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Socrates and St. Paul: Can Christian Apologetics be Public Philosophy?

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Abstract

Can popular Christian apologetics be public philosophy? This paper argues that it can be partly because the criteria for what counts as public philosophy are so vague but also partly because popular Christian apologetics parallels much that counts as public philosophy both in terms of its historical roots in Socrates but also how public philosophy is practiced now. In particular, there are parallels on the role of amateurs vs. professionals, the sorts of topics, the quality of the discussions, and the passion vs. the neutrality of its practitioners.

Introduction

Socrates practiced philosophy in the open air, engaging young, old, politicians, poets, intellectuals, and religious fundamentalists. He was and is renowned for his wisdom. Such wisdom, he thought, ought not to be withheld from others and so his public engagement with anyone who came across his path was part and parcel of his practice of philosophy. The good life, which is to say, the examined life, was his goal. Arguably, much of what has come to be known as public philosophy traces its roots to Socrates. St. Paul, in contrast, was a Jewish scholar who converted to be a follower of Jesus, preacher, missionary, theologian, and writer of large parts of the New Testament. He too, as an apostle, is thought by many to be wise, or at least pointing to the wisdom of God. But Paul, by many people's lights, would certainly not count as a philosopher¹ and perhaps even less as a public philosopher.

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Yet one might dispute the severing of Paul from philosophy or public philosophy. Several centuries after Socrates, Paul walked the same streets and engaged Socrates's heirs in the Areopagus. Most readers will be quite familiar with Socrates's work but perhaps fewer with the philosophy of St. Paul. But consider Acts 17: 16-34 which records the following:

Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the market place every day with those who chanced to be there. Some also of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers met him. And some said, "What would this babbler say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities"—because he preached Jesus and the resurrection. And they took hold of him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is which you present? For you bring some strange things to our ears; we wish to know therefore what these things mean." Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new. So Paul, standing in the middle of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by humans, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all humans life and breath and everything. And he made from one every nation of humanity to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us, for 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring.' Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all people by raising him from the dead." Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked; but others said, "We will hear you again about this." So Paul went out from among them. But some people joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them. (slightly abridged NRSV)

Paul goes to the Areopagus at the “request” (they took hold of him, the text says, so it might have been something of a request he couldn’t refuse!) of the “professional” philosophers. Prior to that, however, he was in the market place with those who chanced to be there. Now perhaps this calls up pictures of the doom-and-gloom street preachers who sometimes frequent our public squares, but that image should, perhaps, be reconsidered. First, the philosophers in Athens were interested enough in what Paul had to say that they brought him to their home turf, the Areopagus, to hear more. One can little imagine most philosophers today bringing a street preacher into their seminar rooms. Second, the content of what Paul said includes some interesting philosophical moves, interesting enough, presumably, for him to receive the invitation to the Areopagus. Third, although some wrote his message off, others wanted to hear him further and at least a few people were convinced by what he said. We don’t know if they were among the “professional” philosophers or not, but it seems at least likely since they were interested in what he had to say in the first place.

Paul was engaged in what would now be called “Christian apologetics.” That is, he took on, much in the way Socrates’ did in the *Apology*, a defense of his life and beliefs. Lest one think that Paul’s life was not at risk, later in Acts 21-25 Paul is brought (amidst much intrigue) before the local governor in Palestine. However, along the way, he gives defense of his life and views a number of times, both publically to the crowd and privately in front of the governor Felix who keeps bringing Paul in for further discussion over a period of two years. Paul also spoke to Festus the new governor, who invited King Agrippa and his wife Bernice to listen in. Agrippa was close to persuaded. Paul, being a Roman citizen, appeals to be heard in Rome and is sent there. Eventually, he is condemned (by tradition, at least) to die and his life is ended in Rome after, perhaps, a reprieve of some years.

The apology of Socrates is famous. The apology of Paul is equally famous. The former roots philosophy and what has come to be called “public philosophy,” the latter, apologetics and what we might think of as popular apologetics. Is Christian apologetics a form of public philosophy? To answer that question, we’ll need both a definition of “apologetics” and some criteria for what counts as public philosophy. The former is taken up in section I, along with a comparison and exploration of how apologetics is related to philosophy. Section II takes up the nature of public philosophy. Section III returns to the issue of whether Christian apologetics can be public philosophy.

I

Apologetics, as typically understood by those who practice it, is a defense of the Christian faith. One might ask, “A defense against what?” The comparison to Socrates’ apology can

be instructive. Socrates' apology begins only when he is brought to court on more-or-less trumped-up charges after having lived his life in the public's eye. One might think that Christian apologetics need only be done under similar circumstances. Indeed, apologetics in the New Testament happens under similar circumstances, at least sometimes, as can be seen from the history of Paul's arrest. However, Paul is not under arrest in Athens and one might wonder how it is that we should take Paul's discussion with the philosophers as apology. Again, a parallel with Socrates suggests itself. Socrates took philosophy to *be* a way of life and not merely as a way *to* life. This is borne out by the fact that he acts no differently when he is arrested than when he is sitting in the public square. His "official" apology is, in fact, no more than an extension of the way he lived every day. Similarly for Paul. While he does give a more-or-less formal apology once arrested and brought before the various authorities, he was engaged daily in what he understood as the work of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. So apologetics can be either formal, where one explicitly defends the faith with reasons and evidence or it can be informal and engaged in rather everyday circumstances with more or less rigorous argument or sometimes "merely" with explanations and demonstration. Paul and Socrates both seem to have lived, or at least tried to live, their lives so as to give witness to the wisdom they believed they had. Paul's wisdom was received from God, Socrates's by challenging the Delphic oracle. The question is, what is that wisdom? For Socrates it seems less to involve a specific content and more the use of rational means to solve certain important questions about how to live. For Paul, the wisdom had more content and, indeed, a quite specific content. One should live one's life by serving Jesus and one does that via loving one's neighbor.

