

# THE PHILOSOPHY OF JESUS

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## Introduction I: Who Is this Book For?

IT IS FOR BOTH Christians and non-Christians.

(1) It's designed to show Christians a new dimension of Jesus: Jesus the philosopher.

(2) And it's designed to show non-Christians a new dimension of philosophy, a new philosophy and a new philosopher. It's not designed to convert them.

But I am a Christian as well as a philosopher; that is, I believe Jesus is God. And I won't hide that or fake it. That's why I capitalize His name throughout the book.

But wait! If I just lost your potential readership by that statement, I challenge you—as a philosopher, now, not as a Christian—to ask yourself this question before you leave, and to give a logical answer: would you refuse to read a book about the philosophy of Buddha just because it was written by a Buddhist? Or a book explaining the philosophy of the Qur'an just because it was written by a

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Muslim? Wouldn't it make more sense to refuse to read it if it *wasn't*?

## Introduction II: Why Is Jesus a Philosopher?

WHAT? JESUS, A PHILOSOPHER? Would He give a lecture at Harvard, or engage in a long Socratic dialog in Plato's Academy, or write a critique of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*?

Obviously not. And everyone knows that. That is "trivially true."

In another sense, Jesus *was* a philosopher, but this second sense is also trivial. Everyone has some "philosophy of life." Even Homer Simpson is a philosopher.

But Jesus was a philosopher in a meaningful middle sense, the sense in which Confucius, Buddha, Muhammad, Solomon, Marcus Aurelius, and Pascal were philosophers.

I quote C.S. Lewis as my authority to support this classification, in a letter to Dom Bede Griffiths (*Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, volume II*. San Francisco: Harper/SF, 2004, p. 191):

I question your account of Our Lord, when you say "He is essentially a poet and not at all a philosopher." Surely the "type of mind" represented in the human nature of Christ (and in virtue of His humanity we may, I suppose, neither irreverently nor absurdly speak of it as a "type of mind") stands at just about the same distance from the poetic as from the philosopher. . . . After all, how full of argument, of repartee, even of irony, He is. The passage about the denarius ("whose image and superscription?"); the dilemma about John's baptism; the argument against the Sadducees from the words "I am the God of Jacob, etc.": the terrible, yet almost humorous, trap laid for his Pharisaic host ("Simon, I have something to say to you"); the repeated use of the *a fortiori* ("If . . . how much more"); and the appeals to our reason ("Why do not ye of yourselves judge what is right?")—surely in all these we recognize as the human and natural vehicle of the Word's incarnation a mental complexion in which a keen-eyed peasant *shrewdness* is just as noticeable as an imaginative quality—something in other words quite as close (on the natural level) to Socrates as to Aeschylus.

Even about the parables . . . the mode in which the fable represents its truth is intellectual

*Why Is Jesus a Philosopher?*

rather than imaginative—like a philosopher's *illustration* rather than a poet's *simile*. The unjust judge, to the imagination, presents no likeness to God—carries into the story no divine flavour or colour (as the Father of the Prodigal Son, for instance, does). His likeness to God is purely for the intellect. It is a kind of proportion sum—A:B::C:D.

But this book is not so much about Jesus' philosophical *style* or method or "cast of mind" but about his philosophical *substance*, his philosophical *answers*, his *philosophy*.



## Introduction III: What Are the Four Great Philosophical Questions?

THERE ARE FOUR PERENNIAL philosophical questions. “Philosophy” means “the love of wisdom,” and wisdom, if we had it, would give us answers to at least these four great questions:

1. What is? What is real? Especially, what is most real?
2. How can we *know* what is real, and especially the most real?
3. Who are we, who want to know the real? “Know thyself.”
4. What *should* we be, how should we live, to be more real?

They are the questions about being, truth, self, and goodness. The divisions of philosophy that explore these four questions are called by four technical names: metaphysics, epistemology, philosophical anthropology, and ethics.

*What Are the Four Great Philosophical Questions?*

1. First things first: everything is relative to metaphysics. The first thing every baby wants to know is: What's there? My son's first question was "Wot dat?" He kept shooting the question at everything, like a machine gun, until he got a catalog of answers, a universe.

If we are wise, we never grow up.

2. But we do change. Around the beginning of adolescence we turn critical: we want to know not just the difference between cats and dogs but the difference between truth and falsehood. We want to know how we can know, how we can be sure. We become epistemologists.

And since the most interesting question of metaphysics is about *ultimate* reality, the most interesting question of epistemology is about knowing ultimate reality: how can we finite fools know infinite wisdom? How can man know God? Or even that there is a God?

3. A little later, we also turn inward. We wonder who we really are once we stop playing with our masks on other people's stages. Why is it so hard to "know thyself"? Obviously,

what we are is human beings, but what is *that?* (“Wot dat?”) Once we know the known, we want to know the knower.

4. Finally, when we realize that this self that knows is fundamentally different from everything else in the known universe because it alone *can fail* to be its true self, we then demand to discriminate not only between truth and falsehood but also between good and evil. We can be bad or good. Nothing else in the universe has that choice. Our selves, unlike acorns or stars, are not wholly given to us but made by our choices. Once we realize that, we ask how we can become our true selves, our real selves, our good selves. How can bad people become good people? And what *is* it to be a good person? (“Wot dat?”)

The logical order of questions is this: we must first know something real before we can know how we know it; and we must first know who we are before we can know what is good for us. The order is also an order of increasing concreteness, increasing practicality, and increasing accessibility and interest to ordinary people. Ethics is based on

*What Are the Four Great Philosophical Questions?*

metaphysics, it is logically posterior to metaphysics; but it is psychologically more compelling.

Philosophers have thought profoundly about these four questions for over two millennia. Why have they not found answers that are adequate, final, and universally acknowledged? Why is one of the best definitions of a philosopher “one who contradicts other philosophers”? H.L. Mencken said, “Philosophy consists largely of one philosopher arguing that all the others are jackasses. He usually proves it.”

The Christian answer: because the only adequate and final answer to all four great philosophical questions is Christ. The most philosophical writer in the Bible, John, begins his Gospel by identifying Jesus with the *Logos* (“In the beginning was the *Logos*, and the *Logos* was with God and the *Logos* was God . . . and the *Logos* became flesh and dwelt among us.”) What is the *Logos*? It is an incredibly rich Greek word. Here are some of its meanings: the *Logos* means the Word of God, the Revelation of God, the Speech of God, the Wisdom of God, the Mind of God, the Truth of God, the Reason of God, the Philosophy of God.

Jesus is God’s philosophy.