

*Ab alio expectes alteri quod feceri.*<sup>1</sup>

## Classical Thought<sup>2</sup>



### The Roman Empire and Classical Thought: The Advent of Christ (1)

#### Christ and philosophy

The advent of Christ (unlike the advent of Christianity) does not fit in most secular outlines of philosophy. This is because religion is not considered to be philosophy. However in reality philosophy begins with Adam not Thales. Thales was the first to try to do philosophy *without God* by means of unaided human reason. He was not the first philosopher: everyone does philosophy and has done since Adam.

The advent of Christ represents a step in philosophy not only in religion. In fact, it is hard to distinguish religion and philosophy at all. Philosophy is the attempt to develop a world-view in which every aspect of man's experience has its proper place: reality, how we know what we know and how we should live our lives. The critical task of philosophy is to cross examine opinions in order to find reliable presuppositions in these areas. Philosophers ask tough questions about conceptual clarity and logical consistency so we can ask, did Christ have a philosophy?

Yes! Christ cross-examined people and said things that were completely at odds with popular philosophical opinions of his day. He presented a world-view that unifies our view of reality, how we know what we know and how we should live our lives. But unbelieving philosophers do not accept this. Nor do they say, "yes, Jesus was a philosopher but a very bad one." Instead they insist that he is not part of the history of philosophy only of the history of religion. When he is dealt with in philosophy books it is always the advent of Christianity not the advent of Christ which is discussed. This is because because Christianity can be seen as a social movement and you can look at its leading speakers rather than assessing what *Jesus* taught.

#### Old Testament Philosophy

<sup>1</sup> Expect from others what you do for them. Publilius Syrus.

<sup>2</sup> These lessons are derived from material in *The History of Western Philosophy* 3 Courses Taught at Christ College by Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen. These are available from Covenant Media Foundation <https://www.cmfnow.com/>. As far as I am aware they are the best (if not the only) rigorous treatment of the whole of the history of philosophy from a Christian perspective. Please note that I do not endorse the Theonomist perspective of CMF and the late Dr Bahnsen. This perspective does not, however, mar the usefulness of these lectures.

The advent of Christ is a step in the history of philosophy also because Jesus presented himself as the Jewish Messiah. The Old Testament presents a philosophy of reality (metaphysics), knowledge (epistemology), and how to live life (ethics) all of which Jesus assumed when he appeared as Messiah – the promised prophesied one. Jesus used the Old Testament, saying many times, “have you not read?” when confronting his opponents. He asked Nicodemus, “are you a teacher in Israel and do not know these things?” because he assumed an Old Testament perspective would be *familiar* to his hearers.

The Bible view of reality is dualistic:<sup>3</sup> there is a difference between the Creator and the creature. It also has a personal view of reality: the creator is personal not impersonal. He is sovereign and holy and he not only brought the world into existence but controls everything that happens. God judges on basis of his holy character and he is known to all men by means of the created order as well as in their own internal constitution.

### **The Way (ethics), the Truth (epistemology), the Life (metaphysics)**

Jesus assumed this philosophy. He said, “I am the way the truth and the life. No man cometh unto the father but by me.” John 14:6 This is good news! Jesus says something uplifting and encouraging: objective truth *is* to be found, he can give life. However, the downside is “no one cometh to the father but by me.” It is that kind of exclusive, self-assured teaching that is offensive in a democratic culture like our own. People think that since everyone has the *political* right to hold their own opinion, and to say what they want to say that therefore no one has the right to be correct or incorrect and everyone is in a grey area of “who knows?” Jesus says “I do know. I am exclusively the truth.” This is distasteful to unregenerate man.

“I am the way, the truth and the life” has ethical, epistemological and metaphysical consequences as we will see below.

The opening of John's Gospel is full of philosophical implications. “In the beginning was the word...” Word here is *λόγος*, “and the *λόγος* was with God, and the *λόγος* was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men.” John 1: 4 the life was the light of men.

In John 14:6 “way” has to do with guidance or how to live your life, that is, ethics. “Truth” has to do with epistemology and Life (which we see from John 1:4 equates to “the light of men”) is a particular philosophy of nature (metaphysics). A person's view of nature and how values relate to nature, is the underlying issue in philosophy. According to the New Testament there is a philosophy of nature given to us and it is given because a personal *λόγος* has made the world and gives life to all things.

Heraclitus<sup>4</sup> said there has to be an order in this changing world. He called that principle of order in the changing world *λόγος* and claimed that there is a reason, an account, a rationale that governs all things. But Heraclitus was a pagan so his *λόγος*, his god, is *part* of the natural order and flows through all the changes we experience – it is an *emanent* *λόγος*. John declares the *transcendent* *λόγος* when he talks about Jesus being the creator of all things, the eternal one who was there in the beginning and God himself.

Hebrews 1:3a says: “Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the *word of his power*...” This tells us that the “word of Christ's power” unifies and sustains all things. In other words, Jesus is the providential sustainer of all things as well

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<sup>3</sup> See Democritus Term 1 Week 8 Day 4.

