



A PROPOSAL

Teaching Philosophy to Seventh-day Adventist Students

In the mid-1960s, I was asked to teach an Introduction to Philosophy course at a Seventh-day Adventist college. After the first exam, a number of students let me know they were struggling; a few even dropped the class within a few weeks. Even some theology majors were disenchanted and, in two cases, openly hostile. Unlike my near-ecstasy studying philosophy in college, they saw it as pointless. It surprised me that future pastors could not see the relevance of this discipline to their futures. Deeply committed to Adventism, they wanted

(admirably in a way) to get out of school and help “finish the work.” Philosophy, they believed, was not going to help them preach or evangelize any better. Climbing that intellectual mountain would not strengthen them; it was a waste of time.

A Proposed Solution

Looking back, I wish I had adopted a template for the course; or perhaps a filter, through which all the material might be organized in more familiar terms. I would likely employ John E. Smith’s insightful observation: There are only two basic starting points in philosophical reflection: the self and

the world.¹ Whichever starting point you select, you must account for the one you did not select, but that initial choice often shapes everything that follows. Self/World (like subject/object, the one and many, change and permanence, appearance and reality) is one of those useful polarities that helps clarify otherwise opaque material.

I would begin with what philosophers usually mean when they say the “self” or the “world.” My first encounter with that distinction came in a college English class when we were

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assigned B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two*,² which argued that when we introspect or observe ourselves feeling and thinking, we are not observing anything more than our own bodies. Our genetic and environmental histories produce our behaviors and moral awareness. Thus, there really can be no self-determining activity or freedom of choice. (To be fair, one of Skinner's contributions was his insistence that more than our mental states affect our behavior, that the environment is a major causal agent in what we do.) But Skinner went further, asserting that our actions are not the result of our being autonomous agents.

Writer and critic Joseph Wood Krutch's *The Measure of Man*³ was also assigned as a counterpoint. Krutch (1893-1970), a humanist and man of letters, was not about to allow Skinner to vaporize the uniqueness of human agency and self-consciousness. Skinner wanted, I would suggest to students, to understand the self only through the world or natural processes and not give it the uniqueness it seems to require based on introspection. Clearly, the "mind" and our sense of agency cannot function without the brain, but will understanding all the physical/chemical factors that affect human behavior adequately account for the activities of the mind and the decisions made by what we call the will? If one begins by denying the uniqueness and importance of the self in philosophical reflection, he or she cannot possibly

allow space for anything but cause-and-effect events. This leaves little room for morality, human freedom, or the experience of God.

**Examples for Using the Template:
The Pre-Socratics**

Instead of summarizing schools of thought and the major thinkers within them, I would impose the Self/World Template (SWT) on both. I would have students read primary and (accessible) secondary sources while coaching them in applying the SWT. Starting with the pre-Socratics, I would ask them to decide whether early Greek reflection began with the interiority of the self or the self's experience of the world. They ought to see quickly that Thales argued that everything arises from water; hence, the world is his point of departure. In their own ways, Anaximander, Anaximenes, and Heraclitus (seventh to sixth century B.C.E.) also started with the world.

In contrast, by insisting that being was indivisible and unchanging, Parmenides and Zeno (fifth century B.C.E.) chose not to start with the world but with the self's analysis of the conceptual problem. If "Being" is by definition "eternal," sensory phenomena cannot reveal it. The ultimately "real" cannot be reduced to "appearances." Thinking about the nature of

Being itself, one understands that it cannot be ensconced in material reality.

Plato and Aristotle

In the Dialogues, Socrates and Plato (fifth to fourth century B.C.E.) cemented the importance of the self in philosophy.⁴ Could the dictum "know thyself" be any clearer? Using logical analysis, they claimed that one must begin (if not conclude) reflection about ethical truth and metaphysics with the self as a moral and thinking agent. Conversation and rigorous thought (not sense perception) uncover the elements of the nature of the good and of justice. "Ideas" or "forms" (known only to the mind) are the ultimate reality. One is not learning either ethics or metaphysics from the world, but "remembering" essential truths that are already stored in the mind or self. Physical objects are instantiations of the forms, copies of the "real." Students should come to realize at the same time that the Dialogues are models of deductive argument.

While impressed by Plato's passion for ethics and rationality, Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.)⁵ saw essences in "particulars," not universals. He defined matter as the principle of individuation, not merely a copy of something more ultimate. He began his reflections with the world and the logic of *induction*, and produced remarkable science for his era. From these two philosophers have come rivers of thought that

still nurture our intellectual efforts.

I say again: To start with the self means that our experience of our own consciousness and feelings is given at least equal weight in our efforts to understand the nature of reality. Our sense perceptions are not ignored, but they cannot become so powerful that self-consciousness is treated as no more than a collection of physical effects completely subject to natural law.

