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Why Alvin Plantinga Still Matters with Meghan Sullivan

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The Veritas Forum

In January, The Veritas Forum convened 170 student writers to learn from leading Christian scholars and to write essays for their campus publications, and we devoted one writing track to the legacy of philosopher Alvin Plantinga. Widely credited with making belief in God credible in academic philosophy, Plantinga continues to influence the next generation of Christian thinkers—from philosophers to plumbers. In this podcast episode, we discuss the influence of Plantinga's life and thought with Notre Dame's Meghan Sullivan.

Transcript

Welcome to the Veritas Forum podcast. We hope you've been enjoying our summer series Hinge, but this week we're taking a little break for a special podcast episode. This past January, the Veritas Forum brought together 170 student writers from across the country to interact with leading Christian scholars and to refine their writing for publication on campus.

We devoted one of our writing tracks to the life and thought of Alvin Plantinga. One of the most important Christian philosophers of the last century. Widely credited with making belief in God credible in contemporary academic philosophy, Plantinga continues to influence the next generation of Christian thinkers.

In this podcast, we sit down with Meghan Sullivan, professor of philosophy at Notre Dame, to discuss the influence of Plantinga's life and his thought.

[music] All right, Megh, could you just tell us a little bit about your journey to philosophy? How did you find this massive world of thought? I think it's funny when a lot of my students have no idea what philosophy is before they get to college, and I actually did know what it was in high school. My best friend in high school, Jessica Rosenkrantz, her father was a philosophy professor at UNC Greensboro, which is our local university.

I knew a professional philosopher, and in high school, if you'd asked me, I would have

said, "I definitely don't want that job." He writes books that nobody understands, and it seems just completely pointless, and I want a job that really matters. If you had told me when I was in high school that I'd end up being a philosopher, and even working in the same subfield as Professor Rosenkrantz, I would have been stunned. I got to college, and I thought I would study politics and be a lawyer.

That was what my heart was really set on. I took a bunch of the pre-law classes. I took econ, I took political science, and I got put into a class called Issues of Life and Death, which was an intro to ethics course.

200 some odd students at UVA, a big survey, and I loved that class. I remember vividly I'd be working in the library late at night on papers, and I'd have an option of working on a paper for my politics class or working on a paper for my philosophy class. The philosophy class would be like my treat.

I think what I loved about it was you got to say what you really thought about the question. My other classes, it was a lot of interpreting and repeating other people's ideas, but my philosophy professor was like do you think it's moral for someone to commit suicide? And your answer to the question is clearly as possible and argue as strongly as you can to try to get to the truth. I thought that was really fun.

I thought I'll keep doing philosophy as my hobby, but nobody can't be a philosopher. I keep studying politics and get ready for law school. The summer between my second and third years of college, by then I'd taken a fair number of philosophy classes and I loved all of them and I'd taken some very abstract classes.

I did a pre-law internship in Belfast. It was transformative experience, but not in the way you'd expect. I did study abroad and I went to Northern Ireland for the summer and I hated every minute of that.

Everything looked great on paper, but I just wasn't enjoying it. I would go home to the my norm every night and I would read Stephen King novels and philosophy books. And I remember on that flight home, I just thought I have been in denial that this was where my heart really was.

And I don't have to make a quick decision about law school right now, but I should start investigating this path. And luckily I also had some completely irresponsible teachers who when I got back from Ireland and I was like I love philosophy. I hate everything else.

I don't like anything as much as I like philosophy. They were like go to philosophy grad school, which now you're never supposed to tell undergraduates because they're like no jobs for professional philosophers. But my teacher was like of course you should become a philosopher.

That's so great. And so I did it and I didn't really find out how risky the venture was until

a few years later. That's usually how that goes, philosophy in particular.

So college was very much a journey of discovering your love and passion for philosophy, but it was also this emergence of discovering Christian faith. How did those two, I guess, discoveries either work together or maybe was there a conflict as you started to explore both of those arenas? There was a lot of conflict. First, you can always look back and kind of narrate what's happening in your life from a distance much better than you can in the moment.

So around the same time I was discovering how much I loved philosophy and really enjoying my coursework, I was also starting to think really seriously about issues of faith and not in a philosophical way. I think this surprises a lot of people, but I didn't actually get into philosophy of religion until late in graduate school. When I was an undergraduate, I had a profound experience of God, my first years of college, and started thinking really seriously about whether or not I had a good handle on what my life meant and what the world meant.

