of Christ and after Justin's conversion to Christianity:

Philosophy is indeed one's greatest possession, and is most precious in the sight of God, to whom it alone leads us and to whom it unites us, and in truth they who have applied themselves to philosophy are holy men.¹

In addition to the praise heaped upon the philosophers, among whom Justin had counted himself before his conversion,² the text is one of the earliest pieces of evidence for the historical reality of Christian intellectual engagement with pagan or secular philosophy. Whether that engagement proved spiritually fruitful or sterile in any particular age or any particular tradition of philosophy, Christian intellectuals have often sought out engagement with philosophy as an inherent task of the intellectual life of the Church, in order to pursue and develop the understanding of Christian revelation and the mode of life informed by it. One lasting result of the impetus represented by Justin is to be found even now in the normative requirement in Catholic education that, at a certain stage of development, anyone who receives a

¹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, in *Selections from the Fathers of the Church*, vol. 3, *St. Justin Martyr*, trans. Thomas B. Falls (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 5.

² See Justin's description in *Dialogue with Trypho* of the various schools of philosophy he tried.

serious Catholic education must be introduced to serious philosophical reflection on where we came from, what we are, and where we are born to go.

In addition, one of the general points John Henry Newman made in *The Idea of a University* is that the human mind looks for unity in the diversity of intellectual disciplines it pursues. In search of this unity, it seeks a kind of primary discipline that takes into account the truths discovered throughout the other disciplines as it seeks to understand what it can of the whole of reality, not just its parts. But Newman also pointed out that, in the absence of such a unifying discipline, practitioners of each particular discipline will often claim for their particular discipline the prize of being primary—of being the discipline by which all others must be understood and judged.³

Take classical and modern physics. A familiar claim of some physicists, but even more so of non-physicist physicalists, is that physics is the fundamental intellectual discipline for understanding what is real. All reality, living reality, historical reality, moral reality, indeed perhaps even literary reality, must be reduced to reality as described by the physicists or rejected as unreal or epiphenomenal, or in a kinder, gentler vein, non-reductively emergent and supervenient. Whichever position is taken, whether reduction, non-reductive emergence, or epiphenomenalism, the thought is that the real work of the really real is done by reality as described by physics, either in its actual contemporary state or, more likely, in an idealized future state always on the horizon of where physics presently is. We are really atoms spinning ceaselessly in the void, mostly empty space, the warp and woof of a four-dimensional space-time manifold, or congeries of strings in an even more bizarre thirteen-dimensional manifold, or whatever was said most recently to surpass what was said before that by the leading physicists in California or Cambridge.

However, anyone who has actually practiced physics knows that, even when uttered by a physicist, these are not claims *of* physics, but *about* physics. What prompts them is the sense that there is no intellectual discipline other than contemporary physics itself that can both understand the achievements of physics and integrate them into a larger intellectual comprehension of reality as a whole. These claims about physics nicely display Newman's point about the way in which a particular discipline, in the absence of a larger more comprehensive discipline, can take on an importance for its practitioners well beyond its disciplinary limits.

³ John Henry Newman, *Idea of a University* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996). discourse 3, no. 4 and 10, and esp. discourse 4, nos. 4–5 and 14–15.

In the case of physics, if a more comprehensive unifying discipline is not to be found, this attitude is not entirely unjustified, for Newman's point is partly Aristotelian. Aristotle had pointed out that, if one cannot show that unchangeable, and thus non-physical beings, exist, then what Aristotle called "first philosophy" would just be physics as he understood it, the science of change, rather than that discipline that in philosophy has come to be called metaphysics.⁴ Even as physics has changed extraordinarily since Aristotle, his point still appears to hold for contemporary physics.

But if such an overarching unifying discipline is to be found, claiming for one's own limited discipline the role of unifying discipline is hubris that goes beyond the discipline itself, is not rationally justified, and lacks the proper humility of an intellectual discipline before its proper object. Physics should stick to physics and not masquerade as metaphysics, if there is something other than and greater than the corporeal world as described by physics, perhaps literature, or music, or God. So, for Newman, to concretely understand education, rather than just abstractly, one has to answer the question as to whether there is or is not such a unifying discipline to be found, and what its object is.

The point I want to make here is that what we call philosophy in a Christian education has to have proper humility and avoid hubris, because it has to take history seriously. And the history it has to take seriously is the history of Christ incarnate. It must be philosophy after Christ. To make my point, I want to distinguish here three senses of "philosophy": a sociological sense, a sapiential sense, and an autonomous sense. In one sense of the term, the autonomous sense, philosophy has an essential place in Christian education, and to the extent possible ought to engage in the unifying activity that Newman describes. However, it has to be open to the possibility that it is not the primary discipline of which Newman spoke. I want to claim that, in another sense of the term, the sapiential, there is no such thing as Christian philosophy apart from Sacred Theology. In the autonomous sense, however, I do think there is something that we could call Christian philosophizing. The latter will not characterize a field of study, but rather provide an insight into the character of the one who pursues philosophy, not just in Christian educational institutions, but wherever and whenever he or she pursues autonomous philosophy as such.

⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 6.1.1026a27–32 and 11.7.1064b6–12, trans. W. D. Ross, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

How To Speak of Philosophy

We can speak of philosophy in many ways, including the common cultural sense of the question “what’s your philosophy of life?” Here I would like to consider it in the context of education. In that case, we can speak of it in a sociological sense, in which case we would mean by “philosophy” something like the collection of all the different things that happen to take place in the departments called “philosophy department” throughout the world of higher education. Here there is no normative content to what we say. No claim is made that this is what philosophy should be, only what it in fact is at this particular time. Particular individuals within departments of philosophy in the sociological sense may make claims as to what philosophy ought to be, which is often what the claimant himself or herself is doing. One is reminded of the exchange between Socrates and Euthyphro, when Socrates asks Euthyphro what piety is, and Euthyphro responds, “what I’m doing now.” However, Socrates points out that his answer does not answer Socrates’s question. Nonetheless, however much particular individuals might assert a normative claim about philosophy, little agreement among these individuals is to be found. So, in the sociological sense, “philosophy” is used descriptively, and it makes little sense to ask what should be studied in those departments. Philosophy in this sense just is what it is, and it is not what it is not.

