



The GREAT
CONVERSATION

A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY

NORMAN MELCHERT
DAVID R. MORROW

EIGHTH EDITION

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A WORD TO INSTRUCTORS

Philosophy is both argument and innovation. We try in this introductory text to provide students with excellent examples of both in the ongoing story of a basic part of our intellectual life. We aim to teach students how to think by apprenticing them to a succession of the best thinkers humanity has produced, mainly but not exclusively in the Western tradition, thereby drawing them into this ongoing conversation. So we see how Aristotle builds on and criticizes his teacher, Plato, how Augustine creatively melds traditions stemming from Athens and Jerusalem, how Kant tries to solve “Hume’s problem,” and why Wittgenstein thought most previous philosophy was meaningless.

This eighth edition continues to represent the major philosophers through extensive quotations set in a fairly rich cultural and historical context. The large number of cross-references and footnotes continue to make the conversation metaphor more than mere fancy. And the four complete works—*Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Meditations*—are retained.

New to This Edition

A number of new features will be found in this edition. Throughout, the text has been tightened up and minor sections were deleted to make room for new material. In addition, several larger changes have been made. These changes include the following:

- Three new chapters introduce students to the beginnings of philosophical conversations in India and China, with one chapter on ancient Indian philosophy and two chapters on ancient Chinese philosophy.
- A new chapter is devoted entirely to philosophy in the Islamic world.
- A section on Hildegard of Bingen in a chapter on medieval thought and new sketches of Hypatia and Margaret Cavendish, and a profile of Émilie du Châtelet.

Again, for this edition, a student web page is available at www.oup.com/us/melchert. Here students will find essential points, vocabulary flashcards, sample multiple-choice questions, and further web

resources for each chapter. The latter consist mainly, though not exclusively, of original philosophical texts. This means that if you want to assign students to read, say, Hume's *Enquiry* or parts of Plato's *Republic*, these texts are easy for them to find. An Instructor's Manual is available at the same site.

The text is again available both as a single hard-back edition and as two paperback volumes, so it can be used economically in either a whole-year or a single-semester course. Although the entire book

contains too much material for a single semester, it provides a rich menu of choices for instructors who do not wish to restrict themselves to the earlier or later periods.

In this era, when even the educated have such a thin sense of history, teaching philosophy in this conversational, cumulative, back- and forward-looking way can be a service not just to philosophical understanding, but also to the culture as a whole.



A WORD TO STUDENTS

We all have opinions—we can’t help it. Having opinions is as natural to us as breathing. Opinions, moreover, are a dime a dozen. They’re floating all around us and they’re so different from each other. One person believes this, another that. You believe in God, your buddy doesn’t. John thinks there’s nothing wrong with keeping a found wallet, you are horrified. Some of us say, “Everybody’s got their own values”; others are sure that *some* things are just plain wrong—wrong for everybody. Some delay gratification for the sake of long-term goals; others indulge in whatever pleasures happen to be at hand. What kind of world do we live in? Jane studies science to find out, Jack turns to the occult. Is death the end for us?—Some say yes, some say no.

What’s a person to do?

Study Philosophy!

You don’t want simply to be at the mercy of accident in your opinions—for your views to be decided by irrelevant matters such as whom you

happen to know or where you were brought up. You want to believe for *good reasons*. That’s the right question, isn’t it? Which of these many opinions has the best reasons behind it? You want to live your life as wisely as possible.

Fortunately, we have a long tradition of really smart people who have been thinking about issues such as these, and we can go to them for help. They’re called “philosophers”—lovers of wisdom—and they have been trying to straighten out all these issues. They are in the business of asking which opinions or views or beliefs there is good reason to accept.

Unfortunately, these philosophers don’t all agree either. So you might ask, If these really smart philosophers can’t agree on what wisdom says, why should I pay them any attention? The answer is—because it’s the best shot you’ve got. If you seriously want to improve your opinions, there’s nothing better you can do than engage in a “conversation” with the best minds our history has produced.

One of the authors of this book had a teacher—a short, white-haired, elderly gentleman with a

thick German accent—who used to say, “Whether you will philosophize or won’t philosophize, you *must* philosophize.” By this, he meant that we can’t help making decisions about these crucial matters. We make them either well or badly, conscious of what we are doing or just stumbling along. As Kierkegaard would say, we express such decisions in the way we live, whether or not we have ever given them a moment’s thought. In a sense, then, you are already a philosopher, already engaged in the business philosophers have committed themselves to. So you shouldn’t have any problem in making a connection with what they write.

Does it help to think about such matters? You might as well ask whether it helps to think about the recipe before you start to cook. Socrates says that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” And that’s what philosophy is: an examination of opinions—and also of our lives, shaped by these opinions. In thinking philosophically, we try to sort our opinions into two baskets: the good-views basket and the trash.

We want to think about these matters as clearly and rationally as we can. *Thinking* is a kind of craft. Like any other craft, we can do it well or poorly, with shoddy workmanship or with care, and we improve with practice. It is common for people who want to learn a craft—cabinetmaking, for example—to apprentice themselves for a time to a master, doing what the master does until the time comes when they are skillful enough to set up shop on their own. You can think of reading this book as a kind of apprenticeship in thinking, with Socrates, Plato, Kant, and the rest as the masters. By thinking along with them, noting their insights and arguments, following their examinations of each other’s opinions, you should improve that all-important skill of your own.

This Book

This book is organized historically because that’s how philosophy has developed. It’s not just a recital of this following that, however. It is also intensively *interactive* because that’s what philosophy

has been. We have taken the metaphor of a conversation seriously. These folks are all talking to each other, arguing with each other, trying to convince each other—and that makes the story of philosophy a dramatic one. Aristotle learns a lot from his teacher, Plato, but argues that Plato makes one big mistake—and that colors everything else he says. Aquinas appreciates what Aristotle has done but claims that Aristotle neglects a basic feature of reality—and that makes all the difference. In the seventeenth century, Descartes looks back on his predecessors with despair, noting that virtually no agreement has been reached on any topic; he resolves to wipe the slate clean and make a new start. Beginning with an analysis of what it is to believe anything at all, C. S. Peirce argues that what Descartes wants to do is impossible. And so it goes.

Not all the philosophers in this book have been involved in the same conversation, however. While this book focuses mainly on the Western tradition—the philosophical conversation that began in ancient Greece—other cultures have had their own philosophical conversations. Philosophy arose independently in India and China as well, and the conversations in South and East Asia have been as rich as those in the West. This book cannot hope to convey those conversations in their entirety, but it will introduce you to some key ideas in each of them. Examining early Indian and Chinese philosophy alongside Western philosophy helps illuminate both the commonalities among those traditions—the questions that human beings have wrestled with all over the globe—and the differences between them.

To emphasize the conversational and interactive aspect of philosophy, the footnotes in this book provide numerous cross-references, mainly within Western philosophy but also between Western and non-Western thinkers. Your understanding of an issue will be substantially enriched if you follow up on these. To appreciate the line one thinker is pushing, it is important to see what he is arguing against, where he thinks that others have made mistakes, and how other thinkers have approached the same problems. No philosopher simply makes

pronouncements in the dark. There is always something that bugs each thinker, something she thinks is terribly wrong, something that needs correction. This irritant may be something current in the culture, or it may be what other philosophers have been saying. Using the cross-references to understand that background will help you to make sense of what is going on—and why. The index of names and terms at the back of this book will also help you.

Philosophers are noted for introducing novel terms or using familiar words in novel ways. They are not alone in this, of course; poets and scientists do the same. There is no reason to expect that our everyday language will be suited, just as it is, to express the truth of things, so you will have some vocabulary to master. You will find key words in boldface and a list of them at the end of each chapter. Use this list to help you review important concepts and arguments. Many of these boldfaced terms are defined in the Glossary at the back of the book.

The Issues

The search for wisdom—that is, philosophy—ranges far and wide. Who can say ahead of time what might be relevant to that search? Still, there are certain central problems that especially concern philosophers. In your study of this text, you can expect to find extensive discussions of these four issues in particular:

1. *Metaphysics*, the theory of reality. In our own day, Willard Quine has said that the basic question of metaphysics is very simple: *What is there?* The metaphysical question, of course, is not like, “Are there echidnas in Australia?” but “What kinds of things are there fundamentally?” Is the world through and through made of material stuff, or are there souls as well as bodies? Is there a God? If so, of what sort? Are there universal features to reality, or is everything just the particular thing that it is? Does everything happen necessarily or are fresh starts possible?

2. *Epistemology*, the theory of knowledge. We want to think not only about what there is, but also about *how we know* what there is—or, maybe, whether we can know anything at all! So we reflectively ask, What is it to know something anyway? How does that differ from just believing it? How is knowing something related to its being true? What is truth? How far can our knowledge reach? Are some things simply unknowable?
3. *Ethics*, the theory of right and wrong, good and bad. We aren’t just knowers and believers. We are doers. The question then arises of what wisdom might say about how best to live our lives. Does the fact that something gives us pleasure make it the right thing to do? Do we need to think about how our actions affect others? If so, in what way? Are there really goods and bads, or does thinking so make it so? Do we have duties? If so, where do they come from? What is virtue and vice? What is justice? Is justice important?
4. *Human nature*—Socrates took as his motto a slogan that was inscribed in the temple of Apollo in Delphi: know thyself. But that has proved none too easy to do. What are we, anyway? Are we simply bits of matter caught up in the universal mechanism of the world, or do we have minds that escape this deterministic machine? What is it to have a mind? Is mind separate from body? How is it related to the brain? Do we have a free will? How important to my self-identity is my relationship to others? To what degree can I be responsible for the creation of myself?

Running through these issues is a fifth one that perhaps deserves special mention. It centers on the idea of *relativism*. The question is whether there is a way to get beyond the prejudices and assumptions peculiar to ourselves or our culture—or whether that’s all there is. Are there *just* opinions, with no one opinion ultimately any better than any other? Are all views relative to time and place, to culture and position? Is there no *truth*—or, anyway, no truth that we can know to be true?

This problem, which entered all the great conversations early, has persisted to this day. Most of the Western philosophical tradition can be thought of as a series of attempts to kill such skepticism and relativism, but this phoenix will not die. Our own age has the distinction, perhaps, of being the first age ever in which the basic assumptions of most people, certainly of most educated people, are relativistic, so this theme will have a particular poignancy for us. We will want to understand how we came to this point and what it means to be here. We will also want to ask ourselves how adequate this relativistic outlook is.

What we are is what we have become, and what we have become has been shaped by our history. In this book, we look at that history, hoping to understand ourselves better and, thereby, gain some wisdom for living our lives.

Reading Philosophy

Reading philosophy is not like reading a novel, nor is it like reading a research report in biology or a history of the American South. Philosophers have their own aims and ways of proceeding, and it will pay to take note of them at the beginning. Philosophers aim at the truth about fundamental matters, and in doing so they offer arguments.

If you want to believe for good reasons, what you seek is an **argument**. An argument in philosophy is not a quarrel or a disagreement, but simply this business of offering reasons to believe. Every argument, in this sense, has a certain structure. There is some proposition the philosopher wants you to believe—or thinks every rational person ought to believe—and this is called the **conclusion**. And there are the reasons he or she offers to convince you of that conclusion; these are called the **premises**.

In reading philosophy, there are many things to look for—central concepts, presuppositions, overall view of things—but the main things to look for are the arguments. And the first thing to identify is the conclusion of the argument: What is it that the philosopher wants you to believe? Once you have identified the conclusion, you need to look for the reasons given for believing that

conclusion. Usually philosophers do not set out their arguments in a formal way, with premises listed first and the conclusion last. The argument will be embedded in the text, and you need to sniff it out. This is usually not so hard, but it does take careful attention.

Occasionally, especially if the argument is complex or obscure, we give you some help and list the premises and conclusion in a more formal way. You might right now want to look at a few examples. Socrates in prison argues that it would be wrong for him to escape; that is the conclusion, and we set out his argument for it on p. 144. Plato argues that being happy and being moral are the same thing; see an outline of his argument on p. 176. Anselm gives us a complex argument for the existence of God; see our summary on p. 314. And Descartes argues that we have souls that are distinct from and independent of our bodies; see p. 319.

Often, however, you will need to identify the argument buried in the prose for yourself. What is it that the philosopher is trying to get you to believe? And why does he think you should believe that? It will be helpful, and a test of your understanding, if you try to set the argument out for yourself in a more or less formal way; keep a small notebook, and list the main arguments chapter by chapter.

Your first aim should be to *understand* the argument. But that is not the only thing, because you will also want to discover how good the argument is. These very smart philosophers, to tell the truth, have given us lots of poor arguments; they're only human, after all. So you need to try to *evaluate* the arguments. In evaluating an argument, there are two things to look at: the truth or acceptability of the premises and whether the premises actually do support the conclusion.

For an argument to be a good one, the reasons given in support of the conclusion have to at least be plausible. Ideally the premises should be known to be *true*, but that is a hard standard to meet. If the reasons are either false or implausible, they can't lend truth or plausibility to the conclusion. If there are good reasons to doubt the premises, then the argument should not convince you.

It may be, however, that all the premises are true, or at least plausible, and yet the argument is a poor one. This can happen when the premises do not have the right kind of relation to the conclusion. Broadly speaking, there are two kinds of arguments: **deductive** and **inductive**. A good deductive argument is one in which the premises—if true—*guarantee* the truth of the conclusion. In other words, the conclusion couldn't possibly be false if the premises are true. When this condition is satisfied, we say that the argument is **valid**. Note that an argument may have validity even though the premises are not in fact true; it is enough that if the premises *were* true, then the conclusion *would have to be* true. When a deductive argument is both valid and has true premises, we say it is **sound**.

Inductive arguments have a looser relation between premises and conclusion. Here the premises give some support to the conclusion—the more support the better—but they fall short of guaranteeing the truth of the conclusion. Typically philosophers aim to give sound deductive arguments, and the methods of evaluating these arguments will be those of the preceding two paragraphs.

You will get some help in evaluating arguments because you will see philosophers evaluating the arguments of other philosophers. (Of course, these evaluative arguments themselves may be either good or bad.) This is what makes the story of philosophy so dramatic. Here are a few examples. Aristotle argues that Plato's arguments for eternal, unchanging realities (which Plato calls Forms) are completely unsound; see pp. 198–199. Augustine tries to undercut the arguments of the skeptics on pp. 267–268. And Hume criticizes the design argument for the existence of God on pp. 456–458.

Sometimes you will see a philosopher criticizing another philosopher's presuppositions (as Peirce criticizes Descartes' views about doubt, pp. 596–597) or directly disputing another's conclusion (as Hegel does with respect to Kant's claim that there is a single basic principle of morality, pp. 512–513). But even here, it is argument that is the heart of the matter.

In reading philosophy you can't just be a passive observer. It's no good trying to read for

understanding while texting with your friends. You need to concentrate, focus, and be actively engaged in the process. Here are a few general rules:

1. Have an open mind as you read. Don't decide after the first few paragraphs that what a philosopher is saying is absurd or silly. Follow the argument, and you may change your mind about things of some importance.
2. Write out brief answers to the questions embedded in the chapters as you go along; check back in the text to see that you have got it right.
3. Use the key words to check your understanding of basic concepts.
4. Try to see how the arguments of the philosophers bear on your own current views of things. Bring them home; apply them to the way you now think of the world and your place in it.

Reading philosophy is not the easiest thing in the world, but it's not impossible either. If you make a good effort, you may find that it is even rather fun.

Web Resources

A website for this book is available at www.oup.com/us/melchert. Here you will find, for each chapter, the following aids:

- Essential Points (a brief list of crucial concepts and ideas)
- Flashcards (definitions of basic concepts)
- Multiple-Choice Questions (practice tests)
- Web Resources (mostly original works that are discussed in this text—e.g., Plato's *Meno* or Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*—but also some secondary treatments)

The web also has some general resources that you might find helpful:

- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <http://plato.stanford.edu>
- Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <http://www.iep.utm.edu>

Both these encyclopedias contain reliable in-depth discussions of the philosophers and topics we will be studying.

Philosophy Pages: <http://www.philosophypages.com>

A source containing a variety of things, most notably a Philosophical Dictionary.

Project Vox: <http://www.projectvox.org>

A source containing information about selected women philosophers of the early modern period,

whose philosophical voices and contributions are being recovered and recognized by historians of philosophy.

YouTube contains numerous short interviews with and about philosophers, such as those at <https://youtube/nG0EWNzFl4> and <https://youtube/B2fLyvsHHaQ>, as well as various series of short videos about philosophical concepts, such as those by Wireless Philosophy at <https://www.youtube.com/user/WirelessPhilosophy>



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Comments relating to this new edition may be sent to us at norm.mel@verizon.net or dmorrow2@gmu.edu.

I was aware that the reading of all good books is indeed like a conversation with the noblest men of past centuries who were the authors of them, nay a carefully studied conversation, in which they reveal to us none but the best of their thoughts.

—*René Descartes*

We—mankind—are a conversation.

—*Martin Heidegger*

In truth, there is no divorce between philosophy and life.

—*Simone de Beauvoir*

CHAPTER

1

BEFORE PHILOSOPHY

Myth in Hesiod and Homer



Everywhere and at all times, we humans have wondered at our own existence and at our place in the scheme of things. We have asked, in curiosity and amazement, “What’s it all about?” “How are we to understand this life of ours?” “How is it best lived?” “Does it end at death?” “This world we find ourselves in—where does it come from?” “What is it, anyway?” “How is it related to us?”

These are some of the many philosophical questions we ask. Every culture offers answers, though not every culture has developed what we know as philosophy. Early answers to such questions universally take the form of stories, usually stories involving the gods—gigantic powers of a personal nature, engaged in tremendous feats of creation, frequently struggling with one another and intervening in human life for good or ill.

We call these stories *myths*. They are told and retold, taught to children as the plain facts, gaining authority by their age, by repetition, and by the apparent fact that within a given culture, virtually everyone accepts them. They shape a tradition, and traditions shape lives.

Philosophy, literally “love of wisdom,” begins when individuals start to ask, “Why should we believe these stories?” “How do we know they are true?” When people try to give good reasons for believing (or not believing) these myths, they have begun to do philosophy. Philosophers look at myths with a critical eye, sometimes defending them and sometimes appreciating what myths try to do, but often attacking myths’ claims to literal truth. So there is a tension between these stories and philosophy, a tension that occasionally breaks into open conflict.

This conflict is epitomized in the execution of the philosopher **Socrates** by his fellow Athenians in 399 B.C. The Athenians accused Socrates of corrupting the youth because he challenged the commonly accepted views and values of ancient Athens. But even though Socrates challenged those views, his own views were deeply influenced by them. He was part of a conversation, already centuries old among the Greeks, about how to understand the world and our place in it. That conversation continued after his death, right down to the present

day, spreading far beyond Athens and winding its way through all of Western intellectual history.

If we want to understand this conversation, we need to understand where and how it began. We need to understand Socrates, and we need to understand where he came from. To do that, we need to understand the myths through which the ancient Greeks had tried to understand their world. Our aim is neither a comprehensive survey nor mere acquaintance with some of these stories. We will be trying to understand something of Greek religion and culture, of the intellectual and spiritual life of the people who told these stories. As a result, we should be able to grasp why Socrates believed what he did and why some of Socrates' contemporaries reacted to him as they did. With that in mind, we take a brief look at two of the great Greek poets: Hesiod and Homer.

Hesiod: War Among the Gods

The poet we know as **Hesiod** probably composed his poem *Theogony* toward the end of the eighth century B.C., but he drew on much older traditions and seems to have synthesized stories that are not always consistent. The term *theogony* means "origin or birth of the gods," and the stories contained in the poem concern the beginnings of all things. In this chapter, we look only at certain central events, as Hesiod relates them.

Hesiod claims to have written these lines under divine inspiration. (Suggestion: Read quotations aloud, especially poetry; you will find that they become more meaningful.)

The Muses once taught Hesiod to sing
Sweet songs, while he was shepherding his lambs
On holy Helicon; the goddesses
Olympian, daughters of Zeus who holds
The aegis,* first addressed these words to me:
"You rustic shepherds, shame: bellies you are,
Not men! We know enough to make up lies
Which are convincing, but we also have
The skill, when we've a mind, to speak the truth."
So spoke the fresh-voiced daughters of great Zeus
And plucked and gave a staff to me, a shoot
Of blooming laurel, wonderful to see,

And breathed a sacred voice into my mouth
With which to celebrate the things to come
And things which were before.

—*Theogony*, 21–35¹

The Muses, according to the tradition Hesiod is drawing on, are goddesses who inspired poets, artists, and writers. In this passage, Hesiod is telling us that the stories he narrates are not vulgar shepherds' lies but are backed by the authority of the gods and embody the remembrance of events long past. They thus represent the *truth*, Hesiod says, and are worthy of belief.

What have the Muses revealed?

And sending out
Unearthly music, first they celebrate
The august race of first-born gods, whom Earth
Bore to broad Heaven, then their progeny,
Givers of good things. Next they sing of Zeus
The father of gods and men, how high he is
Above the other gods, how great in strength.

—*Theogony*, 42–48

Note that the gods are *born*; their origin, like our own, is explicitly sexual. Their ancestors are Earth (Gaea, or Gaia) and Heaven (Ouranos).* And like people, the gods differ in status and power, with Zeus, king of the gods, being the most exalted.

There is confusion in the Greek stories about the very first things (no wonder), and there are contradictions among them. According to Hesiod, first there is *chaos*, apparently a formless mass of stuff, dark and without differentiation. Out of this chaos, Earth appears. (Don't ask how.) Earth then gives birth to starry Heaven,

to be
An equal to herself, to cover her
All over, and to be a resting-place,
Always secure, for all the blessed gods.

—*Theogony*, 27–30

After lying with Heaven, Earth bears the first race of gods, the **Titans**, together with the

*Some people nowadays speak of the Gaea hypothesis and urge us to think of Earth as a living organism. Here we have a self-conscious attempt to revive an ancient way of thinking about the planet we inhabit. Ideas of the Earth-mother and Mother Nature likewise echo such early myths.

*The *aegis* is a symbol of authority.

Cyclops—three giants with but one round eye in the middle of each giant’s forehead. Three other sons, “mighty and violent,” are born to the pair, each with a hundred arms and fifty heads:

And these most awful sons of Earth and Heaven
Were hated by their father from the first.
As soon as each was born, Ouranos hid
The child in a secret hiding-place in Earth*
And would not let it come to see the light,
And he enjoyed this wickedness.

—*Theogony*, 155–160

Earth, distressed and pained with this crowd hidden within her, forms a great sickle of hardest metal and urges her children to use it on their father for his shameful deeds. The boldest of the Titans, Kronos, takes the sickle and plots vengeance with his mother.

Great Heaven came, and with him brought
the night.
Longing for love, he lay around the Earth,
Spreading out fully. But the hidden boy
Stretched forth his left hand; in his right he took
The great long jagged sickle; eagerly
He harvested his father’s genitals
And threw them off behind.

—*Theogony*, 176–182

Where Heaven’s bloody drops fall on land, the Furies spring up—monstrous goddesses who hunt down and punish wrongdoers.†

In the Titans’ vengeance for their father’s wickedness, we see a characteristic theme in Greek thought, a theme repeated again and again in the great classical tragedies and also echoed in later philosophy: Violating the rule of **justice**—even in the service of justice—brings consequences.

The idea repeats itself in the Titan’s story. Kronos, now ruler among the Titans, has children by Rhea, among them Hera, **Hades**, and **Poseidon**. Learning of a prophecy that he will be dethroned by one of these children, Kronos

seizes the newborns and swallows them.* When Rhea bears another son, however, she hides him away in a cave and gives Kronos a stone wrapped in swaddling clothes to swallow. The hidden son, of course, is **Zeus**.

When grown to full strength, Zeus disguises himself as a cupbearer and persuades Kronos to drink a potion. This causes Kronos to vomit up his brothers and sisters—together with the stone. (The stone, Hesiod tells us, is set up at Delphi, north-west of Athens, to mark the center of the earth.) Together with his brothers and their allies, Zeus makes war on the Titans. The war drags on for ten years until Zeus frees the Cyclops from their imprisonment in Tartarus. The Cyclops give Zeus a lightning bolt, supply Poseidon with a trident, and provide Hades with a helmet that makes him invisible. With these aids, the gods overthrow Kronos and the Titans and hurl them down into Tartarus. The three victorious brothers divide up the territory: Zeus rules the sky (he is called “cloudgatherer” and “storm-bringer”); Poseidon governs the sea; and Hades reigns in Tartarus. Earth is shared by all three. Again, the myths tell us that wickedness does not pay.

Thus, the gods set up a relatively stable order in the universe, an order both natural and moral. Although the gods quarrel among themselves and are not above lies, adultery, and favoritism, each guards something important and dear to humans. They also see to it that wickedness is punished and virtue is rewarded, just as was the case among themselves.

-
1. Why are philosophers dissatisfied with mythological accounts of reality?
 2. What is the topic of Hesiod’s *Theogony*?
 3. Tell the story of how Zeus came to be king of the gods.
 4. What moral runs through these early myths?
-

*This dank and gloomy place below the surface of the earth and sea is known as Tartarus.

†In contemporary literature, you can find these Furies represented in Jean-Paul Sartre’s play *The Flies*.

**“Kronos” is closely related to the Greek word for time, “chronos.” What might it mean that Kronos devours his children? And that they overthrow his rule to establish cities—communities of justice—that outlive their citizens?

Homer: Heroes, Gods, and Excellence

Xenophanes, a philosopher we will meet later,* tells us that “from the beginning all have learnt in accordance with **Homer**.”² As we have seen, poets were thought to write by divine inspiration, and for centuries Greeks listened to or read the works of Homer, much as people read the Bible or the Koran today. Homer, above all others, was the great teacher of the Greeks. To discover what was truly excellent in battle, governance, counsel, sport, the home, and human life in general, the Greeks looked to Homer’s tales. These dramatic stories offered a picture of the world and people’s place in it that molded the Greek mind and character. Western philosophy begins against the Homeric background, so we need to understand something of Homer.

Homer simply takes for granted the tradition of gods and heroes set down in Hesiod’s *Theogony*. That sky-god tradition of Zeus, Athena, and Apollo celebrates clarity and order, mastery over chaos, intellect and beauty: fertile soil, one must think, for philosophy.

Homer’s two great poems are *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Here, we focus on *The Iliad*, a long poem about a brief period during the nine-year-long Trojan war.† This war came about when **Paris**, son of the Trojan king **Priam**, seduced **Helen**, the famously beautiful wife of the Spartan king **Menelaus**. Paris spirited Helen away to his home in **Troy**, across the Aegean Sea from her home in Achaea, in southern Greece (see Map 1). Menelaus’s brother, **Agamemnon**, the king of Argos, led an army of Greeks to recover Helen, to avenge the wrong against his brother, and—not just incidentally—to gain honor, glory, and plunder.

*See “Xenophanes: The Gods as Fictions,” in Chapter 2.

†The date of the war is uncertain; scholarly estimates tend to put it near the end of the thirteenth century B.C. The poems took form in song and were passed along in an oral tradition from generation to generation. They were written down some time in the eighth century B.C. Tradition ascribes them to a blind bard known as Homer, but the poems we now have may be the work of more than one poet.

Among Agamemnon’s forces was **Achilles**, the greatest warrior of them all.

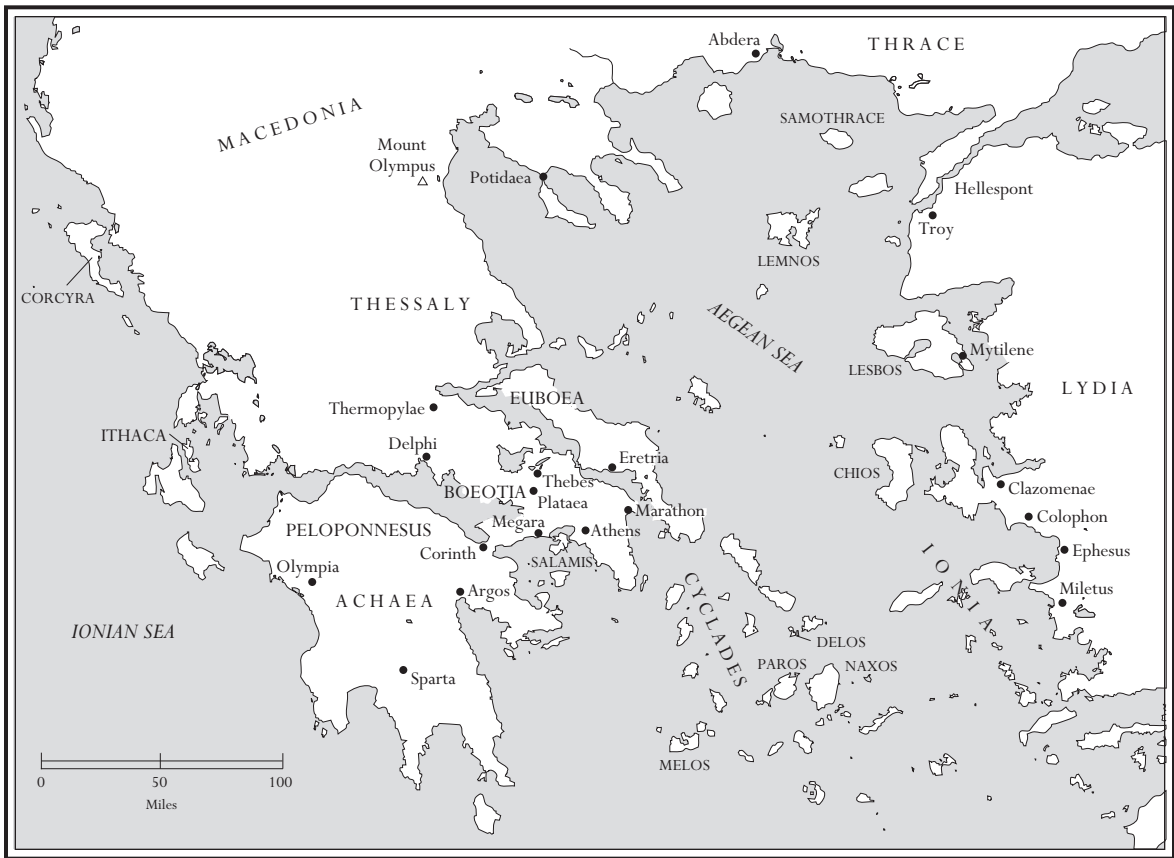
Here is how *The Iliad* begins.

Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus’
son Achilles,
murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans
countless losses,
hurling down to the House of Death so many
sturdy souls,
great fighters’ souls, but made their bodies carrion,
feasts for the dogs and birds,
and the will of Zeus was moving toward its end.
Begin, Muse, when the two first broke and clashed,
Agamemnon lord of men and brilliant Achilles.
What god drove them to fight with such a fury?
Apollo the son of Zeus and Leto. Incensed at
the king
he swept a fatal plague through the army—men
were dying
and all because Agamemnon had spurned
Apollo’s priest.

—*The Iliad*, Book 1, 1–12³

The poet begins by announcing his theme: rage, specifically the excessive, irrational anger of Achilles—anger beyond all bounds that brings death and destruction to so many Greeks and almost costs them the war. So we might expect that the poem has a *moral* aspect. Moreover, in the sixth line we read that what happened was in accord with the will of Zeus, who sees to it that flagrant violations of good order do not go unpunished. In these first lines we also learn of **Apollo**, the son of Zeus, who has sent a plague on the Greek army because Agamemnon offended him. We can see, then, that Homer’s world is one of kings and heroes, majestic but flawed, engaged in gargantuan projects against a background of gods who cannot safely be ignored.

The story Homer tells goes roughly like this. In a raid on a Trojan ally, the Greeks capture a beautiful girl who happens to be the daughter of a priest of Apollo. The army awards her to Agamemnon as part of his spoils. The priest comes to plead for her return, offering ransom, but he is rudely rebuffed. Agamemnon will not give back the girl. The priest appeals to Apollo, who, angered by the treatment his priest is receiving, sends a plague to Agamemnon’s troops.

MAP 1 *The Greek Mainland*

The soldiers, wanting to know what is causing the plague, appeal to their seer, who explains the situation and suggests returning the girl. Agamemnon is furious. To forfeit his prize while the other warriors keep theirs goes against the honor due him as commander. He finally agrees to give up the girl but demands Achilles' prize, an exceptionally lovely woman, in exchange. The two heroes quarrel bitterly. Enraged, Achilles returns to his tent and refuses to fight anymore.

Because Achilles is the greatest of the Greek warriors, his anger has serious consequences. The war goes badly for the Greeks. The Trojans fight their way to the beach and begin to burn the ships. Patroclus, Achilles' dearest friend, pleads with him to relent, but he will not. If Achilles won't have pity on his comrades, Patroclus says, then at least let him

take Achilles' armor and fight in his place. Achilles agrees, and the tactic has some success. The Greeks drive the Trojans back toward the city, but in the fighting Patroclus is killed by **Hector**, another son of Priam and the greatest of the Trojan warriors.

Achilles' rage now turns on Hector and the Trojans. He rejoins the war to wreak havoc among them. After slaughtering many, he comes face to face with Hector. Achilles kills him and drags his body back to camp behind his chariot—a profoundly disrespectful thing to do. As the poem ends, King Priam goes alone by night into the Greek camp to plead with Achilles for the body of his son. He and Achilles weep together, for Hector and for Patroclus, and Achilles gives up the body.

This summary emphasizes the human side of the story. From that point of view, *The Iliad* can be

thought of as the story both of the tragedy that excess and pride lead to and of the humanization of Achilles. The main moral is the same as that expressed by a motto at the celebrated oracle at Delphi: “Nothing too much.”* **Moderation** is what Achilles lacked, and his lack led to disaster. At the same time, the poem celebrates the “heroic virtues”: *strength, courage, physical prowess*, and the kind of *wisdom* that consists in the ability to devise clever plans to achieve one’s ends. For Homer and his audience, these characteristics, together with moderation, make up the model of human excellence. These are the virtues ancient Greeks taught their children.

The gods also appear throughout the story, looking on, hearing appeals, taking sides, and interfering. For instance, when Achilles is sulking about Agamemnon having taken “his” woman, he prays to his mother, the goddess Thetis. (Achilles has a mortal father.) Achilles asks Thetis to go to Zeus and beg him to give victory to—the Trojans!

Zeus frets that his wife Hera will be upset—she favors the Greeks—but he agrees. If Zeus grants an appeal, that will be done. (Recall the sixth line of the poem.) Homeric religion, while certainly not a monotheism, is not exactly a true polytheism either. The many powers that govern the world seem to be under the rule of one.† That rule gives a kind of order to the universe.

Moreover, this order is basically a just order, though it may not be designed altogether with human beings in mind. Zeus sees to it that certain customs are enforced: that oaths are kept, that supplicants are granted mercy, and that the rules governing guest and host are observed—the rules that Paris violated so grossly when he seduced Helen away from her husband, Menelaus. Homer suggests that the Greeks eventually win the war because Zeus punishes the violation of these customs. However, the Greeks are punished with great losses

before their eventual victory because Agamemnon had acted unjustly in taking Achilles’ prize of war.

The Homeric idea of justice is not exactly the same as ours. The mortals and gods in Homer’s world covet **honor** and glory above all else. Agamemnon is angry not primarily because “his” woman was taken back to her father but because his honor has been offended. Booty is valued not for its own sake so much as for the honor it conveys—the better the loot, the greater the honor. Achilles is overcome by rage because Agamemnon has humiliated him, thus depriving him of the honor due him. That is why Thetis begs Zeus to let the Trojans prevail until the Greeks restore to Achilles “the honor he deserves.”

What is just in this social world is that each person receive the honor that is due, given that person’s status and position. Nestor, wise counselor of the Greeks, tries to make peace between Agamemnon and Achilles by appealing to precisely this principle.

“Don’t seize the girl, Agamemnon, powerful as you are—

leave her, just as the sons of Achaea gave her, his prize from the very first.

And you, Achilles, never hope to fight it out with your king, pitting force against his force: no one can match the honors dealt a king, you know,

a sceptered king to whom Zeus gives glory.

Strong as you are—a goddess was your mother—he has more power because he rules more men.”

—*The Iliad*, Book 1, 321–329

Nestor tries to reconcile them by pointing out what is just, what each man’s honor requires. Unfortunately, neither one heeds his good advice.

The gods are also interested in honor. It has often been remarked that Homer’s gods reflect the society that they allegedly govern; they are powerful, jealous of their prerogatives, quarrel among themselves, and are not above a certain deceitfulness, although some sorts of evil are simply beneath their dignity. The chief difference between human beings and the gods is that human beings are bound for death and the gods are not. Greeks often refer to the gods simply as “the immortals.” Immortality makes possible a kind of blessedness among the gods that is impossible for human beings.

*This was one of several mottoes that had appeared mysteriously on the temple walls. No one could explain how they got there, and it was assumed that Apollo himself must have written them.

†We shall see philosophers wrestling with this problem of “the one and the many.” In what sense, exactly, is this world *one* world?

As immortals, the gods are interested in the affairs of mortals, but only insofar as they are entertained or their honor is touched. They are spectators of the human comedy—or tragedy; they watch human affairs the way we watch soap operas and reality television. In a famous passage from the *Iliad*, Zeus decides to sit out the battle about to rage below and simply observe, saying,

“These mortals do concern me, dying as they are. Still, here I stay on Olympus throned aloft, here in my steep mountain cleft, to feast my eyes and delight my heart.”

—*The Iliad*, Book 20, 26–29

The gods both deserve and demand honor, punishing humans who refuse to give it. We saw that Apollo sent a plague because Agamemnon refused the ransom offered by Apollo’s priest. When humans dishonor the gods or do not respect their prerogatives, they are guilty of arrogance, or **hubris**. In this state, human beings in effect think of themselves as gods, forgetting their finitude, their limitations, their mortality. Hubris is punished by the gods, as hero after hero discovers to his dismay.

The gulf between Homeric gods and mortals—even those, like Achilles, who have one divine parent—is clear and impassable. In closing this brief survey of Greek myths, we want to emphasize a particular aspect of this gulf: Those whose thoughts were shaped by Homer neither believed in nor aspired to any immortality worth prizing. There is a kind of shadowy existence after death, but the typical attitude toward it is expressed by Achilles when Odysseus visits him in the underworld.

“No winning words about death to me, shining Odysseus!

By god, I’d rather slave on earth for another man—
some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive—
than rule down here over all the breathless dead.”

—*The Odyssey*, Book 11, 555–558⁴

For these conquerors who glory in the strength of their bodies, nothing after death could compare to glory in this life. They know they are destined to die, believe that death is the end of any life worth

living, and take the attitude expressed by Hector when faced with Achilles:

“And now death, grim death is looming up beside me,
no longer far away. No way to escape it now. This, this was their pleasure after all, sealed long ago—
Zeus and the son of Zeus, the distant deadly Archer—
though often before now they rushed to my defense.
So now I meet my doom. Well let me die—
but not without struggle, not without glory, no,
in some great clash of arms that even men to come will hear of down the years!”

—*The Iliad*, Book 22, 354–362

Again, even at the end, the quest for honor is paramount.

-
1. Describe the main characters in Homer’s poem *The Iliad*—for example, Agamemnon, Achilles, Apollo, Zeus, and Hector.
 2. Retell the main outline of the story.
 3. What is the theme of the poem, as expressed in the first lines?
 4. How are honor and justice related in Homer’s view of things?
 5. What virtues are said to constitute human excellence?
 6. Describe the relationship between humans and gods. In what ways are they similar, and how do they differ?
 7. What is hubris, and what is its opposite?
 8. Do Homer’s heroes long for immortality? Explain.
-

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

1. Gather examples of mythological thinking that are current today. What questions would a philosopher want to ask about them?

KEY WORDS

Socrates	Justice
Hesiod	Hades
<i>Theogony</i>	Poseidon
Titans	Zeus

Homer	Achilles
Paris	Apollo
Priam	Hector
Helen	moderation
Menelaus	honor
Troy	hubris
Agamemnon	

2. Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948), 22.
3. Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1990). All quotations are taken from this translation; references are to book and line numbers.
4. Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1996). References are to book and line numbers.

NOTES

1. Hesiod, *Theogony*, trans. Dorothea Wender, in *Hesiod and Theognis* (New York: Penguin Books, 1973). All quotations are taken from this translation; numbers are line numbers.

CHAPTER

2

PHILOSOPHY BEFORE SOCRATES



If the great conversation of Western philosophy is rooted in the poetry of Hesiod and Homer, it first sprouted in the protoscientific thought of Ionia (see Map 1). A little more than a century before Socrates' birth, Greek thinkers on the eastern shore of the Aegean Sea began to challenge the traditional myths with attempts at more rational explanations of the world around them. Western philosophy was born in these attempts and in the conversation that it began. So, it is to these first Greek philosophers that we now turn.

It is seldom entirely clear why thinkers raised in a certain tradition become dissatisfied enough to try to establish a new one. The reason is even more obscure in the case of the earliest Greek philosophers because we have a scarcity of information about them. Although most of them wrote books, these writings are almost entirely lost, some surviving in small fragments, others known only by references to them and quotations or paraphrases by later writers. As a group, these thinkers are usually known as the “pre-Socratics.” This name

testifies to the pivotal importance put on Socrates by his successors.*

For whatever reason, a tradition grew up in which questions about the nature of the world took center stage, a tradition that was not content with stories about the gods. For thinkers trying to *reason* their way to a view about reality, the Homeric tales and Hesiod's divine genealogy must have seemed impossibly crude. Still, the questions addressed by these myths were real questions: What is the true nature of reality? What is its origin? What is our place in it? How are we related to the powers that govern it? What is the best way to live? Philosophy is born when thinkers attempt to answer these questions more rationally than myth does.

In early Greek philosophical thought, certain issues took center stage. There is the problem of

*In this chapter, we look only at selected pre-Socratic thinkers. A more extensive and very readable treatment of others—including Anaximenes, Empedocles, and Anaxagoras—can be found in Merrill Ring, *Beginning with the Pre-Socratics* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1999).

the one and the many: If reality is in some sense one, what accounts for the many different individual things (and kinds of things) that we experience? Greek myth tends to answer this question in animistic or personal terms by referring either to birth or to spontaneous emergence. For instance, we find Hesiod simply asserting that “Chaos was first of all, but next appeared / Broad bosomed Earth” (*Theogony*, 116, 117). How, why, when, and by what means did it appear? On these questions the tradition is silent.

Then there is the problem of *reality and appearance*. True, things appear to change; they appear to be “out there,” independent of us. But we all know that things are not always what they seem. Might reality in fact be very different from the way it appears in our experience? How could we know?

Of course, there is also the question about *human reality*: Who are we, and how are we related to the rest of what there is? These questions perplex our first philosophers and we shall see them struggling to frame ever more satisfactory answers to them.

Thales: The One as Water

Thales (c. 625–547 B.C.) of Miletus, a Greek seaport on the shore of Asia Minor (see Map 1), seems to have been one who was dissatisfied with the traditional stories. Aristotle, one of the most important philosophers in the Western tradition, calls Thales the founder of philosophy.* We know very little about Thales, and part of what we do know is arguably legendary. So, our consideration here is brief and somewhat speculative. He is said to have held (1) that the cause and element of all things is water and (2) that all things are filled with gods. What could these two rather obscure sayings mean?

Concerning the first, it is striking that Thales supposes there is some *one* thing that is both the origin and the underlying nature of all things. It is surely not obvious that wine and bread and stones and wind are really the same stuff despite all their differences. It is equally striking that Thales chooses one of the things that occur naturally in the world of our experience to play that role, rather

than one of the gods. Here we are clearly in a different thought-world from that of Homer. Thales’ motto seems to be this: *Account for what you can see and touch in terms of things you can see and touch*. This idea is a radical departure from anything prior to it.

Why would Thales choose water to play the role of the primeval stuff? Aristotle speculates that Thales must have noticed that water is essential for the nourishment of all things and that without moisture, seeds will not develop into plants. We might add that Thales must have noticed that water is the only naturally occurring substance that can be seen to vary from solid to liquid to gas. The fact that the wet blue sea, the white crystalline snow, and the damp and muggy air seem to be the same thing despite their differences could well have suggested that water might take even more forms.

At first glance, the saying that all things are full of gods seems to go in a quite different direction. If we think a moment, however, we can see that it is consistent with the saying about water. What is the essential characteristic of the gods, according to the Greeks? Their immortality. To say that all things are full of gods, then, is to say in effect that *in each thing*—not outside it or in addition to it—is a principle that is immortal. But this suggests that the things of experience do not need explanations from outside themselves as to why they exist. Moreover, tradition appeals to the gods as a principle of action. Why did lightning strike just there? Because Zeus was angry with *that man*. But to say that all things are themselves full of gods may well mean that we do not have to appeal beyond them to explain why events happen. Things have the principles of their behavior within themselves.

Both sayings, then, point thought in a direction quite different from the tradition of Homer and Hesiod. They suggest that if we want to understand this world, then we should look to this world, not to another. Thales seems to have been the first to have tried to answer the question, Why do things happen as they do? in terms that are not immediately personal. In framing his answer this way, Thales is not only the first philosopher in the Greek tradition, but also the first scientist. It is almost impossible to overestimate the significance of this shift for the story of Western culture.

*We cover Aristotle in Chapter 9.

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1. In what way are the two sayings attributed to Thales consistent?
 2. Contrast the view suggested by Thales' sayings with that of Homer.
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Anaximander: The One as the Boundless

Let's grant that Thales produced a significant shift in Western thought. What next? Although he may have done so, we have no evidence that Thales addresses the question of *how* water accounts for everything else. If everything is water, why does it seem as though so many things are *not* water, that water is just one kind of thing among many?

There is something else unsatisfactory about his suggestion: Even though water has those unusual properties of appearing in several different states, water itself is not unusual. It is, after all, just one of the many things that need to be explained. If we demand explanations of dirt and bone and gold, why should we not demand an explanation for water as well?

Ancient Greeks would have found a third puzzling feature in Thales' idea. They tended to think in terms of opposites: wet and dry, hot and cold. These pairs are opposites because they cancel each other out. Where you have the wet, you can't have the dry, and so on. Water is wet, yet the dry also exists. If the origin of all things were water, how could the dry have ever come into existence? It seems impossible.

Although again we are speculating, it is reasonable to suppose that problems such as these led to the next stage in our story. We can imagine **Anaximander**, a younger fellow citizen from Miletus born about 612 B.C., asking himself—or perhaps asking Thales—these questions. How does water produce the many things of our experience? What makes water so special? So the conversation develops.

Like Thales, Anaximander wants an account of origins that does not appeal to the gods of Homer and Hesiod, but as we'll see, he does not reject the divine altogether. We can reconstruct Anaximander's reasoning thus:

1. Given any state of things *X*, it had a beginning.
2. To explain its beginning, we must suppose a prior state of things *W*.
3. But *W* also must have had a beginning.
4. So we must suppose a still prior state *V*.
5. Can this go on forever? No.
6. So there must be something that itself has no beginning.
7. We can call this “the infinite” or “**the Boundless.**”

It is from this, then, that all things come.

We are ready now to appreciate a passage of Aristotle's, in which he looks back and reports the views of Anaximander.

Everything either is a beginning or has a beginning. But there is no beginning of the infinite; for if there were one, it would limit it. Moreover, since it is a beginning, it is unbegotten and indestructible.

. . . Hence, as we say, there is no source of this, but this appears to be the source of all the rest, and “encompasses all things” and “steers all things,” as those assert who do not recognize other causes besides the infinite. . . . And this, they say, is the divine; for it is “deathless” and “imperishable” as Anaximander puts it, and most of the physicists agree with him. (DK 12 A 15, *IEGP*, 24)¹

Only the Boundless, then, can be a beginning for all other things. It *is* a beginning, as Aristotle puts it; it does not *have* a beginning. Because it is infinite, moreover, it has no end either—otherwise it would have a limit and not be infinite.

It should be no surprise that the infinite is called “divine.” Recall the main characteristic of the Greek gods: They are immortal; they cannot die. As Anaximander points out, this is a key feature of the Boundless.

Here we have the first appearance of a form of reasoning that we will meet again when later thinkers try to justify belief in a god (or God) conceived in a much richer way than Anaximander is committed to.* Yet even here some of the key features of later thought are already present. The Boundless “encompasses all things” and “steers all things.” Those familiar with the New Testament will be

*For examples, see Thomas Aquinas' proofs of the existence of God (Chapter 15).

reminded of Paul's statement that in God "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).²

We have seen how Anaximander deals with one of the puzzles bequeathed to him by Thales. It is not water but the Boundless that is the source and element of all things. What about the other problem? By what process does the Boundless produce the many individual things of our experience?

Here we have to note that the Boundless is thought of as indefinite in character, neither clearly this nor that. If it had a clear nature of its own, it would already exclude everything else; it would be, for instance, water but not fire, so it would have limits and not be infinite. Therefore, it must contain all things, but in a "chaotic" mixture.* The hot, the cold, the dry, and the wet are all present in the Boundless, but without clear differentiation.

How, then, does the process of differentiation from the Boundless work? If Anaximander could show how these basic four elements (hot, cold, dry, and wet) separate out from the chaos, his basic problem would be solved. The *one* would generate *many* things. The question of how particular things are formed could be solved along similar lines. Note that at this early stage of thought, no clear distinction is made between heat as a property of a thing and the thing that is hot. There is just "the hot" and "the cold," what we might think of as hot stuff and cold stuff. In fact, these stuffs are virtually indistinguishable from earth (the cold), air (the dry), fire (the hot), and water (the wet). To the ancient Greeks, the universe as we experience it seems to be composed of various mixtures of these elemental stuffs.†

To solve his problem, Anaximander uses an analogy: Fill a circular pan with water; add some bits of limestone, granite, and lead (what you need is a variety of different weights); and then swirl the water around. You will find that the heavier bits move toward the middle and the lighter bits to the

outside. Like goes to like; what starts as a jumble, a chaos, begins to take on some order. Anaximander is apparently familiar with this simple experiment and makes use of it to explain the origin of the many.

If the Boundless were swirling in a **vortex motion**, like the water in the pan, then what was originally indistinguishable in it would become separated out according to its nature. You might ask, Why should we think that the Boundless engages in such a swirling, vortex motion? Anaximander would simply ask you to look up. Every day we see the heavenly bodies swirl around the earth: the sun, the moon, and even the stars. Did you ever lie on your back in a very dark, open spot (a golf course is a good place) for a long time and look at the stars? You can see them move, although it takes a long while to become conscious of their movement.*

Furthermore, it seems clear that the motions we observe around us exemplify the vortex principle that like goes to like. What is the lightest of the elements? Anyone who has stared at a campfire for a few moments will have no doubt about the answer. The sticks stay put, but the fire leaps up, away from the cold earth toward the sky—toward the immensely hot, fiery sun and the other bright but less hot heavenly bodies. In short, Anaximander turns not to gods or myths to try to explain the nature of the world, but to reasoning and experience.

Of Anaximander's many other interesting ideas, one deserves special attention—an idea that connects him to Hesiod and Homer as surely as his reliance on reasoning and experience sets him apart. Anaximander tells us that existing things "make reparation to one another for their injustice according to the ordinance of time" (DK 12 B 1, *IEGP*, 34). Several questions arise here. What existing things? No doubt it is the opposites of hot and cold, wet and dry that Anaximander has in mind, but why does he speak of injustice? How can the hot and cold do each other injustice, and how can they "make reparation" to each other?

*Remember that Hesiod tells us that "Chaos was first of all."

†Much of Greek medicine was based on these same principles. A feverish person, for instance, has too much of the hot, a person with the sniffles too much of the wet, and so on. What is required is to reach a balance among the opposite elements.

*Copernicus, of course, turns this natural view inside out. The stars only *appear* to move; in actuality, Copernicus suggests, it is *we* who are moving. See pp. 353–354.

Much as Homer requires a certain moderation or balance in human behavior, assuming, for instance, that too much anger or pride will bring retribution, Anaximander presupposes a principle of balance in nature. The hot summer is hot at the expense of the cold; it requires a cold winter to right the balance. The rainy season comes at the expense of the dry; it requires the dry season to right the balance. Thus, each season encroaches on the “rights” due to the others and does them an injustice, but reparation is made in turn when each gets its due—and more. This keeps the cycle going.

Unlike in Hesiod and Homer, though, Anaximander’s cosmic balance is not imposed on reality by the gods. Anaximander conceives it as immanent in the world process itself. In this he is faithful to the spirit of Thales, and in this both of them depart from the tradition of Homer. Anaximander’s explanations are framed impersonally. It is true that the Boundless “steers all things,” but the jealous and vengeful Homeric gods who intervene at will in the world have vanished. To explain particular facts in the world, no will, no purpose, no emotion, no intention is needed. The gods turn out to be superfluous.

You can see that a cultural crisis is on the way. Since the Homeric tradition was still alive and flourishing in the religious, artistic, political, and social life of Greek cities, what would happen when this new way of thinking began to take hold? Our next thinker begins to draw some conclusions.

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1. What puzzling features of Thales’ view seem to have stimulated Anaximander to revise it?
 2. State Anaximander’s argument for the Boundless.
 3. How, according to Anaximander, does the Boundless produce the many distinct things of our experience?
 4. What evidence do we have in our own experience for a vortex motion?
 5. How is the injustice that Anaximander attributes to existing things related to the Homeric virtue of moderation?
 6. What sort of crisis was brewing in Ionia? Why?
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Xenophanes: The Gods as Fictions

Anaximander, as far as we know, only criticized the gods implicitly. He focused on solving his problems about the nature and origins of the world. Although his results were at odds with tradition, we have no record that he took explicit notice of this. But about forty miles north of Miletus, in the city of Colophon (see Map 1), another thinker named **Xenophanes** did notice. Like Thales and Anaximander, Xenophanes was an Ionian Greek living on the eastern shores of the Aegean Sea. We are told that he fled in 546 B.C., when Colophon fell to the Persians, and that he lived at least part of his life thereafter in Sicily. Xenophanes was a poet and apparently lived a long life of more than ninety-two years.

Xenophanes is important to our story because he seems to have been the first to state clearly the religious implications of the new nature philosophy. He explicitly criticizes the traditional conception of the gods on two grounds. First, the way Hesiod and Homer picture the gods is unworthy of our admiration or reverence:

Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods all those things which in men are a matter for reproach and censure: stealing, adultery, and mutual deception. (DK Z1 B11, *IEGP*, 55)*

What he says is true, of course. It has often been remarked that Homer’s gods are morally no better (and in some ways may be worse) than the

*When the Greeks talk about “men,” they may not have been thinking about women. Women were not citizens, for example, in ancient Athens. It does not follow, of course, that what the Greeks say about “men” has no relevance for women of today. Here is a useful way to think about this. Aristotle formulated the Greek understanding of “man” in terms of *rational animal*, a concept that can apply to human beings generally. What the Greeks say about “man” may well apply to women, too, although one should be on guard lest they sneak masculinity too much into this generic “man.” Their mistake (and not theirs alone!) was to have underestimated the rationality and humanity of women.

We will occasionally use the term “man” in this generic sense, but we will often paraphrase it with “human being” or some other substitute. Rather than the awkward “he or she,” we will sometimes use “he” and sometimes “she,” as seems appropriate.

band of ruthless warrior barons on whom they are so clearly modeled. They are magnificent in their own fashion, but flawed, like a large and brilliant diamond containing a vein of impurities. What matters about Xenophanes' statement is that he not only notices this but also clearly expresses his disapproval.* He thinks it is shameful to portray the gods as though they are no better than the kind of human beings whom good men regard with disgust. That Homer, to whom all Greeks of the time look for guidance in life, should give us this view of the divine seems intolerable to Xenophanes. This moral critique is further developed by Plato.† For both of them, such criticism is the negative side of a more exalted idea of the divine.

This kind of criticism makes sense only on the basis of a certain assumption: that Homer is not simply reporting the truth but is inventing stories. Several sayings of Xenophanes make this assumption clear.

The Ethiopians make their gods snub-nosed and black; the Thracians make theirs gray-eyed and red-haired. (DK 21 B 16, *IEGP*, 52)

And if oxen and horses and lions had hands, and could draw with their hands and do what man can do, horses would draw the gods in the shape of horses, and oxen in the shape of oxen, each giving the gods bodies similar to their own. (DK 21 B 15, *IEGP*, 52)

Here we have the first recorded version of the saying that god does not make man in his own image but that we make the gods in our image. Atheists and agnostics have often made this point since Xenophanes' time. Was Xenophanes, then, a disbeliever in the divine? No, not at all. No more than Anaximander, who says the infinite sees all and steers all. Xenophanes tells us there is

one god, greatest among gods and men, in no way similar to mortals either in body or mind. (DK 21 B 23, *IEGP*, 53)

Several points in this brief statement stand out. There is only **one god**.* Xenophanes takes pains to stress how radically different this god is from anything in the Homeric tradition. It is "in no way similar to mortals." This point is brought out in some positive characterizations he gives of this god.

He sees all over, thinks all over, hears all over.
(DK 21 B 24, *IEGP*, 53)

He remains always in the same place, without moving; nor is it fitting that he should come and go, first to one place and then to another. (DK 21 B 26, *IEGP*, 53)

But without toil, he sets all things in motion by the thought of his mind. (DK 21 B 25, *IEGP*, 53)

By contrast, we humans see with our eyes, think with our brain, and hear with our ears. We seldom remain in the same place for more than a short time, and if we want to set anything besides ourselves in motion, just thinking about it or wishing for it isn't enough. Xenophanes' god is very different from human beings indeed.

Yet there is a similarity after all, and Xenophanes' "in no way similar" must be qualified. The one god sees and hears and thinks; so do we. He does not do it in the way we do it; the way the god does it is indeed "in no way similar." But god is intelligent, and so are we.

Here is a good place to comment on an assumption that seems to have been common among the Greeks. Where there is order, there is intelligence. Order, whether in our lives or in the world of nature, needs an explanation, and only intelligence can explain it. Though never argued for, this assumption lies in the background as something almost too obvious to comment on. We can find experiences to give it some support, and perhaps these are common enough to make it *seem* self-evident—but it is not. For example, consider the state of papers on your desk or tools in your workshop. If you are like us, you find that these things,

*For a contrary evaluation, see Nietzsche, p. 564.

†See *Euthyphro* 6a, for instance. This criticism is expanded in Plato's *Republic*, Book II, where Plato explicitly forbids the telling of Homeric and Hesiodic tales of the gods to children in his ideal state.

*It may seem that Xenophanes allows the existence of other gods in the very phrase he uses to praise this one god. Scholars disagree about the purity of his monotheism. In the context of other things he says, however, it seems best to understand this reference to "gods" as a reference to "what tradition takes to be gods."

PYTHAGORAS

Pythagoras (b. 570 B.C.), about whom we have as many legends as facts, lived most of his adult life in Croton in southern Italy (see Map 2 on page 23). He combined mathematics and religion in a way strange to us and was active in setting up a pattern for an ideal community. The Pythagorean influence on Plato is substantial.*

Pythagoras and his followers first developed geometry as an abstract discipline, rather than as a tool for practical applications. It was probably Pythagoras himself who discovered the “Pythagorean theorem” (the square of the hypotenuse of a triangle is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides).

He also discovered the mathematical ratios of musical intervals: the octave, the fifth, and the fourth. Because mathematics informs these intervals, the

*We cover the great Greek philosopher Plato in Chapter 8.

Pythagoreans held, somewhat obscurely, that *all things are numbers*. They also believed that the sun, the moon, and other heavenly bodies make a noise as they whirl about, producing a cosmic harmony, the “music of the spheres.”

Pythagoras believed that the soul is a distinct and immortal entity, “entombed” for a while in the body. After death, the soul migrates into other bodies, sometimes the bodies of animals. To avoid both murder and cannibalism, the Pythagoreans were vegetarians. Xenophanes tells the story, probably apocryphal, that Pythagoras saw a puppy being beaten and cried out, “Do not beat it; I recognize the voice of a friend.”

Mathematics was valued not just for itself but as a means to purify the soul, to disengage it from bodily concerns. In mathematical pursuits the soul lives a life akin to that of the gods.

It is said that Pythagoras was the first to call himself a philosopher, a *lover* of wisdom.

if left to their own devices, degenerate slowly into a state of chaos. Soon it is impossible to find what you want when you need it and it becomes impossible to work. What you need to do then is *deliberately* and with some *intelligent plan in mind* impose order on the chaos. Order is the result of intelligent action, it seems. It doesn’t just happen.

Whether this assumption is correct is an interesting question, one about which modern physics and evolutionary biology say interesting things.* Modern mathematicians tell us that however chaotic the jumble of books and papers on your desk, there exists some mathematical function according to which they are in perfect order. But for these ancient Greeks, the existence of order always presupposes an ordering

intelligence. We find this assumption at work in Anaximander’s and Xenophanes’ ideas of god.