The usual questions that probably should occur to you at a younger age kind of hit me at 1819. I started college right as the September 11th attacks happened in 2001. I, at the time did not know anybody that lived in New York or Washington, D.C. But this was a big event.

I was at University of Virginia on my campus. That first year after the 9/11 attacks, it was what everybody was talking about. I remember for the first time thinking human life is really fragile, that you can have this job as an attorney, the job I wanted more than anything else in the world and go and work for this amazing firm in New York and then just one day be annihilated.

This happens to good people for no reason. I started wrestling with the problem of evil now what I'd recognized as the problem of evil, questions about human suffering and purpose. Philosophy was helpful.

I had a lot of teachers who were willing to listen to my crazy questions and give me reading advice, but none of that was really hitting the spot for me or really answering my questions. I'm the anniversary of September 11th. When I was a sophomore in college right at the beginning, I went to church for the first time.

I thought I would go to a church service and somebody would say something really profound and meaningful about why we're here and why human life is so fragile. All these questions that were like stirring in me. I figured church people give speeches like that.

That was kind of my stereotype of what happened in church. It turns out there was a Catholic church that was right near my dorm and so I went to Mass and it was, there

were no speeches. No, but they didn't say anything about September 11th.

The anniversary went totally unremarked. But there were people in prayer and there was, you can't really describe it from the outside accurately. The inside is feeling of a presence of God and the assurance that I was starting to look in the right place.

I started coming to the faith through really a private religious experience route which did not sit well with my growing interest in philosophy. Philosophy is about having public argument, rational discussion and debate and convincing people that this is clearly the truth. Truth started demonstrable and I was starting to develop this really rich, complicated faith life and starting to believe some of the more complicated claims of the Christian tradition and I could not explain it.

I saw a great deal of value and other pieces of my life were starting to fall into place and start to make more sense to me but I was completely not ready to defend it and not interested in it. I would have been terrified of somebody to ask me a bunch of philosophical questions about my faith at that point. But eventually the two started to grow together.

It actually took a while, probably five or six years after. I joined the Catholic Church my third year of college and received the sacraments and became a much more serious Christian but kept it very much as a private part of my life until late in graduate school when I had teachers who were more open about their faith and I started reading much more intellectual, interesting working Christian philosophy and realized I didn't have to keep it separate. You don't have to have all the answers to start to be philosophically interested in your faith.

I needed people to repeatedly tell me that. It doesn't mean that you have to be able to defend every doctrine against all comers. It just means that you're interested in living a unified life.

By the end of graduate school I started to really see the value in that but it took me a while. What sounds like that process, they were almost operating seemingly independently and so how do you reconcile that because it's actually a really challenging question and not immediately obvious. Well, it's something, so I love Augustine and I don't want to compare it all my conversion to his because that would be a joke.

He could roll over in his career. Yeah, exactly. Augustine's somewhere shaking his fist.

One thing I love, if you read the Confessions, there's this really beautiful passage. I can't remember which book it occurs in. Augustine says he's so grateful to God that God gave him Plato before he got the gospel.

God was kind of preparing the way because Augustine had all these crazy philosophical misadventures and he'd really caught up in a school of thought and he tried to convince

everyone of it. And this all happened for him until he finally came to the truth of the Christian faith later in life. I feel like something like that was definitely going on with me.

The reasoning capacity of my mind and my sense of vocation was being formed on one set of rails and my faith and love of truth and confidence in God was being formed in another way. With the providential idea, eventually these two are going to come together and meet, which is I think maybe the chapter I find myself in life in now. But I think it can totally work that way and actually for a great many people forming them in their faith means being formed philosophically first.

Even though the story we owe here is the opposite, the philosophy is something that destroys your faith because you can't argue for it. I don't believe that. Yeah, I remember I studied studying philosophy as an undergraduate and going home and I was studying at a quote unquote secular university and people at my church very worried that I was studying philosophy at a secular university.

It's going to ruin you. It's going to ruin me. I'm going to have this existential crisis and I'm going to, you know, kind of this God's not dead, the movie moment where we imagine that bringing Christian faith into the philosophy discourse is death to your faith.