On the other hand, we could also take “philosophy” in a normative sense conceived of as a discipline with a particular subject matter. In the normative sense and looking at what philosophy is sociologically, it makes sense to ask whether it is what it should be. Could it be better? Could it be worse? Consider a similar case. The same initial distinction might be observed in distinguishing sociologically all the different things that take place within departments of mathematics, which may include such things as computer science or logic, versus the normative conception of mathematics as concerned with quantity and extension as such. Logic provides an interesting example of the ambiguity involved in considering a field sociologically, since the very same study of logic considered normatively quite often takes place in both the mathematics and philosophy departments of the same educational institutions, with its practitioners often talking more to each other across the departments than they do the members of their own respective departments.

Initially, it is perhaps easier to talk about philosophy if we consider it sociologically rather than normatively. Considered sociologically, there is a long historical story to be told, at least in Western philosophy, about its founding in ancient Greek reflections upon the world and human nature, a

long history that proceeds on through the ages to the departments of philosophy that we now know understood in the sociological sense. However, sociologically it is not important whether all those departments themselves tell that story or pursue those or similar questions, because mostly they believe as a matter of fact that they are the present stage of that long history, whatever else they may choose to do.

That story can be told against the admittedly conventional but also useful historical divisions of ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary philosophy. The sociological story involves a beginning in which the scope of the subject matter of philosophy was fairly broad in the ancient world, including most disciplined approaches to understanding the different features of existence—physics, biology, mathematics, but also ethics, tragedy, rhetoric, and so on. That breadth of scope by and large remains within the medieval period, particularly after the retrieval of the Aristotelian philosophical corpus in the Latin West of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. However, it is important to acknowledge different variations on the theme, given the quite different historical and religious conditions within which philosophy took place—Islamic, Jewish, and Christian.

Characteristic of the modern and contemporary period is a narrowing of that scope of philosophy, as various disciplines spun off from philosophy as such, particularly natural scientific disciplines, but also with the birth of the humanities and literary and historical disciplines, leaving philosophy with less and less to do, as it were. This is a familiar story. Take for example the fact that natural science was still being referred to as “natural philosophy” as late as the early twentieth century, despite the fact that by then it bore almost no resemblance to what went on in departments of philosophy. Forgive the personal anecdote, but while a physics major in college, I used to collect textbooks of “natural philosophy” as a hobby. They weren’t very interesting to read, insofar as they pretty much all said the same thing in the same mathematical way with a few improvements here and there, and once in a while what appeared to be a revolutionary chapter at the end. But somewhere the name of those textbooks changed from “natural philosophy” to “physics” around and as late as 1920.

There are two features of this history in the sociological sense that are worthy of note. First, there is a certain forgetfulness of the fact that, in its origins, philosophy consisted in a disciplined way of life more than it did a speculative perspective on ways of life—a practice in the world more than a perspective on it as we tend to think of it now. The French scholar Pierre Hadot examined this character of philosophy in its origins in his *Philosophy*

as a *Way of Life*.⁵ Hadot criticizes the contemporary perspective of readers of ancient philosophy who see the ancients doing pretty much what we now do, building systems of thought, whether theoretical or practical. However, Hadot distinguishes philosophy from philosophical discourse in the ancient world. What we now read is the product of the philosophical discourses of the philosophical mode of life practiced by the ancients. The discourses were not intended to be systems that one then sought to apply. They were produced in the midst of carrying on the philosophical mode of life reflective of the figures identified as their *arche* or principle—Pythagoras, Epictetus, Epicurus, Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, and so on. We, however, look back upon the “schools of philosophy” expressed in the philosophical discourse left to us associated with these figures as constructed systems of thought and theories and remark on how confused these ancient “systems” appear to be.

On the contrary, according to Hadot these figures practiced a way of life that involved philosophical discourse in the development and teaching of that way of life. But those discourses were not systematic treatises on the good life that one would then follow as if a blueprint. Entering into the teacher–disciple relationship was more important than achieving the system of thought as an object of speculation. You lived as a Stoic, a Platonist, a Peripatetic. It filled up your day and life, if you practiced it well. This aspect of the philosophy as a disciplined way of life is nicely captured in Aristotle’s insight that the theoretical study of ethics will not make anyone good. You must become a pupil of those who are good, a disciple of one who is good to learn the discipline of goodness.

Second, in the modern and contemporary period, there was a growing anxiety about just what the role of philosophy is in a world, so different from the ancient world in which it was born and the medieval world in which it encountered in a sustained way Christian thought. What is its task now, after having become so narrow with the loss of so many areas of interest? At the same time as it has become increasingly narrow, in a kind of recapitulation of Newman’s point about universities without a unifying discipline, contemporary philosophy has become increasingly specialized and correspondingly fractious, and can no longer lay claim to the unifying discipline as it may have once done. If it is not unified in itself, how can it unify all the others?

