

15 Minute Learning Series

# 15 Minute Theological Thinking

A General Survey of Theological Philosophy  
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Ciliegia Publishing Company

# 15 Minute Theological Thinking: From Faithful Thought to Faith

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This work is a reflection solely of its author and as such reflects no great scholarship or pride of ownership. As a whole the parts belonging to the author are probably best kept by him and as a matter of fact are probably not fit for reproduction. Still, like any children, I must claim them as my own. Any inaccuracies, similarity to other works, or downright lies should be considered par for the course. For truly, and this work provides some proof of it, there are few original thoughts in the world<sup>1</sup>.

As for that, those parts which may be considered new or not as belonging to the author and appropriated from others, belong to them as should be noted by citation (*mea culpa* if not) and should not be considered a part of this work except by guilt through association.

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<sup>1</sup> Or in the words of Qoheleth “*There is nothing new under the sun.*” *Ecclesiastes 1:9*

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<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	iii
<b>Illustrations, Lists and Charts</b> .....	iv
Preface and Introduction .....	v
Thanks .....	v
By Way of Introduction . . . . .	v
Dedication .....	v
Biblical Quotations .....	v
Chapter 1. ....	1
<i>Mysterion</i> .....	1
<i>Philosophos</i> .....	2
<i>Understanding: Thinking About Thinking</i> .....	3
<i>Logic: Testing the Waters</i> .....	4
Thinking Well: Logical Basis .....	4
Thinking Poorly: Logical Fallacy .....	5
Putting It Together .....	7

**Figures and Illustrations**

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No table of figures entries found.

**Tables**

---

No table of figures entries found.

**Lists**

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List 1: Basic Thought Organization Terms.....	5
List 2: Major Types of Western Logic.....	5
List 3: A Useful Subset of Leibniz's Theory of Proof .....	5
List 4: Three Habits of Highly Ineffective Thinking .....	6

## Thanks

This work, part of my personal *Summa* if you will, is a compendium of several earlier books which relied on the impetus of two people and a series of lunchtime ‘lectures’, but it is founded in the gift of so many. So first to Julien and Allison, thanks for the *Food For Thought* challenge. To my parents and everyone else, thanks for giving me the love of critical thinking and later of philosophy. Thanks especially to my wife, Alice, who married me even though I had a degree in philosophy. Finally an apology to my kids, as they had no choice in the matter.<sup>2</sup>

As for philosophy itself, I also owe a debt of gratitude to the Monks of St. Joseph Abbey and Monty Python’s Flying Circus and to the many others who spent their time giving us such a rich history of thinking and the critical exploration of that thinking.

## By Way of Introduction...

If one agrees with Hegel on this matter<sup>3</sup>, then this preface will be short.

With so many volumes on the subject, why do philosophy and theology deserve yet another book about them?

Despite the moniker, there is no promise that it will only take 15 minutes to understand all of philosophy and the way the Church uses it within theology! The idea of these discussions is to take about 15 minutes of reading and a lifetime of understanding. Not too much to ask or expect?

As for this work, the thinkers discussed here in fact thought of more things than we discuss, and to a much deeper degree than is shown in this work. The pericopes included here show the limited nature of the limited nature of this discussion.

As for myself, I hold but a mere undergraduate degree in this field. Why do I feel qualified to produce such a work? Well, I hold a mere undergraduate degree in this field.

## Dedication

I dedicate this book to everyone who has struggled with the idea of thinking, and especially to those who struggled to teach me this fine art.

## Biblical Quotations

Scripture texts in this work are taken from the *New American Bible, revised edition* © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

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<sup>2</sup> “*THE appearance of this volume demands more than the usual amount of apology.*” Introduction to *Humanism*, by F.C.S. Schiller

<sup>3</sup> And one should; cf. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 1, Georg W. Hegel

# *PART I*

*Intro through Aristotle*

*Prehistory to 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BC*



*“I say this so that no one may deceive you by specious arguments. For even if I am absent in the flesh, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing as I observe your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ. So, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, walk in him, rooted in him and built upon him and established in the faith as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one captivate you with an empty, seductive philosophy according to human tradition, according to the elemental powers of the world and not according to Christ. [For in him dwells the whole fullness of the deity bodily, and you share in this fullness in him, who is the head of every principality and power.]” (Colossians 2:4-8)*

This work starts with an admonishment for the student and the teacher to keep what is being done here in context. This work will endeavor to show the place of human reason within the sacred mysteries and not the other way around. We shall attempt in this time together to emulate Augustine and Anselm in their great quest to bring the mysteries of God into the realm of human understanding, and by doing so increase their love of those mysteries. To think about God in a purely academic form is to be distracted from the very reason for theology, to be deceived by “*specious arguments*” as Paul so succinctly puts it.