That means God will have to die for you in order to do philosophy well. When did you begin to discover that sort of cohesion that you can be an excellent philosopher and still bring faith into the sphere of rationality? I don't know if I've ever totally discovered it. I mean, philosophy is not just one thing, but it's just a lot of stuff.

You know, it's an approach to thinking logically about the world and to wrestling with questions that you can't decide by simple experimentation. That's what I usually tell my students. But then the subject matter of philosophy is literally anything.

The meaning of the word the does God exist. Like what's the correct logic for thinking about space and time? Any topic could be a philosophical topic. So the idea that philosophy is opposed to faith is like equivalent to saying everything is opposed to faith.

Everything logical is opposed to faith, which nobody should accept. But I still think that there are times when I realize I've got a complicated religious faith. I'm Catholic.

We believe a lot of things about God. It's not just a simple belief that there is a God, but it's a belief about Christ. It's a belief about the resurrection of the body, the afterlife, things that happened in the desert 2000 years ago.

It's complicated. And anytime you're trying as a philosopher to make systematic a bunch of really complicated, rich beliefs, you're in trouble. Because it just turns out consistency is hard to get.

Even about simple claims in philosophy, but certainly about very complicated things like

the Christian truth. So I never have felt that I've got it all figured out. And I'm definitely one of these people that's awake from like two to four in the morning wondering if I'm doing it right or what it all means or what's going to happen next.

[MUSIC] Let's transition a bit to Alvin Plantinga, this man who just received the 2017 John Templeton Foundation prize, a man who comes into a world of philosophy that rejects not only belief in God, but almost metaphysics altogether. So we can't even get into these questions that Plantinga wants to bring to the table. How did you first come across Plantinga and what was your first interaction with him? I think I was telling Andy Cratch this summer we were talking about this as like planning has just haunted me at every chapter of my philosophical training.

And when I was like really deep diving into planning what I really admired was not only is this a really smart philosopher who's making like really careful important distinctions and just discovering things that people are overlooking, but he's also a pretty funny writer. He has his own voice like he's doing his way which when you're a graduate student all you want to do is like be special. Absolutely.

That makes sense. Absolutely. And you realize like here's a master and then I look at my papers in there and goofy and boring and barely getting it right and he's able to do be so accurate with such style.

I remember just like being very jealous of that. And then when I started my job so planning out worked at Notre Dame for many many years in his career and has had just a tremendous influence on generations of scholars and PhD students. So then it's kind of just walking into his shadow of like here's an extremely prolific scholar who's also a very generous teacher.

He has always people who believe that their careers are only possible because of his work. I think like you can be super accurate. You can have amazing style but to have that kind of profound human impact with your philosophy.

You just realize like you know the standards just keep raising the bar every time you think you're doing well in your career as a philosopher you get examples of someone like him who just has so much dimension. What do you think allowed him to bring that to what about him I guess specifically allowed him to speak into the world of philosophy in that way? I think he was not afraid ever to be himself. I say he was.

He is not afraid. If you meet him now or hang out with him now you realize like he is extremely authentic. And he in advice to Christian philosophers this really nice little short piece he wrote in the late 80s.

He tries to tell other people of faith who are trying to enter the profession of philosophy you don't have to check who you are at the door. Like you come to philosophy with a set

of questions and interests and hopes and loves and views about what you owe to others that are going to be partially formed and you're going to interact with professional norms but at the same time are like are not worth giving up and in fact like the philosophy done well is pursuit of authentic truth. And so I think that he is a great role model of somebody even very early on in his career when there is extraordinary pressure to conform to norms to please referees and journal editors to get tenure and to convince like 10 other strangers that you're good just in the way that they are.

