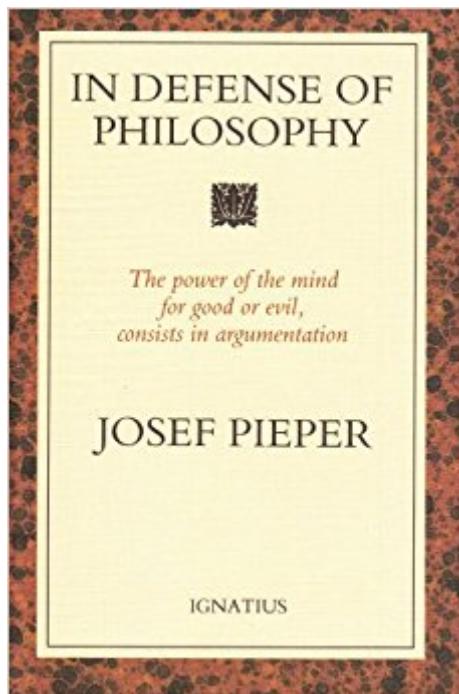


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In Defense Of Philosophy



Synopsis

This book is an engagement between a great modern philosopher defending classical philosophy against an army of challengers to the very notion of philosophy as classically conceived. It is written very much in the spirit of the "scholastic disputations" in the medieval universities, which produced the great Summas: a mutual search for truth, a philosophical laboratory, a careful winnowing of each objection. Such objectivity is lamentably rare in contemporary philosophy. In order to combat modern misunderstandings of challenges to the classical concept of philosophy, Pieper shows us the unique and uniquely valuable thing philosophy is as conceived by his masters: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and above all, Aquinas. Along this path he scatters gems of insight, such as: art and religion as Philosophy's defenders; the relationship between philosophy and science; philosophy as "seeing and saying"; and philosophy as rooted in meditation and loving contemplation. Pieper emphasizes that philosophy is something all human beings do, and should be the better for doing.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

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Josef Pieper's book titled IN DEFENSE OF PHILOSOPHY is a book that readers should carefully consider. Pieper wrote this book to give philosophical meaning to life. He was clear that in a society that admires technology and "practical wisdom" as opposed to those who think and contemplate about abstract realities such as good vs. evil, ethics, justice, etc. needs to reconsider these issues. This book reminds readers what it means to be truly civilized. Pieper dealt with the supposed

opposition between science and philosophy. Pieper has no obvious "ax to grind" with the contributions of modern science and technology. Pieper was clear that science and technology have made life easier and more convenient. Pieper's argument was with "conventional wisdom" which dismissed philosophy as useless. Pieper aggressively defended philosophical inquiry re ontological, metaphysical, and theological issues and questions. Pieper remarked that one who knew truth and could separate honesty from formlessness and lack of a priori thinking (logic, common sense and a starting point). Pieper argued that while science and technology could teach and inform, such could not answer all questions and especially ultimate questions. Pieper cited such thinkers such as Plato (427-347 BC), obviously Aristotle (384-322 BC), St. Augustine (354-430 AD), and especially St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). Readers need not agree with these men, but Pieper made effective use of their thinking to illustrate that ontology(being) and metaphysics were not only useful but crucial for civilized living and behavior. Pieper showed that such philosophical speculation dealt with Man's quest for living. Pieper argued that being included science to understand physical reality, but he also showed that concepts as good, evil, justice, ethics, etc. have as much reality as science and physical reality. Pieper was clear that pure philosophy could teach men to be more civilized, more reflective, and more human. Pieper, being a Catholic, then examined theology. One need not agree with Catholic philosophy and theology to appreciate this aspect of the book. All Pieper tried to convey was that such questions were crucial for living a more humane life. In other words, religious convictions can lead to compassion, mercy, justice, etc. This is not to omit that terrible wrong has been committed in the name of religion(s), but quite often other serious religious people have been around to condemn these wrongs. Pieper excused those who may be agnostic (not sure of a Supreme Being or a hereafter) as long as they were honest in reflection of their doubt. However, Pieper aggressively criticized the militant atheists whose militancy equalled or exceeded the passion of religious zealots. Pieper's view was that a religious view of a starting point or Supreme Being had the advantage of some point of origin. Pieper was also clear that such thought could not be precise, but such thinking could be reasonable and clear. This reviewer has some minor (very minor)criticisms of this book. Pieper could have made the historical argument that science, mathematics, and technology originated in philosophical studies especially among the Ancient Greeks. In other words, those who are so impressed with science and technology and dismiss philosophy should know that the origins of the sciences, mathematics, and technology began as pure philosophy. Pieper could have profited by mention of St. Anselm (1035-1109)whose writing emphasized that the Catholic Faith had to be based not only on revelation and faith but also the rigorous use of reason and logical thinking. Mention could have also