With that in mind, and making no excuses, the foundational thread of this work is Christ – “*as we received him*” as the old translation used to say; “*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation... He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*” (Colossians 1:15, 17) Philosophy, like theology, studied without ground or direction is fruitless, and its followers are easily left with little or no sense of the purpose of philosophy or its benefits, especially as the “handmaiden of theology”. That said, it is off the soapbox (for a moment) and on to the task at hand.

## ***Mysterion***

As implied above, we start with God. Humans have always exhibited a sense of *other*, of not just other people but of something outside of ourselves, what we call *the sacred*. This sense of *sacred* can be caused by or at least often can contain another element, that of the ‘unknown’ or the ‘unknowable’. The word we use to express that comes to us from the Greek word *mysterion*. It does not mean *mystery* as we might think like a puzzle, or a murder to be solved, or the lame excuse for something which cannot be explained, but rather something that is *mystical*, i.e. *associated with the sacred*. In our discussion, the term refers to something that is outside of our experience, natural reason, or understanding and therefore *requires* some type of extra-human (divine) revelation in order to be known and have meaning, or at least be understandable. The word we might be more familiar with is its Latin translation: *sacrament*, hence the relationship between *sacer* and *mysterion*.

Additionally, when we think about this we want to think of it in active terms. Mystery or sacrament speaks to the *encounter* with the sacred, the *active* seeking out and the act of the perceived response of the sacred. Since it is the *sacred*, that encounter takes place outside of ‘normal’ or ‘secular’ or ‘profane’ space, i.e. those places where we do not directly encounter the sacred. And like the sacred, there is a type of knowledge which accompanies mystery. We *know* that it is there. We *know* that it is different than the normal world. We *know* some of the

attributes (positively or negatively) of the sacred. Mystery is not something which is unobtainable or can be dismissed because it is not directly or empirically knowable; it is the word we use to describe something we know which is *beyond* the directly knowable or observable.

This is a very important point and one we need to keep in mind when we not only think about God, but when we discuss God with others. Once again then, 'Knowledge' in this way of thinking is understood as perhaps more of a perception than a scientific proof or certainty, an *understanding* rather than a *certainty*. The understanding that this kind of knowledge exists is somewhat based in what we call "*speculation*" and this is often used as a reason to denigrate and dismiss it. Human speculation is a completely legitimate form of human exploration, and in fact is defended by those same disparagers in other situations. Speculation is an intellectual exercise using limited human reason to fathom unknown things. This is not to say there is not a degree of certainty in speculating and therefore philosophy and theology, but that it is not a certainty in a secular, scientific sense. Mystery implies a connection to something that we do not fully understand yet which we acknowledge and seek, and of which we can have a type of knowledge. We might think of it as we think of the scientific theories of relativity or black holes. We did not have, for many years, certain 'proof' of black holes, except speculative, logical, or rational mathematical 'proof'.

Mystery and proof may seem at odds, and are often put there, but mystery is the very human trait of accepting things we cannot grasp, see, smell or touch.

## ***Philosophos***

General human speculation then, is not necessarily directly connected to theology, but it is directly connected to the sense of mystery, of the universe around us. It is this sense which sends us to Church and to the edges of the universe. Religion and science are both natural human actions based in this sense of wonder about the world around us. How does the world work? Why does the world work? What is our place in it? These questions are at the center of our being, the very mesh with which we are created, and whether we know God or not, we seek understanding from both a sense of wonder and self-survival. I like to call that basic instinct *philosophy*.

If Aristotle, the great Greek philosopher is right and "*definition is understanding*", then Philosophy could simply (and literally) be the "love of wisdom"<sup>4</sup> and we could be done with it. But alas, that would first make for a short book, and second be untrue to the modern philosophical spirit of obfuscation and double meaning. So let us confound it further and state that it is also known in some circles simply as *Metaphysics* (somewhat literally pertaining to and the study of things "beyond the physical", but more on that later). This would be slightly inaccurate as I hope we will see. Those circles are trying to relegate it to some obscure mumbo-jumbo fringe, which has no bearing in our lives. Since Aristotle himself gives us the notion of physics (and metaphysics, and psychology, and biology) which they so seem to love, then to heck with them – they do not know what they are talking about anyway. Let us embark upon our own journey, unfettered by the confusion or judgments of others and delve into the true meaning and place of philosophy and from there to theology.

