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## CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY AS A WAY OF LIFE<sup>1</sup>

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Last night I visited the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. As so often happens when I go to a museum, something in particular stands out and proves memorable. This time it was the exhibit of design ideas by Dieter Rams, who worked many years for the Braun Corporation and brought us so many sleek, beautiful, and yet functional designs. One of his design slogans was printed in bold on the wall: “Question everything generally thought to be obvious.” What that meant practically is that Rams continually rethought design from the ground up. And that idea captures quite nicely what I am trying to say. In what follows, I intend to elaborate on this theme as it relates to philosophy and what it means to the philosophical way of life.

Not so long ago, the idea of “Christian Philosophy” would have been considered an oxymoron not merely among many conservative Protestants, but also among professional philosophers. To be sure, there is a long and distinguished history of Christian philosophy. It is not too much to say that some of the greatest philosophers of Western philosophy have been avowedly Christian, and many less so. Yet one only has to look back about fifty years to realize that—at that point—philosophy in conservative Christian colleges had a very awkward place (assuming it had one at all) and evangelical philosophers (to speak of the tradition in which I work) were generally absent from the wider philosophical landscape. Of course, there were some professors (such as Alvin Plantinga and Arthur F. Holmes, to whose memory this paper is dedicated) who were active as philosophers. Plantinga published *God and Other Minds* with Cornell University Press back in 1967. But Holmes was far more typical of the time: his work was generally more popular and published by such presses as InterVarsity Press and Eerdmans (which also published a number of books by Plantinga). By and large, the big university presses simply weren’t possible venues for explicitly Christian philosophers. Nor would it have been thinkable to imagine a conservative, outspokenly Christian philosopher as the president of the American Philosophical Association.

How times have changed! One need consider only who currently publishes books by Christian philosophers: all the major presses. Given that the list of past presidents of the American Philosophical Association includes the likes of Eleonore Stump and Plantinga, it is safe to say that even the highest ranks of the American Philosophical Association are no longer off limits. Moreover, it is exciting to think that there are more than 1,000 people who are willing to

<sup>1</sup>This presentation was the keynote address for the Society of Adventist Philosophers, San Francisco, California, November 17-18, 2011.

publicly call themselves “Christians” as members of the Society of Christian Philosophers. Nor is this phenomenon limited to analytic philosophers. It is telling that Jean-Luc Marion, whose Christian faith is evident whenever he speaks, is considered to be the most important living French philosopher, attested by his becoming a member of the *Académie Française*. And Marion is not alone: his colleague Jean-Louis Chrétien, who converted to Christianity after landing his position at the Sorbonne, writes from such an obviously Christian perspective that there could be no question about his faith. In the more or less “continental” version of the Society for Continental Philosophy and Theology, the organization in which I serve as executive director—we have nearly three hundred people. Many of those would be considered conservative Christians.

So there is good reason to think that the term “Christian Philosophy” makes considerably more sense today than it has in the last half-century. And, yet, it is safe to say that “Christian Philosophy” has always been a contested term. What, then, are we to make of philosophy’s relation to Christianity? That you have titled this year’s conference “Teaching Philosophy: Promise or Peril?” is good evidence that the problem has not gone away. It certainly hasn’t gone away at Wheaton College, though the situation is markedly different from what it was fifty years ago. There is so much that one could say about the relation of Christianity to philosophy that one hardly knows where to begin. So I have chosen to focus on Christianity and its relation to philosophy as spelled out in its early days, particularly the first couple of centuries. Without doubt, there are the “glory days” of the medieval period, in which philosophy and theology are so closely linked as to be inseparable. Yet our time is much more like that of early Christianity in which there are many competing views all seeking to be heard.

In what follows, I want to accomplish the following. First, I will consider the original conflict between Christianity and philosophy and how that conflict gets spelled out in Scripture. There are several texts that are relevant here. Second, I turn to how early Christianity positioned itself *vis-à-vis* philosophy. As we will see, like other movements of thought in ancient Greece and Rome, Christianity was put forth as an alternative “way of life” to that of Stoicism and Epicureanism. That is, it was put forth as a variant of philosophy. From my perspective, that way of seeing Christianity is just as helpful today—perhaps even more so. Third, I will turn to what I take to be the outcome of living philosophically, that of becoming “radically undogmatic” (to use Hans-Georg Gadamer’s phrase). What he means by such a phrase is a continual openness to questions, particularly regarding oneself.