So, it was not all philosophical argument for Paul, whose life was more filled with preaching and what is now known as evangelism. The term "evangelism" derives from "evangel" which is simply "good news" and evangelism is simply giving witness to that good news. For Paul, the good news of Jesus' provision of salvation was to be shared by any means possible—whether by sermon, a set of directions on a sinking ship (see Acts 27), or a philosophical discussion. The good news needed to be shared. It is news not merely about the afterlife (although it is that too) but also about God coming to earth and empowering us to live the life of love and service as we were designed to do. If we take Socrates' philosophizing as a way of life (the examined life) to be the good news he wished to share, he too was involved in apologetics on a daily basis and after his arrest. His life parallels Paul's in many ways, the major difference, and an important one indeed, is that Paul's message has a specific content—an apparent answer to the questions—whereas Socrates' message is more an approach to questions rather than an answer to them.

As noted, a defense seems to require an opposing offense. Sometimes that happens in extreme cases where one is arrested for one's beliefs and other times it is less extreme and can come from one's neighbors or colleagues. Often Christian apologetics gets started because of criticisms, typically from the outside but sometimes from within. Often defensive apologetics is negative and attempts to refute the criticisms put at Christianity's feet. Other times, however, Christian apologetics also takes the offensive position and attempts to explain and show that Christianity is true. A similar pattern is found in any good "large-picture" philosophical account; one responds to criticisms but also develops positive arguments. Christian apologetics in offense mode, however, often appears to be largely aimed at evangelism, the main point of which is conversion to the Christian faith. Hence, Christian apologetics can be seen as a branch of evangelism, alongside of preaching the gospel, sharing it one-on-one with others, and other means such as print, radio and other media outreach. In a way, however, apologetics runs through all these means of communicating the gospel to others. Good preaching and other forms of giving witness to the gospel will have various apologetic aspects involved from within. For example, many good sermons make arguments over various interpretations of the text.

Given the evangelistic overtones of Christian apologetics, it might be said that the question, "is apologetics public philosophy?" is a non-starter. "Of course not," the critic might say, "apologetics cannot be philosophy and hence certainly cannot be public philosophy." The reasons are not far to seek. Philosophy, especially as Socrates seemed to understand it, was a way of life, a method, an approach to important issues whereby one used reason to look for answers. Apologetics is not open-ended, and not merely a method to approach important issues. Apologists already have answers because they are already committed to the content of the faith. Again, Socrates and Paul are quite different. The former had questions he sought to answer, the latter had answers he sought to share, even when that sharing was via philosophical argumentation. This raises a lot of knotty questions about the relationship between philosophy and apologetics but also about the relationship among objectivity, neutrality, commitment and passion.

I've already noted that apologetics can be seen as a branch of evangelism. That is closely related to another standard feature of apologetics, which is that it is typically taught as a branch of theology (even when it is Christian philosophers who are doing the teaching). Insofar as theology views itself as under the authority of the Christian scriptures, apologetics will as well. So one question to ask is whether an intellectual pursuit falling under the authority of a text can be philosophy (in particular where the text is not itself fundamentally philosophical but full of stories, poems, historical records, and a variety of other sorts of literature). The skeptic may be ready with a firm, "no."

Such a simple reply, however, belies the complexity of thinking Christians and the work they produce. Christian apologetics can, of course, be sub-par, but it can also be very sophisticated. A good number of Christian philosophers *qua* philosophers engage in defending various aspects of theistic belief from various challenges (what some call “negative apologetics”) as well as arguing for the rationality of belief in God and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead (“positive apologetics”). Some work of this sort is published under the title of philosophy of religion and finds itself in the main-stream philosophy journals and with academic publishers. So what is the relationship between apologetics and philosophy, especially when one realizes that other apologetic works are written for a more general audience and might be referred to as “popular apologetics?” A quick perusal of Amazon on the topic “Christian apologetics” will turn up hundreds of books. Then there are the debates, the conferences, and Sunday school meetings where apologetic topics are taken up. How is the apologetic task different from philosophy or public philosophy?

First, to be under the authority of text does not entail that one stupidly follows the text or slavishly obeys a particular interpretation of that text. While plenty of academically unsophisticated Christians do, admittedly, follow the text without a good deal of thought, that sort of behavior is hardly the province of religious people alone. For one example, following the text of the U.S. Constitution seems to have plenty of followers who do so stupidly or follow a particular interpretation slavishly. It is one’s approach to the authority of the text that may make it a philosophical approach. Just as Socrates questioned the standard answers to various questions of his day, so the Christian philosopher can and arguably should do the same. Perhaps, then, the real issue isn’t just the textual source as authority but rather a question of how one’s intuitive commitments, some of which run very deep in our philosophical approaches, play out in our practice of philosophy. A naturalist working within a given set of philosophical intuitions, beliefs, or commitments doesn’t fail to be a philosopher for having those prior commitments. Surely the more professional end of apologetics—that done by, say, Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, George Mavrodes, (the early) John Hick and a myriad of others—should count as philosophy even though it is work done largely within a set of religious commitments. (For example, it is no accident that Plantinga’s modal theory allows for the ontological argument to work whereas some others constructed by naturalist philosophers—David Lewis, for example—may not). Those commitments may have their genesis in the authority of a text and are not simply intuitive, but the intuitions remain the starting place philosophically, even if their genesis is found elsewhere. One could draw a parallel to the philosophical commitments to naturalism of Wilfred Sellars, J.J.C. Smart, and David Lewis. While perhaps not rooted in a commitment to a religious text, naturalist philosophical intuitions might be said to be

