

THE BEREA PAGE

"Examining . . . to see if these things are so" ~ Acts 17.11

An Ancient Guide to Making Sense

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Though he is more associated with the geometry theorem that bears his name, Pythagoras is traditionally known as the first to refer to himself as a "philosopher" (Passmore 1967, 216). He joined others at "the beginning of human attempts … to make sense out of their environment … At that time (approximately 2,700 years ago) … anyone who attempted to provide answers to questions about life was simply a person seeking wisdom, and eventually came to be identified as a person who loves (*philo-*) wisdom (*sophia*)" (Troxell and Snyder 1976, 3–4).

Some may find it odd to pair the word "philosophy" with "making sense of things." Philosophy—capital P—has a reputation in some circles for tedium and obscurity, the pursuits of ivory tower academics who appear more interested in justifying their guild's existence than in making sense of things. I offer no brief for tedium and obscurity, but find it unfortunate that Philosophy's press has led some to be dismissive of philosophy—lower case p—considering it a waste of time, and even unchristian. Colossians 2.8 is sometimes cited in defense of this view, but in context, Paul is condemning a certain kind of φιλοσοφίας (*philosophias*) that's paired with "empty deceit [κενῆς ἀπάτης, *kenēs apatēs*] based on human tradition." He's responding to some who tried to make sense of the world without acknowledging Christ's preeminence; he calls them to make Christ the basis of their outlook, the Christ who, he says elsewhere, "became wisdom [σοφία, *sophia*] from God for us" (1 Cor 1.30). Thankfully, many believers in the first three centuries adopted the positive approach implied in the latter text and "out-thought the world," helping the Christians overcome the "one [Roman] religion that was pluralism" (Glover 1917, 186–187, 213–217). Others followed suit in succeeding centuries and are counted among history's leading thinkers.

How useful can philosophy be? Consider the analysis of some of life's questions by the man Peter Kreeft credits with writing "the greatest of all books of philosophy" (Kreeft 1989, 15). One of his reflections critiques the idea that life is always fair; in truth, it sometimes afflicts the righteous while sparing the wicked, rewarding sinners and punishing saints. He also despairs that heroes and villains meet the same fate, and concludes that nothing ever really changes. Reading his reflections, we aren't surprised when he depicts life as a drudgery that leads nowhere. Or, to say it in his words, "everything's futile." So concludes the Teacher who left us the musings we know as Ecclesiastes.

You would be part of a sizable group if you asked whether he was (a) fair in his conclusion, and (b) informed enough to accurately speak about life now. "After all," some will say, "he wrote

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more than two thousand years ago, before the advances of our enlightened world. We're more aware now, smarter, less prone to credulity than they were. We can control things they could not have imagined." As one group of self-described "non-theist" thinkers, who "begin with humans, not God" (Kurtz 1973, 16), said it fifty-plus years ago, by

> Using technology wisely, we can control our environment, conquer poverty, markedly reduce disease, extend our life-span, significantly modify our behavior, alter the course of human evolution and cultural development, unlock vast new powers, and provide humankind with unparalleled opportunity for achieving an abundant and meaningful life (Kurtz 1973, 14).

It occurs to us that their confidence in humanity demonstrates one of the Teacher's most famous statements: "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun" (Eccl 1.9). We also observe that they could learn from his methodology and conclusion: "under the sun" pursuits are "futile" (הֶבֶל, *hebel;* 38 times in Eccl).

"But," someone replies (again), "he didn't know what we know; didn't do the things we can do now." Specifically, he didn't have our education systems, our access to opportunities that make life more enjoyable, our financial resources to keep improving the world.

To say that is to confuse form with category. Read again what he did as he tested his premise. He tried wealth and power—finances to make life easy. He tried pleasure—hedonism to fill his senses. And, oh yes, he tried wisdom—education to fill his mind. These are the "labors" of Ecclesiastes (cf. Kreeft 1989, 36–45). Again, and again, and yet again, the Teacher concluded they all are futile.

It's apparent that, even in our enlightened age, he has yet something to teach us.

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