#### *Vain Philosophy vs. Christian Philosophy*

So let me begin by turning back to Scripture to see how philosophy is portrayed. If there is anything like a biblical *locus classicus* for the idea that Christianity and

philosophy don't mix, one can find it in the Pauline epistles. Here I consider three Pauline texts, together with what can be read as a "reply" from 1 Peter.

The first of these passages is found in Col 2:8, ESV<sup>2</sup>: "See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ." While it might seem at first glance that Paul is warning against philosophy *per se*, a closer look at the passage reveals that his admonition is more nuanced than that. Literally translated, Paul is warning against philosophy that "makes a prey of you." Being captive here means that one is so held by the grip of such philosophy that one is unable to question it. "Falling prey" is what happens when we believe something without adequate scrutiny. Yet there is more going on here. Given that Paul has just described Christ as the one who holds "all the treasures of wisdom [*sophias*] and knowledge" (Col 2:2-3), he can hardly be read as being against philosophy. For philosophers are, by definition, lovers of wisdom [*sophia*]. So Paul is against any kind of "sham" wisdom, anything that is offered as true by way of what he calls "plausible arguments" (Col 2:4). What Paul has in mind becomes even clearer when we consider the two terms that he pairs with it: *kénas apatés* (Col 2:8). *Kenos* can be translated as "impotent," "false," or "empty." *Apaté* can be translated as "deception," "seduction," "trickery," or "deceit." If we take them together, "empty deceit" is really just nothing that passes itself off as something. *Kénas* is rendered by the KJV as "vain," and that gets at something important: such philosophy is "in vain," for it is nothing; yet it is also "vain," for its origin is human pride. So Paul is not talking about just any philosophy: he is talking about the kind that takes human knowledge to be the measure of all things. Such philosophy has its roots in vanity. Its practitioners are characterized by a conceit of the self.<sup>3</sup> These aspects of vanity and conceit are central to Paul's other comments on philosophy and knowledge.

This leads us to a second passage that is even more important in the Pauline corpus, 1 Corinthians 1. Paul says that he did not proclaim the gospel with "eloquent wisdom" (1 Cor 1:17). The phrase he uses is "*sophia logou*," which can be translated as "eloquent wisdom" (as the NRSV translates it), "clever rhetoric," or "sophisticated speech." What is particularly interesting is that this phrase contains both of the two words at issue for us here: *sophia* (wisdom) and *logos* (reason). Neither of these terms is used here in a positive way. Yet Paul is in no way undermining either wisdom or reason *per se*. Instead, he is talking about a kind of cleverness of speaking that was often identified with the ancient Sophists and which Socrates explicitly criticizes when he denies

<sup>2</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations will come from the ESV.

<sup>3</sup>For more on this, see Bruce Ellis Benson, *Graven Ideologies: Nietzsche, Derrida and Marion on Modern Idolatry* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002).

(in the *Apology*) having made “the weaker argument defeat the stronger.”<sup>4</sup> Yet Paul also goes on to give a strange and unexpected juxtaposition of the “word” and the “cross”: “For the reason [*logos*] of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.” Here he brings together two terms—*logos* and *stauros*—that would seem to be characterized by a magnetic repulsion. How can the phrase “*Ho logos gar ho tou staurou*” [“For the *logos* of the Cross,” which Paul describes as “folly”] find a place in reason, when the cross is perhaps the ultimate symbol of the irrational? Christ’s humiliation and death would seem to be the end of any sort of “reason.” If we turn to Paul’s use of the term “wisdom,” we see that he goes on at some length contrasting “the wisdom of the world” with “the wisdom of God.” Although Paul speaks of God’s “foolishness,” he makes it clear that “God [has] made foolish the wisdom of the world” (1 Cor 1:20). So Paul is in no way denigrating *sophia*, but he is indeed denigrating “the wisdom of the world.” Paul introduces the cross to subvert human wisdom. Given all human expectations regarding power and reason, the cross doesn’t make any sense: it is the inversion of power and the subversion of reason.<sup>5</sup>

Yet what does Paul mean? We have seen that Paul does not denigrate *sophia*. He is not against wisdom *per se*. Nor is he against *logos*. Instead, it makes far more sense to read Paul as criticizing some *sort* of reason. And here we come to the nub of the issue: the problem isn’t with reason *per se* or even with a particular *brand* of reason (such as Platonism or Stoicism). Instead, Paul is countering reason that is, just as in the passage we considered in Colossians, vain and puffed up. It is reason that boastfully assumes it knows. Paul associates this boasting with worldly wisdom (1 Cor 3:18-21). One can see the contrast when Paul speaks of Christ Jesus, “who became for us wisdom from God” (1 Cor 1:30). Thus Paul says, “let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord” (1 Cor 1:31; see Jer 9:23-24). Of course, Paul is not alone in criticizing arrogance and conceit: Socrates made a career out of criticizing those who arrogantly claim “to know,” when in fact they really know nothing. Indeed, Socrates often claims that he does not know and maintains that learning is only possible if one recognizes one’s lack of knowledge. So “the wisdom of the world” comes, again, with an inflated view of the self. On this Paul is clear. One way of putting this hubris is that the Corinthians did not question *themselves* as much as they should have done.