Consider now a saying that shows how closely Xenophanes’ critique of the traditional gods relates to the developing nature philosophy:

She whom men call “Iris,” too, is in reality a cloud, purple, red, and green to the sight. (DK 21 B 32, *IEGP*, 52)

In *The Iliad*, Iris is a minor goddess, a messenger for the other gods. After Hector has killed Patroclus, Iris is sent to Achilles to bid him arm in time to rescue Patroclus’ body (Book 18, 192–210). She seems to have been identified with the rainbow, which many cultures have taken as a sign or message from the gods. (Compare its significance to Noah, for example, after the flood in Genesis 9:12–17.)

Xenophanes tells us that rainbows are simply natural phenomena that occur in natural circumstances and have natural explanations. A rainbow, he thinks, is just a peculiar sort of cloud. This idea suggests a theory of how gods are invented. Natural phenomena, especially those that are particularly

*See p. 361 for an example. Here Descartes claims that a chaos of randomly distributed elements, if subject to the laws of physics, would by itself produce an order like that we find in the world. For more recent views, see the fascinating book by James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987). The dispute over “intelligent design” shows that this is still a live issue.

striking or important to us, are personified and given lives that go beyond what is observable. Like the theory that the gods are invented, this theory has often been held. It may not be stretching things too far to regard Xenophanes as its originator.

It is clear that there is a kind of natural unity between nature philosophy and criticism of Homer's gods. They go together and mutually reinforce one another. Together they are more powerful than either could be alone. We will see that they come to pose a serious threat to the integrity of Greek cultural life.

There is one last theme in Xenophanes that we should address. Poets in classical times typically appealed to the Muses for inspiration and seemed often to think that what they spoke or wrote was not their own—that it was literally inspired, breathed into them, by these goddesses. Remember Hesiod's claim that he was taught to sing the truth by the Muses. Similarly, Homer begins *The Iliad* by inviting the goddess to sing through him the rage of Achilles.* No doubt this is more than a literary conceit; many writers have experiences of inspiration when they seem to be no more than a mouthpiece for powers greater and truer than themselves. Hesiod and Homer may well have had such experiences. Whether such experiences guarantee the *truth* of what the writer says in such ecstatic states is, of course, another question. Listen to Xenophanes:

The gods have not revealed all things from the beginning to mortals; but, by seeking, men find out, in time, what is better. (DK 21 B 18, *IEGP*, 56)

No man knows the truth, nor will there be a man who has knowledge about the gods and what I say about everything. For even if he were to hit by chance upon the whole truth, he himself would not be aware of having done so, but each forms his own opinion. (DK 21 B 38, *IEGP*, 56)

Let these things, then, be taken as like the truth. (DK 21 B 35, *IEGP*, 56)

This is a very rich set of statements. Let us consider them in six points.

1. Xenophanes is explicitly denying our poets' claims of inspiration. The gods have *not* revealed

*Look again at these claims to divine inspiration on pp. 2 and 4.

to us in this way “from the beginning” what is true, Xenophanes says. If we were to ask him why he is so sure about this, he would no doubt remind us of the unworthy picture of deity painted by the poets and of the natural explanations that can be given for phenomena they ascribe to the gods. Xenophanes' point is that a poet's claim of divine revelation is no guarantee of her poem's truth.

2. How, then, should we form our beliefs? By “**seeking**,” Xenophanes tells us. This idea is extremely vague. How, exactly, are we to seek? No doubt he has in mind the methods of the Ionian nature philosophers, but we don't have a very good idea of just what they were, so we don't get much help at this point.

Still, his remarks are not entirely without content. He envisages a process of moving toward the truth. If we want the truth, we should face not the past but the future. It is no good looking back to the tradition, to Homer and Hesiod, as though they had already said the last words. We must look to ourselves and to the results of our seeking. He is confident, perhaps because he values the results of the nature philosophers, that “in time”—not all at once—we will discover “what is better.” We may not succeed in finding the truth, but our opinions will be “better,” or more “like the truth.”*

3. It may be that we know some **truth** already. Perhaps there is even someone who knows “the whole truth.” But even if he did, that person could not be sure that it is the truth. To use a distinction Plato later emphasizes, Xenophanes is claiming that the person would not be able to distinguish his knowledge of the truth from mere opinion.† (Plato, as we'll see, does not agree.) There is, Xenophanes means to tell us, no such thing as *certainty* for limited beings such as ourselves. Here is a theme that later skeptics take up.‡

*In recent philosophy these themes have been taken up by the *fallibilists*. See C. S. Peirce (p. 601).

†See pp. 149–151.

‡See, for instance, the discussions by Sextus Empiricus (pp. 246–251) and Montaigne (pp. 350–353). Similar themes are found in Descartes' first *Meditation* and, in the Chinese tradition, in the work of Zhuangzi (pp. 83–87).

4. This somewhat skeptical conclusion does not mean that all beliefs are equally good. Xenophanes is clear that although we may never be certain we have reached the truth, some beliefs are better or closer to the truth than others. Unfortunately, he does not tell us how we are to tell which are better. Again we have a problem that many later thinkers take up.

5. Until Xenophanes, Greek thought had basically been directed outward—to the gods, to the world of human beings, to nature. Xenophanes directs thought back on itself. His questioning questions itself. How much can we know? How can we know it? Can we reach the truth? Can we reach certainty about the truth? These are the central questions that define the branch of philosophy called **epistemology**, the theory of knowledge. Xenophanes, it seems, is its father.



“I was born not knowing and have only had a little time to change that here and there.”

Richard Feynman (1918–1988)

6. If we ask, then, whether there is anyone who can know the truth *and* know that he knows it, what is the answer? Yes. The one god does, the one who “sees all over, thinks all over, hears all over.” In this answer, Xenophanes carries forward Homer’s emphasis on the gulf between humans and gods. The most important truth about humans is that they are not gods. Xenophanes’ remarks about human knowledge drive that point home once and for all.

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1. What are Xenophanes’ criticisms of the Homeric gods?
 2. What is his conception of the one god?
 3. Can we know the truth about things, according to Xenophanes? If so, how?
 4. Relate his sayings about knowing the truth to the idea of hubris and to claims made by Hesiod and Homer.
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Heraclitus: Oneness in the *Logos*

Heraclitus is said to have been at his peak (probably corresponding to middle age) shortly before 500 B.C. A native of Ephesus (see Map 1), he was, like the others we have considered, an Ionian Greek living on the shores of Asia Minor. We know that he wrote a book, of which about one hundred fragments remain. He had a reputation for writing in riddles and was often referred to in Roman times as “Heraclitus the obscure.” His favored style seems to have been the epigram, the short, pithy saying that condenses a lot of thought into a few words. Despite his reputation, most modern interpreters find that the fragments reveal a powerful and unified view of the world and man’s place in it. Furthermore, Heraclitus is clearly an important influence on subsequent thinkers such as Plato and the Stoics.

One characteristic feature of his thought is that reality is a flux.

All things come into being through opposition, and all are in flux, like a river. (DK 22 A 1, *IEGP*, 89)

There are two parts to this saying, one about **opposition** and one about flux. Let’s begin with the latter and discuss the part about opposition later.

Plato ascribes to Heraclitus the view that “you cannot step twice into the same river.” If you know anything at all about Heraclitus, it is probably in connection with this famous saying. What Heraclitus actually says, however, is slightly different.

Upon those who step into the same rivers flow other and yet other waters. (DK 22 B 12, *IEGP*, 91)

You can, he says, step several times into the same river. Yet it is not the same, for the waters into which you step the second time are different waters. So, you both can and cannot.

This oneness of things that are different—even sometimes opposite—is a theme Heraclitus plays in many variations:

The path traced by the pen is straight and crooked. (DK 22 B 59, *IEGP*, 93)

Sea water is very pure and very impure; drinkable and healthful for fishes, but undrinkable and destructive to men. (DK 22 B 61, *IEGP*, 93)

The way up and the way down are the same. (DK 22 B 60, *IEGP*, 94)

The road from Canterbury to Dover is the road from Dover to Canterbury. They are “the same,” just as the same water is healthful and destructive, the same movement of the pen is crooked (when you consider the individual letters) but also straight (when you consider the line written).

Consider the river. It is the same river, although the water that makes it up is continually changing. A river is not identical with the water that makes it up but is a kind of structure or pattern that makes a unity of ever-changing elements. It is a *one* that holds together the *many*. So it is, Heraclitus tells us, with “all things.” All things are in flux, like the river: ever changing, yet preserving an identity through the changes. The river is for that reason a fitting symbol for reality.

Another appropriate symbol for this flux is fire.

This world-order, the same for all, no god made or any man, but it always was and is and will be an ever-lasting fire, kindling by measure and going out by measure. (DK 22 B 30, *IEGP*, 90)

Is Heraclitus here disagreeing with Thales? Is he telling us Thales is wrong in thinking that water is the source of all things—that it isn’t water, but fire? Not exactly.

Remember that at this early stage of Greek thought the very language in which thoughts can be expressed is itself being formed. This means that thought is somewhat crude, as we observed earlier. Greek thinkers have not yet made a distinction between “hot-stuff” and “fire that is hot.” Heraclitus is reaching for abstractions that he hasn’t quite got and cannot quite express. What he wants to talk about is the “world-order.” This is, we would say, not itself a thing but an abstract pattern or structure in which the things of the world are displayed. Heraclitus, though, hasn’t quite got that degree of abstraction, so he uses the most ethereal, least solid thing he is acquainted with to represent this world-order: fire.

We can be certain, moreover, that Heraclitus does not have ordinary cooking fires primarily in mind. Anaximander believed that the outermost sphere of the universe, in which the sun and stars are located, is a ring of fire. If you have ever been to Greece on a particularly clear day, especially on or near the sea, you can see even through our polluted

atmosphere that not only the sun but also the entire sky shines. The heavens are luminous, radiant. It is not too much to say the sky blazes. In this luminous *aether*, as it was called, the gods are supposed to live. Olympus is said to be their home because its peak is immersed in this fiery element. Notice the epithet Heraclitus gives to fire: He calls it ever-lasting. For the Greeks, only the divine deserves this accolade.

It is, then, the world-order itself that is immortal, divine. No god made *that*, of course, for the world-order is itself eternal and divine. Heraclitus represents it as fire, the most ethereal and least substantial of the elements.

This divine fire is both the substance of the world and its pattern. In its former aspect it is ever “kindling by measure and going out by measure.” This thought is also expressed in the following fragments:

The changes of fire: first sea, and of sea half is earth, half fiery thunderbolt. . . . (DK 22 B 31, *IEGP*, 91)

All things are an exchange for fire, and fire for all things; as goods are for gold, and gold for goods. (DK 22 B 90, *IEGP*, 91)

The sea, we learn, is a mixture, half earth and half fire. All things are in continuous exchange. Earth is washed into the sea and becomes moist; sea becomes air, which merges with the fiery heavens, from which rains fall and merge again with earth. If Heraclitus were able to use the distinction between things and patterns, he might say that *as substance* fire has no priority over other things. It is just one of the four elements engaged in the constant cycles of change. But *as pattern*, as world-order, it does have priority, for this pattern is eternal and divine. He does not, of course, say this; he can’t. If he were able to, he might be less obscure to his successors.

Return now to the first part of our original fragment, where Heraclitus says that “all things come into being through opposition.” What can this mean? Compare the following statements:

War is the father and king of all. . . . (DK 22 B 53, *IEGP*, 93)

It is necessary to understand that war is universal and justice is strife, and that all things take place in accordance with strife and necessity. (DK 22 B 80, *IEGP*, 93)

Strife, opposition, war. Why elevate these into universal principles? To see what Heraclitus is saying, think about some examples. A lyre will produce music, but only if there is a tension on the strings.* The arms of the lyre pull in one direction, the strings in the opposite. Without this opposition, there is no music. Consider the river. What makes it a river? It is the force of the flowing water struggling with the opposing forces of the containing banks. Without the opposition between the banks and the water, there would be no river.

Here's another example, showing two of Heraclitus' themes: A bicycle wheel is *one* thing, though it is composed of *many* parts: hub, spokes, and rim. What makes these many items into one wheel? It is the tension that truing the wheel puts on the spokes, so that the hub and rim are pulling in opposite directions.

Now, if we think not about physical phenomena but about society, we see that the same is true. What is justice, Heraclitus asks, but the result of the conflict between the desires of the wealthy and the desires of the poor? Were either to get the upper hand absolutely, there would be no justice. Tension, opposition, and conflict, he tells us, are *necessary*. Without them the universe could not persist. If we look carefully at each of these examples, we see that each consists of a unity of diverse elements. The lyre, the river, the bicycle wheel, and justice are each a one composed in some sense of many. In every "one," "many" strive.

In *The Iliad*, Achilles laments the death of Patroclus, saying,

"If only strife could die from the lives of gods and men."

—*The Iliad*, Book 18, 126

To this cry, Heraclitus responds,

He did not see that he was praying for the destruction of the whole; for if his prayers were heard, all things would pass away. (DK 22 A 22, *IEGP*, 93)

Strife, then, is necessary. It produces not chaos but the opposite; in fact, the divine world-order is the

guarantee that a balance of forces is maintained. The result is this:

To god all things are beautiful and good and just; but men suppose some things to be just and others unjust. (DK 22 B 102, *IEGP*, 92)

Again we see the Homeric contrast between gods and mortals, and again the contrast is to the disadvantage of mortals. God, the divine fire, the world-order, sees things as they are; and they are good. Strife is not opposed to the good; strife is its necessary presupposition. Mortals, such as Achilles, only "suppose," and what they suppose is false.

We are now ready to consider the most explicit version of Heraclitus' solution to the problem of the one and the many. To do that, we must introduce a term that we will usually leave untranslated. It is a term that has numerous meanings in Greek and has had a long and important history, stretching from Heraclitus to the Sophists, to Plato and Aristotle, into the writings of the New Testament and the Christian church fathers, and beyond. The term is *logos*.*

Logos is derived from a verb meaning "to speak" and refers first to the word or words that a speaker says. As in English, however, a term is easily stretched beyond its simple, literal meaning. As we can ask for the latest word about the economy, the Greek can ask for the *logos* about the economy, meaning something like "message" or "discourse." This meaning easily slides into the *thought* expressed in a discourse. Because such thought is typically backed up by reasons or has a rationale behind it, *logos* also comes to mean "rationale" or "argument." Arguments are composed of conclusions and the reasons offered for those conclusions. So, an argument has a typical pattern or structure to it, which is the job of *logic* to display. (Our term *logic* is derived from the Greek *logos*.) *Logos*, then, can also mean a structure or pattern, particularly if the pattern is a rational one.

*Postmodern critics of the Western philosophic tradition often call it "logocentric," meaning that it privileges rationality and assumes that words—especially spoken discourse—can adequately mirror reality. See Jacques Derrida, p. 700.

*A lyre is an ancient Greek musical instrument similar to a small harp.

You can see that *logos* is a very rich term, containing layers of related meanings: word, message, discourse, thought, rationale, argument, pattern, structure. When the word is used in Greek, it reverberates with all these associations. We have no precise equivalent in English, and for that reason we usually do not translate it.

As we have seen, Heraclitus claims that all things are in a process of continual change and that part of what makes them the things they are is a tension between opposite forces. This world of changes is not a chaos but is structured by a world-order that is divine in nature; in itself, therefore, it is good and beautiful. Unfortunately,

the many do not understand such things.* (DK 22 B 17, *IEGP*, 94)

Though the *logos* is as I have said, men always fail to comprehend it, both before they hear it and when they hear it for the first time. For though all things come into being in accordance with this *logos*, they seem like men without experience. (DK 22 B 1, *IEGP*, 94)

Now Heraclitus tells us that there is a *logos* by which “all things come into being.” What else is this but the structure or pattern of the world-order that we have met before? But now the conception is deepened. The *logos* is not just accidentally what it is. There is a logic to it that can be seen to be reasonable and right. It is not understood, however, by “the many.” As Socrates does later, Heraclitus contrasts the few who are wise, who listen to the *logos*, with the many who are foolish.

Why is it that the many do not understand the *logos*? Is it so strange and distant that only a few people ever have a chance to become acquainted with it? Not at all.

Though they are in daily contact with the *logos* they are at variance with it, and what they meet appears alien to them. (DK 22 B 73, *IEGP*, 94)

To those who are awake the world-order is one, common to all; but the sleeping turn aside each into a world of his own. (DK 22 B 89, *IEGP*, 95)

We ought to follow what is common to all; but though the *logos* is common to all, the many live as though their thought were private to themselves. (DK 22 B 2, *IEGP*, 95)

All people are “in daily contact” with this *logos*. It is all around us, present in everything that happens. You can’t do or say anything without being immersed in it. Yet we ignore it. We are like sleepers who live in private dreams rather than in awareness of this rational pattern of things that “is common to all.” We each manufacture a little world of our own, distorted by our own interests, fears, and anxieties, which we take for reality.

In so doing, we miss the *logos* and become foolish rather than wise. What is it, after all, to be wise?

Wisdom is one thing: to understand the thought which steers all things through all things. (DK 22 B 41, *IEGP*, 88)

The one and only wisdom is willing and unwilling to be called Zeus. (DK 22 B 32, *IEGP*, 88)

To be wise is to understand the nature and structure of the world. To be wise is to see that all is and must be ever-changing, that strife and opposition are necessary and not evil, and that if appreciated apart from our narrowly construed interests, they are good and beautiful. To be wise is to grasp the *logos*, the “thought which steers all things.”* To be wise is to participate in the perspective of Zeus.

Why is this **wisdom** both “willing and unwilling” to be called by the name of Zeus? We can assume it is willing because Zeus is the common name for the highest of the gods, for the divine; to have such wisdom makes one a participant in the divine. Acting according to the *logos* is manifesting in one’s life the very principles that govern the universe. However, such wisdom refuses the name of Zeus as Homer pictures him: immoral, unworthy, and no better than one of the many who do not understand the *logos*. Heraclitus, then, agrees with Xenophanes’ criticisms of traditional religion.

*His term “the many” usually applies to all the individual things of which the world is composed; here, of course, it means “most people.”

*Compare Anaximander, p. 11. Heraclitus here identifies that which “steers all things” as a thought. The Stoics later develop this same theme. See p. 243.

Perhaps people are not to be too much blamed, however, for their lack of wisdom. For

Nature loves to hide. (DK 22 B 123, *IEGP*, 96)

and

The lord whose oracle is at Delphi neither speaks out nor conceals, but gives a sign. (DK 22 B 93, *IEGP*, 96)

Even though the *logos* is common to all, even though all our experience testifies to it, discerning this *logos* is difficult. It is rather like a riddle; the answer may be implicit, but it is still hard to make out. Solving the problem is like interpreting the ambiguous pronouncements of the famous oracle at Delphi, located north and west of Athens (see Map 1). People could go there and ask the oracle a question, as Croesus, king of the Lydians (see Map 1), once did. He wanted to know whether to go to war against the Persians. He was told that if he went to war a mighty empire would fall. Encouraged by this reply, he set forth, only to find the oracle's pronouncement validated by his own defeat.

How, then, is the riddle to be unraveled? How can we become wise, learning the secrets of the *logos*? This is a question that we have asked before. Xenophanes has told us that by "seeking" we can improve our opinions, but that is pretty uninformative.* Does Heraclitus advance our understanding? To some degree he does. Two fragments that seem to be in some tension with each other address this issue:

Those things of which there is sight, hearing, understanding, I esteem most. (DK 22 B 55, *IEGP*, 96)

Eyes and ears are bad witnesses to men if they have souls that do not understand their language. (DK 22 B 107, *IEGP*, 96)

We can come to understand the world-order, then, not by listening to poets, seers, or self-proclaimed wise men but by using our eyes and ears. Yet we must be careful, for the senses can deceive us, can be "bad witnesses." They must be used critically, and not everyone "understands their language." These few remarks do not, of course, take us very far. Later philosophers will fill in this picture.

Finally, Heraclitus draws from his view of the *logos* some significant conclusions for the way humans should live:

It is not good for men to get all they wish. (DK 22 B 110, *IEGP*, 97)

If happiness consisted in bodily pleasures we ought to call oxen happy who find vetch to eat. (DK 22 B 4, *IEGP*, 101)

It is hard to fight against impulse; for what it wants it buys at the expense of the soul. (DK 22 B 85, *IEGP*, 101)

Moderation is the greatest virtue, and wisdom is to speak the truth and to act according to nature, giving heed to it. (DK 22 B 112, *IEGP*, 101)

Why is it not good for men to get all they wish? If they did so, they would destroy the necessary tensions that make possible the very existence of both themselves and the things they want. They would overstep the bounds set by the *logos*, which allows the world to exist at all—a "many" unified by the "one." We must limit our desires, not for prudish or puritanical reasons, but because opposition is the very life of the world-order. Impulses, like Achilles' impulse to anger, are "hard to fight against." Why? Because indulging them at all strengthens them, and we cannot help indulging them to some degree. Indulging an impulse seems to diminish the resources of the soul to impose limits on that impulse. Such indulgence is bought "at the expense of the soul."*

That is why wisdom is difficult and why few achieve it. Most people, like cattle, seek to maximize their bodily pleasures. In doing so, they are "at variance" with the *logos*, which requires of every force that it be limited. That is why "moderation is the greatest virtue"—and why it is so rare.

Note that Heraclitus ties his ethics intimately to his vision of the nature of things. The *logos* within should reflect the *logos* without. Wisdom is "to speak the truth and to act according to nature." To speak the truth is to let one's words (one's *logos*) be responsive to the *logos* that is the world-order. To speak falsely is to be at variance with that *logos*. All one's actions should reflect that balance, the

*See p. 16.

*For a more recent semi-Heraclitean view of the need to be hard on oneself, see Nietzsche, p. 585.

moderation nature displays to all who understand its ways. In the plea for moderation, Heraclitus reflects the main moral tradition of the Greeks since Homer, but he sets it in a larger context and justifies it in terms of the very nature of the universe itself and its divine *logos*.

In his exaltation of the few over the many, Heraclitus also reflects Homeric values.

One man is worth ten thousand to me, if only he be best. (DK 22 B 49, *IEGP*, 104)

For the best men choose one thing above all the rest: everlasting fame among mortal men. But the many have glutted themselves like cattle. (DK 22 B 29, *IEGP*, 104)

The Homeric heroes seek their “everlasting fame” on the field of battle. Heraclitus, we feel, would seek it on the field of virtue.

In Heraclitus, then, we have a solution to the problem of the one and the many. We do live in one world, a *uni*-verse, despite the multitude of apparently different and often conflicting things we find in it. It is made one by the *logos*, the rational, divine, firelike pattern according to which things behave. Conflict does not destroy the unity of the world; unless it goes to extremes, such tension is a necessary condition of its very existence. And if we see and hear and think rightly, we can line up our own lives according to this same *logos*, live in a self-disciplined and moderate way, and participate in the divine wisdom.

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1. What does Heraclitus mean when he says that all things are “in flux”? Give your own examples.
 2. In what sense is the “world-order” fire? Why was it not made by any god?
 3. Explain the saying “War is the father and king of all.”
 4. What is the *logos*?
 5. How is it that we “fail to comprehend” the *logos*?
 6. What is wisdom? Why is it “willing and unwilling” to be called Zeus?
 7. Why is it not good for us to get all we wish? Why is it “hard to fight against impulse”? Why should we fight against it anyway?
 8. Sum up Heraclitus’ solution to the problem of the one and the many.
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Parmenides: Only the One

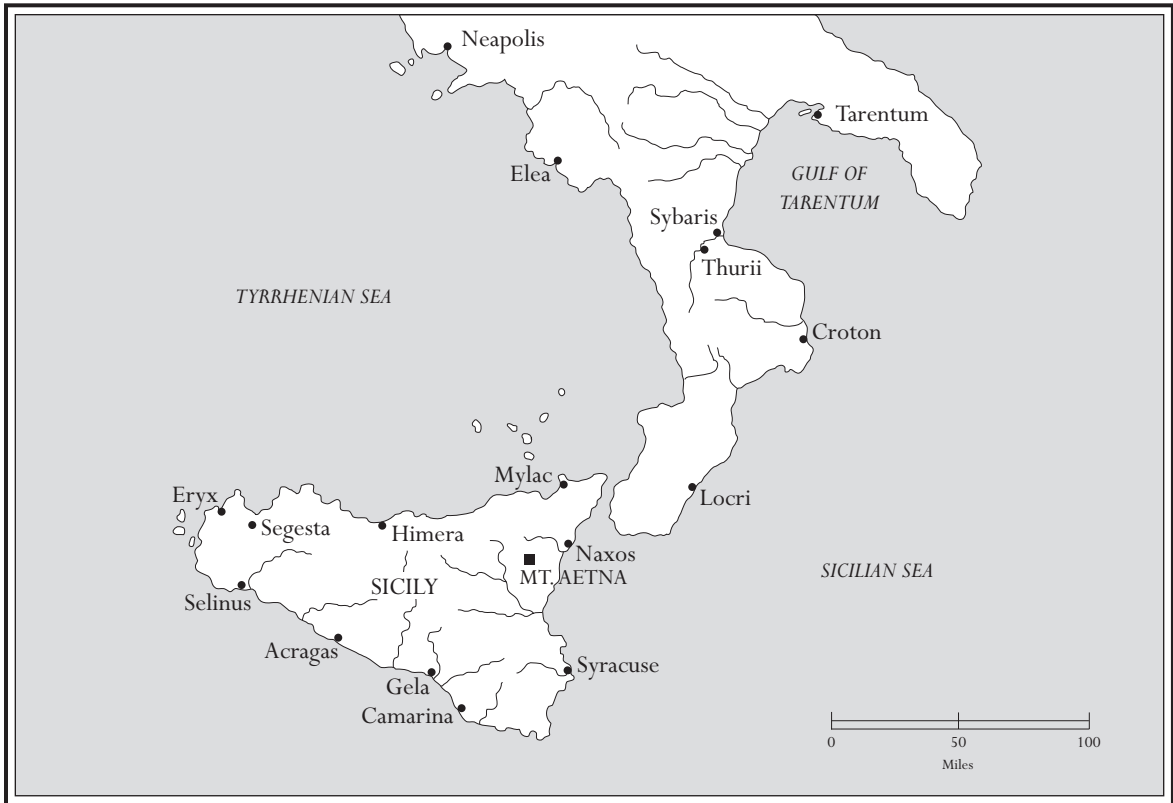
Parmenides introduces the strangest thought so far. His view is hard for us to grasp. Once we see what he is saying, moreover, we find it hard to take seriously. So we need to make a special effort to understand. It helps to keep in mind that Parmenides’ views arise in the course of the great pre-Socratic conversation. He constantly has in mind the views of his predecessors and contemporaries.

What makes the argument of Parmenides so alien to us is its conclusion; most people simply cannot believe it. The conclusion is that there is no “many”; only “**the One**” exists. We find this hard to believe because our experience is so obviously manifold. There is the desk, and here is the chair. They are two; the chair is not the desk and the desk is not the chair. So it seems. If Parmenides is to convince us otherwise, he has his work cut out for him. He is well aware of this situation and addresses the problem explicitly.

Parmenides was not an Ionian, as were Thales, Anaximander, Xenophanes, and Heraclitus. This fact is significant because, in a sense, geographical location is not intellectually neutral. Different places develop different traditions. Parmenides lived at the opposite edge of Greek civilization in what is now the southern part of Italy, where there were numerous Greek colonies. He came from a city called Elea (see Map 2), which, according to tradition, was well governed in part through Parmenides’ efforts. Plato tells us that Parmenides once visited Athens in his old age and conversed with the young Socrates. If this is so, Parmenides must have been born about 515 B.C. and lived until at least the year 450 B.C.

Parmenides wrote a book, in verse, of which substantial parts have come down to us. In the prologue, he claims to have been driven by horse and chariot into the heavens and escorted into the presence of a goddess who spoke to him, saying,

Welcome, youth, who come attended by immortal charioteers and mares which bear you on your journey to our dwelling. For it is no evil fate that has set you to travel on this road, far from the beaten paths of men, but right and justice. It is meet that you learn all things—both the unshakable heart of well-rounded truth and the opinions of mortals in which there is no true belief. (DK 28 B 1, *IEGP*, 108–109)



MAP 2 Southern Italy and Sicily

Such language might seem to be a throwback to the kinds of claims made by Hesiod.* Parmenides is telling us that the content of his poem has been revealed to him by divine powers. Is this philosophy? In fact, it is. The content of the revelation is an **argument**, and the goddess admonishes him to

judge by reasoning the much-contested argument that I have spoken. (DK 28 B 7, *IEGP*, 111)

The claim that this argument was revealed to him by a goddess may reflect the fact that the argument came to him in an ecstatic or inspired state. Or it may just be a sign of how different from ordinary mortal thought the “well-rounded truth” really is. In either case, the claim that the poem is a

revelation is inessential. We are invited to *judge* it, not just to accept it; we are to judge it “by reasoning.” This is the key feature of philosophy.*

Note that the goddess reveals to him two “ways”: the truth and the “opinions of mortals,” which deal not with truth but with **appearance**. His poem is in fact set up in two parts, “The Way of Truth” and “The Way of Opinion.” Because it is the former that has been influential, we’ll concentrate on it.

What, then, is this argument that yields Parmenides’ strange conclusions? It begins with something Parmenides thought impossible to deny.

Thinking and the thought that it is are the same; for you will not find thought apart from what is, in relation to which it is uttered. (DK 28 B 8, *IEGP*, 110)

*Look again at Hesiod’s description of his inspiration by the Muses, p. 2.

*Socrates insists that when a statement is made, we must “examine” it. See pp. 95–97.

When you *think*, the content of your thinking is a *thought*. And every thought has the form: It *is* so and so. If you think, “This desk is brown,” you are thinking what *is*, namely, the desk and its color. If you think “This desk is not brown,” once more you are thinking of what *is*, namely, the desk. Suppose you say, “But I am thinking that it is *not brown*; so I am thinking of what is *not*.” Parmenides will reply that “not brown” is just an unclear way of expressing the real thought, which is that the desk *is*, let us say, gray. If you are thinking of the desk, you are thinking of *it* with whatever color it has. Suppose you say, “But I am thinking of a unicorn, and there aren’t any unicorns; so am I not thinking of what is not?” No, Parmenides might say, for what is a unicorn? A horse with a single horn, and horses and horns both *are*.^{*} So once again we do not “find thought apart from what is.” To think at all, he tells us, is to think that something *is*.

For thought and being are the same. (DK 28 B 3, *IEGP*, 110)

They are “the same” in much the same way that for Heraclitus the way up and the way down are the same. If you have the one, you also have the other. The concept of “being” is just the concept of “what is,” as opposed to “what is not.” Whenever you think, you are thinking of what is. Thinking and being, then, are inseparable.

This is Parmenides’ starting point. It seems rather abstract and without much content. How can the substantial conclusions we hinted at be derived from such premises? The way to do it is to derive a corollary of this point.

It is necessary to speak and to think what is; for being is, but nothing is not. (DK 28 B 6, *IEGP*, 111)

You cannot think “nothing.” Why not? Because nothing *is not*, and to think is (as we have seen) to think of what *is*. If you could think of nothing, it would (by the first premise) be *something*. But that

is contradictory. Nothing cannot be something! Nothing “is not.”

That still does not seem very exciting. Yet from this point remarkable conclusions follow (or seem to follow; whether the argument is a sound one we will examine later).^{*} In particular, all our beliefs about *the many* must be false. You believe, for example, that this book you are reading is one thing and the hand you are touching it with is another, so you believe that there are *many* things. If Parmenides’ argument is correct, however, that belief is false. In reality there is no distinction between them. Parmenides describes ordinary mortals who do not grasp that fact in this way:

Helplessness guides the wandering thought in their breasts; they are carried along deaf and blind alike, dazed, beasts without judgment, convinced that to be and not to be are the same and not the same, and that the road of all things is a backward-turning one. (DK 28 B 6, *IEGP*, 111)

This is harsh! The language he uses makes it clear that he has in mind not only common folks but also philosophers—Heraclitus in particular. It is Heraclitus who insists more rigorously than anyone else that “to be and not to be are the same” (to be straight, for instance, and not straight).[†] Whatever is, Heraclitus tells us, is only temporary; all is involved in the universal flux, coming into being and passing out of being. In that sense, “the road of all things” is indeed “a backward-turning one.” You may be reminded of the phrase common in funeral services: “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”

Parmenides tells us, however, that to think in this way is to be blind, deaf, helpless, dazed—no better than a beast. Things cannot be so. To say that something “comes into being” is to imply that it formerly *was not*. But this is something that you can neither imply, nor say, nor even think sensibly, for it involves the notion of “**not-being**.” And we have already seen that not-being cannot be thought. It is inconceivable, for “thought and being are the same.” So we are confused when we speak

^{*}Actually, it is not entirely clear how Parmenides deals with thoughts that are apparently about nonexistent things. This is a puzzle that is not cleared up until the twentieth century by Bertrand Russell. See the brief treatment of his celebrated theory of definite descriptions on p. 619.

^{*}See the critique by Democritus on pp. 29–30.

[†]See the remark on p. 17 about the path traced by the pen.

of something coming into being. We do not know what we are saying.

The same argument holds for passing away. The fundamental idea involved in passing away is that something leaves the realm of being (of what is) and moves into the realm of not-being (of what is not). A dog dies and *is no more*—or so it seems. But Parmenides argues that this is really inconceivable. Passing away would involve the notion of what is not, but *what is not* cannot be thought. If it cannot be thought, it cannot be. There is no “realm of not-being.” There couldn’t be.

Parmenides summarizes the argument:

How could what is perish? How could it have come to be? For if it came into being, it is not; nor is it if ever it is going to be. Thus coming into being is extinguished, and destruction unknown. (DK 28 B 8, *IEGP*, 113)

But if there can be no coming into being and passing away, then there can be no Heraclitean flux. Indeed, the common experience that things do have beginnings and endings must be an illusion. **Change** is impossible!

For never shall this prevail: that things that are not, are. But hold back your thought from this way of inquiry, nor let habit born of long experience force you to ply an aimless eye and droning ear along this road; but judge by reasoning the much-contested argument that I have spoken. (DK 28 B 7, *IEGP*, 111)

We have already examined the last part of this passage, but it is important to see what contrasts with the “reasoning” that Parmenides commends. We are urged not to let our thought be formed by “habit born of long experience.” Parmenides acknowledges that experience is contrary to the conclusions he is urging on us. Of course the senses tell us that things change, that they begin and end, but Parmenides says not to rely on sensory experience. You must rely on reasoning alone. You must *go wherever the argument takes you*, even if it contradicts common sense and the persuasive evidence of the senses.*

*We will see this theme repeated by Socrates; if it is true that as a young man Socrates conversed with Parmenides (as Plato tells us), it is likely that he learned this principle from him. For an example, see *Crito* 46b, p. 137.

In urging us to follow reason alone, Parmenides stands at the beginning of one of the major traditions in Western philosophy. Although we shouldn’t take such “isms” too seriously, it is useful to give that tradition a name. It is called **rationalism**. Parmenides is rightly considered the first rationalist philosopher.

Notice the contrast to the Ionian nature philosophers. They all try to explain the nature of the things we observe; they start by assuming that the world is composed of many different things changing in many different ways, and it never occurs to them to question this assumption. Heraclitus, remember, says that he esteems most the things we can see and hear and understand.* Parmenides resolutely rejects this reliance on the senses.

He has not finished, however, deriving surprising conclusions from his principles. If we grant his premises, he tells us, we must also acknowledge that what exists

is now, all at once, one and continuous. (DK 28 B 8, *IEGP*, 113)

Nor is it divisible, since it is all alike; nor is there any more or less of it in one place which might prevent it from holding together, but all is full of what is. (DK 28 B 8, *IEGP*, 114)

What is must exist “all at once.” This means that time itself must be unreal, an illusion. Why? Because the present can only be identified as the present by distinguishing it from the past (which is *no longer*) and from the future (which is *not yet*), and this shows that the notions of past and future both involve the unthinkable notion of “what is not.” So “what is” must exist all at once in a continuous present. This thought is later exploited by St. Augustine in his notion of God.†

Moreover, *what is* must be indivisible; it cannot have parts. Why? Well, what could separate one thing from another? Only *what is not*, and what is

*In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such reliance on sensory data is called *empiricism* and is starkly contrasted to rationalism. For an example, see pp. 443–444.

†For Augustine, however, it is only God who enjoys this atemporal kind of eternity; time has a certain reality for Augustine—created and dependent, but not ultimate. See pp. 274–276.

not *cannot be*. You might be inclined to object at this point and say that one thing can be separated from another by some third thing. But the question repeats itself: What separates the first thing from the third? There can't be an infinite number of things between any two things, so at some point you will have to say that the only difference between them is that the one just *is not* the other. But, if Parmenides is right, that's impossible. So all is "full of what is."

It follows, of course, that there cannot be a vortex motion, as Anaximander thought, scattering stuff of different kinds to different places, because there cannot be things of different kinds. It is "all alike." There is not "any more or less of it in one place which might prevent it from holding together."* Why not? Because if there were "less" in some place, this could only be because it is mixed with some nonbeing. Because there is no nonbeing, there cannot be a "**many**." The problem of the one and the many should never have come up!

It also follows that being must be uncreated and imperishable, without beginning or end. If *what there is* had come into being, it must have come from not being—but this is impossible. To perish, it would have to pass away into nothingness—but nothingness is not. So being can neither begin nor end. "For never shall this prevail: that things that are not, are."

We can characterize *what is* in the following terms. It is one, eternal, indivisible, and unchanging. If experience tells you otherwise, Parmenides says, so much the worse for experience.

If you think about it for a moment, you can see that Parmenides has thrust to the fore one of the basic philosophical problems. It is called the problem of **appearance and reality**. Parmenides readily admits that the world *appears* to us to be many and to change continuously and that the things in it seem to move about. What he argues is that it is not so *in reality*. In reality, he holds, there is just the one.

*Anaximenes, a nature philosopher we are not considering, holds that air, when compressed, becomes cloud, then water, then earth and stone. When more rarefied, it becomes fire. Parmenides argues that such an explanation for the many kinds of things we seem to experience is impossible, because such compression and rarefaction implicitly involve expelling or adding nonbeing.

Any convictions we have to the contrary are just "the opinions of mortals in which there is no true belief."

We are all familiar with things not really being what they appear to be. Sticks in water appear to be bent when they are not. Roads sometimes appear to be wet when there is no water on them, and so on. The distinction is one we can readily understand. What is radical and disturbing about Parmenides' position is that everything our senses acquaint us with is allocated to the appearance side of the dichotomy. Nowhere do we sense what really is. Can this be right? This problem puzzles many a successor to Parmenides—or at least *appears* to do so!

Because these views are so strange, so alien to the usual ways of thinking, it is worth noting the response of Parmenides' contemporaries and successors. Do they dismiss him as "that crazy Eleatic" who denies multiplicity and change? Do they think of him as a fool and charlatan? No, they take him very seriously. Plato, for example, always treats Parmenides with respect. Why? Because he, more successfully than anyone else up to his time, does what they are all trying to do: to follow reason wherever it leads. If his conclusions are uncongenial, that means only that his arguments must be examined carefully for any errors. Parmenides provides for the first time a coherent, connected argument—something you can really wrestle with. Succeeding Greek philosophers all try to come to terms with Parmenides in one way or another. Even though few accept his positive views, his influence is great, and his impact is still felt today.

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1. What does Parmenides mean when he says that "thought and being are the same"?
 2. What is the argument that there are not, in reality, *many* things?
 3. If Parmenides is right, why must Heraclitus be wrong about all things being in flux?
 4. Doesn't the testimony of our senses prove that there are many things? Why does Parmenides maintain that it does not?
 5. How must reality (as opposed to appearance) be characterized?
 6. In what sense is Parmenides a rationalist?
-

Zeno: The Paradoxes of Common Sense

In response to Parmenides' strange argument, you may be tempted to slice an apple in two just to prove that there really are many things or wiggle your ears to show change actually happens. Of course, that won't do, because Parmenides has arguments to show that all this is merely appearance, not reality. Still, his conclusion is so at odds with common sense that we feel there must be something wrong with it.

But one of Parmenides' pupils, **Zeno**, claims to have arguments showing that common sense (and the natural science developing out of it) has its own problem: It generates logical contradictions. It is bad enough if a view conflicts with deeply held convictions, but it is even worse if those convictions turn out to be contradictory in themselves. So, Zeno holds, his arguments not only counter those who abuse his teacher, but also "pay them back with interest" (Plato, *Parmenides*, 128d).

Some of Zeno's arguments concern the many, but his most famous arguments concern change—in particular, the sort of change that we call "motion." Common sense assumes that motion is something real, but Zeno argues that these assumptions lead us into inconsistencies. Let us look at three of his arguments.

1. Suppose Achilles were to enter a race with a tortoise. Being honorable and generous, the great runner would offer the tortoise a head start. The tortoise would lumber laboriously along, and after a suitable interval Achilles would spring from the starting blocks. But surprise! He would be unable, despite his utmost efforts, to catch the tortoise. Why?

Consider this: when Achilles begins to run, the tortoise is already at some point down the race course; call it A. To catch him, Achilles must first reach point A. That seems obvious. By the time Achilles has reached A, however, the tortoise has moved on to some further point, B. That also seems obvious. So Achilles needs to race to point B. He does so. Of course, by the time Achilles has attained B, the tortoise is at C. Another effort, this time to get to C, and again the tortoise is beyond him—at D. You can see that no matter how long

the race goes on, Achilles will not catch the tortoise. So much for all that training!

This looks like a perfectly fair deduction from commonsense principles. So common sense holds both that one runner can catch another (because we see it done) *and* that one runner cannot catch another (as the argument shows). This is self-contradictory.

2. Consider an arrow in flight. Common sense holds that the arrow moves. Where does it move? Once this question is asked, it looks as though there are just two possibilities. Either the arrow moves in the space where it is or it moves in some space where it is not—but neither is possible.

It obviously cannot move in a space it does not occupy, because it simply isn't there. Nor can it move in the space it occupies at any given moment, because at that moment it takes up the whole of that space, and there is no place left for it to move into. So the arrow cannot move at all. Once again, this seems a commonsense deduction; however, once again it is at odds with common sense itself, because nothing is more common than believing you can shoot an arrow at a target.

3. You no doubt believe that you can move from where you are now sitting to the door of the room. If you get a sudden yen for a pizza, you might just do it. Before you could get to the door, however, there is something else you would have to do first. You would have to get to the midpoint between where you are now and the door. That seems obvious—but consider: Before you could get to that point, there is something else you would have to do first. You would have to get to the midpoint between *that* point and where you are sitting. You can see how it goes. If you always have to get to one point before getting to another, you will not even be able to get out of your chair!

Once again we see common sense in conflict with itself. If our common belief in motion contains self-contradictions, it cannot possibly be true; therefore, it cannot describe reality. You can see why Zeno thought these arguments paid back Parmenides' opponents "with interest."

Let us pause a moment to reflect on what kind of argument Zeno is using here. Logicians call it a **reductio ad absurdum** argument, or a reduction

to absurdity. It has a form like this. (Let's take the arrow case as an example.)

Assume the truth of a proposition.

1. The arrow can move.

Deduce consequences from that assumption.

2. a. It must move either where it is or where it is not.
b. It can do neither.

Draw the conclusion.

3. The arrow cannot move.

Display the contradiction.

4. The arrow can move (by 1), and the arrow cannot move (by 3).

Draw the final conclusion.

5. Motion is impossible because assuming it yields a contradiction—in 4—and no contradiction can possibly be true.

Reductio arguments are **valid** arguments.* They are very powerful arguments. That is why Zeno's arguments are so disturbing, and that is why articles trying to resolve the **paradoxes** still appear today in philosophical and scientific journals.

These are serious paradoxes. Even if you cannot bring yourself to accept their conclusions, refuting Zeno's arguments requires us to reconsider the basic notions of space, time, and motion—a process still going on in contemporary physics. Furthermore, as an episode in the history of Western philosophy, Zeno's paradoxes present examples of rigorous argument that opponents had to imitate to refute—another push toward rationalism.

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1. State Zeno's arguments against motion, and explain how they support Parmenides.
 2. What is the pattern of a reductio ad absurdum argument?
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*See the discussion of validity in the discussion of Aristotle's logic in Chapter 9 and the definition in the Glossary.

Atomism: The One and the Many Reconciled

Anaximander and other nature philosophers proceed on the assumption that the world is pretty much as it seems. We learn of it, as Heraclitus tells us, by sight, hearing, and understanding. We need only to set forth the elements of which it is made, its principles of organization, and why it changes. This might be difficult to do because the world is complex and human minds are limited, but there doesn't seem to be a shadow of suspicion that sight and hearing on the one hand (the senses) and understanding (reasoning) on the other hand might come into conflict. Yet that is precisely the outcome of Parmenidean logic. The world as revealed by our senses *cannot* be reality, and the force of that "cannot" is the force of reason itself. Parmenides has *proved* it. These arguments of Parmenides shake Ionian nature philosophy to its core.

Clearly, it is difficult simply to acquiesce in these results. It is not easy to say that our sensory convictions about the manyness of things, their changeableness, and their motion are all illusory. Several notable thinkers attempt to reconcile the arguments of Parmenides and his pupil Zeno with the testimony of the senses. Empedocles and Anaxagoras, in particular, struggle with these problems, but it is generally agreed that neither of them really resolves the issue. It is not until we come to the atomists that we find, in principle, a satisfactory solution.

Two figures are important in developing atomist thought: Leucippus and **Democritus**. About the former we know very little; two ancient authorities doubt even that he existed. Others, however, attribute to Leucippus the key idea that allows the Parmenidean argument to be met. About Democritus we know much more. He lived in Abdera, a city of Thrace in northern Greece (see Map 1), during the middle of the fifth century B.C. He wrote voluminously, perhaps as many as fifty-two books, of which well over two hundred fragments are preserved. He is also thoroughly discussed by later philosophers such as Aristotle, so we have a fairly complete notion of his teachings.

We need not try to sort out the separate contributions of Leucippus and Democritus. (We can't do so with certainty in any case.) They seem together to have developed the view known as **atomism**, to which we now turn.

THE KEY: AN AMBIGUITY

In a work titled *Of Generation and Corruption* (concerned with coming into being and passing away), Aristotle summarizes the Parmenidean arguments against these kinds of changes and then says,

Leucippus, however, thought he had arguments which, while consistent with sense perception, would not destroy coming into being or passing away or the multiplicity of existing things. These he conceded to be appearances, while to those who upheld the “one” he conceded that there can be no motion without a void, that the void is not-being, and that not-being is no part of being; for what is, in the strict sense, is completely full. But there is not one such being but infinitely many, and they are invisible owing to the smallness of their bulk. They move in the void (for void exists) and, by coming together and separating, effect coming into being and passing away. (DK 67 A 7, *IEGP*, 196)

Notice that Aristotle does not say simply that Leucippus disagrees with Parmenides. To disagree with an opinion is easy—too easy. What is needed is a *reason* to think that other opinion is mistaken. Aristotle says that Leucippus has, or thinks he has, *arguments*. These arguments concede some things to the **monists** (the believers in the indivisible “one”), but they show that these concessions are not as damaging to common sense as the monists had thought. The acceptable parts of the monistic argument can be reconciled with sense perception, with beginning and ending, and with multiplicity. What are these arguments?

Surprisingly, a follower of Parmenides, Melissus, gives us a hint toward an adequate solution:

If there were a many, they would have to be such as the one is. (DK 30 B 8, *IEGP*, 148)

Melissus does not accept that there is a many. He just tells us that *if* there were a many, each thing would have to have the characteristics Parmenides ascribes to the one. Each would have to be all-alike,

indivisible, full, and eternal. What Leucippus does is to accept this principle and to say there are many such “ones.” There are, in fact, an infinite number of them. Democritus was to call them “**atoms**.”

From all we have seen so far, however, this is mere assertion; we need an argument. It goes like this. We must grant to Parmenides that being and not-being are opposites, and of course not-being *is not*. It doesn't follow from these concessions, though, that there is no such thing as empty space. Space can be empty in precisely this sense: It contains no *things* or *bodies*. Nonetheless, space may have *being*. Empty space, which Democritus calls “**the void**,” is *not* the same as not-being. It only seems so if you do not distinguish *being* from *body*. Being a body or a thing may be just one *way* of being something. There may be others. Moreover, *what-does-not-contain-any-body* need not be the same as *what-is-not-at-all*.

Once that distinction is recognized, we can see that Parmenides' argument confuses the two. He argues that there can be only a “one” because if there were “many” they would have to be separated by *what is not*; and what is not *is not*. So there cannot be a many; what is must be all full and continuous. The atomists argue that there is an ambiguity here. Some of what is *can* be separated from other parts of what is—by the void. So there *can* be a many. The void does not lack being altogether. It only lacks the kind of being characteristic of *things*. Democritus also calls the void “no-thing”—not “nothing” (nothing at all), which he acknowledges *is not*. No-thing (the void) is a kind of being in which no body exists. He puts the point this way:

No-thing exists just as much as thing. (DK 68 B 156, *IEGP*, 197)

A diagram may help to make this clear.

Parmenides		
Being		Not-being
is		is not
Democritus		
Being		
Thing	No-thing	Not-being
(Body)	(Void)	is not
	is	

We noted earlier the struggle to develop a language adequate to describe reality. Language begins, as the language of children does, tied to the concrete. Only with great difficulty does it develop enough abstraction—enough distance, as it were, from concrete things—to allow for the necessary distinctions. The language of Parmenides simply lacks the concepts necessary to make these crucial distinctions. Leucippus and Democritus are in effect forging new linguistic tools for doing the job of describing the world. This is a real breakthrough: It makes possible a theory that does not deny the evidence of the senses and yet is rational (that is, does not lead to contradictions).

THE WORLD

Reality, then, consists of atoms and the void. Atoms are so tiny that they are mostly, perhaps entirely, invisible to us. Each of them is indivisible (the word “atom” comes from roots that mean “not cuttable”).* Because they are indivisible, they are also indestructible; they exist eternally. Atoms are in constant motion, banging into each other and bouncing off, or maybe just vibrating like motes of dust in a stream of sunlight. Such motion is made possible by the existence of the void; the void provides a place into which a body can move. Their motion, moreover, is not something that must be imparted to them from outside. It is their nature to move.

These atoms are not all alike, although internally each is homogeneous, as Melissus argues it must be. Atoms differ from each other in three ways: in shape (including size), in arrangement, and in position. Aristotle gives us examples from the alphabet to illustrate these ways. *A* differs from *N* in shape, *AN* differs from *NA* in arrangement,

and *Z* differs from *N* in position. As the atoms move about, some of them hook into others, perhaps of the same kind, perhaps different. If enough get hitched together, they form bodies that are visible to us. In fact, such compounds or composites are what make up the world of our experience. Teacups and sparrow feathers differ from each other in the kinds of atoms that make them up and in the way the atoms are arranged. Light bodies differ from heavy bodies, for example, because the hooking together is looser and there is more void in them. Soft bodies differ from hard ones because the connections between the atoms are more flexible.

The atomists can explain coming into being and passing away as well. A thing comes into being when the atoms that make it up get hooked together in the appropriate ways. It passes away again when its parts disperse or fall apart.

These principles are obviously compatible with much of the older nature philosophy, and the atomists adopt or adapt a good bit of that tradition. The structure of the universe, for instance, is explained by a vortex motion or whirl that separates out the various kinds of compounds. Like tends to go to like, just as pebbles on a seashore tend to line up in rows according to their size. In this way, we get a picture of the world that is, in its broad features, not very different from that of Anaximander. There is, however, one crucial and very important difference.

Anaximander said that the Boundless “encompasses all things” and “steers all things.” Xenophanes claims that the one god “sets all things in motion by the thought of his mind.” Heraclitus identifies the principle of unity holding together the many changing things of the world as a divine *logos*, or thought. In contrast, Democritus’ principles leave no room for this kind of intelligent direction to things. Remember: What exist are atoms and the void. Democritus boldly draws the conclusions from this premise. If we ask why the atoms combine to form a world or why they form some particular thing in this world, the only answer is that they *just do*. The only reason that can be given is that these atoms happened to be the sort, and to be in the vicinity of other atoms of a sort, to produce the kind of thing

*What we call “atoms” nowadays are not, as we well know, indivisible. We also know, since Einstein, that matter and energy are convertible. Nonetheless, physicists are still searching for the ultimate building blocks of nature. Perhaps they are what scientists call “quarks,” “leptons,” and “bosons.” Whether that is so or not, however, the ancient atomists’ assumption that there are such building blocks and that they are very tiny indeed is alive and well in the twenty-first century.

they did produce. There is no further reason, no intention or purpose behind it.*

Nothing occurs at random, but everything occurs for a reason and by necessity. (DK 67 B 2, *IEGP*, 212)

By this, Democritus means that events don't just happen, but neither do they occur in order to reach some goal or because they were planned or designed to happen that way. If we are asked why so and so occurred, the proper answer will cite previously existing material causes. In one sense, this is the final destination of pre-Socratic speculation about nature. It begins by casting out the Homeric gods. It ends by casting out altogether intelligence and purpose from the governance of the world. Everything happens according to laws of motion that govern the wholly mechanical interactions of the atoms. In these happenings, mind has no place.

This account has—or seems to have—serious consequences for our view of human life. We normally think that we are pretty much in control of our lives, that we can make decisions to do one thing or another, go this way or that. It's up to us. If everything occurs “by necessity,” however, as Democritus says, then each of these decisions is itself determined by mechanical laws that reach back to movements of atoms that long preceded our birth. It begins to look as if we are merely cogs in the gigantic machine of the world, no more really in control of our actions than the clouds are in control of (can choose) when it is going to rain. Supposing Democritus (or his modern followers) are right, what happens to our conviction that we have a free will? Democritus does not solve this problem, but he is the first to set out the parameters of the problem with some clarity.†

*Compare the nonpurposive character of evolutionary accounts of the origin of species with creationist accounts.

†Concerning free will, see the discussions by Epicurus (p. 238), the Stoics (p. 243), Augustine (pp. 281–282), Descartes (*Meditation IV*), Hume (pp. 453–455), Kant (pp. 482–483), Hegel (p. 513), Nietzsche (pp. 580–581), and de Beauvoir (pp. 687–688).

THE SOUL

If mind or intelligence cannot function as an explanation of the world-order, it is nonetheless obvious that it plays a role in human life. Democritus owes us an explanation of human intelligence that is compatible with his basic principles. His speculations are interesting and suggestive, though still quite crude. This problem is one we cannot claim to have solved completely even in our own day.

Atomistic accounts of **soul** and mind must, of course, be compatible with a general materialist view of reality: What exist are atoms and the void. According to Democritus, the soul is composed of exceedingly fine and spherical atoms; in this way, soul interpenetrates the whole of the body. Democritus holds that

spherical atoms move because it is their nature never to be still, and that as they move they draw the whole body along with them, and set it in motion. (DK 68 A 104, *IEGP*, 222)

Soul-atoms are in this sense akin to fire-atoms, which are also small, spherical, and capable of penetrating solid bodies and (as Heraclitus has observed) are strikingly good examples of spontaneous motion. The soul or principle of life is, like everything else, *material*.

Living things, of course, have certain capacities that nonliving things do not: They experience sensations (tastes, smells, sights, sounds, pains). Some, at least, are capable of thought, and humans seem to have a capacity to know. Can Democritus explain these capacities using only atoms and the void?

Think first about sensations. Taste seems easy enough to explain. Sweet and sour, salty and bitter are just the results of differently shaped atoms in contact with the tongue. The sweet, Democritus says, consists of atoms that are “round and of a good size,” the sour of “bulky, jagged, and many-angled” atoms, and so on (DK 68 A 129, *IEGP*, 200). These speculations are not grounded in anything like modern experimental method, but the kind of explanation is surely familiar to those who know something of modern chemistry.

Smells are explained along analogous lines, and sounds, too, are not difficult; Democritus explains them in terms of air being “broken up into bodies of like shape . . . rolled along with the fragments of the voice.”³ Vision is hardest to explain in terms of an atomistic view. Unlike touch, taste, and even hearing, it is a “distance receptor.” With sight, it is as though we were able to reach out to the surfaces of things at some distance from us without any material means of doing so. In this respect, the eye seems quite different from the hand or the tongue.

Democritus, however, holds that sight is not really different. Like the other senses, it works by contact with its objects, only in this case the contact is more indirect than usual. The bodies made up of combined atoms are constantly giving off “images” of themselves, he tells us. These images are themselves material, composed of exceptionally fine atoms. These “effluences” strike the eye and stamp their shape in the soft and moist matter of the eye, whereupon it is registered in the smooth and round atoms of soul present throughout the body.

This kind of explanation is regarded by most of his Greek successors as very strange. Aristotle even calls it a great absurdity. It may not strike us as absurd. Indeed, it seems somewhere near the truth.

It does have a paradoxical consequence, though, which Democritus recognizes and is willing to accept. It means that our senses *do not give us direct and certain knowledge of the world*. Our experience of vision is the outcome of a complex set of interactions between the object seen, the intervening medium, and our sensory apparatus. Our experience when we look at a distant mountain is not a simple function of the characteristics of the mountain. That experience depends also on whether the air is clear or foggy, clean or polluted. It depends on whether it is dawn, dusk, or noon. Moreover, what we experience depends (we know now) on what kinds and proportions of rods and cones we have in our eyes, on complex sending mechanisms in the optic nerve, and the condition of the visual center in the brain.

Democritus cannot express his point in these contemporary terms, of course, but they underscore his point. Similar explanations also apply

to the other senses. It was recognized in ancient times that honey, for example, can taste sweet to a healthy person and bitter to a sick one. Clearly, the difference depends on the state of the receptor organs. What is the character of the honey itself? Is it both sweet and bitter? That seems impossible. Democritus draws the conclusion that it is neither. Sweetness and bitterness, hot and cold, red and blue exist only in us, not in nature.

Sweet exists by convention, bitter by convention, color by convention; but in reality atoms and the void alone exist. (DK 68 B 9, *IEGP*, 202)

To say that something exists by **convention** is to say that its existence depends on us.* In nature alone, it is not to be found. If our sense experience is conventional in this sense, then we cannot rely on it to tell us what the world is really like. In a way, Parmenides was right after all!†

It is necessary to realize that by this principle man is cut off from the real. (DK 68 B 6, *IEGP*, 203)

We are “cut off from the real” because whatever impact the real has on us is in part a product of our own condition. This is true not only of the sick person but also of the well one. The sweetness of the honey to the well person depends on sensory receptors just as much as the bitterness to the sick one. Neither has a direct, unmediated avenue to what honey really is.

Later philosophers exploit these considerations in skeptical directions, doubting that we can have any reliable knowledge of the world at all. For Democritus, however, they do not lead to utter skepticism:

There are two forms of knowledge: one legitimate, one bastard. To the bastard sort belong all the following: sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch. The legitimate is quite distinct from this. When the bastard form cannot see more minutely, nor hear nor smell nor taste nor perceive through the touch, then another, finer form must be employed. (DK 68 B 11, *IEGP*, 203–204)

*For a fuller discussion of the ancient Greek distinction between nature and convention, see “*Physis and Nomos*” in Chapter 4.

†See pp. 25–26.

He seems to be telling us that the senses can take us only so far, because they have a “bastard” parentage (that is, they are the products of both the objects perceived and the perceiving organs). But there is “another, finer” and “legitimate” form of knowledge available to the soul. This knowledge is no doubt based on reasoning. Its product is the knowledge that what really exist are atoms and the void. At this point, we would like reasoning itself to be explained in terms of the atomistic view, as the senses have been explained. Democritus offers no such explanation. This is not surprising; indeed, many think that a satisfactory account of reasoning on these materialistic principles is only now, after the invention of the computer, beginning to be constructed—but that, of course, is reaching far ahead of our story.*

HOW TO LIVE

Democritus wrote extensively on the question of the best life for a human being, but only fragments remain. Many of them are memorable, however, and we simply list without comment a number of his most lively aphorisms.

- Disease occurs in a household, or in a life, just as it does in a body. (DK 68 B 288, *IEGP*, 221)
- Medicine cures the diseases of the body; wisdom, on the other hand, relieves the soul of its sufferings. (DK 68 B 31, *IEGP*, 222)
- The needy animal knows how much it needs; but the needy man does not. (DK 68 B 198, *IEGP*, 223)
- It is hard to fight with desire; but to overcome it is the mark of a rational man. (DK 68 B 236, *IEGP*, 225)
- Moderation increases enjoyment, and makes pleasure even greater. (DK 68 B 211, *IEGP*, 223)
- It is childish, not manly, to have immoderate desires. (DK 68 B 70, *IEGP*, 225)
- The good things of life are produced by learning with hard work; the bad are reaped of their own accord, without hard work. (DK 68 B 182, *IEGP*, 226)

*But take a look at “The Matter of Minds” in Chapter 30, pp. 733–738.