traceable in genesis to a naturalist reading of Aristotle or to Hobbes or Hume. All philosophers have some sort of overarching commitment to a framework of intuitions and starting places. To say otherwise seems to simply deny the obvious. In short, a naturalist who defends naturalism is surely a philosopher when the work she does is done well, using philosophical tools, and published in professional journals and presses. So it should be for Christians who are explaining and defending their religious views. But here is the most important point. A good Christian philosopher, as well as a good naturalist philosopher, will be open to reconsidering her arguments, theories and accounts of things.

Each philosophy has a starting point, (and here I don't intend to imply some sort of foundationalism), and that starting point expands out to a more-or-less large world-view framework. These frameworks are intuitively rooted, in most if not all cases. One way to look at philosophy is as a set of question leading to theory production, explanation and defense beginning with that world-view framework. Just as a naturalist is working out a naturalist world-view, so is the Christian philosopher, including the explicit apologist. Among the long list of philosophers from history, many have been Christians. The body of work they individually produced is often an extended set of reflections on their basic views of God, Jesus, salvation, morality and art taken within the Christian framework. One of the best contemporary examples because he has written so widely and well is Wolterstorff. In thinking of his work, one can see a large pattern of deeply biblical and Christian insights that come out in his "neutral" sounding philosophical pieces on art or justice, metaphysics or epistemology. As a Christian philosopher, however, one has quite a lot of freedom within the basic framework. For example, Wolterstorff has been a fairly staunch realist about metaphysical issues. He has been critical of, for example, Nelson Goodman's nominalism and irrealism whereas my work as a Christian philosopher embraces a good deal of what Goodman says and attempts to show it consistent with Christianity. One finds similar disagreements among apologists who are explicitly writing or doing apologetic work. There are many different approaches to apologetic work, all Christian but hardly in agreement. For example, I recall a story about two apologists (whose names are lost to my memory) of the mid-twentieth century discussing God's existence. One presented a long account involving detailed arguments for God's existence. When it was time for the other presenter, he merely said "I'm a pre-suppositionalist. Apologetics should start with God, not argue to the conclusion that God exists. So I have nothing to say in response." Now those are two vastly different philosophical approaches within the apologetic field. What's important, however, may be the attitude with which one holds these approaches. One supposes that these two thinkers, if they were good philosophers, were open to the possibility of a change of view.

This is where things get more complicated. What happens when the apologist approaches “discussions” without much, if any openness to, for example, being wrong or at least admitting that one’s opponents make some good points? While there are such apologists, once again Christian thinkers surely do not have a corner on such close-mindedness. We’ve all met philosophers who are narrow-minded or bigoted about what’s important or what views are true. Here a full discussion would have to look at the role that personality plays in philosophy or any other academic pursuit. Sometimes our personalities get in the way of honest discussion and openness. (On the other hand, sometimes doggedness leads to new insights that show one’s own position to be the right one.) But again, that is not limited to Christian thinkers. Although we may pride ourselves as philosophers for being curious and open, not all of us are. The relationship between commitment and curiosity, stalwartness and stubbornness, can sometimes be quite murky.

The challenge of commitment in philosophy raises a lot of deep problems, issues about which I can only make a few observations. What is the role of commitment in developing, explaining, holding and defending a philosophical view? I was once a committed, metaphysical realist. I now hold a much more unrealistic view. I would have described my younger self as quite committed to realism. But I changed my mind. At first it was a slow process, reading and thinking about the importance of realism and the arguments against it. Then I was “converted,” where the conversion seemed to happen quickly. Could I have imagined my younger realist self eventually becoming an irrealist? Not easily. But it happened. In a parallel way, I have been, for most of my life, a committed Christian. Can I imagine myself not being a Christian? Not easily—probably less easily than I could have foreseen myself becoming an irrealist—but it could happen. Commitment simply does not entail close-mindedness. Neither does it make one stupid or slavish about rejecting alternatives. But the main points I want to make at this juncture are these. First just as philosophy can be well-done, with open-mindedness, a good sense of the give-and-take of the argument and commitment, so can apologetics. Second, open-mindedness should go all the way down to one’s intuitions but that does not entail lack of commitment. Commitment does not entail blind faith. Our intuitions are themselves embedded in the theories we produce and sometimes the evidence we discover challenges those intuitions. When it is more rational to give up one’s commitment to one’s intuitions than to hold onto them is often a matter of what we have learned in new circumstances and the type of rationality we are considering. Third, the relationship between commitment and what we might call “passion” is important. Sometimes commitments involve passion and hence move us toward evangelism for our positions. Other times commitments do not involve passion. The relationship between commitment and passion needs more work than I can give it here, but

it probably has something to do with how connected the theoretical position is to the way one lives.

