

REECE: PERSONAL PHILOSOPHICAL STATEMENT

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Personal Philosophical Statement of Steven D. Reece

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by

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Introduction

In 1995, while a student at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, I took a philosophy of religion class. It was my first formal exposure to the study of philosophy. I found the course to be rigorously challenging, helpful, and significant in my development as a leader. It was the first time in my life that I was exposed to my underlying philosophical and worldview assumptions. I was challenged to take my experience in how I responded to life and assess it academically, and thereby determine my philosophical “stance.” Philosophy concerns itself with issues of life that cannot be empirically analyzed, synthesized, collated, and stated as definitive fact. Philosophy asks questions that relate to meaning and purpose; instead of asking how, philosophy asks, “Why?” This paper will present several brief statements concerning philosophical frameworks and how I understand and apply them to my life and leadership.

Metaphysics

Metaphysics is the division of philosophy that considers the question of reality or is the study of reality. Knight (2006) states that metaphysics deals with speculation and with the “synthesizing activities of philosophy” and it provides us the “theoretical framework that allows [us] . . . to create worldviews” (pp. 16-17). Determining what is ultimately real is difficult due to the limitations of our experience. Therefore, determining what is real is essentially an act of faith or believing something to be true, real, or trustworthy by one's own convictions..

Epistemology

Epistemology examines “the nature, sources, and validity of knowledge” (Knight, 2006, p. 20). Additionally, epistemology considers what constitutes valid knowledge. Absolute truth

“is eternally and universally true irrespective of time or place” (Knight, 2006, p. 21). When it comes to knowing, the question becomes: Is knowledge subjective or objective? Truth may be built into a person, or be *a priori* and independent of human experience. Truth may be added by experience, as *a posteriori* or “posterior to human experience or [truth]” (Knight, 2006, pp. 21-22).

Axiology

Axiology simply refers to questions of value, which relates to “what a person or a society conceives of as being good or preferable” (Knight, 2006, p. 28). In a direct sense, my values and my associated behaviors are linked, as they are with any other person. Ethics are not something for theoretical or abstract living, but should provide principles concerning our behavior, what we actually do.

Application of Philosophy to My Practice

Philosophically, I am an idealist at heart, but I also entertain a strong tendency toward realism. Knight (2006) indicates that in idealism, truth “is inherent” and “independent of experience” (p. 46). As an *idealist*, Knight indicates that I seek to grasp truth as an idea apart from my experience (p. 46). For an idealist, truth is absolute. I like contrast and things being clearly black and white. I tend to pursue perfection, because the “ideal person is perfect” (Knight, 2006, p. 48). As a *realist*, I enjoy discovering “truth through observation” and through “sensory perception” (Knight, 2006, p. 51). For a realist, truth is an “observable fact” and “Natural Law” is “built into the nature of reality” (p. 51). Reason and logic are therefore important to me, so I think that we can know truth objectively. I would agree with Jones (2005) that “truth is the first essential to knowledge” (as well is faith) (p. 17); however, I would add that

“for what can be *known* about God is plain” and “his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been *clearly perceived*,” Romans 1:19-20 (NIV, 1984).

Subsequently, I believe that God created our reality, for which he fashioned a purpose, toward which we move. I see God's creation as real and beautiful; nevertheless, the true beauty of the world has been corrupted by our sinful actions. Reality for me is seen through the prism of God as Creator, Sustainer, and Savior of the Universe through Christ Jesus. In many ways, my view of reality makes me extremely idealistic. Nevertheless, I am also a realist and I comprehend that we live in a fallen world. For this reason in our world, I see a dichotomy: the world that *is* (realism) and the world that *should be* (idealism). I think that God in his wisdom has made it possible for humankind to reconcile to some degree these dichotomies that exist in our reality. It is here, in this duality—in this space between black and white, light and darkness, that I focus my efforts on attempting to reconcile Jew and Christian.