- The brave man is he who overcomes not only his enemies but his pleasures. There are some men who are masters of cities but slaves to women. (DK 68 B 214, *IEGP*, 228)
- In cattle excellence is displayed in strength of body; but in men it lies in strength of character. (DK 68 B 57, *IEGP*, 230)
- I would rather discover a single cause than become king of the Persians. (DK 68 B 118, *IEGP*, 229)

Many of the themes expressed here should be familiar by now. We will see them worked out more systematically in later Greek philosophy, particularly by Plato and Aristotle.

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1. State as clearly as you can the argument by which the atomists defeat Parmenides and reconcile the one and the many.
 2. How would atomists explain the difference between, say, chalk and cheese? How would they explain the making of cheese from milk?
 3. On atomistic principles, what happens to the notion of a cosmic intelligence?
 4. What is the atomist’s account of soul?
 5. What does it mean to say that sweet and bitter exist “by convention”?
 6. Why does Democritus say that our senses cut us off from the real? Why are we not absolutely cut off?
 7. What problem does atomism pose for the idea that we have a free will?
-

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

1. Twentieth-century philosopher of science Karl Popper quotes Xenophanes approvingly and asserts that the development of thought we can trace in the pre-Socratics exemplifies perfectly the basic structure of scientific thinking. He calls it the “rational critical” method and says it works through a sequence of bold conjectures and incisive refutations. Can you identify such moves in the thinking of the philosophers we have studied so far? (See Popper’s *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* [New York: Harper & Row, 1968].)

2. What sort of defense could you mount against the attacks on common sense put forth by rationalists such as Parmenides and Zeno? Is there something you could do to show that the world of our sense experience is, after all, the real world? Why or why not?
3. Here is an argument to prove that a ham sandwich is better than perfect happiness: (1) A ham sandwich is better than nothing; (2) nothing is better than perfect happiness; therefore (3) a ham sandwich is better than perfect happiness. Will untangling this fallacy throw light on the atomists' critique of Parmenides?
4. If you know something about the physiology of the central nervous system, try to determine whether modern accounts of that system also "cut us off from the real."

KEY WORDS

Thales	seeking
Anaximander	truth
the Boundless	epistemology
vortex motion	Heraclitus
Xenophanes	opposition
one god	flux

logos
 wisdom
 Parmenides
 the One
 argument
 appearance
 not-being
 change
 rationalism
 many
 appearance/reality

Zeno
 reductio ad absurdum
 valid
 paradox
 Democritus
 atomism
 monists
 atoms and the void
 soul
 convention

NOTES

1. Quotations from the pre-Socratic philosophers are in the translation by John Manley Robinson, *An Introduction to Early Greek Philosophy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968). They are cited by the standard Diels/Kranz number, followed by *IEGP* and the page number in Robinson.
2. Biblical quotations in this text are taken from the Revised Standard Version, 1946/1971, National Council of Churches.
3. Quoted in G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 423.

CHAPTER

3

APPEARANCE AND REALITY IN ANCIENT INDIA



In Chapters 1 and 2, we examined how early Greek philosophy grew out of ancient myths and traditions. From these beginnings the conversation that is Western philosophy stretches down to the present. That tradition will remain our central focus in this book, but it is not the only great philosophical conversation. Interestingly, two other great philosophical traditions—the Indian and the Chinese—emerged at roughly the same time as Greek philosophy. As in Greece, these philosophical traditions grew out of the distinctive cultures of their native lands. Despite these very different starting points, all three traditions share certain ideas and concerns. Exploring the commonalities and differences between them illuminates all three traditions.

With that in mind, we turn now to some of the oldest philosophical traditions in India. Rather than attempt a comprehensive survey of the many schools of thought in ancient India, we will explore just a few, focusing on the themes of *the one and the many* and *appearance and reality*, along with the question of the *nature of the self*.

The Vedas and the Upaniṣads

Indian philosophy, like Greek philosophy, developed out of responses to mythical explanations of the origin and nature of the universe. Whereas we looked to the poets Hesiod and Homer to recount Greek myths, we find Indian myths recorded in an ancient set of religious hymns known as the **Vedas**. Composed during the second millennium B.C., the Vedas laid the foundation for Indian religion and philosophy.

Because the Vedic hymns were composed by so many authors over so many centuries, they offer many different accounts of the gods and the creation of the universe. The earliest hymns display a sort of nature worship. Somewhat later hymns introduce a panoply of gods and goddesses, including the mighty sky gods Varuṇa and Mitra; sun gods Sūrya and Savitṛ; Viṣṇu; the infinite and ineffable Aditi; the fire god Agni; Soma, god of inspiration; the mighty rain god Indra, and many more. At some times Varuṇa seems chief among them, giving way in later hymns to Indra, who later makes

way for Prajāpati, lord of all creatures. These gods do not displace each other as part of a continuous narrative, as the Greek Zeus overthrows his father Kronos in Hesiod's telling. Rather, the hymns simply begin treating different gods as supreme, leaving others behind as Indian culture changes and develops. Later still, the hymns come to regard all these gods merely as aspects of a single deity. The *Ṛg Veda* (Rig Veda), says,

They call it Indra, Mitra, Varuṇa, Fire (Agni); or it is the heavenly Sun-bird. That which is One . . . the seers speak of in various terms; they call it Fire, Yama, Matariśvan. (*Ṛg Veda* I.164.46)¹

Eventually, this tentative monotheism broadens into a monistic view of the universe itself. Not only were the various gods really just aspects of a single supreme deity, but so was everything else: everything was but a manifestation of god; god was everything. This is an idea that appears in many traditions around the world.* In the Indian tradition, this all-encompassing deity eventually comes to be called **Brahman**.

Beginning in the first millennium B.C., other kinds of texts were composed to accompany the Vedas. The Brāhmaṇas set out the details of priestly rituals designed to influence worldly affairs. The **Upaniṣads** (Upanishads) contain philosophical reflections on the contents of the Vedas. Composed sometime around the seventh or sixth century B.C., the early Upaniṣads are “the mental background of the whole of the subsequent thought of the country.”² In the Upaniṣads, we see early Indian thinkers grappling with many of the same philosophical problems that perplexed the earliest Greek thinkers: What is the world, and where does it come from? What are we, and how do we relate to the world? Unlike the Greek philosophers, however, the anonymous authors of the Upaniṣads did not reject the older myths, which by this time contained sophisticated ideas about the nature of reality. Instead, they built on those ideas and worked to fashion them into a rationally coherent doctrine,

expressed sometimes in verse, sometimes through direct explanation, and sometimes through stories and legends. Unlike Greek philosophy, then, Indian philosophy arises not from a rejection of myth but from an attempt to extend, explain, and rationalize it.

We will concentrate on just one key idea that crystallizes in the Upaniṣads: the idea of the self—**ātman**, as it is called in Sanskrit, the language in which the Vedas and the Upaniṣads were written. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* works out the nature of the self through a story in which the god Indra and the demon Virocana set out to learn about the self. They offer themselves as students to the god Prajāpati, who makes them wait thirty-two years before speaking to them. “Why have you lived here?” he asks. “What do you want?”

They replied: “Sir, people report these words of yours: ‘The self (*ātman*) that is free from evils, free from old age and death, free from sorrow, free from hunger and thirst; the self whose desires and intentions are real—that is the self that you should try to discover, that is the self that you should seek to perceive. When someone discovers that self and perceives it, he obtains all the worlds, and all his desires are fulfilled.’”

“So, you have lived here seeking that self.” Prajāpati then told them: “This person that one sees here in the eye—that is the self (*ātman*); that is the immortal; that is the one free from fear; that is *brahman*.” (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.7.3–4)³

Indra and Virocana initially accept this explanation, that their self is their body. They leave satisfied, and Prajāpati remarks, “There they go, without learning about the self (*ātman*), without discovering the self!”

Virocana returns to the demons, announcing that the self is the body and that each person should care only for the body.

Indra, however, realizes his mistake. The body cannot be the true self, he reasons, because it is not “free from evils, free from old age and death.” So he returns to Prajāpati, who makes him wait another thirty-two years before explaining that the true self is the self one encounters in a dream. Initially satisfied, Indra leaves again, only to realize that this self, too, can suffer sorrow and unpleasantness.

*In the West, the Stoics would adopt this view. See p. 243. See also the emanation theory of Plotinus (pp. 270–271).

After returning again and waiting another thirty-two years, Indra hears that the self is one who slumbers in a deep, dreamless sleep. Once again, he leaves satisfied, only to recognize his mistake later. In dreamless slumber, the self cannot recognize itself as a self; it is not what he seeks. Once more Indra returns to Prajāpati, who mercifully makes him wait only five more years before saying,

This body . . . is mortal; it is in the grip of death. So, it is the abode of this immortal and non-bodily self. One who has a body is in the grip of joy and sorrow, and there is no freedom from joy and sorrow for one who has a body. Joy and sorrow, however, do not affect one who has no body. . . .

Now, when this sight here gazes into space, that is the seeing person, the faculty of sight enables one to see. The one who is aware: “Let me smell this”—that is the self; the faculty of smell enables him to smell. The one who is aware: “Let me say this”—that is the self; the faculty of speech enables him to speak. The one who is aware: “Let me listen to this”—that is the self; the faculty of hearing enables him to hear. The one who is aware: “Let me think about this”—that is the self; the mind is his divine faculty of sight. This very self rejoices as it perceives with his mind, with that divine sight, these objects of desire found in the world of *brahman*. (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.12.1–5)

The self, then, is something immaterial and eternal that sees, smells, speaks, hears, and thinks on through the faculties of sight, smell, speech, hearing, and thought.

We cannot perceive the self directly, however. In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, the wise man Yājñavalkya discusses *ātman* with his wife Maitreyī, saying,

By what means can one perceive him by means of whom one perceives this whole world?

About this self (*ātman*), one can only say, “not ———, not ———.” He is ungraspable, for he cannot be grasped. He is undecaying, for he is not subject to decay. He has nothing sticking to him, for he does not stick to anything. He is not bound; yet he neither trembles in fear nor suffers injury. (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.5.15)

Just as your eye sees but cannot see itself, the self cannot perceive itself because it is the thing that does the perceiving. So we cannot say that it has any particular characteristics. We can, however,

say what it is *not*—namely, it is not bodily or mortal or subject to fear or injury. It is beyond all of that.

The Upaniṣads introduce two other intriguing ideas about the self. The first is that after the death of the body, the self is reincarnated or reborn in a new body.* The god Kṛṣṇa (Krishna) expresses this idea quite dramatically in a later epic poem, the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Kṛṣṇa says,

Just as a man casting off worn-out clothes takes up others that are new, so the embodied self, casting off its worn-out bodies, goes to other, new ones. (*Bhagavad Gītā* 2.22)

Death is inevitable for those who are born; for those who are dead birth is just as certain. (*Bhagavad Gītā* 2.27)⁴

This cycle of birth, death, and **rebirth** is known as *saṃsāra*. With each turn of the wheel of *saṃsāra*, people leave their old bodies behind to be reborn into new ones. Furthermore, those who have lived good lives are reborn into good circumstances, whereas those who did not are reborn into bad circumstances—or even as lower animals. According to the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*,

Now, people whose behavior here is pleasant can expect to enter a pleasant womb [after death], like that of a woman of the Brahmin [priestly class], the Kṣatriya [warrior class], or the Vaiśya [trader and farmer] class. But people of foul behavior can expect to enter a foul womb, like that of a dog, a pig, or an outcaste woman. (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 5.10.7)

The idea that one’s actions in this life can affect the circumstances of one’s next life is part of the doctrine of *karma*. According to this doctrine, it is built into the very structure of the universe that every good action leads to good consequences for the actor, and every bad action leads to bad consequences for the actor. So, if you do something good for someone else, something good will one day happen to you in return. Some parts of the Indian tradition regard *karma* as the dispensation of the gods, while for others, *karma* is a law of nature in something like the way the law of gravity is a law of nature. (Note, though, that just as gravity

*Some Western thinkers, such as Pythagoras, endorsed this idea, too.

is but one cause that determines how things move, *karma* is only one cause that determines what happens to a person.) Crucially, the idea is not that good people *tend* to live good lives and bad people *tend* to suffer misfortune, but that performing each good deed *causes* good fortune and each bad deed *causes* misfortune for the one who performs it.

While the ideas of rebirth and *karma* are widely accepted throughout ancient India, another important Upaniṣadic idea about the self is endorsed only by some traditions and schools of thought. This is the idea that *ātman* is identical to Brahman, the supreme deity that comprises the whole world. As a famous passage puts it,

This earth is the honey of all beings, and all beings are the honey of this earth. The radiant and immortal person in the earth and, in the case of the body (*ātman*), the radiant and immortal person residing in the physical body—they are both one's self (*ātman*). It is the immortal; it is *brahman*; it is the Whole. (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2.5.1)

Much as the various gods of the Vedas come to be seen merely as different aspects of a supreme deity, so the immaterial core of each person's being comes, in the Upaniṣads, to be seen merely an aspect of that same deity. In many ways, then, the appearance of many turns out to be an illusion; there is only the One.*

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1. What is the relationship between the Upaniṣads and the Vedas?
 2. What is *ātman*, according to the Upaniṣads?
 3. What is *saṃsāra*? What is *karma*? How are the two connected?
 4. In what sense is everything one in the Upaniṣads?
-

The Buddha

Sometime in the fifth century B.C., after the earliest Upaniṣads had already been written, a boy is born to a wealthy aristocratic family in northern India. His parents name him Siddhārtha Gautama. Siddhārtha grows up in the sheltering comforts of

his father's palace. When he finally leaves its walls as a teenager, he discovers all the vicissitudes of life that his parents had concealed from him: old age, infirmity, disease, poverty, hunger, death—in a word, suffering. Shocked by what he sees, Siddhārtha eventually renounces his wealth and position to become a traveling ascetic. After several arduous years of the ascetic life, Siddhārtha seats himself beneath a tree and resolves to remain there until he has discerned the truth about how to live. According to legend, he remains there in meditation for forty-nine nights before achieving enlightenment by seeing the world for what it really is. Thereafter, he is known as the **Buddha**, which means "Awakened One." The views he developed during this time form the foundation of Buddhist philosophy. In time, a non-Vedic religion grew up around them, which we call Buddhism.



"All that is subject to arising is subject to cessation."

—THE BUDDHA

*Compare the views of Parmenides (p. 20).

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS AND THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH

So what did the Buddha discover under that tree? As he eventually explained to his followers, he came to understand four fundamental ideas, which are called the **four Noble Truths**. They are as follows:

1. There is suffering (*duḥkha*).*
2. There is the origination of suffering.
3. There is the cessation of suffering.
4. There is a path to the cessation of suffering.

These claims form the basis of Buddhist philosophy, which became one of several early Indian philosophies to reject the authority of the Vedas and the Upaniṣads. If we can understand what the Buddha means by these four claims, we are well on our way to understanding the basics of Buddhist thought.

The first step to understanding the four Noble Truths is to understand what the Buddha means by “**suffering**.” He is not referring only to the things that shocked him when he ventured out of the palace—death, disease, and physical pain—though these are certainly forms of suffering. He also means to capture despair, frustration, fear, anxiety, lack of control, and a host of other ills. While we would not normally classify all these things as “suffering,” they are all captured by the word *duḥkha*.

The observation that the world contains suffering would hardly seem like a fundamental insight, except perhaps to someone as sheltered as young Siddhārtha. But what the Buddha means is not simply that suffering occurs from time to time; he means that “all is suffering” or “everything suffers.”

*Strictly speaking, the Buddha didn’t use the Sanskrit word “*duḥkha*.” The Buddha spoke a different language, called Pāli, and Buddhist philosophy was mostly written in Pāli for many centuries after his death. Much of the key terminology for Buddhist philosophy was therefore developed in Pāli, but the terms tend to be very similar in sound and meaning. The Pāli equivalent of *duḥkha*, for instance, is *dukkha*, and the Pāli equivalent of *karma* is *kamma*. Because some of the Sanskrit terminology, such as *karma* and *nirvāṇa*, is more familiar to Western readers than their Pāli equivalents, we use the somewhat anachronistic Sanskrit terminology throughout this chapter.

Suffering, he claims, is a pervasive and fundamental feature of life. This may seem to go too far in the other direction. If the idea that suffering occurs seems trivial, the idea that “all is suffering” might seem obviously false. Life certainly has its bleak moments, but it also has moments of joy, of pleasure, of pride, and of satisfaction. Do even *those* moments involve suffering? Yes, says the Buddha, for even when we get what we want, we are constantly at risk of losing it. This threat looms over us, causing anxiety and concern. Furthermore, even for the most powerful among us, *whether* we get what we want—and how long we keep it—is never entirely under our control. All our plans remain forever hostage to fortune, which is a constant source of unease.

The Buddha’s message is not as pessimistic as the first Noble Truth may make it seem. The second Noble Truth says that suffering has a cause; the third that it has an end; and the fourth that its end has a cause. These three truths point us down a path to the cessation of suffering. If we can understand the *cause* of suffering, we can discern the cause of its cessation. And if we can bring about that cause, we can bring suffering to an end.

So what is the cause of suffering, according to the Buddha? At a superficial level, the cause of suffering is craving or attachment. **Attachment** includes strong desires, including both desires for something and desires to avoid something. It is by pursuing what we desire and striving to avoid what we hate that we bring suffering on ourselves. But the Buddha also offers a deeper analysis of the cause of suffering: attachment itself is caused by delusion, by a false understanding of the way the world is. It is because we misunderstand the world that we feel greed and hatred.

With this in mind, the Buddha offers a path to the cessation of suffering, called the **Noble Eightfold Path**. This path, which lies at the foundation of the Buddha’s ethical teachings, consists of the following:

1. Right view
2. Right intention
3. Right speech
4. Right conduct

5. Right livelihood
6. Right effort
7. Right mindfulness
8. Right concentration

It is worth noting that the Buddha lists “right view” first. While all eight aspects of the path are intertwined, such that we cannot really have one without the others, having the **right view**—that is, having the correct understanding of reality—plays a central role in achieving the others. This is because we will not have the right intentions, right speech, right conduct, and so on unless we dispel the delusions that cloud our understanding.

Before we consider exactly what those delusions are, let us say something about some of the other parts of the Eightfold Path. The ultimate goal of Buddhist ethics is the cessation of suffering, wherever it occurs. In this spirit, the Buddha encourages his followers to develop the **Four Divine Abidings**: lovingkindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. **Lovingkindness** consists in wishing for others to be happy. **Compassion** consists in wishing for others to be free from suffering. **Joy**, in this context, involves being happy about others’ happiness. **Equanimity** involves a calm, even-handed assessment of things as they are, without attachment or prejudice. Together with prohibitions of the kind found in most religious and philosophical traditions around the world, such as prohibitions on killing, theft, and lying, the cultivation of the Four Divine Abidings offers a path to right speech, right conduct, and so on. The Buddha places “right intention” before these other things, however, because it is one’s intentions, more than anything else, that determine the quality of one’s actions.

While actions performed from these noble intentions are clearly directed at easing suffering, the complete cessation of suffering requires something more. Even though he rejects the authority of the Vedas, the Buddha accepts the traditional doctrines of karma and rebirth. Given that all life involves suffering, the only way to escape suffering once and for all is to escape *samsāra* entirely. The Buddha claims that those who follow the Noble Eightfold Path can achieve a kind of liberation from *samsāra*

he calls *nirvāṇa*. The first stage of *nirvāṇa* occurs in this life, upon attaining enlightenment. In this state, an enlightened person still experiences many of the things that unenlightened people experience, including pleasant and unpleasant sensations, health and sickness, old age, infirmity, and ultimately death. But unlike the unenlightened person, the enlightened person does not respond to such experiences with strong desires or aversions.

Upon the death of the body, the enlightened person achieves the second, higher stage of *nirvāṇa*—*nirvāṇa* **without remainder**. The Buddha notoriously refuses to explain exactly what this involves. Instead, he explains *nirvāṇa* without remainder by invoking the common Buddhist metaphor of the self as a flame:

The fire burned in dependence on its fuel of grass and sticks. When that is used up, if it does not get any more fuel, being without fuel, it is reckoned as extinguished. So too [after death, the enlightened being] has abandoned that material form by which one describing [the enlightened being] might describe him. . . . [He] is liberated . . . he is profound, immeasurable, hard to fathom like the ocean. (*MN* i.487)⁵

On the one hand, the comparison to a fire that has been extinguished suggests that the enlightened person simply ceases to exist after death. On the other hand, the claim that in *nirvāṇa* without remainder a person is “profound, immeasurable, hard to fathom like the ocean” suggests that the enlightened person does exist in some sense. How can something that does not exist at all be “hard to fathom like the ocean”? But when pressed for details, the Buddha rejects both the suggestion that the “liberated” person exists and the suggestion that he or she does not exist. For good measure, he also rejects the idea that the enlightened person neither exists nor doesn’t exist and the suggestion that he or she both exists and does not exist, saying,

“He reappears” does not apply; “he does not reappear” does not apply; “he both reappears and does not reappear” does not apply; “he neither reappears nor does not reappear” does not apply. (*MN* i.487)

It is hard to know what to make of these claims, and Buddhists have debated them ever since. We can at

least say, though, that *nirvāṇa* without remainder involves an escape from *saṃsāra* and therefore the end of suffering.

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1. What is suffering (*duḥkha*)? What do the four Noble Truths tell us about suffering?
 2. What is the Noble Eightfold Path? Why is “right view” listed first?
 3. What are the Four Divine Abidings and how do they relate to the ultimate goal of Buddhist ethics?
 4. What is *nirvāṇa*? How does it compare to views of the afterlife in Western religions?
-

RIGHT VIEW

The first step toward *nirvāṇa*, we have seen, is having the right understanding of the world—the right view. But what view is that? What are the misunderstandings that condemn us to suffering and rebirth? Perhaps the most important delusion is the belief that objects we see around us are real, enduring entities. Although we seem to see people, animals, trees, stones, and so forth, all that really exists, according to the Buddha, are “heaps” or **aggregates** of momentary phenomena, which the Buddha called **skandhas**. Buddhists analyze reality into five kinds of skandhas: material form (or matter or body), affective sensations, perceptions, mental activity (or habitual mental tendencies), and consciousness. In early Buddhist thought, these skandhas are understood as something like momentary particles. Each form-*skandha* is something like an atom, the smallest possible particle of matter, though unlike the atoms of pre-Socratic Greek thought, each form-*skandha* comes into and blinks out of existence in a single moment.* The other types of skandhas are momentary mental phenomena, such as a particular momentary feeling of pain

*This terminology can be confusing for those versed in classical Greek philosophy, in which entities are sometimes said to be composed of form and matter. (See Aristotle on form and matter, pp. 196–197.) In early Buddhist thought, *rūpa*, which is translated as “form,” “material form,” “material shape,” or “corporeal form,” just *is* matter, though they understand it rather differently than the Greeks do.

or a perception of an object at a particular moment. A human being is nothing but a collection of these different kinds of skandhas.

The analysis of human beings into *skandhas* has profound implications in Buddhist thought. The most important is that it means the Upaniṣads (and perhaps common sense, as well) have foisted on us a deep misunderstanding of the nature of the self. Whereas the Upaniṣads identify the self with an enduring object, *ātman*, the Buddha advances the doctrine of *anātman*, which means “non-self.” There is nothing, the Buddha asserts, that answers to the Vedic idea of the self as an eternal, unchanging entity that constitutes each person’s essential core. Nor is the self to be identified with one’s body or with anything else. One’s body and mind consist of nothing more than a heap of momentary *skandhas*, each coming into being and passing away in every moment. In discussing this idea with his disciples, he considers each thing that might *seem* like it is or belongs to oneself. About each one, including the various kinds of mental *skandhas*, he advises his disciples to say,

This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.
(MN i.135)

This is a puzzling doctrine. It seems natural to ask, If none of these things are the self, is there a self at all? If so, what could it be? If not, *how* could that be? Different Buddhist philosophers have answered these questions in different ways over the centuries, and we will consider one of them later in this chapter. Here, however, we can at least ask why the Buddha would say such a thing.

One reason for rejecting the Upaniṣadic view of *ātman* is that clinging to the idea of a self breeds attachment. Addressing his disciples, the Buddha says,

“You may well cling to that doctrine of self that would not arouse sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair in one who clings to it. But do you see any such doctrine of self . . . ?”—“No, venerable sir.”—“Good. . . . I too do not see any doctrine of self that would not arouse sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair in one who clings to it.”
(MN i.138)

Your attachments, the Buddha is arguing, are ultimately bound up with the idea that there is some *self* that does or possesses the things you crave. Because there is no conception of an enduring self that avoids these pitfall, we can escape attachment—and therefore suffering—only by recognizing that the self is a delusion.

A second motivation for the doctrine of *anātman* lies in another fundamental Buddhist doctrine: *anitya* or **impermanence**. According to the Buddha, everything in the universe is in a constant state of flux, constantly coming into being and passing away.* Look around the room. The things you seem to see—this book, tables and chairs, your hands, and even yourself—are nothing more than streams of momentary *skandhas*. It follows, then, that there is no permanent, unchanging self—no *ātman* as the Upaniṣads understand it. Furthermore, all things and all events are fully caused by the conditions that preceded them—a view that would, with some modification, come to be called **dependent origination**. Each event, including events that would appear to be actions attributable to a self, is the outcome of events that preceded that self and of conditions that are clearly outside the self. Thus, even the idea of the self as the author of one's actions melts away.

Rejecting the Upaniṣadic view of the self creates a problem for the Buddhists. Recall that the Buddha accepts the ideas of rebirth and karma. In the Upaniṣads and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, however, it is the eternal, unchanging self—*ātman*—that is reborn again and again, shedding one body and accepting another like a change of clothes. But if there is no *ātman*, in what sense can we say that a particular person is the reincarnation of some other, deceased person? And perhaps more important, how can a person enjoy or suffer the karmic consequences generated by her past self if she has no self in the first place?

To understand the Buddhist reply to this question, let us consider a particular case—say, that of Emperor Aśoka, who converted to Buddhism after conquering most of the Indian subcontinent during the third century B.C. When Aśoka died, he was

reborn, we will presume, as a human baby. On the Vedic view, what makes the baby a reincarnation of Aśoka, rather than a reincarnation of someone else, is that Aśoka and the baby share the same *ātman*. Furthermore, it is *because* that particular *ātman* did various good and bad deeds during its life as Aśoka that certain karmically caused consequences await it in this life. On the Buddhist view, however, this last step gets things exactly backward. It is *because* Aśoka's good and bad deeds carry karmic consequences for *this* baby, rather than for some other baby, that *this* baby counts as a reincarnation of Aśoka. Consider a parallel with the way that memory works on the Buddhist picture. Buddhists would say that it was because Aśoka saw the bloody battlefields of the Kāliṅga region that the bundle of *skandhas* we call Aśoka could later summon mental images of those battlefields; there is a certain kind of causal connection between one bundle of *skandhas* and another. A similar causal connection applies between the *skandhas* known as Aśoka and those making up some particular baby, except that this connection transmits not memories, but karmic consequences.

This illustrates the complicated relationship between the Vedic tradition and Buddhist thought. The Buddha accepts certain central ideas from the Vedas, such as the doctrines of rebirth and *karma* and the idea that the world we think we see is ultimately an illusion. But the Buddha turns many of those ideas on their heads: rebirth is understood in terms of *karma*, rather than vice versa, and whereas the Vedic tradition seeks an eternal, unchanging reality beneath the ever-changing surface of appearances, the Buddha claims that this constant flux *is* ultimate reality.

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1. What are the five kinds of *skandhas*?
 2. Explain the doctrine of *anātman*. How does it differ from the views of the authors of the Upaniṣads?
 3. How is the doctrine of *anātman* supposed to help people advance along the Noble Eightfold Path?
 4. Explain the Buddhist concepts of impermanence and dependent origination. What do those concepts have to do with the doctrine of *anātman*?
 5. How do Buddhists reconcile the doctrine of *anātman* with the doctrine of *karma*?
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*Compare to the views of Heraclitus (pp. 17–18).

Non-Self and Nāgasena

After the Buddha's death, his followers collect sayings attributed to him, along with stories about his life, into a text known as the *Sūtra Piṭaka*. (Since the Buddha did not write anything himself, the *Sūtra Piṭaka* is the source for the quotations we attributed to the Buddha in the previous section.) Over the next few centuries, other thinkers begin building on the Buddha's thought. Their efforts are compiled into two more texts, the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, which contains rules and instructions for Buddhist monks and nuns, and the **Abhidharma Piṭaka**, which constitutes an early attempt to develop a systematic interpretation of the theoretical aspects of the Buddha's teachings. The attempts to systematize, interpret, and develop the Buddha's ideas inevitably lead to controversies, debates, and disagreements. These, in turn, lead to the formation of distinct schools of Buddhist thought—eighteen in all, according to Buddhist tradition.

Many of the developments and controversies from this period are on display in a dialogue between a monk called Nāgasena and the brilliant and powerful King Milinda.* The record of their dialogue, *Milinda's Questions*, was probably written a few decades or centuries after Milinda's reign; its author is unknown. The book ranges over a wide range of theoretical controversies in Buddhist thought, but we will focus on just one: how to understand the doctrine of *anātman*.

The book opens with King Milinda seeking some wise man who could resolve his philosophical doubts. He visits various renowned sages but comes away disappointed each time. When Nāgasena arrives in Milinda's capital, Milinda summons five hundred servants, climbs into his royal chariot, and goes to pay the monk a visit.

*Milinda is believed to be another name for Menander, a Greek-speaking king of the second century B.C. whose domain stretched from modern-day Afghanistan into northwestern India. He was one of the "Indo-Greek" rulers whose kingdom was, in an indirect way, a remnant of Alexander the Great's conquest of central Asia in the fourth century B.C.

Milinda finds Nāgasena seated among a company of his fellow monks.

Then King Milinda approached the venerable Nāgasena . . . and, having exchanged greetings of friendliness and courtesy, he sat down at a respectful distance. . . . Then King Milinda spoke thus to the venerable Nāgasena:

"How is the revered one known? What is your name, revered sir?"

"Sire, I am known as Nāgasena; fellow [monks] address me, sire, as Nāgasena. But though (my) parents gave (me) the name of Nāgasena . . . it is but a denotation, appellation, designation, a current usage, for Nāgasena is only a name since no person is got at here."

Then King Milinda spoke thus: "Good sirs, let the five hundred [servants] and the eighty thousand monks hear me: This Nāgasena speaks thus: 'Since no person is got at here.' Now, is it suitable to approve of that?" And King Milinda spoke thus to the venerable Nāgasena:

"If, revered Nāgasena, the person is not got at, who then is it that gives you the requisites of robe-material, almsfood, lodgings and medicines for the sick, who is it that makes use of them . . . ? (*MQ* II.25, pp. 34–35)⁶

We see here Nāgasena expressing the Buddhist doctrine of *anātman*: even though there is a convention of using the name "Nāgasena," there is no person—no self—who answers to that name. And we see Milinda respond with the disbelief and objections that one might expect. Milinda presses Nāgasena on just what the other monks mean when they use the name.

"If you say: 'Fellow [monks] address me, sire, as Nāgasena,' what here is Nāgasena? Is it, revered sir, that the hairs of the head are Nāgasena?"

"O no, sire."

"That the hairs of the body are Nāgasena?"

"O no, sire."

"That the nails . . . the teeth, the skin, the flesh, the sinews, the bones, the marrow, the kidneys, the heart . . . or the brain in the head are (any of them) Nāgasena?"

"O no, sire." (*MQ* II.1, pp. 35–36)

Finding that Nāgasena does not identify himself with his body or any of its parts, Milinda takes

a different approach. He wonders if the name “Nāgasena” might refer to one of the five aggregates or *skandhas* that Buddhists take to be the fundamental constituents of reality. With this in mind, Milinda asks,

Is Nāgasena material shape, revered sir?”

“O no, sire.”

“Is Nāgasena feeling . . . perception . . . the habitual tendencies? Is Nāgasena consciousness?”

“O no, sire.”

“But then, revered sir, is Nāgasena material shape and feeling and perception and habitual tendencies and consciousness?”

“O no, sire.”

“But then, revered sir, is there Nāgasena apart from material shape, feeling, perception, the habitual tendencies and consciousness?”

“O no, sire.”

“Though I, revered sir, am asking you repeatedly, I do not see this Nāgasena. Nāgasena is only a sound, revered sir. For who here is Nāgasena? You, revered sir, are speaking an untruth, a lying word. There is no Nāgasena.” (*MQ* II.1, p. 36)

Having exhausted his options, Milinda finds no way to make sense of Nāgasena’s claim about the name “Nāgasena.” He concludes that if Nāgasena is not any of the things that he suggested, then Nāgasena must not exist at all. He states this conclusion dramatically by accusing Nāgasena of lying about his own existence.

Nāgasena responds with an analogy attributed to one of the Buddha’s disciples, the nun Vajirā.

Then the venerable Nāgasena spoke thus to King Milinda: “You, sire, are a noble delicately nurtured, exceedingly delicately nurtured. If you, sire, go on foot at noon-time on the scorching ground and hot sand, trampling on sharp grit and pebbles and sand, your feet hurt you, your body wearies, your thought is impaired, and tactile consciousness arises accompanied by anguish. Now, did you come on foot or in a conveyance?”

“I, revered sir, did not come on foot, I came in a chariot.”

“If you, sire, came by chariot, show me the chariot. Is the pole the chariot, sire?”

“O no, revered sir.”

“Is the axle the chariot?”

“O no, revered sir.”

“Are the wheels the chariot?”

“O no, revered sir.”

“Is the body of the chariot the chariot . . . is the flag-staff of the chariot the chariot . . . is the yoke of the chariot the chariot . . . are the reins the chariot . . . is the goad the chariot?”

“O no, revered sir.”

“But then, sire, is the chariot the pole, the axle, the wheels, the body of the chariot, the flag-staff of the chariot, the yoke, the reins, the goad?”

“O no, revered sir.”

“But then, sire, is there a chariot apart from the pole, the axle, the wheels, the body of the chariot, the flag-staff of the chariot, the yoke, the reins, the goad?”

“O no, revered sir.”

“Though I, sire, am asking you repeatedly, I do not see the chariot. Chariot is only a sound, sire. For what here is the chariot? You, sire, are speaking an untruth, a lying word. There is no chariot. (*MQ* II.1, pp. 36–37)

Let us see if we can make sense of this analogy between the self and the chariot. Nāgasena lays out three options: the chariot consists of some part of the chariot, it consists of all of them together, or it consists of something else entirely. It is clear why the chariot is not the same as any of its parts, such as its left wheel or its axle. And it might seem clear enough why Milinda would deny that the chariot is something *distinct* from all of its parts. After all, there is nothing there *in addition* to the parts of the chariot. But why does Milinda so readily deny that the chariot is *all* of its parts?

Neither Milinda nor Nāgasena elaborates on this point, but later commentators offer the following argument. Suppose the chariot were identical to all its parts, assembled in the proper way. If one thing is identical with another, then the first must have all the properties of the second and vice versa, but the chariot has properties that the parts do not. For instance, the chariot has the property of having carried Milinda to visit Nāgasena, whereas at least some of the parts, such as the flag-staff, clearly lack that property. More important, the chariot has the property of being *one* thing, whereas the parts are *many*. (There’s the problem of the one and the many again!) Many non-Buddhist philosophers found this line of argument unconvincing, however, and the

question of whether something can be identical to its parts remains a point of controversy in Indian philosophy for centuries.*

Whatever Nāgasena's reasons for denying all three options, we must be careful to understand the conclusion that he draws. As the fifth-century A.D. philosopher Buddhaghosa says, it remains true that

when the component parts such as axles, wheels, frame poles, etc., are arranged in a certain way, there comes to be the mere term of common usage "chariot," yet *in the ultimate sense* when each part is examined, there is no chariot.⁷

Thus, Nāgasena is not advising Milinda to stop using the word "chariot" or to stop ordering his servants to bring him his chariot. He acknowledges that the word "chariot" serves a useful role: it is a convenient shorthand for chariot-parts assembled in a certain way. What Nāgasena denies, however, is that the word "chariot" names some enduring entity; in the final analysis, what *really* exists is simply a collection of chariot parts, assembled in a certain way.

Similarly, and more important, Milinda and the monks can use the name "Nāgasena" as a convenient shorthand, but there is ultimately no self that answers to it. This analogy raises an important question: if "chariot" is a convenient shorthand for the parts of the chariot, what is "Nāgasena" a shorthand *for*? Milinda came close to the answer to that question: the name "Nāgasena" is a shorthand for a particular collection of *skandhas*. To invoke another popular Buddhist metaphor—one that Nāgasena

himself uses later in his dialogue with Milinda—this collection of *skandhas* is a bit like the flame of a candle. We can explain the metaphor in modern, scientific terms: When a candle burns, molecules of the solid wax melt, vaporize, and then react with oxygen in the air. That reaction gives off heat and light. The resulting molecules drift away into the air, only to be replaced by other molecules of the wax. Those molecules react with other oxygen molecules precisely *because* of the heat given off by the molecules before them. Thus, the flame that exists in each moment is causally connected to the flame that existed in the moment before it, but it is also distinct from that flame.*

Nāgasena would happily agree that there is *some sense* in which we can say that there *is* a flame or a person there, as long as we acknowledge that there is no enduring *thing* behind the constant flow of *skandhas*. To acknowledge this, however, amounts to denying the Upaniṣadic view of the self, which is precisely what the Buddhists are concerned to deny.†

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1. Explain the analogy between the self and the chariot. Why does Nāgasena think that the chariot is not just the sum of its parts?
 2. Explain the analogy between the self and a flame. How does saying that the self is like a flame contradict the Upaniṣadic view of *ātman*?
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The Brahmanical Schools

While Buddhist philosophers were busy systematizing the Buddha's teachings, other Indian thinkers began picking up ideas from the Vedas and Upaniṣads and developing them into philosophical systems. Six distinct schools of thought emerged from that process: Vaiśeṣika, Nyāya, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsā, and Vedānta. Because each of these intellectual traditions accepts the authority of

*Interestingly, Indian Buddhists never resorted to a kind of argument that the Greeks applied to problem of the one and the many: Imagine a ship made of wood. If we replace one piece of wood in the ship, it remains the same ship. But what if we replace *every* piece of wood, one by one, over many years? Is it still the same ship? If so, then the ship cannot be identical to its parts. If not, there is no non-arbitrary point at which it ceases to be the original ship, and its identity is a matter of convention. Applied to Milinda's chariot, this so-called Ship of Theseus problem could provide a further argument for the claim that the word "chariot" is simply a conventional term for a group of chariot parts. Perhaps Milinda would have said that although there are ship parts, there is no ship, except in a conventional sense.

*Buddhist philosophers have also used rivers as metaphors for *anātman*. Compare Heraclitus' use of both fire and a river as symbols for constant flux (p. 18).

†Compare to David Hume's theory of the self (pp. 451–453).

the Vedas, they are referred to as Vedic or **Brahmanical schools**.^{*} Recall, though, that the Vedas and their accompanying writings are vast and complex. Thus, even though the schools all regard the Vedas as authoritative sources of knowledge, they focus on different parts and aspects of that tradition and come to incompatible conclusions. Some even reject apparently central teachings of the Vedas, such as the claim that all things are merely aspects of a single deity, Brahman. One thing they do share, however, is a belief in *ātman*.

Like the Buddhists, the Brahmanical schools first compiled their teachings into sets of aphorisms or *sūtras*. They also applied the term **sūtra** to the entire set of aphorisms that lays out the core teachings of a particular school. Modern scholars disagree about when these *sūtras* were composed and when they were first written down. Although traditional accounts attribute each *sūtra* to a particular person, we know very little about these “**sūtra-makers**” (*sūtra-kāra*), including where and even when they lived. Scholars believe the *sūtra-makers* mostly lived between the second century B.C. and the second century A.D.

The *sūtras* themselves are often so brief and laconic that it is difficult or impossible to understand them without commentaries. At the time they were composed, these commentaries would have been transmitted orally from teacher to student through the generations. By the fifth century A.D., individual philosophers begin writing down commentaries on the *sūtras*—although, again, it is often hard to provide definite dates for many of these early commentators’ lives. Coming to the *sūtras* some two millennia later, we generally depend on those written commentaries, which means that we often see the *sūtras* through the eyes of thinkers who lived centuries after the *sūtras* were originally written.

Given the breadth and depth of each of the six orthodox schools, we cannot hope to cover them all here. Instead, we focus here on two closely related schools, known as Vaiśeṣika and Nyāya, often with the help of later commentators.

VAIŚEṢIKA

The **Vaiśeṣika** (Vaisheshika) school, rooted in *sūtras* attributed to the *sūtra-maker* Kaṇāda, develops a realist understanding of the diversity of objects in the world. The *sūtra-maker* rejects the monism embraced by some of the Upaniṣads, arguing instead for the existence of independent material objects built out of the five elements attested elsewhere in the Upaniṣads: earth, water, fire, air, and ether. The first four elements consist of indivisible atoms, while the fifth—ether—is a single, all-pervading substance that serves as the medium for sound. The Vaiśeṣikas take all these elements to be real, enduring things that exist independent of any mind. Furthermore, the first four elements consist of innumerable indivisible atoms, which can combine to form new objects.^{*} Those objects, in turn, are also understood as real, enduring wholes. The Vaiśeṣikas, then, would take a very different view of Milinda’s chariot than the Buddhists do. Recall that Nāgasena laid out three options for the relation between the chariot and its parts, one of which was that the chariot is something distinct from its parts. While Nāgasena and Milinda reject that option out of hand, it is precisely what the Vaiśeṣikas take the chariot to be. When various atoms combine in the right way, something new comes into being—say, wood. And when wood is shaped and combined in the right way, a further thing comes into being: the chariot. On the Vaiśeṣika view, each of these things is a real object, distinct from its parts.

The key to understanding this idea is the concept of **inherence**, which plays a central and complex role in Vaiśeṣika metaphysics. One of its roles is to explain this relationship between a whole and its parts—between the one and the many. When the right kinds of parts are combined in the right way, a new object is said to inhere in those parts. This contrasts with what the Vaiśeṣika call the conjunction of different objects. When the pages of this book are bound together between two covers, you have a new object—a book, which is said to inhere in its parts. But when you place the book on

^{*}The term Brahmanical comes from their ties to the priestly class known as the *brāhmaṇas*.

^{*}Compare to the views of pre-Socratic atomists such as Democritus (pp. 29–30).

a table, you have not thereby created a new object; you have two distinct objects that are merely in conjunction with each other. An analogy with modern chemistry may help elucidate this point. At room temperature, hydrogen molecules—each composed of two hydrogen atoms—form an invisible gas. The same goes for oxygen molecules. But when you burn the two together, binding each hydrogen molecule to one oxygen atom, you get something quite different: water. Each molecule of water is said to inhere in its constituent atoms. The atoms still exist, of course, and each has properties that the water molecule lacks; but the water molecule is an object in its own right, with its own properties, and it will exist as long as its parts are combined in the right way. Similarly, Milinda’s chariot inheres in its parts—the wheels, the axle, and so on—and those parts, in turn, inhere in the various atoms that make them up. The Buddhist view, according to the Vaiśeṣikas, fails to recognize the significance of this relation of inherence.

To understand the other roles that inherence plays in Vaiśeṣika thought, we must consider the other things that the Vaiśeṣikas take to exist. Atoms are said to be **substances**, which the Vaiśeṣikas understand as entities that have their own existence and in which things can inhere. The wholes that inhere in those atoms, such as wood and other objects of everyday experience, are also substances. The Vaiśeṣikas argue that such real, mind-independent substances must exist if we are to explain why our perceptions of the material world correlate with one another. When you see a piece of wood in front of you, you can also reach out and touch the wood. You can rap your knuckles on it and hear a certain sound. If the wood is freshly cut, it will have a certain odor. The best explanation for this correlation of perceptions, they argue, is that there exists some kind of substratum that causes all of those perceptions.

But atoms and the things that inhere in them are not the only kinds of substances. Besides atoms and the ether, there are four other kinds of substance in Vaiśeṣika thought: Time and space are considered substances, each real in themselves and irreducible to any of the other substances. So are selves (*ātman*) and minds, to which we will return shortly.

Substances, in turn, are but one of six **categories** in the Vaiśeṣika catalogue of existence. We will mention only three more of the categories. **Attributes**, such as redness or hardness, comprise the second category. Kaṇāda lists seventeen kinds of attributes, such as color, taste, and magnitude. The Vaiśeṣika commentator Praśastapāda adds seven more, to round out the traditional Vaiśeṣika list of twenty-four attributes. These attributes are said to inhere in substances. A red brick, for instance, has the attributes *red* and *hard* inhering in it.*

The second category to be mentioned here is *viśeṣa* or **particularity**, which is often regarded as a distinctive innovation of the Vaiśeṣikas.† Inhering in each individual substance—each fire-atom, for instance—is a unique identity, which differentiates it from all other substances, even those that are of the same kind and share all the same attributes. This identity has no attributes of its own; its only feature is that it is numerically distinct from all other particularities, so that by inhering in one particular substance, it marks that substance as numerically distinct from every other substance.‡ We can get a hint of what role particularity plays in Vaiśeṣika thought by recalling that the Upaniṣads declared that *ātman*, the self, lacked any defining characteristics. Some strands of Brahmanical thought inferred from this that there was only one *ātman*, since otherwise you would have two things that were utterly indistinguishable from one another. To resist the conclusion, the Vaiśeṣikas introduce the idea of particularities, which inhere in various selves, thereby distinguishing one *ātman* from another

*Compare this account of substances and attributes to Aristotle’s account of substances and accidents (pp. 186–187, 194–196).

†In fact, the Vaiśeṣika school takes its name from this term.

‡This is a difficult concept to grasp. It may be useful to consider the name used for a similar idea, developed independently more than a thousand years after Kaṇāda by the medieval European philosopher Duns Scotus, who called this individuating property “thisness.” Each thing has a “thisness” that distinguishes it from every other thing, just as, in Vaiśeṣika thought, each individual thing has a *viśeṣa* or particularity that distinguishes it from every other individual thing.

without attributing any particular characteristics to them.

The third category to be mentioned here are **universals**, which the Vaiśeṣikas understand as that which things of the same kind have in common. The Vaiśeṣikas take these to be eternal, independent entities that inhere in substances or attributes. The universal *fire* inheres in all fire-atoms, the universal *chariot* in all chariots, and the universal *redness* inheres in all instances of the attribute red (which, in turn, inhere in particular substances). On the Vaiśeṣika view, we perceive these universals whenever we perceive something in which they inhere.* It is on this basis that we recognize distinct fire-atoms, for instance, as belonging to the same kind.

Let us return now to the Vaiśeṣika view of two particularly important substances, self (*ātman*) and mind. The self, on the Vaiśeṣika view, is the substance that has knowledge. In opposition to the Buddhists and in keeping with the other Brahmanical schools, the Vaiśeṣika maintain that the self is a real, independent entity. In contrast to some of the other Brahmanical schools, however, the Vaiśeṣika insist that there are many selves—one for each person. This can be inferred, they argue, from the doctrine of rebirth, and so the Vedic passages on the unity of all selves are to be understood metaphorically. While the self cannot be perceived, except by the rare few who have advanced far enough in the practice of meditation, even the ordinary person is directly conscious of the existence of his or her self. The fact that each of us can, through inspection, come to recognize truths such as “I know” and “I am experiencing suffering” is taken to imply the existence of the self as something distinct from the atoms that make up one’s body, since neither knowledge nor feeling can inhere in those atoms.†

*The concept of universals plays a significant role in Greek philosophy beginning with Socrates, with Socrates’ successors debating the proper way to understand universals and our knowledge of them. We will discuss these debates in detail in the coming chapters.

†Compare this to the views of Avicenna (p. 304) and Descartes (p. 369), who claim that we can know our selves through introspection and inference, respectively.

That consciousness of one’s self and one’s attributes, however, occurs *through* an independent substance, mind, which is connected to but distinct from the self.* Your mind is regarded as something like a special internal sense organ or self-consciousness by which one becomes aware of your self, your body, and their attributes. The Vaiśeṣika argue that mind must be a separate substance from the self because the self is always present with the body, whereas consciousness is not; just as sight does not operate when your eyes are closed, so your inner awareness does not operate when your mind is not active.

On the whole, then, Vaiśeṣika ideas largely echo common sense. The world is much as it appears to be: the objects we perceive are real, independent things, as is the self. The problem of the one and the many is likewise resolved in favor of common sense: There are many things, including many selves, with each complex whole counting as one object that inheres in many parts for as long as those parts are joined together. Certain aspects of Vaiśeṣika thought go beyond common sense, of course, but this is only to be expected in any systematic attempt to make sense of the world around us.

NYĀYA

A different Brahmanical school, the **Nyāya**, traces its roots to sūtras attributed to a somewhat later sūtra-maker called Akṣapāda Gautama.† Whereas the Vaiśeṣikas are best known for their development of a realist metaphysics, **Naiyāyikas**—as adherents of Nyāya are known—focus on logic and epistemology. Because they use their sophisticated logical theories to defend a broadly Vaiśeṣika metaphysics, Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika are regarded as natural allies among the Brahmanical schools.

Like the other Brahmanical schools, Nyāya builds its epistemology on the notion of a **pramāṇa**. A **pramāṇa**, or knowledge source, is a method of acquiring genuine knowledge. The Naiyāyikas

*Contrast this with the view of Descartes (pp. 369–372), who identifies the self with the mind, instead of regarding them as two separate entities.

†This Gautama is not to be confused with the Buddha, whose original name was Siddhārtha Gautama.

recognize four *pramāṇas*: perception, inference, analogy, and testimony.

About the *pramāṇa* called perception, the *Nyāya-sūtra* says,

Perceptual knowledge arises from a connection of sense faculty and object, does not depend on language, is inerrant, and is definitive. (*NS* 1.1.4, p. 20)⁸

The first condition—that perceptual knowledge “arises from a connection of sense faculty and object”—is fairly straightforward: to gain knowledge through perception, some sensory organ must be connected to an object in the right way, as when your eyes see this book. Note that, according to the Naiyāyikas, your sense organs can connect not only with the atoms that comprise an object, but also with the object as a whole and even with the universals that inhere in that object. The second condition—that perception “does not depend on language”—is that acquiring perceptual knowledge does not require being able to put one’s new knowledge into words. The third condition—that perception “is inerrant”—may seem surprising. After all, our eyes and ears often err; reality does not always match appearances. You think you see an old friend down the street, but as you get closer, you realize that it’s a stranger. Gautama is not denying this; as the important Nyāya commentator Vātsyāyana (fl. c. 450 A.D.) explains, the point of the sūtra is that a particular instance of perception only counts as a *pramāṇa*—as a genuine source of knowledge—when the perceiver perceives things for what they really are. Similarly, Gautama includes the fourth condition—that perception is “definitive”—to exclude instances where someone perceives something indistinctly. When you see someone in the distance and cannot make out who it is, your perceptual experience is not definitive, and so it cannot count as a genuine *pramāṇa*.

After explaining perceptual knowledge, the *Nyāya-sūtra* continues:

Next is inference, which depends on previous perception and is threefold: from something prior, from something later, and through experience of a common characteristic. (*NS* 1.1.5, p. 28)

A modern translator explains the threefold nature of inference with several examples:

If we see a river swollen we infer that there has been rain, if we see the ants carrying off their eggs, we infer that there will be rain and if we hear a peacock scream, we infer that clouds are gathering.⁹

In the case of the swollen river, we see something and draw an inference about what happened earlier. In the case of the fleeing ants, we see something and draw an inference about what will happen later. In the case of the screaming peacock, we hear something and draw an inference about what is happening now. The things on which we base our inferences—the swollen river, the fleeing ants, and the peacock’s scream—are called **inferential marks**, because they mark or indicate the presence of some other event or entity. As with perception, however, the sūtra-maker emphasizes that to count as a legitimate *pramāṇa*, our inferences must meet certain standards. In particular, we must base our inferences on the right inferential marks. For instance, if we mistake ants fleeing chaotically from a damaged nest for ants moving their eggs systematically before a storm, we cannot properly be said to be using inference in the strict sense. The Naiyāyika develop these ideas into a sophisticated theory of logic.

The third Nyāya *pramāṇa*, analogy, is generally regarded as the least important of the *pramāṇas*. It involves recognizing what something is based on its similarity to another thing.

As for the final *pramāṇa*, testimony, the *Nyāya-sūtra* describes it this way:

Testimony is instruction by a trustworthy authority. (*NS* 1.1.7, p. 35)

Such testimony is of two kinds, because it has two kinds of objects: that which is experienced (here in this world), and that which is not experienced (here in this world). (*NS* 1.1.8, p. 36)

Vātsyāyana explains:

A trustworthy authority is someone who knows something directly, an instructor with the desire to communicate it faithfully as it is known. (*NS*, p. 36)

When it comes to “that which is experienced,” testimony might come from an expert teacher explaining a topic she knows well or from a friend describing something he has just seen. But testimony’s most important role in Nyāya thought is as the basis for accepting “that which is not experienced”—namely, the supernatural claims of the Vedas, which the Naiyāyikas count as the faithful communication of sages who could perceive that which ordinary mortals could not.

Equipped with this theory of knowledge the *Nyāya-sūtra* proceeds to develop a sophisticated account of philosophical method. A key concept in this method is *tarka*, which the sūtra-maker defines as follows:

Tarka is reasoning that proceeds by considering what is consistent with knowledge sources [*pramāṇa*], in order to know the truth about something that is not [yet] definitely known. (NS 1.1.40, p. 44)

Vātsyāyana explains:

Desire to know arises, in the first instance, when the truth about something is not known. . . . And the thing being considered has two contrary properties attributed to it, such that one wavers, thinking, “Maybe it is this way, maybe not.” Granting that there is a means to establish one of the two properties, he holds that there is a *pramāṇa* that would settle which is possible. One side is possible, given the evidence of knowledge sources, and not the other.

The basic method of *tarka*, then, is to begin with a controversy between two mutually incompatible views and then refute one of those views by showing that it is inconsistent with something that is known through a recognized *pramāṇa*.*

Vātsyāyana explains that this does not, in itself, produce definitive knowledge, since it only suggests that the remaining alternative is consistent with the truth. The next step in Nyāya philosophical method is to establish that alternative directly on the basis of one or more *pramāṇas*.

The Naiyāyikas deploy their methodology to defend a realist metaphysics very similar to that of the Vaiśeṣika. The *Nyāya-sūtra* begins by arguing for

the reality of everyday objects. The sūtra-maker does this by voicing claims or arguments advanced by imaginary critics of realism. For instance, he imagines a critic saying,

But when we examine things closely through cognition, we do not find true objects, just as we do not find a cloth when we distinguish the threads. (NS 4.2.26, p. 62)

The thought here is the same one that Nāgasena defends in his discussion with Milinda: when we consider a complex object, such as a cloth or a chariot, we find that there is nothing there but its parts, arranged in a particular way. Gautama responds to this view by noting that the *pramāṇa* of perception delivers knowledge of the whole that inheres in the parts—of the cloth that inheres in the threads, for instance—as well as knowledge of its attributes. You might see that a cloth is gray, for instance, even though each individual thread is either black or white. Since denying that the cloth exists or that it is gray is inconsistent with this perceptual *pramāṇa*, we can reject the view that wholes do not exist. This argument is an example of *tarka*: Gautama takes up a controversy about whether complex wholes exist and shows that one position in that controversy is inconsistent with knowledge gained through a particular *pramāṇa*.

The *Nyāya-sūtra* also considers some more radical possibilities. Suppose someone argued not just against the existence of wholes, but against the existence of anything at all. Vātsyāyana explains Gautama’s characteristically terse response:

And, accordingly, there is no possibility of the thesis, “Nothing exists.” “Why?” It’s wrong because of [what the *Nyāya-sūtra* calls] the possibility and impossibility of knowledge sources. If the thesis, “Nothing exists,” were supported by a *pramāṇa*, then that *pramāṇa* would contradict the claim, “Nothing exists.” But on the second option, if there were no *pramāṇa* in support, then how would the thesis, “Nothing exists,” be proved? (NS, p. 64)*

But suppose, Gautama imagines someone saying, that our “conception of things known through

*Compare to Socrates’ method of questioning (p. 95).

*Compare this to Descartes’ famous *cogito* argument (pp. 369, 373).

knowledge sources is akin to conceptions of objects encountered in a dream” (NS 4.2.31, p. 65). That is, perhaps what we *think* are perceptions of real objects are just the creations of our minds, like the objects in a dream. Vātsyāyana explains the sūtra-maker’s rebuttal in several steps. First, he demands a reason to believe this hypothesis that our perceptions are like perceptions in our dreams. Second, he points out that even if we did have a reason to think that our waking perceptions are like dream perceptions, the opponent has not actually argued that the objects we perceive in dreams are unreal. He then imagines the following exchange:

Opponent: The reason is that upon awakening we no longer see them.

Response [from Vātsyāyana]: On your view, one has no resources to deny the reality of dream objects by comparison with the objects of waking experience. If dream objects do not exist because they are not experienced upon awakening, then those very objects we find in waking life must exist, as they are in fact experienced. Your reasoning supports the opposite of what you claim. Non-experience of something can prove that it is absent only when positive experience of it can prove that it exists. But if nothing is true in either case, then not having an experience of something could not be evidence for its absence. . . . Here, determining an absence—the absence of visible objects—depends upon a presence, the presence of visible objects that do in fact exist. (NS, p. 66)

Let us see if we can piece together the Naiyāyika argument here. The opponent has suggested that our waking life is like a dream, meaning that nothing real corresponds to the images we have of things. But how, the sūtra-maker replies, do we identify dream images as unreal? By the fact that they disappear when we wake up, according to the opponent. So identifying something as a dream depends on a contrast, something that we take to be real. But if that is so, argues the sūtra-maker, then the “waking world” cannot be a mere dream. If it were, then we would have no experience of anything real at all. In that case, then there would be no way to contrast “visible objects” with the unreal

objects in a dream and so no basis for calling “visible objects” unreal. In other words, if our waking life were just a dream, we could have no reason to think that to be the case. Notice that this argument does not, by itself, prove that the objects we perceive while awake *are* real. It only shows that one specific argument fails to show that they are unreal.*

This brings us to the reality of the object that receives the most attention in Indian philosophy: the self. We have seen that the Buddhists deny the existence of a real, enduring self behind the various series of physical and mental events that we designate with names like Nāgasena and Gautama, whereas the Vaiśeṣika affirm the existence of such a self. The Naiyāyikas side with the Vaiśeṣika, and their argument for this view has the Buddhist alternative in mind. The *Nyāya-sūtra* says,

Inferential marks for the self are desire, aversion, effort, pleasure, pain, and knowledge. (NS 1.1.10, p. 75)

Recall that in Nyāya epistemology, an inferential mark is something that indicates the presence of something else. This *sūtra*, then, claims that certain things, such as desire and aversion, indicate the presence of a real, enduring self. A person often comes to desire an object by recognizing it as being a kind of thing that has produced pleasure *for the person himself or herself* in the past. This implies a self that endures from one moment to the next—in other words, *ātman*. Similarly, aversion often arises from the recognition of an object as a past source of pain. The desire for knowledge functions slightly differently in the argument: a person desires to know something and therefore deliberates about it. Recognizing the desire to know and the deliberation as belonging to the same person, the person infers the existence of a self that endures across time.

A second Naiyāyika argument about *ātman* inverts the Vaiśeṣika argument for the existence of ordinary objects. Recall that the Vaiśeṣika argue

*Compare this to Descartes’ treatment of the idea that the world we perceive might be like a dream (pp. 366–368).

that substances must be real, independent entities because our perceptions of them through different sense organs correlate with one another: you can both see the book in front of you and feel the smoothness of its pages. Turning this argument on its head, the *Nyāya-sūtra* says,

Because one grasps the same object through sight and touch, there is a self that is distinct from the body and sense organs. (*NS* 3.1.1, p. 80)

Vātsyāyana explains:

Some particular object is grasped by sight; the same object is also grasped by touch: “That very thing which I saw with my eyes I am now feeling through my sense of touch,” and “That very thing which I felt through my sense of touch I am now seeing with my eyes.” The two instances of mental content that are each directed towards one and the same object have—in being comprehended—a single subject. (*NS*, pp. 80–81)

Whereas the Vaiśeṣika would emphasize the use of “that very object” in both of the observations Vātsyāyana mentions, the Naiyāyikas emphasize the use of “I.” The “I” who grasps something by both sight and touch is a unified subject; it is one and the same thing that perceives the object in front of it through various means. This unified subject cannot be the sense organs, Vātsyāyana argues, because each sense organ can only perceive things in one way; the eyes cannot perceive the object through touch, nor the fingers through sight. The “I” cannot be just a bundle of atoms, either, for conscious awareness cannot inhere in atoms. Thus, the self must be something other than the body. It must be an immaterial *ātman*, of the sort the Upaniṣads describe and the Buddhists deny.

