Chapter 5

Philosophy Or Theology?

The last chapter hints at some of the language we use to discuss ideas, and so this chapter begins to explore the sources and controversy of that language. The chapter title seems to intimate that it is one or the other, but what is the difference? Is philosophy truly the ‘handmaiden of theology’ or is as other see it, the Devil’s hand in the corruption of the Truth? This is a constant and unresolved struggle. At times, philosophy lends a language to theology which allows it to soar and at others the means of ripping it apart. So, at the risk of beating a dead horse let us take another moment and put things into context.

Philosophy

When most people think of ‘philosophy’ they often confuse it with *ideology*, which is not “the love of wisdom” but the subjective framework for opinion. Philosophy is actually the systematic study of what the Greeks call ‘wisdom’, a word which has various interpretations, but for those said Greeks basically[[1]](#footnote-1) means the knowledge of right and wrong behavior that is based in the discovery of the truths upon which the universe is constructed. It is a language and a system of knowledge which allows for the cogent discussion of the world, both physically and speculatively. To put it another way, “*Philosophy is the endeavor to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience – everything of which we are aware, which we enjoy, perceive, will, or think – can be interpreted.*” (Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*)

Philosophy is rooted deeply within the desire to *know*, to be *certain*. As Whitehead points out it touches everything we are, or at least what we think we are, and the desire to make sense out of the senseless, to give us order from chaos. We understand that knowledge is action, that is, within knowledge lies our ability to act, to love, to hurt, to excel. The earliest philosophers wanted to show that human experience and human reason could make sense of the world around us, show that the world had patterns and could in some things be predictable aside from arbitrary gods – and with that, ourselves as well.

It is based in logic (for the most part) which is the rules by which any discussion or debate must take place. For this reason it held for millennia the prominent place in the way we talk about the world around us, replaced in the last 100-150 years or so by the language of the physical, and most recently the theoretical sciences. In a way, it similarly replaced the mytho-religious language that previously was used to understand the world around us, yet at the same time it is based in that same language and explores many of the same questions. Philosophy assumes that the ‘truths’ discovered through logical exploration can in fact be used as universals in order to further the discussion and deepen understanding.

But philosophy, like theology, has a weakness: it is based within human reason and experience. While it relies on objective rules, it examines what can only be known by the human mind, either through reason or experience and runs the risk of being taken for ‘fact’ rather than ‘truth’. At its root level, it is indistinguishable from what today we call ‘science’ (remember that the Greeks considered science a subset of philosophy) where basic fact/truths are determined. Scientifically we might say that the Earth circles the Sun, yet we still think ‘factually’ about sunrise and sunset and the notion of time that image evokes. Scientific experimentation, the ‘scientific method’ as it is called, has helped us to know many of the wonders of Creation, yet it has also produced just as many false leads and dead-ends. In the effort to determine our internal ability to wrest a chaotic life from the gods, we over-achieve, believing that all patterns have no meaning aside from that which we give.

Theology

Theology on the other hand frames everything within Revelation. In theology we rely not only on human reason and experience but on what God has told us, that is to say we approach, like Aristotle, with “wonder and awe” and like Anselm “seeking understanding”. We defer own on ability to reason and understand to God’s wisdom. “*Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How inscrutable are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor? Or who has given him anything that he may be repaid?’* *For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.*” (*Romans* 11:33-36)

Theology, contrary to its detractors, does not deny human reason but puts it in its proper place in relationship to the mysteries of God. Philosophy seeks to create a system in which answers and understanding can develop but these systems eventually fall to Gödel’s (1906-1978) *Principle of Incompleteness*: every system eventually produces questions which are unanswerable by that system. What that means is that, as a human, you eventually find propositions which you cannot prove or disprove using the system you develop. You can envision this in terms of math or physics; math needs geometry, algebra, calculus; quantum physics answers questions that physics cannot. The implication is that *all* logical (and therefore human in origin) systems of any complexity have, by definition, a level of *incompleteness*; that is, each of them contains more ‘truths’ than can possibly be proved by the methods and rules of *that* system. In other words, in and of themselves, they will always be incomplete systems for demonstrating truth.

Truth in human systems is derived through logic. In theology, the Truth exists as Revelation, and there exists no need to ‘determine’ a truth. Consequently what we really seek is an *understanding* of Truth that is *derived* *through* logic.

