

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 11 | Issue 2

Article 1

4-1-1994

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Recommended Citation

Owens, Joseph (1994) "The Need for Christian Philosophy," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 2 , Article 1.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil199411219

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol11/iss2/1>

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THE NEED FOR CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY

Joseph Owens

With its probative force drawn solely from premises accessible to the human mind's own inherent powers, Christian philosophy probes the divinely revealed truths under their naturally knowable aspects. From the apologetic or defensive angle, this type of philosophy is needed to meet rational queries—one's own or those of others—arising from religious doctrines, for instance from the tenets of creation, divine providence, immortality of the spiritual soul, or human destiny. On the positive side, Christian philosophy deepens the attraction of revealed doctrines in a way comparable to the enhancement given them by architecture, music, art and poetry in actual Christian life.

I

The expression "Christian philosophy" may seem at first hearing to be a straightforward phrase, quite as "Canadian philosophy" or "American philosophy." It has, however, been given widely differing interpretations in the course of its history down the centuries of the Christian era.¹ In modern times it has evoked conflicting and even contradictory responses from writers who have had occasion to examine closely its import and its field of reference. A brief preliminary overview of modern reactions to the notion is accordingly in order for any contemporary approach to the question of its need. Naturally there would not be much point in asking about the need for Christian philosophy today if one is not first satisfied that this type of philosophy has at least the status of something possible.

On the one hand, for a number of capable modern philosophers and historians the expression "Christian philosophy" has been a blatant contradiction in terms. It has seemed like a square circle. In the present century it was compared by the German philosopher Heidegger to the notion of "iron wood."² Something that has the nature of iron obviously cannot be wood, and something that has the nature of wood cannot be iron any more than a square can be circular. For those writers, a teaching that is characteristically Christian is something that is accepted on the authority of Christian revelation. It is not something that can be reasoned to on the philosophical plane. In contrast, a philosophical tenet is something developed by human reason alone, apart from any revelation through religious channels. "Christian," for them, will involve belief in something on the basis of divine authority, while philosophy eschews any such dependence on a religious source. The case has been regarded by those thinkers as solidly grounded and airtight, and accord-



ingly as closed. What is philosophical is *understood*, in the light of unaided human reason, while something specifically Christian is not understood but is *believed* on the strength of its religious source. The religious source is not something in the purely rational order. Stated bluntly and succinctly, that is one side of the issue at stake. The stand is definite.

On the other hand, "Christian philosophy" is a notion that has been in use from quite early times in our era, and today it has received greater prominence than ever before.³ It is a conception that persists, in spite of all attacks upon it. In its earliest use it stood for the way of thinking that in Christian life assumed the prestige held by philosophy in the ancient Greek world. It was what provided an account of the universe as a whole, culminating in the problems of human destiny. So for Augustine all Greek philosophy had reached its apex in Plotinus and now melded with Christian doctrine in giving an overall view of human life.⁴ This was what Augustine himself termed "Christian philosophy." It was "our philosophy," as it had been called in earlier Christian circles. It had quite the same bearing as what one means today in speaking of a general philosophy of life. It was not restricted to today's narrower significance of a special branch in academic studies.

With this concept of Christian philosophy, as it is first found in patristic writings, there can hardly be any quarrel from today's perspectives. But in medieval times "philosophy" became sharply distinguished from sacred theology. Philosophy for the medievals was based on naturally evident principles only, while theology proceeded from divinely revealed truths. The distinction between the two was clear-cut and decisive. The pagan writers were regarded by the thinkers of the middle ages as the "philosophers." In contrast, the Christian writers were the "theologians."⁵ But those theologians in their work made copious use of the philosophers. Against that background a present-century historian of medieval philosophy, Etienne Gilson, found a number of "Christian philosophies" *within* the theological writings of the middle ages. Gilson published books with titles such as *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*,⁶ *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*,⁷ *The Christian Philosophy of the Middle Ages*,⁸ and a general introduction under the caption *Introduction à la philosophie chrétienne*.⁹ Used in this direct contrast to Christian theology, the expression "Christian philosophy" has now become a commonly accepted phrase, regardless of disagreement about its meaning or its possibility.

Long before Gilson's time, in fact, the academic distinction between philosophy and sacred theology had become solidly established in university circles, especially in Scholastic writings and in the German school tradition. The basic division of the one type of study from the other seemed sufficiently obvious. The two were accordingly regarded as radically different disciplines. Philosophy grounded its reasoning on naturally acceptable starting points. It

could not make use of revealed truth as premises for its demonstrations. In consequence it could not permit itself to be specified by anything that was given through divine revelation. In this traditional setting no philosophy seemed amenable to designation by the notion "Christian," as many modern writers viewed the situation. Hence arose the stand that there can no more be a Christian philosophy than there could be a Christian mathematics or a Christian chemistry.