A third Naiyāyika argument for the existence of *ātman* rests on the necessity of an enduring self to explain *karma*. The *Nyāya-sūtra* says,

When a living body is harmed, no sin would be incurred (if there were no self). (*NS* 3.1.4, p. 84)

Vātsyāyana explains:

One who (for example) burns a living body causes harm to the living being, committing a wicked act called sin. “No sin” means that (for those who deny

a permanent self) there would be no connection between the agent of sin and its results. . . . And so, this being the case, the living being . . . who causes harm would not be the one connected to the karmic fruits of harm, and the one who would be connected would not be the one who caused the harm. Thus, on the view that there are distinct beings (in a series, as opposed to a single enduring self), there results the unacceptable consequence of losing what one has done and acquiring what one has not done. (*NS*, p. 84)

The argument here rests on the uncontested assumption that actions have karmic consequences for the person who performs them. If that is true, the Naiyāyikas argue, then there must be an enduring self. Otherwise, the person who performs the actions will not bear the karmic consequences of that action, and the person who *does* bear those consequences will not be the person who performed them.

A fourth argument appeals to rebirth:

Because happiness, fear, and unhappiness are experienced by a new-born appropriately, through connection with what was previously practiced and remembered (a self endures beyond death). (*NS* 3.1.18, p. 86)

Vātsyāyana explains:

A new-born is a child who has not in this lifetime experienced things that cause happiness, fear, and unhappiness. These emotions are nevertheless experienced by the new-born, since the baby shows signs by which these feelings may be inferred. And such experiences come about only through connection with memories. Such connection with memory does not come about without prior practice and experience. And in the case of a new-born, the prior practice and experience can only be during a previous lifetime. In this way we establish that there is a state of the self afterwards too, because the self is different from the body. (*NS*, p. 86)*

Even if we cannot perceive *ātman*, then, we can infer its existence in many ways.

*Compare to Socrates’ argument that the soul exists before the body on pp. 133–134.

1. What are complex objects made of, according to the Vaiśeṣikas?
2. What role(s) does the concept of inherence play in Vaiśeṣika thought?
3. How would the Vaiśeṣikas respond to Nāgasena's arguments about Milinda's chariot?
4. What are the six categories in Vaiśeṣika metaphysics? What role does particularity play in that system?
5. What is the relation between the body, the self, and the mind, according to the Vaiśeṣikas?
6. What is a *pramāṇa*? What *pramāṇas* do the Naiyāyikas acknowledge?
7. Explain the Nyāya account of perceptual knowledge. Why do they count perceptual knowledge as "inerrant"?
8. What is *tarka*? What role does it play in Naiyāyika philosophical method?
9. What arguments do the Naiyāyikas give for the reality of everyday objects?
10. What arguments do the Naiyāyikas give for the reality of *ātman*?

The Great Conversation in India

We have surveyed only the earliest beginnings of philosophy in India—and, indeed, only a few aspects of those early stages. There are entire schools of thought, both Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical, that have gone unmentioned here. From what little we have covered, however, we can see that a sophisticated philosophical conversation began in India around the same time as in Greece, though it seems to have developed more gradually.

This great Indian conversation accelerated and intensified sometime around the second century A.D. One major cause of this acceleration is that Buddhist philosophers began writing in Sanskrit rather than Pāli. This brought them more directly into contact with the Brahmanical philosophers, stimulating centuries of especially intense debate, clarification, elaboration, and philosophical innovation. The period following this change featured such famous Buddhist philosophers as Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu and the rise of new Buddhist schools of thought, such as Madhyamaka and Yogācāra, as

well as the great commentators of the Brahmanical tradition, such as Vātsyāyana and Śāṅkara. It is one of the richest periods of philosophical debate in all human history.

Toward the end of the first millennium A.D., Buddhism began to decline socially, politically, and intellectually within India. By that time, it had already spread throughout east and southeast Asia, where it would thrive and develop to the present day. As the Buddhists faded from the scene in India, the Brahmanical schools turned inward, beginning a new period in the great Indian conversation. But just as European philosophy has been permanently shaped by the debates in ancient Greece, so Indian philosophy has been shaped by the early stages of the conversation that we have surveyed here.

KEY WORDS

Vedas	<i>skandhas</i> (aggregates)
Brahman	<i>anātman</i>
Upaniṣads	impermanence
<i>ātman</i>	dependent origination
rebirth	Abhidharma Piṭaka
<i>saṃsāra</i>	Brahmanical schools
<i>karma</i>	sūtra
Buddha	sūtra-maker
four Noble Truths	Vaiśeṣika
suffering (<i>duḥkha</i>)	inherence
attachment	substances
Noble Eightfold Path	categories
right view	attributes
Four Divine Abidings	particularity
lovingkindness	universals
compassion	Nyāya
joy	Naiyāyikas
equanimity	<i>pramāṇa</i>
<i>nirvāṇa</i>	inferential mark
<i>nirvāṇa</i> without remainder	<i>tarka</i>

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

1. The Buddhists and the Vaiśeṣikas take themselves to be disagreeing about the nature of complex objects. Do you think that one

of them is right? Why? Is it necessary that one of them is wrong, or could these just be two ways of looking at the same thing? What about their disagreement about the nature of the self?

2. Keeping in mind the methods that Buddhists recommend for ending suffering, do you think the cessation of suffering is a worthy goal in life? Why or why not?
3. Write a paragraph in which you apply the doctrine of *anātman* to yourself (or “yourself”).
4. Between the Vaiśeṣikas and Naiyāyikas and the Buddhists, whose arguments do you find more convincing as to the existence of an enduring self? Why?
5. Philosophers in every major tradition in the world have suggested, at least for the sake of argument, that our experiences might be nothing more than a dream. Do you find the Naiyāyikas’ response to this suggestion persuasive? Why or why not?
6. In what sense are the Indian thinkers discussed in this chapter engaged in the same kind of enterprise as the Greek thinkers discussed in the previous chapter? That is, what justifies calling both activities “philosophy”?
7. Based on what you have read here, how do the early philosophical traditions of India and Greece overlap? How do they differ?

NOTES

1. Quotations from the *Ṛg Veda* are from Franklin Edgerton, *The Beginnings of Indian Philosophy: Selections from the Rig Veda, Atharva Veda, Upaniṣads, and Mahabharata* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).
2. S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1:41.
3. Quotations from the Upaniṣads are from Patrick Olivelle, trans., *Upaniṣads* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).
4. W. J. Johnson, trans., *The Bhagavad Gita* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 9.
5. Bhikkhu Ñanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Middle-Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 4th ed. (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2015), 229–230. Quotations from this text are marked *MN* for *Majjima Nikaya* (“Middle-Length Discourses”).
6. I. B. Horner, trans., *Milinda’s Questions* (London: Luzac, 1964). Quotations from this text are marked *MQ*.
7. Quoted in Amber Carpenter, *Indian Buddhist Philosophy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 37.
8. Quotations from the *Nyāya-sūtra* and from Vātsyāyana’s commentary, both marked *NS*, are from Matthew Dasti and Stephen Phillips, trans., *The Nyāya-sūtra: Selections with Early Commentaries* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2017).
9. Satīśa Chandra Vidyābhūṣana, trans., *The Nyāya Sūtras of Gotama* (Allahabad, India: The Panini Office, 1913), available at <https://archive.org/details/TheNyayaSutrasOfGotama>.

CHAPTER

4

THE SOPHISTS

Rhetoric and Relativism in Athens



When we think of “the glory that was Greece,” we think inevitably of **Athens** (see Map 1). To this point, however, we have mentioned Athens scarcely at all. Greek culture, as we have seen, ranged from the southern parts of Italy and Sicily in the west to the Ionian settlements on the shores of Asia Minor and to Thrace in the north. In the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., however, Greek culture came more and more to center in one city: Athens. It is there that we find the next major developments in Greek thought. The story of how this came about is a fascinating tale recorded by the Greek historian Herodotus and pieced together by modern writers from his history and many other sources. To understand the context of our next set of philosophers, we need to understand several key elements of that story. What kind of city was Athens in that time, what was it like to live in Athens, and how was it different from other cities?¹

Although we have used the terms “Greece” and “Greek culture,” there was at the beginning of the fifth century (around 500 B.C.) nothing like

a unified Greek state. Instead, Greek civilization comprised various independent city-states. A city-state (a *polis*) was an area—an island, perhaps, or an arable plain with natural boundaries of mountains and the sea—in which one city was dominant. The city was usually fortified and offered protection to those within and around its walls. The prominent city-states of that time were Thebes, Corinth, Argos, Sparta, and Athens, but there were many more. Among these city-states there were often rivalries, quarrels, shifting alliances, and wars.

Two things happened around the beginning of the fifth century that contributed to the pre-eminence of Athens among the city-states: the beginnings of **democracy** in government and the **Persian wars**.

Democracy

The common people of Athens first gained a voice in government when the statesman Solon reformed the city-state’s constitution around 600 B.C. That reform divided government power among several

bodies. Among them were the Council, which was composed of “the best men” (aristocrats), and the Assembly, to which all free men belonged. Important decisions were made by the Council, but the Assembly could veto measures that were excessively unpopular. This structure was modified over the years, but it took on the character of an ideal; again and again reforms of various kinds were justified as being a return to the constitution of Solon.*

During a large part of the sixth century, Athens was ruled by “tyrants.” This word did not originally have all the negative connotations it now has. It simply meant “boss” or “chief” and was applied to a ruler who was not a hereditary king but had seized power some other way. Some of the tyrants of Athens more or less respected Solon’s constitution, but at least one tyrant was killed to restore the democracy.

In 508 B.C., a quarrel arose concerning citizenship for a large influx of immigrants to the city. The aristocrats, fearful for their power, tried to purge the citizenship rolls, but the Assembly passed a proposal to extend citizenship to many of the new residents. After a three-day siege of the Acropolis by the people, the aristocrats—who had been backed by a king of Sparta and his soldiers—capitulated. Citizenship was broadened, though not so far as to include women and slaves, and the citizens gained control of major decisions. It was to be so for the next hundred years and, with a few exceptions, for some time after that.

The Persian Wars

Meanwhile, a different kind of power struggle was brewing across the Aegean Sea. The rising Persian Empire had been encroaching on the Greek colonies in Asia Minor. These Greek cities paid taxes to the Persians, but in 499 B.C. they rebelled. Athens sent twenty ships to aid the colonies, and in the fighting they burned the Persian city of Sardis. The Persian king Darius the Great put down the

rebellion and, seeking vengeance, turned his attention to mainland Greece.*

In 490 B.C., the Persians came in force across the Aegean, conquered a coastal island, and landed at Marathon. In a famous battle on the plain twenty-six miles north and east of Athens, the Greeks defeated the Persians, killing 6,400 of them. The victory invigorated the democratic city of Athens, which had supplied most of the soldiers for the battle.

It was clear to the Athenians, however, that the Persians would not be stopped by the loss of one battle, no matter how decisive at the time. Herodotus represents the Darius’ successor Xerxes as saying,

I will bridge the Hellespont [see Map 1] and march an army through Europe into Greece, and punish the Athenians for the outrage they committed upon my father and upon us. As you saw, Darius himself was making his preparations for war against these men; but death prevented him from carrying out his purpose. I therefore on his behalf, and for the benefit of all my subjects, will not rest until I have taken Athens and burnt it to the ground, in revenge for the injury which the Athenians without provocation once did to me and my father [the burning of Sardis]. . . . If we crush the Athenians and their neighbours in the Peloponnese, we shall so extend the empire of Persia that its boundaries will be God’s own sky, so that the sun will not look down upon any land beyond the boundaries of what is ours. (Histories 7.8)²

There was much debate in Athens about how to meet the danger. One party favored land-based defenses, citing the former victory at Marathon. The other party, led by Themistocles, favored building up the navy and a defense by sea. After much infighting, the Athenians decided on a large increase in fighting ships of the latest style—and just in time. In the year 480 B.C., Xerxes, lashing ships together to make a bridge, led an army of perhaps 200,000 men across the Hellespont (which separates Asia from Europe), subdued Thrace, and began to advance south toward Athens. Advice was

*For democracy in Athens, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athenian_democracy.

*For the Greco-Persian Wars, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greco-Persian_Wars.

sought, in time-honored fashion, from the Oracle at Delphi (see Map 1). The oracle was not favorable. A second plea brought this response:

That the wooden wall only shall not fall, but help you and your children. (*Histories* 7.141)

How should this opaque answer be interpreted? Some believed that wooden walls on the hill of the Acropolis would withstand the aggressor. Themistocles argued that the “wooden wall” referred to the ships that had been built and that they must abandon Athens and try to defeat the Persians at sea. Most of the Athenians followed Themistocles, though some did not.

First, however, it was necessary to stop the advance of the Persian army. Many saw it as a threat against Greece as a whole, not just against Athens. A force led by Spartan soldiers under the Spartan king Leonidas met the Persians at Thermopylae, eighty miles northwest of Athens (see Map 1). Greatly outnumbered, the Greeks fought valiantly, inflicting many deaths, but were defeated. Leonidas was killed.*

The Persians took Athens, overwhelmed the defenders on the Acropolis, and burned the temples. However, the main Athenian forces, in ships off the nearby island of Salamis, were still to be dealt with. On a day splendid in Greek history, Xerxes sat on a mountain above the bay of Salamis (see Map 1) and saw the Greeks tear apart his navy. Themistocles’ strategy had worked. The next spring (479 B.C.), however, the Persians occupied Athens again. It took a great victory by the combined Athenian and Spartan armies at Plataea to expel the Persians for good.

These victories had several results. Athens, which had borne the brunt of the defense of Greece, became preeminent among the city-states. The city had displayed its courage and prowess for all to see and took the lead in forming a league for the future defense of the Greek lands. In time, the league turned into an Athenian empire. Other states paid tribute to Athens, which saw to their protection, and Athens became a great sea power.

Athens also became very wealthy. It was not only the tribute from the allies, although that was significant. With their control of the sea, Athenians engaged in trading far and wide. A wealthy merchant class developed, and Athens became the center of Greek cultural life. Under **Pericles**, the most influential leader of the democratic city in the middle of the fifth century B.C., the city built the magnificent temples on the Acropolis. Pericles encouraged Greek art and sculpture, supported the new learning, and was a close associate of certain philosophers. A speech of his, commemorating fallen soldiers in the first year of the tragic war with Sparta, gives a sense of what it meant to Athenians to be living in Athens at that time. Only part of it, as represented for us by the historian Thucydides, is quoted here. (Suggestion: Read it aloud.)

Let me say that our system of government does not copy the institutions of our neighbours. It is more a case of our being a model to others, than of our imitating anyone else. Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people. When it is a question of settling private disputes, everyone is equal before the law; when it is a question of putting one person before another in positions of public responsibility, what counts is not membership of a particular class, but the actual ability which the man possesses. No one, so long as he has it in him to be of service to the state, is kept in political obscurity because of poverty. And, just as our political life is free and open, so is our day-to-day life in our relations with each other. We do not get into a state with our next-door neighbour if he enjoys himself in his own way, nor do we give him the kind of black looks which, though they do no real harm, still do hurt people’s feelings. We are free and tolerant in our private lives; but in public affairs we keep to the law. This is because it commands our deep respect.

We give our obedience to those whom we put in positions of authority, and we obey the laws themselves, especially those which are for the protection of the oppressed, and those unwritten laws which it is an acknowledged shame to break. . . .

Then there is a great difference between us and our opponents in our attitude towards military security. Here are some examples: Our city is open to

*This battle is celebrated in the movie *300*.

the world, and we have no periodical deportations in order to prevent people observing or finding out secrets which might be of military advantage to the enemy. This is because we rely, not on secret weapons, but on our own real courage and loyalty. . . .

Our love of what is beautiful does not lead to extravagance; our love of the things of the mind does not make us soft. We regard wealth as something to be properly used, rather than as something to boast about. As for poverty, no one need be ashamed to admit it: the real shame is in not taking practical measures to escape from it. Here each individual is interested not only in his own affairs but in the affairs of the state as well. . . . We do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all. . . .

Again, in questions of general good feeling there is a great contrast between us and most other people. We make friends by doing good to others, not by receiving good from them. . . . We are unique in this. When we do kindnesses to others, we do not do them out of any calculations of profit or loss: we do them without afterthought, relying on our free liberality. Taking everything together then, I declare that our city is an education to Greece, and I declare that in my opinion each single one of our citizens, in all the manifold aspects of life, is able to show himself the rightful lord and owner of his own person, and do this, moreover, with exceptional grace and exceptional versatility. . . . Mighty indeed are the marks and monuments of our empire which we have left. Future ages will wonder at us, as the present age wonders at us now. We do not need the praises of a Homer, or of anyone else whose words may delight us for the moment, but whose estimation of facts will fall short of what is really true. For our adventurous spirit has forced an entry into every sea and into every land; and everywhere we have left behind us everlasting memorials of good done to our friends or suffering inflicted on our enemies.³

Such was the spirit of the Golden Age of classical Athens: proud, confident, serenely convinced that the city was “an education to Greece”—and not without reason. Twenty-five hundred years later, we still are moved by their tragedies, laugh at their comedies, admire their sculpture, are awed by their architecture, revere their democracy, and study their philosophers.

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1. How did Athens come to preeminence among Greek cities?
 2. For what qualities does Pericles praise Athens?
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The Sophists

The social situation in fifth-century B.C. Athens called for innovations in education. The “best men” in the old sense no longer commanded a natural leadership. What counted was ability, as Pericles said, so men sought to develop their abilities.

Aristocratic education centering on Homer was no longer adequate. Most citizens received an elementary education that made them literate and gave them basic skills. If a father wanted his son to succeed in democratic Athens, however, more was needed.

To supply this need, a class of teachers arose offering what we can call higher education. Many of these teachers traveled from city to city as the call for their services waxed and waned. They were professionals who charged for their instruction. Because there was a substantial demand for their services, the best of them became quite wealthy. We can get a sense of what they claimed to provide for their students and of the eagerness with which they were sought out from the beginning of Plato’s dialogue *Protagoras*. As we’ll see, Protagoras was one of the greatest of these teachers.* Socrates is the speaker.

Last night, just before daybreak, Hippocrates, the son of Apollodorus and brother of Phason, began knocking very loudly on the door with his stick, and when someone opened it he came straight in in a great hurry, calling out loudly, “Socrates, are you awake or asleep?” I recognized his voice and said, “It’s Hippocrates; no bad news, I hope?” “Nothing but good news,” he said. “Splendid,” I said; “what is it, then? What brings you here so early?” He came

*Protagoras was paid in the following way. Before the instruction, he and his pupil would go to the temple; there the student would vow to pay, when the course was finished, whatever he then thought Protagoras’ instruction was worth. It is said that when he died, Protagoras was wealthier than five Phidiases. (Phidias was the most famous sculptor in Athens.)

and stood beside me; “Protagoras has come,” he said. “He came the day before yesterday,” I said; “have you only just heard?” “Yes, indeed,” he said; “yesterday evening. . . . Late as it was, I immediately got up to come and tell you, but then I realized that it was far too late at night; but as soon as I had had a sleep and got rid of my tiredness, I got up straight away and came over here, as you see.”

I knew him to be a spirited and excitable character, so I said, “What’s all this to you? Protagoras hasn’t done you any wrong, has he?”

He laughed. “By heavens, he has, Socrates. He is the only man who is wise, but he doesn’t make me wise too.”

“Oh yes, he will,” I said; “If you give him money and use a little persuasion, he’ll make you wise as well.”

“I wish to God,” he said, “that that was all there was to it. I’d use every penny of my own, and of my friends too. But it’s just that that I’ve come to you about now, so that you can put in a word for me with him. First of all, I’m too young, and then I’ve never seen Protagoras.” (*Protagoras* 310a–e)⁴

Note the eagerness expressed by Hippocrates—and for education, too! What could this education be that excited such desire? What did the **Sophists**, as these teachers were called, offer?

While they wait for day to dawn, Socrates tries in his questioning fashion to see whether Hippocrates really knows what he is getting into. Not surprisingly, it turns out that he doesn’t. Undaunted, they set off and go to the home where Protagoras is staying. After some difficulty (the servant at the door is sick of Sophists and slams the door in their faces), they meet Protagoras, who is in the company of a number of other young men and fellow Sophists. Socrates makes his request:

Hippocrates here is anxious to become your pupil; so he says that he would be glad to know what benefit he will derive from associating with you. (*Protagoras* 318a)

Protagoras answers,

Young man, . . . if you associate with me, this is the benefit you will gain: the very day you become my pupil you will go home a better man, and the same the next day; and every day you will continue to make progress. (*Protagoras* 318a)

Socrates, of course, is not satisfied with this answer. If Hippocrates were to associate with a famous painter, then each day his painting might improve. If he studied with a flutist, his flute playing would get better. But in what respect, exactly, will associating with Protagoras make Hippocrates “a better man”?

You have put a good question, Socrates, and I like answering people who do that. . . . What I teach is the proper management of one’s own affairs, how best to run one’s household, and the management of public affairs, how to make the most effective contribution to the affairs of the city both by word and action. (*Protagoras* 318d–319a)

Here we have the key to the excitement of Hippocrates and to the demand for this instruction from the rising middle class of Athens. The Sophists claim to be able to teach the things that foster success, both personal and political, in this democratic city. Many of them also teach specialized subjects such as astronomy, geometry, arithmetic, and music. Nearly all are committed to the new learning developed by the nature philosophers. They are self-consciously “modern,” believing they represent progress and enlightenment as opposed to ignorance and superstition.

However, it is their claim to teach “excellence” or “virtue” (the Greek word *areté* can be translated either way) both in mastering one’s own affairs and in providing leadership in the city that makes them popular.* The excellences they claim to teach are the skills, abilities, and traits of character that make one competent, successful, admired, and perhaps even wealthy.

The term “sophist” has rather negative connotations for us. A *sophism*, for instance, is a fallacious argument that looks good but isn’t, and *sophistry*

*The Greek *areté* (ahr-e-tay) can apply to horses and knives, to flutists and cobblers, as well as to human beings as such. It has to do with the excellence of something when it does well what it is supposed to do. So it goes beyond the sphere of morality but includes it. Though usually translated “virtue,” this English word is really too narrow. We will often use the broader term “excellence,” and especially “human excellence,” when what is in question is not someone’s excellence as a teacher or sailor but as a human being.

is verbally pulling the wool over someone's eyes. The term did not always have such connotations. "Sophist" comes from the Greek *sophos*, meaning wise. The term was applied in the fifth century to many earlier wise men, including Homer and Hesiod. Undoubtedly, the best of the Sophists, such as Protagoras, were neither charlatans nor fools. In connection with their teaching the young, they also made important contributions to the great conversation. They were philosophers who had to be taken seriously; for this reason, they are of interest to us.

RHETORIC

All of the Sophists taught **rhetoric**, the principles and practice of persuasive speaking. Some of the Sophists, Gorgias for example, claimed to teach nothing but that. Clearly, in democratic Athens this art would be very valuable. Suppose, for instance, that you are brought into court by a neighbor. If you hem and haw, utter only irrelevancies, and cannot present the evidence on your side in a coherent and persuasive way, you are likely to lose whether you are guilty or not. Or suppose you feel strongly about some issue that affects the welfare of the city; only if you can stand up in the Assembly of citizens and speak persuasively will you have any influence. You must be able to present your case, marshal your arguments, and appeal to the feelings of the audience. This is the art the Sophists developed and taught.

In one of his dialogues, Plato represents Gorgias as claiming to teach

the ability to use the spoken word to persuade the jurors in the courts, the members of the Council, the citizens attending the Assembly—in short, to win over any and every form of public meeting. (*Gorgias* 452e)⁵

A rhetorician is capable of speaking effectively against all comers, whatever the issue, and can consequently be more persuasive in front of crowds about . . . anything he likes. (*Gorgias* 457b)

We need to understand what rhetoric means to the Sophists because its philosophical consequences are deep. The central idea is that by using the principles of persuasive speaking, one can make a case for any position at all. It follows that if there

are, as we often say these days, two sides to every issue, someone skilled in rhetoric should be able to present a persuasive argument for each side. In fact, this idea was embodied in one of the main teaching tools of the Sophists.

A student was encouraged to construct and present arguments on both sides of some controversial issue. He was not judged to be proficient until he could present a case as persuasive on one side as on the other. This method, presumably, was designed to equip a student for any eventuality; one never knew on what side of some future issue one's interests would lie.

A humorous story about Protagoras illustrates this method. Protagoras agreed to teach a young man how to conduct cases in the courts. Because the young man was poor, it was agreed that he would not have to pay his teacher until he won his first case. Some time elapsed after the course of instruction was over, and the student did not enter into any cases. Finally Protagoras himself brought the student to court, prosecuting him for payment. The student argued thus: If I win this case, I shall not have to pay Protagoras, according to the judgment of the court; if I lose this case, I will not yet have won my first case, and so I will not have to pay Protagoras according to the terms of our agreement; since I will either win or lose, I shall not have to pay. Protagoras, not to be outdone by his student, argued as follows: If he loses this case, then by the judgment of the court he must pay me; if he wins it, he will have won his first case and therefore will have to pay me; so, in either case, he will have to pay me.

The story is probably apocryphal, and the arguments may be "sophistical" in the bad sense, but it is not easy to see what has gone wrong. The example is not far from the flavor of much of the Sophists' teaching.

The philosophical interest of this technique can be seen if we recall certain meanings of the term *logos*, which connotes speech, thought, argument, and discourse. The Sophists trained their students to present opposite *logoi*. There was the *logos* (what could be said) on one side, and there was the *logos* on the other. The presumption was that for every side of every issue a persuasive *logos* could

be developed. Some Sophists seem to have written works consisting of just such opposed *logoi*, presumably as examples for their students.

In this connection, we must note a phrase that later became notorious. It seems to have expressed a boast made by Protagoras and some of the other Sophists. They claimed to teach others *how to make the weaker argument into the stronger*. Suppose you are in court with what looks like a very weak case. The principles of rhetoric, if cleverly applied, could turn your argument into the stronger one—in the sense that it would be victorious.

Such a technique has profoundly skeptical implications. Think back to Heraclitus.* He believes that there is one *logos* uniting the many changing things of the world into one world-order. This *logos* is “common to all.” Although many deviate from the *logos*, it is there and available to everyone. The wise are those who “listen to the *logos*” and order their own lives in accord with the pattern of the world-order. Think of Parmenides, who acknowledges that there is such a thing as the way of opinion but holds that it is quite distinct from the way of truth, in which “thought and being are the same.”†

The practice of the Sophists seems to show that thought and being are *not* the same. Thought and being fall apart; there is no necessary correlation at all. No matter what the reality is, thought can represent it or misrepresent it with equal ease. If a *logos* that will carry conviction can be constructed on any side of any issue, how is one to tell when one is in accord with Heraclitus’ *logos* and when one is not? How is one to discriminate the truth from mere opinion?

The Sophists’ answer is that one cannot. All we have—and all we ever can have—are opinions. Parmenides writes of two ways, the way of truth and the way of opinion. The former represents the way things *are*, whereas the latter sets forth the way things *appear*. The practice of rhetoric raises doubts about our ability to distinguish appearance from reality. For human beings, things are as they seem to be. No more can be said.

So the Sophists agree with Democritus that we are “cut off from the real” by the conventional nature of our sense experience.* But unlike Democritus, they hold that there is no other avenue to the truth. Democritus thinks that reasoning can reveal what the eyes and ears cannot—that reality is composed of atoms and the void. However, if the Sophists are right, then the appeal to reasoning cannot be sustained. For one can reason equally well for and against atoms and the void—or, indeed, anything else!

As you can see, the Sophists tend to be skeptical about their predecessors’ claims to reveal the truth, skeptical of human ability to come to know truth at all. You should be able to see how this **skepticism** is intimately related to the way they conceive and teach rhetoric. If rhetoric can make a convincing case for absolutely anything, then what can one know?

Such skepticism does not reduce them to silence, however. A person can still talk intelligibly about how things seem, even if not about how they really are. No doubt many of the theories of the nature philosophers are understood in just this way; they are plausible stories that represent the way the world seems to be. These stories represent probabilities at best, not the truth; but probabilities are the most that human beings can hope to attain. Without trying to penetrate to the core of reality, the Sophists are content with appearances. Without insisting on certainty, they are content with plausibility. Without knowledge, they are content with opinion.

The skeptical attitude is displayed in a statement by Protagoras concerning the gods. He is reported to have said,

Concerning the gods I am not in a position to know either that they are or that they are not, or what they are like in appearance; for there are many things that are preventing knowledge, the obscurity of the matter and the brevity of human life. (DK 80 B 4, *IEGP*, 269)⁶

This statement seems to have been the basis for an accusation that Protagoras was an atheist. We

*See especially p. 20.

†See pp. 23–24.

*See p. 32.

know that he was at one time banished from Athens and that certain of his books were burned; it is likely that such statements were among those that aroused the anger of the citizens. (We will see a parallel in the case of Socrates.) Protagoras does not, however, deny the existence of the gods. He says that in light of the difficulty of the question, we are prevented from knowing about the gods. His view is not that of the atheist, then, but that of the **agnostic**. The only reasonable thing to do, he says, is to suspend judgment on this issue. This is the view of the skeptic.

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1. What do the Sophists claim to teach? How do they understand *areté*?
 2. What is rhetoric? How was it taught?
 3. How does the concept of a *logos* come into Sophist teaching?
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RELATIVISM

The Sophists' point of view is best summed up in a famous saying by Protagoras.

Of all things the measure is man: of existing things, that they exist; of non-existing things, that they do not exist. (DK 80 B 1, *IEGP*, 245)

A “measure” is a standard or criterion to appeal to when deciding what to believe. Protagoras' statement that man is the measure of all things means that there is no criterion, standard, or mark by which to judge, except ourselves. We cannot jump outside our skins to see how things look independent of how they appear to us. *As they appear to us, so they are*.

Clearly, he means, in the first instance at least, that things are as they appear to the individual. A common example is the wind. Suppose the wind feels cold to one person and warm to another. Can we ask whether the wind is cold or warm in itself—apart from how it seems? Protagoras concludes that this question has no answer. If the wind seems cold to the first one, then to that person it *is* cold; and if it seems warm to the second, then it *is* warm—to that person. About the warmth or coldness of the wind, no more than this can be said. Each person

is the final judge of how the wind seems. Since it is not possible to get beyond such seemings, each individual is the final judge of how things *are* (to that individual, of course).

This doctrine is the heart of a viewpoint known as **relativism**. Here is the first appearance of one of the focal points of this book. From this point on, we see the major figures in our tradition struggling with the problems raised by relativism and the skepticism about our knowledge that attends it. Most of them oppose it. Some make certain concessions to it. But it has never been banished for long, and in one way or another it reappears throughout our history. In our own time, many have adopted some form of it. The Sophists set out the question in the clearest of terms and force us to come to grips with it.

We have now its essence. We need yet to understand what recommends it and what its implications are.

One implication that must have been obvious is that well-meaning citizens, not clearly prejudiced by self-interest, could disagree about the course the city should take. Another is that a well-wrought speech on any side of an issue could in fact convince a court or assembly of citizens. If you put these two observations together, it is not hard to draw the conclusion that the *best logos* about an issue is simply the one that does the best job of convincing. How can one judge which of two opposing *logoi* is the best, if not in terms of success? (An independent “logic,” in terms of which one might judge that a certain persuasive device was “fallacious,” had not yet been developed.) However, if there is no way to tell which *logos* is best except by observing which one *seems* best, then knowledge cannot be distinguished from opinion.* The best opinion is simply that which is generally accepted. But that means it may differ from culture to culture, from time to time, and even from individual to individual. There is no truth independent of what people accept. What seems true to one person or at one time may not seem true to another person or at another time. These observations and arguments

*See “Knowledge and Opinion” in Chapter 8 to see how Plato struggles against this view.

were surely among those that motivated the Sophists to adopt their relativism.



“Relativists tend to understate the amount of attunement, recognition, and overlap that actually obtains across cultures.”

Martha Nussbaum (b. 1947)

There was another factor. Greeks in general, and Athenians in particular, had expanded their horizons. They continued to distinguish, as Greeks always had done, between themselves and “barbarians,” whom they took to be inferior to themselves. But the more they traveled and learned about the customs and characters of other nations, the harder it became to dismiss them as stupid and uncivilized. This exposure to non-Greek ways of doing things exerted a pressure on thought. These ways came to be seen not as inferior but simply as different. There is a famous example given by the historian Herodotus, who was himself a great traveler and observer.

Everyone without exception believes his own native customs, and the religion he was brought up in, to be the best. . . . There is abundant evidence that this is the universal feeling about the ancient customs of one’s country. One might recall, in particular, an anecdote of Darius. When he was king of Persia, he summoned the Greeks who happened to be present at his court, and asked them what they would take to eat the dead bodies of their fathers. They replied that they would not do it for any money in the world. Later, in the presence of the Greeks, and through an interpreter, so they could understand what was said, he asked some Indians, of the tribe called Callatiae, who do in fact eat their parents’ dead bodies, what they would take to burn them. They uttered a cry of horror and forbade him to mention such a dreadful thing. One can see by this what custom can do, and Pindar, in my opinion, was right when he called it “king of all.”⁷

PHYSIS AND NOMOS

The Sophists developed this notion that custom was “king of all” in terms of a distinction between *physis* and *nomos*. The word *physis* is the term for what

the nature philosophers were studying. It is usually translated as “nature” and means the characteristics of the world, or things in general, independent of what human beings impose on it. It is the word from which our “physics” is derived.

Nomos is the word for custom or convention, for those things that are as they are because humans have decided they should be so. Americans drive on the right side of the road, the English on the left. Neither practice is “natural,” or by *physis*. This is a clear example of convention. We drive on one side in America and on the other side in England simply because we have agreed to. In the case Herodotus refers to, it is not so clear that an explicit decision is responsible for how the Greeks and the Indians care for their dead. These are practices that probably go back into prehistory. Still, neither practice is “by nature.” Herodotus assigns the difference to custom, which is certainly *nomos*, for it is possible that, difficult as it might be, Greeks and Indians alike might change their practices. The mark of what is true by *physis* is that it is not up to us to decide, nor can we change it if we want to. If by agreement we can change the order of certain things (for example, which side of the road to drive on), then these things exist by *nomos*, not by *physis*.

Let us talk in terms of “the way things are.” The way things are may be due to *physis* or to *nomos*. If they are due to *physis*, then we cannot go against them. For instance, it is part of the way things are that taking an ounce of strychnine will, unless immediate remedies are taken, cause one to die. It is not possible to swallow an ounce of strychnine, take no remedy, and continue to live. The connection between taking strychnine and death is a matter of *physis*. It does not depend on our decisions.

It is also part of the way things are that poisoning another person is punished in some way. In some societies, the punishment is death, whereas in others, it is imprisonment or a fine. How poisoners are punished is up to people. A particular poisoner could even be pardoned. If the way things are can be changed, then they are established by *nomos* and not by *physis*. It is for this reason that in cases of *nomos* we are likely to talk in terms of what a person “ought” to do: what is “right” or “appropriate” or “good” to do. With respect to the laws of

nature, we have no choice, so there is no question of appropriateness. But conventions, customs, or laws that exist by *nomos* have a “normative” character to them. They state what we should do but may fail to do. We should not, in England, drive on the right, but we can. Murderers should be punished, but they sometimes are not.

The distinction is an important one, and the credit for making it clearly must go to the Sophists. But how, you might ask, did they use it?

The question about the gods can be put clearly using this terminology. Do the gods exist by *physis* or by *nomos*? To answer that they exist by nature is to claim that their existence is independent of whatever humans believe about them. To say that the gods exist only by *nomos* amounts to saying that they are dependent on our belief; they have no reality independent of what we believe about them. The skeptical and relativistic nature of Sophist thought favors the latter alternative. Certain Sophists may have said that if it seems to you the gods exist, then they do exist—for you. But the agnosticism of Protagoras is probably more representative.

The distinction between *nomos* and *physis* is also applied to the virtues and, in particular, to justice. If a settled community like a city-state is to survive, then a certain degree of justice must prevail. Agreements must be kept, deceptions must be exceptions, and each individual must be able to count on others to keep up their end of things. So much is clear.* But is justice, which demands these things, something good by nature? Or is it merely a convention, foisted on individuals perhaps against their own best interest? Is justice a matter of *physis*, or is it entirely *nomos*? This question is important. The Sophists debated it extensively, as did Plato and his successors.

It is clear how the Sophists must answer this question. They can look back to the creation of democracy, which is obviously a change made by

*Justice in this context is clearly something more than the justice of Homeric heroes giving one another the honor due to each (see p. 6). What is needed in settled city-states is more extensive than what is needed by warrior bands. Some notion of fair play or evenhandedness seems to be involved. The nature of justice is a perennial problem, and we will return to it.

human beings. They can see the process of laws being debated and set down. They observe decisions being made and sometimes reversed. Clearly, forms of government, laws, and customs are matters of *nomos*. They are made by and can be altered by human decisions.

From the Sophists’ point of view, if you want to know what is right or just, consult the laws. Is it just to keep agreements made? It is if the laws say so. How much tax is owed? The laws will tell you. For matters not covered explicitly by law, you must look to the customs of the people. Where else can one look? Just as there is no sense in asking whether the wind in itself is either cold or warm (apart from the way it seems to those who feel it), so is there no sense in asking whether a given law is really just. If it seems just to the people of Athens, say, then it is just (for the Athenians).

For clarity’s sake, let’s call this sense of justice conventional justice. Conventional justice is defined as whatever the conventions (the *nomoi*) of a given society lay down as just.

We can contrast with this the idea of natural justice. Heraclitus, for instance, holds that

all human laws are nourished by the one divine law. For it governs as far as it will, and is sufficient for all things, and outlasts them. (DK 22 B 114, *IEGP*, 103)

His idea is that human laws do not have their justification in themselves. They are “nourished,” or get their sustenance, from a “divine law.” This divine law, of course, is “common to all,” the one *logos*. So human laws are not self-sufficient, in Heraclitus’ view. Because people are often “at variance” with the *logos*, we can infer that human law, too, may diverge from the *logos*. It makes sense for Heraclitus to contrast conventional justice with real or natural justice. He believes not only that there is a court of appeal from a possibly unjust human law, but also that human beings can know what divine law requires.

An example of such an appeal is found in **Sophocles’** play *Antigone*. Following a civil war, Creon, king of Thebes, proclaims that the body of Polyneices, leader of the opposition, remain unburied. This was, in Greek tradition, a very bad thing; only if one’s body was buried could the

spirit depart for Hades. Polyneices' sister, **Antigone**, defies the decree and covers the body with dirt. Before the king, she acknowledges that she knew of the king's order and defends her action in these words.

It was not Zeus who published this decree,
Nor have the Powers who rule among the dead
Imposed such laws as this upon mankind;
Nor could I think that a decree of yours—
A man—could override the laws of Heaven
Unwritten and unchanging. Not of today
Or yesterday is their authority;
They are eternal; no man saw their birth.
Was I to stand before the gods' tribunal
For disobeying them, because I feared
A man?⁸

Both Heraclitus and Antigone suggest that beyond conventional justice there is another justice. If the laws established by convention violate these higher laws, it may be permissible to violate the conventions.* For the Sophists, however, no such appeal is possible. One might not like a law and therefore work to change it, but there is no appeal to another kind of law to justify its violation. Their skepticism about any reality beyond appearances and their consequent relativism rule out any such appeal.

A certain conservatism seems to be a consequence of this way of looking at justice. Protagoras, for instance, in promising to make Hippocrates a “better man,” one able to succeed in Athenian society, would scarcely teach him that Athens is profoundly mistaken in her ideas of justice. He certainly would not turn him into a rebel and malcontent or even into a reformer. That is no way to attain the admiration of one's fellow citizens; that is the way to earn their hostility and hatred. So it is likely that the Sophists taught their students to adapt to whatever society they found.

Some of the Sophists, though, draw different conclusions. They agree with Heraclitus that there is a natural justice, but they disagree completely

about its content. Natural justice, they hold, is not the “nourisher” of conventional justice, but its enemy. A Sophist named **Antiphon** writes,

Life and death are the concern of nature, and living creatures live by what is advantageous to them and die from what is not advantageous; and the advantages which accrue from law are chains upon nature, whereas those which accrue from nature are free. (DK 87 B 44, *IEGP*, 251)

Antiphon is telling us that if we only observe, we can see that a *natural* law governs the affairs of men and other living creatures: the law of self-preservation. Like all laws, it carries a punishment for those who violate it: death. Unlike conventional laws, this punishment necessarily follows the violation of the law. That is what makes it a natural law rather than a matter of convention. All creatures, he says, follow this law by seeking what is “advantageous” to themselves.

In contrast to *this* natural law, the restraints conventional justice places on human behavior are “chains upon nature.” Antiphon goes as far as to claim that

most of the things which are just by law [in the conventional sense] are hostile to nature. (DK 87 B 44, *IEGP*, 251)

It is natural, then, and therefore right or just (in the sense of *physis*) to pursue what is advantageous. Some of the time your advantage may coincide with the laws of the city. But because there is a tension between conventional law and your advantage, and because seeking your advantage is in accord with natural law, Antiphon gives us this remarkable piece of advice:

A man will be just, then, in a way most advantageous to himself if, in the presence of witnesses, he holds the laws of the city in high esteem, and in the absence of witnesses, when he is alone, those of nature. For the laws of men are adventitious, but those of nature are necessary; and the laws of men are fixed by agreement, not by nature, whereas the laws of nature are natural and not fixed by agreement. He who breaks the rules, therefore, and escapes detection by those who have agreed to them, incurs no shame or penalty; if detected he does. (DK 87 B 44, *IEGP*, 250–251)

*Note that we have here a justification for civil disobedience. A more recent example is Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”

If you break conventional laws without getting caught, then you have not brought any disadvantage on yourself by doing so. Furthermore, the law of self-preservation takes precedence over the conventional laws because it is “necessary” and “natural.” Only *its* prescriptions cannot be evaded. Antiphon drives the point home:

If some benefit accrued to those who subscribed to the laws, while loss accrued to those who did not subscribe to them but opposed them, then obedience to the laws would not be without profit. But as things stand, it seems that legal justice is not strong enough to benefit those who subscribe to laws of this sort. For in the first place it permits the injured party to suffer injury and the man who inflicts it to inflict injury, and it does not prevent the injured party from suffering injury nor the man who does the injury from doing it. And if the case comes to trial, the injured party has no more of an advantage than the one who has done the injury; for he must convince his judges that he has been injured, and must be able, by his plea, to exact justice. And it is open to the one who has done the injury to deny it; for he can defend himself against the accusation, and he has the same opportunity to persuade his judges that his accuser has. For the victory goes to the best speaker. (DK 87 B 44, *IEGP*, 252–253)

“For the victory goes to the best speaker”: We come around again to rhetoric. No matter which of the sophistic views of justice you take, rhetoric is of supreme importance. Whether you say that conventional justice is the only justice there is or hold that there is a natural justice of self-preservation, it is more important to *appear* just than to *be* just. According to the former view, appearances are all anyone can know; according to the latter, the way you appear to others determines whether you obtain what is most advantageous to yourself.

The Sophists produced a theory of the origins of conventional justice as well. It is not clear how widespread it was; there was no unified sophistic doctrine. But it is of great interest and was picked up in the nineteenth century by Friedrich Nietzsche, who made it a key point in his attempt

at a “reevaluation of values.”* It is represented for us by **Callicles** in Plato’s *Gorgias*.

In my opinion it’s the weaklings who constitute the majority of the human race who make the rules. In making these rules, they look after themselves and their own interest, and that’s also the criterion they use when they dispense praise and criticism. They try to cow the stronger ones—which is to say, the ones who are capable of increasing their share of things—and to stop them getting an increased share, by saying that to do so is wrong and contemptible and by defining injustice in precisely those terms, as the attempt to have more than others. In my opinion, it’s because they’re second-rate that they’re happy for things to be distributed equally. Anyway, that’s why convention states that the attempt to have a larger share than most people is immoral and contemptible; that’s why people call it doing wrong. But I think we only have to look at nature to find evidence that it is *right* for better to have a greater share than worse, more capable than less capable. The evidence for this is widespread. Other creatures show, as do human communities and nations, that right has been determined as follows: the superior person shall dominate the inferior person and have more than him. By what right, for instance, did Xerxes make war on Greece or his father on Sythia, not to mention countless further cases of the same kind of behaviour? These people act, surely, in conformity with the natural essence of right and, yes, I’d even go so far as to say that they act in conformity with natural *law*, even though they presumably contravene our man-made laws.

What do we do with the best and strongest among us? We capture them young, like lions, mould them, and turn them into slaves by chanting spells and incantations over them which insist that they have to be equal to others and that equality is admirable and right. But I’m sure that if a man is born in whom nature is strong enough, he’ll shake off all these limitations, shatter them to pieces, and win his freedom; he’ll trample all our regulations, charms, spells, and unnatural laws into the dust; this slave will rise up and reveal himself as our master; and then natural right will blaze forth. (*Gorgias* 483b–484a)

*See Chapter 24, especially pp. 580–581.

Callicles' basic idea is that we are by nature equipped with certain passions and desires. It is natural to try to satisfy these. Although the weak may try to fetter the strong by imposing a guilty conscience on them, the strong do nothing contrary to nature if they exert all their power and cleverness to satisfy whatever desires they have. Such behavior may be conventionally frowned upon, but it is not, in itself, unjust.

Note how dramatically this contrasts with the ethics of the Greek tradition. Compare it, for instance, to Heraclitus, who holds that it is not good for men to get all they wish, that “moderation is the greatest virtue.”*

Callicles advocates satisfying one's desires to the fullest extent, not moderating them. The really happy man is the one who is strong enough to do this without fear of retaliation. Here we have the very opposite of the “nothing too much” doctrine at Delphi—a negation of the tradition of self-restraint.

The Sophists' views are bold and innovative, a response to the changing social and political situation, particularly in democratic Athens. But they are more than just reflections of a particular society at a given time. They constitute a serious critique of the beliefs of their predecessors and a challenge to those who come after them. These views force us to face the question: Why shouldn't we be Sophists too?

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1. Explain Protagoras' saying, “Man is the measure of all things.”
 2. What in the Sophists' teaching tends toward relativism?
 3. Contrast *physis* with *nomos*.
 4. Contrast conventional justice with natural justice. What two different concepts of natural justice can be distinguished?
 5. How could the *physis/nomos* distinction be turned toward an antisocial direction?
 6. Would a Sophist say that it is more important to be just or to appear just? Why?
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*See p. 21.

Athens and Sparta at War

In the context of the sophistic movement, we are philosophically prepared to understand Socrates and his disciple, Plato. But to understand why Socrates was brought to trial, we need to know something of the **Peloponnesian War**, as it was called by the historian Thucydides, who lived through it.* The Peloponnesus is the large peninsula at the southern tip of mainland Greece, connected by the narrow Isthmus of Corinth to Greece proper. It was named for a largely mythical ancestor, Pelops, supposedly the grandson of Zeus and the grandfather of Agamemnon and Menelaus of Trojan War fame. In the fifth century B.C., the dominant power on the peninsula was the city-state of Sparta (see Map 1).

Sparta was quite unlike Athens. The Spartans had taken an important role in the defeat of the Persians, but thereafter, unlike Athens, they had followed a more cautious and defensive policy. Sparta was primarily a land power; Athens ruled the seas. Although the Spartans had allies, mostly in the Peloponnesus, Athens had created an empire dominating most of the north of Greece and most of the islands in the Aegean. Sparta was not democratic. Rule in Sparta was in the hands of a relatively small portion of the population, in effect a warrior class. Their way of life was austere and, as we say, spartan—devoted not to wealth and enjoyment but to rigorous training and self-discipline. They were supported by a large slave population called Helots and by other subject peoples in the area.

Perhaps it was inevitable that two such formidable powers in close proximity and so different would clash. They cooperated well enough in repelling the Persian invasion, but when that danger was past, their interests diverged. As Thucydides tells us,

What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta. (HPW 1.23)⁹

*For Peloponnesian War, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peloponnesian_War.

War may have been inevitable, but its coming was tragic. In the end, it led to the defeat of Athens and to the weakening of Greece in general. It meant the beginning of the end of the Golden Age of Greece.

The war itself was long and drawn out, lasting from 431 to 404 B.C., with an interval of seven years of relative peace in the middle. It was immensely costly to both sides, in terms of both men lost and wealth squandered. We will not go into the details of the war; they can be found in Thucydides or any of a number of modern histories.* But war does things to a people, especially a long and inconclusive war fought with increasing desperation.

Athens encouraged the development of democracy in her allies and appealed to the people (as opposed to the aristocrats) in cities she hoped to bring into her empire. These moves were resisted by the aristocratic or oligarchical parties in these states, who were often supported by Sparta. Thucydides records the events in Corcyra (see Map 1) after the victory of the democratic side over the oligarchs.

They seized upon all their enemies whom they could find and put them to death. They then dealt with those whom they had persuaded to go on board the ships, killing them as they landed. Next they went to the temple of Hera and persuaded about fifty of the suppliants there to submit to a trial. They condemned every one of them to death. Seeing what was happening, most of the other suppliants, who had refused to be tried, killed each other there in the temple; some hanged themselves on the trees, and others found various other means of committing suicide. During the seven days that Eurymedon [an Athenian naval commander] stayed there with his sixty ships, the Corcyreans continued to massacre those of their own citizens whom they considered to be their enemies. Their victims were accused of conspiring to overthrow the democracy, but in fact men were often killed on grounds of personal hatred or else by their debtors because of the money they owed. There was death in every shape and form. And, as usually happens in such situations, people went to every extreme and beyond it. There were fathers who killed their sons; men were dragged from the temples or butchered on the very

altars; some were actually walled up in the temple of Dionysus and died there. . . .

Later, of course, practically the whole of the Hellenic world was convulsed, with rival parties in every state—democratic leaders trying to bring in the Athenians, and oligarchs trying to bring in the Spartans. (*HPW* 3.81–3.83)

We can see here the disintegration of the traditional Greek ideal of moderation; people “went to every extreme and beyond it.” Moreover, the arguments of the more extreme Sophists found a parallel in concrete political undertakings. Naked self-interest came more and more to play the major role in decisions no longer even cloaked in terms of justice. Perhaps worst of all, Thucydides says, the very meaning of the words for right and virtue changed. When that happens, confusion reigns while moral thought and criticism become impossible.

Pericles died in the early years of the war, leaving Athens without a natural leader. Leadership tended to flow to those who could speak persuasively before the Assembly. These leaders were called “demagogues,” those who could lead (*agoge*) the *demos*. Policy was inconstant and sometimes reversed, depending on who was the most persuasive speaker of the day. Dissatisfaction with democracy began to grow, especially in quarters traditionally allied with the “best people.” When Athens was finally defeated in 404, treachery on the part of these enemies of democracy was suspected but could not be proved.

According to the terms of the peace treaty imposed on Athens, she had to receive returning exiles (most of whom were antidemocratic), agree to have the same friends and enemies as Sparta, and accept provisional government by a Council that came to be known as **the Thirty**. A new constitution was promised, but naturally the Thirty were in no hurry to form a new government. Supported by Spartan men-at-arms, they purged “wrongdoers,” executing criminals and those who had opposed surrender. They soon began to persecute dissidents, as well as people they just didn’t like, expropriating their property to support the new system. They claimed, of course, to be enforcing virtue. In classic fashion, they tried to involve as

* See suggestions in Note 1, at the close of this chapter.

many Athenian citizens as possible in their adventures to prevent them from making accusations later. Socrates, as we learn, was one of five persons summoned to arrest a certain Leon of Salamis. (He refused.) The rule of the Thirty became, in short, a reign of terror. Ever after, Athenians could not hear the words “the Thirty” without a shudder.

This rule lasted less than a year. Exiles, joined by democratic forces within the city, attacked and defeated the forces backing the Thirty. Their leader **Critias** was killed in the fighting, the others were exiled, and democracy was restored. Though a bloodbath was resisted, bad feelings on all sides continued for many years.

Because of the war and its aftermath, Athenians lost confidence in their ability to control their own destiny. The satisfaction in their superiority expressed so well by Pericles disintegrated. Men seemed torn by forces beyond their ability to control in a world that was not well ordered, whether by the gods or by something like the Heraclitean *logos*. The world and human affairs seemed chaotic, beyond managing.

The Greeks had always believed, of course, that humans were not complete masters of their own fate. This belief was expressed in the ideas that the gods intervene in human affairs for their own ends and that none of us can escape our fate. We find such ideas in the works of Homer and in the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles. But in the time of the war, these notions were tinged with a new sense of bitterness and despair.

The third of the great Greek tragedians, **Euripides**, expresses the new mood in his play, *Hippolytus*. The play opens with Aphrodite condemning Hippolytus for scorning love (and so, by extension, Aphrodite). By sparking a passionate desire for Hippolytus in his stepmother, Phaedra, Aphrodite sets off a chain of events that leads to both Phaedra’s and Hippolytus’ deaths. As Hippolytus dies, the goddess Artemis, to whom he had been devoted, vows to take vengeance against Aphrodite by killing whichever mortal she loves best. The impression left by the play is that humans are mere pawns in the hands of greater powers—powers that are in opposition to each other, that make no sense, and have no rhyme or

reason in some higher unity of purpose. Led this way or that by passions we cannot control, we are bound for destruction.

The chorus laments near the end:
 The care of God for us is a great thing,
 if a man believe it at heart:
 it plucks the burden of sorrow from him.
 So I have a secret hope
 of someone, a God, who is wise and plans;
 but my hopes grow dim when I see
 the deeds of men and their destinies.
 For fortune is ever veering, and the currents of life
 are shifting,
 shifting, wandering forever.¹⁰

We have the hope, the chorus says, that our lives are more than “sound and fury, signifying nothing.”* We would like to believe that there is a wise plan to our lives, but if we look about us at the world—and, the Sophists would say, what else can we do?—we find no such reason to hope. Men’s fortunes are “ever veering, and the currents of life are shifting, shifting, wandering forever.”†

So things must have looked in the last decades of the fifth century B.C. in Athens.

Aristophanes and Reaction

Although the Sophists were popular in some circles, they were hated and feared in others. They were a phenomenon that both depended on and fostered the kind of democracy Athens practiced: direct democracy where decisions were made by whichever citizens were present in the Assembly on a given day. Political power rested directly with the people in this system, but the masses, of course, tended to be at the mercy of those who possessed the rhetorical skills to sway them in the direction of their own interests: the demagogues. The old families who could look back to the “good old days” when the “best people” ruled were never happy in this state of affairs. As we have seen, they tried, when they

*Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, act 5, scene 5.

†A somewhat altered version of the play is available in the movie *Phaedra*, starring Melina Mercouri and Anthony Perkins.

could, to reverse the situation—not always with better results!

Among those who were unhappy were certain intellectuals, including a writer of comedies named **Aristophanes**. One of his plays, *The Clouds*,* satirizes the Sophists. It is worth a look not only because it gives us another point of view on the Sophists but also because Aristophanes makes Socrates a principal character in the play. In fact, Socrates appears in *The Clouds* as the leading Sophist, who runs a school called the “Thinkery” to which students come to learn—provided they pay. When we first see Socrates, he is hanging in the air, suspended in a basket.

You see,
only by being suspended aloft, by dangling
my mind in the heavens and mingling my rare
thought
with the ethereal air, could I ever achieve strict
scientific accuracy in my survey of the vast
empyrean.
Had I pursued my inquiries from down there on
the ground,
my data would be worthless. The earth, you see,
pulls down
the delicate essence of thought to its own gross
level.

—*Clouds*, p. 33¹¹

This is, of course, attractive nonsense. As we’ll see, Socrates neither had a Thinkery, charged for instruction, nor was interested in speculations about the heavens and earth. Most important, although he shared the Sophists’ interest in human affairs, Socrates was one of their most severe critics. Aristophanes’ picture of Socrates is satire painted with a broad brush.

Socrates’ students are represented as engaging in scientific studies to determine, for example, how far a flea can jump and out of which end a gnat tootles. But that is not the main interest of the play. Strepsiades, a man from the country who has married an extravagant city wife and has a son who loves horse racing, is worried about the debts they have piled up. In particular, several of his son’s

debts are coming due and he hasn’t the money to pay them. So he sends his son to the Thinkery to learn the new sophistic logic, which can make the weaker argument into the stronger. He thinks that by getting his son to learn these rhetorical tricks he may be able to avoid paying back the money.

Strepsiades is at first unable to persuade his son to go. So he becomes a student himself. He does not prove an apt pupil, however, and Socrates eventually kicks him out, but not before he has learned a thing or two. When he meets his son, Pheidippides, he again tries to force him to go to the school.

PHEIDIPPIDES: But Father,

what’s the matter with you? Are you out of your head?

Almighty Zeus, you must be mad!

STREPSIADES: “Almighty Zeus!”

What musty rubbish! Imagine, a boy your age still believing in Zeus!

P: What’s so damn funny?

S: It tickles me when the heads of toddlers like you are still stuffed with such outdated notions.

Now then,

listen to me and I’ll tell you a secret or two that might make an intelligent man of you yet. But remember. You mustn’t breathe a word of this.

P: A word of what?

S: Didn’t you just swear by Zeus?

P: I did.

S: Now learn what Education can do for you: Pheidippides, there is no Zeus.

P: There is no Zeus?

S: No Zeus. Convection-Principle’s in power now. Zeus has been banished.

—*Clouds*, pp. 75–76

The “convection principle” is our old friend the vortex motion or cosmic whirl, by means of which the nature philosophers explain the structure of the world. In the form given this principle by the atomists, as we have seen, there is no need for—indeed, no room for—any intelligent purpose at all. Everything is caused to happen in a completely mechanical fashion. Zeus has indeed been “banished.”

Aristophanes, far from conceding that this is progress, deplors the new thought. The old

*First performed in Athens in 423 B.C., the eighth year of the war.

methods of education are farcically confronted with the new by means of two characters, dressed in the masks of fighting cocks, called the just *logos* and the unjust *logos*. (In this translation, they are called “Philosophy” and “Sophistry,” respectively.) After some preliminary sparring and insult trading, the just *logos* speaks first.

PHILOSOPHY: Gentlemen,

I propose to speak of the Old Education, as it flourished once
beneath my tutelage, when Homespun Honesty,
Plainspeaking, and Truth
were still honored and practiced, and throughout
the schools of Athens
the regime of the three D’s—DISCIPLINE, DECORUM,
and DUTY—
enjoyed unchallenged supremacy.

Our curriculum was Music and Gymnastics, enforced by that rigorous discipline summed up in the old adage:

BOYS SHOULD BE SEEN BUT NOT
HEARD. . . .

SOPHISTRY: Ugh, what musty, antiquated rubbish. . . .

P: Nonetheless, these were the precepts on which I bred a generation of heroes, the men who fought at Marathon. . . .

No, young man, by your courage I challenge you. Turn your back upon his blandishments of vice,
the rotten law courts and the cheap, corrupting softness of the baths.

Choose instead the Old, the Philosophical Education. Follow me
and from my lips acquire the virtues of a man:—

A sense of shame, that decency and innocence of mind that shrinks from doing wrong.

To feel the true man’s blaze of anger when his honor is provoked.

Deference toward one’s elders; respect for one’s father and mother.

—*Clouds*, pp. 86–89

This speech is applauded roundly by the chorus, who say that the unjust *logos* will have to produce “some crushing *tour de force*, some master stroke” to counter these persuasive comments. The unjust *logos* is not at a loss.

SOPHISTRY: Now then, I freely admit

that among men of learning I am—somewhat pejoratively—dubbed

the Sophistic, or Immoral Logic. And why?

Because I first

devised a Method for the Subversion of Established Social Beliefs

and the Undermining of Morality. Moreover, this little invention of mine,

this knack of taking what might appear to be the worse argument

and nonetheless winning my case, has, I might add, proved to be

an *extremely* lucrative source of income. . . .

—Young man,

I advise you to ponder this life of Virtue with scrupulous care,

all that it implies, and all the pleasures of which its daily practice

must inevitably deprive you. Specifically, I might mention these:

Sex. Gambling. Gluttony. Guzzling. Carousing. Etcet.

And what on earth’s the point of living, if you leach your life

of all its little joys?