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<sup>4</sup> think *Philadelphia* – the city of 'brotherly love'



For our purposes then, philosophy is *the devotion* (hence the word ‘love’: philo) *and discipline of thinking* (hence the idea of study: ‘-ology’) *which is committed to understanding*. It is not just a commitment of knowing *how the world is put together*, like the molecular components of water, but *also* of an understanding of ‘truth’ of *how the world works and our place in it*. One can see then, that philosophy, rather than being separate and inconsequential to science, math, politics, ethics or whatever you can come up with (thanks again, Aristotle), is integral to all human thought and action. A fairly “bold statement for a one eyed fat man”<sup>5</sup>, but one which I hope will be vindicated by the end of this work.

So on what basis is such a claim made? Before we jump into theology then we spend a bit of time understanding the *language* of theology. Before theology became a discipline in its own right, thinkers explored the world. Before the Greeks knew of Scripture and the Jewish understanding of God who is the basis for meaning, they approached meaning from a physical, homo-centric foundation. So they started with the world around them.

The Greeks divided this world into physical categories: tangible objects (earth, wind, fire and water) and the metaphysical ones: as said, the things which were beyond the physical (beauty, truth, etc.). Perhaps more speculative than tangible, they created logic and science, using reason and experience to transform knowledge into understanding and that understanding in action. In its own way it is similar to what we presently call science<sup>6</sup> in that it too seeks a ‘Unified Theory’, not just of the physical universe but of life and living. We will use words like ‘*being*’ and ‘*substance*’ to help us understand this world, but mostly to help us understand ourselves. What are we? What is thought? How are we different than the world around us? How are we part of it? We will examine critical methods using words like ‘*logic*’ and ‘*dialectic*’. In this form it is as legitimate of a science as physics itself (and was considered such by the Greeks – but again, that is a later discussion).

## ***Understanding: Thinking About Thinking***

This seems like such a simple term, and in order to stave off that kind of quick conclusion let us here and now strip it of such a simplistic dismissal. *Understanding*, or as we will also call it *wisdom*, is getting your head around an idea, not just at your level but on *its* level. What I mean by this is seeing it ‘eye to eye’, on its own ground and not with hubris or bias. In perhaps an inappropriate appropriation of an idiom: *Seeing is skin deep but Understanding goes right to the bone*.<sup>7</sup>

Understanding is not a passive activity. It should be, and is, efficacious as we will see. We come together, then, here within these pages seeking more knowledge and wisdom than when we entered, as both student and teacher. It is a road to understanding God, not a destination (to over-coin a phrase) and in order to begin we need to shod our feet with good shoes for the journey and take the first steps. On our way we can both look ahead on our journey and behind to where we have been, but we must always keep our focus: *understanding* is the main goal and the art of *logic* is our main road.

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<sup>5</sup> *True Grit*

<sup>6</sup> Or perhaps more correctly we should say that in its own way science is similar to and based within what we call philosophy.

<sup>7</sup> As my father always says “‘I see’, said the blind man to the deaf mute”.

## Logic: Testing the Waters

Another word which we must wrest from the hands of infidels is *logic*. Logic is the *art and action of critical thinking*, not merely the means by which you ‘win’ an argument<sup>8</sup>. By that I mean it contains the tools and methods to allow us to evaluate *validity* and *falsity* and therefore determine the *truth* of a statement or proposition. It is primarily *systematic* and *deductive* in nature, that is, it follows a deductive reasoning path called a *syllogism* which uses *thesis* (aka *premises, or truths*) to reach a *conclusion* (aka a new truth) as in: ‘If A and B then C’, and not ‘A and B imply C’ or ‘I think A therefore C’. The art of argumentation, known as ‘rhetoric’ was formalized in the West by the Greeks and was taught religiously (or philosophically, I suppose) until recently (think of *classical* education systems like the English). The art of critical thinking requires a chest of tools, and logic is the foundation. For most people though they are often now delegated not to Philosophy but the realm of Psychology (which too has been discounted as a speculative science, and not just because it rises from philosophy, but more on that later perhaps) and is by that means often used against us rather than for us. But then I digress. Let us continue on the path of definition and the understanding which comes from it.