This fractiousness may help to explain why so often philosophy departments adopt the sociological stance when thinking about themselves, what

⁵ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995). See also Hadot, “Ancient Philosophy: An Ethics or a Practice,” in *The Selected Writings of Pierre Hadot: Philosophy as Practice*, trans. Matthew Sharpe and Federico Testa (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

they do, and how they should proceed. By contrast, despite the equally specialized nature of their disciplines, physicists, mathematicians, biologists, and the like can tell you what each of their fields do. But what do the physicists see when they look at philosophy? What answer are they given when they ask of the philosophers, “what do you do?” Often the answer given when defending its place in the curriculum is that philosophy teaches something called “critical thinking,” which critical thinking, it seems, is sorely absent in fields like history, literature, mathematics, or physics.

Philosophy in a Second Sense

However, if we turn to considering philosophy normatively, claiming for it a certain subject matter, we can talk about a second sense of the term quite different from the sociological sense only too briefly described above. Christians and their institutions of higher education have a certain advantage in thinking normatively about what philosophy ought to be, even after the sociological diaspora of the modern period. A useful starting point for the normative consideration of philosophy for Christians is reflection upon the point that St. John Paul II made in his 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, that it is important for philosophy to return to and recover its sapiential dimension—it ought to pursue that sapiential dimension.

By referring to the *sapiential* dimension of philosophy, St. John Paul deliberately places philosophy within a normative conception of philosophy as the love of and search for wisdom. While acknowledging a broad diversity of philosophical approaches, he places philosophy normatively considered within the traditions of philosophy born within ancient Greece that flourished in many different ways and even in some traditions into the modern period despite the advance of the sociological diaspora.

Focusing upon this sapiential character of philosophy and situating it within the tradition of ancient Greek thought, one should be under no illusions that others will not dispute that such a setting ought to provide a normative account of philosophy and its tasks. It is precisely because one takes a normative stance that one enters into inquiry and dispute with others about its subject matter, others such as Justin Martyr. One task of philosophy conceived in the normative sense I have adopted is to argue about whether there is any hope for such sapiential philosophy.

Consider Plato and Aristotle. Plato had described a love of wisdom that is the pursuit of the highest cause or causes of things that allows one to put order into one’s own life and the life of the world around one. Platonic wisdom, if achieved through discipline, would have this twofold character,

speculative and normatively practical because of the speculative vision. Recall the vision of the philosopher in the Allegory of the Cave, outside the cave gazing upon the Sun, the Form of the Good that gives being and unity to all other forms and all other things. Where the prisoner had been compelled by some mysterious undescribed external compulsion to leave the cave, dragged kicking and screaming out of it, by contrast, in the vision of the Sun, informed by goodness as such, the former prisoner, now the lover of wisdom, experiences an internal compulsion to return to the cave and assist others.

Consider for a moment the asymmetrical parallel of the two compulsions—the compulsion to leave the cave and the compulsion to return to the cave. The prisoners are enslaved by their ignorance. But the image of their imprisonment does not work as an allegory if they are aware of their shackles, aware of being chained there. They are unknowingly compelled to remain seated gazing at the non-being of the shadows. They first feel a compulsion when they are freed and made to get up and look at the fire behind them. But the compulsion they feel comes to them extrinsically. Someone or something is pulling them away from the shadows. No doubt in their ignorance, this feeling of external compulsion feels like enslavement, and yet in reality the compulsion is freeing them. Yet they are forced eventually out into the open beyond the cave. Only now are they free to wander about, drawn to the things they see by their own desire, drawn to the really real and ultimately the Sun, the Form of the Good. However, the vision of the Good results in another new compulsion, a compulsion that has been internalized and that leads the lover of wisdom back into the cave to help others out. The vision of the Good is the wisdom that has become his form, the form of his life, his action toward himself and toward others—not a discourse, but a disciplined way of life. Because the compulsion comes from within now, rather than from without, the philosopher is genuinely free in his mode of life, his disciplined practice of care for himself and care for others. *Veritas vos liberabit*—the truth will set you free. So, the wisdom that informs the philosopher is both speculative and practical. It is of course also tragic as presented by Plato's Socrates, as the lover of wisdom's return to the cave leads to his death, overcome by the resistance of the very slaves to ignorance that he now seeks to free and drag out of the cave. The fact that the philosopher who returns to the cave is killed by the other prisoners leaves the reader with a subtle suggestion that whatever compulsion originally freed the philosopher could not have involved merely human agency, but must have been greater, perhaps something of the divine. Finally, it must be granted that Socrates himself does not see death as a tragedy. As he explains in the *Phaedo*, the love

of wisdom is nothing other than preparation for death, and he consoles his friends with arguments about the soul after death.

After Aristotle, however, the speculative aspect of this search will be understood to be the search for first or primary philosophy that we now call metaphysics, contrasted with the practical search for *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. Still, Aristotle also said with some great degree of practical wisdom that the speculative study of ethics will not make anyone good. Much less so, we might add, the speculative pursuit of physics or metaphysics. So, even there we see that, for Aristotle, while ethics may take the normative aspects of human life as its subject matter, it is not itself the normative practical wisdom that Plato sought. However, it is important not to forget or misunderstand Hadot's point. Even for Aristotle, philosophy itself, including the practices that lead to both speculative and practical wisdom, however distinct they may be, was a disciplined way of life, not a speculative system, as it may be for us now. Still, after Aristotle, while the ideal of the wise man is the one who possesses both speculative and practical wisdom, the unity of wisdom itself has become problematic. In a sense, it has undergone a divorce, severing the speculative from the normative.

By and large, with other traditions like Stoicism mixed in, it is this Greek sapiential tradition, including Aristotle's distinction between speculative and practical wisdom, that the early Church encounters and engages, the historical encounter given evidence to by Justin Martyr.