Planning always seem to be comfortable doing things his way. A lot of people are not writing about religion not only did he write about religion but he wrote about like the nitty-yitty detailed messy versions of Christianity that a lot of people a lot of philosophers don't really want to engage with. People were just rediscovering interest in topics in metaphysics that had been kind of unfashionable in previous generations and planning it was really interesting these questions he had thought he had something really interesting and rigorous to say so just started writing books about it and the audience you know grew out of that it wasn't like he was trying to appeal to some set of people or say the right thing at the right time he just in some respects he's a true philosopher even though I can really disagree with him on some of his claims in metaphysics but he believes he's like speaking the truth the way Socrates the way Aristotle thought philosophers should do is you sit in the public square and there's truth that people need to realize and they might be inconvenient or uncomfortable but I'm like gonna argue for them and let's have a discussion let's open it up when it seems like his bravery in that regard and his dedication to the rigor of philosophy he in his I guess in his love for philosophy he's then able to bring these questions that were previously or recently off the table questions of God questions of even metaphysics and say all right I here's something that matters here's something that we can actually say that's really valuable even though we haven't been discussing it was it his credibility as a philosopher that allowed that God to become part of the conversation in philosophy again or was it something else I think a lot was going on a lot a lot is always going on in philosophy but certainly the last like few decades of you look at like the 1950s till now a couple things have happened one was that people got interested in question and like the quote unquote big questions questions in religion questions about the nature of reality that went through like a brief period of being poo poo but then we'll rediscover it pretty quickly in the 60s and planning it was somebody that was genuinely interested in these questions and willing to write in a kind of clear creative way about them and he had good ideas or say like a lot of people wanted to dismiss personal religious beliefs so the planning and some of his writings talks about the faith of like his grandmother who you know maybe is not PhD in epistemology but the belief is really complicated truths about the nature of God and how is it that somebody like his grandmother could come to have that kind of knowledge and this is something you know philosophers don't spend a lot of time trying to protect and explain your grandma's knowledge of the divine but planning it takes super seriously and he's like you know this interesting phenomenon of uh of

philis the search for philosophical justification like everybody has it's not just the purview of professional philosophers and wants to explain how this kind of knowledge would be possible for absolutely anybody so just kind of like opening up the doors like making the debate way bigger involving people of different uh education levels and backgrounds involving questions that like the academy might not have thought or that interesting anymore but still are in fact interesting to a great number of people and just saying we can do this we can use the same techniques that uh we hold the highest standards of work in philosophy too but make the topics that are suddenly on the table interesting again and I think I think like philosophy was hungry for that certainly there were generations of christian undergraduates and graduate students who saw his example and thought I want to do that and colleagues you know people that he was working with who were like I didn't know this was allowed I didn't know this was a way that we're allowed to do philosophy again he's like no you know no who said it's against law I'm just gonna do it and let's see what happens um and that's really exciting I think part of it is like you know the needs nobody forgot about god in the 40s definitely not in the 40s world war 2s raging and people are acutely aware of these big questions it's just sometimes the academic fads uh wax and wane and ways that uh that maybe don't get them represented everywhere planning almost brings a dose of reality to academia by almost bringing those questions back into a place where we can discuss those things I think so and something that's something that's also I think really important for christian philosophers now when uh when they consider what their role is in the academy is there's a temptation for us to kind of ghettoized christian thought to say that there's something that is like the catholic intellectual tradition the christian intellectual tradition and uh it's got hard walls around it we need to protect the walls we need to like build our monasteries and protect the truth against like the wars that are raging out there and every other topic and planning it takes the tradition super seriously I mean he's he's engaged with calvin and aquinas and anselm and thinking deeply about the tradition but he is also firmly engaged with cutting edge work and secular epistemology modal logic me new modal logic he knew um he was able to take much like aquinas great thinkers of the past able to take the resources from the best that philosophy has in the 20th century 21st century and to show that we can use it to develop our own concepts of god and and try to think more seriously and rigorously about um the questions of faith as they're posed to us now so we're sitting here uh in boston at an augusting collective retreat which is a a national network of student journals started at dart mith and harvard and it's now grown up to over 20 campuses and these journals exist on uh to help serve their campus to help start these conversations in a very similar way to what planiga was about um how did you come to be involved with uh this network and then and how do you and what would you say to um these students who were trying to wrestle with their faith and and and and reunify that with uh reason with um tough inquiry and asking those really difficult questions so i've been involved with the veritas forum for the last couple years and they're one of the co-sponsors of this retreat uh and i love veritas events uh because i think i've done now like six or seven of these discussions or debates

