

WHY PHILOSOPHY?

Let's get off on the right foot by being honest about something. While some people have purchased this book out of a desire to learn more about philosophy, others (probably most) are reading this book because it is a required text for a mandatory philosophy class. Since philosophy is famous (or infamous) for always asking "Why?" it is only fair to turn this question back on the philosophers. Why, of all the classes available at a university, do so many schools designate an introductory level philosophy class as mandatory? Why philosophy?

The "Why philosophy?" question is sharpened by another element. The reality is that an extremely small percentage of the people who take a philosophy class will become professional philosophers. This is true also, by the way, for most of those who major in the subject. This makes philosophy very different from many majors; it is not really about career preparation, at least in any direct sense. If someone majors in marketing, we anticipate that they will pursue a career in this area (although that doesn't always happen). So besides the fact that your university may require a course in the area, why take philosophy if you have no intention of going into this field?

In the first part of this chapter, we will offer some reasons why we think philosophy is important to everyone, and why it is a mainstay in just about every college curriculum. Before we get to those reasons, though, we want to acknowledge a rather unique element in this

book because it will influence our ideas about philosophy's relevance. The subtitle informs you that Christianity is somehow involved with philosophy in this book. In other words, this philosophy text has a particular angle. In reality, philosophy never starts from a neutral position on any matter. Every philosopher has biases, commitments, backgrounds, and life experiences that shape their approach to the subject. That is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, it is impossible for it to be otherwise. Thus, by calling this "Christianity and the Big Questions," we are simply advertising that the authors' Christian commitments will come into play in how we approach philosophy's subject matter. Thus, the second major chunk of this chapter examines the "Why (should I care about) philosophy?" question from a more focused perspective and asks, "Why should Christians care about philosophy?"

THINKING ABOUT THINGS

Some variation of the "Why philosophy?" question is a pretty standard way to begin an introductory book on the topic, and often the discussion starts with different definitions of philosophy itself. Right away that says something about the topic. Philosophers, who disagree about almost everything, often also disagree on what philosophy is and what it should do. As a beginning point, we will define philosophy as "thinking about things." Obviously we will have to sharpen this definition because "thinking about things" characterizes many different aspects of our life. We think about what we want to do over the weekend, the most effective route to get to work, and whether we will dump more money into repairing our current car or bite the bullet and buy a newer one. Thus, we will need to examine our basic "thinking about things" definition by looking at the types of "thinking" philosophy uses and the types of "things" that are the targets of philosophical thought. In other words, we need to understand both the "how to" and the "what" of philosophy.

One indicator of how philosophical thought differs from other types of thinking is embedded in something we all know but rarely ponder. Why is it that almost no one takes a philosophy class until they get to college? After all, by the time we get to college, almost every

other general studies subject area is familiar to us. We have had years of English, science, math, history, art, and music, but no philosophy. Why is this? The short answer is that your brain isn't really ready for it until you move into adulthood. Philosophical thought requires the sorts of capacities that the brain isn't fully prepared to perform when we are children.

Developmentally, we only begin to transcend memorization, purely concrete thought, and reliance on external authority and gain these complex brain functions as we move into later adolescence. When we complain that philosophy seems so abstract, we are, in a sense, complaining about being asked to think like adults—making independent judgments, sifting data to determine relevance, recognizing ambiguity and, yes, thinking abstractly. Philosophy is really an invitation to leave the "kid's table" and a promotion to the "adult table." In short, you can now think like an adult, and thinking in a philosophical manner is part of shouldering that responsibility.

Adult thinking is identity forming. What we decide to believe about a number of critical areas, a topic we will take up shortly, is critical to the type of person we will become. However, *how* we think is also determinative. And even though philosophers today may not give too much attention to it, developing a philosophical approach to thinking is an identity-shaping process. In short, philosophical thinking has a view toward molding us to be a certain kind of person, a person the classical and early Christian thinkers would have described as "intellectually *virtuous*."

We will discuss virtue in more depth in later chapters, but we need to make a few preliminary observations if we want to grasp what will be said below. First, the classical meaning of "virtue," and the definition we have in mind throughout this section, is "excellence." Virtue designates an ideal toward which we strive in order to become complete. Second, virtue requires action, but even more fundamentally, it is an inner disposition to act in certain ways. We often refer to this as character—the values that are so deeply ingrained that they have become our default switch for certain behaviors. Third, we are not born virtuous. Instead, we are born with the *capacity* to become virtuous. Like athletic or musical capacities, we need to practice the

virtues so that we progress toward the ideals they set before us. They are, if you will, good habits that we develop through repetition. Finally, even though we may speak of the virtues as separate qualities, in real life they tend to develop (or fail to develop) in support of each other.