II

I turn now to the second thing we need in order to answer the question, “can Christian apologetics be public philosophy?” We need a set of criteria for what counts as public philosophy. Here we face another set of problems, for there appear to be no clear criteria for what counts as public philosophy. Consider the following from Joshua Miller:

My department invited Sharon Meagher [herself a key player in public philosophy] to do a seminar last Friday on how to redirect our energies towards “public philosophy.” Meagher has a great textbook for introducing philosophy through an exploration of urban issues that offers a situated approach to philosophical inquiry, and she’s done a lot of work trying to organize and advocate for publicly engaged philosophers. What got us hung up was how much of what we were already doing was “public philosophy.” The term “public philosophy” can encompass things as diverse as doing any sort of philosophy in public (like anything in *The Stone* or *The Partially Examined Life*), doing any sort of political philosophy, or engaging the public in doing any sort of philosophy (*Socrates Cafe*, my own *Free Philosophy Courses* page, etc.) In a banal sense, any time a philosopher publishes a paper, they’re [sic] doing philosophy in public just by making the paper openly accessible. Anyone with a philosophy blog or podcast is doing “public philosophy” by that definition. Even a classroom is public, after all, but teaching in one doesn’t seem to be enough to qualify. Shy as we were to name the thing we didn’t want to be for fear of offence, we sometimes seemed to be using the term as a kind of corporate marketing speak, “re-envisioning” ourselves into a new justification for the status quo. Rebranding is a great new use for the fallacy of the heap. Philosophers well know the kinds of problems that emerge from definition and typology, yet we easily fall into the same kinds of traps as non-philosophers when we’re not consciously practicing our metacognitive techniques. And so on Friday we struggled over whether we wanted to define public philosophy as “engaged” or “activist” philosophy, whether it would include politicized (African-American, feminist, queer, Africanist) engagement with the traditional philosophical canon, and whether the work done under this title could include difficult and often jargonistic analytic and textual scholarship. Is “public philosophy” just “philosophy”?²

That is a good question. Perhaps we can get some help from the American Philosophical Association's committee on public philosophy whose mission is to

1. Organize and support programs that demonstrate the personal value and social usefulness of philosophy, such as suitable lecture series, and radio and television appearances by philosophers.
2. Organize and support programs that bring public attention to philosophy and philosophers, such as book signings.
3. Establish ties to national and local media.
4. Prepare appropriate news releases for the divisional meetings of the APA and for other events of philosophical significance.
5. Serve as a conduit so that media and other inquiries can be channeled to appropriate individuals in the profession.
6. Create or support the creation of audio tapes and videotapes useful for calling attention to philosophy and for garnering support for philosophy.
7. Encourage APA members to engage in public debate about significant issues by such means as sponsoring op-ed essay contests.
8. Establish contact with politicians, civil servants, and opinion makers to impress upon them the full scope of the contributions philosophers can make.
9. Make common cause with ethics institutes and other organizations in promoting the engagement of philosophy with broader publics.³

Now a good number of things on the APA's list sound like what Miller calls "corporate marketing speak, 're-envisioning' ourselves into a new justification for the status quo." 1-6 and 8 seem to fall directly into that category. 7 and 9 less clearly so, but are different from 1-6 and 8 in that there appears to be some philosophical content urged in the missional statements other than wearing sandwich signs on main street. Writing op-eds and engaging ethics institutes would have the advantage of having us say something with philosophical content.

The Public Philosophy Network says about itself that it "is an online social network for philosophers, community-based practitioners, policy makers, and other constituents interested in thinking critically about public issues."⁴ What counts as a "public issue" is not particularly clear either. Perhaps we find help from Sharon Meagher, an active member of the Public Philosophy Network:

Despite the public perception that continues to share Aristophanes' view that philosophers remain "in the clouds," incapable of doing publically relevant work, at

least some philosophers have remained committed to a Socratic model of philosophy that is engaged with public life. Some key philosophical traditions, notably the American Pragmatist tradition and, in Europe, the Frankfurt School, remain vibrant and have embraced a commitment to publically engaged scholarship. Admittedly many other philosophers (including some adherents to these traditions) have lost sight of this model and rarely engage the public. Yet as the discipline of philosophy has been transformed—by the concern for (and growing legitimacy of) practical and applied ethics, feminist and critical race theories, and other new sub-disciplines—a new generation of publically engaged philosophers has emerged. This is a development that has been promoted by the changing demographics of the discipline: As more women of all ethnicities and races, more men of color, and more working class persons have entered the discipline, they have insisted that philosophy be practiced in ways that address the questions salient to their experiences and their histories. Together with the allies they have cultivated, these thinkers have transformed the discipline in multiple ways to insure its relevance.⁵

According to Meagher, public philosophers are committed to publically engaged philosophy. This does little to clarify. She does, however, mention the American pragmatists and the Frankfurt school as examples of traditional public engagement and, more recently because of demographic changes, philosophers are increasingly interested in publically engaged philosophy. These latter philosophers have transformed the discipline to ensure it remains relevant.

I'm not sure that helps much. Relevant to what? Given the list of sub-disciplines—practical and applied ethics, feminist and critical race theories—one suspects that what “publically engaged” comes to has to do with subject matter, at least in part. Like the later 19th and early 20th century pragmatist movement—Jane Addams and John Dewey, for example—today's public philosophers want to take the theory into the streets and elementary schools. But Addams and Dewey didn't take just any and every theory into the streets and the schools. They took their own, as do women of all ethnicities, men of color, and working class persons. This is to be praised. Philosophy, as the love of wisdom, should in fact make a difference to how people live. But does such a view of public philosophy limit it too much? While we should all be making sure our neighbors are well-treated, does that entail that the “public” in “public philosophy” is only about the common good in a political sense?