on college campuses where you pick a big question is belief in god rational and it's a question a lot of people are very curious about you get an incredibly diverse audience from people who are deeply religious people who are deeply skeptical people who have never had the opportunity to raise these questions before and they'll come out and then we do philosophy for two hours about questions of faith and you try to pitch it at a level where everybody feels involved but those are really exciting i mean the average person's gonna come to one of my metaphysics talks one that's probably i'm lucky if like eight people would turn up or care a big a big day of research talk yeah but a veritas forum like hundreds of people come out um and care about the truth and care about their neighbors like care about having these debates in the room with other human beings who are also searching for the truth so that's like that's the philosopher's dream that's what we're here for but it's been really exciting seeing all these students and they asking really interesting questions and and not just being in it for debate sake all these all these university campuses have debate organizations on them and and like our training sophists to debate better but these students also want to get it right yeah and and just have this deep abiding concern for the truth which is that's really exciting gives me so much hope you know i get you get stuck reading the newspaper and think like what's happening to us and then you meet these students and you're just like oh it's fine it's hopeful yeah and in many ways these students are are inheriting the work of someone like planiga who paved the way for this kind of intellectual rigor and to bring these questions to the broader academic sphere how can young philosophers or young christian intellectuals look at someone like planiga and learn from how he did it in his time and and maybe adjust for their own framework and for their own campus context short answer is i think these students should feel like this is a like that they can become great philosophers any one of them has the talent if this is where they're interested in their vocation seems to be calling them they you don't have to spend a lot of time worrying if you were born with the philosophy bug or whether or not you have the special innate talent for philosophy it's the kind of thing that's nurtured and in fact like forming friendships at events like this um learning from people who are much more senior who are able to tell you a little bit about their intellectual journey and development that's that's really important so one i'd hope that they look at people like planning as a role model well at the same time realizing that because really good philosophy is going to be responsive to the context in which it's produced that if they they're not going to defend the same views of the planning it defended they might have the same inclination this idea that like the faith is worth defending the questions of religion are are central to us how we find meaning in our lives but realize that the kinds of philosophical arguments that are convincing and the kinds of truths that are most important in the year 2040 are just not going to be the same as they were in 1980 and that's great and so students like wanting to emulate the in the person um but and the rigor but realizing that they've got their own philosophical questions to tackle and that part of what's going to make their work really invigorating i think is is like letting their real questions bubble up to the surface and then trying to develop i like the way Andy

Crotch put it in the presentation yesterday trying to develop the craft that planning it had um but crafting it towards their own ends and towards answering the questions that we're we're facing now which you know it just changes it changes so fast it changes so fast but underneath it all are these same drives and desires to come to understand the world around you to come to understand your own life that stays timeless in a way but the challenge maybe is then how do i how do i wrestle with that in my context there's often a misconception that religious thought can exist in its own sphere that is maybe less intellectually rigorous it's maybe feel good it helps you make sense of some confusing things actually don't i don't hear this from too many people usually i'll hear it from people who have been sold on this goofy definition that faith just is belief without evidence or belief with that reason and i never understand where people are getting that from as that is not the view of faith you get in the bible jesus is telling people things to believe all of the time and not just like saying like he doesn't just give the disciples like a laundry list he's like put all these in your belief box he's giving them arguments he's giving them illustrative examples and thought experiments and even when christ himself isn't doing this paul is doing it i mean if anybody's a philosopher at st paul sometimes too is detriment because he can get a little bit dry but he's making arguments about big questions and small questions dietary laws in the nature of the resurrection everything is like up there to be argued about and thought about and epistles need to be written and there are people in rome we're doing it wrong uh it's it's like from its very inception an intellectual and religious faith at the very earliest disciples and apostles are all raising questions you know judis is raising this question to jesus about the moral law and jesus is answering it and he's trying to respond to jesus's worries this is just a theme throughout every book of the bible so the idea that there's some part of faith that's meant to be not looking for reasons looking for evidence or intellectual i i think people have sometimes accepted that usually from secular authorities that you know it's just playing into the hands of philosophers like richard docket's philosophers right that's clear quote unquote yeah um who just want to get the get the christian or get the person of faith to accept by definition faith is not looking for reasons and then of course you're going to get hammered for being anti-science for being anti-rationalist because you've just you've given away the ghost you've given away the whole ship so i don't think it's biblical i think it's much more reasonable to think of faith as i mean this is a question i'm wrestling with quite a bit as a philosopher right now but i think that there's no part of our uh the part of our minds that searches for reasons and evidence that's bad all we're created that way it's part of what it is to be created in the image of a rational being and so we have to honor that and just realize that some of the questions we're dealing with when we deal when we try to understand who god is and what his purposes are and what our purposes are are very hard questions yeah uh and we are wrestling with the kinds of questions where it's hard to find evidence that's directly relevant and where uh human sin and our own limitations are always complicating things uh but this is our condition that we have to wrestle with and faith is asking the questions and caring about the answers and seeing the value and the beliefs that we're forming um but none of that