The North African theologian Tertullian took an attitude quite different from Justin Martyr's toward the philosophical disciplines. He saw them as the seedbed of heresies the Church needed to avoid. Thus, his famous rhetorical question often cited as, "what has Athens to do with Jerusalem."⁶ But it is important to recognize that Tertullian posed that dichotomy on behalf of the notion of revelation as the *true* way of life, as genuine wisdom, writing, "Christ called Himself truth, not custom." His claim was not on behalf of a conception of the irrationality of the Christian faith, as if accepting its irrationality constituted the merit of faith. His claim was on behalf of God's revelation as genuinely rational and truly sapiential, as opposed to the errors of the philosophers in their claims to wisdom. By contrast, Justin sees

⁶ Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 7.9–11: "What then of Athens and Jerusalem? What of the Academy and the Church? What of heretics and Christians? Our education is from the porch of Solomon, he who himself had taught that "the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart [Quid ergo athenis et hierosolymis? quid academiae et ecclesiae? Quid haereticis et christianis? nostra quo de porticu solomonis est qui et ipse tradiderat dominum in simplicitate cordis esse quaerendum]." (Library of Latin Texts Online, Brepolis Publishers. www.brepolis.net; trans. mine).

within these disciplines of ancient philosophy a *preparatio evangelica*. Rather than a seedbed of heresy, if understood correctly they are the soil within which the seed of Christian life can grow and flower, providing material to be transformed in the flourishing of Christian life, for those who hear and accept the good news of life in Christ who is Truth.

Now, with this particular normative sense of philosophy in view, what philosophy should be, its sapiential character, there is another broad historical story about philosophy and where we are now, very much like but also crucially different from the sociological history described earlier. In the ancient period, the philosophical search for wisdom took place in many ways as a counterpoint to the cultic and civic religion of the pantheon, as a certain demythologizing and depersonalizing of the religious search for understanding of the highest causes of things.

An interesting figure here is Socrates. On the one hand, as he describes his quest for wisdom defending his life in the *Apology*, he takes seriously the Oracle of Delphi that sets him out on his quest for wisdom, attending to the voice of the divine reported to him by his friend Chaerephon, the divine voice that played a role in the cultic religion of ancient Greece. In addition, before he dies, Socrates instructs his disciple Crito that “we owe a cock to Asclepius,” a cultic religious sacrifice. On the other hand, in his dialogue with Euthyphro, he explicitly asks Euthyphro, “Euthyphro, do you really believe these stories about the gods,” stories often portraying the gods as engaged in what look like petty human squabbles, in particular mentioning Zeus’s imprisoning his father Cronos who had previously castrated his own father Uranus—primeval Oedipal acts, as it were, among the gods and titans.

Most importantly, the dialogue ends in confusion as they fail to figure out what the appropriate human language is with which to speak of the gods. This result is not a denial of the existence of the divine, what we would now call “atheism.” It is rather, and can be understood to be, a religiously motivated apoplexy, in the quest for wisdom faced with divine transcendence. How can one be genuinely pious if one cannot speak coherently of or to the gods? So, Socratic demythologizing does not come with atheism about the gods, but a lack of ability to speak. This demythologizing move of ancient Greek philosophy can be seen to culminate in Aristotle’s divine being as self-thinking-thought-thinking-itself-thinking.

However, starting in the later stages of the ancient period and continuing into the medieval in the encounter of Jewish and Christian revelation with the Greek tradition, we see in the West a sometimes negative but often positive appropriation of the Greek philosophical search for wisdom in service to a better understanding of that sacred revelation. Ancient philosophy adopts

the role of handmaiden to what Aquinas calls *Sacra Doctrina*, or what we now call Sacred Theology.

As Joseph Ratzinger describes this stage in the engagement of Christian religious faith with philosophy, there is a kind of re-personalizing without re-mythologizing of the ultimate principle of being, once it is recognized that this ultimate principle that the Greeks sought is the god that Jews, Muslims, and Christians worship, Christians knowing that god as a consubstantial Trinity of persons.⁷ However, as this re-personalizing described by Ratzinger is taking place, philosophical reasoning assists the universalizing concern of Christianity toward the recognition of God as first principle of all being, and ultimately creator *ex nihilo* of all that is—the God of Israel is the God of all. In effect, the universal highest principle of all that exists, sought by the Greeks, speaks like a god without myth—a possibility mostly incomprehensible to Greek philosophical thought.⁸ Not even Aristotle’s de-mythologized self-thinking-thought-thinking-itself-thinking speaks. It thinks itself without speaking of itself. But in the Gospel of John the *Logos* is a *Verbum*.

Finally, in the revelation that culminates in Christ, the practical ethical question of wisdom—“how ought we to live?”—is captured in the recognition that, along with all other created things, persons in particular come from God but also have their natural destiny and fulfillment, their happiness, *eudaimonia* or *beatitudo*, in a knowing loving union with God. We ought to live knowingly and lovingly as creatures of God, made to his image, and destined, God willing and by his grace, to eternal beatitude and joy with him and one another in him.⁹ The Christian life is a disciplined way of life informed by what God has spoken. “Nil hoc verbo veritatis verbo verius” — “Truth Himself speaks truly, or there’s nothing true.”¹⁰

⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 70–76 (ch. 3: “The God of the Philosophers”). See also Etienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1941).

⁸ See Plato, *Timaeus* 29d, for the mythic character of his account of the generation, not creation, of the world as we experience it. David Sedley argues that creation accounts as one sees in such pre-Christian settings are always a creating out of a preexisting stuff that is acted upon, not a causing to be from nothing; see *Creation and Its Critics in Antiquity* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007). See also my “Evolution and Catholic Faith,” in *Darwin in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Phillip R. Sloan, Gerald McKenny, and Kathleen Eggleston (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 269–98.