been made of the scientific achievements of Catholic Scholastics and authorities. A good example is Pope Sylvester II (999-1002) who invented the first or one of the first mechanical clocks. Pieper could have mentioned Roger Bacon (1214-1294) who some historians credit with developing the scientific method and did original work in astronomy and optics. Further mention could have been made re St. Albertus Magnus (c.1193-1280) who wanted to study "everything created." Pieper should have mentioned St. Albertus Magnus' work in mineralogy, biology, astronomy, other physical sciences, etc. Readers should know that these men were Catholic monks and friars who, in their religious convictions, tried to investigate what they thought was God's Creation. In other words, men who dealt with pure philosophy were historically important in scientific achievements. Pieper's book is highly recommended. Again, those who accept science and technology while dismissing philosophical speculation could learn from this book. As this reviewer mentioned elsewhere, "...a society based on national defense and full employment is better suited to an insect colony rather than a human/humane society." Pieper's book is a reminder of what it means to be truly human and civilized.

Why do I need to type so many words in this block just to say that it is a good product. CHANGE THIS.

A good introduction and jumping off point to Pieper's philosophy and philosophy in general. Reading this book first might make his other works (like *Virtues of the Human Heart*, *Abuse of Language* *Abuse of Power*, and *Leisure the Basis of Culture*) more palatable. Pieper, here, describes what philosophy is - its likeness to poetry; why it should be done - freedom can not exist without it; and where philosophy stands in relationship to the exact sciences and religion. Pieper, with great detail, also lays Sartre flat, and criticizes Jaspers and Heidegger to the degree that they fail to recognize their own religiosity and how this contradicts their views of what a philosopher is -- throwing their own words in their face, so to speak. Great reading. This book might read something like a simple methodology; much more comprehensible than "Living the Truth" which is quite a book, a definite methodology, but difficult reading.

In this book, Pieper explains the importance of philosophy, its approaches and realms of interest. He contrasts it with the modern empirical scientific mentality, and explains the continued importance of philosophy. In this book Pieper touches on many themes that are common to his writings, for instance the importance of the proper use of language in conveying truth and reality. It is a useful

read to craft an argument against those that religion, and indeed philosophy, have no place in public discourse. Pieper not only points to why the opposite is true, he also points to where science and its approaches fall short.

Philosophy as a discipline surely needs some defending these days, given that Karl Jaspers (hardly a lightweight intellectual) declared, in 1960, that philosophy "has become an embarrassment for everybody" (*Wahrheit und Wissenschaft*, p. 20). Too many of my students, I fear, tend to share Jaspers' despair! Providing a healthy antidote, Josef Pieper, one of this century's greatest Christian philosophers, has a slim treatise (all of his works tend to be brief) entitled *In Defense of Philosophy: Classical Wisdom Stands Up to Modern Challenges* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, c. 1992; German original, c. 1966). Right away Piper gives us his thesis: "to engage in philosophy means to reflect on the totality of things we encounter, in view of their ultimate reasons; and philosophy, thus understood, is a meaningful, even necessary endeavor, with which man, the spiritual being, cannot dispense" (p. 12). Or, in the words of Whitehead, philosophy seeks to discover "What is it all about?" (Some of you may remember Freddy Prinz, a gifted Latino comic who starred in a TV series years ago. He committed suicide, while at the height of his career, leaving a simple note: "What's it all about?") Good question! Hard to answer! Doing so involves philosophizing, an activity we don't necessarily relish or especially enjoy. Like great poetry and art, philosophy cares little for "entertaining" its practitioners, seems indifferent to what's up-to-date or fashionable. Philosophizing is not the same as studying philosophy, such as we do (rightly, to some degree, in college classes) when we learn what Plato and Aristotle thought about education and ethics, epistemology and esthetics. And it's not the same as figuring out how to accomplish practical ends, as did the Sophist in Plato's *Protagoras* who proclaimed himself wise and thus capable of "teaching others how to deal successfully with the world." All too many sophists artfully talk "philosophy," and are thus called philosophers. Certainly they know how to play the role, ceaselessly striving to be "creative" and "original," polishing their wares to suit the current "party line"--and, I might add, amply illustrated by the trendy "deconstructionists" in today's universities. But they're not philosophers! For, as Pieper says, "the true philosopher, thoroughly oblivious of his own importance, and 'totally discarding all pretentiousness', approaches his unfathomable object unselfishly and with an open mind" (p. 39). Thus, in some ways, Heidegger was right to say "philosophy is of no use." It's truly one of the "liberal arts," practiced by those who are free enough to think theoretically, without concern for any "bottom line" rationale. Aristotle, in his *Metaphysics*, says the word "free" means the same as "nonpractical." Rightly practiced, then, philosophy seeks to know Truth, to understand Reality, to

