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Philosophy, Metaphysics, and Epistemology

by Reece, Steven - Wednesday, January 18, 2017, 1:54 PM

The Importance of Philosophy

I do not think that I was born a ready made philosopher, but that is apparently what I am becoming, more so now than in my younger years. Until seminary, I never really questioned my worldview or any of the underlying philosophical assumptions associated with it.

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 assumptions and worldview as a person. I was challenged to take my experience in how I responded to life and assess it academically and then to determine my philosophical "stance." I will share some of what I discovered at the end of my post.

It is important to study philosophy because it addresses issues in life that cannot be empirically analyzed, synthesized, collated, and stated as "definitive fact." Philosophy addresses life questions that relate to meaning and purpose; instead of asking how, philosophy asks, "Why?"

Knight points out that philosophy is comprised of three components: activity, attitude, and content (Knight, 2006, pp. 5-9). Personally, I resonate with content that is, asking philosophical questions.

I wrote in my Journal Post that the one aspect of the reading in Chapter 1 that spoke to me most, was the discussion on philosophy and most specifically, who I am as a philosopher. My pattern has been to ask questions instead of seeking answers. I tend to ask good questions that "are meaningful and relevant" (Knight, p. 9). People have said to me on several occasions that I challenge them to think by asking them good questions.

So for me, the study of philosophy is grounded upon me becoming better at asking questions. I think that by learning more about my philosophical assumptions, I will become more skilled in "sparking a great public dialogue" (Cremin, as cited in Knight, p. 4) about Holocaust education.

My understanding to this point of my philosophical stance is that of an idealist, who can be realistic. I have learned to be flexible though however. My epistemology is rationalistic (I like reason). In 1995, I wrote that in my axiology, I valued rationality, orderliness, balance, symmetry, morality, light, perfection, life, and persons, but not mystical experiences. Today, due to the nature of my work and my study at the PhD level, I am more focused on "moral values and conduct" (Knight, 2006, p. 29).

Metaphysics and Epistemology

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. In my conviction, I believe that God created our reality, for which he created a purpose, toward which we move.

For me, I see God's creation as real and beautiful; nevertheless, the true beauty of the world has been corrupted by our sinful actions. The reality for me is seen through the prism of God as Creator, Sustainer, and Savior of the Universe through Christ Jesus.

I will deal with the question experientially for the most part.

For more than forty years, I have dealt with death, murder, crime, etc. in my various capacities. I have always struggled with the question of why some tragedy has occurred or allowed to take place. I deal with the reality of Shoah (Holocaust) on a daily basis. Many people in this day, doubt that it occurred. However, I have been to the camps and seen the ashes and held bone fragments in the palm of my hand.

I care for abandoned and overgrown Jewish cemeteries in Poland. Where are the descendant's, who were to care for them? They are gone up in smoke or shot in the back of the head. The presence of these Jewish cemeteries in Poland speaks to the lives of those Jews, who once lived there.

The people, who live in the communities surrounding these cemeteries, have told me stories of how Jews were rounded up one day, marched to the cemetery and executed. The earth itself reveals the fact that it was once disturbed by the existence of depressions on the spots where victims were murdered and then buried in a mass grave.,

I know humanity is inherently evil because of such acts. My question is what should I do? I have chosen by God's leadership to do what he has shown me that is required of me: Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly (Micah 6:8). I seek to speak to the injustice of what men and women did to their neighbors by or through restorative acts of loving-kindness. The cycle of the evil of the past may be overcome through what Scott Peck calls "loving acts" (Johnson, 2012, p. 127).

Forgiveness, I believe, may emerge through these loving acts, opening and enriching dialogue, which could possibly lead to reconciliation. Clearly, the responsibility for breaking the cycle of evil falls upon Christians. Flannery (1997) supports this view and argues that Christians need to "adopt the Jewish agenda" and take a step toward reconciliation (p. 3). I believe that if Christians engage in a significant and loving act, such as caring for neglected Jewish cemeteries in Poland, they may embrace something uniquely Jewish. Hopefully, this small step may lead one day to break the cycle of evil allowing 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.

Steven



Re: Philosophy, Metaphysics, and Epistemology

by Aka, Sharon - Wednesday, January 18, 2017, 2:11 PM

Hi Steven,

Wow, you went deep on this one!

I have some questions and observations. You say that for over 40 years you have dealt with death, murder, and crime in your various capacities. What were you doing? And you say that you take care of cemeteries. Why do you do that?

I was deeply saddened to read that many people in your area don't believe that the Holocaust happened. I too have visited the camps, seen the pictures, and felt the gut wrenching response to the horrific reality.

You have revealed yourself to us in a very authentic raw way. But it makes me curious about where you gather your strength to carry on in the tasks that you have described when the pain of them seem to haunt you. I appreciate your candor and willingness to share.

