A Christian Approach to Philosophy

This chapter briefly discusses some of the issues that are important in Christian philosophy. The section on metaphysics is more concerned with building a rationale for the acceptance of the biblical view of reality than it is in a systematic treatment of the four aspects of metaphysics outlined in Chapter 2. As a result, the line of reasoning moves from selected observations concerning reality, to humanity’s search for meaning, to the self-disclosure of God in Christ, to a summary of the biblical view of reality. Many answers to questions raised by the anthropological, theological, ontological, and cosmological aspects of metaphysics are implicit rather than explicit in the discussion.

The section on epistemology focuses on the central role of the Bible as a source of valid truth, and how this source relates to other knowledge sources, such as science and reason. The discussion of ethics highlights the essence of sin and righteousness, the basis of Christian ethics, the tension between legalism and antinomianism, and some observations for Christian ethics in daily life. Aesthetics is treated in terms of people’s aesthetic nature, the relation of the beautiful and the ugly, and Christian aesthetic responsibility.

The selection of material for discussion in this chapter has been somewhat arbitrary. Many other approaches to a Christian philosophy could have been utilized, and many other topics could have been
discussed within the existing framework. The goal of this chapter will be fulfilled if it serves as a catalyst for thought about the philosophy undergirding Christian education.

**SOME OBSERVATIONS CONCERNING METAPHYSICS**

The most fundamental and inescapable observation facing every individual is the reality and mystery of personal existence in a complex environment. Jean-Paul Sartre, an existentialist of atheistic persuasion, raised this issue when he noted that the basic philosophic problem is that something is there, rather than that nothing is there. Francis Schaeffer, reflecting upon this thought, wrote that “nothing that is worth calling a philosophy can sidestep the question of the fact that things do exist and that they exist in their present form and complexity.”² People are continually faced with the fact of their being and existence. Even an attempt to deny that existence is, in effect, a confirmation of it as individuals rationalize, postulate, and conjecture.

**Reality Has Intelligible, Friendly, Purposeful, Personal, and Infinite Aspects**

As persons examine the universe in which they exist, they make several observations. One is that their environment is intelligible. They do not exist in a universe “gone mad” or one behaving in an erratic fashion. On the contrary, the universe apparently operates according to consistent laws that can be discovered, communicated, and utilized in making trustworthy predictions. Modern science is predicated upon this predictability.

Observant individuals also note that the universe in its most basic nature is friendly to humans and other forms of life. If it were not basically friendly, life would be unable to continue. Life would most certainly be extinguished by the ceaseless warfare of an unfriendly environment upon a relatively feeble existence. People have found that the natural world appears to be made-to-order to meet such needs as food, water, temperature, light, and a host of other necessities that are essential to the continuation of life. The parameters of conditions necessary for the maintenance of life are quite narrow, and even small changes in the supply of life’s essentials threaten the existence of life as we know it. The continued existence of life, therefore, points to a basically friendly universe.
Closely related to observations of cosmic intelligibility and friendliness is the purposefulness of existence. The purposefulness of our environment is attested to by the fact that nearly everything in our daily lives lends itself to purpose. Human beings would cease to exist meaningfully without purpose. Our lives do not exist, either internally or externally, in a state of randomness.

Another aspect of existence that people have noted is that human existence is personal. We each recognize that we differ from other individuals—I am not you, my thoughts are not your thoughts, and my reactions to a situation may differ markedly from yours. People are not interchangeable parts of a universal machine. Individuality is built into human existence. When individuality is separated from human existence, such as in slavery or prostitution, people become less than fully human. Individuals not only differ from other humans; they also differ from other forms of life. Human beings are manipulators of abstract symbols. That gives them the ability to reflect upon the contingencies of life rather than merely to respond to them in the manner of Pavlov’s dogs or Skinner’s rats and pigeons. It is true, as certain schools of psychology have pointed out, that individuals often (perhaps most often) live on a level less than fully human. Much of the advertising industry is built upon that insight. People, however, living at their fullest as human beings are not tied into some variation of an unalterable stimulus-response reinforcement sequence. In their individuality they make choices, initiate actions, and undergo the results of those choices and actions. My choices and experiences are unique and mold me into the personal, distinctive individual that I am.

Human beings are also aware that they exist in an apparently infinite universe. Their own sun is one of approximately 100 billion flaming stars that make up the Milky Way Galaxy. They realize that it would take at least 100,000 years to cross their galaxy if they could travel at the speed of light—about 186,000 miles per second. And yet their own star cluster is only one of at least one billion known galaxies. People are faced with the mind-boggling problem of apparent infinity in terms of both time and space, and still they find, as they develop more sophisticated scientific instruments, that universal space presents itself as a
receding frontier. One is left to wonder what might lie beyond the boundaries of space—except more space.