Logic is the study of *truths* (*known as thesis or premises*) and the systematic methods for determining the validity of such truths. It evaluates not the *source* of the truth but the ‘*truth*’ itself. Truths therefore may originate from rational thought, science or experience, and may develop from any resource available to the human mind and heart. What we want to understand is a *truth* in the context of the *argument* being made *with* it and then ultimately the truth of the conclusion made *from* it.

## Thinking Well: Logical Basis

But what is truth? Are mine the same as yours (*with all apologies to Pilate and the Evangelist John*)? Logic gives us an answer to this question because it is the best objective basis (so far) for the determining of *truth* available to us mere humans. All well and good but how do we fight our way through the pervasive chicken-and-egg problem to objectively determine what is logical? At what point do we determine that a premise is sufficiently ‘true’ and ‘true’ in and of itself? These questions and many others have been used to establish the logical ground rules, and the means to accomplish them have been proposed, honed, and ‘perfected’ over time.

## Terms Logic

As any scanner of dictionaries can tell you, the problem with defining things is finding all of the words you need to define first in order to define that thing. When honing our definition of logic there are terms to be addressed in order to understand that definition, and so let us start by defining a few of them. Do not worry, we will constantly address new words so be appraised that many other definitions will follow so you will definitely<sup>9</sup> get your money’s worth. Think of this first set of definitions as the *how is human thought organized* group (in descending order):

**Methods:** ways of demonstrating and formulating ideas, like a syllogism ( $A^2 + B^2 = C^2$ ).

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<sup>8</sup> And by ‘winning’ they mean crushing the life out of your opponent with nothing more than clichés, sound bytes, and pat slogans, but not the Truth.

<sup>9</sup> Ha, ha...get it?

**Systems:** a grouping of things (classes) from which logical premises may be derived (like axioms in Trigonometry – remember?)

**Truths:** basics by which other methods, systems, or arguments may be measured or developed (like ‘humans think’) also known in an argument as the *theses* or *premises* or...well you get the idea.

**List 1: Basic Thought Organization Terms**

## The Logical Playing Field

On our journey, we will be concentrating on Western thought, and while some exploration of Eastern thinking will take place, for now, as they say, write what you know. In order to understand the basics we will keep it basic. That said, there are (basically) two main systems of Logic developed in the West:

- Predicative:** based in terms (nouns and verbs). (predi-CA-tive)
- Propositional:** based on the operators between those terms (+, -, =, and, or).

**List 2: Major Types of Western Logic**

For our purposes the two main representative Logics of these systems are:

**Aristotelian:** Classic basis for Western logic. It is of the predicative type because it uses *sylogisms* (if A and B then C or if A is B and B is C then A is C) involving nouns and verbs and such words as *all*, *some*, *are*, *not* and is worried about the words and their relations.

**Boolean:** Familiar to all computer programmers, a symbolic pared-down version of Aristotle’s form. It fashions “truth tables” using *and*, *or*, *not*, and is more about how the words or phrases are paired using those operators.

For simplicity, suffice it to say that our focus is on *deductive* styles of thinking and that these two representative forms fit the bill. They also bookend us nicely in time with Aristotle’s classical style coming from ancient Greece 4<sup>th</sup> century BC and Boole’s coming from the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## The Last Word?

One final thought to keep in mind. Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) postulated that propositions can be thought of as *contingent* (may or may not be true) or *necessary* (can only be true). That said, what we really want to pull out of this tidbit is his two ‘great’ premises for establishing this basis:

**The Identity of Indiscernibles** This is the paring down of something until it is undistinguishable from another thing, that is, all of their properties are identical, meaning that the things themselves are for all practical purposes the same thing.

**Principle of Sufficient Reason** The acceptance of a premise because at this point no reasonable argument can be made *against* it.

**List 3: A Useful Subset of Leibniz's Theory of Proof**

## Thinking Poorly: Logical Fallacy

This section is probably the most important, in a negative way (the *via negativa* as St. Thomas would say which makes it positive), because it is sometimes easier to understand where an

argument fails than where it succeeds. We do not want to always be skeptical, but it is best to make sure an argument is formed correctly first in order to judge its validity. Arguments can seem very successful if you ignore their fallacies!

The term *fallacy* is used in Logic to imply several types of ‘error’ in an argument. There are probably as many methods of fallacy categorization as fallacies, we can group them together in a couple of ways.