In Gilson's day this objection was expressly raised against the very notion of "Christian philosophy" by another prominent French historian of philosophy and expert in medieval writings, Emile Bréhier. A formal debate between the two conflicting views on the topic was arranged in the early thirties of the present century. In it the issues were clearly drawn up.¹⁰ Both sides agreed from the start that as a philosophy a Christian philosophy had to be accountable solely to the tribunal of unaided human reason. It could not appeal to religious sources for support. That condition was accepted unhesitatingly by both sides in the debate. It focused the problem precisely on the question how Christianity could specify a discipline without entering intrinsically into its reasoning processes.

To Cartesian or Enlightenment philosophers, this objection necessarily presented a veritable impasse. Where the structure of philosophy was conceived on the model of a mathematical or experimental science, value free and mathematically controllable, the motivation or religious conditioning of its practitioner could not legitimately affect its specification. No matter what the personal motivation of a mathematician or a physicist may be it does not serve to characterize his science as specifically Christian, in the Enlightenment view of the notion "science." That is why there cannot be such a thing as a Christian mathematics or a Christian chemistry, according to these thinkers.

But we are no longer in the Enlightenment era. In philosophy today, as understood in the present postmodern and hermeneutic age, the intrinsic character of one's philosophy varies according to one's linguistic and cultural upbringing, and in a person's cultural upbringing a decisive role may be played by the individual religious conditioning and background. In consequence, a philosopher whose motivation and training are Christian can well be drawn to special problems of personal concern. She or he may readily look for naturally knowable starting points on the philosophic level that are different from those that would attract a non-Christian. The same holds proportionally, of course, for thinkers brought up in Islamic or Jewish or any other culture.

In accord with this wide possibility of choice, a selection is in fact made by each individual thinker from among the indefinitely numerous groupings of naturally knowable starting points for philosophical reasoning. The selection of this group of philosophical principles may well be dependent on the

person's religious habituation. It can be made freely in line with that motivation. The result is that on such a basis an entire philosophy may be specified as Christian, even though nothing specifically Christian enters into its reasoning processes. This means that a person can pursue philosophy for the purpose of aiding her or his religious faith. Because of the direction given by the extrinsic yet presupposed personal upbringing, the philosophical thinking becomes a specifically distinct type of philosophy from that of non-Christian thinkers. As with Aristotle,¹¹ a pre-philosophical dialectic serves as the *path* leading up to the principles from which the properly philosophic reasoning commences. But the path itself remains extrinsic to the strictly philosophical discourse.

In a word, there is ample ground today for justifying the notion of Christian philosophy, especially if one is following in some way the current hermeneutical conception of what philosophy is. In this regard one has to show that Christian interests do in fact furnish the motivation for distinctive Christian philosophy that will elucidate revealed tenets, but will not infringe in any way upon the domain of sacred theology by introducing dependence on revealed premises. With this more technical formulation of what Christian philosophy envisages, one is in a position to approach the question whether or not there is any need for it in today's intellectual world.

II

Perhaps the best approach to the present question will consist in a glance at a few particular Christian beliefs taken one by one. Each may be examined in itself to see if it has any need of philosophical understanding in order to play its role more effectively in Christian life and in its relations to philosophical concerns. The procedure of first considering these tenets individually seems indicated by the lack of any immediately obvious reason why the notion of Christianity in general should require philosophical support. Christianity had in fact no express mandate from its founder to engage in philosophical activity. Thousands upon thousands of people have led good Christian lives without any immediate help from absorption in philosophy courses. Most Christians, perhaps, have little if any inkling of what academic philosophy means. The issue, accordingly, is best approached not from the notion of Christianity in general but rather from the consideration of particular Christian beliefs taken each in itself. The individual tenet may be asked if philosophical elucidation will help it play the part meant for it in religious practice and in the problems to which it gives rise when it is confronted with philosophical issues.

As a first instance, one might look at the initial article of the Nicene Creed. That basic truth of Christian belief readily presents aspects that repay careful philosophical consideration without at all infringing upon the mystery in-

volved in this revelation. The article is formulated as "I believe in God, the Father almighty, the maker of heaven and earth."¹² Correspondingly, the opening words of the first book in the Bible are "In the beginning God created heaven and earth." Here the notion of "making" is familiar enough to natural reason. It means bringing a new thing into being through transforming some material into an object different from what it was, as wood for instance is made into a table or bread is made from flour. But there are difficulties here. When the *totality* of the finite things in heaven and earth is under question, there is no room for any other finite material out of which they could be made. This notion of *creatio ex nihilo*, that is, of making something out of nothing calls accordingly for philosophical elucidation to show that one is not conceiving nothingness as a sort of material out of which the world would be educed. Rather, one should mean that nothing else was already in existence out of which the things could be made. The notion of creation has to be explained as the imparting of existence without anything whatever to work upon.