Socrates wanted to make Athens a better place to live, a place where people of good will could think clearly about what it is to be human and to provide an environment in which humans could, indeed, live the good life. Perhaps public philosophers want exactly that for

our contemporary states. But Socrates was concerned not merely with questions about the public good. He was concerned with intensely personal issues as well, and in some ways even more concerned about religious issues.⁶ So the “public” in Socratic public philosophy was broader than perhaps what we’ve seen so far.

Christopher Phillips’s sense of public philosophy is a little wider. The founder of the Socrates Café movement, his discussions range over a wide variety of subjects, including, in a recent NPR interview, what is success, should race matter, what is good art, and what does love of country mean? Phillips presumably leaves no stone unturned. Everything is open to question and Phillips and his volunteers presumably want to see what turns up in the senior centers, schools, malls and other places where the Socrates Cafes happen. Or perhaps it’s not so much *what* turns up but the fact that *people* from all walks of life turn up. Like Socrates, he isn’t necessarily trying to change someone else’s beliefs but to encourage everyone to ground her or his beliefs on something reasonable. But as one reviewer says:

Phillips's own philosophical weakness is in romanticizing questioning as nearly an end in itself, claiming to run a "church service for heretics," even though his belief that "all so-called truths . . . are never the last word" is itself a popular dogma. Nevertheless, as in the case of the usually silent fifth-grader who wonders out loud about the word "wonder," . . . he winningly showcases a tantalizing method for getting philosophy to thrive more widely.⁷

Are we making progress or is the whole point to keep asking questions? Perhaps both. We all know philosophy begins with questions. In some sense, every human is a philosopher, with opinions, ideas, and beliefs on which we act. So getting the search for wisdom out of the privilege of the university classroom and into the bars, prisons, and shopping malls will help individuals clarify what their own positions are. Yet Socrates himself knew what he believed and when he asked questions, it was not always with a view to just helping the other person clarify his beliefs. Socrates was, in the end, quite convinced that he was doing the right thing by not fleeing Athens.

III

At this point, we have three notions of public philosophy on the table. The APA’s marketing version, the Public Philosophy Network’s social policy/activist version, and the Socrates Café let’s-try-to-learn-something-by-pooling-our-thoughts version. Would Christian apologetics count as public philosophy under any of these?

There are several parallels. There are sophisticated apologetics (such as those published in professional journals) and popular publications, debates, conferences, etc. The quality of these books, debates, conferences etc. vary widely just as the quality of the dialogues at Socrates cafes do or, for that matter, discussions in our classrooms. Also, the work that typically comes under “philosophy of religion” and is written and presented by professionally trained philosophers (at meetings dedicated largely to philosophy of religion, for example, the Society of Christian Philosophers and the Society for the Philosophy of Religion) has a parallel, one supposes, in the Public Philosophy Network where Ph.D. philosophers, many of whom work in university settings, write for professional audiences as well as try to influence policy or actively engage in changing the way things are. Furthermore, some subjects, say philosophy of language, are not going to capture the imagination of the general population any more than the technicalities of some version of the ontological argument will. Some topics are more amenable to public discussion and understanding than others.

Having considered some of the parallels between the spectrum that runs from philosophy of religion to popular Christian apologetics and grand theories of justice to everyday political conversations, perhaps we can now ask whether popular Christian apologetics is a version of public philosophy. Returning to our three versions of public philosophy, the APA, the PPN and the Socrates café models, it’s not clear that Christian apologetics will fit any of them. Although there are some exceptions, many of the Christian apologists doing popular apologetics do not have PhDs. There are, of course, exceptions. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland who are both quite sophisticated philosophers, have also written works specific to apologetics, including fairly popular-level books. Those who do have PhDs often turn out higher quality work, even when it is written for a general audience. But the more popular material is often written by those with little, if any, philosophical training beyond an M.A. and sometimes not even that. That fact alone might incline one to place popular Christian apologetics, if it fits anywhere, alongside of the Socrates café movement. The problem with that, however, is that the point of much popular apologetics is evangelism and not merely open-ended discussion. Here we face, in a perhaps less clear way, the problem in comparing Socrates and St. Paul. Socrates’s “good news” appears to be a method for approaching important questions, whereas Paul has definitive answers to the questions.

The APA’s re-envisioning approach to public philosophy also does not apply directly to Christian apologetics. The latter is not, generally, trying to “re-envisioner” Christian theology or philosophy of religion.⁸ Nor is it typically trying to make the public commons a better place for people of color, women or people of a variety of sex orientations. One thing to note about this latter approach to public philosophy, however, is that some of its

practitioners do have answers to the questions at the ready. It's not as if public philosophers are merely interested in the questions. As I noted above, Jane Addams took her own views into the streets and did not merely set up philosophical cafes. Nevertheless, she is known for listening to the people who came into Hull House in order to learn what she could from them and their situations. It seems that some sort of balance between one's philosophical commitments and one's openness to questions and change are vital to the practice of good philosophy, public or otherwise.