Reconciling, or restoring things to an earlier state, has become one of the major themes of my life. In my attempt to reconcile Jews and Christians, Micah 6:8 has become my moral compass and it guides my work of reconciliation. The core of Micah 6:8 is based on a pattern of a simple string of only three verbs emphasizing “*doing, loving, and walking* – connected to three basic moral values – *justice, mercy, and humility*,” which according to Hyman (2005) “make it comprehensible and easy to remember” (p. 164). He concludes:

The three verbs indicate deliberate human actions and are different from verbs that represent involuntary actions such as breathing, crying, and sneezing. The series of three pairs of ‘a verb tied to a moral value’ creates an appealing poetic rhythm. Together, they constitute a series that is a moral guideline for behavior among humans; a goal worth striving for (p. 164).

A blogger, David Wong (2012), wrote, “If people were actually as bad as we say they are, civilization could not exist.” Despite our differences, failings, and conflicts, we exist in

community. There must be a way for us to live together peacefully to some degree. As an idealist, I think that evil and hatred drive people apart; evil can be overcome. On the other hand, kindness and love draw people together. As human beings, we are interrelated and have the capacity to love one another. Therefore, love or concern for others *is* a fundamental expression of humanity. I believe such compassion is a God-given trait, which echoes his heartfelt concern for humanity. Consequently, I think, that gave us a set of tools to navigate our relationships with each other. He commanded us to “love our neighbor,” as indicated in Leviticus 19:18 and Mark 12:31 (NIV, 1984). Generally, human understanding of this command is to love people, who are like themselves. Jesus turns our understanding of what a neighbor is on its head, when he commanded us to “love [our] enemies,” in Matthew 5:44 (NIV, 1984). We are therefore, to love “the other”—the one different from us, no matter what, no matter, who they are. But, how do *I really* do this, i.e., this idea into practice?

Jews have suffered persecution at the hand of their *Christian* neighbors for centuries in Europe, including Poland; however, during the era of the Second World War and the Shoah, the Jews endured at the hands of the Nazis “the most severe and unprecedented oppression and terror” in their history (Krysińska & Lester, 2006, p. 142). I have experienced the aftermath of this reality, when I lived in Poland for 12 years serving as a Baptist minister. Consequently, I sought to discover how to love my neighbor, the Jew—the one distinctly different from me, as a follower of Christ. I embarked on building a bridge as a means to bridge the gap between Jew and Christian. I did this simply by caring for restoring Jewish cemeteries and thereby seek reconciliation through simply making right what the Nazis attempted to destroy.

In retrospect, I see that I have applied philosophical principles to my work and leadership in two ways. I have taken *the ideas about what should be*, such as leadership theories, Scripture,

etc. and I have applied them *to what is in a real world*. Realism involves inductive reasoning to assess the world around it in order to determine “general principles from observation” (Knight, 2006, p. 51). So, I began to unravel the complexity of the real world in which I was working and through observation, trial and error, I determined how I might work in it. According to Kolb Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) advances a theory that “helps to explain how experience is transformed into learning and reliable knowledge” (p. xxi). Kolb ties ELT to the work of Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget; he also connects experience to ELT because it emphasizes “the central role that experience plays in the learning process” (p. 31). Learning according to Kolb may be defined as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 49). From Kolb, I am seeing how knowledge is being created by the transformation of my experience in my life and the development of my philosophical positions.

Conclusion

Flannery (1997) argues that Christians need to “adopt the Jewish agenda” and take a step toward reconciliation (p. 3). In my life’s work, I am seeking to reconcile the dualistic reality of the Jewish-Christian experience through mutually caring for Jewish cemeteries. I believe that if Christians engage in a significant and loving act, such as caring for neglected Jewish cemeteries in Poland, we may embrace something uniquely Jewish. Hopefully, this small step may lead one day to breaking the cycle of evil and allow forgiveness and reconciliation to emerge in the midst of Jewish and Christian communities. Ultimately, dealing with the reality of evil in the world comes down to my conviction that in God by doing what is right yields hope. By faith, I believe that God has a plan for this world and for me in what he has assigned me to do.

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