This becomes even more obvious when we consider what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 8. There Paul says that “‘knowledge’ puffs up, but love builds up” [*gnosis phusioi, agape oikodomei*] (1 Cor 8:1). Paul quotes the arrogant Corinthian

<sup>4</sup>Plato, *Apology* 19c.

<sup>5</sup>I develop this interpretation at greater length in my article, “The ‘Thinking-after’ of *Metanoia*: On Breton’s *The Word and the Cross*,” *Philosophy and Theology* 16 (2004): 219-228.

claim right back at them when he says “we all know [*pantes gnōsin exomen*]” and connects it with the phrase “*oidamen hoti*,” the result being the phrase “we know that we know.” What disturbs Paul is their brutal arrogance and pretensions to knowledge. If one says “*oidamen hoti pantes gnōsin exomen*,” then one is making a very strong claim indeed. The verb *oida* (to know) comes from the root *eidō* (to see). In Plato’s philosophy, for instance, knowing the *eidos* of something means that one has grasped it perfectly. The kind of knowledge that *oida* provides is “comprehension,” as opposed to “apprehension.” Whereas comprehension is to “conceive fully or adequately,”<sup>6</sup> apprehension suggests incompleteness. “Adequately” here does not mean “good enough,” but “adequation” in the sense of the medieval phrase *adaequatio intellectus et rei*—a perfect one-to-one correspondence between the mind and the object of thought. In the NT, *oida* is often used in this sense of knowing perfectly or fully. So the Corinthians claim to have something like “perfect knowledge,” and that puffs them up with pride. It is no wonder that Paul is upset.<sup>7</sup>

Having seen that Paul is hardly against reason and wisdom *per se*, I want to close this first section by turning to 1 Pet 3:15. If Col 2:8 seems to be a threat to Christian philosophers, then 1 Pet 3:15 can be read as their biblical justification. For we are called to provide “a defense [*apologian*] to anyone who demands from you an accounting [*logon*] for the hope that is in you.” The context for this passage is the persecution facing Christians at the time. Peter is exhorting them to stand firm and to be ready to explain their faith whenever asked. Giving a *logos* for one’s belief and action would have been a perfectly understandable demand by a Greek. In effect, he says: you should be prepared to give a rational account of why you believe and act as you do. One can hardly quibble with that expectation. Yet Peter goes on to stress that they should do so “with gentleness and reverence.” One way of framing what he says is that it is in marked contrast to what we saw in the Corinthians. They manifest neither gentleness nor respect. Thus Peter’s injunction can be seen as being like Paul’s in an important respect. There is to be no haughtiness of spirit when one gives an account of one’s faith. Indeed, if the hope that is within us is ultimately Christ crucified and raised from the dead, then our hope is not in ourselves, but in Christ. We do not proclaim the wisdom of the world, but a “wisdom” that challenges the wisdom of the world. Yet it does so not in the sense of abandoning wisdom, but of going beyond it to a higher sort of wisdom. Such “wisdom” involves a kind of recognition of the limits of our knowledge. We become questioners who question *ourselves*.

<sup>6</sup>*The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), s.v. “comprehend.”

<sup>7</sup>Here I draw from my article, “The Economies of Knowledge and Love in Paul,” in Norman Wirzba and Bruce Ellis Benson, eds., *Transforming Philosophy and Religion: Love’s Wisdom* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008) 28-41.

Moreover, it is a kind of wisdom that we are called not just to believe, but to live out. This brings us to the second part of the paper, in which we consider how Christianity is a way of living one's life.

*Philosophy as a Way of Life*

More than anyone else, Pierre Hadot has helped remind us that, for the ancients, philosophy is nothing other than a way of life—a way of existing in the most everyday and ordinary way. That philosophy has come in our time to be something not readily available to the masses is perhaps the worst development in its history. As much as one mourns the recent closings of philosophy departments in the UK, they are not all that surprising: some philosophers have done an excellent job of clothing their speech in jargon, publishing articles that can only be read by a few, and holding themselves aloof from public life. It should not be shocking that, as a result, they are deemed irrelevant by society.