Here, we might want to turn to the root of Christian philosophical work and apologetics to get a better sense of what *good* apologetics should be. It was Peter rather than Paul who wrote:

Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence; and keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are abused, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing right, if that should be God's will, than for doing wrong. *1 Peter 15b-17* (NRSV)

Being prepared to give a reason for the "hope that was within" is no small or easy command, for Peter says this in the middle of a discussion of how the follower of Christ should respond to suffering at the hands of others. The early Christians were often the oppressed of society, including slaves, women, and conscripted soldiers. The roots of Christian apologetics thus are not the often-times "nice" intellectual debates of contemporary Christian apologetics but discourses embedded in the Christian tradition of love and service to others. Unfortunately, Christian apologetics has frequently lost its root in loving one's neighbor and been redirected to intellectual one-upmanship. But something similar has happened from the time of Socrates to the time of the abstract philosophy of the academy today as well. Socrates did not hold a nice, comfortable university post from which he could write interesting articles about causal reference theories. He spent his life talking to all who would listen and his goal was to not only find his own way to the good life but to share his method and its results with others in a way that would lead to them living the good life. Hence, in part, the movement called "public philosophy" is an attempt to bring philosophy down from the clouds and into public life—to make a practical difference. Here we find what may seem to some a surprising turn of events. Marxist, feminist, queer philosophy and Christian apologetics may have more in common than one first might think. The point is not merely to think about the world but to change it. Of course, not all these sorts of philosophers will agree with what the changes should be, but then, that is what good (public) philosophy aims to resolve, isn't it?

Here we should return to the issue of apologetics' relationship with theology and philosophy. As I mentioned above, since Christian apologetics is rooted in scripture, the work of the apologist is typically thought of as a branch of theology. But of course, keeping the philosopher's nose from poking under the edge of that tent is no easy task. And it's not just the philosophers worrying about what the Christians are saying either. Christian theologians from the second century (and perhaps even the first, with Paul) have dabbled in philosophy, attempting to integrate the witness of the Christian scripture with the thinking of the Athenians. In doing so, they often ran into the same set of issues "professional" philosophers have recognized, viz., that the relationship between theory and practice is an uneasy one. Arguably, however, theology (and philosophy) should not merely be about abstract understanding but about wisdom and how to live. So thought Paul about theology and Socrates about philosophy.

Philosophy has always been intertwined with Christian theology but we need to think not just about how philosophy and theology have interacted but rather about what the point of Christianity is in the first place. Early in Christian history, Christians were not called "Christians." In Acts 9 we find a reference to Saul (who became Paul) as a follower of the Way (that is, a follower of Jesus). Jesus once described himself as "the way, the truth and the life" and one wonders if this early reference to the "Way" harks back to Jesus' words that many early Christian believers would have heard from the apostles. Be that as it may, I want to make the point that early on Christianity wasn't a religion of its own. It was considered a sect of Judaism, as we find in Acts 24 where Paul is described (by the Jewish leaders) as a follower of the Nazarene sect (after Jesus, the Nazarene). As Christianity moved out of Judaism, it became a way of life. That is the main point. Christianity was not just something one does when it is convenient or just on week-ends and it is not merely a theoretical position. It is an entirely engaging way of being in the world, including a way of love and service. Early followers of Jesus were "known for their love," as Tertullian put it in the 2nd century.

Recall the context of Peter's urging his fellow Christians to be prepared to give a defense for their hope. It is the context of suffering. But Peter tells them to give a defense "with gentleness and reverence; and keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are abused, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing right, if that should be God's will, than for doing wrong." Peter is as concerned that they love each other—perhaps more concerned—than that they provide an intellectual *apologia*. Christian defense of the faith is not, or at least should not, be about intellectual one-upmanship or winning a debate. It is about showing others how to live the good life.

It's about how to deal with suffering, how to treat one another with love, how to honor one's neighbor, and how to be in the world.

If we return to Paul, we see him also willing to suffer and eventually to die to communicate what he took the truth to be, the core of which is love, for God is love. But in the meantime, he communicated the story of Christ and his resurrection to any and all who would listen. He preached, yes. But he also argued and defended the faith in any number of New Testament passages as well as in the synagogues and public markets all over Asia Minor and even as far as Rome and perhaps Spain. Was he a public philosopher?

Perhaps not if one of the requirements of doing philosophy, public or otherwise, is being "neutral" or "objective." Paul was anything but neutral. He was committed and passionate! Passion, one supposes, is appropriate to many things but especially, one could argue, to living the good life. If one has found a way in which to live that brings one happiness and joy, why wouldn't one be passionate about it? But the relationship between commitment and passion remains murky and I can't clear it up easily or quickly. But I suspect that Socrates was passionate in a way not totally dissimilar to Paul even though the two "calls" from the divine functioned differently in their lives. Socrates began his philosophical journey as a response to the Oracle at Delphi. Told something he found very difficult to believe, he set out to show the Oracle wrong. But the Oracle wasn't wrong and the longer Socrates pursued his divine mission, the more he became convinced that that was his divine purpose in life. By the end, he is unwilling to let the worse people win by fleeing Athens rather than face his death on trumped-up charges. He says that he was daily in the square, pursuing the truth. But what was the truth? Perhaps Socrates had less certitude about where he was going when he died than Paul, but he did not have less certitude that living with integrity according to his philosophical approach to questions was right. Socrates' method was hence more classically "philosophical" than Paul's. But his method was part of the truth he taught. But not method alone; he was also committed to some content. If nothing else, he was committed to the belief that the way he lived his life was a good way, a way in which others too could find fulfillment. But he also believed that because of his way of life that in the afterlife he would be received by people of like mind. While he was less committed, perhaps, to his version of the afterlife, he was no less committed to the truth than Paul. They perhaps would not have agreed on what *was* true but perhaps they might have had they engaged in dialogue.⁹ They definitely would have agreed that the truth was vitally important, whatever it happened to be. Of course, Paul's divine call contains a lot more specific content than Socrates' call. Thus he was able to preach and not concentrate only on philosophical method and approach. Presumably he was more certain of that content than,

perhaps Socrates was. But was one more passionate than the other? I would suggest at least a tentative “no” in reply.