part of our lives ever requires turning off the the way that we were created to to want reasons to want to know yeah and Andy Andy Krautchen is keynote last night talked about this new secular age in a way that we're this new secular century from 20th to a exactly what would be your your hope for future philosophers and and specifically young Christian intellectuals who are going to come up in a world that's going to be wrestling with new questions but also old questions what what can they learn from people who've done it before them and and how can they do it well this is really tough I think I think every philosopher has this temptation to want to over blow the state of the world today like you know everything's falling apart played at play does like this all the time he's like Greece has collapsed democracy is dead uh and he was a kind of right but he was calling he's calling it a little bit too early um he sees with like C.S. Lewis he's like what's the point of doing philosophy when World War II was raging and then he tries to answer it so I think that students who are coming up in at least the western world today and especially in the United States and Europe are facing some challenges that I would not have predicted a few years ago so one widespread belief that there is no truth uh or you know that everything is fake news uh or that no no nothing is totally trustworthy or the way to determine whether something is trustworthy I was just reading the Washington Post before I came up here Facebook is going to start taking votes about which sources are most trustworthy that's like our standard for truth is what the most people think this is true which is I think a fallacy if you've ever from year one-on-one of your class so one thing I think they need to rediscover is like a love for the truth and the ability to to make other people see its value and I guess I'm a little bit surprised that we've gone so far down the other way I feel really badly about that you know we have made very little progress in solving some of the most serious social justice human rights needs uh in the world I think everybody in the 90s felt like yeah we've got fewer issues with racism now we're a more tolerant society we're more open and now just the last couple of years we're starting to realize nope things are still not quite bad and um so I would hope first that like Christian intellectuals coming up now would just double down on their commitment to the commandment to love and to to understand how radical that commandment was it's really easy to like to John Lennonize it like all you need is love and and it's not that big of a deal and to realize like in the face of some of the challenges we're facing right now what it is to love a white supremacist or to appropriately love each other when we're so fractured we just see very few points of agreement that's a that's a huge challenge and it's gonna pit Christians against uh against maybe some of the mainstream tides and also the belief that like they're still truth uh and it's not even like an esoteric truth it's like there's still some like truths that we can understand and defend and and we need to to like believe that that's still possible so those are my big like philosophical hopes is yeah we kind of stand up to two super weird I couldn't have predicted this was going to be such a big issue in 2018 but but really serious and extremely troubling cultural problems um I guess more specifically I you know we are still in the technological era and the ways that people are communicating in the way that art is being produced and the way that arguments are being made and consumed is

changing rapidly and I would hope that unlike our predecessors who would spend a great deal of time writing books I love writing books and reading them but also realizing that um like really high quality blogs news sites really well curated well-designed web pages making information freely and widely accessible making the truth like loved via these uh these technological means I think that's something that's going to be super exciting in the next century of of scholarship and something that some people are really afraid of I know a lot of college professors were like I missed the smell of books like I can't believe whatever fun candles don't smell is good candles don't smell is good and and it is important that people still yeah the form of a book is still the gold standard it's absolutely beautiful but I think it's also important that we train up generations of scholars who are realizing that there are all kinds of ways that the the truth can be debated and spread and made accessible and we're living in an era it's like you know the second Gutenberg the opportunity to to have these debates so many different formats and with people all around the world and just like being extremely creative and not feeling like tied to the old way of arguing but instead embracing the new opportunities and I think that's also going to happen just again meeting these students the last few days and seeing how excited they are yeah that's great well I think that's that's about it I think that's about a wrap um thank you so much for sitting down with me Megan this is really fascinating love what you're doing love your work and very cool to see how um someone like album planning that continues to inspire generations of young philosophers who are just crushing it we hope so we hope so we hope so that's the most optimistic I think we can be as philosophers yeah fair enough we hope so we might be wrong

(gentle music) [Silence]