Yet it was not always so. Both ancient and medieval philosophies were seen as first and foremost ways of *living*. To be sure, Plato and Augustine (for example) give us what we today would term metaphysical, epistemological, and moral theories. But their goal was to give us philosophies to live by that are only *secondarily* theoretical. Recovering this applicability to everyday life is of prime importance to answering the question of what philosophy's role should be in a Christian college. We are, to put it boldly, *teaching students how to live life*. True, there are aspects of Christian philosophy that put it deeply at odds with other sorts of philosophy—though these differences should not be overemphasized—but the basic idea of living “the good life” is as much a part of Aristotelianism as it is of Christianity.

What does that mean practically? At the beginning of Hadot's *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* he quotes Kant, who writes: “The ancient Greek philosophers, such as Epicurus, Zeno, and Socrates, remained more faithful to the Idea of the philosopher than their modern counterparts have done. . . . ‘When will you finally begin to *live* virtuously’, said Plato to an old man who told him he was attending classes on virtue. The point is not always to speculate, but also ultimately to think about applying our knowledge.”<sup>8</sup> Ethics are first and foremost about becoming a certain kind of person, which is why ethics professors who aren't ethical seem like such a contradiction in terms. Consider what Plutarch says about philosophy as something one *does*:

Most people imagine that philosophy consists in delivering discourses from the heights of a chair, and in giving classes based on texts. But what these people utterly miss is the uninterrupted philosophy which we see being

<sup>8</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on the Philosophical Encyclopedia*, *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 29, Abt. 4,1.1, Vorlesungen. Kleine Vorlesungen und Ergaenzungen (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 1980), 9 and 12.

practiced every day in a way which is perfectly equal to itself. . . . Socrates did not set up a grandstand for his audience and did not sit upon a professorial chair; he had no fixed timetable for talking and walking with his friends. Rather, he did philosophy sometimes by joking with them, or by drinking or going to war or to the market with them, and finally by going to prison and drinking poison. He was the first to show that at all times and in every place, in everything that happens to us, daily life gives us the opportunity to do philosophy.<sup>9</sup>

The love of “*sophia*,” then, is not some kind of theoretical love, but a practical one. The focus here was on *becoming* a certain kind of person, rather than simply *knowing*. Philosophy is an activity in which we remake our lives.

Plato defines philosophy as training for death. One aspect of this training is that one is preparing for one’s own death. That means that one learns to live in the moment. *Carpe diem* can sound almost trite to us today; yet it is a profound insight in light of one’s ever-approaching death. While the Christian view of the afterlife significantly recontextualizes this insight, it in no way negates it: as one Christian monk once noted, “Since the beginning of our conversation, we have come closer to death. Let us be vigilant while we still have the time.” If, as Christians, we combine this idea of training for death with dying with Christ—so not just a literal death, but also death to self and sin—the idea becomes even more profound. We are dying in multiple senses. The Christian notion of “conversion” (*metanoia*) is that of a fundamental, 180-degree reorientation of the self. It is nothing short of a movement in which we become different persons and thus die to self. Yet something very much like this idea of conversion is actually to be found in ancient philosophy. Hadot reminds us of the prominent place that *askēsis* plays in ancient philosophy. While the term *askēsis* is often translated as “asceticism,” it is much better translated as “spiritual exercises” that concern both body and soul. They are designed so that we (to quote Hadot) “let ourselves be changed, in our point of view, attitudes, and convictions. This means that we must dialogue with ourselves, hence do battle with ourselves.”<sup>10</sup> According to Hadot, the goal of *askēsis* is to bring about “a conversion which turns our entire life upside down, changing the life of the person who goes through it.”<sup>11</sup> So *metanoia* and *askēsis* end up being remarkably similar.

Further, while Christians tend to think that spiritual exercises or disciplines are something unique to Christianity, the reality is that such disciplines long predate its advent. Thus early Christians imported such disciplines from pagan philosophy and Judaism, adapting them for distinctively Christian

<sup>9</sup>Plutarch, *Whether a Man Should Engage in Politics When He Is Old* 26.796d.

