

MICHAEL S. JONES

A CHRISTIAN INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY

Michael S. Jones

Department of Philosophy, Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA, USA.

Email: msjones2@liberty.edu

Review of Steven B. Cowan and James S. Spiegel, *The Love of Wisdom: A Christian introduction to philosophy* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 476 pages.

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Why another introduction to philosophy? Philosophy professors, who probably receive at least a half dozen new introductory philosophy textbooks each year from publishers that hope to entice them to adopt their texts as required reading for introductory philosophy classes, are likely to greet the publication of yet another introduction to philosophy with “enthusiastic ambivalence.” Doubtless this is part of the reason why many recent introductory philosophy texts have born such unusual titles as *Coffee and Philosophy*, *You Decide! Current Debates in Introductory Philosophy*, and *The Pig That Wants to Be Eaten: 100 experiments for the armchair philosopher*.¹ *The Love of Wisdom* has no such clever title, but it does have other features that make it almost unique as an introductory text and that will assure it a receptive audience in some segments of the market.

The signature attribute of this particular introduction is that it is intentionally and openly written from a traditional Christian perspective. That a philosophy textbook would be written from a religious perspective may strike some as odd, perhaps even as somehow inappropriate. The relationship of philosophical thought, which tends to focus on reason, and religion, which often exhibits a propensity to justify beliefs in non-rational ways, has often been contentious. Many Christian thinkers since Tertullian (“What hath Athens to do with Jerusalem?”) have argued that “faith” and reason are distinct and incommensurate paths to knowledge. But others have pointed out that such thinkers invariably use reason in their arguments and unfailingly have a personal philosophy, even if they are not explicitly aware of it.

While some religious thinkers are very hostile toward the formal study of philosophy, others welcome the intellectual rigor of philosophy as a way of deepening theological understanding or propagating and defending the faith. Steven B. Cowan and James S. Spiegel fall into the latter category. Their book, *The Love of Wisdom: A Christian introduction to philosophy*, uses philosophical analysis to deepen and defend a conservatively Christian perspective on a range of philosophical issues.

The outline of *The Love of Wisdom* is very conventional. The book opens with an introduction that provides a brief historical orientation to the background and methods of philosophical investigation and then discusses how the study of philosophy helps one “to develop a reasonable worldview.”² This clear correlation of philosophy and worldview is somewhat unusual in introductory philosophy texts, and in the opinion of this reviewer it is a welcome addition, since it helps the beginning philosophy student understand how the sometimes abstract discussions that follow have a very practical impact on his or her life.

Following the introduction are chapters on logic, epistemology, philosophy of science, metaphysics, philosophical anthropology, philosophy of religion, ethics, political philosophy, and aesthetics. The book closes with a fourteen page glossary, an index of names, a subject index, and a scripture index. This final addition is another unusual feature,

but one that may be appreciated by some readers. The book is, after all, subtitled *A Christian introduction to philosophy*.

The tenor of the book is one of rational examination of issues. Emblematic of this is the quote from Galileo found on p. 101, "I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forgo their use."³ The reader does not get the impression that the authors are straining to maintain their religious position in the face of better arguments to the contrary. In general their presentation of the arguments seems to naturally lead to a conclusion that is compatible with their Christian belief system. Naturally, those who do not believe that an objective philosophical investigation would support Christian belief could object that the authors of *The Love of Wisdom* have skewed their presentations of the issues, but those who believe that Christianity and philosophy can be allies rather than enemies will find this introductory discussion of the interface of the two very informative.

What might baffle the non-Christian reader the most is the occasional rejection of a position apparently for no other reason than that it is not compatible with Christianity (or the Bible). An example of this is found at the end of the chapter on epistemology. Here the authors write, "Of the issues surveyed, perhaps the one most relevant to defending Christianity's claim to be a knowledge tradition is the challenge of skepticism. If Christians know such propositions as 'God exists,' 'Jesus rose from the dead,' and 'The Bible is divine revelation,' then any strong form of skepticism that would rule out such religious knowledge must be false."⁴ The non-Christian reader might understandably consider this approach to be inconsistent with an unbiased philosophical analysis of the issue. However, this is not simply a fideistic retreat into irrationalism. In the case of the book's response to skepticism, as in most others, the authors have already discussed skepticism philosophically⁵ and provided a number of purely philosophical responses to it.