⁹ See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 1, a. 1, and I-II, qq. 1–5.

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Adoro Te Devote*, trans. Gerard Manley Hopkins, rosarychurch.net/mystic/aquinas.html.

This movement of appropriating Greek philosophy within *Sacra Doctrina* finds exemplary but not exclusive form in Augustine and Aquinas. Augustine recognizes the ways in which the questions of the philosophers are the natural human questions that arise in the heart of all human beings concerning happiness, joy, and peace. Even if, as Augustine himself believes, Christian revelation provides the best response to those questions, the questions do not come from within Christian revelation itself. They are the questions of the restless human heart itself, arising out of common human experience, created precisely to ask those questions. In that respect Augustine continues the movement in Christian life begun with Justin Martyr. The nature we are born to is the proximate cause of our questions, the nature the Greeks sought to understand.

Yet what Augustine recognized was that the Greek philosophical pursuit of wisdom, originating in the study of human life or nature, only deepens the natural restlessness of the heart for God, as one recognizes that, in the midst of all its wonderful achievements, secular pagan wisdom ultimately fails to bring to the desire of the heart understanding, joy, and peace. It does not bring rest to the restless heart. At its best, it promotes further inquiry, deeper questions but also greater unsatisfied human longing. Only in what has been revealed in and through Christ do such rest and peace come. Rather than humanity rising to the heights of wisdom, wisdom descends in the person of Christ to the depths of humanity.

Still, philosophy, understood as the sapiential quest of pagan thought, has for Augustine a place within the Christian life precisely because of the depth with which it can explore and encourage the restlessness of the heart for God, blowing, as it were, upon the still glowing embers of human desire after sin, stirring up the flames of a burning desire that knows no satisfaction in this world.

Thus, in this engagement with the Greek search for wisdom as we see it in Augustine, the early Church is essentially arguing that the revelation of Christ made known to us through the Church's appropriation of Sacred Scripture is what the Greek philosophers were looking for. The questions of the Greeks find adequate and ultimate answers that constitute love as joy only in revelation, and most clearly in Christ incarnate. The revelation of Christ our savior is the normative philosophy the Greeks were looking for. The *Confessions* are, of course, as much a story of Augustine's intellectual struggles, his intellectual concupiscence and pride of life, as of his struggles with bodily concupiscence.¹¹ And the wisdom he ultimately finds that brings

¹¹ See Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 30, a. 1, ad 1, and q. 77, a. 5, on intellectual concupiscence and "pride of life."

rest to his heart is both speculative and normative. Philosophy as a way of life after Christ now has the primary character of listening rather than striving, reading rather than speaking, loving rather than grasping. Consider for a moment St. Ambrose and the extraordinary effect he had upon Augustine's conversion. Recall that one of the aspects of St. Ambrose's disciplined way of life that impressed Augustine most was his disciplined reading of Holy Scripture silently, silently in a world where most people read aloud when they read at all. That silent reading bore disciplined fruit in Ambrose's preaching that Augustine attentively listened to, preaching that at last spoke to Augustine's restless heart.

Nonetheless, that reading and listening lead to further questioning and inquiry into what has been revealed to one about the highest cause through whom all things were made, Christ the *Logos*, the *Verbum*, the Word made incarnate. The lover of wisdom seeks to love what he or she has come to know and understand. Christ is Wisdom incarnate, and the disciplined loving pursuit of understanding Christ and all things in God as revealed by Christ is the wisdom the Greeks sought but could not provide for themselves. After Augustine, the normative sapiential traditions of philosophy inherited from the Greeks have become inherently Augustinian.

Aquinas will repeat this fundamental *apologia* that sacred doctrine is the normative philosophy the Greeks sought. That is the extraordinary achievement of the beautiful argument of the first question of the first part of the *Summa theologiae*. In that question Aquinas argues that, despite the authentic achievements of the "philosophical disciplines," still, by the standards of Greek philosophy itself, specifically the standards set out by Plato and particularly Aristotle in the *Posterior Analytics*, *Sacra Doctrina* or Sacred Theology, which is intellectual inquiry that takes its starting point from divine revelation, is in the first place a *scientia* participating by faith in God's own self-understanding or *scientia*,¹² in the second place both a speculative and a practical *scientia*, in the third place most certain among all the *scientiae*, in the fourth place a wisdom, and in the fifth place the highest of all wisdoms as bearing upon the highest of all causes that allows us to put order into our own lives and in the world around us, primarily a discipline and only secondarily a discourse.

Aquinas underscores the aspect of *Sacra Doctrina* as providing the discipline necessary to achieve wisdom when, in commenting on the Apostle's Creed, he quotes Hab 2:4 and writes, "my righteousness lives by faith.' And

¹² This is in the ancient and medieval sense of "science" as an ordered body of knowledge pertaining to some subject matter, a sense much broader than we now employ to describe modern natural science in particular, but also the human and social sciences.

this is clear, since no one of the philosophers before the advent of Christ was able, despite his entire effort, to know God and of the things necessary to eternal life, so much as an old woman knows by faith after the advent of Christ.”¹³ Notice that Aquinas does not here deny that the philosophers before Christ knew anything of God and what is necessary. Employing for emphasis what in our age is an unfortunate metaphor, he says it does not compare to what a person of faith knows after Christ. This theme of the poverty of the wisdom of the philosophers is analyzed more systematically in *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 1, a. 1, where Aquinas asks “whether it is necessary for there to be a discipline in addition to the philosophical disciplines.” It is necessary to have such a discipline because of the poverty of what the philosophical disciplines achieve in the knowledge of the human end and the discipline to achieve it, the difficulty of knowing it apart from faith, and the many errors that accompany even what the philosophical disciplines do achieve. The necessary discipline is *Sacra Doctrina*.