To the inquiring mind this consideration poses a number of questions that call for philosophical answers. A Christian can of course through the gift of faith firmly *believe* what stands written in the Bible or is stated in the creed. Yet in actual life one has to face one's own questions and also those of the people with whom one associates. Our mind is naturally inquisitive. It is thrown at once upon the defensive at the objection that "making" should require a material out of which something new is made. Here the proper procedure for human knowledge, one may urge, should be to accept the supposition that something always was there. One then could theorize about the "big bang" starting the process that has resulted in the extremely complicated universe we know today. Or, with the medievals, one could argue about the concept of creation from all eternity. But the making of something without any preexisting material, as required by the Christian tenet, seems to defy human comprehension. Ground is offered for the temptation to say that the very notion is too farfetched to merit any serious consideration. There are better things to do than to waste time thinking about it. Here the banner of ridicule is easy to flaunt. Christian faith does indeed require belief in mysteries that readily provide ground for caricature, and the step from the sublime to the ridiculous can be made to look very short.

Accordingly Christian writers from very early times became engaged in defensive procedures against such objections to their beliefs. Highly developed Greek philosophy was vigorous and active in the patristic era. In face of it Christian defenders, or "apologists" as they were called in the Greek parlance of the day, soon developed the technique of drawing upon philosophy itself to meet philosophical objections. This technique has been described as their using Goliath's own sword to cut off Goliath's head.¹³

The technique, in point of fact, proved effective up to the point for which it was required. It would not convince anyone already persuaded of the opposite. But at least it gave oneself, and proclaimed before the public, the quietude and assurance that one was not flying in the face of human reason when adhering to Christian beliefs. It used philosophical weapons to decapitate philosophical objections of one's own or those of others, even though by itself it could not bring about religious conversion.

This apologetic or defensive need for philosophy can be seen persisting down the centuries, through medieval into modern times. One may be startled at first by new attacks upon Christian faith. But if one has sufficient philosophical knowledge to see the foundations upon which the structure of the objections is raised, one is not disturbed. One is able to see how one's own philosophical thinking is not at all affected by the opposed conclusions. They are conclusions that may proceed cogently on the basis of other philosophies, but not at all from one's own starting points. Accordingly one's own religious beliefs remain untroubled by the objections or the caricature. The other person's stand likewise stays unaffected. There is no conversion, as long as each adheres to the starting points already adopted. But one has shown convincingly that one's own religious belief can stand up just as strongly as ever in the pluralistic ambient of philosophy today. That is all that is required when the situation is viewed from the defensive or apologetic angle. Here Christian philosophy has been notably rewarding and satisfying. Surely it fills a need.

Hence in regard to the present example, namely the belief that God made the heavens and the earth, the belief mentioned first in Bible and creed, one can smooth out the notion of "making" in a way that allows room for the Christian belief in creation out of nothing. "Making," or in traditional philosophical terminology "efficient causality," can be explained as the giving of existence to something else, rather than in the older Greek conception of starting motion in something already existent. The things we experience around us receive and lose existence. The existence cannot be explained just by the thing's nature. The nature of a tree just as a tree, for instance, does not mean that the tree actually exists. Its present existence, rather, does not come from itself but from something else. The process is traced back to existence that subsists of itself, and the existence so reached is God as philosophically conceived. In this perspective "making" is elucidated as the imparting of existence, whether or not some material is already there. The notion of "making" is accordingly freed from necessary dependence upon a material out of which the thing is made. The Christian belief that God created all existents other than himself is thereby secured from the philosophical attack that a preexistent material is required. "Making" is shown to mean the imparting of existence, whether or not a preexisting material is there to receive the actuation.

One may, of course, insist that this manner of reaching God from the existence of sensible things through rational discourse is the procedure of a particular type of philosophy, a type of existential thinking that is far from enjoying general acceptance in the philosophical world of today or of any other epoch. That observation is true. But need it be surprising in the current hermeneutical conception of the nature of philosophy? The starting points of philosophies vary indefinitely, and the whole of each properly reasoned philosophy follows consistently in the wake of the respective starting points. Hence the well-known observation that philosophers never agree among themselves.¹⁴ Accordingly we have our present-day genial pluralism in the philosophical world.

What is at issue here is to understand the rationale of this pluralism. The starting points need to be carefully selected. Then the rest of your philosophy follows cogently in their wake, if you are thinking consistently.¹⁵ Even the philosophies of other thinkers will become interpreted in the light of one's own principles. Aquinas, for instance, could take Aristotle's reasoning to divine existence, from actuality and potentiality, and make it prove something that Aristotle never intended. With existence recognized as the dominant and immediately known actuality in sensible things, the structure of the Aristotelian reasoning is seen to culminate for Aquinas in a unique and infinite God, instead of in the finite separate substances of the Stagirite. Likewise Aquinas takes the arguments of other thinkers besides Aristotle and interprets them in the light of his own starting points, reaching cogently his own characteristic conclusions. The point here is that one's personal philosophic starting points determine the way one interprets a philosophical demonstration.

What is required for the apologetic or defensive purposes, then, is to understand the way philosophies work. The hermeneutic understanding of the nature of philosophy decapitates the objection that one is merely using one's own personal starting points, instead of submitting to an alleged agreement among philosophers after the fashion expected for an Enlightenment science. It meets the objection in a thoroughly philosophical way, namely by a philosophical manifestation of the nature of philosophy itself. It is using Goliath's sword in precisely that manner. Where the existential actuality of sensible things is seen as the basic determination in the starting points, its influence will be all-pervasive and decisive. Only by the use of radically different starting points will the alleged insuperable difficulties arise.