<sup>10</sup>Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) 91.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid. 83.

ends. Further, as Christianity was trying to find its own identity, the second-century Apologists such as Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria explicitly positioned Christianity as a competing philosophy—not just any philosophy but the *true* philosophy that had been prefigured by earlier philosophers. And that emphasis was continued by such thinkers as Origen, the Cappodocian Fathers (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory Nazianzen, and Gregory of Nyssa). It is also to be found in John Chrysostom, who works out *askēsis* in the following way: he encourages those wishing to follow the way of Christian faith to consider their souls to be like paintings or pieces of sculpture. We are the works of art that God has created, though God gives us the great honor of further fashioning ourselves. Of course, we do not do so all by ourselves; indeed, Saint Chrysostom exhorts parents to be part of the process with their children. By extension, so we all in Christian community are part of helping fashion one another to become beautiful works of art.

Of course, Chrysostom was writing in a way that was very much conditioned by his time. The idea that one saw one's own person as an artwork was common, whether one was a pagan, a Jew, or a Christian. The point of studying ancient texts was to become different persons. As Peter Brown observes about readers in late antiquity, "the Classics, a literary tradition, existed for the sole purpose of 'making [persons] into classics': exposure to the classics of Greek and Latin literature was intended to produce exemplary beings, their raw humanity molded and filed away by a double discipline, at once ethical and aesthetic."<sup>12</sup> The goal was to find exemplary authors and figures to be emulated—and then to do so. We can connect this idea back to Paul, whose well-known exhortation is as follows: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom 12:1).

Let me suggest that we read this verse with this small change of wording: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living, sacrificial *work of art*." This idea that we should view ourselves as works of art becomes even more plausible when we consider what Paul says in Eph 2:10: "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." The word translated as "workmanship" could literally be translated as "work of art," since Paul uses the Greek term *poiēma*. So Paul quite explicitly says that we are God's works of art, a meaning that the English term "workmanship" fails to capture adequately. As God's art works, we have been "created in Christ Jesus for good works," and we fulfill God's intentions for us when we "walk" in those good works.

<sup>12</sup>Peter Brown, "The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity," *Representations* 1 (1983): 1.



Practically, though, what does the *askēsis* that develops us as living works of art involve? Consider the following list of activities: research, investigation, reading, listening, attention, self-mastery, and indifference to indifferent things.<sup>13</sup> The most important of these categories is that of “attention” or “self-awareness.” What the Stoics called “*prosoche*” (attention) “supposes that, at each instant, we renew our choice of life . . . and that we keep constantly present in our minds the rules of life which express that choice.”<sup>14</sup> The goal here is to be constantly aware of what one is doing—one’s actions, thoughts, motivations—and thus constantly aware of whom one is becoming. Given that Paul exhorts us not to be “conformed to this world” but instead to “be transformed” (Rom 12:2), such attention is surely appropriate. Under the category of listening, we could place both prayer and meditation. When we engage in meditation, we allow God to speak to us, as well as to ruminate upon Christian teachings about how we ought to live. The result of meditation, at least in principle, is that we are able to deal with anything that comes our way. For the Stoics, meditation involves remembering and even memorizing key maxims, dwelling upon them, and seeing how they can be put into practice. The point of meditation is to transform both our thinking and our practice. Meditating on the fruit of the Spirit (for example) can provide us with insight as to how we can *live out* such characteristics as patience and self-control. Indeed, Saint Paul calls us to think on those things that will lift up our gaze and our lives: “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil 4:8). Then he goes on to connect these meditations to practice: “Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you” (Phil 4:9). Research, investigation, and reading all involve immersing ourselves in the truths of the Christian faith and considering how those truths should practically be expressed. Reading Scripture is clearly central to a distinctively Christian *askēsis*, but so is reading theology or classic Christian texts. We are also involved in research and investigation when we speak with fellow believers about living the life of faith or when we seek out the counsel of someone who is truly wise and mature in the faith.

While we can clearly find such emphases in the sources of the Christian tradition, they are also to be found in philosophy. Christianity is not the only form of *prosoche*. It is safe to say that we can learn quite a bit about attention to one’s self from Socrates. As to research and investigation, one can learn much about being virtuous from Aristotle. Philosophers have much to teach

<sup>13</sup>Hadot, 84.

<sup>14</sup>Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge: Harvard, 2004) 193.

us, and this is something that we probably need to be better at explaining to our respective college administrations. To put this in different terms, the most important aspect of what we are doing when we teach students philosophy is that we are teaching them to live life. It is not that philosophy simply teaches us about how to think: it does that, of course, yet we can also learn courage from Socrates and resolution from Epictetus. To learn from them in no way means that we simply embrace their philosophers wholesale. Instead, we are always sifting the wheat from the chaff. But we must do this even when we read Christian theology—the difference is much more one of degree than of kind.