Additionally, in general there is no founding principle for philosophy; this is only the claim of theology. Philosophy recognizes simply that there is a need to draw a line, a point beyond which, *ad infinatum*, we are merely spinning our intellectual wheels; we make an agreement that logically we have reach an idea/truth which everyone can subscribe to and which is pretty basic and, from which, argumentation can proceed.[[2]](#footnote-2) But this is not universal for every system. Theology on the other hand, starts from the point of God. It seeks not to bring order out of chaos, or sense out of senselessness, for there is no need for that; Creation tells us that God has already done all of that for us. Theology then seeks to make sense of *that which already is established*. Philosophy seeks to impose meaning *on* the world around us whereas theology seeks to glean meaning *from* the world around us.

Putting Them Together

So it seems that at times the two are at cross purpose. Ah, and with these two it has never really been an easy relationship; you know the problems, evident in any romantic comedy…everyone in her family loves him but some in his family are suspicious of her…but they love each other in a quirky on-again-off-again manner…so it is with Theology and Philosophy. There are many who reject one or the other out-right, refusing to admit that they even know the other, much less owe the other any sort of debt. Most fully embrace the other, relying on the strengths and shoring up the weaknesses of the other. The problem is that, as in any romantic comedy, one just cannot seem to get along without the other.

So let us take a moment and look at two approaches to theology using two very early Church Fathers from the 2nd century.

* Justin Martyr

 Justin Martyr was born at the beginning of the second century (~100-~165) in Nablus (in what is now the West Bank), of a pagan Greek family. In his early life he explored many systems of philosophy before arriving, through Plato, at Christianity. He eventually moved to Rome and opened a school for Christian apologetics and theology *as well as* secular philosophy. As a teacher, Justin was keen on showing to both his students and especially the Roman authorities how Christianity was nothing new[[3]](#footnote-3) but brought completeness to the already existing accepted pagan philosophies (similarly to his feelings in relation to Judaism,).

Starting as a secular philosopher, he recounts a chance meeting with a Christian who spoke to him. It was then that “*…a flame was immediately kindled in my mind, and I was seized with an ardent love of the Prophets, and of those men who are the friends of Christ; and reflecting with myself on what I had heard, I saw that theirs was the only sure and valuable philosophy: thus it was that I became a Philosopher, and I could wish that all men were of the same mind as myself, not to turn from the doctrines of the Savior; for they inspire a certain dread, and possess a power to overawe those who are turned from the right way; but they become the most pleasant resting place to such as fully practice them.*” (*Dialogue With Trypho*, 8) So Christianity as the philosophy supplants all other philosophies in his mind, but even with its flaws he does not completely abandon secular philosophy, nor the rational path which led him to Christianity; indeed, for him, philosophy and theology are one in the same. “*Philosophy is indeed one's greatest possession, and is most precious in the sight of God, to whom it alone leads us and to whom it unites us, and they in truth are holy men who have applied themselves to philosophy. But, many have failed to discover the nature of philosophy, and the reason why it was sent down to men; otherwise, there would not be Platonists, or Stoics, or Peripatetics, or Theoretics, or Pythagoreans, since this science of philosophy is always one and the same.”* (*Dialogue With Trypho*, 2) We can see from this quote that at the time there is no sense of ‘theology’ as being different from basic human rational exploration (philosophy). Metaphysics is metaphysics in his book. It is just that there is a right and a bunch of wrong philosophies.

During his lifetime, Christianity is experiencing some serious persecution. He was an open champion of Christianity to the Roman population at large, and was especially ardent about stopping the persecutions and defending the Faith. He wrote extensively (much of which we still have), unabashedly challenging the Roman leaders to be ‘wise’ (in the philosophical sense) and see the value of Christianity by appealing to the general philosophical language and logic understood by the general population. “*Reason directs that all who are really pious and truly philosophers should love that alone which is true, and refuse to follow the opinions of the ancients should they prove to be worthless; for sound reason requires that we should not only reject those who act, or teach anything contrary to that which is right; but that by every means an before his own life, the lover of truth ought even threatened with death, to choose to speak and to do is right....For it is our maxim that we can suffer harm from none, unless we be convicted as doers of evil, or proved to be wicked you may indeed slay us but hurt us you cannot.*” (*First Apology*, 2) He argued that if the Romans already allowed philosophers to say whatever they wanted without fear of reprisal, even if they were the worst of human beings, why then is Christianity a crime?