First, most fallacies can be categorized into three basic types of errors by *where* the error takes place:

***In argument*** the actual components of the argument are flawed.

***In reasoning*** the thinking behind the argument is flawed.

***In belief*** roughly, what we *think* to be true is flawed.

Secondly is to categorize them by *how* they take place, or to put it another way, the *format* of the error:

***Formal*** structure based (*‘form-al’*), that is, the physical structure of the argument is flawed.

***Informal*** internal to the structure (*‘in-form-al’*), that is, one part, a premise or conclusion for example, is flawed.

Most fallacies have very fancy name but for our purposes we will lump, I mean organize, errors into three ‘quick’ ways to identify them (though there are many more specifically identified):

1. ***An invalid idea presented as valid***: Using irrelevant, incorrect or insignificant information (which is similar to *belief*), for example:

*Ad hominem* – personal attack (“*This person says they have a plan, but that cannot be correct because they’re a liberal/conservative*”) not attacking the validity of the argument but the person/group making the argument.

2. ***Applying an unjustified premise***: Use of *non-sequitur*<sup>10</sup> (non-following) statements (as with *reasoning*, or *formal*), for example:

*Consequent Affirmation* – bi-directional logic; using the premise to prove itself (“*Aristotle was Greek, that guy’s name is Aristotle so he must be Greek*”)

3. ***Fact Misuse***: Ignoring or suppressing relevant information (an *informal* type), for example:

“No I did not touch my sister.” (*the stick I poked her with touched her*).

#### **List 4: Three Habits of Highly Ineffective Thinking**

By way of thinking well about thinking poorly, we want to keep in mind that what most of these categories and fallacies deal with is the improper use of ideas or their presentation. The conclusion being that we must think before we speak.

To sum up, an argument is considered “valid” when its conclusion follows logically from its premises, with logically meaning not having fallacies and “invalid” when it does. An argument is considered “sound” when it is *valid* and all of its premises are true. Understanding fallacy helps

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<sup>10</sup> Just one non-sequitur after another....

us to understand that an argument can contain premises that are true yet still be invalid. Likewise, structurally, it can be valid and yet contain false premises.

## Putting It Together

Ultimately we are seeking to know God better. There are many paths to God, from prayer to meditation. In this sense, theology, as human speculation about God's revelation of Himself to us, is both prayer and meditation. It requires our whole self, mind and heart, and like prayer and meditation, should lead us to action – loving God with our whole heart, our whole mind, our very being and loving others as we love ourselves. Theology is just one more path in learning to love better.

Theological speculation is not for everyone, nor is it for the faint of heart. It leads us closer to God, which as any saint will tell you, is a risky action. But the risk in theology is its misuse. It is not a club to convince others, nor is one theological system sufficient to explain God. Additionally, Theology uses the language of Philosophy, which can confuse. What we want to explore is and understand is that philosophy and philosophical thinking rely on a structured, consistent language. If we spend all of our time arguing terms, where does that leave us? No, really that is just a rhetorical question. Logic is the tool of philosophy, but the aim is to examine life, in a consistent and repeatable manner.

As confusing as all the terms and categorizations we have discussed so far may be, do not be worried. Rome was not philosophized in a day, as we might but probably should not say. Philosophers have proposed various ideas for centuries, using different words and groupings but all seeking the same end – a common language for discussing ideas, so we should not get bogged down in the terms, and then creating a common language and structure for presenting those terms. Placing thinking errors within categories only serves us mnemonically and so there are no hard and fast rules which dictate their commitment to memory. Thousands of years have gone into perfecting our understanding of logic, and probably thousands more will continue in their development. Keeping in mind the notions which they represent is the first step to utilizing them. It is also the most important step in utilizing them.

One final word on Logic: *do not expect to remember every one definition*, even generally. Expect instead to understand them and utilize them in avoiding and identifying error when constructing or understanding arguments. We will be exploring them more in the next chapter.

With that in mind, by way of pre-warning: suffice it to say these methods do not speak to the veracity or the morality of the truths being examined, merely that they are or are not relevant to the argument. When looking at logic we are not making judgments so much about the *content* of the thesis but their *context*.

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*"These common thoughts are expressed in a shared public language, consisting of shared signs...a sign has a 'sense' that fixes the reference and is 'grasped by everybody' who knows the language..."*

**Noam Chomsky**, *Language and Thought*