So far, what we have considered here have been mainly personal sorts of spiritual exercises. Yet there is another kind of spiritual exercise about which Hadot reminds us: the Socratic dialogues. Hadot argues that it is Socrates who brings spiritual exercises—which likely have their origins in practices that go back to time immemorial—to the fore in a way that no previous philosopher had done. The Socratic dialogues are about putting the interlocutors through a rigorous examination. In other words, the topic is not merely some point of belief (though it is that too); it is also the very interlocutors themselves. Consider Socrates' rebuke to the Athenian senate:

My very good friend, you are an Athenian and belong to a city which is the greatest and most famous in the world for its wisdom and strength. Are you not ashamed that you give your attention to acquiring as much money as possible, and similarly with reputation and honour, and give no attention or thought to truth [*aletheia*] and understanding [*phronesis*] and the perfection of your soul?<sup>15</sup>

Shortly thereafter, Socrates goes on to say:

I have never lived an ordinary quiet life. I did not care for the things that most people care about—making money, having a comfortable home, high military or civil rank, and all the other activities, political appointments, secret societies, party organizations, which go on in our city. . . . I set myself to do you individually in private what I hold to be the greatest possible service. I tried to persuade each one of you not to think more of practical advantages than of his mental and moral well-being.<sup>16</sup>

One could easily imagine such a claim from a Christian theologian or someone writing on living the Christian life. Socrates makes a claim about what is really important in life that is remarkably similar to what we as Christians would say.

With important notable exceptions, then, the kind of life that Socrates tries to live is remarkably similar to the kind we as Christians try to live. Yet the Socratic dialogues likewise have a particular character that administrators

<sup>15</sup>Plato, *Apology* 29d-e

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 36b-c.

of Christian colleges may not necessarily appreciate: the dialogues don't really have a set direction or outcome. In other words, the *goal* of the dialogues is arriving at *truth*, wherever it may lie. Although the usual depiction of the "Socratic Method" is that Socrates has in mind exactly where he intends to go—and asks questions accordingly—the reality is that Socrates frequently admits that he *doesn't know*. In the eponymous dialogue, Meno says:

Socrates, even before I met you they told me that in plain truth you are a perplexed man yourself and reduce others to perplexity. At this moment I feel you are exercising magic and witchcraft upon me and positively laying me under your spell until I am just a mass of helplessness. If I may be flippant, I think that not only in outward appearance but in other respects as well you are exactly like the flat sting ray that one meets in the sea. Whenever anyone comes into contact with it, it numbs him, and that is the sort of thing that you seem to be doing to me now. My mind and my lips are literally numb, and I have nothing to reply to you. Yet I have spoken about virtue hundreds of times, held forth often on the subject in front of large audiences, and very well too, or so I thought. Now I can't even say what it is.

To this, Socrates replies: "It isn't that, knowing the answers myself, I perplex other people. The truth is rather that I infect them also with the perplexity I feel myself. So with virtue now. I don't know what it is. You may have known before you came into contact with me, but now you look as if you don't."<sup>17</sup> Elsewhere, Socrates describes himself precisely in terms of perplexity. He says, "I am utterly disturbing (*atopos*) and I create only perplexity (*aporia*)."<sup>18</sup> Yet achieving this state of being *atopos* and having a sense of *aporia* is part of the very *point* of the dialogues.

What I am suggesting here is that philosophy is a way of life that works by way of an *askêsis* that leads us *both* to knowledge and to *aporia*. To be sure, Socrates does not simply lead his listeners to *aporia*: There are many doctrines; most notably that of the Forms that Socrates puts forth. To read the dialogues and think that Socrates does not have views regarding what is real, what we can know, and what we ought to do would be a significant misreading. Living the Socratic life has definite contours that lead us to think and act in one way and not another. Yet *aporia* still plays an important role. On one hand, *aporia* is central to the idea of Socratic ignorance. If we assume that we already know something, it is impossible to learn it: we already know. In contrast, to ask is to admit that one does not know. As Gadamer puts it, "Discourse that is intended to reveal something requires that that thing be broken open by the question. . . . To ask a question means to bring into the open."<sup>19</sup> So no new

<sup>17</sup>Plato, *Meno* 79e-80b, 80c-d.

<sup>18</sup>Plato, *Theaetetus* 149a.

<sup>19</sup>Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d rev. ed., trans Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989) 363.

knowledge is possible if we insist that we already know. And *learning* to admit our ignorance is actually quite difficult: it is part of the *askēsis* of knowing and questioning ourselves.