The most fundamental intellectual virtue necessary for philosophical thought is rationality. One “adult” feature of philosophy is that it requires coming to a conclusion, not simply having an opinion. Conclusions and opinions both result in beliefs we think are true, but there is a critical difference. Opinions are easy to come by; you simply stake a claim in a particular viewpoint and that’s that. Conclusions, on the other hand, require more work. You have to give reasons for them and show why those reasons are more satisfactory than premises that may support contrary conclusions. In short, philosophy demands reasoned and supported opinions. That is why philosophy is generally referred to as “rational” thinking; it is thinking that requires justification with reasons that should appeal to other folks who also have the capacity to offer, analyze, and evaluate reasons.

This makes it all sound pretty simple, but when we think back through past discussions on controversial topics, we probably remember situations when we tried to support our positions with what seemed to be good reasons but got nowhere. There can be multiple explanations for this. Sometimes attempts at rational conversations fail because our reasons were not as compelling as we believed. It could also be that the people we discussed these issues with were arrogant, biased, fearful, lazy, or indifferent. Arrogance, fear, laziness and related dispositions are what older philosophers called *vices*. Vices are the opposites of the virtues (which means that the opposite of the virtuous person is the vicious individual). Unless we overcome these vices and nurture their correcting virtues, we will be incapable of thinking that can be described as “philosophical.” We could compile a long list of these intellectual dispositions, but we will limit ourselves to some of the most important.

One of the most vital virtues of philosophical thinking is courage. People recognize that our ideas are vitally important to us; what we believe is central to who we are. Thus, when philosophy challenges our existing beliefs, it calls into question our very identity. This can be

frightening. Without intellectual courage—openness to consideration of new ideas and to change—we will never be able to engage the big questions fearlessly and honestly.

Intellectual courage is closely related to another virtue—autonomy. Autonomy refers to independence or freedom in our thinking. Autonomy would seem to be easy because we usually don’t like others to tell us what to think. However, this isn’t always the case. In many situations we are quite happy to let others make choices for us. When we make a decision, we own it, and this can be a considerable burden. The principle of autonomy helps explain why philosophical thought has a reputation for challenging the status quo. We believe many things on authority and quite often with good reason. While it makes sense for me to rely on my doctor’s authority in reading a chest X-ray or my CPA’s interpretation of the tax code, certain things that we take on authority should be questioned or examined at some point. Tradition, culture, religion, peer groups, political affiliations, or locality may nudge us toward certain beliefs and sometimes send us down the wrong path. Philosophy wants us to avoid accepting a belief just because a powerful authority says we should. It does not necessarily mean that we automatically reject these authorities, but philosophy wants us to think through whether the reasons for accepting their views are valid.

While some struggle with autonomy and intellectual courage, others seem very open to encountering and discussing the hard questions. Does this mean they are virtuous philosophical thinkers? Not necessarily. Some people have little difficulty in entertaining new and different ideas, not because they possess courage or other intellectual virtues, but because they have become cynical. In fact, some think of cynicism as the inevitable outcome of philosophical thought. However, nothing could be further from the truth. **Skepticism** and **relativism** are frequent indicators of intellectual vice—the opposite of the type of thought necessary for good philosophy.

In some cases cynicism is nothing more than a mask for intellectual laziness. Laziness is a constant temptation because philosophy confronts us with complex problems. When we discover the difficulty involved in resolving a philosophical quandary, it is easy to jump to

cynical (“no one can know”) or relativistic (“that may be true for you, but it’s not true for me”) responses. In contrast to the vice of cerebral laziness, philosophical thought calls us to the virtue of perseverance, in which the ideal is to persist in seeking answers, or at least to seek conclusions about what answers are insufficient, even when solutions do not immediately appear on the horizon.

Cynicism can also be a sign of intellectual arrogance. The ironic thing about cynicism is that it is actually a claim to know something: it declares certainty about our inability to achieve certainty. Therefore, not even the cynic is skeptical about everything. However, it may be the case that the cynic is correct that *some* problems may not have a solution. That conclusion is allowable in philosophical thought, but with two important qualifications. One cannot arrogantly assert a skeptical position and expect others to bear the burden of proof if they disagree. The skeptic needs to support a position with reasons. Also, as with any other philosophical position taken, a skeptical viewpoint will benefit from a healthy dose of humility that remains open to the possibility that contrary views might offer better solutions.

Perhaps one of the reasons so many dislike philosophy is that it has a tendency to humble us. This is bitter medicine for most of us because we rather enjoy the illusion that we are pretty smart, and it stings when we are not quite certain how to defend our view or respond to contrasting answers. Unless we have developed the virtue of humility, it is easier to strike back defensively, run away in fear, or become arrogant in our certainty rather than admit that we do not (yet) have all the answers.

Finally, cynicism almost inevitably involves a lack of integrity. By integrity, we mean a unity between different things you believe and a congruity between your claims and your actions. The reason relativism is almost always dis-integrated is that, no matter how loudly we proclaim there is no truth, we don’t actually live as if it is true. Ethics is the most common arena in which people often adopt the view that there is no knowable truth. At the same time, many of the same people who claim moral skepticism also will be quite happy to let you know that your purchases, voting record, or views on sexuality reflect a deficient set of values. See the problem?