<sup>4</sup> See Term 1 Week 4 Day 4

as creator and he is separate from creation as creator. This is an elementary philosophy of nature or reality (metaphysics).

There is also an elementary epistemology in John 1. Jesus is the source of life; he is life light of men. John 1:9 says that he is the true light that enlightens every man who comes into the world. Christ enlightens *every* man coming into the world. Since not everyone who is born is saved, it is plainly not not saving faith that is meant here. It is rather speaking of a general work of Christ that allows men to know what they know. Christ, the sustainer of men, makes knowledge possible.

The Old Testament already taught that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. The Old Testament personified Wisdom in Proverbs as the creator of all things. The world shows a cause and effect system and displays an order that is wise so that, in the long run, those who defy Wisdom suffer and those who live in accordance with it are blessed – and this Wisdom created the world. In other words the order is not something imposed from outside. It is not as if God created the world and then tries to manage the course of the world. It is rather that Wisdom itself created the world to be the way that it is. This interpretation of Wisdom is seen by many as a foreshadowing of the doctrine that Christ is the *λόγος* that enlightens all men coming into the world.

In Colossians 2:3 Paul tells us that in Christ “are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” He then is the key to any wisdom and knowledge that men would have. If men will not see the world as the *λόγος* reveals it, they will not be able to understand anything properly. So we see a metaphysic and epistemology in the New Testament focused on Christ and also a doctrine of value or an ethic. Jesus is the way: even pagan philosophers read the New Testament and understand that Christianity is a lifestyle and an ethic. There are moral norms in the Bible and guidance for men. But beyond that the guidance the New Testament gives is for all areas of life. This is not popular and is offensive in our day and age.

Christianity does not present an ethic which is just for internal thoughts of men, for their private prayers, families and churches. It is rather an ethic that is universal. It applies to all men and all areas of life.

In 1 Peter 1 we are told to be holy in all manner of living. If we follow Christ we walk in the light (John 8:12) and if we are to be Jesus disciples we must abide in his word. If we abide in his word we will know the truth and the truth will set us free. What does it mean to abide in his word? To *live according to* his word. All one's life is to be governed and shaped by the Word of God. Before Jesus went to the cross in John 17 he prayed that his followers would be sanctified by the truth – they would be distinctive and consecrated and set aside by the truth – and then Jesus declared, “thy word is truth.” To be a follower of Christ, then, is to live your entire life distinctively on the basis of the truth presented in God's word the truth which is embodied in Jesus and is worked out and codified in the scriptures of the Old Testament and New Testament. And if Jesus expects us to live our lives entirely on the basis of his word that applies in every area of life; economics, arts and sciences... all must be conducted on the basis of his word as well.

Jesus is called in 1 Timothy 6 and in Revelation 19:16 “King of Kings and Lord of Lords” and so Christianity has political implications. Christianity presents not only a view of reality and of human reason (metaphysics and epistemology) and of how to live our lives (ethics) but also it develops into a world view that has political applications as well. Jesus claims to be the king over all kings. Pilate was inclined to let Jesus go until Jews cried out that Pilate would not be a friend of Caesar's to let go someone who claimed to be a king. The Jews understood the political implications although they had the wrong concept of kingship: they knew there was an antithesis here. Pilate takes Him back and privately asks him about this. Jesus tells him in effect, “you've said it but not a king in the way that you understand. I do not rule with physical force because my kingdom does not originate

from this world like yours, Pilate, but my kingdom is from above. And you would have no authority over me if it had not been given to you from above.” Jesus is claiming here that there is a higher law. Here we can note that the Old Testament had pointed out the existence of a higher law before Stoicism was ever invented. Jesus claimed that there was a higher law and a higher personal authority that Pilate would have to answer to. *And* he said, “*I am* that authority.”

Exercise:

This is a very difficult lesson but important. You will have gained something valuable even if you only grasp some of the concepts. Doing the exercise will help clarify things. Answers on the last page.

1. Who was the first philosopher?

2.

Way	Epistemology	The nature of reality
Truth	Ethics	How we know what we know
Life	Metaphysics	How we should live our lives

Connect the word from John 14:6 in the first column with the technical name of the branch of philosophy to which it relates in the centre column. Then connect this with the meaning of that technical term in the last column.

3. *Λόγος*

Both the New Testament and the pagan philosopher Heraclitus use this term. Which group of meanings below is that meant by *λόγος* as used by Heraclitus and which group of meanings is that used by the New Testament?

A.

personal  
creator of the world  
distinct from the world  
transcendent

B.

the rationale that governs all things  
part of the natural order  
flows through all the changes we experience  
emanent

4. What is meant by: A. “transcendent” and B. “emanent?”

5. Can you translate the words in the picture?

1. Who was the first philosopher? Adam

2.

Way            Ethics            How we should live our lives

Truth           Epistemology        How we know what we know

Life            Metaphysics        The nature of reality

3. *Λόγος*

B. Heraclitus

A. the New Testament

4. A. transcendent = distinct from the created universe. B. emanent = flowing or coming from the universe.

5. +EGO·SUM·VIA·VERI-TAS·ET·VITA+ “I am the way the truth and the life.”