On the other hand, it is not as if philosophy—or any other kind of thinking, for that matter—simply leads us onward and upward to ever more knowledge. Here we need to be quite clear about what this *aporia* really is. While the term often gets bandied about by postmodern thinkers—particularly those who’ve read Jacques Derrida—it is simply a part of life. The Greek word *poros* means “a way,” either literally or figuratively. With the addition of the *alpha privative*, it means simply “without a way.” In other words, to reach a point of *aporia* is to be at a point where it seems as if one can go no further. Yet it is *not* as if one has simply gotten nowhere at all. As much as philosophy allows us to know, it always shows us that there is considerably more that we do not know. Or to put this problem in a different way: we always recognize—or at least we do if we are paying attention—that our attempts to answer questions are imperfect and incomplete. We say, “Yes, we know this, but we do not know that.” This recognition actually returns us to Paul and the limits of human reason. We are, thinks Paul, thinking far too highly of human reason if we think we either have all of the answers or understand perfectly. It is not only in this way that human reason can go wrong, but we are certainly misguided if we take reason to provide more than it can actually provide.

Derrida famously formulates the recognition of *aporia* in terms of doing justice. We always want to do justice to justice—or justice to anyone that we encounter—but we realize that any actual instantiation of justice is never perfectly just. This is not to say that no justice is done; instead, it is to say that justice is both experienced and not experienced. In any concrete application of justice, I am successful to a certain point. Much of the time, our success is sufficient enough that we simply don’t experience any sense of justice being lacking. Yet, if Aristotle is right that there is an exact “golden mean” in every situation, then it is not hard to conclude that we probably do not hit that exact point all that often. We may come remarkably close and even hit it on occasion, but even the well-developed *phronimos* [the one who has learned to live aright] is still “on the way.”

In seeing the limits of what we know and how one question naturally leads to others, it is no wonder that Christian college administrations can find philosophers to be somewhat menacing to the very project of Christian education. For, as long as we think that a Christian education is ultimately some kind of answer giving, then philosophy is a threat. It is far more peril than promise. Of course, Christian educators are not alone here: in much the same way that Athens viewed Socrates as a threat to the established assumptions of society, so philosophers have been under suspicion ever since. After all, the charge of corrupting the youth has never really gone away. Even in the last ten-year review of our department, I was asked to address specifically the

worry that somehow philosophy is leading students away from the faith. I'm pleased to say that my argument was found to be convincing. But I'm sad to say that such a worry was still present.

Here I turn to the last section of my paper—what the *askêsis* of philosophy helps our students become.

#### *Askêsis as Radical Openness*

Given what we as philosophers attempt to do, the *askêsis* of philosophy is the art of both learning something and learning what we do not know. Without doubt, philosophy does lead us to truth. Yet it also continually reminds of what we do not and may not ever know, at least on this side of eternity. Whereas the modern assumption regarding human knowledge was that, at some point in time, with enough hard work and cooperation, we would know all, the postmodern assumption that has replaced it is that human knowledge will never be full and transparent, however much it achieves. Given that realization, recovering the kind of questioning typical of Socrates provides us with the way to live. And here it is appropriate to turn to Gadamer and his idea of radical openness.

Gadamer speaks of the logical structure of openness. He begins with the idea—that goes back to Hegel—that genuine experience is always *negative*. It is when we do not expect something that we actually have an experience. Otherwise, we are simply reliving old experiences, seeing what we have always seen. This is why Gadamer says that “strictly speaking, we cannot have the same experience twice.”<sup>20</sup> What allows for a genuine experience? Questions, for they bring things into the open. A question breaks open what had previously been closed. It allows for the possibility of a depth of answer that we previously thought to be impossible, or even simply did not think about at all. As Plato has shown us, *doxa*—opinion—tends to suppress questions. We think we already know. If you remember back to what we earlier observed about 1 Cor. 8:1, Paul summarizes the Corinthians’ hubris as “we know that we know.” *This is their dogmatism*. Paul, in contrast, serves as Socrates to the Corinthians by putting their dogmatism into question, using irony in a way that is quite Socratic in tone.

In contrast to such dogmatism, Gadamer speaks of learning to be “radically undogmatic.” Here it is easy to miss what Gadamer has in mind, since radical undogmatism could simply sound like skepticism. Yet Gadamer goes on to say the following: “The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfillment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, while it might seem that the end of knowledge is that we come to a place where we now

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 353.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 355.

finally know, Gadamer is saying that experience both gives us knowledge *and* makes us open to more knowledge. Instead of the experienced person being the one who is closed—the one who already knows, so has nothing left to learn—experience teaches us that, however much we know, we still have more to learn. We take our knowledge seriously, in the sense that we think we really *do* know something. But we don't take it seriously in the sense that we think we have now finally arrived. As the old saying has it, the more you know, the more you realize you don't know. That is part of what it means to be “experienced.” Of course, all of this is easy to say, but it is difficult to live out, for it means finding the golden mean between the extremes of dogmatism and skepticism.