More Recent Philosophical Examples

Next, I might touch on early church history which, in its efforts to blend Hebrew and Greek thought, tended to follow Plato in the writings of Plotinus, Augustine, and Anselm (third, fourth, and 11th to 12th centuries A.D.).⁶ I would contrast Anselm's ontological argument approach (faith seeking understanding through deduction) to the Hebrew approach, which assumed God's reality and saw God's activity everywhere in the world (through both induction and deduction). Later, we would revisit Aristotle through the Arab revival of his thought, which resulted in the magisterial contributions of Thomas Aquinas (13th century A.D.),⁷ whose arguments for God clearly reflected his interest in using—as did Aristotle—the world as a starting point. By now, I would hope, Adventist students would see clearly how philosophical work impacts theological development. No one can understand how theology unfolded, I would emphasize, if he or she does not understand how philosophy shaped it.

Rationalism

Skipping over figures like Erasmus, Bacon, and the like, I might go directly to the so-called Age of Reason, which is often thought to begin with Descartes.⁷ During this period (16th to 17th centuries A.D.), a new sensibility arose in which assuming certain truths by faith and attempting to demonstrate them

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with powerful logic began to give way to a rational, skeptical, logical, and axiomatic philosophy. I would want students to understand that Descartes' method of doubting⁸ all that could be doubted in order to find a new, certain foundation for knowledge resulted in some very significant philosophical shifts. Descartes made sharp distinctions between mind and body, reason and revelation, philosophy and theology, and settled on mathematics as the “ideal” knowledge because it is strictly a human creation that is logical to its core. In his *Cogito*, he began with the thinking self and found in it the starting point for knowing everything else, even the reality of the world. His leap into rationality fomented a revolution in which the “reasonable” in observations of nature, politics, and religion became the quest for other philosophers of his era like Pascal and Hobbes. His dualism spawned its own reaction in George Berkeley and Benedict Spinoza (17th and 18th centuries),⁹ which could also be briefly explored; again, using the same template.

Empiricism

In reaction to rationalism, David Hume (1711-1776) and other empiricists like John Locke (1632-1704) insisted that knowledge must be founded on sense perception. They were among the strongest Enlightenment critics of a rationalistic religion. Hume's radical empiricism challenged even the basis for the cause-and-effect understanding of physical events because there are no sense impressions of such connections.¹⁰ So, here is an example of starting philosophical reflection with the world and not the self in a fairly radical manner. As a result, so-called “natural religion” suffered a devastating blow (17th and 18th centuries).

Kant

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) reacted to David Hume's radical empiricism with his famous comment: “David Hume has awakened me from my dogmatic slumbers.”¹¹ So, Kant set out to create in his terms a “Copernican Revolution in philosophy” by locating essential elements of our sense impressions in the self, creating the unheard of *synthetic a priori*, experiences which are *necessary* even while sensory.¹² I would probably take a class period or two to unpack this phrase for students, for it represents the most

ambitious effort to date in philosophy to integrate the self and the world in epistemology.

Following Kant, the reaction against empiricism continued not with a focus on reason, but with an emphasis on “personal experience” or the “heart.” Another aspect of “self” was invoked to replace reason as the primary source of understanding. This “romantic” turn became pietism in religion, and the dance between the two poles of self and the world continued in a new form, persisting to the present day.

The Modern Period

If the teacher looks at subsequent philosophers through this Self/World Template, I believe students should better grasp the philosophers’ concerns.

Finally, if time permitted, I would review the existentialist revolt against the dominance of scientific thought in the early to middle part of the 20th century.

Process Philosophy

Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947),¹³ who was influenced greatly by the developments in physics and possessed a deep affection for the arts, developed a model for reality that turned out to be perhaps the most creative metaphysical synthesis of the self and the world ever devised. To theorize that every “drop” of experience (or actual occasion) we have is suffused with creative potential and newness, that each moment (and each decision we make) closes off some possibilities and opens new ones, that not only the self but nature, too, dwells in this reality, was an intellectual breakthrough of monumental proportions. It suggested, perhaps for the first time, that given quantum mechanics and other insights, human beings might be able to situate randomness and chance

in nature itself, in the brain and physical body, so that it is not only selves who possess room for freedom and morality, but God as well, the Creator of this highly regulated universe we experience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I might have them review the writings of Marilynne Robinson (1943-), whose *The Death of Adam*¹⁴ and *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness From the Modern Myth of the Self*¹⁵ are among the most impressively written books affirming the importance of the self in understanding. She argues that many modern thinkers mistakenly insist that the answers to our deepest questions *must* start and end with science or what I have called the “world.”

It is my hope that this approach (just one of many possibilities, of course) could be fruitful in introducing Adventist students to philosophy and inspiring an appropriate fascination with the importance of rigorous, truly critical thinking that, while independent of faith, is inescapably related to it. ☞

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