In contrast, the intellectually virtuous thinker will seek a consistency in understanding how their ideas fit into a coherent whole. This is why we will speak of philosophical *systems*. Instead of embracing a string of unconnected and contradictory beliefs or activities that cannot be grounded in what we claim to believe, philosophy recognizes that what I confess about ethics, for example, should be consistent with what I believe about God, reality, knowledge, and other important matters. In short, philosophical thought is holistic and seeks integrity.

The list of intellectual virtues above is not exhaustive. For example, we could mention dispositions such as fairness, empathy, and generosity. These qualities allow us to put ourselves in another’s place, hear their ideas in their most robust form, and examine competing viewpoints in an evenhanded way. In a sense, these and other intellectual virtues boil down to a “do unto others” stance that respects the ideas of others in the same way we want them to respect our views.

This last observation is a hint of where our Christian commitments have already peeked through. Toward the beginning of this section, we noted that, while giving reasons is a pivotal aspect of philosophical thinking, **reason** by itself often leads to dead ends unless we include fairness, humility, courage, and other virtues in the philosophical process. You may have noted that these are not just virtues of our mind. They are also moral qualities and, we will argue later, spiritual qualities. In other words, while many philosophers are reluctant to go here, it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that productive philosophical discourse has a moral dimension. It does not simply call us to think in certain ways. Instead, philosophical thought requires that we desire and acquire certain moral qualities in order to successfully engage philosophical issues.

Before we move on to our discussion of what philosophical thinking thinks *about*, a concluding observation on the intellectual virtues might be helpful. I have noted a growing trend in philosophy department websites to cite statistics about the success of philosophy majors on graduate school entrance tests like the GRE, LSAT, and MCAT. Indeed, this shines a positive light on the discipline. Philosophy majors have a high rate of acceptance into law schools, medical schools, and

other competitive graduate programs. Moreover, starting and mid-career salaries for philosophy majors, including those who do not go into teaching philosophy, are well above average when compared to other college degrees.

The reason for including this type of selling point for philosophy is, no doubt, to relieve anxieties (perhaps belonging to parents as much as to students) about future earning potential for those who choose philosophy as a major. Fair enough; we all have bills to pay. However, these income indicators point to something even more important. Philosophy provides thinking tools that allow its majors to do well in problem solving, analytical processes, and critical thinking that challenging (and higher paying) professions covet. In short, the intellectual virtues fostered by a philosophy curriculum are not just about philosophy. They prepare students in the most transferrable and in-demand skill conceivable: thinking critically. So much for the idea that philosophy isn't practical.

THINKING ABOUT THINGS

When someone asks what we are thinking about, "nothing" is sometimes the response. Even though we have all done this, we know that "nothing" is a bogus answer. Thinking has an object; we think *about*. So now that we have examined some qualities of philosophical thinking, we need to look at what philosophy thinks about. As the subtitle indicates, philosophy is interested in the "big questions." But we need to explore why some questions can be described as "big."

One way to explain why we call certain questions "big" is to consider what might be called philosophy's metaquestion: "What is the meaning of life?" We often caricature this question with images of the solitary mountaintop guru, offering obscure answers to seekers who want to know life's ultimate purpose. However, the question lingers. For some reason we find it almost impossible to believe that our existence is accidental or meaningless. The purpose of life is a big deal to us, and the basic impulse to inquire about the meaning of existence seems to be hardwired into our very being.

Before we travel too far into the details of philosophy's fascination with "meaning of life" inquiries, we should highlight one word

within this phrase: "meaning." Philosophy is not just about discovery of facts and data, although it does rely on accurate information. We also want to know the *meaning* of things. Thus, in addition to our curiosity about how various governmental systems work or why some breeds of dogs ignite our allergies and others don't, philosophy seeks to go beyond mere facts to understand the significance of political systems for legal or economic freedom, or why we become so deeply attached to our basset hound. Political structures and puppies are not just there as brute facts; we assign value to them. The fact that we hang pictures on the wall of our bedroom or office, name our car "Friedrich," or make a philosophy class a requirement for an undergraduate degree attests to the fact that we are meaning seekers and meaning speakers. We ascribe significance to and express our values through objects, language, relationships, religious commitments, and spending patterns.

In view of what we have said above, then, philosophy's interest in meaning takes us to places we would not go if we were only interested in brute facts about the biological condition we refer to as life. This provides a good opportunity to respond to those who argue that science eliminates the need for subjects like philosophy, or religion for that matter. After all, science does a great job of answering certain types of questions and bringing beneficial results to our life. In contrast, philosophy seems to keep gnawing on the same issues for centuries without ever arriving at testable conclusions. So why not just get over philosophy and look to science as our source of knowledge?