In effect, the unified search for Platonic wisdom took a fall in Aristotle when he separated speculative wisdom from practical wisdom. However, Aquinas puts them back together again in *Sacra Doctrina*, knowing full well of Aristotle's separation. Still, with a nod to Aristotle's distinction, Aquinas does recognize that there is a way in which *Sacra Doctrina* can be pursued by the learned that does not in fact lead to the practice of the way of life that Christ manifests—in Hadot's terms a mere discourse rather than a genuine philosophical discipline. In addition, echoing Aristotle, he recognizes that those who engage in the practice may be more learned in *Sacra Doctrina* than the theologians.¹⁴

Sacra Doctrina is the wisdom Plato and the philosophers sought, the position Justin Martyr took in the second century, Augustine at the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth, and again Aquinas in the thirteenth. It is *Sacra Doctrina* that is philosophy after Christ. Aquinas, for all of his use of Aristotle, has a fundamentally Platonic and Augustinian sense of what philosophy as wisdom should be, given the historical fact of the Incarnation. Because of his faith in Christ, it is *Sacra Doctrina* as discipline. But where Plato's wisdom was ultimately a tragedy, Aquinas's is, in the classical sense, a *commedia*.

¹³ Aquinas, *Expositio in symbolum apostolorum*, proem. Aquinas's Latin, quoting Hab 2:4 has “iustus meus ex fide vivit,” where the Vulgate has “iustus autem in fide sua vivet.” So I have translated the passage in Aquinas somewhat freely to achieve something like a grammatically correct translation in English of what Aquinas appears to have been reading.

¹⁴ ST I, q. 1, a. 6, ad 3.

A Third Sense of Philosophy

However, Aquinas's discussion in the first question of the *Summa* now also allows us to isolate a third sense of philosophy from the two we have considered so far. It is a variation on the second, normative sense, but with an epistemological turn. While *Sacra Doctrina* counts as philosophy in the second, sapiential sense, indeed it is in that sense philosophy par excellence, we can also speak of philosophy as the endeavor of normative philosophy unaided by the epistemological resources of religious faith. In the very first article of question 1 of the *Summa*, Aquinas begins with the question "whether it is necessary that there be a discipline in addition to the philosophical disciplines?" Aquinas answers yes to that question, that the necessary discipline in addition to the philosophical disciplines is *Sacra Doctrina*, which we now know is the highest wisdom. When one reads that article, one often passes too quickly over the presupposition of the question, which is that the "philosophical disciplines" of which Aquinas writes do not have to justify themselves. They are taken for granted as achieving something, even if not the something that makes *Sacra Doctrina* necessary. Thus, in the first article, Aquinas is not justifying the legitimacy of what he calls "the philosophical disciplines." Those disciplines are not rejected, but taken for granted. On the contrary, Aquinas is justifying the legitimacy of *Sacra Doctrina*.

Aquinas believes such limited, narrowly circumscribed philosophy as manifested in the philosophical disciplines has a role to play as handmaiden to *Sacra Doctrina*, responding to challenges that come from outside of *Sacra Doctrina*, but also assisting from within in the pursuit of greater clarity and understanding of what has been revealed. Still, as limited philosophy, it has to recognize its ultimate inadequacy as wisdom. To say that it is inadequate as wisdom is not to say it is in principle in error, although Aquinas does not hesitate to point out errors when they occur in practice. It is only to recognize that it does not achieve what it strives for.

This third sense of philosophy is genuinely autonomous in that it does not rely upon *Sacra Doctrina* to provide it with principles and additional truths upon which to conduct itself. In this respect, although there are several other philosophical traditions that Aquinas draws upon, by and large it is autonomous Aristotelian philosophy that he employs as handmaiden to *Sacra Doctrina*. However, such autonomous philosophy is also open to the possibility of something greater than itself which it can serve, deepening the understanding of what we are, where we came from, and where we are going in a way that also increases the restlessness of our hearts by its

final inadequacy as wisdom. It is in this third sense that I deny that there is any such thing as Christian philosophy. If there is a Christian philosophy, it is nothing other than the *Sacra Doctrina* that epistemologically presupposes faith.

Nonetheless, now turning to the modern period, against the background of the development of the natural sciences and reflection upon the worldwide scale of natural evils and disasters, the third autonomous sense of philosophy becomes increasingly skeptical of the possibility of transcendent knowledge and wisdom, and turns away from its role as handmaiden to *Sacra Doctrina*, with some among the philosophers eventually even forbidding the aspirations of wisdom to attain a transcendent First Cause of all things. Increasingly, autonomous philosophy is devoted to attempting to provide a kind of alternative mundane wisdom over against what are understood to be the irrational claims of faith in a personal First Cause of all that exists.

Modern autonomous philosophy in this third sense now effectively re-mythologizes the Christian faith, mostly in order to turn away from that faith as irrational. God is now seen as one among the many gods of superstitious primitives. Often *Sacra Doctrina* is now portrayed as a form of irrationality, at best little more than a repository of morally uplifting stories, in order for autonomous philosophy to propose itself as a demythologized rational alternative to Christian faith, ironically recapitulating the move of ancient philosophy against Greek pagan religion before its encounter with Christian revelation. In that respect, it is a reactionary autonomous philosophy.

In short, in this second sapiential way of telling the story of philosophy that I have pursued here, in these three stages we have initially a philosophy searching for wisdom, then an autonomous philosophy giving way to and serving a greater love of wisdom that has been revealed to humankind by the personal first principle philosophy seeks, a first principle of being who speaks, and finally a reactionary philosophy seeking to free itself from what it perceives to be the bondage of a revealed and transcendent divine wisdom. It may seem harsh to speak of the modern move as reactionary, but what is meant by that is that, with some notable exceptions, it seeks to ignore history, even when it is being historical, and return to philosophy as it was before Christ. It is defensive of its autonomy in a way that ancient philosophy was not. In being so, it loses its humility.