Furthermore, in the Introduction the authors clearly state that they will approach things from a Christian perspective. This should not mean that they will not be concerned to evaluate arguments and issue objectively, rationally, and with a steadfast devotion to truth. On the contrary, in the context of their avowal of the correspondence theory of truth they write, "Sometimes scientists and historians (and others) make claims based on their research that seem to conflict with the Christian worldview. When this happens, there are two possibilities that the Christian faces. One possibility is that the scientist or historian who contradicts Christian belief is right and the Christian has got it wrong. A commitment to truth as correspondence requires that Christians not retreat into blind faith but seriously consider the possibility that we may need to adjust at least some of our beliefs."⁶ But it does mean that they believe that there are reasons to believe in the truth of Christianity that

are sufficiently strong that the authors are at least *prima facie* justified in rejecting beliefs that are incompatible with Christianity. What these strong reasons are is hinted at in various places in the text, most especially in the chapter on philosophy of religion.

Of course, this same aspect of the book is likely to endear the book to many Christian readers. Cowan and Spiegel make a very conscious effort to show how rational philosophical discourse can be reconciled to and frequently compliments traditional Christian beliefs. A good example of this is the chapter on philosophy of science, and most especially the subsection "Theistic Science."⁷

The book is not without flaws, of course. Various minor objections can be raised. Sometimes the presentations of particular theories, positions, and arguments are too summative. For example, the presentation of Divine Command Theory is so concise that it can leave the reader with the impression that DCT has not developed past the point of medieval Ockhamist arbitrariness. At times significant issues are left out altogether, such as a discussion of Kant in the chapter on epistemology: there isn't one (though aspects of Kant's epistemology are discussed in the metaphysics chapter). But these defects are perhaps unavoidable in an introductory text, which because of its broad scope must limit its depth and content itself with introducing ideas and arguments in a relatively cursory fashion.

Perhaps the most significant shortcoming is an occasional tendency to present a particular take on an issue as if it is "the" Christian position, rather than simply one of several possible Christian positions.⁸ An example of this occurs in the chapter on aesthetics, where Cowan and Spiegel argue for an aesthetic objectivism as if this is the natural outworking of theism. It seems that the major motivation for their conviction that they must defend some form of aesthetic objectivism stems from their desire to maintain a parallel with the ethical objectivism argued for earlier in the book.⁹ They seem to feel that some form of ethical realism is necessary in order to avoid ethical relativism and that the parallel between ethics and aesthetics is sufficiently close that failing to affirm aesthetic realism would jeopardize their position in ethics as well.

However, acceptance of this parallelism between ethics and aesthetics is not part of the historic Christian faith, nor is realism in either of these realms the obviously Christian position. Some recent Christian thinkers have argued for a conceptualism in ethics (what some have called "divine nature theory" or "modified divine command theory") rather than ethical realism.¹⁰ It seems plausible that a Christian philosopher could go in that direction in aesthetics, too.

Such imperfections notwithstanding, *The Love of Wisdom* has much to recommend it. It contains many features that make it useful as a textbook, including questions for further reflection at the end of each subsection and very solid lists of recommended readings at the end of each chapter. It

is sufficiently accessible to beginners without being oversimplified and utilizes interesting illustrations from contemporary culture and current issues that help retain the reader's interest. Its abundance of real life applications help the reader both to understand and to appreciate the importance of the issues discussed. It contains only occasional block quotes, which may be viewed as a weakness by some, but some find that having more than a few block quotes becomes a distraction.

The Love of Wisdom: A Christian introduction to philosophy is probably the best introduction to philosophy currently available to those who want a traditional Christian perspective on philosophical issues. It is well written, covers a wide range of issues, and makes an honest attempt to deal with the issues objectively. It would make an excellent textbook for any introductory philosophy class that wants to investigate the issues with some Christian guidance or where the professor wants to contrast religious and secular positions on a range of issues. It is also a good choice for individual Christians who simply want to probe deeper into their Christian faith. As Francis Bacon is quoted, in this very book, as saying, "A little philosophy inclineth men's minds to atheism; but depth in philosophy bringeth men's minds to religion."¹¹

Notes:

¹ Bruce N. Waller, *Coffee and Philosophy: A Conversational Introduction to Philosophy with Readings* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2006); Bruce N. Waller, *You Decide! Current Debates in Introductory Philosophy* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2006); Julian Baggini, *The Pig That Wants to Be Eaten: 100 experiments for the armchair philosopher* (New York: Plume, 2006).

² Steven B. Cowan and James S. Spiegel, *The Love of Wisdom: A Christian introduction to philosophy* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 7.

³ Cowan and Spiegel, 101.

⁴ Cowan and Spiegel, 97.

⁵ Cowan and Spiegel, on pages 50-52 and 60-63.

⁶ Cowan and Spiegel, 45.

⁷ Cowan and Spiegel, 136ff.

⁸ There are, on the other hand, places where the authors clearly acknowledge that Christians may disagree on an issue, and even that there may be a range of positions on a particular issue that are compatible with Christian beliefs.

⁹ The analogy between aesthetics and ethics is mentioned on Cowan and Spiegel p.430.

¹⁰ See, for example, Robert M. Adams, *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹¹ Cowan and Spiegel, 254.