The quick response is that science does not have the tools to answer some pretty important questions—namely, the *meaning* of life questions. Neurologists and chemists might (hopefully) find a cure for dementia, but they lack the tools to explain why we should administer those treatments to humans rather than canines if supplies and costs require that we make a choice. The astronomer may discover even more distant galaxies, but astronomy itself can't explain why one perceives a starry night sky as beautiful or why we prefer beauty to ugliness. In short, while philosophers will want to draw on the information discovered by science about ourselves and the universe, we still want to know what it all *means*.

PHILOSOPHY AS HUMANIZING

Another characteristic of the things about which philosophy thinks is best expressed in the language of “humanization,” which implies several things. First, as noted above, philosophy doesn’t force us to ask questions that we would never think of. The questions embedded in the book’s chapter titles are natural, *human* questions. They will still be around even if philosophy as an academic discipline disappears. Second, as far as we can tell, only human beings ponder the meaning of their life or the purpose of things. We may reflect on the philosophical significance of different aspects of the nonhuman world, but that is an act that only humans engage in. As far as we can tell, bovines do not philosophize. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, philosophy is humanizing in the sense that it stands as a counterweight against potentially depersonalizing forces in our world.

Much of a college curriculum is geared toward preparing you for a career. That is a good and important thing. However, a quick calculation helps put your career into perspective. If your full-time work life begins in your early twenties and ends in your late sixties, once you subtract all the hours when you are not at work during that span of years, you will discover that about ten years of your life is spent on the job. You are going to be a human being for a much longer time than you will be an accountant, asbestos removal technician, fifth grade teacher, or whatever work roles you may fill during your lifetime.

Our social well-being depends on you receiving solid training for whatever social role you will play, so career preparation is a good thing. However, at least part of your education should acknowledge that you are more than just a professional practitioner, no matter how vital that function may be. In fact, the meaning of work within the broader context of your human existence is an important philosophical investigation. In the end, ethics, justice, gender, truth, and religion are relevant to all humans precisely because they are human beings. Assuming our humanity itself is relevant, this makes philosophy one of the most important things we can investigate. Thus, even though students are often dismayed by the realization that philosophy is not as directly linked to career goals as other classes, they shouldn’t be.

Philosophy reminds us that whatever job titles we may have between 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m., we are all thinking, loving, anxious, valuing, meaning-seeking human beings.

PHILOSOPHY AS AN INTEGRATING DISCIPLINE

As noted above, part of the “big” in the big questions is including every dimension of human life and refusing to reduce our humanity to a set of occupational tasks. Closely related to this is the “big question” of how we bring all the elements of human existence into an integrated whole. This quest for integration is a primary concern of the earliest of the Western philosophers, a group referred to collectively as the *Presocratics* (since they came prior to *Socrates*). While they disagreed radically in their conclusions (a tradition philosophers continue to honor), they agreed that one topic deserved careful consideration. This is traditionally referred to as the problem of “the One and the Many.” “The Many” refers to the dazzling variety of components that comprise our universe—living things of all types and sizes, metals, planets, gall bladders, oceans, and an array of other things. Despite this multiplicity, all these components seem to function as an integrated whole. That is “the One.” In short, the Presocratics were attempting to figure out what put the “uni-” in the universe and draws the diverse parts of our cosmos into a unified whole.

It is no accident that the word “university” is closely related to “universe.” Within the university we study “the Many” in the wide variety of programs and majors that focus attention on a particular aspect of the universe or human experience. This focus on “the Many” intensifies as we move from lower division survey classes to more specific upper division courses and then on to highly specialized graduate programs and research agendas. In other words, we get more and more about “the Many” with almost no attention given to consideration of how it all coalesces into “the One.”

Specialization is not a bad thing in itself, but without the counterweight of something that calls us to think integrally, we can (and do) become splintered and narrow people. Philosophy is an important part of this integrative balance. To keep us from becoming dis-integrated individuals who know a lot about small segments of the universe,

philosophy wants to “go big” by crossing disciplinary boundaries and thinking about what it *all* means, how it all hangs together, and what gives “the Many” its cohesiveness and coherence.

PHILOSOPHY AS THE REALM OF DANGEROUS IDEAS

A final characteristic of philosophy’s “big questions” is that they involve thinking about powerful and dangerous ideas. Philosophical topics are “big” in the sense that they can be intellectual dynamite. At first glance this doesn’t seem to be the case. After all, the stereotypical image of a philosopher is an old goateed guy in a tweed jacket, serenely contemplating esoteric ideas that no one else cares about. However, in our last chapter, we will examine how Socrates’ philosophy resulted in his execution. On a more positive note, we will meet *John Paul Sartre*, whose philosophy had such impact that he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature (although he refused to accept it). We will also be introduced to *Augustine of Hippo*, whose ideas profoundly shaped the church and its theology for centuries, and *Karl Marx*, whose political thought realigned the maps of the world. *John Locke*’s political philosophy was considered so radical that he had to flee England for several years; but he was a formative influence behind the American Revolution, and his “radical” political views are at the core of United States of America’s founding documents. *Rene Descartes* lived in almost constant fear that his ideas would put him at odds with the Inquisition, and he eventually moved to Sweden to avoid this danger.