A materialistic philosophy, for instance, starts from the tenet that whatever can be known has length, breadth and thickness. From that starting point there is no way of reaching anything immaterial, such as the spiritual soul or an existence that subsists just in itself. That type of starting point can hardly hope to ground a demonstration that God exists, as God is believed in by a Christian. The Christian philosopher understands this, and thereby sees that

the arguments of his opponent do not affect his own philosophical reasoning to the existence of God. Likewise, the Kantian objection that the categories of theoretical reasoning are meant to apply only to the sensible world and have no validity outside what is sensible, does not at all touch a philosophy that reasons from starting points of a different type. But in all cases like this, the Christian thinker needs to understand the nature of philosophy itself, and keep aware of how it works. Philosophy itself is what gives reassurance here.

Accordingly there is definite need for a philosophy that is Christian. That philosophy does not convert anybody, nor is it intended to do so. But it is immensely reassuring. It enables one to remain steadfast in upholding the inherent dignity of human intelligence while accepting mysteries on religious faith. It is Goliath's own sword, namely philosophy, that is used by the Christian thinker to sever the head of the attacker by making manifest the nature of the starting points or principles upon which the assault was based.

These considerations, then, illustrate vividly the defensive or apologetic side of Christian philosophy in the demonstration of the existence of God as maker of the universe. Christian philosophy, precisely as such, is not meant to convert anybody to belief in the Christian God. That is a prerogative of divine grace. It is in no way a task for philosophy. But the situation does establish an important role for philosophy in Christian life. All in all, a Christian philosophy is from this angle a veritable need. It is a solid defense of Christian belief on the intellectual level.

This defensive or apologetic side of Christian philosophy may at first hearing have a decidedly negative ring. But even in the demonstration of God's existence it resounds with positive appeal, and amply so. In understanding existence as the very nature of God, philosophy offers a penetrating overture into a fuller grasp of the status of all perfections in God. Without existence there cannot be the least actuality or perfection. There would be just nothing. In the other extreme, where existence subsists, as it does in God, it involves all perfections. Hence anything at all positive that we can imagine or think of, has to be found in its primary existence in God. Once existence has been shown with Aquinas to be "the actuality of all actualities" and "the perfection of all perfections,"¹⁶ God is seen to be endowed by his very nature with all positive attributes in an infinitely high degree. That includes the attribute of power, power that in subsistent existence is not hemmed in by any finite nature, a nature that would inevitably limit its extent. Thereby God is shown to be omnipotent in the way required by the notion of creation *ex nihilo*, insofar as the divine ability to "make" is not limited by any demand for a material upon which to act. Similarly God's concurrence in the act of human free will in creatures does not infringe upon human or angelic liberty. This gives philosophical basis for the rhetorical question in the Scriptures "...what achievement of ours but the doing of it is thine?"¹⁷

These very positive aspects can be elucidated in the pursuit of Christian philosophy. The process gives tremendous satisfaction to the inquiring human intellect. It is at every step a means of solidity and sustenance in one's religious practice. It provides a rational framework for the deepening and development of one's spirituality. Surely just as the arts of poetry, music, painting and architecture can give very positive elevation to religious life without detriment to their nature as arts, so this positive function of Christian philosophy may be regarded as a need for Christian life in overall fashion. Though developed professionally in academic minds, it is able to simmer down to the general Christian public through popular preaching and literature and art.

In itself, however, none of the philosophical reasoning about the first article of the Christian creed reaches to the notion of God as a father. One of the criticisms leveled against the Greek philosopher Aristotle is that his conception of God as the prime mover of the universe is too cold a notion to be applied to the God of Christian revelation. It has been regarded as incongruous in a Christian context. But this objection bears on something beyond the philosophical demonstration's scope. Philosophical reasoning is not at all capable of reaching the notion of God as father, either within the divine Trinity or in the adoption of human beings through grace as God's children. Those are truths left for supernatural revelation. The fatherhood of God in both respects remains a mystery of faith. Yet as creator of the visible universe God can be known by philosophical reasoning, and the infinite existence that is so known remains open to whatever further aspects faith may add to it.

There is, moreover, nothing necessarily cold about the philosophical notion of subsistent existence. Subsistent existence opens out to the inclusion of every perfection or intelligible attraction that may be brought into our awareness through means beyond philosophical discovery. Philosophy shows that subsistent existence, because infinite, far surpasses the power of the human mind to comprehend. Philosophy thereby solidly establishes the conclusion that there can be more things in heaven and earth than can be dreamt of. In regard to the divine nature, philosophy cannot bring forward any cogent reason why an infinitely perfect nature could not be internally related to itself in three different ways in the persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Philosophy has no means for making these internal relations manifest. But by the same token it cannot bring out any demonstrative reason against the revealed tenet. It accordingly offers no valid ground for disbelief. The finitude of the human mind cannot, even by definition, hope to penetrate the fullness of an infinite first cause. That is why human reason cannot understand or explain or do away with the mystery of the blessed Trinity.