Very well then, consider your natural needs.

Suppose, as a scholar of Virtue, you commit some minor peccadillo,

a little adultery, say, or seduction, and suddenly find yourself

caught in the act. What happens? You’re ruined, you can’t defend yourself

(since, of course, you haven’t been taught). But follow me, my boy,

and obey your nature to the full; romp, play, and laugh

without a scruple in the world. Then if caught in flagrante,

you simply inform the poor cuckold that you’re utterly innocent

and refer him to Zeus as your moral sanction.

After all, didn’t he,

a great and powerful god, succumb to the love of women?

Then how in the world can you, a man, an ordinary mortal,

be expected to surpass the greatest of gods in moral self-control?

Clearly, you can't be.

—*Clouds*, pp. 91–94

To his father's satisfaction, Pheidippides is persuaded to study with the Sophists. But the climax comes when the son turns what he has learned, not on the creditors, but on his father. After a quarrel, he begins to beat his father with a stick. This is not bad enough; he claims to be able to *prove* that he is right to do so!

PHEIDIPPIDES: Now then, answer my question: did you lick me when I was a little boy?

STREPSIADES: Of course I licked you.

For your own damn good. Because I loved you.

P: Then *ipso facto*,

since you yourself admit that loving and lickings are synonymous, it's only fair that I—for your own damn good,

you understand—whip you in return.

In any case by what right do you whip me but claim exemption for yourself?

What do you think I am? A slave?

Wasn't I born as free a man as you?

Well?

S: But . . .

P: But what?

Spare the Rod and Spoil the Child?

Is that your argument?

If so,

then I can be sententious too. *Old Men Are Boys Writ Big*,

as the saying goes.

A fortiori then, old men logically deserve to be beaten more, since at their age they have clearly less excuse for the mischief that they do.

S: But it's unnatural! It's . . . *illegal!*

Honor your father and mother.

That's the law.

Everywhere.

P: The *law*?

And who made the law?

An ordinary man. A man like you or me.

A man who lobbied for his bill until he persuaded the people to make it law.

By the same token, then, what prevents me now from proposing new legislation granting sons the power to

inflict corporal punishment upon wayward fathers? . . .

However, if you're still unconvinced, look to Nature

for a sanction. Observe the roosters,

for instance, and what do you see?

A society

whose pecking order envisages a permanent state of open

warfare between fathers and sons. And how do roosters

differ from men, except for the trifling fact that human society is based upon law and rooster society isn't?

—*Clouds*, pp. 122–124

Strepsiades is forced by the “persuasive power” of this rhetoric to admit defeat: “The kids,” he says, “have proved their point: naughty fathers should be flogged.” But when Pheidippides adds that since “misery loves company” he has decided to flog his *mother*, too, and can prove “by Sokratic logic” the propriety of doing so, that's the last straw. Strepsiades cries out,

By god, if you prove *that*,
then for all I care, you heel,
you can take your stinking Logics
and your Thinkery as well
with Sokrates inside it
and damn well go to hell!

—*Clouds*, p. 126

Disillusioned by the promise of sophistry, Strepsiades admits he was wrong to try to cheat his son's creditors. Convinced that the new education is, as the just *logos* has put it, the “corrupter and destroyer” of the youth, he ends the play by burning down the Thinkery. The moral is drawn, as it typically is, by the chorus—in this case a chorus of *Clouds* representing the goddesses of the new thought:

This is what we are,
the insubstantial *Clouds* men build their hopes
upon,
shining tempters formed of air, symbols of desire;
and so we act, beckoning, alluring foolish men
through their dishonest dreams of gain to
overwhelming

ruin. There, schooled by suffering, they learn at last to fear the gods.

—*Clouds*, p. 127

The Clouds is surely not a fair and dispassionate appraisal of the sophistic movement. It is a caricature by a traditionalist deeply antagonistic to the changes Athenian society was going through. And yet it poses some serious questions. Is there a way to distinguish between *logoi* independent of their persuasiveness? If not, is argument just a contest that the most persuasive must win? And if Strepsiaides can think of no logical rejoinder to his son's sophisms, what is the outcome? Are arson and violence the only answer? But if that is so, in what sense is that answer superior to the rhetoric that it opposes? Isn't it just employing another tool of force, less subtle than the verbal manipulations of the rhetorician?

What is put in question by the Sophists and Aristophanes' response to them is this: Is there any technique by which people can discuss and come to agree on matters important to them that does not reduce to a power struggle in the end? Is there something that can be identified as being reasonable, as opposed to being merely persuasive? Can human beings, by discussing matters together, come to know the truth? Or is it always just a question of who wins?

This is the question that interests Socrates.

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1. What philosophical question is posed by Aristophanes' play *The Clouds*?
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KEY WORDS

Athens	relativism
democracy	<i>physis</i>
Persian wars	<i>nomos</i>
Pericles	Sophocles
Sophists	Antigone
<i>areté</i>	Antiphon
rhetoric	Callicles
skepticism	Peloponnesian War
agnostic	The Thirty

Critias
Euripides
Hippolytus

Aristophanes
The Clouds

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

1. Sophist/relativist views about the good or the true are often expressed by the question "Who's to say?" Is that a good question? If not, why not?
2. What do you think? Is it more important to be just or to *appear* just? Why?

NOTES

1. *The Pelican History of Greece* by A. R. Burn (New York: Penguin Books, 1984) is a lively treatment of these matters. A standard source is J. B. Bury, *A History of Greece* (London: Macmillan, 1951). The Greek historians Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon are also quite readable.
2. Quotations from Herodotus, *The Histories* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), are cited in the text by title, book number, and section number.
3. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: Penguin Books, 1954), 2.35–41.
4. Quotations from Plato's *Protagoras*, trans. C. C. W. Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), are cited in the text by title and section numbers.
5. Quotations from Plato's *Gorgias*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), are cited in the text by title and section number.
6. Quotations from John Manley Robinson's *An Introduction to Early Greek Philosophy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968) are cited in the text using the standard Diels/Kranz numbers, followed by the page number in *IEGP*.
7. Herodotus, *The Histories* (Penguin Books, 1972), bk. 3, sec. 38.
8. Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. H. D. F. Kitto, in *Sophocles: Three Tragedies* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), ll. 440–450.
9. Quotations from Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: Penguin Books, 1954), are cited in the text using

the abbreviation *HPW*. References are to book and section numbers.

10. Euripides' *Hippolytus*, trans. David Grene, in *Euripides I*, ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), ll. 1102–1110.

11. Quotations from Aristophanes' *Clouds*, trans. William Arrowsmith (New York: New American Library, 1962), are cited in the text by title and page numbers.

CHAPTER

5

REASON AND RELATIVISM IN CHINA



Social and political turmoil, it seems, makes fertile ground for philosophy. In the previous chapter, we considered how Greek philosophy flowered in Athens during the political turmoil of the fifth century B.C. In this chapter, we look to another society in turmoil to find a similar philosophical flowering: ancient China. From the sixth century B.C. until China's political reunification under the Qin dynasty in 221 B.C., Chinese thinkers developed a variety of philosophies, known as the **Hundred Schools of Thought**. Of these, six emerged as most important. In this chapter, we will focus on three of these schools that illustrate the development of logic and reason in ancient China: the Mohists, named after their founder Mozi; the School of Names, sometimes called the Logicians; and Daoism, especially as embodied in the work of Zhuangzi. As when we examined some early philosophical movements in India, we will not attempt a complete survey of these schools. Instead, we will consider specific aspects that throw the Chinese and Western traditions into sharper relief by bringing out the similarities and differences between them. For though

Western and Chinese philosophy had no interaction with each other until much later, we can learn a great deal about each of these great conversations by using one to see how differently the other might have turned out.

A Brief History of Ancient China

In recounting the earliest history of China, it is hard to know where legend ends and fact begins. That is because by the time our story begins, in about 551 B.C., the story of Chinese history was already more than two thousand years long. That story begins with the mythical founders of civilization, including Fuxi (who taught the people how to hunt and fish), Shen Nong (who taught them how to farm), and the **Yellow Emperor**. After a series of other famous rulers, there allegedly arose the three **sage kings**: Emperor Yao, whose morally perfect leadership culminated in his decision to pass the throne to a worthy successor rather than to his unworthy sons; Emperor

Shun, the able administrator to whom Yao passed the throne; and Emperor Yu, whom Shun chose as his own successor. These mythical figures would be remembered as model rulers and moral exemplars. Yu, it is said, founded the Xia dynasty, the first of three ancient dynasties in traditional accounts of Chinese history. It is unclear whether the Xia dynasty really existed. If it did, it may have been the same as the ancient Erlitou culture uncovered by archaeologists in what is now north-central China and believed to date from the eighteenth to the sixteenth centuries B.C., roughly consistent with the traditional histories that place the Xia dynasty in the first half of the second millennium B.C.

No later than the middle of the second millennium B.C., however, legend gives way to fact with the rise of the Shang dynasty, the first dynasty with a clear grounding in the historical and archaeological record. Founded by King Tang, the Shang developed a sophisticated Bronze Age society and pioneered the earliest form of Chinese writing. After nearly five centuries ruling what is now north-central China, they were conquered by the **Zhou dynasty** in 1046 B.C.

Building on the Shang culture, the Zhou dynasty established a complex society governed by a vast constellation of feudal states, all subordinate to the Zhou kings.* The Zhou kings claimed that they ruled with Heaven's blessing, which had passed to them from the Shang because of their moral superiority to the degenerate late Shang kings. This established the idea of the **Mandate of Heaven**, a divine right to rule based on moral goodness and beneficence toward the people. Although the dynasty's founding rulers, King Wen and his son, King Wu, were revered as models of good leadership, the strength and moral superiority of the Zhou kings dwindled as the centuries passed. By the eighth century B.C., various feudal lords seized power from the king, who remained in place as a figurehead.

*This is roughly around the time of the Trojan War, the reign of King David in Israel, and the middle of the Vedic period in India. See p. 4, p. 255, and pp. 35–36, respectively.

Over the following centuries, these feudal lords fought among themselves for power and influence. And just as the lords had struggled to seize power from the Zhou king, the powerful families within their own states fought to seize power and influence for themselves. The result was a period of great conflict, in which ancient social and political structures were upended and everything seemed in flux. For three hundred years, various factions battled for supremacy in what is known as the **Spring and Autumn Period**. By the early fifth century B.C., seven large states had established themselves. They would continue fighting among themselves for nearly three hundred more years, in what is known as the **Warring States Period**. Throughout this chaotic age, the Chinese fondly recalled the way their ancient rulers had delivered peace and prosperity through virtuous government. It was in the context of this social chaos and the wistful recollection of a lost golden age that philosophy first emerged in China.

As with early Greek philosophy, early Chinese philosophy responded to the dominant myths of its time. Unlike the Greeks, however, the Chinese did not focus on myths about gods or the creation of the world. Indeed, while the Chinese did believe in an all-powerful but impersonal Heaven and in the existence of ghosts and spirits, they had no equivalent to the gods of Hesiod and Homer. Their myths were about mortals. What is more, these mortals were not the heroic warriors of Homeric legend, but wise and benevolent rulers—kings and ministers who improved the well-being of their people through competent administration and clever inventions rather than warfare and who embodied virtues like loyalty and benevolence rather than courage and martial skill. Unsurprisingly, then, early Chinese philosophy had a different focus and a different flavor than did early Greek philosophy.

Whereas the earliest Greek philosophers sought to offer rational *alternatives* to the mythical explanations of the world and its origins, the founding figure of Chinese philosophy, **Confucius**, sought to offer a rationally coherent *justification* of the particular moral and political ideals embodied in mythical accounts of Chinese history. We will set

that justifications aside until a later chapter, instead skipping ahead a few generations to consider an important critical response to Confucius and the intellectual developments he sparked. Some of these developments resemble the pre-Socratic and Sophist contributions to Greek thought.

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1. What role did the Yellow Emperor, the sage kings, and the early Zhou kings play in ancient Chinese thought? Are there people who played a similar role in ancient Greek thought? What about in modern thought?
 2. In what ways were the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period socially and politically tumultuous? How does the turmoil during those periods compare to the social and political turmoil in Greece in the fifth century B.C.?
 3. How did the dominant myths of ancient China differ from those of ancient Greece?
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Mozi

Mozi, the man, is a mystery; we know remarkably little about him. He was probably born in Lu, one of the warring states in what is now Shandong province in China. He was probably born sometime between 500 B.C. and about 470 B.C., around the end of Confucius' lifetime, and probably survived until about the beginning of the fourth century B.C. (This makes him a contemporary of the Sophists and Socrates.) He may have been born to a lower-class family of artisans, but if so, he apparently rose to become a renowned military engineer and builder of fortifications, the well-educated founder of a flourishing philosophical school, and, for a time, a minister in the neighboring state of Song. His philosophy retains the indelible stamp of his engineering background: careful, methodical, rational, and practical. That philosophy is expounded in a book that, like many books in ancient China, was compiled over many generations but named after the famous philosopher on whose ideas it was based: the *Mozi*.

Among Mozi's philosophical innovations was the introduction of criteria by which to test the acceptability of a claim.

Master Mo Zi* spoke, saying: "In general, it is not permissible, when making a statement, to fail to establish a standard first and [then] speak. If you do not establish a standard first and [then] speak, it is like using the upper part of a potter's revolving wheel and trying to establish the direction of the sunrise and sunset with it. I think that, although there is a distinction between the sunrise and the sunset, you will, in the end, certainly never be able to find it and establish it. This is why, for a statement, there are three criteria. What are the three criteria? I say there is examining it, there is determining its origin, and there is putting it to use. How do you examine it? You examine the affairs of the first sages and great kings. How do you determine its origin? You look at the evidence from the ears and eyes of the multitude. How do you put it to use? You set it out and use it in governing the state, considering its effect on the ten thousand people. These are called the 'three criteria.'" (*Mozi* 37.1)¹

The idea here is that the "first sages and great kings" were wise men who knew how to conduct their affairs. The fact that they accepted a certain doctrine is therefore taken as evidence of its acceptability. That people can see and hear evidence for something themselves is further evidence of its acceptability. And finally, an acceptable doctrine, according to Mozi, will produce benefits if it is put into practice, whereas an unacceptable one will bring harm. There is some ambiguity in the *Mozi* about whether these standards are supposed to bring us closer to the *truth* or simply lead us to beneficial opinions. Standing as he does near the very beginning of the philosophical tradition in China, Mozi may not have been able to clearly distinguish between these possibilities. At any rate, the benefit that Mozi takes to justify a belief is not necessarily a benefit for the believer himself or herself, as it is for the Sophists, but for the society as a whole.

We can see these three criteria at work in Mozi's arguments for the existence of ghosts and spirits:

Master Mo Zi spoke, saying: "Since the passing of the three sage kings of the Three Dynasties of

*The *zi* at the end of Mozi means "Master," making "Master Mo Zi" somewhat redundant. Many Chinese philosophers are known by such names, including Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Confucius, who is known in Chinese as Kongzi or "Master Kong." Mozi's full name was said to be Mo Di.

former times, the world has lost righteousness and the feudal lords use [military] force in governing [rather than virtue], so that those living now who are rulers and ministers, and superiors and inferiors, are without kindness or loyalty whilst fathers and sons, the younger and older brothers, are without compassion, filial conduct, respect, upright behavior and goodness. . . . Why have things come to this? It is because everyone is doubtful and suspicious on the question of whether ghosts and spirits exist or not, and do not clearly understand that ghosts and spirits are able to reward the worthy and punish the wicked. Now if all the people of the world could be brought to believe that ghosts and spirits are able to reward the worthy and punish the wicked, then how could the world be in disorder?" (*Mozi* 31.1)

Here we have Mozi bemoaning the chaotic and violent nature of his time and encouraging the belief in ghosts for the good consequences it would bring. He goes on to argue that

in bringing up the method of how [the people of the world] examine and know whether something exists or not, we must certainly take the ears and eyes of the multitude to be a standard on the matter of existence and non-existence. If someone has genuinely heard something or seen something, then we must take it as existing. . . . If this is the case, why not put the matter to the test by going into a district or a village and asking about it? If, from ancient times to the present, since people came into existence, there have been those who have seen ghost-like or spirit-like things, or have heard ghost-like or spirit-like sounds, then how can ghosts and spirits be said to be non-existent? (*Mozi* 31.3)*

To counter the objection that many of these people may be untrustworthy, Mozi relates five cases of kings or dukes who encountered ghosts, often in the company of others. Finally, he alludes to the practices of the sage kings.

Master Mo Zi said: "Suppose we accept that the evidence of the ears and eyes of the masses is not enough to trust and cannot be used to resolve doubt. Would we not accept that the sage kings of the Three Dynasties of former times—Yao, Shun,

Yu, Tang, Wen and Wu—are enough to be taken as standards? . . .

"When the sage kings bestowed their rewards, they invariably did so in the ancestral temple, and when they meted out [capital] punishment, they invariably did so at the altar of soil. Why did they bestow rewards in the ancestral temple? To announce [to the ghosts and spirits] that the apportionment was equitable. Why did they mete out [capital] punishment at the altar of soil? To announce [to the ghosts and spirits] that the judgment was fair. . . .

"In ancient times, the sage kings certainly took ghosts and spirits to exist and their service to the ghosts and spirits was profound. But they also feared that their descendants of later generations would not be able to know this, so they wrote it on bamboo and silk to transmit it and hand it down to them. . . . What is the reason for this? It is because the sage kings took it to be important. . . . To oppose what the sage kings took to be fundamental cannot be regarded as the Way of the gentleman." (*Mozi* 31.9–31.11)

We can also see some of these same criteria at work in the *Mozi's* arguments for the foundation of his ethical and political philosophy: the doctrine of impartial concern or **mutual care**, according to which the guiding principle of life is to care for everyone equally.* This is the most famous of Mozi's doctrines, in part because it conflicted with the traditional Chinese view that people would *and should* prioritize their own family, friends, and associates over strangers.

Master Mo Zi spoke, saying: "The way in which the benevolent man conducts affairs must be to promote the world's benefit and eliminate the world's harm. It is in this way he conducts affairs." If this is so, then what is the world's benefit? What is the world's harm?

Master Mo Zi said: "Now if states attack each other, if houses usurp each other, if people harm each other, if there is not kindness and loyalty between rulers and ministers, if there is not love and filiality between fathers and sons, if there is not concord and harmony between older and younger brothers, then this is harmful to the world."

*Compare to what Heraclitus says about "eyes and ears" on p. 21.

*Compare with Jesus' instruction to love "your neighbor as yourself." See pp. 256–258.

If this is so, then how can we not examine from what this harm arises? Does it not arise through mutual love? Master Mo Zi spoke, saying: “It arises through *lack* of mutual love. Nowadays, feudal lords know only to love their own states and not to love the states of others, so they have no qualms about mobilizing their own state to attack another’s state. Nowadays, heads of houses know only to love their own house and not to love the houses of others, so they have no qualms about promoting their own house and usurping another’s house. Nowadays, individual people know only to love their own person and not to love the persons of others, so they have no qualms about promoting their own person and injuring the persons of others. For this reason, since the feudal lords do not love each other, there must inevitably be savage battles; since heads of houses do not love each other, there must inevitably be mutual usurpation; and, since individuals do not love each other, there must inevitably be mutual injury. Since rulers and ministers do not love each other, there is not kindness and loyalty; since fathers and sons do not love each other, there is not compassion and filial conduct; and, since older and younger brothers do not love each other, there is not harmony and accord. When the people of the world do not all love each other, then the strong inevitably dominate the weak, the many inevitably plunder the few, the rich inevitably despise the poor, the noble inevitably scorn the lowly, and the cunning inevitably deceive the foolish. Within the world, in all cases, the reason why calamity, usurpation, resentment and hatred arise is because mutual love does not exist, which is why those who are benevolent condemn this state of affairs.”

Since they already condemn it, how can it be changed? Master Mo Zi spoke, saying: “It can be changed by the methods of universal mutual love and the exchange of mutual benefit.” In this case, then, what are the methods of universal mutual love and exchange of mutual benefit? Master Mo Zi said:

*The translator uses the term “mutual love” instead of “mutual care.” Other translators have used the term “universal love” as well. This can be misleading because Mozi’s concern is with how we *treat* one another, not with the emotions we feel toward one another; he is encouraging us to *care* for everyone equally, even if we do not *care about* everyone equally. It may not be possible to love everyone (in an emotional sense) in the way you love your own family, but that doesn’t mean it’s impossible to behave impartially.

“People would view others’ states as they view their own states. People would view others’ houses as they view their own houses. People would view other people as they view themselves. . . . If the people of the world all loved each other, the strong would not dominate the weak, the many would not plunder the few, the rich would not despise the poor, the noble would not scorn the lowly, and the cunning would not deceive the foolish. Within the world, in all cases, there would be nothing to cause calamity, usurpation, resentment and hatred to arise because of the existence of mutual love. This is why those who are benevolent praise it.” (*Mozi* 15.1–15.3)

Here we have Mozi arguing for his doctrine of mutual care by pointing out the good consequences of people’s practicing it and the bad consequences of people’s rejecting it. Again, Mozi bemoans the state of society and prescribes a solution. (His insistence that people should be taught to believe in ghosts seems to have been, in part, a way of encouraging people to put the difficult doctrine of mutual care into practice.)

Mozi then turns to consider some objections to his solution, including the claim that

“If it [love] were universal, it would be good. However, this is something that cannot be done. It is comparable to lifting up [Mount Tai] and jumping over the Yellow River and the Qi Waters.” Master Mo Zi said: “That is not a valid comparison. Lifting up [Mount Tai] and jumping over the Yellow River could be said to be a feat of extraordinary strength. From ancient times to the present, no-one has been able to do this. By comparison, universal mutual love and exchange of mutual benefit are quite different from this. The sage kings of ancient times practiced these things.” (*Mozi* 15.8)

This last claim would surely have surprised many of Mozi’s contemporaries, who took the sage kings’ behavior as evidence for the rightness of prioritizing one’s friends and family over strangers. Nonetheless, Mozi goes on to support his claim about the sage kings by listing the ways in which Emperor Yu, King Wen, and King Wu practiced mutual care through their diligent efforts to bring benefits to their people, concluding that

if [officers and gentlemen] wish the world to be well ordered and abhor its disorder, [they] should

take as right universal mutual love and exchange of mutual benefit. These were the methods of the sage kings and the Way of order for the world, so it is impossible that they not be assiduously pursued. (*Mozi* 15.10)

Here we have Mozi applying the first criterion, which is examining the “affairs of the first sages and great kings.” Thus, even in advocating for a radical revision in Chinese social practices, Mozi paints his proposals as in step with the practices of the great kings of old.

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1. What three criteria does Mozi propose for determining the acceptability of a claim? What do you think of those criteria?
 2. How does Mozi argue for the existence of ghosts? How do his arguments relate to his three criteria?
 3. What is Mozi’s doctrine of mutual care? What arguments does he give for it?
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The School of Names

Whereas Mozi is famous for the practicality of his philosophical interests, other ancient Chinese philosophers are notorious for the supposed frivolity of their arguments. They delight in logical paradoxes, in drawing subtle distinctions, in using convoluted arguments to prove the opposite of whatever anyone else believed (which they called “**making the inadmissible admissible**”), and in pursuing what their contemporaries saw as pointless word games with the names of things. Because of this last tendency, later scholars would group these disparate thinkers together as the **School of Names**. They are often compared to the Sophists of ancient Greece, but in many ways, they are closer to the Eleatics like Parmenides and Zeno.* Just as the Eleatics pushed the limits of

*The thinker who most resembles the Sophists was a contemporary of Confucius and early forerunner of the School of Names called Deng Xi. It is said that he would, for a fee, argue either side of any case—and sometimes both sides—and, by twisting the letter of the law, prove whichever side he was hired to argue. According to legend, a frustrated ruler eventually executed him, thereby restoring peace and order to his land.

early Greek logic to explore key themes in Greek philosophy, such as appearance and reality, the philosophers of the School of Names explored key themes in early Chinese philosophy, such as sameness and difference.

The Eleatic tendencies of the School of Names appear most clearly in Hui Shi, whose life remains even more mysterious than Mozi’s. He lived during the fourth century B.C. and is often described as a statesman, sometimes as talented and sometimes not. One account even depicts him as an expert in the sort of protoscience that motivated the Eleatics. He is best known, however, for a set of cryptic and sometimes paradoxical aphorisms known as the

Ten Theses:

The largest thing has nothing beyond it; it is called the One of largeness. The smallest thing has nothing within it; it is called the One of smallness.

That which has no thickness cannot be piled up; yet it is a thousand *li* [about three hundred miles] in dimension.

Heaven is as low as the earth; mountains and marshes are on the same level.

The sun at noon is the sun setting. The thing born is the thing dying.

Great similarities are different from little similarities; these are called the little similarities and differences. The ten thousand things all are similar and all are different; these are called the great similarities and differences.

The southern region has no limit and yet has a limit.

I set off for Yue today and came there yesterday.

Linked rings can be separated.

I know the center of the world: it is north of Yan [in the north] and south of Yue [in the south].

Let love embrace the ten thousand things; Heaven and earth are a single body. (*Zhuangzi* 33)²

Although the original explanations of and arguments for these aphorisms have been lost, we can see several themes that we have already encountered among the pre-Socratics, such as the relativity of perspective and an interest in infinitely large and infinitesimally small measures of space or time. From today’s perspective, a journey to Yue occurs today, but from tomorrow’s perspective,

it occurred yesterday. A line consists of infinitesimally thin points that have no thickness, but it can stretch over great distances. The world (allegedly) being infinitely large, anywhere that you can stand has the same (infinite) amount of space in all directions; everywhere is the center of the world. At the exact moment when the sun reaches its zenith, it is already beginning to decline. Elsewhere, Hui Shi even offers some paradoxes that seem to echo Zeno's paradoxes of motion:*

No matter how swift the barbed arrow, there are times when it is neither moving nor at rest. . . .

Take a pole one foot long, cut away half of it every day, and at the end of ten thousand generations, there will still be some left. (*Zhuangzi* 33)

Whereas we only know of Hui Shi's thought from others' brief reports, we have some complete writings from the other leading figure of the School of Names, Gongsun Long (c. 320–250 B.C.). Gongsun is most famous for a maddeningly cryptic dialogue about the classical problem of **“hardness and whiteness.”** In ancient Chinese philosophy, the phrase “hardness and whiteness” stands for conceptually distinct but physically overlapping qualities or properties of an object, such as the hardness and whiteness of a white stone; you can *think* about the stone's color and firmness as distinct aspects of the stone, but you cannot remove one from the stone while leaving the other.

In the dialogue, Gongsun draws on this idea to argue that “a white horse is not a horse.” While there are as many interpretations of this dialogue as there are interpreters, many interpretations take Gongsun to be intentionally twisting the meaning of phrases to “make the inadmissible admissible.” His goal, on these interpretations, is not really to convince anyone that a white horse is not a horse, but to perplex, dazzle, and amuse his listeners with his cleverness. At the beginning of the dialogue, for instance, Gongsun argues as follows.

- A. Is it correct to say that a white horse is not a horse?
- B. It is.

- A. Why?
- B. Because “horse” denotes the form and “white” denotes the color. What denotes the color does not denote the form. Therefore we say that a white horse is not a horse.
- A. There being a horse, one cannot say that there is no horse. If one cannot say that there is no horse, then isn't [it] a horse? Since there being a white horse means that there is a horse, why does being white make it not a horse?
- B. Ask for a horse, and either a yellow or a black one may answer. Ask for a white horse, and neither the yellow horse nor the black one may answer. If a white horse were a horse, then what is asked in both cases would be the same. If what is asked is the same, then a white horse would be no different from a horse. If what is asked is no different, then why is it that yellow and black horses may yet answer in the one case but not in the other? Clearly the two cases are incompatible. Now the yellow horse and the black horse remain the same. And yet they answer to a horse but not to a white horse. Obviously a white horse is not a horse. . . . (“On the White Horse”)³

While it is obvious that Gongsun's conclusion is false, it is not always obvious exactly how his argument has gone astray. And for every objection that his partner raises, Gongsun has a ready and witty reply. After many more iterations of this sort, one can imagine a frustrated courtier throwing up his hands, pointing at a horse, and shouting, “That thing! Right there! I don't care what you call it, just give it to me! I want to go riding!”

Neither Gongsun Long nor Hui Shi, nor any of the other members of the School of Names, is known to have explicitly endorsed relativism or skepticism. Instead, they used their newfound powers of reasoning to defend seemingly inadmissible claims. In this way they are more like the Eleatics than the Sophists. But their eagerness to “make the inadmissible admissible” and their facility in doing so instills exactly the kind of doubts about knowledge that the Sophists sowed in ancient Athens.

* See p. 27.

1. Pick one of Hui Shi's ten theses. What do you think it means?
2. How do you interpret Gongsun Long's argument that "a white horse is not a horse"?
3. How are the philosophers of the School of Names like the Eleatics in ancient Greek philosophy? How are they like the Sophists?

The Later Mohists

Confronted with the sophistry of the School of Names, Mozi's later followers set about the hard work of transforming logic from a source of paradoxes into a source of knowledge. Over the course of two centuries or so, these followers, known as **Mohists**, developed sophisticated views about a range of philosophical topics, including logic, metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of language, and ethics. In doing so, they explicitly address many of the logical issues raised by the School of Names, such as sameness and difference, "hard and white," the endless and dimensionless, and the relation of names to objects. They also explored a range of other topics, including geometry, optics, engineering, and economics. The later sections of the *Mozi* record their work on all of these topics, sometimes in cryptic formulations. We will focus here on their development of logic.

In contrast to the School of Names, the Mohists explicitly reject the idea that a statement and its denial can both be admissible.

The other is not admissible; two are not admissible. . . . Everything is either "ox" or "not-ox." It is like a hinge. There are two—there is no way to deny (this).

Disputation is contending about "that" (the other). Winning in disputation depends on validity. . . . One says it is "ox," one says it is "not-ox"; this is contending about "that" (the other). In this case, both are not valid. Where both are not valid, of necessity, one is not valid. . . . (*Mozi* Canons & Explanations A74–75)

The first part of this passage says that a particular thing is either an ox or not an ox. It must be one or the other and it cannot be both an ox and a non-ox. The second part of the passage explains that in an argument, the winner is the one who gets the right

answer; in an argument about whether some creature is an ox, it cannot be that both sides are correct. Thus, these passages express two central principles of logic, which Aristotle articulated at roughly the same time in Greece: the law of non-contradiction, which says that a statement and its denial cannot both be true, and the law of excluded middle, which says that either a statement or its denial is true.

Given that the "admissible" cannot also be "inadmissible," the Mohists concluded that Hui Shi's and Gongsun Long's paradoxical reasoning must contain mistakes. But it is easier to see *that* such reasoning is mistaken than to say exactly *how* it is mistaken. The Mohists set about explaining away such sophistry by aiming for ever greater logical precision in their concepts and definitions. For instance, they note that

A beginning is a specific instant of time. . . . Time in some cases has duration and in some cases does not. A beginning is a specific instant of time without duration. (*Mozi* Canons & Explanations A44)

This careful definition of a beginning seems aimed at dispelling some of Hui Shi's paradoxes, such as the claim that the sun is simultaneously at its zenith and declining or that an arrow is simultaneously moving and at rest. Other Mohist claims seem similarly aimed at specific paradoxes associated with the School of Names. Those paradoxes, then, arose not from being too clever about logic, but from not being clever enough. Used correctly, the Mohists believed, logic could be a powerful tool for distinguishing true from false and right from wrong.

Disputation is about making clear the distinction between right and wrong (true and false), and investigating the pattern of order and disorder. It is about clarifying instances of sameness and difference, examining the principles of name and entity, determining what is beneficial and harmful, and resolving what is doubtful and uncertain. With it, there is enquiry and investigation into how the ten thousand things are; there is discussion and analysis of the kinds of the many words. Names are the means of "picking out" entities; words are the means of expressing concepts; explanations are the means of bringing out causes. Through kinds (classes) choices are made; through kinds (classes) inferences are drawn. (*Mozi* Choosing the Lesser 45.1)

Picking out the correct entities and drawing correct inferences requires following acceptable patterns of reasoning and avoiding unacceptable ones.

With respect to things (the following apply):

Sometimes a thing is so if it is this.

Sometimes a thing is not so if it is this.

Sometimes a thing is so if it is not this.

Sometimes a thing is general (in one case) but is not general (in another case).

Sometimes a thing is so (in one case) but not so (in another case). (*Mozi* Choosing the Lesser 45.4)

These principles sound odd to us, but they relate to typical forms of disputation in which one argues that because a thing x is y and because something is true of x it must also be true of y . The *Mozi* points out that principles of reasoning like this are sometimes correct, but other times are not:

A white horse is a horse. To ride a white horse is to ride a horse. A black horse is a horse. To ride a black horse is to ride a horse. *Huo* is a person. To love *Huo* is to love a person. *Zang* is a person. To love *Zang* is to love a person. These are examples of there being this and it is so. (*Mozi* Choosing the Lesser 45.5)

These examples illustrate the first principle in the list above. Because a particular entity—such as this white horse or this person—is of a particular kind, an action performed with that particular entity is an action performed with an entity of that particular kind. The obvious target here is Gongsun Long’s infamous claim that a white horse is not a horse.

Huo’s parents are people. Huo’s serving his parents is not serving people. His younger brother is a beautiful person. Loving a younger brother is not loving a beautiful person. A cart is wood. Riding a cart is not riding wood. A boat is wood. Boarding a boat is not boarding wood. A robber is a person. . . . Not being a robber isn’t not being a person. How can this be made clear? . . . To wish there were no robbers is not to wish there were no people. (*Mozi* Choosing the Lesser 45.6)

The examples given here illustrate the second principle in the list above, which warns against various mistaken inferences that *appear* similar to the acceptable inferences endorsed by the first principle. For instance, although the name “people” applies to

Huo’s parents, we cannot infer from the fact that Huo loves his parents *as parents* that he loves them *as people*. Although a robber is a person, we cannot infer that someone who dislikes robbers or wishes there were no robbers dislikes people *per se* or wishes there were no people.

Other passages illustrate the third, fourth, and fifth principles, further distinguishing between patterns of interpretations or inference that differ in acceptability despite being grammatically similar. For instance, from the fact that an ox has yellow hairs, we may infer that it is a yellow ox; but from the fact that the ox has many hairs, we cannot infer that it is many oxen.

If the Mohists used their disagreements with the School of Names to sharpen their logical skills, they mainly deployed those skills against their primary philosophical rivals at the time, the Confucians. Much of the *Mozi* consists of detailed arguments for their own moral and political views as opposed to the Confucians’. They regarded argumentation and rational criticism as the primary means of demonstrating that their views were true and the Confucians’ views were false. For much of the golden age of classical Chinese philosophy, it seems that their criticisms were taken seriously. Indeed, Mohism seems to have been the main competitor to Confucianism during this period. After the reunification of China in 221 B.C., however, Confucianism decisively eclipsed Mohism, which faded into obscurity.

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1. How might the Mohists use the claim about starting points having no duration to refute some of Hui Shi’s paradoxical claims?
 2. How do the examples given above illustrate the Mohists’ five principles of argumentation?
 3. How does the Mohists’ use of reasoning differ from that of the School of Names?
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Zhuangzi

Whereas the Mohists responded to the School of Names by trying to set logic on a firmer foundation, another philosopher, Zhuangzi, responded very differently. He turned reason against itself,

using it to argue for its uselessness in attaining genuine knowledge. And whereas the later Mohists left no trace of their personalities in their writings, the book named for Zhuangzi bursts with character, revealing an educated, eccentric, playful genius deeply at odds with the elite culture of his time. He lived sometime in the late fourth century B.C., but unlike the other great philosophers of his day, he neither sought nor held a position at court (except, perhaps, a minor post in his home state). Indeed, Zhuangzi disdained such positions, preferring the life of a hermit.

Once, when Zhuangzi was fishing in the Pu River, the king of Chu sent two officials to go and announce to him: “I would like to trouble you with the administration of my realm.”

Zhuangzi held on to the fishing pole and, without turning his head, said, “I have heard that there is a sacred tortoise in Chu that has been dead for three thousand years. The king keeps it wrapped in cloth and boxed, and stores it in the ancestral temple. Now would this tortoise rather be dead and have its bones left behind and honored? Or would it rather be alive and dragging its tail in the mud?”

“It would rather be alive and dragging its tail in the mud,” said the two officials.

Zhuangzi said, “Go away! I’ll drag my tail in the mud!” (*Zhuangzi* 17)

It seems that Zhuangzi’s one connection to the world of politics was through a friendship with Hui Shi of the School of Names, who was chief minister of the king of Wei. The stories about them depict the two as friendly intellectual sparring partners:

Zhuangzi and Huizi were strolling along the dam of the Hao River when Zhuangzi said, “See how the minnows come out and dart around where they please! That’s what fish really enjoy!”

Huizi said, “You’re not a fish—how do you know what fish enjoy?”

Zhuangzi said, “You’re not I, so how do you know I don’t know what fish enjoy?”

Huizi said, “I’m not you, so I certainly don’t know what you know. On the other hand, you’re certainly not a fish—so that still proves you don’t know what fish enjoy!”

Zhuangzi said, “Let’s go back to your original question, please. You asked me *how* I know what

fish enjoy—so you already knew I knew it when you asked the question. I know it by standing here beside the Hao.” (*Zhuangzi* 17)

Indeed, after Hui Shi’s death, Zhuangzi is said to have remarked that

Since you died, Master Hui, I have had no material to work on. There’s no one I can talk to any more. (*Zhuangzi* 24)

It was not only in his alienation from public life that Zhuangzi defied the spirit of his times. He also took a radically different attitude toward death and mourning. He regarded the fear of death as folly. Even when his own wife died, Zhuangzi responded differently than most people would.

Zhuangzi’s wife died. When Huizi went to convey his condolences, he found Zhuangzi sitting with his legs sprawled out, pounding on a tub and singing. “You lived with her, she brought up your children and grew old,” said Huizi. “It should be enough simply not to weep at her death. But pounding on a tub and singing—this is going too far, isn’t it?”

Zhuangzi said, “You’re wrong. When she first died, do you think I didn’t grieve like anyone else? But I looked back to her beginning and the time before she was born. Not only the time before she was born, but the time before she had a body. Not only the time before she had a body, but the time before she had a spirit. In the midst of the jumble of wonder and mystery a change took place and she had a spirit. Another change and she had a body. Another change and she was born. Now there’s been another change and she’s dead. It’s just like the progression of the four seasons, spring, summer, fall, winter.

“Now she’s going to lie down peacefully in a vast room. If I were to follow after her bawling and sobbing, it would show that I don’t understand anything about fate. So I stopped.” (*Zhuangzi* 18)

These stories about Zhuangzi’s life come from the *Zhuangzi*, a collection of writings compiled some six centuries after his death. Some of it probably includes Zhuangzi’s own writing, but much of it, including the stories about his life, was written by others after Zhuangzi’s death. By that time, the same historians who had grouped Hui Shi, Gongsun Long, and others into the School of Names had lumped Zhuangzi and an enigmatic character called

Laozi together as Daoists. **Daoism** came to be understood loosely as the school of thought descended from the *Zhuangzi* and the *Dào dé jīng*, both of which emphasize certain themes such as a skeptical bent, an admiration for nature, and an emphasis on spontaneous, effortless action.

The *Zhuangzi* blends stories, poetry, and clever argumentation—often in a single passage—producing a work quite unlike anything else in ancient Chinese philosophy. One striking aspect of the *Zhuangzi* is the way it uses reason to undermine confidence in reason’s ability to deliver knowledge.

Nie Que asked Wang Ni, “Do you know what all things agree in calling right?”

“How would I know that?” said Wang Ni.

“Do you know that you don’t know it?”

“How would I know that?”

“Then do things know nothing?”

“How would I know that? However, suppose I try saying something. What way do I have of knowing that if I say I know something I don’t really not know it? Or what way do I have of knowing that if I say I don’t know something I don’t really in fact know it? Now let me ask *you* some questions. If a man sleeps in a damp place, his back aches and he ends up half paralyzed, but is this true of [a fish]? If he lives in a tree, he is terrified and shakes with fright, but is this true of a monkey? Of these three creatures, then, which one knows the proper place to live? Men eat the flesh of grass-fed and grain-fed animals, deer eat grass, centipedes find snakes tasty, and hawks and falcons relish mice. Of these four, which knows how food ought to taste? Monkeys pair with monkeys, deer go out with deer, and fish play around with fish. Men claim that Maoqiang and Lady Li were beautiful; but if fish saw them, they would dive to the bottom of the stream; if birds saw them, they would fly away; if deer saw them, they would break into a run. Of these four, which knows how to fix the standard of beauty for the world? The way I see it, the rules of benevolence and righteousness and the paths of right and wrong all are hopelessly snarled and jumbled. How could I know anything about such discriminations?” (*Zhuangzi* 2)

Here Zhuangzi has Wang Ni respond to a question about knowledge by asking for a criterion by which to determine whether he knows. When Nie Que presses Wang Ni to admit that he does *not* know,

Wang Ni refuses, asking for a criterion by which to know whether he knows whether he knows. Nie Que thinks he sees where this is going and suggests that Wang Ni is leading him down the path to skepticism. But Wang Ni sidesteps the accusation of skepticism by denying that he knows whether skepticism is true. He then resorts to a common skeptical tactic of pointing out the diversity of opinions about any given subject, though in his typically atypical fashion, he refers not to the diversity of opinions among different people, but to the diversity of opinions among different species.

Still, Zhuangzi is not quite a skeptic. He does not claim that we cannot know anything. Instead, he skillfully uses reason to shake our confidence in what we think we know, and especially in what we think we know through reason. In another passage, he writes,

Suppose you and I have an argument. If you have beaten me instead of my beating you, then are you necessarily right, and am I necessarily wrong? If I have beaten you instead of your beating me, then am I necessarily right, and are you necessarily wrong? Is one of us right and the other wrong? Are both of us right, or are both of us wrong? If you and I don’t know the answer, then other people are bound to be even more in the dark. Whom shall we get to decide what is right? Shall we get someone who agrees with you to decide? But if he already agrees with you, how can he fairly decide? Shall we get someone who agrees with me? But if he already agrees with me, how can he decide? Shall we get someone who disagrees with both of us? But if he already disagrees with both of us, how can he decide? Shall we get someone who agrees with both of us? But if he already agrees with both of us, how can he decide? Obviously, then, neither you nor I nor anyone else can know the answer. Shall we wait for still another person? (*Zhuangzi* 2)

Taking aim squarely at rational argument, Zhuangzi raises the classical epistemological problem of finding a criterion by which to determine what counts as knowledge.* Even having the better argument

* On the Western treatment of this “problem of the criterion,” see pp. 248–249.

may not suffice, Zhuangzi suggests, for even the better of two arguments could be flawed. After working carefully through some possible ways to resolve the problem, Zhuangzi concludes that “neither you nor I nor anyone else can know the answer.” But consider carefully what question it is that goes unanswered: it is the question of *whether the winner of the argument is necessarily right*. Once again, Zhuangzi is simply raising doubts, not denying that we know anything.

The problem for Zhuangzi is not that knowledge is impossible or that reasoning is useless. The problem is that words often lead us astray. One reason for this is that by naming something, we are adopting a particular perspective, which closes off other equally valid perspectives and other possibilities of thought.

Everything has its “that,” everything has its “this.”* From the point of view of “that,” you cannot see it; but through understanding, you can know it. . . . Therefore the sage does not proceed in such a way but illuminates all in the light of [Nature]. (Zhuangzi 2)

Zhuangzi offers a concrete example of words leading his friend Hui Shi astray:

Huizi said to Zhuangzi, “The king of Wei gave me some seeds of a huge gourd. I planted them, and when they grew up, the fruit was big enough to hold five piculs.† I tried using it for a water container, but it was so heavy I couldn’t lift it. I split it in half to make dippers, but they were so large and unwieldy that I couldn’t dip them into anything. It’s not that the gourds weren’t fantastically big—but I decided they were no use and so I smashed them to pieces.”

Zhuangzi said, “You certainly are dense when it comes to using big things! In Song there was a man who was skilled at making a salve to prevent chapped hands, and generation after generation his family made a living by bleaching silk in water. A traveler

heard about the salve and offered to buy the prescription for a hundred measures of gold. The man called everyone to a family council. ‘For generations we’ve been bleaching silk and we’ve never made more than a few measures of gold,’ he said. ‘Now, if we sell our secret, we can make a hundred measures in one morning. Let’s let him have it!’ The traveler got the salve and introduced it to the king of Wu, who was having trouble with the state of Yue. The king put the man in charge of his troops, and that winter they fought a naval battle with the men of Yue and gave them a bad beating [because the salve, by preventing the soldiers’ hands from chapping, made it easier for them to handle their weapons]. A portion of the conquered territory was awarded to the man as a fief. The salve had the power to prevent chapped hands in either case; but one man used it to get a fief, while the other one never got beyond silk bleaching—because they used it in different ways. Now you had a gourd big enough to hold five piculs. Why didn’t you think of making it into a great tub so you could go floating around the rivers and lakes, instead of worrying because it was too big and unwieldy to dip into things! Obviously you still have a lot of underbrush in your head!” (Zhuangzi 1)

To see the point of this story, imagine that Zhuangzi asked Hui Shi, “Is a gourd a boat?” Hui Shi, quite reasonably, would reply, “It’s not.” And so from the perspective of thinking of his giant gourds *as gourds*, Hui Shi deems it unallowable to call what he has a boat. But from another perspective, that is precisely what he has. Calling the thing a gourd has led Hui Shi astray by making it harder for him to see certain possibilities. So it is, Zhuangzi thinks, whenever we rely too heavily on words and the conventional meanings attached to them. Thus, he laments,

Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him? (Zhuangzi 26)

There is hope, however. For while words will lead us astray, a certain kind of knowledge is still possible. Zhuangzi delights in depicting knowledge and expertise in people his fellow philosophers would have disdained. Among the famous examples is his story of **Cook Ding**.

Cook Ding was cutting up an ox for [King Hui of Wei]. At every touch of his hand, every heave of his shoulder, every move of his feet, every thrust

*The references to “this” and “that” are to an ancient Chinese style of argument in which one person asserts that a particular name applies to a particular entity—“This entity is *this* kind of thing, not *that* kind of thing”—and the other person either affirms or denies it.

†A picul is the amount of weight that someone could carry on his or her shoulder. It was probably equivalent to a little more than one hundred pounds.

of his knee—zip! zoop! He slithered the knife along with a zing, and all was in perfect rhythm, as though he were performing the dance of the Mulberry Grove or keeping time to the Jingshou music.

“Ah, this is marvelous!” said [the king.] “Imagine skill reaching such heights!”

Cook Ding laid down his knife and replied, “What I care about is the Way, which goes beyond skill. When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years I no longer saw the whole ox. And now—now I go at it by spirit and don’t look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants. I go along with the natural makeup, strike in the big hollows, guide the knife through the big openings, and follow things as they are. So I never touch the smallest ligament or tendon, much less a joint.

“A good cook changes his knife once a year—because he cuts. A mediocre cook changes his knife once a month—because he hacks. I’ve had this knife for nineteen years and I’ve cut up thousands of oxen with it, and yet the blade is as good as though it had just come from the grindstone. There are spaces between the joints, and the blade of the knife really has no thickness. If you insert what has no thickness into such spaces, then there’s plenty of room—more than enough for the blade to play about in. That’s why after nineteen years the blade of my knife is still as good as when it first came from the grindstone.

“However, whenever I come to a complicated place, I size up the difficulties, tell myself to watch out and be careful, keep my eyes on what I’m doing, work very slowly, and move the knife with the greatest subtlety, until—flop! The whole thing comes apart like a clod of earth crumbling to the ground. I stand there holding the knife and look all around me, completely satisfied and reluctant to move on, and then I wipe off the knife and put it away.”

“Excellent!” said [the king]. “I have heard the words of Cook Ding and learned how to care for life!” (*Zhuangzi* 3)

Cook Ding knows how to butcher an ox, but his knowledge surpasses anything he can put into words. He understands the world—or, at least, his small part of it—in a far more subtle, nuanced, and flexible way than words could ever capture.

Putting this knowledge into practice, Cook Ding embodies one of the Daoists’ most famous ideas, *wúwéi*, meaning something like “nonpurposive action” or “acting without artificial interpretation.” It is sometimes described as “acting without acting” or “achieving without acting.” The idea is, roughly, that a person who is guided by nature and well-honed intuition—the person who turns nature and natural processes to his or her advantage rather than trying to force nature to comply with human desires—will achieve more than a person guided by deliberation or clunky linguistic conceptualizations of the situation before them. We can see this ourselves in especially gifted athletes. Watch Roger Federer or Rafael Nadal play tennis. They don’t deliberate about how to respond to their opponent’s shot. And yet fluidly, almost effortlessly, they are right where they need to be to hit the ball.

The story of Cook Ding suggests that Zhuangzi is not, ultimately, a skeptic. How so? Cook Ding keeps his cleaver sharp by carving his ox at the joints. This implies that the world *is* a particular way, independent of our beliefs about it. When Zhuangzi says that “what from somewhere is so from somewhere else is not so,” he is not denying that the world has this objective reality; he is denying that our language—our *names* for the parts of the world—can capture the subtle variations in the world around us. Furthermore, trying to capture the world in language invariably highlights some ways of thinking of a thing while setting others aside. Thus, while there is an objective world and we can have some kind of genuine knowledge about it, this knowledge does not come from language or reasoning.

Zhuangzi expresses a corollary of this lesson in another story of an artisan.

Duke Huan was in his hall reading a book.

The wheelwright Pian, who was in the yard below chiseling a wheel, laid down his mallet and chisel, stepped up into the hall, and said to Duke Huan, “This book Your Grace is reading—may I venture to ask whose words are in it?”

“The words of the sages,” said the duke.

“Are the sages still alive?”

“Dead long ago,” said the duke.

L A O Z I

The other founding document of Daoism, besides the *Zhuangzi*, is a small book of eighty-one chapters, each containing a set of brief, aphoristic sayings, often obscure to the casual reader. This book is widely known as the *Dào dé jīng*, which means “Classic of the Way of Virtue,” but it is also known as the *Laozi*, after its alleged author, Laozi.* Ancient tradition identifies this Laozi with the sixth-century B.C. thinker Lao Dan, but the book’s true author—or, more likely, authors—probably lived in the fourth century B.C. and simply presented his own work as the wisdom of an ancient sage. Despite this mystery, we will use Laozi as a pseudonym for whoever actually wrote the text.

One of the central concepts in the *Dào dé jīng* is the *Dào*. The word literally means “the Way,” as in a way or path that one might follow. Many ancient Chinese thinkers used the term to mean something like the correct way to live one’s life.† Laozi understands the word in this way, too, but he also uses it to mean something much broader. The *Dào dé jīng*’s cryptic opening lines famously declare,

A Way that can be followed is not a constant Way.
A name that can be named is not a constant name.
Nameless, it is the beginning of Heaven and Earth;
Named, it is the mother of all myriad creatures. (DDJ, 1)

Laozi is telling us that the *Dào* is the source of all things, both because the entire universe

emerges from it and because every creature is created by it.* But Laozi is also telling us that human language is not up to the task of describing or telling us what the *Dào* is or how to follow it.† In this respect, he shares Zhuangzi’s views about the limits of language. So instead of trying to describe the *Dào*, Laozi often turns to metaphors. For instance, he compares the *Dào* to water, which moves effortlessly through the world, nourishing all things without distinction, and to unhewn wood, which has not yet been divided into distinct objects for human purposes.

Because the *Dào* is also the path for living properly, these metaphors for the *Dào* are also models for human life. Somewhat paradoxically, Laozi tells us we should try for effortlessness in our actions—here is the famous Daoist doctrine of *wúwéi* again—and unsophisticated simplicity in our desires.

The greatest misfortune is not to know contentment.
The worst calamity is the desire to acquire. (DDJ, 46)
Your name or your body, which do you hold more dear?
Your body or your property, which is of greater value?
Gain or loss, which is the greater calamity?
For this reason, deep affections give rise to great expenditures.
Excessive hoarding results in great loss.
Know contentment and avoid disgrace;
Know when to stop and avoid danger;
And you will long endure. (DDJ, 44)

Why do we endanger our health and our bodies, Laozi is asking us, to acquire more things? Why do we risk “danger” and “disgrace” to acquire one shiny

*It is also widely known in the West as the *Tao Te Ching*, following an older system for romanizing Chinese characters. In that system, *Dào* is spelled *Tao* and Laozi is spelled Lao Tzu.

†It is of interest to note that early Christianity was known simply as “the Way.” And in his book *The Abolition of Man*, the Christian writer, C. S. Lewis, refers to the pattern of objective values in reality as “the *Tao*.”

*Compare Plotinus on the emanation of all things from the One (pp. 270–271).

†Compare Maimonides (p. 309) and Aquinas (p. 325) on negative theology.

L A O Z I

bauble after another? If we think these things will make us happy, we are wrong. So Laozi is telling us. If only we could “know when to stop,” we could find contentment.*

The world has lost its way, Laozi believes, precisely because people lost sight of the natural simplicity of the *Dào*.† Whereas the waterlike *Dào* embraces and supports all things without distinction, humans carve the world into good and bad according to their own purposes: into the beautiful and the ugly, the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor; and then we prize the beautiful, strong, hard, and rich and set about contending with one another to acquire more and more of these things.

To try to manage the strife that accompanies this contention, people develop elaborate systems of law and etiquette, logic and disputation. All of this, Laozi argues, is futile. Only by returning to the natural simplicity of the *Dào* can we find virtue, contentment, peace, and security.‡ The *Dào dé jīng* closes with this paradox-laden warning:

Words worthy of trust are not beautiful;
Words that are beautiful are not worthy of trust.
The good do not engage in disputations;

*Compare the Buddha on attachment (p. 39) and Epicurus on desire (pp. 239–240).

†Compare Heraclitus, who warns us against being “at variance with” the *logos*, from which all things are created (pp. 20).

‡Compare St. Paul in Romans 2:16: “By works of the law shall no one be justified.”

Those who engage in disputation are not good.
Those who know are not full of knowledge;
Those full of knowledge do not know.*

Sages do not accumulate.

The more they do for others, the more they have;

The more they give to others, the more they possess.

The Way of Heaven is to benefit and not harm.

The Way of the sage is to act but not contend.

(*DDJ*, 81)

Social media is full of people trying to present themselves as beautiful, trustworthy, knowledgeable, wealthy, and powerful. Things were not so different in Laozi’s day, even if they took different forms, and he is dismissing that preening as foolishness. He is advising us not to try to show off, accumulate wealth, or outdo other people. True happiness is not to be found there, but in the humble life of following the *Dào*.†

NOTE

There are many translations of the *Dào dé jīng*, and they differ considerably from one another. These quotations are from Philip J. Ivanhoe (trans.), *The Daodejing of Laozi* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2003). References are to chapter numbers.

*Compare Socrates’ claim to ignorance (p. 97).

†Compare the Stoics on keeping our wills in harmony with nature (p. 243).

“In that case, what you are reading there is nothing but the chaff and dregs of the men of old!”

“Since when does a wheelwright have permission to comment on the books I read?” said Duke Huan. “If you have some explanation, well and good. If not, it’s your life!”

Wheelwright Pian said, “I look at it from the point of view of my own work. When I chisel a wheel, if the blows of the mallet are too gentle, the chisel will slide and won’t take hold. But if they’re too hard, it will bite and won’t budge. Not too gentle, not too hard—you can get it in your hand and feel it in your mind. You can’t put

it into words, and yet there's a knack to it somehow. I can't teach it to my son, and he can't learn it from me. So I've gone along for seventy years, and at my age I'm still chiseling wheels. When the men of old died, they took with them the things that couldn't be handed down. So what you are reading there must be nothing but the chaff and dregs of the men of old." (*Zhuangzi* 13)

Zhuangzi's writings have continued to be influential throughout Chinese history. During the Han dynasty, the so-called Neo-Daoists claimed that the Way of Confucius and the Way of Daoists were actually one. Roughly half a millennium later, after the fall of the Han dynasty, Zhuangzi's and Laozi's ideas fused with Buddhist ideas imported from India to create a distinctly East Asian style of Buddhism, known in China as Chan Buddhism and in Japan as Zen Buddhism. So it often happens in the great philosophical conversations of the world: An idea born in one tradition meets some other idea, perhaps drawn from some other great conversation, and the meeting kindles new insights and opens new directions for thought.

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1. In what sense is Zhuangzi skeptical? In what ways is he not a skeptic?
 2. Is Zhuangzi a relativist? Why or why not?
 3. If the truth cannot be taught in words, why did Zhuangzi write a book?
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KEY WORDS

Hundred Schools of Thought	making the inadmissible admissible
Yellow Emperor	School of Names
sage kings	Ten Theses
Zhou dynasty	hardness and whiteness
Mandate of Heaven	Mohism
Spring and Autumn Period	Daoism
Warring States Period	Cook Ding
Confucius	<i>wúwéi</i>
mutual care	<i>Dào</i>

NOTES

1. Quotations from Ian Johnston, trans., *Mozi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) in this section are cited in the text by chapter name and section number.
2. Quotations labeled *Zhuangzi* are from Burton Watson, trans., *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) and are cited by chapter number.
3. Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963).

CHAPTER

6

SOCRATES

To Know Oneself



Some philosophers are important just for what they say or write. Others are important also for what they are—for their personality and character. No better example of the latter exists than **Socrates**.

Socrates wrote nothing, save some poetry written while awaiting execution; he is said to have written a hymn to Apollo and to have put the fables of Aesop into verse. But those have not survived. His impact on those who knew him, however, was extraordinary, and his influence to the present day has few parallels.

The fact that he wrote nothing poses a problem. We depend on other writers for our knowledge of him. Aristophanes is one source, but such farce cannot be taken at face value. Another source is **Xenophon**, who tells numerous stories involving Socrates but is philosophically rather unsophisticated.* Aristotle, too, discusses him. But our main source is Plato, a younger companion of Socrates and a devoted admirer.

*Note: This is not Xenophanes, the pre-Socratic philosopher discussed in Chapter 2.

Plato didn't write a biography or a scholarly analysis of his master's thought. He left us a large number of dialogues, or conversations, in most of which Socrates is a participant, often the central figure. But these dialogues were all written after Socrates' death, many of them long after. And in the later dialogues, there can be no doubt that Plato is putting ideas of his own into the mouth of Socrates. We should not think there is anything dishonest about this practice. The ancient world would have accepted it as perfectly in order; Plato surely believed that his own ideas were a natural development from those of Socrates and that in this way he was honoring his master. But it does pose a problem if we want to discuss the historical Socrates rather than Plato's Socrates. No definitive solution to this problem may ever be found. Still, some things are reasonably certain.

For the most part, the dialogues of Plato can be sorted into three periods, as follows.

1. The early dialogues, such as *Euthyphro*, *Crito*, and the *Apology*, are thought to represent quite

accurately Socrates' own views and ways of proceeding. They seem to have been written soon after his death. In these dialogues, Socrates questions various individuals about the nature of piety, courage, justice, or virtue/excellence (*areté*).* The outcome of the conversation is usually negative in the sense that no agreed-on solution is reached. The participant, who at the dialogue's beginning claims to know the answer, is forced to admit ignorance. You might ask, Is there any point to such conversations? Well, the participants do learn something—that is, how little they really know. In this way the ground is cleared of at least some intellectual rubbish.

2. In the middle dialogues, such as *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, and the monumental *Republic*, Socrates is still the main protagonist. Here, however, we find positive doctrines aplenty, supported by many arguments. Here Plato is working out his own solutions to the problems that the Sophists posed and trying to go beyond the negative outcomes of Socratic questioning. What Plato is doing here will be the main subject of Chapter 8.
3. The late dialogues contain further developments and explore difficulties discovered in the doctrines of the middle period. Here Socrates' role diminishes; in the very late *Laws*, he disappears altogether.

In this chapter and the next, we discuss Socrates primarily as he appears in the early works of Plato, and we read in their entirety three short dialogues. Before reading those, however, we need to learn something about Socrates' character and person.

Character

Socrates was born in 470 or 469 B.C. His father was a stonemason and perhaps a minor sculptor. It is thought that Socrates pursued this same trade as a young man. He married Xanthippe, a woman with

a reputation for shrewishness, and had three sons, apparently rather late in life.

His mother was a midwife, and Socrates calls himself a “midwife” in the realm of thought. A midwife does not give birth herself, of course. In a similar way, Socrates makes no claim to be able to give birth to true ideas but says he can help deliver the ideas of others and determine their truth. He does this by examining them and testing their consistency with other ideas expressed in the conversation. The question is always this: Do the answers to Socrates' questions fit together with the original claim that what was said is true? As we read the three dialogues, we will see numerous examples of his “midwifery.”*

No one ever claimed that Socrates was good-looking, except in a joke. Xenophon reports on an impromptu “beauty contest” held at a banquet. The contestants are Critobulus, a good-looking young man, and Socrates. Socrates is challenged to prove that he is the more handsome.