So if Plato, for example, could be accepted, then they merely had to see that Plato was simply an incomplete understanding now provided by Christianity. “*And that you may learn that Plato borrowed our teachers, (I mean the account which is given by Prophets,) when he said that God altered shapeless matter, and created the world; hear how the same things expressly taught by Moses, who has been mentioned as the first Prophet, and older than the Greek writers; by whom the Spirit of Prophecy, declaring how, and from what, God in the beginning created the world, spoke thus: ‘*the beginning God created the heaven and the earth; and earth was invisible, and unfurnished, and darkness was the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God moved over waters. And God said Let there be light and it was so.*’ So that both Plato, and those who agree with him and we ourselves, have learnt, and you may be persuaded, that by Word of God, the whole world was created from matter which was described before by Moses. That which your poets call Erebus* [a sort of primordial deity]*, we know to have previously mentioned by Moses.*” (*First Apology*, 59) In the end he did not have much success with changing any civic officials’ mind on the subject but he was lucky enough to be a Roman citizen and so in the persecution of 165 (under Marcus Aurelius) he was merely arrested and beheaded.

While he apparently operated his school in the open and wrote letters to officials, it is not until he is *formally* ratted out as being Christian that he runs afoul of the law. We have a second century observer’s transcription of his trial:

“*The saints were seized and brought before the prefect of Rome, whose name was Rusticus. As they stood before the judgment seat, Rusticus the prefect said to Justin: ‘Above all, have faith in the gods and obey the emperors.’ Justin said: ‘We cannot be accused or condemned for obeying the commands of our Savior, Jesus Christ.’*

*Rusticus said: ‘What system of teaching do you profess?’ Justin said: ‘I have tried to learn about every system, but I have accepted the true doctrines of the Christians, though these are not approved by those who are held fast by error.’*

*The prefect Rusticus said: ‘Are those doctrines approved by you, wretch that you are?’ Justin said: ‘Yes, for I follow them with their correct teaching.’*

*The prefect Rusticus said: ‘What sort of teaching is that?’ Justin said: ‘Worship the God of the Christians. We hold him to be from the beginning the one creator and maker of the whole creation, of things seen and things unseen. We worship also the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He was foretold by the prophets as the future herald of salvation for the human race and the teacher of distinguished disciples. For myself, since I am a human being, I consider that what I say is insignificant in comparison with his infinite godhead. I acknowledge the existence of a prophetic power, for the one I have just spoken of as the Son of God was the subject of prophecy. I know that the prophets were inspired from above when they spoke of his coming among men.’* [Trinitarian ref]

*Rusticus said: ‘You are a Christian, then?’ Justin said: ‘Yes, I am a Christian.’*

*The prefect said to Justin: ‘You are called a learned man and think that you know what is true teaching. Listen: if you were scourged and beheaded, are you convinced that you would go up to heaven?’ Justin said: ‘I hope that I shall enter God’s house if I suffer that way. For I know that God’s favor is stored up until the end of the whole world for all who have lived good lives.’*

*The prefect Rusticus said: ‘Do you have an idea that you will go up to heaven to receive some suitable rewards?’ Justin said: ‘It is not an idea that I have; it is something I know well and hold to be most certain.’*

*The prefect Rusticus said: “Now let us come to the point at issue, which is necessary and urgent. Gather round then and with one accord offer sacrifice to the gods.’ Justin said: ‘No one who is right thinking stoops from true worship to false worship.’*

*The prefect Rusticus said: ‘If you do not do as you are commanded you will be tortured without mercy.’ Justin said: ‘We hope to suffer torment for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ, and so be saved. For this will bring us salvation and confidence as we stand before the more terrible and universal judgment-seat of our Lord and Savior.’*

*In the same way the other martyrs also said: ‘Do what you will. We are Christians; we do not offer sacrifice to idols.’*

*The prefect Rusticus pronounced sentence, saying: ‘Let those who have refused to sacrifice to the gods and to obey the command of the emperor be scourged and led away to suffer capital punishment according to the ruling of the laws.’ Glorifying God, the holy martyrs went out to the accustomed place. They were beheaded, and so fulfilled their witness of martyrdom in confessing their faith in their Savior.*”