deal with issues too subtle for TV commercials (or even documentaries). As Pieper explains it: "Theoria and 'theoretical' are words that, in the understanding of the ancients, mean precisely this: a relationship to the world, an orientation toward reality characterized entirely by the desire that this same reality may reveal itself in its true being. This, and nothing else, is the meaning of truth; nothing else but the self-revelation of reality" (p. 45). Truth and Reality are disclosed to those who "listen in silence" (p. 47), to those who, as Jesus said, have good eyes, to those who see things as they are. Too frequently, in our pervasively pragmatic culture, folks fix the label "theoretical" on whatever's irrelevant to them, but in fact it's what's most important. For "philosophy (as contemplation of reality as such and as the highest possible actualization of theoria) means: to listen so perfectly and intensely that such receptive silence is not disturbed and interrupted by anything, not even by a question" (p. 47). Like Mary sitting at Jesus' feet--unlike Martha bustling about doing "practical" things--real philosophers relish attentive silences. Such is the nature of contemplative thought. One might almost say that false philosophers stress communication while true philosophers stress contemplation. The Greek "theoria" was translated into Latin as "contemplatio," from whence comes the English word contemplation. Rightly understood, Pieper says, contemplation "means a loving gaze, the beholding of the beloved" (p. 53). Consequently, "For the true philosopher . . . the challenge seems to be this: to acknowledge, before any consideration of specifics and without regard to usefulness, that reality is good in itself--all things, the world, 'being' as such; yes all that exists, and existence itself!" (p. 54). Such was "Anaxagoras' answer to the question posed to him, 'Why are you here on earth?' His reply: to behold in contemplation, eis theorian, the sky and the order of the universe" (p. 59). Since we think with words, things are truly knowable only if they have been created, spoken into existence, and only if there is a discernable order to the universe. All too many modern thinkers, such as Sartre, discard the doctrine of creation without realizing they thereby discard the possibility of knowing things with any certainty. As creatures, created in God's image, however, we're endowed with a spirituality, a mind, which enables us to transcend our bodily limitations. We have an apparently unlimited ability to know. Given our standing, "oriented toward the world of everything that is real," the "totality of all being" becomes subject to philosophy. Thus "To philosophize means nothing else but to reflect on the whole of all reality" (p. 64). That's no small task! But it does indicate the grandeur of man's calling! Though some modern thinkers seem more anxious to disclaim than to claim certainty in any area, true philosophers must insist that whatever has being is potentially knowable. That's because, as Pieper says: "all existing things originated in the creative and inventive mind of God, and consequently, when they were conceived and then also 'spoken', they received in themselves, as their essence, the quality of 'spoken word', the character,

therefore, to be in principle understandable and intelligible. 'We see all things (Augustine wrote) because they exist; yet they exist because you (O God) see them" (p. 75). While this little book applies most directly to philosophy, it has important implications for those of us who teach and preach. Too often we reduce Revelation, reduce the Gospel to purely pragmatic, therapeutic concerns. We assume that folks really need how-to-do-it messages, tricks of the trade useful in the marketplace. But in fact, if we're fundamentally spiritual beings, we deeply hunger to know . . . to know the Truth about Reality. So we really need to hear about God, about heavenly things, about the health and holiness which transcend concerns for diet and sobriety. We need to know what's really good, not just how to "feel good." We need to learn how to contemplate, to theorize, to listen to the Word.

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