It’s improbable that your philosophical ideas will put you on death row, impress the Nobel Prize committee, or cause a realignment of the geopolitical map. However, they are powerful enough to alienate you from family members or create lifelong bonds of unity with others. Even though we might use phrases like, “that’s just your idea” or “it’s only a theory,” words like “just” and “only” cannot hide the fact that philosophical ideas are highly flammable. The reason is that the sorts of theories, ideas, and beliefs we refer to as “philosophical” get to the heart of our identity. They shape what we see when we look into a night sky, read the news, or gaze at the face of an infant. Our

philosophy determines which social voices we will deem as authoritative or hazardous and informs our conclusions about whether we can find it permissible or reprehensible to go to war. These ideas can deepen our commitment to God or cement us into ardent opposition to all religion. In other words, the philosophical views you will find in this book, depending on whether you accept them, reject them, or even remain indifferent toward them, will continually confront you with the question “Who should you be?” As is the case with all potent entities, ideas have the power to do great good or devastating evil. This is a big deal, so decisions about which philosophical claims will mold our identity moves philosophy into the arena of “big questions.”

Our basic definition of philosophy as “thinking about things” now has more precision. We have highlighted how the tools and disciplines of philosophical thinking are constructed on intellectual capacities that only begin to mature as we enter adulthood. In order to achieve good outcomes, its demand for reasons that support our conclusions must be accompanied by virtues like openness, courage, perseverance, humility, and empathy. Finally, we specified that the goal of philosophical thinking is not just to arrive at a larger quantity of factual data. Instead, it is to contemplate powerful ideas that integrate the whole of our humanity, and to seek an understanding of how diverse things hang together and what everything ultimately means. We hope that the qualities that philosophy endeavors to foster in us and the questions it pursues help answer the “Why philosophy?” question. It is a demanding and dangerous process, but failure to engage in the perennial questions reflectively and rigorously also has its dangers.

A CHRISTIAN APPROACH

Up to this point, almost everything you have read could be included in a philosophy text written by an author with no interest in or commitment to the Christian faith. This should not be a disappointment to Christians but a cause for celebration. A desire to understand the deepest dimensions of our being and universe is shared by all human beings, regardless of faith commitments. In fact, we believe this desire to understand is God given. However, faith commitments, whether they are religious or secular, will influence what we see as the proper

place, limitations, and possibilities of the philosophical quest. For this reason we want to explain what is meant by a Christian approach to the big questions and explore why a proper understanding of the Christian faith should intensify rather than diminish one's interest in and engagement with philosophy.

The first step of explaining what is meant by a Christian approach to the big questions requires that we clarify what is *not* intended in this phrase. First, it is not philosophical theology. Philosophical theology is a branch of theology that starts from Christian doctrine—miracles, incarnation, and Trinity, for example—and applies philosophical tools, language, and analysis in hopes of gaining a clearer understanding and expression of theological beliefs. Nor is this an apologetics book. Apologetics does employ philosophical arguments, but its goal differs from philosophy. Instead of beginning from the broad spectrum of naturally arising philosophical questions, apologetics offers arguments specifically geared toward defending Christian beliefs against criticisms and convincing others that Christianity, or some aspect of Christianity, is true.

Philosophical theology and apologetics are both worthy endeavors, and there will be places where conversations in this book will overlap with them. However, our approach is different in that, unlike philosophical theology, we will allow philosophy rather than theology to select the questions to be examined and, unlike apologetics, we will not work toward a predetermined and specific conclusion.

PHILOSOPHY AS "CHRISTIANITY'S GAME"

One way the Christian element of this book emerges is through the focus on the vital role philosophy has played in the church's mission throughout history. If the idea of philosophy as central to Christian activity and identity sounds odd to you, you are not alone. Many years ago, I asked one of our students why she had chosen philosophy as her major. Her response was, "I want to beat the pagans at their own game." I was disappointed that she had concluded that philosophy was "the pagan's game," but not surprised. After all, as higher education has become increasingly secularized, some have questioned whether Christianity has a valid voice in philosophical discussions

at all. Many secular scholars argue that philosophy demands that faith commitments remain on the sidelines if we want to "play the game." As a result, many Christians, as my student's response indicates, assume that philosophy is either inherently hostile or indifferent to Christian faith.

The impression that philosophy is fundamentally secular is historically shortsighted. In reality, some historical perspective reveals that the question "Does Christianity have a place within philosophical discussions?" is one that few philosophers throughout Western history would have dreamed of asking. Instead, for the majority of philosophy's history, the more common question was, "Does philosophy have a place within Christian discussions?" I hope you read that last sentence carefully because it has a profound impact on how we understand the relationship between philosophy and Christianity. For a large span of Western history, few people doubted Christianity's right to address life's biggest issues. The Christian faith was so deeply entrenched in the Western world that its authority on the big questions was not up for debate. What was in doubt was whether philosophy should have a place alongside theology in the discussion of "the big questions." Many Christians are surprised to discover that the church's answer to the question "Does philosophy have a place within Christian discussions?" has been a resounding "Yes!" In short, Christianity has understood philosophy as "its game."