SOCRATES: Do you think beauty exists in man alone, or in anything else?

CRITOBULUS: I believe it is found in horse and ox and many inanimate things. For instance, I recognize a beautiful shield, sword or spear.

S: And how can all these things be beautiful when they bear no resemblance to each other?

C: Why, if they are well made for the purposes for which we acquire them, or well adapted by nature to our needs, then in each case I call them beautiful.

S: Well then, what do we need eyes for?

C: To see with of course.

S: In that case my eyes are at once proved to be more beautiful than yours, because yours look only straight ahead, whereas mine project so that they can see sideways as well. . . .

C: All right, but which of our noses is the more beautiful?

S: Mine, I should say, if the gods gave us noses to smell with, for your nostrils point to earth, but mine are spread out widely to receive odours from every quarter.

*The meaning of this important word is discussed in Chapter 4, on p. 59.

*You might like to look at the actual words in which Socrates claims this role of midwife for himself. See Chapter 7, p. 134.

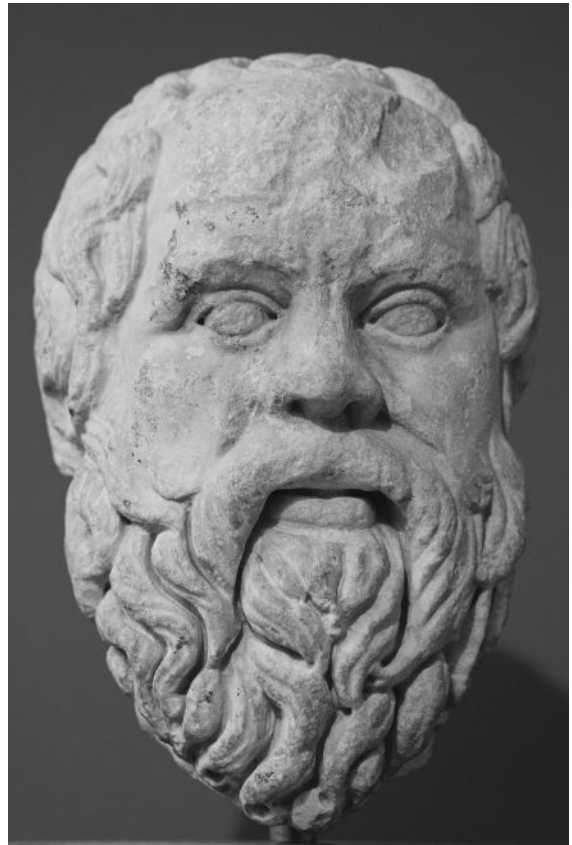
- C: But how can a snub nose be more beautiful than a straight one?
- S: Because it does not get in the way but allows the eyes to see what they will, whereas a high bridge walls them off as if to spite them.
- C: As for the mouth, I give in, for if mouths are made for biting you could take a much larger bite than I.
- S: And with my thick lips don't you think I could give a softer kiss?¹

After this exchange, the banqueters take a secret ballot to determine who is the more handsome. Critobulus gets every vote, so Socrates exclaims that he must have bribed the judges! It must have been nearly impossible to resist caricaturing this odd-looking man who shuffled about Athens barefoot and peered sideways at you out of his bulging eyes when you spoke to him. Aristophanes was not the only writer of comedies to succumb to the temptation.

We see several things about Socrates in this little excerpt: (1) It was not for his physical attractiveness that Socrates was sought after as a companion; he was acknowledged on all sides to be extraordinarily ugly, though it seems to have been an interesting kind of ugliness; (2) we see something of Socrates' humor; here it is light and directed at himself, but it could also be sharp and biting; (3) we have our first glimpse of the typical Socratic method, which proceeds by question and answer, not by long speeches; and (4) we see that Socrates here identifies the good or the beautiful in terms of usefulness or advantage, and this is typical of his views on these questions of value.

He served in the army several times with courage and distinction. In Plato's *Symposium*, the story of an all-night banquet and drinking party, **Alcibiades**, a brilliant young man we shall hear more of, gives the following testimony:

Now, the first thing to point out is that there was no one better than him in the whole army at enduring hardship: it wasn't just me he showed up. Once, when we were cut off (as happens during a campaign), we had to do without food and no one else could cope at all. At the same time, when there *were* plenty of provisions, he was better than the rest of



"I do not even have any knowledge of what virtue itself is."

—SOCRATES

us at making the most of them, and especially when it came to drinking: he was reluctant to drink, but when pushed he proved more than a match for everyone. And the most remarkable thing of all is that no one has ever seen Socrates drunk. . . .

Once—and this was the most astonishing thing he did—the cold was so terribly bitter that everyone was either staying inside or, if they did venture out, they wore an incredible amount of clothing, put shoes on, and then wrapped pieces of felt and sheepskin around their feet. Socrates, however, went out in this weather wearing only the outdoor cloak he'd usually worn earlier in the campaign as well, and without anything on his feet; but he still made his way through the ice more easily than the rest of us with our covered feet. . . .

One morning, a puzzling problem occurred to him and he stayed standing where he was thinking

about it. Even when it proved intractable, he didn't give up: he just stood there exploring it. By the time it was midday, people were beginning to notice him and were telling one another in amazement that Socrates had been standing there from early in the morning deep in thought. Eventually, after their evening meal, some men from the Ionian contingent took their pallets outside—it was summer at the time—so that they could simultaneously sleep outside where it was cool and watch out for whether he'd stand there all night as well. In fact, he stood there until after sunrise the following morning, and then he greeted the sun with a prayer and went on his way. (*Symposium* 219e–220d)²

Alcibiades goes on to tell how Socrates saved his life and in a retreat showed himself to be the coolest man around, so that

anyone could tell, even from a distance, that here was a man who would resist an attack with considerable determination. And that's why he and Laches got out of there safely, because the enemy generally don't take on someone who can remain calm during combat. (*Symposium* 221b)

He sums up his view by saying that

there's no human being, from times past or present, who can match him. . . .

The first time a person lets himself listen to one of Socrates' arguments, it sounds really ridiculous. . . . He talks of pack-asses, metal-workers, shoe-makers, tanners; he seems to go on and on using the same arguments to make the same points, with the result that ignoramuses and fools are bound to find his arguments ridiculous. But if you could see them opened up, if you can get through to what's under the surface, what you'll find inside is that his arguments are the only ones in the world which make sense. And that's not all: under the surface, his arguments abound with divinity and effigies of goodness. They turn out to be extremely far-reaching, or rather they cover absolutely everything which needs to be taken into consideration on the path to true goodness. (*Symposium* 221c–222a)

It is somewhat ironic to hear Alcibiades talking of “true goodness” here. He was for a time a close associate of Socrates but in later life became

notorious for lechery and lust for power. Eventually he deserted and offered his services as a general to the Spartans! The common opinion was that Alcibiades was handsome and brilliant but also treacherous and despicable. Nonetheless, there is no reason to doubt the testimony to Socrates that Plato here puts into his mouth.

The party is invaded by a bunch of revelers, and everyone drinks a great deal. One by one, everyone but Socrates leaves or falls asleep. Shortly after dawn,

Socrates went to the Lyceum for a wash, spent the day as he would any other, and then went home to sleep in the evening. (*Symposium* 223d)

He “spent the day as he would any other.” How was that? Socrates' days seem to have been devoted mainly to conversations in the public places of Athens. He was not independently wealthy, as you might suspect. Xenophon tells us that

he schooled his body and soul by following a system which . . . would make it easy to meet his expenses. For he was so frugal that it is hardly possible to imagine a man doing so little work as not to earn enough to satisfy the needs of Socrates. (*Memorabilia* 1.3.5)³



“That man is richest whose pleasures are the cheapest.”

Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862)

He was temperate in his desires and possessed remarkable self-control with regard not only to food and drink but also to sex. He apparently refrained from the physical relationship that was a fairly common feature of friendships between older men and their young protégés in ancient Athens.* Although he used the language of “love” freely, he held that the proper aim of such friendships was to make the “beloved” more virtuous, self-controlled, and just. No doubt he believed that the young could not learn self-control from

*See, for example, the complaint of Alcibiades in *Symposium* 217a–219d.

someone who did not display it. By common consent the judgment of Alcibiades was correct: Socrates was unique.

Is Socrates a Sophist?

In *The Clouds*, Aristophanes presents Socrates as a Sophist. There are undeniable similarities between Socrates and the Sophists, but there are also important differences. We need to explore this a bit.

Socrates clearly moves in the same circles as the Sophists; he converses with them eagerly and often, and his interests are similar. His subject matter is human affairs, in particular *areté*—excellence or virtue. As we have seen, the Sophists set themselves up as teachers of such excellence. Socrates does not. He cannot do so, he might insist, because he does not rightly know what it is, and no one can teach what he doesn't understand. Nonetheless, he explores this very area, trying to clarify what human excellence consists in, whether it is one thing or many (for example, courage, moderation, wisdom, justice), and whether it is the kind of thing that can be taught at all.

We have noted that many of the Sophists also teach specialized subjects, including geometry, astronomy, and nature philosophy in general. Socrates apparently was interested in nature philosophy as a youth but gave it up because it could not answer the questions that really intrigue him, such as Why are we here? and What is the best kind of life? Human life is what fascinates him.

Young men associate themselves with Socrates, too, sometimes for considerable periods of time, and consider him their teacher. He does not, as we noted in connection with Aristophanes' "Thinkery," have a school. And he does not consider himself a teacher. In fact, we will hear his claim that he has never taught anyone anything. (This takes some explaining, which we will do later.) So he is unlike the Sophists in that regard, for they do consider that they have something to teach and are proud to teach it to others.

Socrates is unlike the Sophists in another regard. He takes no pay from those who associate themselves with him. This is, of course, perfectly consistent with his claim that he has nothing

to teach. Xenophon adds that Socrates "marvelled that anyone should make money by the profession of virtue, and should not reflect that his highest reward would be the gain of a good friend" (*Memorabilia* 1.2.7).

Like the Sophists, Socrates is interested in the arts of communication and argument, in techniques of persuasion. But it is at just this point that we find the deepest difference between them, the difference that perhaps allows us to deny that Socrates is a Sophist at all. For the Sophists, these arts (rhetoric) are like strategies and tactics in battle. The whole point is to enable their practitioner to win. Argument and persuasion are thought of as a kind of contest where, as Antiphon put it, "victory goes to the best speaker." The Sophists aim at *victory*, not *truth*. This is wholly consistent with their skepticism and relativism. If all you can get are opinions anyway, then you might as well try to make things appear to others in whatever way serves your self-interest. And rhetoric, as they conceive and teach it, is designed to do just that.*

For Socrates, on the other hand, the arts of communication, argument, and persuasion have a different goal. His practice of them is designed not to win a victory over his opponent but to advance toward the truth. He is convinced that there is a truth about human affairs and that we are capable of advancing toward it, of shaping our opinions so that they are more "like truth," to use that old phrase of Xenophanes.† Socrates could never agree that if a man *thinks* a certain action is just, then it *is* just—not even "for him." So he is neither a relativist nor a skeptic. Justice, Socrates believes, is something quite independent of our opinions about it. And what it is needs investigation.

Socrates' way of proceeding coheres well with this conviction about truth. He usually refrains from piling up fine phrases in lengthy speeches that might simply overwhelm his listeners; he does not want them to agree with his conclusions for reasons they do not themselves fully understand and agree to. So he asks questions. He is very insistent

*See the Antiphon quote on p. 66.

†Look again at the fragment from Xenophanes on p. 16.

that his listeners answer in a sincere way, that they say what they truly believe. Each person is to speak for himself. In the dialogue *Meno*, for instance, Socrates professes not to know what virtue is. Meno expresses surprise, for surely, he says, Socrates listened to Gorgias when he was in town. Yes, Socrates admits, but he does not altogether remember what Gorgias said; perhaps Meno remembers and agrees with him. When Meno admits that he does, Socrates says,

Then let's leave him out of it; he's not here, after all. But in the name of the gods, Meno, please do tell me in your own words what you think excellence is. (*Meno* 71d)⁴

So Meno is put on the spot and has to speak for himself. Again and again Socrates admonishes his hearers not to give their assent to a proposition unless they really agree.

The course of Socrates' conversations generally goes like this. Someone, often Socrates himself, asks a question: "What is piety?" or "Can human excellence be taught?" Someone, usually someone other than Socrates, suggests a reply. Socrates then proposes they "examine" whether they agree or disagree with this proposition. The examination proceeds by further questioning, which leads the

person questioned to realize that the first answer is not adequate. A second answer that seems to escape the difficulties of the first is put forward, and the pattern repeats itself. A good example is found in *Euthyphro*, to which we'll turn shortly. In the early, more authentically Socratic dialogues, we are usually left at the end with an inconsistent set of beliefs; it is clear that we cannot accept the whole set, but neither Socrates nor his partner knows which way to go. Thus the participant is brought to admit that he doesn't understand the topic at all—although he thought he did when the conversation began.

This technique of proposal–questions–difficulties–new proposal–questions is a technique that Plato calls **dialectic**. Socrates thinks of it as a way, the very best way, of improving our opinions and perhaps even coming to know the truth. What is the connection between dialectic and truth? The connection is this: So long as people sincerely say what they believe and are open to revising this on the basis of good reasons, people can *together* identify inadequate answers to important questions. There really can be no doubt that certain answers won't do. But if you can be sure that some opinions aren't right, what remains unrefuted may well be in the vicinity of the truth. It is important, however, to note that even in the best case this sort of examination cannot *guarantee* the truth of what is left standing at the end. Socrates apparently knows this; that's why he so often confesses his ignorance.

This dialectical procedure, then, is better at detecting error than identifying truth, and for it to do even that, certain conditions must be met. Each participant must say what he or she really believes, and no one must be determined to hang on to a belief "no matter what." In other words, the aim must be not victory over the other speaker, but progress toward the truth. Dialectic is the somewhat paradoxically cooperative enterprise in which each *assists* the others by *raising objections* to what the others say.

We should reflect a moment on how odd this seems. We usually think we are being helped when people agree with us, support us in our convictions, and defend us against attacks. Socrates, however, thinks the best help we can get—what we really



need—is given by questions that make us think again, questions that make us uncomfortable and inclined to be defensive. Again like Xenophanes, Socrates does not think that truth is obvious. It is by “seeking” that we approach the truth, and that’s neither easy nor comfortable. Socrates’ technique for seeking the truth is this dialectic of question and answer.

That this is a cooperative enterprise and not merely a competition to see who wins is displayed in the fact that communication is not one way. Socrates does not deliver sermons; he does not lecture, at least not in the early dialogues. Also, anyone can ask the questions. In Plato’s dialogues, it is usually Socrates who asks, but not always. Sometimes he gives his partner a choice of either asking or answering questions.

As you can imagine, this rather antagonistic procedure was not always understood or appreciated by Socrates’ compatriots. It was certainly one of the factors that generated hostility toward him. In fact, you had to be a certain kind of person to enjoy talking with Socrates and to benefit from a conversation with him, as a passage from the *Gorgias* makes clear. Here the topic is rhetoric, or the art of persuasion. At issue is whether persuasion can lead to knowledge of truth or whether it is restricted to opinion. Socrates says to Gorgias, who teaches rhetoric,

If you’re the same kind of person as I am, I’d be glad to continue questioning you; otherwise, let’s forget it. What kind of person am I? I’m happy to have a mistaken idea of mine proved wrong, and I’m happy to prove someone else’s mistaken ideas wrong, I’m certainly not *less* happy if I’m proved wrong than if I’ve proved someone else wrong, because, as I see it, I’ve got the best of it: there’s nothing worse than the state which I’ve been saved from, so that’s better for me than saving someone else. You see, there’s nothing worse for a person, in my opinion, than holding mistaken views about the matters we’re discussing at the moment. (*Gorgias* 458a)⁵

This is a crucial passage for understanding Socrates’ technique. He is in effect telling us that he will converse only with those who have a certain *character*. Progress in coming to understand the truth is as much a matter of character as intelligence. If you care more for your reputation, for wealth, for winning, or for convincing others that your opinion

is the right one, Socrates will leave you alone. Or, if you insist on talking with him, you are bound to leave feeling humiliated rather than enlightened; for your goals will not have been reached. To make progress, he says, you must be such a person as he himself claims to be. What sort of person is that? You must be just as happy to be shown wrong as to show someone else to be wrong. No—you must be even *happier*, for if you are weaned from a false opinion, you have escaped a great evil.

It is worth expanding on this point a bit. To profit from a conversation with Socrates, you must (1) be open and honest about what you really do believe; and (2) not be so wedded to any one of your beliefs that you consider an attack on it as an attack on yourself. In other words, you must have a certain objectivity with respect to your own opinions. You must be able to say, “Yes, that is indeed an opinion of mine, but I shall be glad to exchange it for another if there is good reason to do so.” This outlook skirts two dangers: wishy-washiness and **dogmatism**. People with these Socratic virtues are not wishy-washy, because they really do have opinions. But neither are they dogmatic, because they are eager to improve their opinions.

This attitude does, in any case, seem to characterize Socrates. At this point, the character and aims of Socrates stand as a polar opposite to those of the Sophists. There could never have been a day on which Socrates taught his students “how to make the weaker argument into the stronger.” To take that as one’s aim is to show that one cares not for the truth but only for victory. To teach the techniques that provide victory is to betray one’s character, to show that one is looking for the same thing oneself: fame, wealth, and the satisfaction of one’s desires. That is why the Sophists taught for pay and grew wealthy. That is why Socrates refused pay and remained poor. And that is why the portrait Aristophanes gives us in *The Clouds* is only a caricature—not the real Socrates.

What Socrates “Knows”

Socrates’ most characteristic claim concerns his ignorance. In his conversations, he claims not to know what human excellence, courage, or piety is.

He begs to be instructed. Of course, it is usually the instructors who get instructed, who learn that they don't know after all. How shall we understand Socrates' claim not to know?

In part, surely, he is being ironic, especially in begging his partner in the conversation to instruct him. Socrates is simply playing the role of ignorant inquirer. But there is more to it than that. With respect to those large questions about the nature of human excellence, it is fairly clear that Socrates never does get an answer that fully satisfies him. In the sense of "know" that implies you can't be wrong, Socrates does not claim to know these things. Even on points he might be quite confident about, he must allow that the next conversation could raise new difficulties—difficulties he cannot overcome. In this respect, his confession of ignorance is quite sincere.



"The wisest man is he who does not fancy that he is so at all."

Nicolas Boileau Despreau (1636–1711)

Nonetheless, there are things that are *as good as known* for Socrates, things he is so confident about that he is even willing to die for them. When we read his defense before the jury, we will see him affirm a number of things—remarkable things—with the greatest confidence. He will say, for instance, that a good man cannot be harmed—something, we wager, that you don't believe. This combination of ignorance and conviction seems paradoxical. How can we understand it?

As Socrates examines his convictions and the beliefs of others, discarding what is clearly indefensible, certain affirmations survive all the scrutiny. These are claims that neither Socrates nor any of his conversational partners have been able to undermine; these claims have *stood fast*. You can imagine that as the years go by and his convictions come under attack from every conceivable quarter, those few principles that withstand every assault must come to look more and more "like the truth," to recall that phrase from Xenophanes, so much like the truth that it becomes almost

inconceivable that they should be upset in the future. These convictions Socrates is willing to bet on, even with his life.

Before we examine some of the early dialogues, it will be useful to identify several of them.*

WE OUGHT TO SEARCH FOR TRUTH

In his conversation with Meno, Socrates says that

there's one proposition that I'd defend to the death, if I could, by argument and by action: that as long as we think we should search for what we don't know we'll be better people—less fainthearted and less lazy—than if we were to think that we had no chance of discovering what we don't know and that there's no point in even searching for it.
(*Meno* 86b–c)

This remark occurs in the context of an argument we will examine later,[†] that the soul is directly acquainted with truth before it enters a human body. This argument has the practical consequence that we may hope to recover the knowledge we had before birth. Socrates says that although he is not certain about every detail of this argument, he is sure that we will be better persons if we do not give up hope of attaining the truth.

Again we can see the Sophists lurking in the background; for it is they who claim that knowledge of truth is not possible for human beings, each of us being the final "measure," or judge, of what seems so to us. Socrates believes that this doctrine (relativism) will make us worse persons, fainthearted and lazy. After all, if we can dismiss any criticism by saying, "Well, it's true for *me*," then our present beliefs are absolutely secure; so why should we undertake the difficult task of examining them? The Sophist point of view seems to Socrates like a prescription for intellectual idleness and cowardice. And he is certain that to be idle and cowardly is to be a worse person rather than a better one. So one thing that "stands fast" for Socrates is that we ought to search for the truth.

*Because in this section we make use of material from several of the middle dialogues, we cannot claim with certainty to be representing the historical Socrates.

[†]See pp. 133–134.

HUMAN EXCELLENCE IS KNOWLEDGE

Socrates seems to have held that human excellence consists in knowledge. No doubt this strikes us as slightly odd; it seems overintellectualized, somehow. Knowledge, we are apt to think, may be one facet of being an excellent human being, but how could it be the whole of it?

The oddness is dissipated somewhat when we note what sort of knowledge Socrates has in mind. He is constantly referring us to the craftsmen—to “metal-workers, shoe-makers, tanners,” as Alcibiades said—and to such professions as horse training, doctoring, and piloting a ship. In each case, what distinguishes the expert from a mere novice is the possession of knowledge. Such knowledge is not just having abstract intellectual propositions in your head, however; it is knowledge of *what* to do and *how* to do it. The Greek word here is *techne*, from which our word “technology” comes. This *techne* is a kind of applied knowledge. What distinguishes the competent doctor, horse trainer, or metal-worker, then, is that he or she possesses a *techne*. The amateur or novice does not.

Socrates claims that human excellence is a *techne* in exactly this same sense. What does the doctor know? She knows the human body and what makes for its health—its physical excellence. What does the horse trainer know? He knows horses—their nature and the kind of training they need to become excellent beasts. In a quite parallel fashion, the expert in human excellence (or virtue)—if there is one—would have to know human nature, how it functions, and wherein its excellence consists.*

Just as the shoemaker must understand both his materials (leather, nails, thread) and the use to which shoes are put—the point of having shoes—so those who wish to live well must understand themselves and what the point of living is. And just as one who has mastered the craft of shoemaking will make fine shoes, Socrates thinks, so one who has mastered the craft of living will live well. Knowledge in this *techne* sense, Socrates holds, is

both a necessary condition for human excellence (without it you cannot be a good person) and a sufficient condition (when it is present, so are all the excellent qualities of human life).

In the *Meno* we find another argument that knowledge is necessary for living well. Socrates gets agreement that human excellence must be something beneficial. But, he argues, things that are generally beneficial need not always be so. For instance, whether wealth, health, and strength are an advantage to the possessor depends on whether they are used wisely or foolishly. And the same goes for what people generally call virtues.

S: Now, among these qualities, take those that you think aren’t knowledge—those that are different from knowledge—and let me ask you whether they’re sometimes harmful and sometimes beneficial. Take courage, for instance, when it isn’t wisdom but is something like recklessness. Isn’t it the case that unintelligent recklessness harms people, while intelligent boldness does them good?

M: Yes.

S: And does the same go for self-control and cleverness? Are intelligent learning and training beneficial, while unintelligent learning and training are harmful?

M: Most definitely.

S: In short, then, mental endeavour and persistence always end in happiness when they are guided by knowledge, but in the opposite if they are guided by ignorance.

(*Meno* 88b–c)

The conclusion that human excellence consists in knowledge faces a difficulty. If it is knowledge, then it should be teachable. Recall Socrates’ conversation with Protagoras. He points out that if a father wanted his son to be a painter, he would send him to someone who knew painting. If he wanted him to learn the flute, he would send him to someone who was an expert in flute playing. But where are the teachers of human excellence? Socrates could not allow that the Sophists were such. And he disclaims any knowledge of what such excellence consists in, so he can’t teach it. But if there are no teachers, perhaps it isn’t knowledge after all.

*See Aristotle’s development of just this point, pp. 210–211.

Socrates is able to resist this conclusion by a device that we'll examine soon.* For now, it is enough to note that this is one thing that “stands fast” for him: that human excellence is wisdom or knowledge.†

ALL WRONGDOING IS DUE TO IGNORANCE

This thesis is a corollary to the claim that virtue is knowledge. If to know the right is to do the right, then failing to do the right must be due to not knowing it. Not to know something is to be ignorant of it. So whoever acts wrongly does so out of ignorance. If we knew better, we would do better.

Socrates holds that we always act out of a belief that what we are doing is good. At the least, we think that it will produce good in the long run. We never, Socrates thinks, intend to do what we *know* is wrong or bad or evil or wicked. So if we do things that are wrong, it must be that we are not well-informed. We believe to be good what is in fact evil—but that is to believe something false, and to believe the false is to be ignorant of the true. Here we have a strong argument for the importance of moral education for the young. They can be brought up to be excellent human beings if only they come to learn what is in fact good and right and true.

For a comparison, let us look again to Euripides' *Hippolytus*, where Phaedra (who is, you remember, in love with her stepson) struggles with her passion.

We know the good, we apprehend it clearly. But we can't bring it to achievement. Some are betrayed by their own laziness, and others value some other pleasure above virtue.⁶

Here Phaedra expresses the view that even when we “know the good,” we sometimes fail to do it. Socrates does not agree; he believes it is not possible to apprehend the good clearly and not do it.

*See pp. 132–133.

†There is a kind of paradox here, as you may already suspect. Socrates claims (1) that human excellence is knowledge, (2) that he lacks this knowledge, and yet (3) that he is a good man. It seems impossible to assert all three consistently; to assert any two seems to require the denial of the third. Socrates, however, has a way out. In Chapter 7, we address this Socratic paradox. See p. 130.

Neither laziness nor pleasure can stand in the way. For human excellence *is* knowledge.

This view is connected intimately to Socrates' practice. He is not a preacher exhorting his fellow men to live up to what they know to be good. He is an inquirer trying to discover exactly what human excellence is. All people, he assumes, do the best they know. If people can be brought to understand what human excellence is, an excellent life will follow.

This view has seemed mistaken to many people. Not only Euripides disagrees. Among others, so do Aristotle, Saint Paul, and Augustine.

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING OF ALL IS TO CARE FOR YOUR SOUL

There is a final cluster of things Socrates seems to “know.” They all hang together and are represented in the dialogues we'll be reading, so I'll just mention several of them briefly here.

Among the striking and unusual propositions that Socrates embraces are that it is better to suffer injustice than to commit injustice and that a good person cannot be harmed in either life or death.

These claims have to do with the soul. The soul, Socrates believes, is the most important part of a human being; from convictions in the soul flow all those actions that reveal what a person really is. Indeed, Socrates even seems to identify himself with his soul.* For that reason, the most important task any person has is to care for the soul. And to that end nothing is more crucial than self-knowledge. Just as the shoemaker cannot make good shoes unless he understands his material, you cannot construct a good life unless you know yourself.

In the *Apology*, Socrates says that for a human being “the unexamined life is not worth living.” In particular, we need to know what we *do* know and what we *do not* know so that we can act wisely, and not foolishly. For foolishness is behavior based on false opinions. As you can see, this concern with the soul animates Socrates' practice; it is in pursuit of such self-knowledge that he questions his

*See the jest Socrates makes just before he drinks the hemlock in *Phaedo* 115c, p. 145.

contemporaries—both for their sake and for his. One of the two mottoes at the Delphic Oracle might be the motto for Socrates’ own life and practice: “Know Thyself.”



“Ful wys is he that can himselven knowe.”

Geoffrey Chaucer (1343–1400)

1. Describe briefly the character of Socrates, as we know it from the testimony of his friends.
 2. In what ways is Socrates like the Sophists?
 3. In what ways is he different?
 4. How does Socrates proceed in his “examination” of his fellow citizens?
 5. What is the connection between dialectic and truth?
 6. What kind of a person do you have to be to profit from a conversation with Socrates?
 7. A number of things seem to have “stood fast” for Socrates in the course of all his examinations, things that in some sense we can say he “knows.” What are they?
-

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

Here are several convictions Socrates thinks have withstood all the criticisms to which they have been exposed:

- That the most important thing in life is to care for the well-being of the soul
- That a good person cannot be harmed by a worse person

- That it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it

Choose one to consider. If you agree, try to say why. If you disagree, try to come up with a critique that might get Socrates to change his mind.

KEY WORDS

Socrates	dialectic
Xenophon	dogmatism
Alcibiades	<i>techne</i>

NOTES

1. Xenophon, *Symposium V*, trans. W. K. C. Guthrie, in *Socrates*, 67–68.
2. Quotations from Plato’s *Symposium*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), are cited in the text by title and section number.
3. Quotations from Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, in *Xenophon: Memorabilia and Oeconomicus*, ed. E. C. Marchant (London: Heinemann, 1923), are cited in the text by title and book and section number.
4. Quotations from Plato’s *Meno*, trans. Robin Waterfield in *Meno and Other Dialogues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), are cited in the text by title and section number.
5. Quotations from Plato’s *Gorgias*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), are cited by title and section number.
6. Euripides, *Hippolytus*, trans. David Grene, in *Euripides I*, ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), ll. 380–384.

CHAPTER

7

THE TRIAL AND DEATH OF SOCRATES

We are now ready to read several of Plato's early dialogues. In each of them Socrates is the major figure. They must have been written soon after Socrates' death. Because many people witnessed the trial and would have known of his conduct while awaiting execution, scholars think they present as accurate a picture of the historical Socrates as we can find. We'll read *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, and *Crito* in their entirety and a selection from *Phaedo*.

This chapter is partitioned into two parts for each dialogue. The text of the dialogue is printed first; this is followed by a section of commentary and questions. Here is a suggestion for you. Begin by giving each dialogue in turn a quick reading

(they are all quite short). Don't try to understand everything the first time through; just get a feel for it. It would be ideal to read them aloud with a friend, each taking a part. After you have done the quick read-through, go to the commentary and questions that follow. Using these as a guide, reread each dialogue section by section, trying this time to understand everything and answering the questions as you go along. A good plan is to write out brief answers. You will be amazed at how rich these brief works are.

References are to page numbers in a standard Greek text of Plato.¹ These numbers are printed in the margins and are divided into sections *a* through *e*.

EUTHYPHRO

*Translator's Introduction*

Euthyphro is surprised to meet Socrates near the king-archon's court, for Socrates is not the kind of man to have business with courts of justice. Socrates explains that he is under indictment by one Meletus for corrupting the young and for not believing in the gods in whom the city believes. After a brief discussion of this, Socrates inquires about Euthyphro's business at court and is told that he is prosecuting his own father for the murder of a laborer who is himself a murderer. His family and friends believe his course of action to be impious, but Euthyphro explains that in this they are mistaken and reveal their ignorance of the nature of piety. This naturally leads Socrates to ask, What is piety? and the rest of the dialogue is devoted to a search for a definition of piety, illustrating the Socratic search for universal definitions of ethical terms, to which a number of early Platonic dialogues are devoted. As usual, no definition is found that satisfies Socrates.

*The Greek term *hosion* means, in the first instance, the knowledge of the proper ritual in prayer and sacrifice and, of course, its performance (as Euthyphro himself defines it in 14b). But obviously Euthyphro uses it in the much wider sense of pious conduct generally (e.g., his own) and in that sense the word is practically equivalent to righteousness (the justice of the Republic), the transition being by way of conduct pleasing to the gods.*

Besides being an excellent example of the early, so-called Socratic dialogues, Euthyphro contains several passages with important philosophical implications. These include those in which Socrates speaks of the one Form, presented by all the actions that we call pious (5d), as well as the one in which we are told that the gods love what is pious because it is pious; it is not pious because the gods love it (10d). Another passage clarifies the difference between genus and species (11e). The implications are discussed in the notes on those passages.

The Dialogue

2 EUTHYPHRO: ¹What's new, Socrates, to make you leave your usual haunts in the Lyceum and

spend your time here by the king-archon's court? Surely you are not prosecuting anyone before the king-archon as I am?

SOCRATES: The Athenians do not call this a prosecution but an indictment, Euthyphro.

b E: What is this you say? Someone must have indicted you, for you are not going to tell me that you have indicted someone else.

S: No indeed.

E: But someone else has indicted you?

S: Quite so.

E: Who is he?

S: I do not really know him myself, Euthyphro. He is apparently young and unknown. They call him Meletus, I believe. He belongs to the Pitthean deme, if you know anyone from that deme called Meletus, with long hair, not much of a beard, and a rather aquiline nose.

E: I don't know him, Socrates. What charge does he bring against you?

c S: What charge? A not ignoble one I think, for it is no small thing for a young man to have knowledge of such an important subject. He says he knows how our young men are corrupted and who corrupts them. He is likely to be wise, and when he sees my ignorance corrupting his contemporaries, he proceeds

d to accuse me to the city as to their mother. I think he is the only one of our public men to start out the right way, for it is right to care first that the young should be as good as possible, just as a good farmer is likely to take care of the young plants first, and of the others later. So, too, Meletus first gets rid of us who corrupt the young shoots, as he says, and

3 then afterwards he will obviously take care of the older ones and become a source of great

¹We know nothing about Euthyphro except what we can gather from this dialogue. He is obviously a professional priest who considers himself an expert on ritual and on piety generally, and, it seems, is generally so considered.

One Euthyphro is mentioned in Plato's *Cratylus* (396d) who is given to *enthousiasmos*, inspiration or possession, but we cannot be sure that it is the same person.

blessings for the city, as seems likely to happen to one who started out this way.

- E: I could wish this were true, Socrates, but I fear the opposite may happen. He seems to me to start out by harming the very heart of the city by attempting to wrong you. Tell me, what does he say you do to corrupt the young?
- b** S: Strange things, to hear him tell, for he says that I am a maker of gods, and on the ground that I create new gods while not believing in the old gods, he has indicted me for their sake, as he puts it.
- E: I understand, Socrates. This is because you say that the divine sign keeps coming to you.² So he has written this indictment against you as one who makes innovations in religious matters, and he comes to court to slander you, knowing that such things are easily misrepresented to the crowd. The same is true in my case. Whenever I speak of divine matters in the assembly and foretell the future, they laugh me down as if I were crazy; and yet I have foretold nothing that did not happen. Nevertheless, they envy all of us who do this. One need not worry about them, but meet them head-on.
- c** S: My dear Euthyphro, to be laughed at does not matter perhaps, for the Athenians do not mind anyone they think clever, as long as he does not teach his own wisdom, but if they think that he makes others to be like himself they get angry,
- d** whether through envy, as you say, or for some other reason.
- E: I have certainly no desire to test their feelings towards me in this matter.
- S: Perhaps you seem to make yourself but rarely available, and not to be willing to teach your own wisdom, but I'm afraid that my liking for people makes them think that I pour out to anybody anything I have to say, not only without charging a fee but even glad to reward anyone who is willing to listen. If then they were intending to laugh at me, as you say they laugh at you, there would be nothing unpleasant in

their spending their time in court laughing and jesting, but if they are going to be serious, the outcome is not clear except to you prophets.

- E: Perhaps it will come to nothing, Socrates, and you will fight your case as you think best, as I think I will mine.
- S: What is your case, Euthyphro? Are you the defendant or the prosecutor?
- E: The prosecutor.
- S: Whom do you prosecute?
- 4** E: One whom I am thought crazy to prosecute.
- S: Are you pursuing someone who will easily escape you?
- E: Far from it, for he is quite old.
- S: Who is it?
- E: My father.
- S: My dear sir! Your own father?
- E: Certainly.
- S: What is the charge? What is the case about?
- E: Murder, Socrates.
- S: Good heavens! Certainly, Euthyphro, most men would not know how they could do this and be right. It is not the part of anyone to do this, but of one who is far advanced in wisdom.
- E: Yes, by Zeus, Socrates, that is so.
- S: Is then the man your father killed one of your relatives? Or is that obvious, for you would not prosecute your father for the murder of a stranger.
- E: It is ridiculous, Socrates, for you to think that it makes any difference whether the victim is a stranger or a relative. One should only watch whether the killer acted justly or not; if he acted justly, let him go, but if not, one should prosecute, even if the killer shares your hearth and table. The pollution is the same if you knowingly keep company with such a man and do not cleanse yourself and him by bringing him to justice. The victim was a dependent of mine, and when we were farming in Naxos he was a servant of ours. He killed one of our household slaves in drunken anger, so my father bound him hand and foot and threw him in a ditch, then sent a man here to enquire from the priest what should be done. During that time he gave no thought or care to the bound man, as being a killer, and it was no matter if he died, which he did. Hunger and cold and his bonds caused his death before the messenger came back from the seer. Both my father and my other relatives are angry that I
- c**
- d**

²In Plato, Socrates always speaks of his divine sign or voice as intervening to prevent him from doing or saying something (e.g., *Apology* 31d), but never positively. The popular view was that it enabled him to foretell the future, and Euthyphro here represents that view. Note, however, that Socrates dissociates himself from “you prophets” (3e).

am prosecuting my father for murder on behalf of a murderer when he hadn't even killed him, they say, and even if he had, the dead man does not deserve a thought, since he was a killer.

- e** For, they say, it is impious for a son to prosecute his father for murder. But their ideas of the divine attitude to piety and impiety are wrong, Socrates.
- s:** Whereas, by Zeus, Euthyphro, you think that your knowledge of the divine, and of piety and impiety, is so accurate that, when those things happened as you say, you have no fear of having acted impiously in bringing your father to trial?
- 5** **E:** I should be of no use, Socrates, and Euthyphro would not be superior to the majority of men, if I did not have accurate knowledge of all such things.
- s:** It is indeed most important, my admirable Euthyphro, that I should become your pupil, and as regards this indictment challenge Meletus about these very things and say to him: that in the past too I considered knowledge about the divine to be most important, and that now that he says I am guilty of improvising and innovating about the gods I have become your pupil. I would say to him: "If, Meletus, you agree that Euthyphro is wise in these matters, consider me, too, to have the right beliefs and do not bring me to trial. If you do not think so, then prosecute that teacher of mine, not me, for corrupting the older men, me and his own father, by teaching me and by exhorting and punishing him." If he is not convinced, and does not discharge me or indict you instead of me, I shall repeat the same challenge in court.
- E:** Yes, by Zeus, Socrates, and, if he should try to indict me, I think I would find his weak spots and the talk in court would be about him rather than about me.
- c**
- s:** It is because I realize this that I am eager to become your pupil, my dear friend. I know that other people as well as this Meletus do not even seem to notice you, whereas he sees me so sharply and clearly that he indicts me for ungodliness. So tell me now, by Zeus, what you just now maintained you clearly knew: what
- d** kind of thing do you say that godliness and ungodliness are, both as regards murder and other things; or is the pious not the same and alike in every action, and the impious the opposite

of all that is pious and like itself, and everything that is to be impious presents us with one form³ or appearance in so far as it is impious?

- E:** Most certainly, Socrates.
- s:** Tell me then, what is the pious, and what the impious, do you say?
- E:** I say that the pious is to do what I am doing now, to prosecute the wrongdoer, be it about murder or temple robbery or anything else, whether the wrongdoer is your father or your mother or anyone else; not to prosecute is impious. And observe, Socrates, that I can quote the law as a great proof that this is so. I have already said to others that such actions are right, not to favour the ungodly, whoever they are. These people themselves believe that Zeus is the best and most just of the gods, yet
- 6** they agree that he bound his father because he unjustly swallowed his sons, and that he in turn castrated his father for similar reasons. But they are angry with me because I am prosecuting my father for his wrongdoing. They contradict themselves in what they say about the gods and about me.
- s:** Indeed, Euthyphro, this is the reason why I am a defendant in the case, because I find it hard to accept things like that being said about the gods, and it is likely to be the reason why I shall be told I do wrong. Now, however, if you, who have full knowledge of such things, share their opinions, then we must agree with them too, it would seem. For what are we to say, we who agree that we ourselves have no knowledge of them? Tell me, by the god of friendship, do you really believe these things are true?

³This is the kind of passage that makes it easier for us to follow the transition from Socrates' universal definitions to the Platonic theory of separately existent eternal universal Forms. The words *eidos* and *idea*, the technical terms for the Platonic Forms, commonly mean physical stature or bodily appearance. As we apply a common epithet, in this case pious, to different actions or things, these must have a common characteristic, present a common appearance or form, to justify the use of the same term, but in the early dialogues, as here, it seems to be thought of as immanent in the particulars and without separate existence. The same is true of 6d where the word "form" is also used.

- E: Yes, Socrates, and so are even more surprising things, of which the majority has no knowledge.
- S: And do you believe that there really is war among the gods, and terrible enmities and battles, and other such things as are told by the poets, and other sacred stories such as are embroidered by good writers and by representations of which the robe of the goddess is adorned when it is carried up to the Acropolis? Are we to say these things are true, Euthyphro?
- c** E: Not only these, Socrates, but, as I was saying just now, I will, if you wish, relate many other things about the gods which I know will amaze you.
- S: I should not be surprised, but you will tell me these at leisure some other time. For now, try to tell me more clearly what I was asking just now, for, my friend, you did not teach me adequately when I asked you what the pious was, but you told me that what you are doing now, prosecuting your father for murder, is pious.
- d** E: And I told the truth, Socrates.
- S: Perhaps. You agree, however, that there are many other pious actions.
- E: There are.
- S: Bear in mind then that I did not bid you tell me one or two of the many pious actions but that form itself that makes all pious actions pious, for you agreed that all impious actions are impious and all pious actions pious through one form, or don't you remember?
- e** E: I do.
- S: Tell me then what this form itself is, so that I may look upon it, and using it as a model, say that any action of yours or another's that is of that kind is pious, and if it is not that it is not.
- E: If that is how you want it, Socrates, that is how I will tell you.
- S: That is what I want.
- 7** E: Well then, what is dear to the gods is pious, what is not is impious.
- S: Splendid, Euthyphro! You have now answered in the way I wanted. Whether your answer is true I do not know yet, but you will obviously show me that what you say is true.
- E: Certainly.
- S: Come then, let us examine what we mean. An action or a man dear to the gods is pious, but an action or a man hated by the gods is impious. They are not the same, but quite opposite, the pious and the impious. Is that not so?
- E: It is indeed.
- S: And that seems to be a good statement?
- b** E: I think so, Socrates.
- S: We have also stated that the gods are in a state of discord, that they are at odds with each other, Euthyphro, and that they are at enmity with each other. Has that, too, been said?
- E: It has.
- S: What are the subjects of difference that cause hatred and anger? Let us look at it this way. If you and I were to differ about numbers as to which is the greater, would this difference make us enemies and angry with each other, or would we proceed to count and soon resolve our difference about this?
- c** E: We would certainly do so.
- S: Again, if we differed about the larger and the smaller, we would turn to measurement and soon cease to differ.
- E: That is so.
- S: And about the heavier and the lighter, we would resort to weighing and be reconciled.
- E: Of course.
- S: What subject of difference would make us angry and hostile to each other if we were unable to come to a decision? Perhaps you do not
- d** have an answer ready, but examine as I tell you whether these subjects are the just and the unjust, the beautiful and the ugly, the good and the bad. Are these not the subjects of difference about which, when we are unable to come to a satisfactory decision, you and I and other men become hostile to each other whenever we do?
- E: That is the difference, Socrates, about those subjects.
- S: What about the gods, Euthyphro? If indeed they have differences, will it not be about these same subjects?
- E: It certainly must be so.
- e** S: Then according to your argument, my good Euthyphro, different gods consider different things to be just, beautiful, ugly, good, and bad, for they would not be at odds with one another unless they differed about these subjects, would they?
- E: You are right.

- S: And they like what each of them considers beautiful, good, and just, and hate the opposites of these?
- E: Certainly.
- 8** S: But you say that the same things are considered just by some gods and unjust by others, and as they dispute about these things they are at odds and at war with each other. Is that not so?
- E: It is.
- S: The same things then are loved by the gods and hated by the gods, and would be both god-loved and god-hated.
- E: It seems likely.
- S: And the same things would be both pious and impious, according to this argument?
- E: I'm afraid so.
- S: So you did not answer my question, you surprising man. I did not ask you what same thing is both pious and impious, and it appears that what is loved by the gods is also hated by them. So it is in no way surprising if your present action, namely punishing your father, may be pleasing to Zeus but displeasing to Kronos and Ouranos, pleasing to Hephaestus but displeasing to Hera, and so with any other gods who differ from each other on this subject.
- b** E: I think, Socrates, that on this subject no gods would differ from one another, that whoever has killed anyone unjustly should pay the penalty.
- c** S: Well now, Euthyphro, have you ever heard any man maintaining that one who has killed or done anything else unjustly should not pay the penalty?
- E: They never cease to dispute on this subject, both elsewhere and in the courts, for when they have committed many wrongs they do and say anything to avoid the penalty.
- S: Do they agree they have done wrong, Euthyphro, and in spite of so agreeing do they nevertheless say they should not be punished?
- E: No, they do not agree on that point.
- S: So they do not say or do anything. For they do not venture to say this, or dispute that they must not pay the penalty if they have done wrong, but I think they deny doing wrong. Is that not so?
- d** E: That is true.
- S: Then they do not dispute that the wrongdoer must be punished, but they may disagree as to who the wrongdoer is, what he did and when.
- E: You are right.
- S: Do not the gods have the same experience, if indeed they are at odds with each other about the just and the unjust, as your argument maintains? Some assert that they wrong one another, while others deny it, but no one among gods or men ventures to say that the wrongdoer must not be punished.
- e** E: Yes, that is true, Socrates, as to the main point.
- S: And those who disagree, whether men or gods, dispute about each action, if indeed the gods disagree. Some say it is done justly, others unjustly. Is that not so?
- E: Yes, indeed.
- 9** S: Come, now, my dear Euthyphro, tell me, too, that I may become wiser, what proof you have that all the gods consider that man to have been killed unjustly who became a murderer while in your service, was bound by the master of his victim, and died in his bonds before the one who bound him found out from the seers what was to be done with him, and that it is right for a son to denounce and to prosecute his father on behalf of such a man. Come, try to show me a clear sign that all the gods definitely believe this action to be right. If you can give me adequate proof of this, I shall never cease to extol your wisdom.
- b** E: This is perhaps no light task, Socrates, though I could show you very clearly.
- S: I understand that you think me more dull-witted than the jury, as you will obviously show them that these actions were unjust and that all the gods hate such actions.
- E: I will show it to them clearly, Socrates, if only they will listen to me.
- c** S: They will listen if they think you show them well. But this thought came to me as you were speaking, and I am examining it, saying to myself: "If Euthyphro shows me conclusively that all the gods consider such a death unjust, to what greater extent have I learned from him the nature of piety and impiety? This action would then, it seems, be hated by the gods, but the pious and the impious were not thereby now defined, for what is hated by the gods has also been shown to be loved by them." So I will not insist on this point; let us assume, if you wish, that all the gods consider this unjust and that they all hate it. However,

d is this the correction we are making in our discussion, that what all the gods hate is impious, and what they all love is pious, and that what some gods love and others hate is neither or both? Is that how you now wish us to define piety and impiety?

E: What prevents us from doing so, Socrates?

S: For my part nothing, Euthyphro, but you look whether on your part this proposal will enable you to teach me most easily what you promised.

e E: I would certainly say that the pious is what all the gods love, and the opposite, what all the gods hate, is the impious.

S: Then let us again examine whether that is a sound statement, or do we let it pass, and if one of us, or someone else, merely says that something is so, do we accept that it is so? Or should we examine what the speaker means?

E: We must examine it, but I certainly think that this is now a fine statement.

10 S: We shall soon know better whether it is. Consider this: Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?

E: I don't know what you mean, Socrates.*

11 S: I'm afraid, Euthyphro, that when you were asked what piety is, you did not wish to make its nature clear to me, but you told me an affect or quality of it, that the pious has the quality of being loved by all the gods, but you

b have not yet told me what the pious is. Now, if you will, do not hide things from me but tell me again from the beginning what piety is, whether loved by the gods or having some other quality—we shall not quarrel about that—but be keen to tell me what the pious and the impious are.

E: But Socrates, I have no way of telling you what I have in mind, for whatever proposition we put forward goes around and refuses to stay put where we establish it.

S: Your statements, Euthyphro, seem to belong to my ancestor, Daedalus. If I were stating them and putting them forward, you would

perhaps be making fun of me and say that because of my kinship with him my conclusions in discussion run away and will not stay where one puts them. As these propositions are yours, however, we need some other jest, for they will not stay put for you, as you say yourself.

E: I think the same jest will do for our discussion, Socrates, for I am not the one who makes them go round and not remain in the same place; it is you who are the Daedalus; for as far as I am concerned they would remain as they were.

d S: It looks as if I was cleverer than Daedalus in using my skill, my friend, in so far as he could only cause to move the things he made himself, but I can make other people's move as well as my own. And the smartest part of my skill is that I am clever without wanting to be, for I would rather have your statements to me remain unmoved than possess the wealth of Tantalus as well as the cleverness of Daedalus. But enough of this. Since I think you are making unnecessary difficulties, I am as eager as you are to find a way to teach me about piety, and do not give up before you do. See whether you think all that is pious is of necessity just.

E: I think so.

12 S: And is then all that is just pious? Or is all that is pious just, but not all that is just pious, but some of it is and some is not?

E: I do not follow what you are saying, Socrates.

S: Yet you are younger than I by as much as you are wiser. As I say, you are making difficulties because of your wealth of wisdom. Pull yourself together, my dear sir, what I am saying is not difficult to grasp. I am saying the opposite of what the poet said who wrote:

b You do not wish to name Zeus, who had done it, and who made all things grow, for where there is fear there is also shame.

I disagree with the poet. Shall I tell you why?

E: Please do.

S: I do not think that "where there is fear there is also shame," for I think that many people who fear disease and poverty and many other such things feel fear, but are not ashamed of the things they fear. Do you not think so?

E: I do indeed.

S: But where there is shame there is also fear. For is there anyone who, in feeling shame and

*From 10a to 11a, there appears a complex and rather confusing argument. We omit it here and supply a paraphrase in the commentary section that follows the dialogue.—N.M. & D.M.

- c** embarrassment at anything, does not also at the same time fear and dread a reputation for wickedness?
- E: He is certainly afraid.
- S: It is then not right to say “where there is fear there is also shame,” but that where there is shame there is also fear, for fear covers a larger area than shame. Shame is a part of fear just as odd is a part of number, with the result that it is not true that where there is number there is also oddness, but that where there is oddness there is also number. Do you follow me now?
- E: Surely.
- S: This is the kind of thing I was asking before, whether where there is piety there is also justice, but where there is justice there is not always piety, for the pious is a part of justice. Shall we say that, or do you think otherwise?
- d** E: No, but like that, for what you say appears to be right.
- S: See what comes next: if the pious is a part of the just, we must, it seems, find out what part of the just it is. Now if you asked me something of what we mentioned just now, such as what part of number is the even, and what number that is, I would say it is the number that is divisible into two equal, not unequal, parts. Or do you not think so?
- E: I do.
- e** S: Try in this way to tell me what part of the just the pious is, in order to tell Meletus not to wrong us any more and not to indict me for ungodliness, since I have learned from you sufficiently what is godly and pious and what is not.
- E: I think, Socrates, that the godly and pious is the part of the just that is concerned with the care of the gods, while that concerned with the care of men is the remaining part of justice.
- S: You seem to me to put that very well, but I still need a bit of information. I do not know yet what you mean by care, for you do not mean the care of the gods in the same sense as the care of other things, as, for example, we say, don’t we, that not everyone knows how to care for horses, but the horse breeder does.
- 13** E: Yes, I do mean it that way.
- S: So horse breeding is the care of horses.
- E: Yes.
- S: Nor does everyone know how to care for dogs, but the hunter does.
- E: That is so.
- S: So hunting is the care of dogs.
- b** E: Yes.
- S: And cattle raising is the care of cattle.
- E: Quite so.
- S: While piety and godliness is the care of the gods, Euthyphro. Is that what you mean?
- E: It is.
- S: Now care in each case has the same effect; it aims at the good and the benefit of the object cared for, as you can see that horses cared for by horse breeders are benefited and become better. Or do you not think so?
- E: I do.
- S: So dogs are benefited by dog breeding, cattle by cattle raising, and so with all the others. Or do you think that care aims to harm the object of its care?
- c** E: By Zeus, no.
- S: It aims to benefit the object of its care?
- E: Of course.
- S: Is piety then, which is the care of the gods, also to benefit the gods and make them better? Would you agree that when you do something pious you make some of the gods better?
- E: By Zeus, no.
- S: Nor do I think that this is what you mean—far from it—but that is why I asked you what you meant by the care of gods, because I did not believe you meant this kind of care.
- d** E: Quite right, Socrates, that is not the kind of care I mean.
- S: Very well, but what kind of care of the gods would piety be?
- E: The kind of care, Socrates, that slaves take of their masters.
- S: I understand. It is likely to be a kind of service of the gods.
- E: Quite so.
- S: Could you tell me to the achievement of what goal service to doctors tends? Is it not, do you think, to achieving health?
- E: I think so.
- e** S: What about service to shipbuilders? To what achievement is it directed?
- E: Clearly, Socrates, to the building of a ship.
- S: And service to housebuilders to the building of a house?
- E: Yes.
- S: Tell me then, my good sir, to the achievement of what aim does service to the gods tend? You

obviously know since you say that you, of all men, have the best knowledge of the divine.

E: And I am telling the truth, Socrates.

S: Tell me then, by Zeus, what is that excellent aim that the gods achieve, using us as their servants?

E: Many fine things, Socrates.

14 S: So do generals, my friend. Nevertheless you could easily tell me their main concern, which is to achieve victory in war, is it not?

E: Of course.

S: The farmers too, I think, achieve many fine things, but the main point of their efforts is to produce food from the earth.

E: Quite so.

S: Well then, how would you sum up the many fine things that the gods achieve?

E: I told you a short while ago, Socrates, that it is a considerable task to acquire any precise knowledge of these things, but, to put it simply, I say that if a man knows how to say and do what is pleasing to the gods at prayer and sacrifice, those are pious actions such as preserve both private houses and public affairs of state. The opposite of these pleasing actions are impious and overturn and destroy everything.

b

S: You could tell me in far fewer words, if you were willing, the sum of what I asked, Euthyphro, but you are not keen to teach me, that is clear. You were on the point of doing so, but you turned away. If you had given that answer, I should now have acquired from you sufficient knowledge of the nature of piety. As it is, the lover of inquiry must follow his beloved wherever it may lead him. Once more then, what do you say that piety and the pious are? Are they a knowledge of how to sacrifice and pray?

c

E: They are.

S: To sacrifice is to make a gift to the gods, whereas to pray is to beg from the gods?

E: Definitely, Socrates.

d S: It would follow from this statement that piety would be a knowledge of how to give to, and beg from, the gods.

E: You understood what I said very well, Socrates.

S: That is because I am so desirous of your wisdom, and I concentrate my mind on it, so that no word of yours may fall to the ground. But tell me, what is this service to the gods? You say it is to beg from them and to give to them?

E: I do.

S: And to beg correctly would be to ask from them things that we need?

E: What else?

e S: And to give correctly is to give them what they need from us, for it would not be skillful to bring gifts to anyone that are in no way needed.

E: True, Socrates.

S: Piety would then be a sort of trading skill between gods and men?

E: Trading yes, if you prefer to call it that.

15 S: I prefer nothing, unless it is true. But tell me, what benefit do the gods derive from the gifts they receive from us? What they give us is obvious to all. There is for us no good that we do not receive from them, but how are they benefited by what they receive from us? Or do we have such an advantage over them in the trade that we receive all our blessings from them and they receive nothing from us?

E: Do you suppose, Socrates, that the gods are benefited by what they receive from us?

S: What could those gifts from us to the gods be, Euthyphro?

E: What else, do you think, than honour, reverence, and what I mentioned just now, gratitude?

b S: The pious is then, Euthyphro, pleasing to the gods, but not beneficial or dear to them?

E: I think it is of all things most dear to them.

S: So the pious is once again what is dear to the gods.

E: Most certainly.

c S: When you say this, will you be surprised if your arguments seem to move about instead of staying put? And will you accuse me of being Daedalus who makes them move, though you are yourself much more skillful than Daedalus and make them go round in a circle? Or do you not realize that our argument has moved around and come again to the same place? You surely remember that earlier the pious and the god-beloved were shown not to be the same but different from each other. Or do you not remember?

E: I do.

S: Do you then not realize now that you are saying that what is dear to the gods is the pious? Is this not the same as the god-beloved? Or is it not?

- E: It certainly is.
- S: Either we were wrong when we agreed before, or, if we were right then, we are wrong now.
- E: That seems to be so.
- S: So we must investigate again from the beginning what piety is, as I shall not willingly give up before I learn this. Do not think me
- d** unworthy, but concentrate your attention and tell the truth. For you know it, if any man does, and I must not let you go, like Proteus, before you tell me. If you had no clear knowledge of piety and impiety you would never have ventured to prosecute your old father for murder on behalf of a servant. For fear of the gods you would have been afraid to take the risk lest you should not be acting rightly, and would have been ashamed before men, but
- e** now I know well that you believe you have clear knowledge of piety and impiety. So tell me, my good Euthyphro, and do not hide what you think it is.
- E: Some other time, Socrates, for I am in a hurry now, and it is time for me to go.
- S: What a thing to do, my friend! By going you have cast me down from a great hope I had, that I would learn from you the nature of the
- 16** pious and the impious and so escape Meletus' indictment by showing him that I had acquired wisdom in divine matters from Euthyphro, and my ignorance would no longer cause me to be careless and inventive about such things, and that I would be better for the rest of my life.

COMMENTARY AND QUESTIONS

Read 2a–5a Note that **Euthyphro** is surprised to find Socrates at court, suggesting that Socrates is neither the sort who brings suit against his fellow citizens nor the sort one would expect to be prosecuted.

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- Q1. Why does Socrates say that **Meletus** is likely to be wise? (2c)
- Q2. What sort of character does Socrates ascribe to Meletus here? Is Socrates sincere in his praise of Meletus?
- Q3. There seem to be two charges against Socrates. Can you identify them? (2c, 3b)
-

Socrates famously claims to have a “**divine sign**” that comes to him from time to time. We hear of it again in the *Apology*. That the gods should speak to mortals in signs does not strike the ancient Greeks as a strange notion. Usually the gods speak through oracles, prophets, or seers. Euthyphro claims this ability for himself, saying that he “foretells the future.” He assumes (mistakenly) that Socrates too claims this ability, and he concludes that it is out of envy for this talent that Meletus and the others are pressing charges. Moreover, Socrates’ “sign” from the gods, Euthyphro thinks, would also explain the accusation that Socrates is introducing “new gods.”

Does Socrates believe in the “old gods”? There can be little doubt that his view of the Olympians is much the same as that of Xenophanes or Heraclitus: The stories of Homer cannot be taken literally. (See *Euthyphro* 6a.) Yet he always speaks reverently of “god” or “the god” or “the gods” (these three terms being used pretty much interchangeably). And he feels free to use traditional language in speaking about the divine, so he writes that last hymn to Apollo and would probably have agreed with Heraclitus that the divine is “willing and unwilling to be called Zeus.”*

Moreover, Xenophon tells us that Socrates behaves in accord with the advice given by the Priestess at Delphi when asked about sacrifice and ritual matters: “Follow the custom of the State: that is the way to act piously.” Xenophon goes on to tell us,

And again, when he prayed he asked simply for good gifts, “for the gods know best what things are good.” Though his sacrifices were humble, according to his means, he thought himself not a whit inferior to those who made frequent and magnificent sacrifices out of great possessions. . . . No, the greater the piety of the giver, the greater (he thought) was the delight of the gods in the gift.²

There seems every reason to suppose that Socrates is pious in the conventional sense. Still, he would not have held back his beliefs if asked directly about the gods; as he says in 3d, his “liking for people” makes it seem that he pours out to anybody what he has to say. And traditionalists might well take exception to some of that.

*See p. 20.

What of the “sign”? Was that an introduction of new gods? Socrates does not seem to have thought of it as such. It seems to be analogous to what we would call the voice of conscience, though clearly it was much more vivid to him than to most of us. It never, he tells us, advises him positively to do something; it only prevents him, and it is clearly nothing like Euthyphro’s future-telling. (Note that in 3e he separates himself from “you prophets.”) But he clearly thinks of the sign as a voice of the divine.

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- Q4. Why is Euthyphro in court?
Q5. What does Euthyphro claim to know?
-

Read 5a–6e We now know what the topic of this conversation is to be. Socrates says he is “eager” to be Euthyphro’s pupil.