A bit long perhaps but the exchange is interesting for its description of the contact of two different theological systems and for how Justin’s mind and Roman law worked. In this case, it is not so much that Justin depends upon understood philosophical concepts to explain doctrine or other Christian beliefs and practices but that he wants his audience to see his certitude in the Revelation that he has studied and that what they believe, via the secular philosophers, is the *basis for* and *contained within* and perfected by belief in Christ. “…*in order that we might not remain the children of necessity and ignorance but of choice and of knowledge and that we might obtain remission of the sins we had formerly committed in the water, there is called over him who chooses the new birth and repents of his sins the name of God the Father and Lord of all things*…” (61)

Theology is the perfection of philosophy. The philosophical concept of the Logos represented absolute truth to secular thinkers, and as the Gospel of John states, Jesus is the Logos.

* Tertullian

Tertullian (~160-~220), from Carthage in North Africa and son of a centurian, saw on the other hand this incompleteness of human philosophy as indication of its complete hooieness[[4]](#footnote-4). It was the reason for all the wrong thinking that was taking place. “*For philosophy is the material of the world’s wisdom, the rash interpreter of the nature and dispensation of God.* ***Indeed heresies are themselves instigated by philosophy****…****What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?*** *What has the Academy to do with the Church? What have heretics to do with Christians? Our instruction comes from the porch of Solomon, who had himself taught that the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart.* ***Away with all attempts to produce a Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic Christianity!*** *We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after receiving the gospel! When we believe, we desire no further belief. For this is our first article of faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides.*” (*Heretics*, 7) [all emphasis my own]

Yet even Tertullian himself could not help but refer to and discuss philosophers and philosophical notions as a means of making his point. “*But the special ground of dislike to the sect is, that it bears the name of its Founder. Is there anything new in a religious sect getting for its followers a designation from its master? Are not the philosophers called from the founders of their systems – Platonists, Epicureans, Pythagoreans? Are not the Stoics and Academics so called also from the places in which they assembled and stationed themselves and are not physicians named from Erasistratus, grammarians from Aristarchus, cooks even from Apicius?*” (*Apology*, 3) and “*I do not dwell on the philosophers, contenting myself with a reference to Socrates, who in contempt of the gods, was in the habit of swearing by an oak, and a goat, and a dog. In fact, for this very thing Socrates was condemned to death, that he overthrew the worship of the gods.*” (*Apology*, 14)[[5]](#footnote-5)

Somewhat of a contemporary of Justin, whereas Justin represents the close of the first century, Tertullian lived in the last half of the second century. Like Justin he too was an apologist, hoping to convince the powers that be to not destroy Christianity, though as a lawyer he took a much more historical/rule-of-law path, therefore not really needing the philosophers. Similarly he too takes the Roman officials to task for treating Christianity differently than other crimes, and pointing out their own legal hypocrisy when it came to their rituals and beliefs. “*Rulers of the Roman Empire, if seated for the administration of justice on your lofty tribunal, under the gaze of every eye and occupying there all but the highest position in the state, you may not openly inquire into and sift before the world the real truth in regard to the charges made against the Christians; if in this case alone you are afraid or ashamed to exercise your authority in making public inquiry with the carefulness which becomes justice; if finally the extreme severities inflicted on our people in recently private judgments stand in the way of our being permitted to defend ourselves before you, you cannot surely forbid the Truth to reach your ears by the secret pathway of a noiseless book.*” (*Apology*, 1) And further, “*You say* *’You do not worship the gods‘ and ‘you do not offer sacrifices for the emperors.’ Well we do not offer sacrifice for others, for the same reason that we do not for ourselves, – namely that your gods are not at all the objects of our worship. So we are accused of sacrilege and treason. This is the chief ground of charge against us – nay, it is the sum total of our offending; and it is worthy then of being inquired into, if neither prejudice nor injustice be the judge, the one of which has no idea of discovering the truth and the other simply and at once rejects it. We do not worship your gods because we know that there are no such beings. This, therefore, is what you should do: you should call on us to demonstrate their non existence, and thereby prove that they have no claim to adoration; for only if your gods were truly so, would there be any obligation to render divine homage to them.*” (*Apology*, 10)

Just as we can see Justin’s thinking and style through his work, when we read Tertullian we sense the similar brilliance. Whereas Justin understood the language of philosophy, Tertullian understood the language of the law. Both use that brilliance to produce theological works of timeless power and depth.

