

PHILOSOPHY AND THE WESLEYAN VISION

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Philosophy, like all theory, is really the attempt to get practice right. When practice runs into conflict with reality, better theory guides practice to more truthful responses. Unlike the popular misconception that theory is irrelevant, even the most abstract philosophical arguments about God's existence, human free will, and personal and social ethics are really attempts to get reality right so that humans can properly relate to it. It may be theoretical, but it has crucial practical importance nonetheless.

The same is true for the Wesleyan theological vision for life. Its message of the divine creation as an integrated whole; its realism about the corrupting influence of human sin and the limiting effects of ignorance and failure; as well as its optimism about God's prevenient and transforming grace are all aspects of knowledge that correct human practices and transform life. Education in the best sense of the Wesleyan tradition is the institutional expression of this kind of knowledge. It puts reality in proper perspective through the liberal arts, the specialized disciplines, and the professions. Its understanding of creation, sin, and grace imagines life that is grounded in creation, yet is affected by human sin. And then that education seeks to liberate people from both error and vice, form them as whole persons in community, and renew them in the image of God through participative grace.

Implicit in this transformation of persons is the transformation of knowledge itself. The Wesleyan vision not only brings hope and grace for the sin-sick soul but also supplies a

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healing grace to the intellect and knowledge itself. It exposes selfish, parochial, and merely conventional belief. In doing so it replaces a narrowness of mind and spirit with a fullness of knowledge that enables the abundant life. Likewise, philosophy's commitment to rational criticism as a guide to truth, its systematic commitment to conceptual clarity, and its principled devotion to the morally good life are all made better in dialogue with the Wesleyan concerns over creation, sin, and grace. And the Wesleyan vision for life and knowledge is similarly more deeply grounded, systematically understood, and effectively communicated through its conversation with philosophical wisdom.

The key to much of the Wesleyan vision is its view of the nature of integration itself. It rejects the view that philosophy is largely in conflict with the theological. Nor does it compartmentalize theology and philosophy as two independent worlds. Neither does it adopt an easy identity between the two arenas of knowledge. It disputes all three of these approaches because they do not integrate. And it affirms their complementary relationship whereby both philosophy and the Wesleyan vision bring mutual insights to a growing, holistic view of reality and personal life in God's world. This, of course, means that the worlds of theology and philosophy are sometimes in conflict and sometimes in harmony. But as they remain in dialogue, they reveal a richer wisdom about both the limitations and insights that arise from that dialogue.

One key point of tension between the Wesleyan vision and philosophy is at the level of philosophical knowledge and methods. The Wesleyan vision affirms that creation constitutes humans as rational, moral, and relational beings centered in the image of God. However, it also maintains that this rational capacity, even in its best expressions, is limited by human finiteness,⁴⁰ partly illustrated in the fact that humans have only a minimal rational knowledge of God's existence and attributes.⁴¹

Distinguishing these two sides of the human capacity for reason is extremely important for the abundant life. Without a realistic understanding of both the capacities and *incapacities* of human knowledge, no person or community can effectively relate to reality, truth, or goodness. On the positive side, rea-



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son can enable persons to think logically and base belief on the best grounds so they can act truthfully in relation to God and His world. On the negative side, understanding reason's incapacity is equally enabling and ennobling. Recognizing ignorance is one aspect of the beginning of wisdom. Likewise, knowing the difference between the probably true and the certainly true makes the difference between a friendly dialogue and dogmatic diatribe. The former recognizes that it could be wrong, while the latter recognizes no such limit in philosophy or life. What the study of philosophy must do through its resources and methods is enable persons to effectively discern these differences.

Closely linked to the issue of ignorance, but clearly distinguished from it, is the very important integrative connection between philosophy and sin. Wesleyan convictions require philosophy to examine the limits of knowledge based in sin, beyond just natural ignorance. This consideration points to the fact that the love of wisdom is not the only principle operative in human belief formation. Besides reason there is in sin an entrenched self-love that infects all that humans do. A Wesleyan integration with philosophy would examine just how entrenched this self-interested love is in distorting philosophical and other kinds of knowledge, such as that found in the moral and political life of our times. The process would explore and apply the Pauline view that in sin, persons and communities "suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom. 1:18).⁴²

However, the Wesleyan vision would not stop the dialogue with philosophy here. The final word on philosophy is not the corruption of knowledge in human sin but rather is grace and agape love at work in the redemption of knowledge. Knowing truth by love is the answer to the suppression of truth in unrighteousness. By love of the other, the other is more truly known. Philosophy thus integrated with the theology of love would challenge knowledge conceived on the basis of rational self-interest, power, suspicion, and desire. It would remake knowledge, not on these minimalist grounds, but rather on the basis of truth known in community and community based on other-centered love.⁴³

Finally, the integration of the Wesleyan vision with philosophy is best understood in the conviction that knowledge

is primarily for the sake of practice and community. In the words of John Macmurray, “[A]ll meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action, and all meaningful action for the sake of friendship.”⁴⁴ The Wesleyan vision is to obtain knowledge for the restoration of God’s world—the inward and outward transformation of persons and societies by human participation in God’s grace. Here we have knowledge for the sake of action and action for the sake of love. This is not only the Wesleyan vision in philosophical terms, but also the scriptural vision of the New Testament. ■

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ENDNOTES

- ⁴⁰John Wesley, “Imperfection of Human Knowledge,” vol. 5 of *The Works of John Wesley*, Edition Number 3, ed. Thomas Jackson (1831, 1872; repr. Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1978), 337-50; John Wesley, “The Case of Reason Impartially Considered,” vol. 6 of *The Works of John Wesley*, Edition Number 3, ed. Thomas Jackson (1831, 1872; repr. Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1978), 350-360; John Wesley, “An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,” vol. 8 of *The Works of John Wesley*, Edition Number 3, ed. Thomas Jackson (1831, 1872; repr. Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1978), 3-42; James R.Thobaben, “Holy Knowing: A Wesleyan Epistemology,” in *The Death of Culture: Epistemology, Metaphysics, and Morality*, ed. Mark J. Cherry (The Netherlands: Springer, 2006), 99-132.
- ⁴¹ John Wesley, “Imperfection of Knowledge,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 337- 38.
- ⁴²Merold Westphal, “Taking St. Paul Seriously: Sin as an Epistemological Category,” in *Christian Philosophy*, ed. Thomas P. Flint (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 200-226.
- ⁴³ Norman Wirzba, “The Primacy of Love,” in *Transforming Philosophy and Religion: Love’s Wisdom*, eds. Norman Wirzba and Bruce Ellis Benson (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), 17.
- ⁴⁴John Macmurray, *The Self As Agent* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 15.

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