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- Q6. Why does Socrates say he wants Euthyphro to instruct him? Do you think he really expects to be helped?
Q7. Do you think this is going to be a serious inquiry? Or is Socrates just having some sport with Euthyphro?
-

Notice in 5d the three requirements that must be met to satisfy Socrates. He wants to know what **the “pious”** or the “holy” or the “godly” is (all these words may translate the Greek term).

1. A satisfactory answer will pick out some feature that is the same in every pious action.
2. This feature will not be shared by any impious action.
3. It will be that feature (or the lack of it) that *makes* an action pious (or impious).

What Socrates is searching for, we can say, is a **definition** of piety or holiness.* He wants to know what it is so that it can be recognized when it

appears. It is like wanting to know what a crow is: We want to know what features all crows have that are not shared by eagles and hedgehogs, the possession of which ensure that this thing we see before us is indeed a crow.

Would knowing what piety is be useful if one were about to be tried for impiety? A Sophist might not think so at all. At that point, the typical Sophist would just dazzle the jury with rhetoric. But Socrates, as always, wants to know the truth. He wants to know the truth even more than he wants to be acquitted. We can think of this as one aspect of his persistent search to know himself. Who is he? Has he been guilty of impiety? Only an understanding of what piety truly is will tell.

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- Q8. What does Euthyphro say piety is?
Q9. What does Socrates focus on as the likely reason he is on trial?
Q10. What is Socrates’ objection to the definition Euthyphro has proposed?
-

Note particularly the term “**form**” in 6d–e. It clearly does not mean “shape,” except perhaps in a most abstract sense. The form of something is whatever makes it the kind of thing it is. The form may sometimes be shape, as the “form” of a square is to be an area bounded by equal straight lines and right angles, but it need not be. When we ask in this sense for the “form” of an elephant, we are asking for more than an outline drawing and for more than even a photograph can supply. What we want is what the biologist can give us; we are asking what an elephant is. Notice that the biologist can do this not only for elephants but also for mammals—and no one can draw the geometrical shape of a mammal. (True, you can draw a picture of *this* mammal or *that* mammal, but not a picture of a mammal *as such*. Yet it can be given a definition.) In the same way, it is perfectly in order to ask for the “form” of abstract qualities such as justice, courage, or piety.

Read 7a–9b Here we have Euthyphro’s second attempt at answering Socrates’ question.

*There are a number of different kinds of definition.

For a critique of Socrates’ kind, see Wittgenstein’s notion of “family resemblances” in Chapter 26.

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- Q11. What is Euthyphro's second answer?
 Q12. Why does Socrates exclaim, "Splendid!"?
 Q13. What is the difference between answering "in the way" he wanted and giving a "true" answer?
-

Note Socrates' characteristic invitation in 7a: "Let us examine what we mean." How does this examination proceed? He reminds Euthyphro of something he admitted earlier—that there is "war among the gods" (6b)—and wonders whether that is *consistent* with the definition Euthyphro now proposes; do the two fit together, or do they clash?

-
- Q14. How does Socrates derive the conclusion (8a) that "the same things then are loved by the gods and hated by the gods"? Is this a correct deduction from the statements Euthyphro previously agreed to?
 Q15. What further conclusion follows? Why is that disturbing?
-

In 8b, Socrates drives the disturbing consequence home by applying it to Euthyphro's own case. Socrates is never one to leave things up in the air, unconnected to practical life. If this is a good understanding of piety, then it ought to illuminate the matter at hand. But of course, Euthyphro cannot admit that his own prosecution is loved by some of the gods and hated by others—that it is both pious and impious. He protests that *none* of the gods would disagree that "whoever has killed anyone unjustly should pay the penalty."

Now, this is sneaky. Can you see why? It is a move that might slide past a lesser antagonist, but Socrates picks it up immediately.

-
- Q16. What do people dispute about concerning wrongs and penalties? And what not?
-

So Socrates drives Euthyphro back to the issue: In light of the admission that the gods quarrel, what reason is there to think that prosecuting his father is an instance of what the gods love and thus an example of piety?

-
- Q17. Do you believe that Socrates has put Euthyphro in an untenable position here?
-

Read 9c–11d Socrates takes the lead here and proposes a modification to the earlier definition. Euthyphro embraces the suggestion with enthusiasm in 9e. Be sure you are clear about the new definition. Write it down.

Again we get the invitation to examine this new attempt. In 9e, Socrates backs it up with this question: "Or do we let it pass, and if one of us, or someone else, merely says that something is so, do we accept that it is so?" Are there reasons why this should not be accepted? The mere fact that someone—anyone—says it is so does not make it so. Do you agree with Socrates here?

In 10a, we get an important question, one that reverberates through later Christian theology and has a bearing on whether there can be an **ethics** independent of what God or the gods approve. Suppose we agree that in normal circumstances it is wrong to lie (allowing that a lie may be justified, for example, if it is the only way to save a life). And suppose, for the sake of the argument, we also agree that God or the gods hate lying (in those normal circumstances). What is it, we still might ask, that *makes* lying wrong? Is it the fact that it is hated by the divine power(s)? Or is there something about lying itself that makes it wrong—and that is why the gods hate it? To ask these questions is a way of asking for the "form" of wrongness. (Look again at the three requirements for a satisfactory definition in 5d and on page 112; it is the third requirement that is at issue.)

Suppose we agree, Socrates says, that what all the gods love is pious and what they all hate is impious; the question remains whether it is this love that explains the piety of the pious. Suppose it is. Then a behavior is pious *simply because* that behavior pleases the gods. It follows that if the gods loved lying, stealing, or adultery, that would make it right to lie, steal, or sleep with your neighbor's spouse. In this case, ethics is tied intrinsically to religion.

The alternative is that there is something about these actions that makes them wrong—and

that is why the gods hate them. If this alternative is correct, then a secular ethics, independent of God, is possible. If we could identify what it is about lying that makes it wrong, we would have a reason not to lie whether we believe in the gods or not. Those who think that God's command (or love) is what *makes* lying wrong will be likely to say, if they lose faith in God, that "everything is permitted."* But on the alternative to divine command theory, this radical consequence does not follow. The question Socrates raises is an important one.

Assuming that the alternatives are clear, which one should we prefer? There is no doubt about Socrates' answer: the pious is pious *not* because the gods love it; rather, the gods love what is pious because of what it is. In the omitted section (10a–11a), Socrates piles up analogies to explain this. Let's try to simplify. Suppose that Henry, a gardener, loves his roses. The roses are loved, then, because Henry loves them. But he doesn't love them because they are loved by him! That would be absurd. He loves them because of something in the roses, something that makes them worthy of his love—their fragrance, perhaps, or their beauty.

In the same way, Socrates argues, if the gods love piety in humans, it must be because there is something lovable about it. Socrates wants to understand what it is. That is why he complains in 11a that Euthyphro has not answered his question. He says that Euthyphro has told him only "an affect or quality" of the pious—namely, that it is loved by the gods. But, he claims, Euthyphro has not yet made its "nature" or "form" clear. To be told only that the pious is what all the gods love is to learn only about how it is regarded by them. Euthyphro has spoken only of something external; he has not revealed what it really is!

*This formula, "Everything is permitted," is that of Ivan Karamazov, the atheist in Dostoyevsky's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. The servant of the family, Smerdyakov, is persuaded that this is so, and on these grounds he murders the brothers' father.

Q18. Is this a good argument? Suppose, in response to the question, "Why do the gods love the pious?" one were to reply, "They just do!" Is Socrates assuming that there must be a reason? Is he assuming what he needs to prove?

Socrates probably calls Daedalus (in 11c) his "ancestor" because Daedalus was the mythical "patron saint" of stonemasons and sculptors. He was reputed to be such a cunning artisan that his sculptures took life and ran away.

Q19. Why is Socrates reminded of Daedalus here?

Read 11e–end Again Socrates makes a suggestion, this time that piety and justice are related somehow. It seems a promising idea, but some clarifications are needed. Are they identical? Or is one a part of the other? And if the latter, which is part of which?

Q20. What answer do the two settle on? Why?

Q21. In what way are the fear/shame and odd/number distinctions analogous?

Q22. What are the two kinds of "care" that are distinguished? (13a–c and 13d–e)

Q23. Which one is the relevant one? Why?

In 14c we reach a crucial turning point in the dialogue. Note that Socrates here says they were on the verge of solving the problem, but Euthyphro "turned away." If only he had answered a certain question, Socrates says, he "should now have acquired . . . sufficient knowledge of the nature of piety." But Euthyphro didn't answer it.

Apparently Socrates feels that they were on the right track. Let us review. Piety is part of justice. It is that part consisting in **care of the gods**. The kind of care at issue is the kind that slaves offer their masters. Such service on the part of slaves is always directed to some fine end (for example, health, ships, houses). The question arises, To what fine end is service to the gods

devoted? To put it another way, what is the point of piety? What is it *for*? What is “that excellent aim that the gods achieve, using us as their servants?” Remember that for Socrates the good is always something useful or advantageous. He is here asking—on the tacit assumption that piety is something good—what advantage piety produces. We can identify the good things produced by service to doctors. What good things are produced by service to the gods? If one could answer this question, the nature of piety might finally be clarified.

Unfortunately, all Euthyphro can say is that piety produces “many fine things.” When pressed harder, he in effect changes the subject, although he probably doesn’t realize he is doing so. He says in 14b that “to put it simply,” piety is knowing “how to say and do what is pleasing to the gods at prayer and sacrifice.” This certainly does not answer the question of what aim the gods achieve through our service!

Let us, however, briefly consider Euthyphro’s statement. First, it does go some way toward answering the question of what we should do to be pious. Euthyphro’s answer is in fact the traditional answer common to most religions: pray and offer sacrifice. That answer would have been the standard one in Athens, and it is a little surprising that it comes out so late in the dialogue. It corresponds to the advice of the Delphic Oracle to “follow the custom of the state.”

Second, Euthyphro’s statement mentions some advantages to being pious in this way: preserving “both private houses and public affairs of state.” But this is puzzling. Why does Socrates not accept this as an answer to the question about the aim we seek to achieve by being pious in just this way?

No answer is given in the dialogue; perhaps it must just remain puzzling. But here is a suggestion. Socrates, at the end of the Peloponnesian War, may simply be unable to believe this is true. No doubt Athens had offered many prayers and had made all the required sacrifices during the war. Athens had prayed for victory, just as Sparta must have prayed for victory. Yet Athens not only lost; she also did irreparable damage to



herself. Such piety, it seemed, did *not* preserve private houses and public affairs. If the promised advantages do not materialize, Socrates would conclude, this kind of piety is not after all a good thing. Perhaps the exasperation evident in 14c expresses Socrates’ view that by this time in history it is all too clear piety can’t be that. It can’t be a kind of “trading skill” between gods and mortals. And on the assumption that piety is a good thing, it must be something quite different from Euthyphro’s version of it.

This is rather speculative but not, we think, implausible. As we’ll see, Jesus and the Christians have an answer about what piety is for. We find it clearly, for instance, in St. Augustine.* It is an answer that Socrates is close to but does not quite grasp. It demands that we rethink the nature of God and the relations of man to God altogether. But that is a story for later.

Socrates, regretfully, feels it is necessary to follow his “teacher” and once more takes up his questioning in 14c. There is a fairly simple argument running through these exchanges, but it is

*See p. 283.

not easy to pick it out. Let us try to identify the steps; check the text to see that we are getting it right.

1. Piety is prayer and sacrifice. (This is Euthyphro's latest definition, now up for examination.)
2. Prayer and sacrifice are begging from the gods and giving to the gods.
3. The giving must, to be "skillful," be giving what they need.
4. To give what they need would be to benefit them.
5. But we cannot benefit the gods.
6. If our giving does not benefit the gods, the only alternative is that this giving "pleases" them.
7. But that is just to say that they like it, it is dear to them—it is what they love.
8. And that returns us to the earlier definition: that piety is what all the gods love. (And we already know that this is not satisfactory. So we are going in a circle.)

The crux of the argument is, no doubt, Premise 5. It is expressed by Euthyphro in a surprised question in 15a and accepted by Socrates. Why can't we benefit the gods? No reasons are given

here, but they are not hard to find. The gods, recall, are the immortals, the happy ones. To think of them as having needs that mere mortals could supply would have seemed to many Greeks as impious in the extreme. We receive all our benefits from them. To think that we could benefit them would be arrogance and hubris of the first rank.

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- Q24. Do you agree with this view? What do you think of this argument? Has the discussion really come full circle?
- Q25. What characteristic of Socrates do you think Plato means to impress on us in Socrates' next-to-last speech?
- Q26. Has Euthyphro learned anything in the course of this discussion?
- Q27. Have you? If so, what?
-

At the end of the dialogue, Euthyphro escapes, leaving us without an answer to the question examined. Socrates must go to his trial still ignorant of the nature of piety.

APOLOGY



Translator's Introduction

*The Apology*¹ professes to be a record of the actual speech that Socrates delivered in his own defence at the trial. This makes the question of its historicity more acute than in the

¹The word *apology* is a transliteration, not a translation, of the Greek *apologia*, which means defense. There is certainly nothing apologetic about the speech.

dialogues in which the conversations themselves are mostly fictional and the question of historicity is concerned only with how far the theories that Socrates is represented as expressing were those of the historical Socrates. Here, however, we are dealing with a speech that Socrates made as a matter of history. How far is Plato's account accurate? We should always remember that the ancients did not expect historical accuracy in the way we do. On the other hand, Plato makes it clear

that he was present at the trial (34a, 38b). Moreover, if, as is generally believed, the Apology was written not long after the event, many Athenians would remember the actual speech, and it would be a poor way to vindicate the Master, which is the obvious intent, to put a completely different speech into his mouth. Some liberties could no doubt be allowed, but the main arguments and the general tone of the defence must surely be faithful to the original. The beauty of language and style is certainly Plato's, but the serene spiritual and moral beauty of character belongs to Socrates. It is a powerful combination.

Athenian juries were very large, in this case 501, and they combined the duties of jury and judge as we know them by both convicting and sentencing. Obviously, it would have been virtually impossible for so large a body to discuss various penalties and decide on one. The problem was resolved rather neatly, however, by having the prosecutor, after conviction, assess the penalty he thought appropriate, followed by a counter-assessment by the defendant. The jury would then decide between the two. This procedure generally made for moderation on both sides.

Thus the Apology is in three parts. The first and major part is the main speech (17a–35a), followed by the counter-assessment (35a–38c), and finally, last words to the jury (38c–42a), both to those who voted for the death sentence and those who voted for acquittal.

The Dialogue

17 I do not know, men of Athens, how my accusers affected you; as for me, I was almost carried away in spite of myself, so persuasively did they speak. And yet, hardly anything of what they said is true. Of the many lies they told, one in particular surprised me, namely that you should be careful not to be deceived by an accomplished speaker like me. That they were not ashamed to be immediately proved wrong by the facts, when I show myself not to be an accomplished speaker at all, that I thought was most shameless on their part—unless indeed they call an accomplished speaker the man who speaks the truth. If they mean that, I would agree that I am an orator, but not after their manner, for indeed, as I say, practically nothing they said was true. From me you will hear the whole truth, though not, by Zeus, gentlemen, expressed in embroidered and stylized phrases like theirs, but things spoken at random and expressed in the first words that come to mind, for I put my trust in the justice of what I say, and let none of

you expect anything else. It would not be fitting at my age, as it might be for a young man, to toy with words when I appear before you.

One thing I do ask and beg of you gentlemen: if you hear me making my defence in the same kind of language as I am accustomed to use in the market place by the bankers' tables,² where many of you have heard me, and elsewhere, do not be surprised or create a disturbance on that account.

d The position is this: this is my first appearance in a law-court, at the age of seventy; I am therefore simply a stranger to the manner of speaking here. Just as if I were really a stranger, you would certainly excuse me if I spoke in that dialect and manner in which I had been brought up, so too my present request seems a just one, for you to pay no attention to my manner of speech—be it better or worse—but to concentrate your attention on whether what I say is just or not, for the excellence of a judge lies in this, as that of a speaker lies in telling the truth.

It is right for me, gentlemen, to defend myself first against the first lying accusations made against me and my first accusers, and then against the later accusations and the later accusers. There have

b been many who have accused me to you for many years now, and none of their accusations are true. These I fear much more than I fear Anytus and his friends, though they too are formidable. These earlier ones, however, are more so, gentlemen; they got hold of most of you from childhood, persuaded you and accused me quite falsely, saying that there is a man called Socrates, a wise man, a student of all things in the sky and below the earth, who makes the worse argument the stronger. Those who spread that rumour, gentlemen, are my dangerous accusers, for their hearers believe that those who study these things do not even believe in the gods. Moreover, these accusers are numerous, and have been at it a long time; also, they spoke to you at an age when you would most readily believe them, some of you being children and adolescents, and they won their case by default, as there was no defence.

d What is most absurd in all this is that one cannot even know or mention their names unless one

²The bankers or money-changers had their counters in the market place. It seems that this was a favourite place for gossip.

of them is a writer of comedies.³ Those who maliciously and slanderously persuaded you—who also, when persuaded themselves then persuaded others—all those are most difficult to deal with: one cannot bring one of them into court or refute him; one must simply fight with shadows, as it were, in making one’s defence, and cross-examine when no one answers. I want you to realize too that my accusers are of two kinds: those who have accused me recently, and the old ones I mention; and to think that I must first defend myself against the latter, for you have also heard their accusations first, and to a much greater extent than the more recent.

19 Very well then. I must surely defend myself and attempt to uproot from your minds in so short a time the slander that has resided there so long. I wish this may happen, if it is in any way better for you and me, and that my defence may be successful, but I think this is very difficult and I am fully aware of how difficult it is. Even so, let the matter proceed as the god may wish, but I must obey the law and make my defence.

b Let us then take up the case from its beginning. What is the accusation from which arose the slander in which Meletus trusted when he wrote out the charge against me? What did they say when they slandered me? I must, as if they were my actual prosecutors, read the affidavit they would have sworn. It goes something like this: Socrates is guilty of wrongdoing in that he busies himself studying things in the sky and below the earth; he makes the worse into the stronger argument, and he teaches these same things to others. You have seen this yourselves in the comedy of Aristophanes, a Socrates swinging about there, saying he was walking on air and talking a lot of other nonsense about things of which I know nothing at all. I do not speak in contempt of such knowledge, if someone is wise in these things—lest Meletus bring more cases against me—but, gentlemen, I have no part in it, and on this point I call upon the majority of you as witnesses. I think it right that all those of you who have heard me conversing, and many of you have, should tell each other if anyone of you have ever heard me discussing such subjects to any extent

at all. From this you will learn that the other things said about me by the majority are of the same kind.

Not one of them is true. And if you have heard from anyone that I undertake to teach people and charge a fee for it, that is not true either. Yet I think it a fine thing to be able to teach people as Gorgias of Leontini does, and Prodicus of Ceos, and Hippias of Elis.⁴ Each of these men can go to any city and persuade the young, who can keep company with anyone of their own fellow-citizens they want without paying, to leave the company of these, to join with themselves, pay them a fee, and be grateful to them besides. Indeed, I learned that there is another wise man from Paros who is visiting us, for I met a man who has spent more money on Sophists than everybody else put together, Callias, the son of Hipponicus. So I asked him—he has two sons—“Callias,” I said, “if your sons were colts or calves, we could find and engage a supervisor for them who would make them excel in their proper qualities, some horse breeder or farmer. Now since they are men, whom do you have in mind to supervise them? Who is an expert in this kind of excellence, the human and social kind? I think you must have given thought to this since you have sons. Is there such a person,” I asked, “or is there not?” “Certainly there is,” he said. “Who is he?” I asked, “What is his name, where is he from? and what is his fee?” “His name, Socrates, is Evenus, he comes from Paros, and his fee is five minas.” I thought Evenus a happy man, if he really possesses this art, and teaches for so moderate a fee. Certainly I would pride and preen myself if I had this knowledge, but I do not have it, gentlemen.

One of you might perhaps interrupt me and say: “But Socrates, what is your occupation? From where have these slanders come? For surely if you did not busy yourself with something out of the common, all these rumours and talk would not

³This refers in particular to Aristophanes, whose comedy, *The Clouds*, produced in 423 B.C., ridiculed the (imaginary) school of Socrates.

⁴These were all well-known Sophists. Gorgias, after whom Plato named one of his dialogues, was a celebrated rhetorician and teacher of rhetoric. He came to Athens in 427 B.C., and his rhetorical tricks took the city by storm. Two dialogues, the authenticity of which has been doubted, are named after Hippias, whose knowledge was encyclopedic. Prodicus was known for his insistence on the precise meaning of words. Both he and Hippias are characters in the *Protagoras* (named after another famous Sophist).

have arisen unless you did something other than most people. Tell us what it is, that we may not speak inadvisedly about you.” Anyone who says that seems to be right, and I will try to show you what has caused this reputation and slander. Listen then. Perhaps some of you will think I am jesting, but be sure that all that I shall say is true. What has caused my reputation is none other than a certain kind of wisdom. What kind of wisdom? Human wisdom, perhaps. It may be that I really possess this, while those whom I mentioned just now are wise with a wisdom more than human; else I cannot explain it, for I certainly do not possess it, and whoever says I do is lying and speaks to slander me. Do not create a disturbance, gentlemen, even if you think I am boasting, for the story I shall tell does not originate with me, but I will refer you to a trustworthy source. I shall call upon the god at Delphi as witness to the existence and nature of my wisdom, if it be such. You know Chairephon. He was my friend from youth, and the friend of most of you, as he shared your exile and your return. You surely know the kind of man he was, how impulsive in any course of action. He went to Delphi at one time and ventured to ask the oracle—as I say, gentlemen, do not create a disturbance—he asked if any man was wiser than I, and the Pythian replied that no one was wiser. Chairephon is dead, but his brother will testify to you about this.

b Consider that I tell you this because I would inform you about the origin of the slander. When I heard of this reply I asked myself: “Whatever does the god mean? What is his riddle? I am very conscious that I am not wise at all; what then does he mean by saying that I am the wisest? For surely he does not lie; it is not legitimate for him to do so.” For a long time I was at a loss as to his meaning; then I very reluctantly turned to some such investigation as this: I went to one of those reputed wise, thinking that there, if anywhere, I could refute the oracle and say to it: “This man is wiser than I, but you said I was.” Then, when I examined this man—there is no need for me to tell you his name, he was one of our public men—my experience was something like this: I thought that he appeared wise to many people and especially to himself, but he was not. I then tried to show him that he thought himself wise, but that he was not.

d As a result he came to dislike me, and so did many of the bystanders. So I withdrew and thought to myself: “I am wiser than this man; it is likely that

neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know.” After this I approached another man, one of those thought to be wiser than he, and I thought the same thing, and so I came to be disliked both by him and by many others.

After that I proceeded systematically. I realized, to my sorrow and alarm, that I was getting unpopular, but I thought that I must attach the greatest importance to the god’s oracle, so I must go to all those who had any reputation for knowledge to examine its meaning. And by the dog,⁵ gentlemen of the jury—for I must tell you the truth—I experienced something like this: in my investigation in the service of the god I found that those who had the highest reputation were nearly the most deficient, while those who were thought to be inferior were more knowledgeable. I must give you an account of my journeyings as if they were labours I had undertaken to prove the oracle irrefutable. After the politicians, I went to the poets, the writers of tragedies and dithyrambs and the others, intending in their case to catch myself being more ignorant than they. So I took up those poems with which they seemed to have taken most trouble and asked them what they meant, in order that I might at the same time learn something from them. I am ashamed to tell you the truth, gentlemen, but I must. Almost all the bystanders might have explained the poems better than their authors could.

c I soon realized that poets do not compose their poems with knowledge, but by some inborn talent and by inspiration, like seers and prophets who also say many fine things without any understanding of what they say. The poets seemed to me to have had a similar experience. At the same time I saw that, because of their poetry, they thought themselves very wise men in other respects, which they were not. So there again I withdrew, thinking that I had the same advantage over them as I had over the politicians.

Finally I went to the craftsmen, for I was conscious of knowing practically nothing, and I knew that I would find that they had knowledge of many

⁵A curious oath, occasionally used by Socrates, it appears in a longer form in the *Gorgias* (482b) as “by the dog, the god of the Egyptians.”

fine things. In this I was not mistaken; they knew things I did not know, and to that extent they were wiser than I. But, gentlemen of the jury, the good craftsmen seemed to me to have the same fault as the poets: each of them, because of his success at his craft, thought himself very wise in other most important pursuits, and this error of theirs overshadowed the wisdom they had, so that I asked myself, on behalf of the oracle, whether I should prefer to be as I am, with neither their wisdom nor their ignorance, or to have both. The answer I gave myself and the oracle was that it was to my advantage to be as I am.

As a result of this investigation, gentlemen of the jury, I acquired much unpopularity, of a kind that is hard to deal with and is a heavy burden; many slanders came from these people and a reputation for wisdom, for in each case the bystanders thought that I myself possessed the wisdom that I proved that my interlocutor did not have. What is probable, gentlemen, is that in fact the god is wise and that his oracular response meant that human wisdom is worth little or nothing, and that when he says this man, Socrates, he is using my name as an example, as if he said: “This man among you, mortals, is wisest who, like Socrates, understands that his wisdom is worthless.” So even now I continue this investigation as the god bade me—and I go around seeking out anyone, citizen or stranger, whom I think wise. Then if I do not think he is, I come to the assistance of the god and show him that he is not wise. Because of this occupation, I do not have the leisure to engage in public affairs to any extent, nor indeed to look after my own, but I live in great poverty because of my service to the god.

Furthermore, the young men who follow me around of their own free will, those who have most leisure, the sons of the very rich, take pleasure in hearing people questioned; they themselves often imitate me and try to question others. I think they find an abundance of men who believe they have some knowledge but know little or nothing. The result is that those whom they question are angry, not with themselves but with me. They say: “That man Socrates is a pestilential fellow who corrupts the young.” If one asks them what he does and what he teaches to corrupt them, they are silent, as they do not know, but, so as not to appear at a loss, they mention those accusations that are available against all philosophers, about “things in the sky and things below the earth,” about “not

believing in the gods” and “making the worse the stronger argument”; they would not want to tell the truth, I’m sure, that they have been proved to lay claim to knowledge when they know nothing.

These people are ambitious, violent and numerous; they are continually and convincingly talking about me; they have been filling your ears for a long time with vehement slanders against me. From them Meletus attacked me, and Anytus and Lycon, Meletus being vexed on behalf of the poets, Anytus on behalf of the craftsmen and the politicians, Lycon on behalf of the orators, so that, as I started out by saying, I should be surprised if I could rid you of so much slander in so short a time. That, gentlemen of the jury, is the truth for you. I have hidden or disguised nothing. I know well enough that this very conduct makes me unpopular, and this is proof that what I say is true, that such is the slander against me, and that such are its causes. If you look into this either now or later, this is what you will find.

Let this suffice as a defence against the charges of my earlier accusers. After this I shall try to defend myself against Meletus, that good and patriotic man, as he says he is, and my later accusers. As these are a different lot of accusers, let us again take up their sworn deposition. It goes something like this: Socrates is guilty of corrupting the young and of not believing in the gods in whom the city believes, but in other new divinities. Such is their charge. Let us examine it point by point.

He says that I am guilty of corrupting the young, but I say that Meletus is guilty of dealing frivolously with serious matters, of irresponsibly bringing people into court, and of professing to be seriously concerned with things about none of which he has ever cared, and I shall try to prove that this is so. Come here and tell me, Meletus. Surely you consider it of the greatest importance that our young men be as good as possible?⁶ — Indeed I do.

Come then, tell the jury who improves them. You obviously know, in view of your concern. You say you have discovered the one who corrupts them, namely me, and you bring me here and accuse me to the jury. Come, inform the jury and

⁶Socrates here drops into his usual method of discussion by question and answer. This, no doubt, is what Plato had in mind, at least in part, when he made him ask the indulgence of the jury if he spoke “in his usual manner.”

tell them who it is. You see, Meletus, that you are silent and know not what to say. Does this not seem shameful to you and a sufficient proof of what I say, that you have not been concerned with any of this? Tell me, my good sir, who improves

e our young men? —The laws.

That is not what I am asking, but what person who has knowledge of the laws to begin with? —These jurymen, Socrates.

How do you mean, Meletus? Are these able to educate the young and improve them?

—Certainly.

All of them, or some but not others? —All of them.

25 Very good, by Hera. You mention a great abundance of benefactors. But what about the audience? Do they improve the young or not? —They do, too.

What about the members of Council? —The Councillors, also.

But, Meletus, what about the assembly? Do members of the assembly corrupt the young, or do they all improve them? —They improve them.

All the Athenians, it seems, make the young into fine good men, except me, and I alone corrupt them. Is that what you mean? —That is most definitely what I mean.

b You condemn me to a great misfortune. Tell me: does this also apply to horses do you think? That all men improve them and one individual corrupts them? Or is quite the contrary true, one individual is able to improve them, or very few, namely the horse breeders, whereas the majority, if they have horses and use them, corrupt them? Is that not the case, Meletus, both with horses and all other animals? Of course it is, whether you and Anytus say so or not. It would be a very happy state of affairs if only one person corrupted our youth, while the others improved them.

c You have made it sufficiently obvious, Meletus, that you have never had any concern for our youth; you show your indifference clearly; that you have given no thought to the subjects about which you bring me to trial.

And by Zeus, Meletus, tell us also whether it is better for a man to live among good or wicked fellow-citizens. Answer, my good man, for I am not asking a difficult question. Do not the wicked do some harm to those who are ever closest to them, whereas good people benefit them? —Certainly.

d And does the man exist who would rather be harmed than benefited by his associates? Answer, my good sir, for the law orders you to answer. Is there any man who wants to be harmed? —Of course not.

Come now, do you accuse me here of corrupting the young and making them worse deliberately or unwillingly? —Deliberately.

What follows, Meletus? Are you so much wiser at your age than I am at mine that you understand that wicked people always do some harm to their closest neighbours while good people do them good, but I have reached such a pitch of ignorance that I do not realize this, namely that if I make one of my associates wicked I run the risk of being harmed by him so that I do such a great evil deliberately, as you say? I do not believe you, Meletus, and I do not think anyone else will. Either I do not

26 corrupt the young or, if I do, it is unwillingly, and you are lying in either case. Now if I corrupt them unwillingly, the law does not require you to bring people to court for such unwilling wrongdoings, but to get hold of them privately, to instruct them and exhort them; for clearly, if I learn better, I shall cease to do what I am doing unwillingly. You, however, have avoided my company and were unwilling to instruct me, but you bring me here, where the law requires one to bring those who are in need of punishment, not of instruction.

And so, gentlemen of the jury, what I said is clearly true: Meletus has never been at all concerned with these matters. Nonetheless tell us, Meletus, how you say that I corrupt the young; or is it obvious from your deposition that it is by teaching them not to believe in the gods in whom the city believes but in other new divinities? Is this not what you say I teach and so corrupt them? —That is most certainly what I do say.

c Then by those very gods about whom we are talking, Meletus, make this clearer to me and to the jury: I cannot be sure whether you mean that I teach the belief that there are some gods—and therefore I myself believe that there are gods and am not altogether an atheist, nor am I guilty of that—not, however, the gods in whom the city believes, but others, and that this is the charge against me, that they are others. Or whether you mean that I do not believe in gods at all, and that this is what I teach to others. —This is what I mean, that you do not believe in gods at all.

d You are a strange fellow, Meletus. Why do you say this? Do I not believe, as other men do, that the sun and the moon are gods? —No, by Zeus, jurymen, for he says that the sun is stone, and the moon earth.

My dear Meletus, do you think you are prosecuting Anaxagoras? Are you so contemptuous of the jury and think them so ignorant of letters as not to know that the books of Anaxagoras⁷ of Clazomenae are full of those theories, and further, that the young men learn from me what they can

e buy from time to time for a drachma, at most, in the bookshops, and ridicule Socrates if he pretends that these theories are his own, especially as they are so absurd? Is that, by Zeus, what you think of me, Meletus, that I do not believe that there are any gods? —That is what I say, that you do not believe in the gods at all.

You cannot be believed, Meletus, even, I think, by yourself. The man appears to me, gentlemen of the jury, highly insolent and uncontrolled. He seems to have made this deposition out of insolence, violence and youthful zeal. He is like one

27 who composed a riddle and is trying it out: “Will the wise Socrates realize that I am jesting and contradicting myself, or shall I deceive him and others?” I think he contradicts himself in the affidavit, as if he said: “Socrates is guilty of not believing in gods but believing in gods,” and surely that is the part of a jester!

b Examine with me, gentlemen, how he appears to contradict himself, and you, Meletus, answer us. Remember, gentlemen, what I asked you when I began, not to create a disturbance if I proceed in my usual manner.

Does any man, Meletus, believe in human affairs who does not believe in human beings? Make him answer, and not again and again create a disturbance. Does any man who does not believe in horses believe in equine affairs? Or in flute music but not in flute-players? No, my good sir, no man could. If you are not willing to answer, I will tell

c you and the jury. Answer the next question, however. Does any man believe in divine activities who does not believe in divinities? —No one.

Thank you for answering, if reluctantly, when the jury made you. Now you say that I believe in divine activities and teach about them, whether new or old, but at any rate divine activities according to what you say, and to this you have sworn in your deposition. But if I believe in divine activities I must quite inevitably believe in divine beings. Is that not so? It is indeed. I shall assume that you

d agree, as you do not answer. Do we not believe divine beings to be either gods or the children of gods? Yes or no? —Of course.

Then since I do believe in divine beings, as you admit, if divine beings are gods, this is what I mean when I say you speak in riddles and in jest, as you state that I do not believe in gods and then again that I do, since I believe in divine beings. If on the other hand the divine beings are children of the gods, bastard children of the gods by nymphs or some other mothers, as they are said to be, what man would believe children of the gods to exist, but not gods? That would be just as absurd as

e to believe the young of horses and asses, namely mules, to exist, but not to believe in the existence of horses and asses. You must have made this deposition, Meletus, either to test us or because you were at a loss to find any true wrongdoing of what to accuse me. There is no way in which you could persuade anyone of even small intelligence that it is not the part of one and the same man to be-

28 lieve in the activities of divine beings and gods, and then again the part of one and the same man not to believe in the existence of divinities and gods and heroes.

I do not think, gentlemen of the jury, that it requires a prolonged defence to prove that I am not guilty of the charges in Meletus’ deposition, but this is sufficient. On the other hand, you know that what I said earlier is true, that I am very unpopular with many people. This will be my undoing, if I am undone, not Meletus or Anytus but the slanders and envy of many people. This has destroyed many other good men and will, I think, continue to do so. There is no danger that it will stop at me.

b Someone might say: “Are you not ashamed, Socrates, to have followed the kind of occupation that has led to your being now in danger of death?” However, I should be right to reply to him: “You are wrong, sir, if you think that a man who is any good at all should take into account the risk of life or death; he should look to this only in his actions, whether what he does is right or wrong, whether

⁷Anaxagoras of Clazomenae, born about the beginning of the fifth century B.C., came to Athens as a young man and spent his time in the pursuit of natural philosophy. He claimed that the universe was directed by Nous (Mind) and that matter was indestructible but always combining in various ways. He left Athens after being prosecuted for impiety.

c he is acting like a good or a bad man.” According to your view, all the heroes who died at Troy were inferior people, especially the son of Thetis who was so contemptuous of danger compared with disgrace.⁸ When he was eager to kill Hector, his goddess mother warned him, as I believe, in some such words as these: “My child, if you avenge the death of your comrade, Patroclus, and you kill Hector, you will die yourself, for your death is to follow immediately after Hector’s.” Hearing this, he despised death and danger and was much more afraid to live a coward who did not avenge his

d friends. “Let me die at once,” he said, “when once I have given the wrongdoer his deserts, rather than remain here, a laughingstock by the curved ships, a burden upon the earth.” Do you think he gave thought to death and danger?

This is the truth of the matter, gentlemen of the jury: wherever a man has taken a position that he believes to be best, or has been placed by his commander, there he must I think remain and face danger, without a thought for death or anything

e else, rather than disgrace. It would have been a dreadful way to behave, gentlemen of the jury, if, at Potidaea, Amphipolis and Delium, I had, at the risk of death, like anyone else, remained at my post where those you had elected to command had ordered me, and then, when the god ordered me, as I thought and believed, to live the life of a philosopher, to examine myself and others, I had abandoned my post for fear of death or anything else.

29 That would have been a dreadful thing, and then I might truly have justly been brought here for not believing that there are gods, disobeying the oracle, fearing death, and thinking I was wise when I was not. To fear death, gentlemen, is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not, to think one knows what one does not know. No one knows whether death may not be the greatest of all blessings for a man, yet men fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils. And surely it is

b the most blameworthy ignorance to believe that one knows what one does not know. It is perhaps on this point and in this respect, gentlemen, that I differ from the majority of men, and if I were to claim that I am wiser than anyone in anything, it would be in this, that, as I have no adequate knowledge of things in the underworld, so I do not

think I have. I do know, however, that it is wicked and shameful to do wrong, to disobey one’s superior, be he god or man. I shall never fear or avoid things of which I do not know, whether they may not be good rather than things that I know

c to be bad. Even if you acquitted me now and did not believe Anytus, who said to you that either I should not have been brought here in the first place, or that now I am here, you cannot avoid executing me, for if I should be acquitted, your sons would practise the teachings of Socrates and all be thoroughly corrupted; if you said to me in this regard: “Socrates, we do not believe Anytus now; we acquit you, but only on condition that you spend no more time on this investigation and do not practise philosophy, and if you are caught

d doing so you will die,” if, as I say, you were to acquit me on those terms, I would say to you: “Gentlemen of the jury, I am grateful and I am your friend, but I will obey the god rather than you, and as long as I draw breath and am able, I shall not cease to practise philosophy, to exhort you and in my usual way to point out to any one of you whom I happen to meet: Good Sir, you are an Athenian, a citizen of the greatest city with the

e greatest reputation for both wisdom and power; are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation and honours as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of your soul?” Then, if one of you disputes this and says he does care, I shall not let him go at once or leave him, but I shall question him, examine him and test him, and if I do not think he has attained the goodness that he says he has, I shall reproach him because he attaches little importance to the

30 most important things and greater importance to inferior things, I shall treat in this way anyone I happen to meet, young and old, citizen and stranger, and more so the citizens because you are more kindred to me. Be sure that this is what the god orders me to do, and I think there is no greater blessing for the city than my service to the god. For I go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for

b your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul as I say to you: “Wealth does not bring about excellence, but excellence brings about wealth and all other public and private blessings for men.”

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⁸The scene between Thetis and Achilles is from *The Iliad* (18, 94ff.).

Now if by saying this I corrupt the young, this advice must be harmful, but if anyone says that I give different advice, he is talking nonsense. On this point I would say to you, gentlemen of the jury: “Whether you believe Anytus or not, whether you acquit me or not, do so on the understanding that this is my course of action, even if I am to face death many times.” Do not create a disturbance, gentlemen, but abide by my request not to cry out at what I say but to listen, for I think it will be to your advantage to listen, and I am about to say other things at which you will perhaps cry out. By no means do this. Be sure that if you kill the sort of man I say I am, you will not harm me more than yourselves. Neither Meletus nor Anytus can harm me in any way; he could not harm me, for I do not think it is permitted that a better man be harmed by a worse; certainly he might kill me, or perhaps banish or disfranchise me, which he and maybe others think to be great harm, but I do not think so. I think he is doing himself much greater harm doing what he is doing now, attempting to have a man executed unjustly. Indeed, gentlemen of the jury, I am far from making a defence now on my own behalf, as might be thought, but on yours, to prevent you from wrongdoing by mistreating the god’s gift to you by condemning me; for if you kill me you will not easily find another like me. I was attached to this city by the god—though it seems a ridiculous thing to say—as upon a great and noble horse which was somewhat sluggish because of its size and needed to be stirred up by a kind of gadfly. It is to fulfill some such function that I believe the god has placed me in the city. I never cease to rouse each and every one of you, to persuade and reproach you all day long and every-

31 where I find myself in your company.

Another such man will not easily come to be among you, gentlemen, and if you believe me you will spare me. You might easily be annoyed with me as people are when they are aroused from a doze, and strike out at me; if convinced by Anytus you could easily kill me, and then you could sleep on for the rest of your days, unless the god, in his care for you, sent you someone else. That I am the kind of person to be a gift of the god to the city you might realize from the fact that it does not seem like human nature for me to have neglected all my own affairs and to have tolerated this neglect now for so many years while I was always concerned with you, approaching each one of you like a father

or an elder brother to persuade you to care for virtue. Now if I profited from this by charging a fee for my advice, there would be some sense to it, but you can see for yourselves that, for all their shameless accusations, my accusers have not been able in their impudence to bring forward a witness to say that I have ever received a fee or ever asked for one. I, on the other hand, have a convincing witness that I speak for truth, my poverty.

It may seem strange that while I go around and give this advice privately and interfere in private affairs, I do not venture to go to the assembly and there advise the city. You have heard me give the reason for this in many places. I have a divine sign from the god which Meletus has ridiculed in his deposition. This began when I was a child. It is a voice, and whenever it speaks it turns me away from something I am about to do, but it never encourages me to do anything. This is what has prevented me from taking part in public affairs, and I think it was quite right to prevent me. Be sure, gentlemen of the jury, that if I had long ago attempted to take part in politics, I should have died long ago, and benefited neither you nor myself. Do not be angry with me for speaking the truth; no man will survive who genuinely opposes you or any other crowd and prevents the occurrence of many unjust and illegal happenings in the city. A man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public, life if he is to survive for even a short time.

I shall give you great proofs of this, not words but what you esteem, deeds. Listen to what happened to me, that you may know that I will not yield to any man contrary to what is right, for fear of death, even if I should die at once for not yielding. The things I shall tell you are commonplace and smack of the lawcourts, but they are true. I have never held any other office in the city, but I served as a member of the Council, and our tribe Antiochis was presiding at the time when you wanted to try as a body the ten generals who had failed to pick up the survivors of the naval battle.⁹

⁹This was the battle of Arginusae (south of Lesbos) in 406 B.C., the last Athenian victory of the war. A violent storm prevented the Athenian generals from rescuing their survivors. For this they were tried in Athens and sentenced to death by the Assembly. They were tried in a body, and it is this to which Socrates objected in the Council’s presiding committee which prepared the business of the Assembly. He obstinately persisted in his opposition, in which he stood alone, and was overruled by the majority. Six generals who were in Athens were executed.

This was illegal, as you all recognized later. I was the only member of the presiding committee to oppose your doing something contrary to the laws, and I voted against it. The orators were ready to prosecute me and take me away, and your shouts were egging them on, but I thought I should run any risk on the side of law and justice rather than join you, for fear of prison or death, when you were engaged in an unjust course.

- c**
- This happened when the city was still a democracy. When the oligarchy was established, the Thirty¹⁰ summoned me to the Hall, along with four others, and ordered us to bring Leon from Salamis, that he might be executed. They gave many such orders to many people, in order to implicate as many as possible in their guilt. Then I showed again, not in words but in action, that, if it were not rather vulgar to say so, death is something I couldn't care less about, but that my whole concern is not to do anything unjust or impious. That government, powerful as it was, did not frighten me into any wrongdoing. When we left the Hall, the other four went to Salamis and brought in Leon, but I went home. I might have been put to death for this, had not the government fallen shortly afterwards. There are many who will witness to these events.
- d**
- e**

Do you think I would have survived all these years if I were engaged in public affairs and, acting as a good man must, came to the help of justice and considered this the most important thing? Far from it, gentlemen of the jury, nor would any other man. Throughout my life, in any public activity I may have engaged in, I am the same man as I am in private life. I have never come to an agreement with anyone to act unjustly, neither with anyone else nor with any one of those who they slanderously say are my pupils. I have never been anyone's teacher. If anyone, young or old, desires to listen to me when I am talking and dealing with my own concerns, I have never begrudged this to anyone, but I do not converse when I receive a fee and not when I do not. I am equally ready to question the rich and the poor if anyone is willing to answer my questions and listen to what I say. And I cannot justly be held responsible for the good or bad

- 33**
- b**

conduct of these people, as I never promised to teach them anything and have not done so. If anyone says that he has learned anything from me, or that he heard anything privately that the others did not hear, be assured that he is not telling the truth.

- c**
- Why then do some people enjoy spending considerable time in my company? You have heard why, gentlemen of the jury, I have told you the whole truth. They enjoy hearing those being questioned who think they are wise, but are not. And this is not unpleasant. To do this has, as I say, been enjoined upon me by the god, by means of oracles and dreams, and in every other way that a divine manifestation has ever ordered a man to do anything. This is true, gentlemen, and can easily be established.

- d**
- If I corrupt some young men and have corrupted others, then surely some of them who have grown older and realized that I gave them bad advice when they were young should now themselves come up here to accuse me and avenge themselves. If they are unwilling to do so themselves, then some of their kindred, their fathers or brothers or other relations should recall it now if their family had been harmed by me. I see many of these present here, first Crito, my contemporary and fellow demesman, the father of Critoboulos here; next Lysanias of Sphettus, the father of Aeschines here; also Antiphon the Cephisian, the father of Epigenes; and others whose brothers spent their time in this way; Nicostratus, the son of Theozotides, brother of Theodotus, and Theodotus has died so he could not influence him; Paralios here, son of Demodocus, whose brother was Theages; there is Adeimantus, son of Ariston, brother of Plato here; Acantidorus, brother of Apollodorus here.

- e**
- I could mention many others, some one of whom surely Meletus should have brought in as witness in his own speech. If he forgot to do so, then let him do it now; I will yield time if he has anything of the kind to say. You will find quite the contrary, gentlemen. These men are all ready to come to the help of the corruptor, the man who has harmed their kindred, as Meletus and Anytus say. Now those who were corrupted might well have reason to help me, but the uncorrupted, their kindred who are older men, have no reason to help me except the right and proper one, that they know that Meletus is lying and that I am telling the truth.
- b**

¹⁰This was the harsh oligarchy that was set up after the final defeat of Athens in 404 B.C. and that ruled Athens for some nine months in 404–3 before the democracy was restored.

Very well, gentlemen of the jury. This, and maybe other similar things, is what I have to say in my defence. Perhaps one of you might be angry as he recalls that when he himself stood trial on a less dangerous charge, he begged and implored the jury with many tears, that he brought his children and many of his friends and family into court to arouse as much pity as he could, but that I do none of these things, even though I may seem to be running the ultimate risk. Thinking of this, he might feel resentful toward me and, angry about this, cast his vote in anger. If there is such a one among you—I do not deem there is, but if there is—I think it would be right to say in reply: My good sir, I too have a household and, in Homer’s phrase, I am not born “from oak or rock” but from men, so that I have a family, indeed three sons, gentlemen of the jury, of whom one is an adolescent while two are children. Nevertheless, I will not beg you to acquit me by bringing them here. Why do I do none of these things? Not through arrogance, gentlemen, nor through lack of respect for you. Whether I am brave in the face of death is another matter, but with regard to my reputation and yours and that of the whole city, it does not seem right to me to do these things, especially at my age and with my reputation. For it is generally believed, whether it be true or false, that in certain respects Socrates is superior to the majority of men. Now if those of you who are considered superior, be it in wisdom or courage or whatever other virtue makes them so, are seen behaving like that, it would be a disgrace. Yet I have often seen them do this sort of thing when standing trial, men who are thought to be somebody, doing amazing things as if they thought it a terrible thing to die, and as if they were to be immortal if you did not execute them. I think these men bring shame upon the city so that a stranger, too, would assume that those who are outstanding in virtue among the Athenians, whom they themselves select from themselves to fill offices of state and receive other honours, are in no way better than women. You should not act like that, gentlemen of the jury, those of you who have any reputation at all, and if we do, you should not allow it. You should make it very clear that you will more readily convict a man who performs these pitiful dramatics in court and so makes the city a laughing-stock, than a man who keeps quiet.

Quite apart from the question of reputation,

c gentlemen, I do not think it right to supplicate the jury and to be acquitted because of this, but to teach and persuade them. It is not the purpose of a juryman’s office to give justice as a favour to whoever seems good to him, but to judge according to law, and this he has sworn to do. We should not accustom you to perjure yourselves, nor should you make a habit of it. This is irreverent conduct for either of us.

d Do not deem it right for me, gentlemen of the jury, that I should act towards you in a way that I do not consider to be good or just or pious, especially, by Zeus, as I am being prosecuted by Meletus here for impiety; clearly, if I convinced you by my supplication to do violence to your oath of office, I would be teaching you not to believe that there are gods, and my defence would convict me of not believing in them. This is far from being the case, gentlemen, for I do believe in them as none of my accusers do. I leave it to you and the god to judge me in the way that will be best for me and for you.

[The jury now gives its verdict of guilty, and Meletus asks for the penalty of death.]

e There are many other reasons for my not being angry with you for convicting me, gentlemen of the jury, and what happened was not unexpected. 36 I am much more surprised at the number of votes cast on each side, for I did not think the decision would be by so few votes but by a great many. As it is, a switch of only thirty votes would have acquitted me. I think myself that I have been cleared on Meletus’ charges, and not only this, but it is clear to all that, if Anytus and Lycon had not joined him in accusing me, he would have been fined a thousand drachmas for not receiving a fifth of the votes.

b He assesses the penalty at death. So be it. What counter-assessment should I propose to you, gentlemen of the jury? Clearly it should be a penalty I deserve, and what do I deserve to suffer or to pay because I have deliberately not led a quiet life but have neglected what occupies most people: wealth, household affairs, the position of general or public orator or the other offices, the political clubs and factions that exist in the city? I thought myself too honest to survive if I occupied myself with those things. I did not follow that path that would have made me of no use either to you or to myself, but I went to each of you privately and conferred upon him what I say is the greatest benefit, by trying to persuade him not to care for any of his belongings

before caring that he himself should be as good and as wise as possible, not to care for the city's possessions more than for the city itself, and to care

- d** for other things in the same way. What do I deserve for being such a man? Some good, gentlemen of the jury, if I must truly make an assessment according to my deserts, and something suitable. What is suitable for a poor benefactor who needs leisure to exhort you? Nothing is more suitable, gentlemen, than for such a man to be fed in the Prytaneum,¹¹ much more suitable for him than for any of you who has won a victory at Olympia with a pair or a team of horses. The Olympian victor
- e** makes you think yourself happy; I make you be happy. Besides, he does not need food, but I do. So if I must make a just assessment of what I deserve,
- 37** I assess it at this: free meals in the Prytaneum.

When I say this you may think, as when I spoke of appeals to pity and entreaties, that I speak arrogantly, but that is not the case, gentlemen of the jury; rather it is like this: I am convinced that I never willingly wrong anyone, but I am not convincing you of this, for we have talked together but a short time. If it were the law with us, as it is

- b** elsewhere, that a trial for life should not last one but many days, you would be convinced, but now it is not easy to dispel great slanders in a short time. Since I am convinced that I wrong no one, I am not likely to wrong myself, to say that I deserve some evil and to make some such assessment against myself. What should I fear? That I should suffer the penalty Meletus has assessed against me, of which I say I do not know whether it is good or bad? Am I then to choose in preference to this something that I know very well to be an evil
- c** and assess the penalty at that? Imprisonment? Why should I live in prison, always subjected to the ruling magistrates? A fine, and imprisonment until I pay it? That would be the same thing for me, as I have no money. Exile? for perhaps you might accept that assessment.

I should have to be inordinately fond of life, gentlemen of the jury, to be so unreasonable as to suppose that other men will easily tolerate my company and conversation when you, my fellow

- d** citizens, have been unable to endure them, but found them a burden and resented them so that

you are now seeking to get rid of them. Far from it, gentlemen. It would be a fine life at my age to be driven out of one city after another, for I know very well that wherever I go the young men will

e listen to my talk as they do here. If I drive them away, they will themselves persuade their elders to drive me out; if I do not drive them away, their fathers and relations will drive me out on their behalf.

Perhaps someone might say: But Socrates, if you leave us will you not be able to live quietly, without talking? Now this is the most difficult point on which to convince some of you. If I say that it is impossible for me to keep quiet because that means disobeying the god, you will not believe me and will think I am being ironical. On the other hand, if I say that it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living for man, you will believe me even less.

- b** What I say is true, gentlemen, but it is not easy to convince you. At the same time, I am not accustomed to think that I deserve any penalty. If I had money, I would assess the penalty at the amount I could pay, for that would not hurt me, but I have none, unless you are willing to set the penalty at the amount I can pay, and perhaps I could pay you one mina of silver.¹² So that is my assessment.

Plato here, gentlemen of the jury, and Crito and Critoboulus and Apollodorus bid me put the penalty at thirty minae, and they will stand surety for the money. Well then, that is my assessment, and they will be sufficient guarantee of payment.

[The jury now votes again and sentences Socrates to death.]

- c** It is for the sake of a short time, gentlemen of the jury, that you will acquire the reputation and the guilt, in the eyes of those who want to denigrate the city, of having killed Socrates, a wise man, for they who want to revile you will say that I am wise even if I am not. If you had waited but a little while, this would have happened of its own accord. You see my age, that I am already advanced in years and close to death. I am saying this not

¹¹The Prytaneum was the magistrates' hall or town hall of Athens in which public entertainments were given, particularly to Olympian victors on their return home.

¹²One mina was 100 drachmas, equivalent to, say, twenty-five dollars, though in purchasing power probably five times greater. In any case, a ridiculously small sum under the circumstances.

d to all of you but to those who condemned me to death, and to these same jurors I say: Perhaps you think that I was convicted for lack of such words as might have convinced you, if I thought I should say or do all I could to avoid my sentence. Far from it. I was convicted because I lacked not words but boldness and shamelessness and the willingness to say to you what you would most gladly have heard from me, lamentations and tears and

e my saying and doing many things that I say are unworthy of me but that you are accustomed to hear from others. I did not think then that the danger I ran should make me do anything mean, nor do I now regret the nature of my defence. I would much rather die after this kind of defence than live after making the other kind. Neither I nor any

39 other man should, on trial or in war, contrive to avoid death at any cost. Indeed it is often obvious in battle that one could escape death by throwing away one's weapons and turning to supplicate one's pursuers, and there are many ways to avoid death in every kind of danger if one will venture to do or say anything to avoid it. It is not difficult to avoid death, gentlemen of the jury, it is much more difficult to avoid wickedness, for it runs faster than death. Slow and elderly as I am, I have been caught by the slower pursuer, whereas my accusers, being clever and sharp, have been caught by the quicker, wickedness. I leave you now, condemned to death by you, but they are condemned by truth to wickedness and injustice. So I maintain my assessment, and they maintain theirs. This perhaps had to happen, and I think it is as it should be.

c Now I want to prophesy to those who convicted me, for I am at the point when men prophesy most, when they are about to die. I say gentlemen, to those who voted to kill me, that vengeance will come upon you immediately after my death, a vengeance much harder to bear than that which you took in killing me. You did this in the belief that you would avoid giving an account of your life, but I maintain that quite the opposite will happen to you. There will be more people to test you, whom I now held back, but you did not notice it.

d They will be more difficult to deal with as they will be younger and you will resent them more. You are wrong if you believe that by killing people you will prevent anyone from reproaching you for not living in the right way. To escape such tests is neither possible nor good, but it is best and easiest not

to discredit others but to prepare oneself to be as good as possible. With this prophecy to you who convicted me, I part from you.

e I should be glad to discuss what has happened with those who voted for my acquittal during the time that the officers of the court are busy and I do not yet have to depart to my death. So, gentlemen, stay with me awhile, for nothing prevents us from talking to each other while it is allowed. To

40 you, as being my friends, I want to show the meaning of what has occurred. A surprising thing has happened to me, judges—you I would rightly call judges. At all previous times my usual mantic sign frequently opposed me, even in small matters, when I was about to do something wrong, but now that, as you can see for yourselves, I was faced with what one might think, and what is generally thought to be, the worst of evils, my divine sign has not opposed me, either when I left home at dawn, or when I came into court, or at any time that I was about to say something during my speech. Yet in other talks it often held me back in the middle of my speaking, but now it has opposed no word or deed of mine. What do I think is the reason for this? I will tell you. What has happened to me may well be a good thing, and those of us who believe death to be an evil are certainly mistaken. I have convincing proof of this, for it is impossible that my customary sign did not oppose me if I was not about to do what was right.

Let us reflect in this way, too, that there is good hope that death is a blessing, for it is one of two things: either the dead are nothing and have no perception of anything, or it is, as we are told, a change and a relocating for the soul from here to another place. If it is complete lack of perception, like a dreamless sleep, then death would be a great advantage. For I think that if one had to pick out that night during which a man slept soundly and did not dream, put beside it the other nights and days of his life, and then see how many days and nights had been better and more pleasant than that night, not only a private person but the great king would find them easy to count compared with the other days and nights. If death is like this I say it is an advantage, for all eternity would then seem to be no more than a single night. If, on the other hand, death is a change from here to another place, and what we are told is true and all who have died are there, what greater

- 41 blessing could there be, gentlemen of the jury? If anyone arriving in Hades will have escaped from those who call themselves judges here, and will find those true judges who are said to sit in judgment there, Minos and Radamanthus and Aeacus and Triptolemus and the other demi-gods who have been upright in their own life, would that be a poor kind of change? Again, what would one of you give to keep company with Orpheus and Musaeus, Hesiod and Homer? I am willing to die many times if that is true. It would be a wonderful way for me to spend my time whenever I met Palamedes and Ajax, the son of Telamon, and any other of the men of old who died through an unjust conviction, to compare my experience with theirs. I think it would be pleasant. Most important, I could spend my time testing and examining people there, as I do here, as to who among them is wise, and who thinks he is, but is not.

What would one not give, gentlemen of the jury, for the opportunity to examine the man who led the great expedition against Troy, or Odysseus, or Sisyphus, and innumerable other men and women one could mention. It would be an extraordinary happiness to talk with them, to keep company with them and examine them. In any case, they would certainly not put one to death for doing so. They are happier there than we are here in other respects, and for the rest of time they are deathless, if indeed what we are told is true.

- You too must be of good hope as regards death, gentlemen of the jury, and keep this one truth in mind, that a good man cannot be harmed either in life or in death, and that his affairs are not neglected by the gods. What has happened to me now has not happened of itself, but it is clear to me that it was better for me to die now and to escape from trouble. That is why my divine sign did not oppose me at any point. So I am certainly not angry with those who convicted me, or with my accusers. Of course that was not their purpose when they accused and convicted me, but they
- e thought they were hurting me, and for this they deserve blame. This much I ask from them: when my sons grow up, avenge yourselves by causing them the same kind of grief that I caused you, if you think they care for money or anything else more than they care for virtue, or if they think they are somebody when they are nobody.

- Reproach them as I reproach you, that they do not care for the right things and think they are worthy when they are not worthy of anything. If you do this, I shall have been justly treated by you, and my sons also.

Now the hour to part has come. I go to die, you go to live. Which of us goes to the better lot is known to no one, except the god.

COMMENTARY AND QUESTIONS

As we delve into the character of Socrates as Plato portrays it in this dialogue, we should be struck by his single-mindedness. If it should turn out that death is a “change from here to another place,” how would Socrates spend his time there? He would continue precisely the activities that had occupied him in this life; he would “examine” all the famous heroes to see which of them is wise. And why does he think such examination is so important, a “service to the god”? No doubt because it undermines hubris, that arrogance of thinking one possesses “a wisdom more than human.”

Read 17a–18a In this short introductory section, Socrates contrasts himself with his accusers, characterizes the kind of man he is, and reminds the jury of its duty.

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- Q1. What is the function of Socrates’ contrast between **persuasion** and **truth**? List the terms in which each is described.
- Q2. What kind of man does Socrates say that he is?
- Q3. What is his challenge to the jury?
-



“As scarce as truth is, the supply has always been in excess of the demand.”

Josh Billings (1818–1885)

Read 18b–19a Socrates distinguishes between two sets of accusers.

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- Q4. Identify the **earlier accusers** and the later accusers. How do they differ?

Q5. Why is it going to be very difficult for Socrates to defend himself against the earlier accusers?

Read 19b–24b Here we have Socrates’ defense against the “earlier accusers.” He tries to show how his “unpopularity” arises from his practice of questioning. He describes the origins of this occupation of his and discusses the sort of wisdom to which he lays claim.

Q6. What are the three points made against him in the older accusations?

Q7. What does Socrates say about each of these accusations?

Q8. How does Socrates distinguish himself from the Sophists here?

We have mentioned the **Oracle at Delphi** before. One could go there and, after appropriate sacrifices, pose a question. The “Pythian” (21a) was a priestess of Apollo who would, in the name of the god, reply to the questions posed. We have noted that the Oracle characteristically replied in a riddle, so it is not perverse for Socrates to wonder what the answer to Chairephon’s question means. What sort of wisdom is this in which no one can surpass him? He devises his questioning technique to clarify the meaning of the answer.