**Humanity’s Observations Lead to a Search for Meaning**

As people face the inescapability of their own personal existence; the apparent infinity in space, time, and complexity of their universe; and the orderliness of “what is” and/or “what appears to be,” they are also confronted with the problem of meaning for both personal life and the existence of the universe. Humanity throughout time has been unable to escape the quest for meaning. Different people have approached the problem in varying ways. The existentialist claims, in opposition to the underlying rationale of modern science, that there is no external meaning in the universe except absurdity or whatever meaning a person may choose to impute to it; the cosmos of itself has no meaning. The postmodernists hold that knowledge is a social construction. The pragmatist claims that the ultimate meaning of existence is beyond us, and that philosophers must not make factual statements that cannot be validated by the experience of their senses. Meanwhile, the analytic philosopher claims that metaphysical statements are meaningless, and that people must seek to define ever more clearly the words and concepts of their immediate environment.

Others are not satisfied with these evasive and meaningless answers to the problem of meaning. Their minds rebel at a system of thought that sees intelligence flowing out of ignorance, order out of chaos, personality out of impersonality, and something out of nothing. They cannot accept the irrational explanation that existence is the result of infinite time plus infinite chance plus nothing. For them an infinite universe postulates an infinite Creator, an intelligent and orderly universe points to an ultimate Intelligence, a basically friendly universe points to a benevolent Being, and the personality of the individual leads to the concept of a Personality upon which individual personalities are modeled. They refer to this infinite Creator, ultimate Intelligence, benevolent Being, and original Personality as “god,” while at the same time realizing that no word is more meaningless than “god” until it is defined.

It should be noted at this juncture that these observations do not “prove” the existence of God. On the other hand, they deliver a telling thrust in favor of His existence. The existence of a Creator-God cannot be proven, but neither can it be disproven. The conclusion of His existence, however, is more reasonable than the opposite conclusion, which
leaves us in the hands of chance, necessity, adaptive response, and nothingness. “So,” claims Herman Horne, “we accept it on faith, faith in our reason and faith beyond our demonstration.”

It was noted in the first half of this book, when we discussed the metaphysical-epistemological dilemma, that all persons (whether they admit it or recognize it or not) live by faith. It remains for each individual to appropriate and focus this faith in design or accident, in plan or chance, in intelligence or ignorance, in purposefulness and meaningfulness or aimlessness and randomness. In his perceptive essay, “The Will to Believe,” William James laid down the principle that in the absence of positive proof one is entitled to believe the best. If what is best is partially defined as what is possible and logical, then faith in a Creator-God would be better than faith in time plus chance plus nothing.

**The Problem of Pain Confuses Meaning**

Credibility in a benevolent Creator-God is lessened for some individuals by the fact that all is not well in their environment. There seems to be a tension in nature. They observe a beautiful creation that appears to be made for life and happiness, but is filled with animosity, deterioration, and killing. Humanity is faced with the seemingly impossible problem of pain and death existing in the midst of orderliness and life. There is a great controversy between the forces of good and the forces of evil, and this is reflected in every phase of life. The universe may be friendly to life; but there is no denying that it is often antagonistic to peace, orderliness, and life. The habitation of humanity is not a place of neutrality. It is often an arena of active conflict. This state of affairs points to the forces of evil within a friendly universe.

Such a paradox raises an important question: If God is both omnipotent (infinite in power) and loving (benevolent), how can evil exist? If God is perfectly loving, He must wish to abolish evil; and if He is all-powerful, He must be able to abolish evil. Why, therefore, if there

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is a God, does evil continue to exist? Any viable theistic answer to humanity’s quest for meaning must take this problem into account in a satisfactory manner.

**Human Limitations and the Necessity of God’s Self-disclosure**

Observant individuals soon become aware of their own mental limitations and those of the race. They not only realize humanity’s almost complete ignorance of the intricacies of its immediate environment, but they are also aware of their inability even to begin mentally to cope with the apparent infinity of time, space, and complexity in the universe at large. At this point they also become aware of the fact that if unaided finite minds are incapable of understanding the complexities of creation, they will also be unable to begin to understand the infinite Creator, since of necessity a maker must be more complex than that which is made.

Even after realizing their intellectual limitations, people still have a driving desire to uncover the meaning of life. Humanity, in its search for the meaning of existence, wonders if there is an understandable answer, or whether the response of the universe is total, absolute, and unbearable silence. Is the Creator-God “a maker who went on vacation” after the creation, as the eighteenth-century deists postulated, or is He one who is willing to make a revelation of Himself to finite beings on a level which they can understand?

Many believe it to be incomprehensible that the Creator-God, who put so much intelligent thought into the design of the universe and so much purposeful care into the development of human personality and the maintenance of life, would leave intelligent life on a spinning ball in the midst of space in silence regarding meaning. In the light of conscious thought, total silence can be held as a possibility but not necessarily a probability. It seems more probable in the context of environmental purposefulness, friendliness, personalness, and intelligibility that the Creator-God would break through to humanity in its finiteness and helplessness by means of a revelation of Himself and universal purpose in a communicative mode and on a level that would be understandable. Individuals have seen this self-revelation in terms of sacred writings that claim to be from a divine source.