In a word, a philosophic consideration of the first article of the creed aptly illustrates the helpful role of Christian philosophy. It offers intellectual un-

derpinning to an article of Christian faith defensively or apologetically. From that angle it offers deep intellectual attraction to the inquiring mind. By distinguishing the naturally knowable aspects from those that are attainable only through revelation it makes clear the extent to which human reason can uphold or attack the revealed doctrine. In this way philosophy provides deeply appreciated satisfaction for a groping human intellect, and meets in welcome fashion a veritable human need. In so doing, moreover, it presents Christian truth with a depth and appeal fully comparable to the enhancement given to the riches of religious faith by poetry, music, architecture and art.

III

A second instance that illustrates the need for Christian philosophy may be found in the problems about the immortality of the human soul. Quite generally people feel that somehow their loved ones live on in one way or another after bodily death. Grave or crematory is hard to accept as absolutely the end. Christian belief, moreover, has consistently upheld the soul's immortality. But rational proof of survival after bodily death turns out to be difficult, and therefore, perhaps, unwelcome as a topic for ordinary discourse. In a short manuscript setting forth personal beliefs, Lord Byng of Vimy is said to have communicated to Georges Vanier, who was later to be one of his successors as Governor General of Canada, his own attitude towards immortality. Byng claimed to believe in immortality as implicitly as anyone does. But he was glad that nobody had ever been able to prove it to him, in spite of numerous efforts.¹⁸ Quite obviously, Christian philosophy may see here a challenge to probe the reasons for this attitude.

Pagan philosophy was able to show that the range of the human mind's thinking surpasses the limits of the merely material order.¹⁹ Our thinking obviously transcends the here and now. We can think in terms of infinite extension and infinite time. That is enough to show that in its nature the human soul has capacities that reach beyond material limitations, and that it accordingly specifies an existence that does not depend upon a body even though matter is a specifying principle of its nature. This grounds the conclusion that the human soul is naturally indestructible, since its existence does not depend upon bodily parts that can be dissolved in death. So once the human soul is endowed with existence it naturally has that existence forever. Within its own nature there is no material factor that would permit its destruction.

But the topic has its difficulties. In dramatically recounting Socrates' last discourse in the prison cell before the drinking of the lethal hemlock, Plato described how the audience was overwhelmed by the sublimity of the topic, yet did not find the argument convincing.²⁰ The difficulty was attributed to the greatness of the subject and the weakness of human intelligence. Our own

reaction today may not be much different. Philosophical arguments for the soul's survival may appear enticing, but they do not seem to click with cogency. For Plato, the soul unlike material things was the cause of its own motion. It was defined as a self-mover. It was not dependent upon anything else for its motion, and accordingly was exempt from destruction. This reasoning started in and stayed in the order of life as operation. In that setting, what the premises entailed was immortality.²¹ But in his own half dozen or so discussions on the indestructibility of the spiritual soul, written during the later periods of his career, Aquinas nowhere makes his reasoning bear on the soul's immortality. He seems to limit it strictly, against an Aristotelian background, to the notion of indestructibility understood in the Peripatetic sense. Human beings can think and can will beyond the limits imposed by material conditions. This shows that human nature has a factor that is not dependent on matter for its existence. Therefore it cannot lose existence through destruction of the bodily composite. Yet no capability for acting outside the body is thereby shown. Rather, the soul as we know it cannot naturally be aware of anything or do any thinking except in terms of material objects. In consequence it cannot have any activity apart from the body. It is not a ghost in a machine, as satirized by Gilbert Ryle in our own century. The soul constitutes but a single agent along with the material side in the body. Accordingly it is naturally inert without the bodily component. Aristotle himself had insisted that soul and body form but a single agent.²²

For Aquinas, then, any existence that the soul would retain after bodily death would thereby be naturally one of inactivity. It could not cause in Platonic fashion any motion at all, let alone self-motion. It would be dormant in much more radical fashion than persons in the Old Testament Sheol, or in the Greek Hades. There would be nothing about it that could be described in terms that implied life, such as "survival" or "immortality." "Survival" in its etymology means "living on," and "immortality" means perpetual life as contrasted with death. "Existence," on the contrary, has "non-existence" as its opposite. It need not imply the presence of life. A stone is existent, without being alive. You do not say, in any literal sense, that a stone survives a fire or that its duration is immortal. Its perpetual existence would not be regarded as immortality. However, a human soul's perpetual existence without any life at all would perhaps run much more against the grain for today's normal thinker than blanket acceptance of annihilation through death. Yet the philosophical possibility of that type of existence for the human soul after death throws one back on religious faith in regard to its immortality. One may firmly believe in its future life through Christian faith while refusing to claim that it can be demonstrated by natural reasoning. At the same time, the philosophical demonstration of the divine omnipotence allows for means of activity in the separated soul that are entirely beyond our philosophical ken.