Is either Paul or Socrates “neutral” or “objective” about their views? Does anyone in philosophy (or any other intellectual) have such a thing? Do we even want to live in a world where people do? Socrates is not “neutral” or “objective” about the truth he held. Neutral people don’t die for what they believe. Dying for one’s beliefs requires some sort of passion toward one’s commitments. Objective people have, of course, looked at the facts and given them an interpretation and reached their conclusions. Socrates could certainly be said to have done that. But that is no less true of Paul. He started out as the infamous persecutor of the followers of the Way and ended up being one of their most important leaders and promoters. Did he weigh the evidence and reach an objective conclusion? Here I only repeat: neutral people don’t die for what they believe. Objectivity, insofar as it is neutrality, is not necessarily something we value. But another type of objectivity should lead us to overcome neutrality—the objectivity of weighing evidence for oneself and reaching one’s own conclusions. From that, commitment flows. Of course, Paul received a revelation quite different in content than Socrates, and the latter took a more skeptical approach which led to philosophical questioning than did Paul. But Paul was likely to be open to some different approaches within the faith than it might appear. He was, after all, not flat out rejected or ignored by the philosophers in Athens.

So, there are differences in the approach of Paul and Socrates. Socrates often is portrayed as not knowing the answers to the questions he posed. Sometimes I’m sure he didn’t know and continued in ignorance even after lengthy dialogues. Of course, he probably saw himself as somewhat closer to the truth, having ruled out various possibilities. But the main point is that there is a sort of openness of thought presented in the early Socratic dialogues that doesn’t appear to be present in Paul’s work (or in the later dialogues of Plato, for that matter). That brings us to the original challenge to apologetics as a branch of philosophy. Where is the tentativeness of conclusion? And that brings us back to the question of commitment and questioning.

While there are New Testament passages where Paul attempts to separate his own opinion from God’s authority (see, for example, various places in the Corinthian letters), they are the exception rather than the rule. Paul seems committed and not open, Socrates, perhaps more often than not, open and not committed. Yet commitment is a difficult thing to judge. In some matters, one can be committed but where it makes little difference for one’s life. In other matters, being committed can lead to one’s death, a rather substantial difference in one’s life! And we do see Socrates quite committed about certain issues. Presumably those

include that the unexamined life is not worth living, that using reason to solve problems is the best way, and that escaping his punishment, no matter how unfair, would set a bad example and undo his life-long efforts at helping his fellow Athenians live the good life. He did go to his grave for his beliefs and his integrity in the end.

For Socrates, commitment came as a result of reason. But it also had a religious component. I don't think the religious claims he made at his defense can be explained away as rhetorical niceties. But for Paul, the religious component is much stronger but also much more detailed. Perhaps when one has a spiritual revelation that changes one's belief orientation as Paul did on the Damascus road, the result is more self-assuredness. Socrates' approach to his revelation is to question it. Paul seems rather just to run with it. Is this a difference in temperament or is it something peculiar to religious commitment? Since I know too many good, even excellent, Christian philosophers, I don't believe that deep religious commitment makes one close-minded by itself. And we don't know how close-minded Paul was. Committed, yes. Close-minded about it? We don't have enough evidence. Could Paul have changed his mind? Perhaps. He did, after all, seem pretty convinced of his Judaism and he gave that up for something he took to be a better account of life.

To return to public philosophy, I would add that people who do public philosophy are bound to be passionate about what they do and committed to their own views. If we find public philosophers not passionate about what they are saying (whether that be a full-blown theory of X, Y or Z or a long series of questions that aim to sharpen our grasp on the truth) we might suspect them of being sophists rather than seekers of the truth—or perhaps like the Athenians of Paul's era who spent their time only in hearing what was new.

So can apologetics be public philosophy? I suggest at least a tentative “yes.” Now of course, some will demur arguing, perhaps, that attachment to religion is itself a societal detriment or arguing that insofar as someone is passionately religious they cannot be, in fact, good philosophers. Yet consider the public discussions of, say, Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens. As “philosophers,” their work has been soundly criticized (perhaps no surprise, for Dawkins is a biologist and Hitchens a journalist). But that hasn't stopped their work from being widely read and hasn't stopped them from being admired by many. One of the reasons for this admiration may be just that Dawkins and Hitchens are deeply committed to, as well as very passionate about, their beliefs. One would not, I think, use the term “neutral” to apply to either. How about objective? Perhaps if one means that they have weighed the evidence and reached their own conclusions. Yet perhaps many would say these two of the four horsemen of the atheistic apocalypse are public philosophers. If these atheistic apologists count as (public) philosophers, there appears little reason to reject popular

Christian apologists as (public) philosophers. Furthermore, is the passionate religious commitment of many Christian apologists fundamentally different in structure than the passionate commitment of “political” philosophy that flies under the banner of African-American, feminist, queer or Africanist? Different, certainly in content (at least sometimes), but not so much in the structure of passion. But whether and how it is different would have to be handled on a case to case basis. But it seems that at least some who approach public philosophy are not merely interested in pursuing questions in an open-minded way but pursuing a political viewpoint to which they are quite committed and even passionate.