Given our conventional divisions of ancient, medieval, and modern, we are of course in the fourth age—post-modern, as the reactionary modern philosophy has not paid its dues and kept its promises to provide wisdom free of all irrationalities of faith. By and large, this is well recognized in

continental philosophy, and increasingly so in Anglo-American philosophy. But it is the age in which the best we seem to be able to do in talking about philosophy is to return to the first sociological sense of philosophy—it is sociologically institutionalized and whatever is happening in departments with the name “philosophy” in the institutions of higher learning.

In giving these two alternative stories of philosophy, I have in the first place told oversimplified and flawed histories. Things are much more complicated than I have suggested. In the second place, suitably corrected, I have told two stories that are compatible. They do not exclude one another, but should rather be seen as complimentary. Part of the importance of emphasizing history is that there are many ways to see the story of philosophy and the situation we are now in that do not exclude one another, but rather shed light upon our predicament. That is why doing the history of philosophy is doing philosophy—it engages movements of thought embedded in traditions, not simply abstract lifeless concepts.

Coming to a Conclusion about Philosophy after Christ

I want to conclude with a suggestion. At the beginning I said that I do not think there is any such thing as Christian philosophy. Now we can see that what I mean by that is that there is no such thing as Christian philosophy if we are talking about autonomous philosophy. If we are speaking of sapiential philosophy, however, we have seen that Aquinas argues it is *Sacra Doctrina* that culminates in the Incarnation of Christ and our disciplined living in imitation of him.

However, even in the sense of autonomous philosophy, I do think there is such a thing as philosophizing in a Christian way. To philosophize in a Christian way is to take seriously the history of revelation and the Incarnation of Christ, not so much as a corrective to autonomous philosophy, as if providing otherwise unknown premises for argument, but as posing a challenge to philosophy in the third, limited and autonomous sense. If autonomous philosophy is to be true to the search for wisdom, it has to acknowledge and respond to the claims of Christ. That is not to say that, in acknowledging and responding to the claims of Christ, it transforms itself into Theology. No. But philosophy in the third, autonomous sense has to ask itself whether it is adequate to the task it has set itself, once it takes into account the historical fact of the Incarnation. It ought to defend its autonomy. But it ought also to consider whether it is the last word on reality. Indeed, it ought to consider whether it is even the first word on reality. Is it wisdom itself? Or is it more John the Baptist to one greater than it?

So, to what extent does philosophizing in a Christian way take its bearings from the truth of the claims that the Church makes about God and Christ? We ask this not because it will lead to the creation of something called Christian philosophy that has been revealed, not created. Rather, we ask it because it will inform the way in which Christians and their fellow travelers think about the tasks of philosophy in the third sense.

I say "fellow travelers" because it is possible to philosophize in a Christian way without affirming the truths of Christian faith, indeed, even without being a believer in God. To philosophize in a Christian way requires only that the philosopher take seriously the challenge to wisdom that the historical reality of Christ poses to the aspirations of philosophy in the third, autonomous sense. The autonomy of philosophy in the third sense consists in the fact that it does not take its epistemic starting points from a position of faith in divine revelation. However, that autonomy does not free it from the epistemic responsibility to consider the challenge that revelation poses to it as the search for wisdom. It should be the virtue of any philosopher in the third sense to acknowledge that there may be a greater wisdom, even if he or she does not recognize it. The standard of inquiry that requires autonomous philosophy to take seriously challenges to its claim to wisdom come from within autonomous philosophy itself. That is simply the humility of good philosophy.

In short, if we want to know what philosophy is after Christ, we have to ask ourselves in what sense we are speaking of philosophy. If in the first sociological sense, the answer is simple. What philosophy after Christ is is nothing less and nothing more than what takes place in philosophy departments in educational institutions throughout the world. But that is simply a philosophy that almost overwhelmingly does not take seriously the claims of Christianity. Indeed, in some but not all instances, it is a philosophy that explicitly sees itself as a rational alternative to the irrationality of Christian faith. In practice, it is to treat the claims of Christianity as if they are not truth claims, to treat Christianity as if it is a fideistic faith, not a rational faith willing to put itself to the test. Looking back to Justin Martyr's praise of philosophy, to pursue philosophy merely in that first sense is, on the contrary, intellectually lazy.

If we are talking about philosophy in the second sense, then we are attempting to recapture the sapiential dimension of philosophy, as St. John Paul II urged us. But if we are talking about philosophy in that second sense, and if Aquinas is right, we have to acknowledge that we are talking about *Sacra Doctrina* broadly construed, and not what any department of philosophy in the sociological sense would recognize as philosophy.

So, I end with a question. Is there hope for autonomous philosophy, philosophy in the third sense acknowledged by Aquinas, philosophy that is not dependent upon revelation for its principles and central truths and yet is open in humility to a greater wisdom than itself? This is autonomous philosophy that is recognizable in the philosophy departments of this world, even if not particularly advocated or practiced in some. In that respect, it is philosophy that can dialectically engage the other philosophies that animate those departments, both learning from them and contributing to them when possible.

In particular, autonomous philosophy done well can be said to be a kind of Socratic philosophy after Christ. Socrates said that the beginning of wisdom is to acknowledge that one does not know. But this autonomous philosophy after Christ is different from the historic Socratic philosophy precisely because it takes account of history after Christ. It is open to the possibility that the end of philosophy in this sense, its *telos*, not just its beginning or *arche*, is to acknowledge that it does not know. It should be in its own uncertainty that philosophy after Christ acknowledges that it is not the wisdom our hearts seek.