Against this background one can understand Lord Byng's spontaneous attitude of adhering to immortality for the human soul and at the same time of being suspicious about philosophical arguments that attempt to demonstrate it. At least there is need for care in focusing the question upon the precise aspect that can be reached by philosophical reasoning. The rest may then be left to religious belief, quite as God may be shown philosophically to be the creator of the world without any demonstration of fatherhood. Intimations of immortality there well may be, on account of the mind's thinking in terms that transcend the material order. But to prove philosophically that the popular intimations so suggested will in fact be realized, is quite another task. There is good reason for being suspicious about the cogency of philosophical arguments based upon them.

By the same token, however, a strong philosophical underpinning for religious belief in immortality is provided by the cogent demonstration that once a spiritual soul has been given existence it can never be separated naturally from that existence.²³ The spiritual soul is naturally indestructible, unlike the sensible things that come under our immediate observation. Arguments based on the material nature of perceptible things do not hold in regard to it. Christian philosophy, therefore, can furnish the believer with solid defensive or apologetic reasons against the stand that the spiritual soul perishes in death. Further, the positive philosophic study of the spiritual soul's characteristic activities becomes deeply attractive and satisfying to one's religious propensities. As Aristotle insisted so eloquently in the opening lines of his work *On the Soul*, the study of the soul ranks on the highest level among the objects that excite and satisfy our natural craving for knowledge.²⁴ It furnishes a second welcome instance of a way in which Christian philosophy can satisfy a religious need.

IV

A third instance that may be brought forward to illustrate the need for Christian philosophy regards human destiny. Christian belief places that destiny in the beatific vision of God. Human beings, it proclaims, are meant for the eternal happiness of heaven. Nothing less can really satisfy the longings of the human heart. In the oft-quoted phrase of Augustine this revealed truth has been repeated down the centuries: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless till it rests in Thee."²⁵ But to cold human reason this outlook presents anomalies. It means that our highest goodness and happiness will consist basically in intellectual contemplation. Scripture expresses it as "This is eternal life: to know thee alone who art truly God..."²⁶

In his *Ethics* the Greek philosopher Aristotle had concluded on purely philosophical grounds that theoretical contemplation is the highest of human goods and contains all other goods in one way or another within its scope.

This Aristotelian conception has continually given rise to sharp opposition. The spontaneous reaction of people is "We don't want to contemplate for all eternity, we want to *do* things." A widely read book on Aristotle written by John Herman Randall shortly after the middle of the present century stated blandly that if Aristotle were living in modern America he would never have placed human felicity in contemplation. He would have located it in action and production and progress. A Christian philosophy based on existence is not at all bothered by this objection. It can show that things grasped by human cognition have three different kinds of existence. As we perceive the things in the sensible world we see that first of all they exist in themselves. As we reflect upon our own cognition of them, we are aware that they exist also in our thought. Their existence in themselves, as real, is seen to have an epistemological priority comparable to that of fact over fiction, of truth over phantasy. Spontaneously we rank the real existence of things as higher than their existence in somebody's cognition, and the existence of one hundred dollars in one's pocket as above the hopeful existence of them in one's dreams at a racetrack. A vessel actually battling the waves in a furious storm is accorded more reality than that of a painted ship upon a painted ocean. It is doing something in itself, the painted ship is not.

But the things also exist in the creative essence of God. There they have divine existence, and the beatific knowledge of them through contemplation of them in the divine essence will be proportionately superior to experience of them in their own real existence. Experiencing and living them in the splendor of the divine essence will be a better and fuller and more satisfactory way of experiencing them. This point is brought home trenchantly when one applies to it Aristotle's dictum "The actuality of thought is life."²⁷ Far from being the idleness of a painted ship, it is life and activity in the fullest and highest degree. It shows on the philosophical level how the beatific vision of the divine essence, once it has been accepted as a supernaturally revealed truth, can satisfy the unlimited aspirations of the human heart throughout the infinite duration of eternity. In positive fashion it thereby makes the prospect of heaven philosophically attractive.

V

These instances of help from Christian philosophy could be multiplied extensively by going through the numerous tenets of Christian faith one by one. But the three just considered should be sufficient to illustrate the different ways in which a Christian philosophy may fill important needs. Defensively and apologetically Christian philosophy can come to grips with objections from ourselves and from others in regard to the truths of Christian revelation. The philosophy does not demonstrate any supernatural truths. It will not convince anyone who has not already accepted them on religious faith. It

does not make converts. It merely uses a philosophical sword to cut off the head of a philosophical objection. That is its apologetic function. The better your philosophy is, the more effectively will it do the job. Where philosophies such as materialism or pantheism lead in a different direction from that of Christian philosophy, an understanding of how those philosophies work will make manifest the reason why they reach such different conclusions. It will show on the philosophical level why a Christian philosophy is immune to their attacks.²⁸ No philosophy can force any other philosophy to accept the philosophy's own starting points. In the genial atmosphere of today's pluralism, this is an attitude that has every right to claim universal acceptance.