That returns us to the important and interesting question about the relationship between philosophy and evangelism, the latter of which is often the point of apologetic efforts on the behalf of Christianity.¹⁰ Here some brief observations are in order. First, a great deal of apologetics is, in fact, in-house, a “preaching-to-the-choir.” It is, after all, defense done by those who already believe. But apologetics that takes the offensive position is also aimed at conversion. Certainly the bulk of Paul’s preaching was, and much of the current work of, for example, William Lane Craig is as well. Second, the “conversion” model of apologetics will certainly not be limited to philosophical discussion but will including preaching the gospel message and calling, sometimes quite overtly, for conversion. One suspects that insofar as “apologetics” is also preaching that it is less philosophical in orientation and more theological even though the demarcating lines there are not always clear. Third, conversion is not merely “philosophical” if one thinks of philosophy primarily as theory generation and defense. Conversion is a life-changing issue in Christianity calling not merely for a change in intellectual belief but also for life-style changes and, in fact, taken seriously enough, for a change in one’s whole life pattern. Paul’s conversion was not merely the result of thinking hard and long in an objective manner about Judaism compared to the teachings of Jesus. It involved a personal revelation from Jesus, at least according to Acts. It was after his conversion that Paul spent three years in preparation for his ministry efforts, a time which no doubt included some hard intellectual work but also further revelations from God, according (again) to Acts. Fourth, there are philosophers—and perhaps many public philosophers fall into this camp—who aim at conversion and life-style changes. Those who defend feminist or GLTBQ stances or practical political views sometimes enter “conversion” mode. The balance between objective evaluation of arguments and a passion for conversion can be a hard one to find. When one leaves the former and engages the latter exclusively, perhaps one has left philosophy for preaching even if one’s position is not religious. Finally, when the move to conversion mode begins negatively to affect how one is arguing, perhaps one has left *good* philosophy behind, at least as it is typically thought of. Appeals to emotionally laden arguments without any value placed on evidence do play a role (typically not for the good) in Christian apologetics but in other areas of philosophical

endeavor as well. One can think here of appeals for the rights of animals that go in for the “shock” factor of animals under vivisection where there is no appeal to more evidence-based data. Here I’m not saying that emotions should play no role—we are not thinking machines as much of male-dominated philosophy in the West has suggested. But good philosophy includes all appropriate approaches to issues of importance. Falling on the emotional side alone is no better than falling on the so-called rational side alone.

So can Christian apologetics be public philosophy? I think there are some reasons to think it can and some to think it cannot. Perhaps an easier question to answer (granting plausibility to its being public philosophy at all) is whether it is *good* public philosophy. It will rise and fall as good public philosophy on at least two counts. The first is the strength and cogency of its arguments. Some popular Christian apologetics, as I’ve already noted, is not very sophisticated. But that keeps it from being good Christian apologetics, not from being Christian apologetics at all. Second, it will rise and fall as good public philosophy in terms of how well the person doing the philosophy pursues the good life (that is, for Christians, pursues the way of love) something that Peter and Paul early on recognized. We would, presumably, say the same thing of any “secular” public philosophy. It should pursue the good life. Or at least perhaps we *should* say that. And isn’t that, in a way, the point of public philosophy at least as Socrates lived it, and people such as Jane Addams? They wanted to learn as much as they could from people around them and to put into place mechanisms by which to improve the lot of those very people as well as themselves.

What should we say about public philosophy and the role of religion? This essay barely scratches the surface. But I think we can safely say that there is no obviously compelling reason to reject religious philosophy, be it Christian, Buddhist, Hindu or otherwise, as philosophy or public philosophy. Public philosophy may be described as good or bad because of its arguments or lack thereof; or it may be good or bad depending on the “amateurs” who practice it, or good or bad depending on the positive influence it has on individuals and society. Those points seem to hold whether the philosopher is religious or not. So perhaps public philosophy, insofar as it is a separate entity from philosophy overall, ought not to close the gates to the market when they see St. Paul coming but invite him into the Areopagus to converse with Socrates.¹¹

Notes

¹ Even Christian philosophers are divided on this subject. See some recent work by Paul Moser and the large, and largely, Christian philosophical response to his position.

<http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=131>

² <http://www.anotherpanacea.com/2012/08/what-is-public-philosophy/>

³ <http://publicphilosophy.org/mission.html>

⁴ <http://publicphilosophynetwork.ning.com/page/new-tab>

⁵ <http://publicphilosophynetwork.ning.com/forum/topics/what-is-public-philosophy>

⁶ See Mark McPherran, *The Religion of Socrates*. Univesity Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1996.

⁷ From Publisher's Weekly, quoted at http://www.amazon.com/Socrates-Cafe-Fresh-Taste-Philosophy-ebook/dp/B0045Y23XO/ref=dp_kinw_strp_1

⁸ Although there are some recent attempts at new approaches to Christian apologetics, including my own. See Mark S. McLeod Harrison and Phil Smith, *Being at Home in the World: A New Christian Apologetic*, Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2011 and Mark S. McLeod-Harrison, *Apologizing for God: The Importance of Living in History*, Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011.

⁹ On this, see a popular, although well done, book of apologetics: Peter Kreeft *Socrates meets Jesus*, Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1987. Although not Paul engaging Socrates, the book is written by a PhD in philosophy.

¹⁰ I thank Jack Russell Weinstein for raising this question in his response to my submission, as well as for other helpful organizational and content comments.

¹¹ I thank my colleague Phil Smith for comments on this paper. As always, his comments were clear and to the point.