Gadamer writes that “the art of questioning is the art of questioning even further—i.e., the art of thinking.”<sup>22</sup> That last point cannot be made too strongly. Thinking, strictly speaking, just *is* the art of questioning. To think about something is to ask questions about it. Is it this way or that way? Do I get it “right” if I say it like this, or should I say it some other way? Richard Rorty has famously given up on the project of “getting things right.”<sup>23</sup> But that is what we philosophers do: we try to get it right. And the only way that we can continue this project is by asking questions. We tend to say that something is “questionable” if it seems incorrect or in need of further questioning. But everything is “questionable” if we mean that it can further be questioned—that we can know even *more* about it. Indeed, we can take this a step further. Gadamer points out that even ideas that occur to us suddenly have a structure to them that is like a question. When we have such ideas, we realize that we never saw things like that before. To see something in a new way is to put it into question.

What I've said so far may make it sound as if questioning is simply a kind of art that we could eventually master. To be sure, questioning *is* an art. It is something that takes a long time to learn. When Socrates is accused of asking all the questions, his reply is that asking the questions is much harder than giving the answers. And he's right. Yet the art of questioning is something that cannot fully be mastered. When we start asking questions, we can never be sure in advance where they might take us. Consider what Gadamer says about conversation:

We say that we “conduct” a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a genuine conversation is never the one that we wanted to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way one word follows another, with

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 367.

<sup>23</sup>See, e.g., Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

the conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led. No one knows in advance what will “come out” of a conversation.<sup>24</sup>

A conversation in which we allow things to develop takes its own route. If we truly listen to what the other has to say, that may require us to go down paths we haven’t gone down before. This is not to say that we will simply *agree* with the other person; instead, we listen to the other with the assumption that the other may have something to teach us. But we do so with the goal of “testing” what the other person has to say: we question the other. That may mean that we discover the other’s point to be deficient in some way(s). Yet it may also mean that we find ourselves to be deficient. As Gadamer puts it, “it is possible that someone practicing the art of dialectic—i.e., the art of questioning and of seeking truth—comes off worse in the argument in the eyes of those listening to it.”<sup>25</sup> Gadamer speaks of one being “pulled up short.”<sup>26</sup> His reference is to the experience of reading a text and finding that it challenges us, but the same—even more forcefully—can take place when we dialogue with another person and discover that the other understands better.

The goal of all this back and forth—whether with a text, another person, or an idea—is that we come to truth. Gadamer may sound overly confident when he closes *Truth and Method* by saying that the “discipline of questioning and inquiring . . . guarantees truth,” but that is what philosophers have thought from the very beginning of philosophy. When we take our students and introduce them to the discipline of questioning, we also share in that assumption, one that we have seen to be true. We work toward “coming to the truth,” realizing that it is not something which we find immediately, even though we do actually find it. This is the promise of philosophy and also something that philosophy has actually delivered.

Yet philosophy also delivers questions. Questions are the means by which we get to truth, but getting to truth is not the end of questioning but the enriching of our questions.

To do so would not make the questions go away. Instead, the goal would be to draw more people—more of our students, for instance—into this questioning way of life and to show why it matters in the deepest possible sense and at the most practical level. To be sure, when students are introduced to this way of life, it is somewhat threatening. They learn that some of the things they’ve always thought might be wrong, or at least too simplistic, but it does not take them too long to realize that the alternative of going back to simple ways of thinking is neither attractive nor possible. To grow into a kind

<sup>24</sup>Gadamer, 383.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 367.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 268.

of life in which not all answers are simple takes time and involves *askēsis*. It is one thing to be an adolescent who questions everything; it is quite another to know how to ask productive questions, ones that push us toward knowledge, ones that open rather than shut doors. Such a life is a life of promise: we offer students the chance to become thoughtful questioners and discover *truth*.

Christian philosophy as a way of life is an *askēsis*—one *develops* into a thoughtful questioner and *becomes* a work of art. We aspire to be the *phronimos*—the one who knows and exhibits practical wisdom. We become works of art in Christ by becoming questioners who learn how to appropriately question everything, but most of all *ourselves*.