That is the apologetic side. But positively, Christian philosophy will bring out the marvelous intellectual appeal of Christian belief and life that is grounded by the revealed truths. From this angle, Christian philosophy should surely rank with poetry, music, painting and architecture in enhancing the impression of the Christian message upon the human mind. There is accordingly a corresponding need for the philosophy, working in its own characteristic fashion. The three instances just considered, namely the existence of God, the indestructibility of the spiritual soul, and the location of the supreme human happiness in contemplation, bring out vividly the way Christian philosophy meets this need.²⁹

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NOTES

1. See Maurice Nédoncelle, *Is There a Christian Philosophy?*, trans. Illyd Trethowan (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1960), pp. 44-81; 100-14. Norman Kretzmann, "Faith Seeks, Understanding Finds: Augustine's Charter for Christian Philosophy," in *Christian Philosophy*, ed. Thomas P. Flint (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), pp. 1-6. An issue of *The Monist*, 75:3 (July, 1992) has "Christian Philosophy" as its general topic. A discussion of methodology for the topic may be found in Arthur F. Holmes, *Christian Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Nutley, NJ: Craig Press, 1969).

2. "...ein hölzernes Eisen und ein Misverständnis," Martin Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1953), p. 6.

3. See coverage in *Christliche Philosophie im katholischen Denken des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Emerich Coreth et al. (Graz: Verlag Styria, 1987-1988) and *Christliche Philosophie in Deutschland 1920 bis 1945*, ed. Paul Wolff (Regensburg: Josef Habel, 1949). The Society of Christian Philosophers, which meets regularly in conjunction with other philosophical associations, has as its "main aim: to integrate faith with philosophy"—Marilyn McCord Adams, "Philosophy and the Bible: The Areopagus Speech," *Faith and Philosophy*, 9 (1992), 135. On this topic, cf. *infra*, n. 29.

4. See Augustine, *Contra Academicos*, 3.17.37; 3.18.41; 3.19.42.

5. Cf.: "Et tenent philosophi perfectionem naturae, et negant perfectionem supernatu-

ralem; theologi vero cognoscunt defectum naturae et necessitatem gratiae et perfectionem supernaturalem." John Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, Prolog. 1.1.5, in *Opera omnia* (Ed. Balić Vatican City, 1950), I, 5.15.-17.

6. Trans. L. E. M. Lynch (New York: Random House, 1960). The original French title was *Introduction à l'étude de saint Augustin* (Paris: Vrin, 1929).

7. Trans. L. K. Shook (New York: Random House, 1956).

8. New York: Random House, 1955. See also Gilson, *Elements of Christian Philosophy* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1960).

9. Paris: Vrin, 1960. This key work for understanding Gilson's views on Christian philosophy has been only recently translated into English, by Armand Maurer, under the title "Christian Philosophy: An Introduction." It is expected to be published shortly.

10. *Bulletin de la Société française de Philosophie*, 31 (1931), pp. 39; 42; 49-52.

11. *Topics*, 1.2.101b2-4. On current hermeneutics as the heir to the Aristotelian tradition in this regard, see Richard Bernstein, "Hermeneutics and its Anxieties," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, 62 (1988), 65.

12. See Henricus Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 36th ed. (Barcelona: Herder, 1976), p. 52, no. 125.

13. St. Jerome, *Epistola ad Magnum*, Ep. 70, no. 2; *PL*, XXII, 666. The simile of using Goliath's own sword to cut off the attacker's head was emphasized by Leo XIII in the encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, no. 7; see *The Papal Encyclicals, 1878-1903*, ed. Claudia Carlen (Consortium Books: McGrath Publishing Co., 1981), II, 20a. It was not intended in any way to render philosophy self-destructive, for the purpose of the encyclical was to promote Christian philosophy. The meaning, rather, is that philosophy is the appropriate weapon for cutting off the head of the argument pitted against the faith. The humble pebble and sling made the approach possible.

14. In making this observation, Bertrand Russell, *Our Knowledge of the External World*, 2nd ed. (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1926), p. 29, notes the fruitlessness of "explicit controversy" in philosophical matters.

15. For a study of this procedure in Aquinas regarding demonstrations of the existence of God, see my article "Aquinas and the Five Ways," *The Monist*, 58 (1974), 16-35.

16. Aquinas, *De potentia*, 7.2.ad 9. The text is "Unde patet quod hoc quod dico esse est actualitas omnium actuum, et propter hoc est perfectio omnium perfectionum"—ed. P. M. Pession, 9th ed. (Turin: Marietti, 1953), p. 192b. Cf. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.3.4c, and *Expositio libri peryermenias*, 1.5.397-400 (Rome: Commissio Leonina, 1989, I*, 31). On the reasoning from existential actuality, found in sensible things, to the divine existence, see Barry Miller, *From Existence to God* (London: Routledge, 1992).

17. Isaias, 26.12, Knox translation of the Vulgate: "Omnia enim opera nostra operatus est Deus." Cf.: "Like flowing water is a king's heart in Jahweh's hand; he directs it wherever he pleases." Proverbs, 21.1; *The New Jerusalem Bible* trans.