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Re: Philosophy, Metaphysics, and Epistemology

by Reece, Steven - Thursday, January 19, 2017, 9:37 AM

Sharon,

Thank you for your thoughtful response and excellent questions. You have certainly made me think. I realize that I did not give much of a context in my post, but I purposefully wrote as I did, so that post would not become too long. What I do in leading The Matzevah Foundation and how I entered the work which I am doing is complex, to say the least. As we say in Texas, "it is a big drink of water," or like "drinking out of a firehose."

I dealt with death for the first time, when my grandparents were tragically killed in a car accident. Following graduation from the university, I worked in a hospital in Dallas, where I literally saw and touched death on a daily basis for nearly 4 years. I learned to put death into perspective as a normal but difficult part of life. After working in the hospital, I became a photojournalist, I covered death regularly. Two of the worst tragedies that I covered were a mass shooting in a restaurant in Killeen, Texas and the Branch Davidian standoff in Waco, TX. When I entered the ministry, I served in Poland for 12 years during which, I encountered 2 other transformational events that impacted my life: the Kosovo War and the Holocaust.

The latter 2 events are linked and significant to me in that in both instances, death occurred at the hand of "their neighbors." The crux of both tragedies may be boiled down to hatred of "the other," the one, who is not like me. Spiritually and through specific Scripture passages, God led me to understand and see the connection between the shedding of innocent blood and its impact on us (and even the land). By seeking justice for innocent victims we are acting towards restoration or redemption.

Why do I restore Jewish cemeteries? Briefly, I did not start out to do "restore a Jewish cemetery." It is something that God led me to over time. It began, when I had a conversation with a woman in a restaurant in Otwock (a city just outside of Warsaw) with a waitress named Hannah. She was interested in me and what I was doing with a group of young college students in her city. She asked me a great many questions at every meal about what we are doing and why. Hannah was very pleased with our work and the good that we were doing for her city.

One day quite unexpectedly, she suggested that I take these young people to visit the Jewish cemetery in the city. I asked her very politely this question: "Madam, are you of Jewish descent?" She replied simply, "Yes."

This encounter led to a series of questions:

1. What was significant about that Jewish cemetery to Hannah?
2. What was the meaning of a cemetery to a Jew or someone, who had Jewish heritage?

I wanted to find out. Ultimately it led to the question: What should be the Christian -- my response to the Shoah?

I later began to research the issue and I discovered the importance of a Jewish cemetery in Judaism, Jewish tradition, and culture. The Jewish cemetery for me presented a place in which Jew and Gentile (Christians) could meet, open dialogue, and work toward reconciliation. This is the topic of my dissertation.

Why is a Jewish cemetery important? It is important because it is one of 3 things that establish a Jewish community. It is the first thing to be established. Caring for the dead according to the Halakah is one of the highest expressions of true loving-kindness. And, lastly, during the Shoah, not only did the Nazis murder millions of Jews, they desecrated and destroyed Jewish cemeteries as a means to eradicate any evidence of Jewish culture and life.

I find the strength to do what God has called me to do, by his Spirit living within me. I am convinced that God called me to become a "minister of reconciliation" and to be a peacemaker. By so doing, I am being faithful to put into action what God has given me to do, which in turn builds hope in my life to carry on.

Please let me know if you have any other questions.

Steven

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Re: Philosophy, Metaphysics, and Epistemology

by Bernard, Chad - Thursday, January 19, 2017, 2:20 AM

I think that is really cool that you care for cemeteries in Poland. I would love to hear some of the stories that I am sure that you have some time.

I have a question for you. Do you think that reality and truth are the same? I used to think that the question "What is real?" and "What is truth?" were the same question. I do not think so anymore. I would love to hear your take on it.

I think that truth is separate from reality, not that truth cannot exist in reality as I think it typically does. I think reality is based on our experience and that experience can contain both truth and error. For instance, a man's reality could include that the Holocaust never happened, even after seeing evidence or truth that it did. I would argue that his reality was not based on truth.

Do you think I am way off here? Just curious to process this idea further.

Thanks for your thoughts.

Chad

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Re: Philosophy, Metaphysics, and Epistemology

by Reece, Steven - Thursday, January 19, 2017, 10:39 AM

Thank you, Chad for your comments and questions. Caring for Jewish cemeteries is unique and has opened a pathway for me to not only to enter the Jewish world but to enter the academic world, as well. The latter is interesting because I am working with an expert in the field of forensic archeology. My role in this collaboration is to ask good questions as I interact with her students.

Your question about reality and truth is a good one that I have not really considered previously. I do not think that I have ever considered the nature of reality and the nature of truth the same. In my understanding reality is based on what we experience in the world around us, while truth is based on what we perceive about the world around us. We view the world around us subjectively through the lens of our senses and/or experiences. Truth is frequently viewed as being also subjective and not absolute.

I think that, as you noted, that people can sincerely believe that something is sincerely true but be absolutely incorrect. I think that rationally, truth may be known beyond the senses as Knight points out (p. 24). Even though, the nature of our existence, i.e., reality is contingent on my perception of reality, I believe that through revelation, specifically God's revelation (through creation, history, his deeds, Scripture and through his Son), we can know what is true and real. Of course, my considerations and conclusions are based on choices that I make in my worldview and its underlying assumptions.