Tertullian eventually fell into Montanism somewhere around 200, a heresy started around 150 or so by a new convert from Phrygia who apparently had been an earlier priest of an ecstatic pagan cult which believed that the Holy Spirit was giving *new revelations* to the Church, through himself and two women. Its followers were required to follow a rigorous asceticism, including not marrying. Without spending a lot of time on the point, suffice it to say that at this time there were several groups who attacked the structure and practices of the Church. Tertullian eventually left the cult and many of its followers were later re-integrated into the Church by Augustine.

Interestingly enough in all of this, it is Tertullian who is known as the father of Western theology, not Justin.

The World At War

For all what seems to be antagonism, we must realize is that Tertullian is fighting a similar yet different battle than is Justin. Certainly they are both trying to end persecution but they are also beginning to fight battles from within: *heresy* or basically ‘wrong thinking’. But they are different kinds of heresy. For Justin the heresies are like Marcion’s (rejection of OT) and the Gnostics (two Gods, among other things) which are more religious and culturally based, whereas Tertullian is battling more philosophically based ones, like Docetism (aimed at the Christological nature). For that reason we can perhaps understand the difference in their approaches as well as their feelings about secular philosophy and theology. Justin wants to fight fire with fire, Tertullian wants to pour water on it.

Let us take a moment and place this battle into the wider human undertaking. Mysticism versus rationalism, charismatic versus traditional…these battles of interpretation and expression pepper not just theology but all of history like a blunderbuss. Each side takes potshots at the other, with individuals stepping between the parties to try and broker compromises which just seems inflame one side or the other, or provoke yet a third interest to suddenly be spurred to action in opposition to the compromise. It is the struggle of both the Church and her theologians to promote while preserving. Diversity is to be encouraged, but it is diversity of expression, not of belief and the language must be clear to keep the Faith true. Unfortunately we are a belligerent race – ‘pig-headed’ I believe is what Moses meant when he said ‘stiff-necked.’ Words sometimes carry only the weight we give them, and our expectations of others’ ability or need to interpret the way we do are just that – *our* expectation.

The battle of words has quieted but will never go away.

In that way both Justin and Tertullian use language with which they are familiar to argue and explore the meaning of the Revelation they both deeply embrace. How does one articulate truth which one has come to understand in both the head and the heart? That is the challenge to theology, to find and use language which is unambiguous to the meaning it is trying to convey.

Putting It Together

Theology seeks to make known the truths on which it is based. It has its own language, a language of Faith if you will, which has a very specific vocabulary. It is not designed to remain within an esoteric venue though, but to be spread about, to make those truths known to the wider world. When theology seeks a language which can be understood outside of the ‘faith language’ of Tradition, it often turns to secular thinking, what we would call philosophy.

The benefit of using philosophical language and vocabulary is that it provides a common standard venue that is both available and familiar to most people. On the other hand ‘dumbing things down’ and abandoning theological language for a philosophical one introduces the danger of the confusion of the philosophical language and vocabulary with the theological ones, and that danger is as devastating as the benefits which can be derived. Keeping these truths in mind helps us to keep theology rooted not in human reason but in God’s Revelation.

*“Fruitful discourse in science or theology requires us to believe that within the contexts of normal discourse there are some true statements.”*

**Kenneth Lee Pike,** *With Heart and Mind: a personal synthesis of scholarship and devotion*

1. Very basic; for a more in-depth basic see our first work *15 Minute Philosophy*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Leibniz, a 17th century philosopher distinguishes several principles, two of which are: **Identity of Indiscernibles** which is the paring down of something until it is undistinguishable from another thing, meaning that the things themselves are for all practical purposes the same and **Sufficient Reason**, which is the accepting of a premise because at this point no reasonable argument can be made *against* it. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Briefly: this was the charge against Christianity – that it was new and therefore not protected by law from additional necessary civic practices like sacrifice to idols or the emperor. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Technical term. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Though the latter is perhaps not a good argument for keeping the authorities from killing you. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)