Western philosophy predates the origin of Christianity by several centuries, so Christians cannot claim credit or blame for philosophy's origins. However, after the birth of Christianity, the vast majority of philosophers throughout the span of Western history were Christians. Their understanding of the Christian faith may differ significantly from yours, and for many centuries philosophers often were not free to confess any faith other than Christianity. It is also true that influences besides Christianity sometimes were pivotal to their philosophical conclusions. Nonetheless, a large percentage of them self-identified as Christian.

Philosophy found its way into Christian conversations long before the Church gained power and popularity. In fact, it shows up almost from Christianity's beginning. In Acts 17:22-34, the apostle Paul

engages philosophers in discussion on Mars Hill, and in doing so shows his familiarity with the subject by quoting two philosophers (v. 28). Justin Martyr (c. 100–165) studied the main philosophies of his day and, around the age of thirty, became a Christian. He adopted the tunic that publicly identified him as a philosopher, founded a school for the training of Christian scholars, wrote philosophical defenses of Christianity, and was eventually beheaded when he refused to renounce his faith. Although there are broad variations in the details, Justin established a pattern that we find throughout the following centuries in Christian scholarship. He was committed to the ultimate authority of revelation but freely used philosophical language, arguments, and even entire philosophical frameworks when he believed that the classical thinkers provided resources for expressing Christian truths.

Justin was not the only Christian who established a school. As the church grew and became more established, cathedrals and monasteries became educational centers. In fact, after the Roman Empire's demise in the fifth century, about the only place education was available on any formal level was within Christian institutions, and this remained the case for more than a millennium. In some cases these schools combined deep scholarship in Scripture and theology with the writings of the poets, historians, and philosophers of classical Greece and Rome. Often attached to these cathedral and cloister schools were *scriptoria*, in which the Bible, church music, and liturgical materials were copied alongside the great classical and philosophical works. The tremendous time and financial commitment required for this activity is a vivid indicator of the high value Christianity placed on all learning, regardless of whether its origin was Christian or non-Christian. In fact, many of the ancient and classical philosophical texts, if not most of them, would have been lost to history if Christian scholars had not been committed to preserving their ideas.

Around the twelfth century, universities began to emerge from the cathedral and monastic schools, and their numbers grew rapidly into the Renaissance. These schools prepared students in the liberal arts (in which philosophy played a central role), medicine, law, and theology. Theology was considered the “queen of the sciences,” reflecting the belief that all knowledge originates from and is unified in God and,

if understood properly, leads the student back to the divine source of truth. However, philosophy was often referred to as the “handmaiden” of theology, indicating the conviction that philosophy played a vital role in the proper understanding, systematic organization, and clear expression of theological ideas. As in earlier times, these medieval and Renaissance scholars did not limit themselves to the works of Christians. They read and cited the classical philosophers, such as *Plato* and *Aristotle*, as well as Jewish and Islamic philosophers.

As the Reformation occurred, Protestants gained control of many of these universities, but the curriculum remained relatively constant, with philosophy retaining its vital place within the context of Christian education. This was also the case as universities were planted in the American colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; virtually all of them were intentionally Christian. In fact, as a general statement, it is not until the nineteenth century that Christianity's place at the center of the Western university was questioned. Ironically, philosophy's displacement of theology as the new “queen of the sciences” after the Enlightenment was possible only because earlier Christian scholars held philosophy in such high regard.

The point of this brief historical survey is to remind Christians of an oft-forgotten piece of our family history. While many Christians today assume philosophy is hostile to the faith, the greatest intellects in the Christian family did not shy away from it, nor did they limit themselves to ideas that originated from believers. Instead, they saw philosophy as an activity they should pursue, not despite or in addition to their faith, but because of their faith. Our task now is to move from the recognition that Christians of the past have considered philosophy “their game” to understanding why they viewed philosophical investigation as a critical aspect of Christian self-identity.

WHY IS PHILOSOPHY IMPORTANT TO CHRISTIANS NOW?

When we asked “Why philosophy?” at the beginning of the chapter, we were actually asking a question about motivations. What would, or should, motivate a person to spend time and effort on this process? In response we pointed to philosophy's ability to integrate, humanize,

and develop good habits that have broad applicability. While these general motivations are often highlighted, most books do not mention the more personal reasons that compel philosophers to investigate specific issues. This is a serious gap in the story, because some of the most prominent philosophers in history have dedicated themselves to the exploration of big questions out of specifically Christian motivations. We will spotlight specific examples later in the text, but it would be useful to identify some of the reasons Christians should have an interest in philosophy.