Knight views reality and truth in terms of being "caught in the web of circularity" (Knight, 2006, p. 27). It is sort of like which came first: the chicken or the egg?

Knight labels this dynamic a "dilemma" because with both the metaphysical question of "what is real?" and the epistemological question of "what is true?" comes the tension of making "statements about reality" without theories "for arriving at truth" and vice versa (p. 27).

He goes on to say that it is not possible "to know for certain" whether something is true or real with finality, which is why we must choose "to live by faith" (p. 27) in whatever framework of life we live.

Interestingly, I realized while I was writing this post that I am citing an authority as a source of knowledge as the basis of my statements. There may be other viewpoints on this question, which may be just as valid.

What do you think?

Steven

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Re: Philosophy, Metaphysics, and Epistemology

by Maimon, Ritha - Friday, January 20, 2017, 12:02 AM

Hi Steven and Chad

I am also intrigued by Chad's question of whether the nature of reality and the nature of truth is the same. If reality is what we experience, and we if based our perception of truth based on what we experience, then the two will be similar. But if we based our perception of truth on God's word, then the nature of the two is not the same. Let me explain. Experience and observation of world events such as death, sickness, war, poverty, etc. (this is the reality) suggest that whoever is in control of the events of the world is cruel. We can never reconcile all these with the idea of a loving God (this is the truth) if experience is all we have to guide us in our interpretation of our experience and the construction of reality. However, if we consider the Bible trustworthy and reliable, and take into account what it says about sin, restoration and recreation, it will be easier to believe in the existence of a loving God in a world overwhelmed with pain.

Sorry if this is all confusing.



Re: Philosophy, Metaphysics, and Epistemology

by Peterson, Dawn - Friday, January 20, 2017, 1:54 PM

Wow!

I have really enjoyed reading your discussion back and forth about the issue of reality and truth. I thought I'd share a couple comments that Knight makes about the Christian approach to epistemology.

- From the biblical perspective, all truth is God's truth, since truth finds its source in God as the Creator and Originator.
- There are absolute Truths in the universe, but fallen humans can gain only a relative or imperfect grasp of those absolutes.
- The Bible is not concerned with abstract truth. It pictures truth as related to life. Knowing, in the fullest biblical sense, means applying perceived knowledge to one's daily life. (Knight, 2016, p. 36)

Every one of us has a different "knowledge" because no two people live the same exact life, therefore we will have different perceptions of life. That is why we can all have different ideas on the same thought. Which brings us back to faith. God have us the freedom to be individuals and because of that we have been given the choice to believe or not. Faith in the unseen.

References

Knight, G. R. (2016). *Educating for eternity: a Seventh-day Adventist philosophy of education*. Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press.

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Re: Philosophy, Metaphysics, and Epistemology

by Reis, Thai Thaisa - Thursday, January 19, 2017, 3:06 PM

Hi, Steven:

"Until seminary, I never really questioned my worldview or any of the underlying philosophical assumptions associated with it". That is interesting because I just started thinking about this after doing the missions. I started working with secular, agnostic, atheist people and started giving bible studies through a postmodern method! It was amazing!

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Re: Philosophy, Metaphysics, and Epistemology

by Reece, Steven - Thursday, January 19, 2017, 7:23 PM

Thai,

In what way did you approach the atheists? What kind of questions did you ask? I would be interested to learn a little more about what you did.

Steven

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Re: Philosophy, Metaphysics, and Epistemology

by Siebold, Randy - Friday, January 20, 2017, 12:23 PM

Steven. Thanks for a very thoughtful post and one which clearly enticed others to respond.

I just wanted to make a couple of points for clarity.

First, rather than components, I think it would be helpful to think of activity, attitude, and content as three **aspects** of philosophy—three ways of viewing philosophy that help us understand what it is. When I think of components, it brings to mind the idea that there are three pieces that make up the whole. I rather thing these are three helpful ways of thinking about how to understand the often frustrating concept called philosophy.

Second, you mention Knight (2006, pp. 5-9), Johnson (2012, p. 127), Flannery (1997). Could you also provide a references? I'm assuming Knight is the book Philosophy & Education. And, while not required, it's good practice to use APA (as you questioned elsewhere).

Again, thanks.

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Re: Philosophy, Metaphysics, and Epistemology

by Reece, Steven - Friday, January 20, 2017, 4:09 PM

Dr. Siebold,

Thank you for comments and I thank you especially for making this clarification with regards to "components" versus "aspects." In retrospect, it makes sense and is certainly more applicable to describing what philosophy is.

I will add the references that you requested below.

Thank you,

Steven

References:

Flannery, E. H. (1997). "Jewish-Christian relations: Focus on the future." Journal of Ecumenical Studies 34: 322-325.

Knight, G. R. (2006). Philosophy & Education: An introduction in Christian perspective. Berrien Springs, Mich., Andrews University Press.

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Re: Philosophy, Metaphysics, and Epistemology

by Siebold, Randy - Monday, January 23, 2017, 6:48 PM

Thanks for using citations and now for giving us the citations. 😊

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