For an example, I want to conclude by descending from the heights of theory to the depths of practice to display what I mean by acknowledging uncertainty. Consider the challenge that the reality of evil presents to autonomous philosophy, challenging it to humility before reality. We autonomous philosophers who are also Christians often see evil as a problem to be solved with our apologetics and theodicies of free will. Free will is such a great good that God tolerates evil that proceeds from it and will bring good out of it. One cannot help but believe that we think that we are in the position of defense lawyer for God, who is, as C. S. Lewis put it, "in the dock."¹⁵ Our "free-will defense" gets God off scot-free, as we exculpate him for the horrendous amount of evil that confronts us in his creation.

Hannah Arendt wrote of the banality of evil. Here, I often find myself thinking of the banality of free will, or at least of the banality of its defense, when I consider even those close to me that I love who have suffered at the hands of the "free will" of others, not to mention the extraordinary expressions of "free will" in the Holocaust, genocide in Rwanda, the torture of

¹⁵ C. S. Lewis, "God in the Dock," in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (1970; repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 244: "The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. . . . The trial may even end in God's acquittal. But the important thing is that Man is on the Bench and God in the Dock."

political prisoners, rape, sexual abuse, and exploitation perpetrated by those in authority, pastoral or otherwise, or the brutal violence of “free will” that shoots children in a school learning at their desks or playing on the playground, children pursuing the very activities that God himself delights in. I do not deny the reality of free will properly understood. What I question is the Christian philosopher’s solution to the problem of evil when it exculpates God in this way, whether it properly understands free will.

Augustine’s and Aquinas’s philosophical responses to evil are such a small part of their thought as to be almost incidental. Even then, they do not present the “free-will defense” of God allowing evil.¹⁶ Indeed, I suspect in their own thought, their philosophical responses, such as they were, were beside the point. Much more significant are their efforts to understand God’s response to evil. After all, even in his own defense, in revelation God does not give the “free-will defense.” Rather, I ask you, “where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?” (Job 38:4–7).

We autonomous philosophers who are Christians should ask, when we try to exculpate God for evil, whether our efforts touch the hearts of our fellow human beings, believer or not, or rather deaden them? Do we end up confronting the banality of evil with the banality of a Christian philosophy? Or should our impotence in the face of horrendous evil rather prompt us to “cry out in tears,” “Lord I believe, help my unbelief.” Does our defense rather make us deaf and dumb to the evil and suffering around us, allowing us to walk by with the thought, “well God will make something good of this?” Is it rather a defense of ourselves than of God?

God did not respond to the problem of evil with the free-will defense. He said: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Take the evil of death and consider for a moment the rather different response of Christ to it from Socrates’s welcome embrace of it. Christ’s friend had died.

¹⁶ Augustine accepted a version of the defense in his early work, only to reject it in his later work. See Jesse Couenhoven, “Augustine’s Rejection of the Free-Will Defence: An Overview of the Late Augustine’s Theodicy,” *Religious Studies* 43 (2007): 279–98. For Aquinas’s view that God permits evil, because he can by his almighty power bring good from it, see *ST I*, q. 22, a. 2, ad 2. The key to his response, however, is that Aquinas does not attempt to argue that God could not have created a world with free will that did not contain some measure of evil as the result of that free will and that the good of free will justifies creating such a world. See also *Summa contra gentiles* III, ch. 71.

In Christ's way of life, his discipline, his wisdom, his *misericordia*, he wept, and then he acted to relieve the suffering of the one who had died by raising him from the dead, eventually offering his own life for his friend and all of us. We Christian philosophers cannot imitate Christ's power to raise the dead. Surely, however, we can imitate him by weeping for those who suffer evil and do what we can for them. That is a rather different sense of free will. Not, "your free will is so great a thing that I will fix everything in the end," but, "you were made to the image and likeness of God; your free will allows you to address the evil around you here and now, in imitation of me."

Perhaps we philosophers who are Christian, confronted with horrendous evil, need to learn to be silent and listen to God's response, in order to participate in it. Perhaps then also, our secular colleagues who confront us with this *problem* to be *solved* will listen to our silence, see our response, and be more prepared to hear and see God's response, not our solution. After all, but for the theological gift and virtue of hope, it seems manifestly clear that Christians have little if anything to say about extraordinary evils like the Holocaust, or even the more common evils like the death of innocent children, hunger, homelessness, and poverty, little to say that could possibly do them justice or hope for mercy. Perhaps we Christian philosophers actually dishonor God by saying he will fix it in the end, rather than imitating his actual response to it here and now. If we do not listen to and imitate the discipline of God's response to evil, what right have we Christian philosophers to speak at all about the reality of it?

In our speculative efforts to exculpate God for the problem of evil, we run the risk of blinding ourselves to God's actual response to evil—Christ hanging on a cross for our salvation, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. But if we thus blind ourselves to that response to evil, we cannot possibly hope to imitate it in our own lives as we are called to do as made to the image and likeness of God. I do not want to know how Christian philosophers solve the problem of evil and suffering, and thus exculpate God. I want to know how Christian philosophers respond to the discipline of Christ, in imitation of him to the evil and suffering around them.

Philosophy after Christ has to be willing in humility to stand at the foot of the Cross, "lost, all lost in wonder"¹⁷ at its apparent folly and horror, and wonder at how our hearts can rest in imitation of the peace and joy of the One who reveals himself there. Aristotle tells us that philosophy, the love of wisdom, begins in wonder. N.V

¹⁷ Aquinas, *Adore Te Devote*.