First, Christians are committed to Scripture's authority on matters of faith and practice. Nevertheless, while the Bible's revelation on these issues is sufficient for our salvation, the information within its pages is not exhaustive. Nor are its truths presented in a systematic way. For example, Scripture has little to say directly about ethical questions like nuclear proliferation, cloning, digital piracy, and many of today's other big questions. Moreover, the Bible's ethical teachings are scattered throughout and appear in numerous forms, including laws, parables, and exhortations to Christians facing situations few face today (e.g., eating meat offered to idols). Philosophy offers tools that help us systematize moral thought, determine how to work from general principles to specific situations, and apply biblical teaching to contemporary realities. Likewise, on questions of human freedom, sin, God's attributes, and a raft of other questions, philosophy provides resources for testing, organizing, and voicing the truths of the Christian faith.

In a related manner, Christians have used philosophy to work through difficult questions that naturally arise from our reliance on Scripture. When Scripture speaks of God's right hand or describes God as a shepherd, we intuitively recognize that body-part or occupational language functions differently when it is applied to God than when we use it of people. Philosophy of language asks how we should understand descriptions of God and how human language facilitates or hinders our ideas about God's being and power. Philosophy of science raises interesting questions about how we understand Scripture's language about body, soul, and spirit in the context of mirror neurons and genetics. Because Christians view Scripture's

revelation as authoritative, we should naturally want to know how this fits with our confidence that reason is also a reliable source of truth and knowledge.

The relationship between faith and reason leads us to a third reason Christians have found philosophy useful. The majority of Christians throughout history have affirmed **general revelation**, which means that God reveals some truths through (or to) our rational capacities. Thus, just as historians can rely on manuscripts and other artifacts to help determine the facts about past events they have not witnessed and arrive at potential interpretations concerning the causes and significance of these events, faithful philosophers have argued that careful investigation of God's creation can reveal some truths about the unseen Creator. In short, rather than pitting reason and revelation against each other, most Christians believe that God reveals, at least in part, *through* reason. Thus, when any person recognizes something as true, good, or beautiful, many Christians will argue that these qualities are recognizable because God—the source of truth, goodness, and beauty—has graciously made them knowable, even though the knower may not recognize or acknowledge God as the source.

While Christians have broadly affirmed that God works through our rational capacities to reveal himself, this does not guarantee that we will agree on specifics, such as whether this knowledge can lead to salvation or what is necessary for this knowledge to otherwise provide spiritual benefit. This brings us to a fourth reason philosophy is useful to Christians: it helps us make sense of some longstanding disagreements within the Christian family, some of which are reflected in this book.

One reason for revisiting these intramural debates is that many of our distinctive theological beliefs and practices can be traced back to philosophical differences. You may be aware of some of the favorite Bible verses that Arminians and Calvinists use to support their differing positions on free will and predestination. However, philosophical debates about the nature of time or the attributes of God are also critical factors in this disagreement. Unless we have some grasp of the philosophical contours of this debate, we will have a hard time arriving at an informed position. Similarly, some Christians are confident

that reasons can be given that prove the existence of God, while others find such arguments futile, or even a betrayal of faith. These questions, and many like them, draw us into philosophical discussions undertaken by thoughtful Christian family members. Taking faith seriously entails careful consideration of these rigorous discussions.

Likewise, philosophy is important for Christians because a number of ongoing discussions have been of particular interest to Christians throughout history. For example, most introductory texts will not devote an entire chapter to the relationship between faith and reason as we will. While many secular philosophers would find this an odd topic for a textbook, it is not clear why that would be the case. After all, the relationship between religious faith and reason was a “top of the agenda” topic for centuries for Christians, as well as for Jewish and Islamic scholars, and it still generates considerable philosophical interest today. Similarly, although most philosophers spend little time asking where God fits into discussions of ethics, beauty, or politics, most thinkers throughout history have believed that a full investigation of these topics cannot exclude consideration of God’s will and character. Thus, by drawing God back into philosophical discussions, we are not adding something unique to the mix. Instead, we are foregrounding the fact that most philosophers in Western intellectual history believed that philosophical topics have not been fully investigated unless we include God in the conversation.

BUT WAIT. THERE’S MORE!

The standard “come on” line in the television infomercial is, “But wait. There’s more!” The “more” is intended to communicate that you are not just getting a good buy with the product. You are getting even more; it’s a *great* deal. We believe that a Christian perspective on philosophy has a “There’s more!” bonus feature that is too often overlooked. If done correctly, philosophy helps develop character qualities that are at the heart of the Christian life.

While it may seem clear that philosophy can help you become a better Christian *thinker*, it may not be immediately obvious why it might help you become a better Christian *person*. To see how this might work, we will return to what we said earlier in the chapter

about the centrality of intellectual virtues to philosophy. Hopefully you were able to recognize how careful thought about big issues is stymied by bias, laziness, arrogance, and dishonesty, and that intellectual virtues like fairness, perseverance, humility, and honesty are useful traits for working through tough questions. This implies that good thinkers will avoid intellectual vices and develop the virtues because they help us do the work of rigorous and complex thinking. For Christians, however, these virtues are not simply strategies for doing a job well. There’s more to it than that. Courage, empathy, fairness, humility, and the other virtues are central to our identity as Christians. This means that developing the disciplines required for intellectual excellence is also central to the process Christians refer to as sanctification: growth toward Christlikeness.