18. See Robert Speaight, *Vanier* (Toronto: Collins, 1970), p. 124. In somewhat similar vein, cf.: "Since all men, therefore, will to be blessed, certainly if they will truly, then they also will to be immortal..." Augustine, *The Trinity*, 13.8.11; trans. Stephen McKenna (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 1963), p. 384.

19. See Plato, *Phaedo*, 790-84B; *Phaedrus*, 248AC; Aristotle, *De anima*, 3.4.429a10-b22. Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, Props. 15-17; trans. E. R. Dodds (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), pp. 17-21.

20. Plato, *Phaedo*, 107AB.

21. Aquinas readily looked upon the Platonic argument from self-motion as meant to prove that the soul is immortal as well as subsistent in itself. The reason is that the Platonic premises bore directly upon the soul's life, and not just on its existence. In one of his later works Aquinas wrote: "Et in idem redit dictum Platonis ponentis animam immortalem et per se subsistentem ex eo quod movet seipsam. Large enim accepit motum pro omni operatione,..." *Quaestiones de anima*, 1.Resp.; ed. James H. Robb (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1968), p. 59.2-4. In an earlier work, Aquinas had noted how Augustine's proof showed that the intellectual soul is immortal on the ground of its apprehension of truth, and in a setting largely Platonic: "...et ex hoc procedit probatio Augustini...et ita probatur quod anima intellectiva est immortalis ex eo quod apprehendit veritatem." Aquinas, *Scriptum supra libros Sententiarum*, 1.19.5.3.ad 3m; ed. P. Mandonnet, I, 497.

22. Aristotle, *De an.*, 1.4.408b1-15. The theme is developed against a modern background in Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949), with the Cartesian notion of the soul satirized (pp. 15-16) as a "Ghost in the Machine."

23. Annihilation in the sense of direct and complete withdrawal of existence from a thing would not be in accord with the thing's nature, for the tendency of nature is towards being. Withdrawal of the divine conservation in being does not pertain to nature. Hence there is no *natural* possibility of annihilation. On this theme, see Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia*, 5.3-4; in the English translation *On the Power of God*, Dominican Fathers (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1933, II, 87-104.

24. Aristotle, *De an.*, 1.1.402a1-4.

25. Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1.1; *PL*, XXXII, 661.4-6.

26. Jn., 17.3; trans. *The New English Bible* ('New York': Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, 1961), p. 183.

27. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 12.7.1072b26-27.

28. Current "deconstruction" attacks on philosophies are no exception to this stand. In the "deconstruction" approach, the "signs" have been regarded as "magical performatives, which, like all magic, know how to hide behind their effects, so that you see only the effects, the products." —John D. Caputo, "The Economy of Signs in Husserl and Derrida," in *Deconstruction and Philosophy*, ed. John Sallis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 106. In Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (12.9.1074b35-36), quite differently, human cognition is explained as direct awareness of something *other* than itself. The awareness of itself is only concomitant. Thereby the alleged magic is exposed for all to see. Awareness of the thing signified is shown to have epistemological priority to awareness of the sign, completely defusing this type of attack. The situation holds only for people who locate their philosophic starting points in human language and historicity. However, that seems to be a majority stand today.

29. Examples like these three could easily be multiplied. Perhaps especially relevant in today's ecumenical atmosphere might be the Aristotelian conception of focal meaning, in

which an identical characteristic is found in its fullness in a primary instance only, yet is actually present in other degrees in secondary instances. In point of fact, does not each Christian denomination place the fullness of revealed truth in its own tenets, while claiming that the other sections of Christianity either add to or subtract from the original deposit of revelation? Focal meaning could give a genuinely philosophical explanation of how divine truth may be sincerely respected and revered in whatever instances it may be found. This, of course, is from a strictly *philosophical* viewpoint, and extends to non-Christian religions as well. A copious bibliography of *theological* writings on this ecumenical topic is given by Miika Ruokanen, *The Catholic Doctrine of Non-Christian Religions according to the Second Vatican Council* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), pp. 159-65. On this use made of philosophy in developing Christian theology, see papers in *The Philosophy in Christianity*, ed. Godfrey Vesey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). For the stand that Christian philosophy itself is a "philosophical theology...broader than natural theology" because of the inclusion of doctrinal propositions, see Vesey, p. xi. Likewise in the Vesey volume Norman Kretzmann, "Reason in Mystery," pp. 15-16, explains Christian philosophy as a "philosophical theology" that admits among its premises, as philosophical as assumptions, "propositions that are not also initially accessible to observation and reason." In this way the medieval epoch was "the golden age of philosophical theology" (*ibid.*). Yet also in this perspective the needs signaled in the present paper continue to be operative. One may readily grant that at least in practice the medieval theologians incorporated philosophy into theology in quite that way. But on the relationship as "too close to be healthy," see William Charlton, *Philosophy and Christian Belief* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1988), p. 8. On the danger latent in "a theologically managed philosophy," see Anton Pegis, *St. Thomas and Philosophy* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1964), p. 40.