While philosophy can help us develop the habits and virtues that are central to both spiritual and intellectual growth, we should point out an additional feature. If approached from a Christian perspective, philosophy also nurtures virtues that are rarely mentioned in secular approaches to the study today but are important within spiritual development. Several such virtues could be mentioned, but I’ll limit the discussion to three: gratitude, love, and wisdom.

Although almost every philosopher will acknowledge the benefits of fairness or rigor in rational pursuits, gratitude is rarely mentioned as an important philosophical virtue. In fact, some philosophers consider life a tragic burden rather than a reality for which to be grateful. Most philosophers don’t fit into this extreme category, but neither do they find gratitude an important quality for philosophy. In fact, few secular thinkers even raise the question of whether thankfulness has a rightful place in their work. However, for Christians, who affirm creation as a God-given gift, it is a different story. Thankfulness should be an essential quality of our study. Because philosophy investigates every dimension of the gracious gift of creation, Christianity provides resources to undertake this search with gratitude and joy for every facet of life. In other words, thinking about life’s big questions takes on new meaning when reoriented by a sense of gratitude toward the God who creates such a diverse and wonder-inducing world.

Finally, two hints about why many Christians find philosophy to be consistent with their identity are embedded in the word “philosophy,” which means the love (*philein*) of wisdom (*sophia*). Most introductory texts mention this but view it more as a linguistic data point than a job description. I suspect that their reluctance to consider “loving wisdom” as the fundamental definition and task for philosophy has two sources. First, it reflects a fear that incorporating “love language” with philosophy will interfere with the use of reason. Second, many philosophers are uncomfortable with “wisdom language” because it seems to dictate a goal from the outset rather than allowing people to determine their own conclusions.

However, I think it is difficult to explain philosophy’s value to Christian thinkers without including “love” and “wisdom” in the discussion. First, the most fundamental descriptor of God’s nature is love (e.g., 1 John 4:8). Therefore, it is not accidental that human beings made in God’s image are also lovers. Love (and synonyms like “desire,” “commitment,” “trust,” and “faithfulness”) is basic to our identity. The deepest stories of our life are told in terms of those people, ideas, and beliefs that compel our love and commitment. If philosophy is really about the big questions of *our* existence, it cannot bypass the fact that we are creatures who desire, love, and desire love.

Second, wisdom is an important word for Christians because it requires more from us than simply the accumulation of knowledge. Wisdom requires facts and data, but it also goes beyond them to seek discernment, insight, sound judgment, a sense of perspective, and the capacity to put things within a bigger picture. Sadly, it is quite possible for an individual to have large quantities of data and information and still lack wisdom, and the result is a life that turns out to be far less than God intends for us. Viewed from a Christian perspective, then, wisdom reminds us that philosophical study is not simply a matter of gleaning vast quantities of factual knowledge and passing tests. Instead, it is a means to work toward the bigger goal of becoming wise by growing toward the source of all wisdom: God.

Elements like gratitude, love, and wisdom remind us that philosophy has a dimension for Christians that will not be shared by all. We start with the assumption that our existence and the universe in

which we exist is a gift from a loving God that should evoke gratitude. If we believe that philosophy calls us to a “love of wisdom,” it reminds us that we can (and often do) love unwisely by desiring that which is less than wisdom. “Love of wisdom,” then, is just another way of speaking about the process of transformation required by Christian discipleship. It is, to be sure, a rigorous process of transformation, because Christian philosophy demands that we approach difficult and important questions in an honest and thoughtful manner. Therefore, if we do it well, the Christian practice of philosophy requires a lot from us. It calls us to give attention to elements that don’t show up on the radar for most secular philosophers. At the same time, Christian philosophy never demands less than the intellectual and moral virtues recognized by secular philosophy.

In summary, a Christian approach to the big questions calls for an integration of our faith journey and our learning processes. A Christian approach is convinced that study of the deepest questions and mysteries is not something to be done in addition to faith but that engagement with philosophy can be motivated by faith, be informed by faith, and provide growth within our faith. In other words, it can be an act of worship. As a reminder of this, we close this chapter with a prayer used by the great theologian and philosopher *Thomas Aquinas* to properly orient himself as he sat down to study. Perhaps it would be a good prayer for you to incorporate into your own pursuit of knowledge.

Creator of all things, true source of light and wisdom, origin of all being,
graciously let a ray of your light penetrate the darkness of my understanding.

Take from me the double darkness in which I have been born, an obscurity
of sin and ignorance.

Give me a keen understanding, a retentive memory, and the ability to grasp
things correctly and fundamentally.

Grant me the talent of being exact in my explanations and the ability to
express myself with thoroughness and charm.

Point out the beginning, direct the progress, and help in the completion. I
ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.