Note that several times during his speech Socrates asks the jury not to create a disturbance (20e, 27b, 30c). We can imagine that he is interrupted at those points by hoots, catcalls, or their ancient Greek equivalents.

Q9. Which three classes of people did Socrates question? What, in each case, was the result?

Q10. What conclusion does Socrates draw from his investigations?

Here we can address that paradox noted earlier (page 100) arising out of Socrates’ simultaneous profession of ignorance, his identification of virtue with knowledge, and the claim (obvious at many points in the *Apology*) that he is both a wise

and a good man. In light of his confessed ignorance and the identification of knowledge with virtue, it seems he should conclude that he *isn’t* virtuous. But it is the distinction drawn in 22e–23b between a wisdom appropriate for “the god” on the one hand and “**human wisdom**” on the other that resolves this paradox. The god, Socrates assumes, actually knows the forms of piety, justice, *areté*, and the other excellences proper to a human being. Humans, by contrast, do not; and this is proved, Socrates thinks, by the god’s declaration that there is no man wiser than he—who knows that he doesn’t know!



“Knowledge is proud that he has learned so much; Wisdom is humble that he knows no more.”

William Cowper (1731–1800)

Because humans do not know what makes for virtue and a good life, the best they can do is subject themselves to constant dialectical examination. This searching critique will tend to rid us of false opinions and will also cure us of the hubris of thinking that we have a wisdom appropriate only to the god. The outcome of such examination, acknowledging our ignorance, Socrates calls “human wisdom,” which by comparison with divine wisdom is “worth little or nothing.” Still, it is the sort of wisdom, Socrates believes, that is appropriate to creatures like us. And that is why “the unexamined life is not worth living” for a human being (38a). And that is why there is “no greater blessing for the city” than Socrates’ never-ending examination of its citizens (30a). Such self-examination is the way for us to become as wise and good as it is possible for human beings to be.

Read 24b–28a At this point, Socrates begins to address the “**later accusers.**” He does so in his usual question-and-answer fashion. Apparently, three persons submitted the charge to the court: Meletus, Anytus, and Lycon. Meletus seems to

have been the primary sponsor of the charge, seconded by the other two. So Socrates calls Meletus forward and questions him. As in the *Euthyphro*, two charges are mentioned. Be sure you are clear about what they are.

In 24c Socrates tells the jury his purpose in cross-examining Meletus. He wants to demonstrate that Meletus is someone who ought not to be taken seriously, that he has not thought through the meaning of the charge, and that he doesn't even care about these matters.* In short, Socrates is about to demonstrate to the jury not only what sort of man Meletus is, and that he is not wise, but also what sort of man Socrates is. It is the truth, remember, that Socrates is after; if the jury is going to decide whether Socrates is impious and a corrupter of youth, they should have the very best evidence about what sort of man they are judging. Socrates is going to oblige them by giving them a personal demonstration.

He begins by taking up the charge of corrupting the youth. If Meletus claims that Socrates corrupts the youth, he must understand what corrupting is. To understand what it is to corrupt, one must also understand what it is to improve the youth. And so Socrates asks him, “Who improves them?”

Q11. Does Meletus have a ready answer? What conclusion does Socrates draw from this? (24d)

When Meletus does answer, Socrates' questions provoke him to say that all the other citizens improve the youth and only Socrates corrupts them!

Q12. How does Socrates use the analogy of the horse breeders to cast doubt on Meletus' concern for these matters?

Starting in 25c, Socrates presents Meletus with a **dilemma**. The form of a *dilemma* is this: Two

alternatives are presented between which it seems necessary to choose, but each alternative has consequences that are unwelcome, usually for different reasons. The two alternatives are called the “horns” of a dilemma, and there are three ways to deal with them. One can grasp one of the horns (that is, embrace that alternative with its consequences); one can grasp the other horn; or one can (sometimes, but not always) “go between the horns” by finding a third alternative that has not been considered.

Q13. What are the horns of the dilemma that Socrates presents to Meletus?

Q14. How does Meletus respond?

Q15. How does Socrates refute this response?

Q16. Supposing that this refutation is correct and that one cannot “pass through” the horns, what is the consequence of embracing the other horn? How does Socrates use the distinction between punishment and instruction?

Again Socrates drives home the conclusion that Meletus has “never been at all concerned with these matters.” If he had been, he surely would have thought these things through. As it is, he cannot be taken seriously.

At 26b, the topic switches to the other charge. As the examination proceeds, we can see Meletus becoming angrier and angrier, less and less willing to cooperate in what he clearly sees is his own destruction. No doubt this is an example—produced right there for the jury to see—of the typical response to Socrates' questioning. We might think Socrates is not being prudent here in angering Meletus and his supporters in the jury. But again, it is for Socrates a matter of the truth; this is the kind of man he is. And the jury should see it if they are going to judge truly.

Q17. Socrates claims that Meletus contradicts himself. In what way?

Q18. What “divine activities” must the jury have understood him to be referring to? (27d–e)

*Compare *Apology* 24c, 25c, 26a,b with *Euthyphro* 2c–d, 3a.

Q19. What does Socrates claim will be his undoing, if he is undone?

Read 28b–35d Socrates is now finished with Meletus, satisfied that he has shown him to be thoughtless and unreliable. He even claims to have proved that he is “not guilty” of the charges Meletus has brought against him. No doubt Socrates believes that one cannot be rightly convicted on charges that are as vague and undefined as these have proved to be. Do you think this suffices for a defense?

Socrates then turns to more general matters relevant to his defense. He first imagines someone saying that the very fact that he is on trial for his life is shameful. How could he have behaved in such a manner as to bring himself to this?

- Q20. On what principle does Socrates base his response? Do you agree with this principle?
- Q21. To whom does Socrates compare himself? Is the comparison apt? How do you think this would have struck an Athenian jury?
- Q22. Socrates refers to his military service; in what respects does he say his life as a philosopher is like that?
- Q23. Why does he say that to fear death is to think oneself wise when one is not? Do you agree with this? If not, why not?
-

In 29c–d Socrates imagines that the jury might offer him a “deal,” sparing his life if only he ceased practicing philosophy. Xenophon tells us that during the reign of the Thirty, Critias and another man, Charicles, demanded that Socrates cease conversing with the young. If this story is accurate, it may be that Socrates has this demand in mind. Or it may be that there had been talk of such a “deal” before the trial.

Q24. What does Socrates say his response would be? (Compare Acts 5:29 in the Bible.)

Q25. Why does he say that “there is no greater blessing for the city” than his service to the god? What are “the most important things”? Do you agree?

In the section that begins in 30b, Socrates makes some quite astonishing claims:

- If they kill him, they will harm themselves more than they harm him.
- A better man cannot be harmed by a worse man.
- He is defending himself not for his own sake but for theirs.

These claims seem to turn the usual ways of thinking about such matters completely upside down. Indeed, to our natural common sense, they seem incredible. They must have seemed so to the jury as well. We usually think that others can harm us. Socrates tells us, however, that this natural conviction of ours is false. It’s not that we cannot be harmed at all, however. Indeed, we can be harmed—but only if we do it to ourselves! How can we harm ourselves? By making ourselves into worse persons than we otherwise would be. We harm ourselves by acting unjustly. That is why Socrates says that if his fellow citizens kill him they will harm themselves more than they will harm him. They will be doing injustice, thereby corrupting their souls; and the most important thing is care for the soul.

Q26. Socrates claims throughout to be concerned for the souls of the jury members. Show how this is consistent with his daily practice in the streets of Athens.

Q27. What use does Socrates make of the image of the “gadfly”?

Socrates feels a need to explain why, if he is so wise, he has not entered politics. There are two reasons, one being the nature of his “wisdom.” He focuses here on the other reason: his “sign” prevented it. If it had not, he says, there is little doubt

that he would “have died long ago” and could not have been a “blessing to the city” for all these years.

He cites two incidents as evidence of this, one occurring when the city was democratic, one under the rule of the Thirty. He is trying to convince the jury that he is truly apolitical because he was capable of resisting both sorts of government. In both cases, he resisted alone because the others were doing something contrary to law, and in both cases he was in some danger. Why should he feel the need to establish his political neutrality? Surely because there was a political aspect to the trial—not explicit, but in the background.

In 33a, he gets to what many people feel is the heart of the matter. Let us ask: Why was Socrates brought to trial at all? There was his reputation as a Sophist, of course—all those accusations of the “earlier accusers.” There was the general hostility that his questioning generated. There was his “divine sign.” But it is doubtful that these alone would have sufficed to bring him to court. What probably tipped the balance was the despicable political career of some who had once been closely associated with him, in particular Critias, leader of the Thirty, and Alcibiades, the brilliant and dashing young traitor. This kind of “guilt by association” is very common and very hard to defend against. If these men had spent so much time with Socrates, why hadn’t they turned out better? Socrates must be responsible for their crimes! This could not be mentioned in the official charge because it would have violated the amnesty proclaimed by the democracy after the Thirty were overthrown. But it is hard not to believe that it is lurking in the background.

In defending himself against this charge, Socrates makes another remarkable claim. He has *never*, he says, “been anyone’s teacher.” For that reason, he cannot “be held responsible for the good or bad conduct of these people, as I never promised to teach them anything and have not done so.” This requires some explaining.

In the dialogue *Meno*, Socrates calls over a slave boy who has never studied geometry. He draws a square on the ground and divides it equally by bisecting the sides vertically and horizontally. (Draw

such a square yourself.) He then asks the boy to construct another square with an area twice the original area. Clearly, if the original area is four, we want a square with an area of eight. But how can we get it? (Before you go on, think a minute and see if you can solve it.)

Socrates proceeds by asking the boy questions. The first, rather natural suggestion is to double the length of the sides. But on reflection, the boy can see (as you can, too) that this gives a square of sixteen. Wanting something between four and sixteen, the boy tries making the sides of the new square one and a half times the original. But this gives a square of nine, not eight. Finally, at a suggestion from Socrates, the boy sees that taking the diagonal of the original square as one side of a new square solves the problem. (Do you see why?)*

How does this illuminate Socrates’ claim never to have been anyone’s teacher? The crucial point is that the boy can just “see” that the first two solutions are wrong. And when the correct solution is presented, he “recognizes” it as correct. But he has never been taught geometry! Moreover, his certainty about the correct solution does not now rest on Socrates’ authority, but on his own recognition of the truth. So Socrates doesn’t teach him this truth!

This leaves us with another puzzle. How could the boy have recognized the true solution as the true one? Consider this analogy. You are walking down the street and see someone approaching. At first she is too far away to identify, but as she gets nearer you say, “Why, that’s Joan!” Now, what must be the case for you to “recognize” Joan truly? You must already have been acquainted with Joan in some way. That alone is the condition under which recognition is possible.

Socrates thinks the slave boy’s case must be similar. He must already have been acquainted with this truth; otherwise, it is not possible to explain how he recognizes it when it is present before him.

*A fuller explanation with a diagram of the square can be found on p. 151.

But when? Clearly not in this life. Socrates draws what seems to be the only possible conclusion: that he was acquainted with this truth before birth and that it was always within him. (This is taken as evidence that the soul exists before the body, but that is not our present concern.) Coming to know is just recognizing what, in some implicit sense, one has within oneself all along. Socrates simply asks the right questions or presents the appropriate stimuli. But he doesn't "implant" knowledge; he doesn't teach.

In the dialogue *Theatetus*, Plato represents Socrates as using a striking image:

I am so far like the midwife that I cannot myself give birth to wisdom, and the common reproach is true, that, though I question others, I can myself bring nothing to light because there is no wisdom in me. . . . The many admirable truths they bring to birth have been discovered by themselves from within. But the delivery is heaven's work and mine. (*Theatetus* 150c–d)³

Here, then, is the background for the claim that Socrates has never taught anyone anything. His role is not that of teacher or imparter of knowledge but that of "midwife," assisting at the birth of ideas which are within the "learner" all along and helping to identify those that are "illegitimate." This is why he says that he cannot be held responsible for the behavior of men like Critias and Alcibiades.

Q28. What additional arguments does Socrates use in 33d–34b?

Q29. Why does he refuse to use the traditional "appeal to pity"? See particularly 35c.

Read 35e–38b The verdict has been given, and now, according to custom, both the prosecution and the defense may propose appropriate penalties. Meletus, of course, asks for death.

Q30. What penalty does Socrates first suggest? Why?

Along the way, Socrates says something interesting. "The Olympian victor makes you think

yourself happy; I make you be happy." What could this mean? Compare health. Is it possible to feel healthy, think yourself healthy, while actually being unhealthy? Of course. A beginning cancer hurts not at all; in that condition, one can feel perfectly all right. No one, however, would say that a person in whom a cancer is growing is healthy. In the same way, Socrates suggests that feeling happy is not the same thing as actually being happy. Think of a city the night after its major league team wins the championship. People are dancing in the streets, hugging each other, laughing and celebrating. They are feeling happy. Are these happy people? Not necessarily. When the euphoria wears off, they may well return to miserable lives. Happiness, Socrates suggests, is a condition or state of the soul, not a matter of how you feel.* This condition, he claims, is what his questioning about virtue can produce.

Q31. Why does Socrates resist exile as a penalty?

Q32. What does he say is "the greatest good" for a man? Why?

Q33. What penalty does he finally offer?

Read 38c–end After being sentenced to death, Socrates addresses first those who voted to condemn him and then his friends. To both, he declares himself satisfied. He has presented himself for what he is; he has not betrayed himself by saying what they wanted to hear to avoid death.

Q34. What does Socrates say is more difficult to avoid than death? And who has not avoided it?

Q35. What does he "prophesy"?

Q36. What "surprising thing" does he point out to his friends? What does he take it to mean?

Q37. What two possibilities does Socrates consider death may hold? Are there any he misses?

Q38. What is the "one truth" that Socrates wishes his friends to keep in mind? How does he try to comfort them?

*If Socrates is right, our contemporary, endless fascination with how we feel about things—including ourselves—is a mistake.

CRITO

*Translator's Introduction*

About the time of Socrates' trial, a state galley had set out on an annual religious mission to Delos, and while it was away no execution was allowed to take place. So it was that Socrates was kept in prison for a month after the trial. The ship has now arrived at Cape Sunium in Attica and is thus expected at the Piraeus momentarily. So Socrates' old and faithful friend, Crito, makes one last effort to persuade him to escape into exile, and all arrangements for this plan have been made. It is this conversation between the two old friends that Plato professes to report in this dialogue. It is, as Crito plainly tells him, his last chance, but Socrates will not take it, and he gives his reasons for his refusal. Whether this conversation took place at this particular time is not important, for there is every reason to believe that Socrates' friends tried to plan his escape, and that he refused. Plato more than hints that the authorities would not have minded much, as long as he left the country.

The Dialogue

43 SOCRATES: Why have you come so early, Crito?

Or is it not still early?

CRITO: It certainly is.

S: How early?

C: Early dawn.

S: I am surprised that the warder was willing to listen to you.

C: He is quite friendly to me by now, Socrates.

I have been here often and I have given him something.

S: Have you just come, or have you been here for some time?

C: A fair time.

b S: Then why did you not wake me right away but sit there in silence?

C: By Zeus no, Socrates. I would not myself want to be in distress and awake so long. I have been surprised to see you so peacefully asleep. It was on purpose that I did not wake you, so that you should spend your time most agreeably. Often in the past throughout my life, I have considered the way you live happy, and especially so now that you bear your present misfortune so easily and lightly.

S: It would not be fitting at my age to resent the fact that I must die now.

c C: Other men of your age are caught in such misfortunes, but their age does not prevent them resenting their fate.

S: That is so. Why have you come so early?

C: I bring bad news, Socrates, not for you, apparently, but for me and all your friends the news is bad and hard to bear. Indeed, I would count it among the hardest.

d S: What is it? Or has the ship arrived from Delos, at the arrival of which I must die?

C: It has not arrived yet, but it will, I believe, arrive today, according to a message brought by some men from Sunium, where they left it.

This makes it obvious that it will come today, and that your life must end tomorrow.

S: May it be for the best. If it so please the gods, so be it. However, I do not think it will arrive today.

C: What indication have you of this?

44 S: I will tell you. I must die the day after the ship arrives.

C: That is what those in authority say.

S: Then I do not think it will arrive on this coming day, but on the next. I take to witness of this a dream I had a little earlier during this night. It looks as if it was the right time for you not to wake me.

C: What was your dream?

S: I thought that a beautiful and comely woman dressed in white approached me. She called me and said: "Socrates, may you arrive at fertile Phthia¹ on the third day."

b

¹A quotation from the ninth book of *The Iliad* (363). Achilles has rejected all the presents of Agamemnon for him to return to the battle and threatens to go home. He says his ships will sail in the morning, and with good weather he might arrive on the third day "in fertile Phthia" (which is his home). The dream means, obviously, that on the third day Socrates' soul, after death, will find its home. As always, counting the first member of a series, the third day is the day after tomorrow.

- c: A strange dream, Socrates.
- s: But it seems clear enough to me, Crito.
- c: Too clear it seems, my dear Socrates, but listen to me even now and be saved. If you die, it will not be a single misfortune for me. Not only will I be deprived of a friend, the like of whom I shall never find again, but many people who do not know you or me very well will think that I could have saved you if I were willing to spend money, but that I did not care to do so. Surely there can be no worse reputation than to be thought to value money more highly than one's friends, for the majority will not believe that you yourself were not willing to leave prison while we were eager for you to do so.
- s: My good Crito, why should we care so much for what the majority think? The most reasonable people, to whom one should pay more attention, will believe that things were done as they were done.
- d c: You see, Socrates, that one must also pay attention to the opinion of the majority. Your present situation makes clear that the majority can inflict not the least but pretty well the greatest evils if one is slandered among them.
- s: Would that the majority could inflict the greatest evils, for they would then be capable of the greatest good, and that would be fine, but now they cannot do either. They cannot make a man either wise or foolish, but they inflict things haphazardly.
- e c: That may be so. But tell me this, Socrates, are you anticipating that I and your other friends would have trouble with the informers if you escape from here, as having stolen you away, and that we should be compelled to lose all our property or pay heavy fines and suffer other
- 45 punishment besides? If you have any such fear, forget it. We would be justified in running this risk to save you, and worse, if necessary. Do follow my advice, and do not act differently.
- s: I do have these things in mind, Crito, and also many others.
- c: Have no such fear. It is not much money that some people require to save you and get you out of here. Further, do you not see that those informers are cheap, and that not much money would be needed to deal with them? My

- money is available and is, I think, sufficient. If, because of your affection for me, you feel you should not spend any of mine, there are those strangers here ready to spend money. One of them, Simmias the Theban, has brought enough for this very purpose. Cebes, too, and a good many others. So, as I say, do not let this fear make you hesitate to save yourself, nor let what you said in court trouble you, that you would not know what to do with yourself if you left Athens, for you would be welcomed
- b in many places to which you might go. If you want to go to Thessaly, I have friends there who will greatly appreciate you and keep you safe, so that no one in Thessaly will harm you. Besides, Socrates, I do not think that what you are doing is right, to give up your life when you can save it, and to hasten your fate as your enemies would hasten it, and indeed have hastened it in their wish to destroy you. Moreover, I think you are betraying your sons
- c by going away and leaving them, when you could bring them up and educate them. You thus show no concern for what their fate may be. They will probably have the usual fate of orphans. Either one should not have children, or one should share with them to the end the toil of upbringing and education. You seem to me to choose the easiest path, whereas one should choose the path a good and courageous man would choose, particularly when one claims throughout one's life to care for virtue.
- d
- e I feel ashamed on your behalf and on behalf of us, your friends, lest all that has happened to you be thought due to cowardice on our part: the fact that your trial came to court when it need not have done so, the handling of the trial itself, and now this absurd ending which will be thought to have got beyond our control through some cowardice and unmanliness
- 46 on our part, since we did not save you, or you save yourself, when it was possible and could be done if we had been of the slightest use. Consider, Socrates, whether this is not only evil, but shameful, both for you and for us. Take counsel with yourself, or rather the

time for counsel is past and the decision should have been taken, and there is no further opportunity, for this whole business must be ended tonight. If we delay now, then it will no longer be possible, it will be too late. Let me persuade you on every count, Socrates, and do not act otherwise.

- b** s: My dear Crito, your eagerness is worth much if it should have some right aim; if not, then the greater your keenness the more difficult it is to deal with. We must therefore examine whether we should act in this way or not, as not only now but at all times I am the kind of man who listens only to the argument that on reflection seems best to me. I cannot, now that this fate has come upon me, discard the arguments I used; they seem to me much the same. I value and respect the same principles
- c** as before, and if we have no better arguments to bring up at this moment, be sure that I shall not agree with you, not even if the power of the majority were to frighten us with more bogeys, as if we were children, with threats of incarcerations and executions and confiscation of property. How should we examine this matter most reasonably? Would it be by taking up first your argument about the opinions of men, whether it is sound in every case that one should pay attention to some opinions,
- d** but not to others? Or was that well-spoken before the necessity to die came upon me, but now it is clear that this was said in vain for the sake of argument, that it was in truth play and nonsense? I am eager to examine together with you, Crito, whether this argument will appear in any way different to me in my present circumstances, or whether it remains the same, whether we are to abandon it or believe it. It was said on every occasion by those who
- e** thought they were speaking sensibly, as I have just now been speaking, that one should greatly value some people's opinions, but not others. Does that seem to you a sound statement?

You, as far as a human being can tell, are exempt from the likelihood of dying tomorrow, so the present misfortune is not likely to lead you astray. Consider then, do you not think it a sound statement that one must not value all the opinions of men, but some and not others,

nor the opinions of all men, but those of some and not of others? What do you say? Is this not well said?

- c**: It is.
- s**: One should value the good opinions, and not the bad ones?
- c**: Yes.
- s**: The good opinions are those of wise men, the bad ones those of foolish men?
- c**: Of course.
- s**: Come then, what of statements such as this:
- b** Should a man professionally engaged in physical training pay attention to the praise and blame and opinion of any man, or to those of one man only, namely a doctor or trainer?
- c**: To those of one only.
- s**: He should therefore fear the blame and welcome the praise of that one man, and not those of the many?
- c**: Obviously.
- s**: He must then act and exercise, eat and drink in the way the one, the trainer and the one who knows, thinks right, not all the others?
- c**: That is so.
- c** **s**: Very well. And if he disobeys the one, disregards his opinion and his praises while valuing those of the many who have no knowledge, will he not suffer harm?
- c**: Of course.
- s**: What is that harm, where does it tend, and what part of the man who disobeys does it affect?
- c**: Obviously the harm is to his body, which it ruins.
- s**: Well said. So with other matters, not to enumerate them all, and certainly with actions just and unjust, shameful and beautiful, good and bad, about which we are now deliberating, should we follow the opinion of the many and fear it; or that of the one, if there is one who has knowledge of these things and before whom we feel fear and shame more than before all the others. If we do not follow his directions, we shall harm and corrupt that part of ourselves that is improved by just actions and destroyed by unjust actions. Or is there nothing in this?
- c**: I think there certainly is, Socrates.
- s**: Come now, if we ruin that which is improved by health and corrupted by disease by not following the opinions of those who know, is life

- e** worth living for us when that is ruined? And that is the body, is it not?
 C: Yes.
 S: And is life worth living with a body that is corrupted and in bad condition?
 C: In no way.
 S: And is life worth living for us with that part of us corrupted that unjust action harms and just action benefits? Or do we think that part of us, whatever it is, that is concerned with justice and injustice, is inferior to the body?
- 48**
 C: Not at all.
 S: It is more valuable?
 C: Much more.
 S: We should not then think so much of what the majority will say about us, but what he will say who understands justice and injustice, the one, that is, and the truth itself. So that, in the first place, you were wrong to believe that we should care for the opinion of the many about what is just, beautiful, good, and their opposites. "But," someone might say "the many are able to put us to death."
- b** C: That too is obvious, Socrates, and someone might well say so.
 S: And, my admirable friend, that argument that we have gone through remains, I think, as before. Examine the following statement in turn as to whether it stays the same or not, that the most important thing is not life, but the good life.
 C: It stays the same.
 S: And that the good life, the beautiful life, and the just life are the same; does that still hold, or not?
 C: It does hold.
 S: As we have agreed so far, we must examine next whether it is right for me to try to get out of here when the Athenians have not acquitted me. If it is seen to be right, we will try to do so; if it is not, we will abandon the idea. As for those questions you raise about money, reputation, the upbringing of children, Crito, those considerations in truth belong to those people who easily put men to death and would bring them to life again if they could, without thinking; I mean the majority of men. For us, however, since our argument leads to this, the only valid consideration, as we were saying just now, is whether we should be acting rightly in giving money and gratitude to those who will
- d** lead me out of here, and ourselves helping with the escape, or whether in truth we shall do wrong in doing all this. If it appears that we shall be acting unjustly, then we have no need at all to take into account whether we shall have to die if we stay here and keep quiet, or suffer in another way, rather than do wrong.
 C: I think you put that beautifully, Socrates, but see what we should do.
- e** S: Let us examine the question together, my dear friend, and if you can make any objection while I am speaking, make it and I will listen to you, but if you have no objection to make, my dear Crito, then stop now from saying the same thing so often, that I must leave here against the will of the Athenians. I think it important to persuade you before I act, and not to act against your wishes. See whether the start of our enquiry is adequately stated, and try to answer what I ask you in the way you think best.
- 49**
 C: I shall try.
 S: Do we say that one must never in any way do wrong willingly, or must one do wrong in one way and not in another? Is to do wrong never good or admirable, as we have agreed in the past, or have all these former agreements been washed out during the last few days? Have we at our age failed to notice for some time that in our serious discussions we were no different from children? Above all, is the truth such as we used to say it was, whether the majority agree or not, and whether we must still suffer worse things than we do now, or will be treated more gently, that nonetheless, wrongdoing is in every way harmful and shameful to the wrongdoer? Do we say so or not?
 C: We do.
 S: So one must never do wrong.
 C: Certainly not.
 S: Nor must one, when wronged, inflict wrong in return, as the majority believe, since one must never do wrong.
- c** C: That seems to be the case.
 S: Come now, should one injure anyone or not, Crito?
 C: One must never do so.
 S: Well then, if one is oneself injured, is it right, as the majority say, to inflict an injury in return, or is it not?

- c: It is never right.
- s: Injuring people is no different from wrongdoing.
- c: That is true.
- s: One should never do wrong in return, nor injure any man, whatever injury one has suffered at his hands. And Crito, see that you do
- d** not agree to this, contrary to your belief. For I know that only a few people hold this view or will hold it, and there is no common ground between those who hold this view and those who do not, but they inevitably despise each other's views. So then consider very carefully whether we have this view in common, and whether you agree, and let this be the basis of our deliberation, that neither to do wrong or to return a wrong is ever right, not even to injure in return for an injury received. Or do you disagree and do not share this view as a
- e** basis for discussion? I have held it for a long time and still hold it now, but if you think otherwise, tell me now. If, however, you stick to our former opinion, then listen to the next point.
- c: I stick to it and agree with you. So say on.
- s: Then I state the next point, or rather I ask you: when one has come to an agreement that is just with someone, should one fulfill it or cheat on it?
- c: One should fulfill it.
- s: See what follows from this: if we leave here
- 50** without the city's permission, are we injuring people whom we should least injure? And are we sticking to a just agreement, or not?
- c: I cannot answer your question, Socrates. I do not know.
- s: Look at it this way. If, as we were planning to run away from here, or whatever one should call it, the laws and the state came and confronted us and asked: "Tell me, Socrates, what are you intending to do? Do you not by this action you are attempting intend to
- b** destroy us, the laws, and indeed the whole city, as far as you are concerned? Or do you think it possible for a city not to be destroyed if the verdicts of its courts have no force but are nullified and set at naught by private individuals?" What shall we answer to this and other such arguments? For many
- things could be said, especially by an orator on behalf of this law we are destroying, which orders that
- c** the judgments of the courts shall be carried out. Shall we say in answer, "The city wronged me, and its decision was not right." Shall we say that, or what?
- c: Yes, by Zeus, Socrates, that is our answer.
- s: Then what if the laws said: "Was that the agreement between us, Socrates, or was it to respect the judgments that the city came to?" And if we wondered at their words, they would perhaps add: "Socrates, do not wonder at what we say but answer, since you are accustomed to proceed by question and answer.
- d** Come now, what accusation do you bring against us and the city, that you should try to destroy us? Did we not, first, bring you to birth, and was it not through us that your father married your mother and begat you? Tell us, do you find anything to criticize in those of us who are concerned with marriage?" And I would say that I do not criticize them. "Or in those of us concerned with the nurture of babies and the education that you too received? Were those assigned to that subject not right to instruct your father to educate you in the arts and in physical culture?" And I would say that they were right. "Very well," they would continue, "and after you were born and nurtured and educated, could you, in the first place, deny that you are our offspring and servant, both you and your forefathers? If that is so, do you think that we are on an equal footing as regards the right, and that whatever we do to you it is right for you to do to us? You were not on an equal footing with your father as regards the right, nor with your master if
- 51** you had one, so as to retaliate for anything they did to you, to revile them if they reviled you, to beat them if they beat you, and so with many other things. Do you think you have this right to retaliation against your country and its laws? That if we undertake to destroy you and think it right to do so, you can undertake to destroy us, as far as you can, in return? And will you say that you are right to do so, you who truly care for virtue? Is your wisdom such as not to realize that your country is to be honoured more than your mother, your father and

all your ancestors, that it is more to be revered and more sacred, and that it counts for more among the gods and sensible men, that you

- b** must worship it, yield to it and placate its anger more than your father's? You must either persuade it or obey its orders, and endure in silence whatever it instructs you to endure, whether blows or bonds, and if it leads you into war to be wounded or killed, you must obey. To do so is right, and one must not give way or retreat or leave one's post, but both in war and in courts and everywhere else, one must obey the commands of one's city and country, or persuade it as to the nature of justice. It is impious to bring violence to bear against your mother or father, it is much more so to use it against your country." What shall we say in reply, Crito, that the laws speak the truth, or not?
- c** I think they do.
- s**: "Reflect now, Socrates," the laws might say "that if what we say is true, you are not treating us rightly by planning to do what you are planning. We have given you birth, nurtured you, educated you, we have given you and all other citizens a share of all the good things we could. Even so, by giving every Athenian the opportunity, after he has reached manhood and observed the affairs of the city and us the laws, we proclaim that if we do not please him, he can take his possessions and go wherever he pleases. Not one of our laws raises any obstacle or forbids him, if he is not satisfied with us or the city, if one of you wants to go and live in a colony or wants to go anywhere else, and keep his property. We say, however, that whoever
- d** of you remains, when he sees how we conduct our trials and manage the city in other ways, has in fact come to an agreement with us to obey our instructions. We say that the one who disobeys does wrong in three ways, first because in us he disobeys his parents, also those who brought him up, and because, in spite of his agreement, he neither obeys us nor, if we do something wrong, does he try to persuade
- e** us to be better. Yet we only propose things, we do not issue savage commands to do whatever we order; we give two alternatives, either to persuade us or to do what we say. He does

neither. We do say that you too, Socrates, are open to those charges if you do what you have in mind; you would be among, not the least, but the most guilty of the Athenians." And if I should say "Why so?" they might well be right to upbraid me and say that I am among the Athenians who most definitely came to that agreement with them. They might well say:

- b** "Socrates, we have convincing proofs that we and the city were congenial to you. You would not have dwelt here most consistently of all the Athenians if the city had not been exceedingly pleasing to you. You have never left the city, even to see a festival, nor for any other reason except military service; you have never gone to stay in any other city, as people do; you have had no desire to know another city or other
- c** laws; we and our city satisfied you. "So decisively did you choose us and agree to be a citizen under us. Also, you have had children in this city, thus showing that it was congenial to you. Then at your trial you could have assessed your penalty at exile if you wished, and you are now attempting to do against the city's wishes what you could then have done with her consent. Then you prided yourself that you did not resent death, but you chose, as you said, death in preference to exile. Now, however, those words do not make you ashamed, and you pay no heed to us, the laws, as you plan to destroy us, and you act like the meanest type of slave by trying to run away, contrary to your undertakings and your agreement to live as a citizen under us. First then, answer us on this very point, whether we speak the truth when we say that you agreed, not only in words but by your deeds, to live in accordance with us." What are we to say to that, Crito? Must we not agree?

c: We must, Socrates.

- s**: "Surely," they might say, "you are breaking the undertakings and agreements that you made with us without compulsion or deceit, and under no pressure of time for deliberation. You have had seventy years during which you could have gone away if you did not like us, and if you thought our agreements unjust. You did not choose to go to Sparta or to Crete, which you are always saying are well governed, nor to any other city, Greek or foreign. You

have been away from Athens less than the lame or the blind or other handicapped people. It is clear that the city has been outstandingly more congenial to you than to other Athenians, and so have we, the laws, for what city can please without laws? Will you then not now stick to our agreements? You will, Socrates, if we can persuade you, and not make yourself a laughingstock by leaving the city.

“For consider what good you will do yourself or your friends by breaking our agreements and committing such a wrong? It is pretty obvious that your friends will themselves be in danger of exile, disfranchisement

- b** and loss of property. As for yourself, if you go to one of the nearby cities—Thebes or Megara, both are well governed—you will arrive as an enemy to their government; all who care for their city will look on you with suspicion, as a destroyer of the laws. You will also strengthen the conviction of the jury that
- c** they passed the right sentence on you, for anyone who destroys the laws could easily be thought to corrupt the young and the ignorant. Or will you avoid cities that are well governed and men who are civilized? If you do this, will your life be worth living? Will you have social intercourse with them and not be ashamed to talk to them? And what will you say? The same as you did here, that virtue and justice are man’s most precious possession, along with lawful behaviour and the laws? Do you not
- d** think that Socrates would appear to be an unseemly kind of person? One must think so. Or will you leave those places and go to Crito’s friends in Thessaly? There you will find the greatest license and disorder, and they may enjoy hearing from you how absurdly you escaped from prison in some disguise, in a leather jerkin or some other things in which escapees wrap themselves, thus altering your appearance. Will there be no one to say that you, likely to live but a short time more, were
- e** so greedy for life that you transgressed the most important laws? Possibly, Socrates, if you do not annoy anyone, but if you do, many disgraceful things will be said about you. “You will spend your time ingratiating yourself with all men, and be at their beck and call. What will you do in Thessaly but feast, as if

54 you had gone to a banquet in Thessaly? As for those conversations of yours about justice and the rest of virtue, where will they be? You say you want to live for the sake of your children, that you may bring them up and educate them. How so? Will you bring them up and educate them by taking them to Thessaly and making strangers of them, that they may enjoy that too? Or not so, but they will be better brought up and educated here, while you are alive, though absent? Yes, your friends will look after them. Will they look after them if you go and live in Thessaly, but not if you go away to the underworld? If those who profess themselves your friends are any good at all,

- b** one must assume that they will. “Be persuaded by us who have brought you up, Socrates. Do not value either your children or your life or anything else more than goodness, in order that when you arrive in Hades you may have all this as your defence before the rulers there. If you do this deed, you will not think it better or more just or more pious here, nor will any one of your friends, nor will it be better for you when you arrive yonder. As it is, you depart, if you depart, after being wronged not by us, the laws, but by men;
- c** but if you depart after shamefully returning wrong for wrong and injury for injury, after breaking your agreement and contract with us, after injuring those you should injure least—yourself, your friends, your country and us—we shall be angry with you while you are still alive, and our brothers, the laws of the underworld, will not receive you kindly, knowing that you tried to destroy us as far as you could. Do not let Crito persuade you, rather than us, to do what he says.”

d Crito, my dear friend, be assured that these are the words I seem to hear, as the Corybants seem to hear the music of their flutes, and the echo of these words resounds in me, and makes it impossible for me to hear anything else. As far as my present beliefs go, if you speak in opposition to them, you will speak in vain. However, if you think you can accomplish anything, speak.

- c:** I have nothing to say, Socrates.
s: Let it be then, Crito, and let us act in this way, since this is the way the god is leading us.

COMMENTARY AND QUESTIONS⁴

Read 43a–44b Plato opens the dialogue with a scene designed to reiterate how different Socrates is from most men. The time is approaching for his execution, yet he sleeps peacefully—as though he had not a care in the world. His dream confirms what he had concluded at the end of the trial: Death is not an evil to be feared but is more like the soul coming home again after many hardships.

Read 44b–46a **Crito** piles reason upon reason to persuade Socrates to escape.

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- Q1. List at least seven reasons Crito urges upon Socrates for making his escape.
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Most of these reasons are prudential in nature, not moral. The one that does appeal to “what is right” seems to come right out of the Sophist’s playbook: What is right, Crito says, is to preserve one’s own life whenever one can.* Several of the reasons appeal to “what people will think” if Socrates does not take this opportunity. This leads Socrates to ask why one should pay any attention at all to what the majority of people say.

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- Q2. What does Crito say in response to this question, and what is Socrates’ reply?
 Q3. What does Socrates indicate is “the greatest good”?
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Read 46b–49a Characteristically, Socrates says they must “examine” whether to act in this way.

-
- Q4. What kind of man does Socrates here say that he is?
-

Socrates reminds Crito that he has always maintained that one should pay attention only to the opinions of the “most reasonable” people. He invites Crito to reexamine this conviction in the

light of his imminent death. Does it “stand fast” even now?

The examination is conducted, as so often, in terms of an analogy; Socrates draws a comparison between the health of the body and the health of the soul. He points out that you don’t listen to just anybody when it comes to matters of bodily health. The same must also be true when it is a matter of the soul’s well-being. You want to listen to those who are wise, not to the opinions of the many. So what most people might think if Socrates escapes or does not escape is, strictly speaking, irrelevant. It should be set aside. Reluctantly perhaps, Crito agrees.

Socrates adds that life is really not worth living when the body is corrupted by disease and ruined; the important thing is “not life, but the good life.” The same must then be true of the soul.

-
- Q5. What corrupts and ruins the soul, according to Socrates? What benefits it?
 Q6. Which, body or soul, is most valuable? Why do you think he says that?
 Q7. Socrates says that three kinds of life are “the same”: The good life, the beautiful life, and the just life. Think about the lives you are familiar with. Do you agree? Is it really the just people whose lives are beautiful and good?
-

They agree, then, that the right thing to do is the only thing they should have in mind when making the decision. The question is simply this: Is it just or unjust to escape? Will escaping bring benefit or harm to the soul?

Read 49a–50a The next principle Socrates brings up for reexamination is this: that one should never willingly do wrong. Why not? Because doing wrong is “harmful and shameful to the wrongdoer.” Again we see Socrates emphasizing that we harm ourselves by harming our souls, and we harm our souls by doing wrong, which makes us into worse people than we otherwise would be.

-
- Q8. What corollary to this “never do wrong” principle does Socrates draw out in 49b–d?

*See the quotations from Antiphon, pp. 65–66.

Q9. Socrates says this is not something the majority of people believe. Do you believe it?

Note that injuring is not the same as inflicting harm. Remember, Socrates was a soldier, and a good one. He even cited his military experience with pride in his defense before the jury. But soldiers inflict damage on other soldiers, perhaps even kill them. Moreover, Athens is about to execute Socrates, but he says nothing to suggest that capital punishment is wrongdoing or injury. It may, then, be justifiable—in war or according to law—to inflict harm. Still, we must never injure each other. Injury is *unjust* harming of another.

What is wrong, Socrates says, is doing injustice in return for an injustice done to you. Wrong done to you never justifies your doing wrong. The reason is simply that doing injustice is *always* wrong, always a corruption of the soul. When you consider how to act, according to Socrates, you should never think about revenge. Revenge looks to the past, to what has happened to you, and you should look only to actions that will promote excellence—in your soul and in others. That is the way to care for your soul.

Socrates says they should examine next whether one should always keep agreements made, providing they are just agreements (49e). Crito agrees immediately, so we come to the major part of the argument.

Read 50a–54d In this section, we have a dramatic piece of rhetoric. Plato gives us a dialogue within the dialogue in the form of an imaginary “examination” of Socrates by the laws of Athens. It is rhetoric all right; but, like Parmenides’ poem, it contains an argument. Socrates will look to this argument, this *logos*, in making his decision. Remember that Socrates says he is the kind of man who listens only to the best *logos*. So it is the argument that we must try to discern.

Socrates indicates the conclusion of the argument right off: that escaping will constitute an attempt to injure the laws, and indeed the whole city. It is this proposition that the laws have to prove. If they can do so, it will follow immediately that Socrates must not escape, because

that would amount to doing injury. It will also be no good for Socrates to reply, “Well, the laws injured me by convicting me unjustly!” because we have already agreed that one must not return injury for injury.

How will escaping injure the laws of Athens? This part of the argument begins with the laws claiming that they are to be honored more than mother, father, or all one’s ancestors.

-
- Q10. What reasons are offered by the laws for this claim?
 Q11. What alternatives does Athens offer its citizens if they do not agree with or like the laws?
 Q12. Could Socrates have left Athens at any time if he was not pleased with the laws?
 Q13. What conclusion follows from the fact that Socrates stayed?

So the situation is this: In virtue of his long residence in Athens, Socrates has agreed to be a citizen under the laws, to accept their benefits and “live in accordance” with them. This agreement was made without any compulsion and in full knowledge of what was involved. There can be no doubt that it is a just agreement. Further, Socrates and Crito have already agreed that just agreements must be kept. But it is not yet clear how breaking this agreement will injure the laws and the city of Athens.

A clue is found in 54b, where the laws say that Socrates was wronged not by them, but by men. No legal order can exist without application and enforcement, courts and punishments, and part of voluntarily accepting citizenship is agreeing to abide by decisions of the legally constituted courts. There can be no doubt that the court that convicted Socrates was a legal court. It should also be noted that Socrates does not criticize the Athenian law against impiety on which he was tried. If the jury made a mistake and decided the case unjustly, that cannot be laid at the door of the laws. So the laws did Socrates no injustice. (Though even if they had, that would not, on Socrates’ principles, justify his doing wrong in return.)

The situation then is this: To escape would be tantamount to an attack on the authority of this court to decide as it did. If *this* court lacks authority over its citizens, what court has such authority? To

attack the authority of the courts is to attempt, insofar as it is possible for one man, to destroy the legal system, and the city, as a whole. “Or do you think it is possible for a city not to be destroyed if the verdicts of its courts have no force but are nullified and set at naught by private individuals?” (50b)

The argument is complex, and it may be useful to set it out in skeleton form.

1. One must never do wrong.
 - a. Because to do wrong is “in every way harmful and shameful to the wrongdoer.” (49b)
 - b. Because doing wrong harms the part of ourselves that is “more valuable.” (48a)
2. One must never return wrong for wrong done. (This follows directly from 1.)
3. To injure others (treat them unjustly) is to do wrong.
4. One must never injure others. (This follows from 1 and 3.)
5. To violate a just agreement is to do injury.
6. To escape would be to violate a just agreement with the laws. (Here we have the argument presented in the dialogue between Socrates and the laws.)
7. To escape would be an injury to the laws. (This follows from 5 and 6.)
8. To escape would be wrong. (This follows from 3 and 7.)
9. Socrates must not escape. (This follows from 1 and 8.)

This *logos* is one that Socrates finds convincing, and Crito has nothing to say against it. So it is the one Socrates will be content to live—and die—by. Once again, it is better to *suffer* injustice than to *do* it, even if that means losing one’s life to avoid committing an unjust act.

There remains the task of countering the considerations Crito has put forward in favor of escape. In 53a–54a, the laws address these arguments point by point.

Q14. Go back to your list in Q1 and state the rebuttal offered by the laws. Who is more persuasive—Crito or the laws?

Read 54d–e *Corybants* are priests of Earth and the fertility goddess Cybele, who express their devotion in ecstatic dances, oblivious to what is going on around them. The dialogue ends with Plato once again emphasizing the very real piety of Socrates. He quietly accepts the verdict of the *logos* as guidance from the god. The voice of reason, as far as it can be discerned, is the voice of the divine.*

* Remember that human reason, for Socrates, is not the same as divine wisdom. We are not gods. That is why continual examination of ourselves is in order; and that is why his “voice” is significant; it supplies something human *logoi* could not. Compare what Heraclitus says about wisdom, the *logos*, and the divine, p. 20.

PHAEDO (DEATH SCENE)



Translator’s Introduction

In the Phaedo, a number of Socrates’ friends have come to visit him in prison on the last day of his life, as he will drink the hemlock at sundown. The main topic of their conversation is the nature of the soul and the arguments for its immortality.

This takes up most of the dialogue. Then Socrates tells a rather elaborate myth on the shape of the earth in a hollow of which we live, and of which we know nothing of the splendours of its surface, the purer air and brighter heavens. The

myth then deals with the dwelling places of various kinds of souls after death. The following passage immediately follows the conclusion of the myth.

The Dialogue (Selection)

No sensible man would insist that these things are as I have described them, but I think it

114d is fitting for a man to risk the belief—for the risk is a noble one—that this, or something like this, is true about our souls and their dwelling places, since the soul is evidently immortal, and a man should repeat this to himself as if it were an incantation, which is why I have been prolonging my tale. That is the reason why a man should be of good cheer about his own soul, if during life he has ignored the pleasures

e of the body and its ornamentation as of no concern to him and doing him more harm than good, but has seriously concerned himself with the pleasures of learning, and adorned his soul not with alien but with its own ornaments, namely moderation, righteousness, courage,

115 freedom, and truth, and in that state awaits his journey to the underworld.

Now you, Simmias, Cebes, and the rest of you, Socrates continued, will each take that journey at some other time but my fated day calls me now, as a tragic character might say, and it is about time for me to have my bath, for I think it better to have it before I drink the poison and save the women the trouble of washing the corpse.

When Socrates had said this Crito spoke:

b Very well, Socrates, what are your instructions to me and the others about your children or anything else? What can we do that would please you most? —Nothing new, Crito, said Socrates, but what I am always saying, that you will please me and mine and yourselves, by taking good care of your own selves in whatever you do, even if you do not agree with me now, but if you neglect your own selves, and are unwilling to live following the tracks, as it were,

c of what we have said now and on previous occasions, you will achieve nothing even if you strongly agree with me at this moment.

We shall be eager to follow your advice, said Crito, but how shall we bury you?

In any way you like, said Socrates, if you can catch me and I do not escape you. And

laughing quietly, looking at us, he said: I do not convince Crito that I am this Socrates talking to you here

d and ordering all I say, but he thinks that I am the thing which he will soon be looking at as a corpse, and so he asks how he shall bury me. I have been saying for some time and at some length that after I have drunk the poison I shall no longer be with you but will leave you to go and enjoy some good fortunes of the blessed, but it seems that I have said all this to him in vain in an attempt to reassure you and myself too. Give a pledge to Crito on my behalf, he said, the opposite pledge to that he gave to the jury. He pledged that I would stay, you must

e pledge that I will not stay after I die, but that I shall go away, so that Crito will bear it more easily when he sees my body being burned or buried and will not be angry on my behalf, as if I were suffering terribly, and so that he should not say at the funeral that he is laying out, or carrying out, or burying Socrates. For know you well, my dear Crito, that to express oneself badly is not only faulty as far as the language goes, but does some harm to the soul. You must be of good cheer, and say you are burying my body, and bury it in any way you like and think

116 most customary.

After saying this he got up and went to another room to take his bath, and Crito followed him and he told us to wait for him. So we stayed, talking among ourselves, questioning what had been said, and then again talking of the great misfortune that had befallen us. We all felt as if we had lost a father and would be orphaned for the rest of our lives. When he had washed, his children were brought to him—two of his sons were small and one was older—and the women of his household came to him. He spoke to them before Crito and gave them what instructions he wanted. Then he sent the women and children away, and he himself joined us. It was now close to sunset, for he had stayed inside for some time. He came and sat down after his bath and conversed for a short

c while, when the officer of the Eleven came and stood by him and said: “I shall not reproach you as I do the others, Socrates. They are angry with me and curse me when, obeying the orders of my superiors, I tell them to drink the poison. During the time you have been here I have

come to know you in other ways as the noblest, the gentlest, and the best man who has ever come here. So now too I know that you will not make trouble for me; you know who is responsible and you will direct your anger against them. You know what message I bring. Fare you well, and try to endure what you must as easily as possible.” The officer was

d weeping as he turned away and went out. Socrates looked up at him and said: “Fare you well also, we shall do as you bid us.” And turning to us he said: How pleasant the man is! During the whole time I have been here he has come in and conversed with me from time to time, a most agreeable man. And how genuinely he now weeps for me. Come, Crito, let us obey him. Let someone bring the poison if it is ready; if not, let the man prepare it.

e But Socrates, said Crito, I think the sun still shines upon the hills and has not yet set. I know that others drink the poison quite a long time after they have received the order, eating and drinking quite a bit, and some of them enjoy intimacy with their loved ones. Do not hurry; there is still some time.

117 It is natural, Crito, for them to do so, said Socrates, for they think they derive some benefit from doing this, but it is not fitting for me. I do not expect any benefit from drinking the poison a little later, except to become ridiculous in my own eyes for clinging to life, and be sparing of it when there is none left. So do as I ask and do not refuse me.

Hearing this, Crito nodded to the slave who was standing near him; the slave went out and after a time came back with the man who was to administer the poison, carrying it made ready in a cup. When Socrates saw him he said: Well, my good man, you are an expert in this, what must one do? —“Just drink it and walk
b around until your legs feel heavy, and then lie down and it will act of itself.” And he offered the cup to Socrates who took it quite cheerfully, . . . without a tremor or any change of feature or colour, but looking at the man from under his eyebrows as was his wont, asked: “What do you say about pouring a libation from this drink? Is it allowed?” —“We only mix as much as we believe will suffice,” said the man.

c I understand, Socrates said, but one is allowed, indeed one must, utter a prayer to the

gods that the journey from here to yonder may be fortunate. This is my prayer and may it be so.

And while he was saying this, he was holding the cup, and then drained it calmly and easily. Most of us had been able to hold back our tears reasonably well up till then, but when we saw him drinking it and after he drank it, we could hold them back no longer; my own tears came in floods against my will. So I covered my face. I was weeping for myself—not for him, but for my misfortune in being deprived of such a comrade. Even before me, Crito was unable to restrain his tears and got up. Apollodorus had not ceased from weeping before, and at this moment his noisy tears and anger made everybody present break down, except Socrates. “What is this,” he said, “you strange fellows. It is mainly for this reason that I sent the women away, to avoid such unseemliness, for I am told one should die in good omened silence. So keep quiet and control yourselves.”

e His words made us ashamed, and we checked our tears. He walked around, and when he said his legs were heavy he lay on his back as he had been told to do, and the man who had given him the poison touched his body, and after a
118 while tested his feet and legs, pressed hard upon his foot and asked him if he felt this, and Socrates said no. Then he pressed his calves, and made his way up his body and showed us that it was cold and stiff. He felt it himself and said that when the cold reached his heart he would be gone. As his belly was getting cold Socrates uncovered his head—he had covered it—and said—these were his last words—“Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius;¹ make this offering to him and do not forget.” —“It shall be done,” said Crito, “tell us if there is anything else,” but there was no answer. Shortly afterwards Socrates made a movement; the man uncovered him and his eyes were fixed. Seeing this Crito closed his mouth and his eyes.

Such was the end of our comrade, . . . a man who, we would say, was of all those we have known the best, and also the wisest and the most upright.

¹A cock was sacrificed to Asclepius by the sick people who slept in his temples, hoping for a cure. Socrates obviously means that death is a cure for the ills of life.

COMMENTARY AND QUESTIONS

Read 114d–115e About fifteen people were present for this last conversation. Plato, it is said, was absent because he was ill. By this point, they have agreed that the soul is immortal and that the souls of the just and pious, especially if they have devoted themselves to wisdom, dwell after death in a beautiful place.

-
- Q1. What are said to be the “ornaments” of the soul?
 Q2. What harm, do you think, can it do the soul to “express oneself badly”?
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Read 116–end Socrates seems to have kept his calm and courage to the end—and his humor. There is a little joke about burial at 115c. Xenophon, too, records this:

A man named Apollodorus, who was there with him, a very ardent disciple of Socrates, but otherwise simple, exclaimed, “But Socrates, what I find it hardest to bear is that I see you being put to death unjustly!” The other, stroking Apollodorus’ head, is said to have replied, “My beloved Apollodorus, was it your preference to see me put to death justly?” and smiled as he asked the question.⁵

The simple majesty of the final tribute is, perhaps, unmatched anywhere.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

1. Socrates believes that acts of injustice cannot be wrong simply because the gods disapprove of them. There must be something about such acts themselves, he claims, that makes them wrong. If you agree, try to say what that is. If you disagree, argue for that conclusion.

2. Imagine that you are a member of the Athenian jury hearing the case of Socrates. How would you vote? Why?
3. How might constant resort to the F-word harm the soul?
4. Should Socrates have accepted Crito’s offer of escape? Construct a *logos* that supports your answer.

KEY WORDS

Euthyphro	persuasion
Meletus	truth
divine sign	earlier accusers
the pious	Oracle at Delphi
definition	human wisdom
form	later accusers
ethics	dilemma
care of the gods	Crito

NOTES

1. The dialogues and translator’s introductions in this chapter are from Plato, *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, 2nd ed., trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1975).
2. Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, trans. E. C. Marchant, in *Xenophon IV*, ed. E. C. Marchant and O. J. Todd (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), bk. 1, 3, 2–3.
3. Plato, *Theatetus*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961).
4. We are indebted to R. E. Allen’s interpretation of the *Crito* in his *Socrates and Legal Obligation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980).
5. Xenophon, *Apology 28*, trans. O. J. Todd, in *Xenophon IV*, ed. E. C. Marchant and O. J. Todd (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

CHAPTER

8

PLATO

Knowing the Real and the Good



When Socrates died in 399 B.C., his friend and admirer Plato was just thirty years old. He lived fifty-two more years. That long life was devoted to the creation of a philosophy that would justify and vindicate his master, “the best, and also the wisest” man he had ever known (*Phaedo* 118).¹ It is a philosophy whose influence has been incalculable in the West. Together with that of Plato’s pupil Aristotle, it forms one of the two foundation stones for nearly all that is to follow; even those who want to disagree first have to pay attention. In a rather loose sense, everyone in the Western philosophical tradition is either a Platonist or an Aristotelian.



“The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.”

Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947)

In Raphael’s remarkable painting *The School of Athens* (see the cover of this book), all the sight lines

draw the eye toward the two central figures. Plato is the one on the left, pointing upward. Aristotle is on the right with a hand stretched out horizontally. We will not be ready to appreciate the symbolism of these gestures until we know something of both, but that these two occupy center stage is entirely appropriate.

Plato apparently left Athens after Socrates’ death and traveled widely. About 387 B.C., he returned to Athens and established a school near a grove called “Academos,” from which comes our word “academy.” There he inquired, taught, and wrote the dialogues.

Let us briefly review the situation leading up to Socrates’ death. An ugly, drawn-out war with Sparta ends in humiliation for Athens, accompanied by internal strife between democrats and oligarchs, culminating in the tyranny of the Thirty, civil war, and their overthrow. The Sophists have been teaching doctrines that seem to undermine all the traditions and cast doubt on everything people hold sacred. The intellectual situation in general, though it will look active and fruitful from a future vantage point, surely looks chaotic and unsettled

from close up. It is a war of ideas no one has definitely won. You have Parmenides' One versus Heraclitus' flux, Democritus' atomism versus the skepticism of the Sophists, and the controversy over *physis* and *nomos*. Some urge conformity to the laws of the city; others hold that such human justice is inferior to the pursuit of self-interest, which can rightly override such "mere" conventions. In this maelstrom appears Socrates—ugly to look at, fascinating in character, incredibly honest, doggedly persistent, passionately committed to a search for the truth, and convinced that *none* of his contemporaries know what they are talking about. Ultimately, he pays for that passion with his life.

After Socrates' execution, Plato takes up his teacher's tenacious search for the truth. He sets for himself the goal of refuting skepticism and relativism. He intends to *demonstrate*, contrary to the Sophists, that there is a truth about reality and that it can be known. And he intends to show, contrary to Democritus, that this reality is not indifferent to moral and religious values.

His basic goal, and in this he is typically Greek, is to establish the pattern for a good state.* If you were to ask him, "Plato, exactly what do you mean by 'a good state'?" he would have a ready answer. He would say that a good state is one in which a good person can live a good life. And if you pressed him about what kind of person was a good person, he would acknowledge that here was a hard question, one needing examination. But he would at least be ready with an example. And by now you know who the example would be. It follows that Athens as it existed in 399 B.C. was not, despite its virtues, a good state, for it had executed Socrates.

To reach this goal of setting forth the pattern of a good state, Plato has to show that there is such a thing as goodness—and not just by convention. It couldn't be that if Athens *thought* it was a good thing to execute Socrates then it *was* a good thing to execute Socrates. Plato knew in his heart that was wrong. But now he has to *show* it was wrong.

*His *Republic* is an attempt to define an ideal state. The *Laws*, perhaps his last work, is a long and detailed discussion trying to frame a realistic constitution for a state that might actually exist.

Mere assertion was never enough for Socrates, and it won't do for Plato, either. He will construct a *logos*, a *dialectic*, to show us the goodness that exists in *physis*, not just in the opinions of people or the conventions of society. And he will show us how we can come to know what this goodness is and become truly wise. These, at least, are his ambitions.

Knowledge and Opinion

People commonly contrast what they *know* with what they merely *believe*. This contrast between mere belief, or opinion, and knowledge is important for Plato. Indeed, he uses it to critique sophistic relativism and skepticism and to derive surprising conclusions—conclusions that make up the heart of his philosophy.

The Sophists argue that if someone thinks the wind is cold, then it is cold—for that person.* And they generalize this claim. "Of *all* things, the measure is man," asserts Protagoras. In effect, all we can have are opinions or beliefs. If a certain belief is satisfactory to a certain person, then no more can be said. We are thus restricted to appearance; knowledge of reality is beyond our powers.

Plato tries to meet this challenge in three steps. First, he has to clarify the distinction between opinion and knowledge. Second, he has to show that we do have knowledge. Third, he needs to explain the nature of the objects that we can be said to know. As we will see, Plato's **epistemology** (his theory of knowledge) and his **metaphysics** (his theory of reality) are knit together in his unique solution to these problems.

MAKING THE DISTINCTION

What is the difference between **knowing** something and just **believing** it? The key seems to be this: You can believe falsely, but you can't know falsely. Suppose that on Monday you claim to know that John is Kate's husband. On Friday, you learn that John is unmarried and has never been anyone's husband. What will you then say about your Monday self? Will you say, "Well, I used to know (on Monday) that John was married, but now I

*See p. 62.

know he is not”? This would be saying, “I did know (falsely) that John was married, but now I know (truly) that he is not.” Or will you say, “Well, on Monday I *thought* I knew that John was married, but I *didn't* know it after all”? Surely you will say the latter. If we claim to know something but then learn it is false, we retract our claim. We can put this in the form of a principle: Knowledge involves truth.

Believing or having opinions is quite the opposite. If on Monday you *believe* that John is married to Kate and you later find out he isn't, you won't retract the claim that you did believe that on Monday. You will simply say, “Yes, I did believe that; but now I believe (or know) it isn't so.” It is quite possible to believe something false; it happens all the time. Believing does not necessarily involve truth.

We can, of course, believe truly. But even so, belief and knowledge are not the same thing. In the *Meno*, Plato has Socrates say,

As long as they stay put, true beliefs too constitute a thing of beauty and do nothing but good. The problem is that they tend not to stay for long; they escape from the human soul and this reduces their value, unless they're anchored by working out the reason. . . . When true beliefs are anchored, they become pieces of knowledge and they become stable. That's why knowledge is more valuable than true belief, and the difference between the two is that knowledge has been anchored. (*Meno* 98a)²

In the *Republic*, Plato compares people who have only true opinions to blind people who yet follow the right road (*R* 506c).³ Imagine a blind woman who wanders along, turning this way and that. It just happens that each of her turnings corresponds to a bend in the road, but her correct turnings are merely a lucky accident. By contrast, those who can see the road have a reason why they turn as they do, for they can see where the road bends. They know that they must turn left here precisely because they can give an account of why they turn as they do—namely, to stay on the road.

We can connect this contrast between true belief and knowledge with the practice of Socrates. It is his habit, as we have seen, to examine others about their beliefs. And we can now say that surviving such examination is a necessary condition for any belief to count as knowledge. It is only a



negative condition, however, because such survival doesn't guarantee truth; perhaps we simply have not yet come across the devastating counterexample. But Plato wants more than survival. In addition to surviving criticism, he wants to supply positive reasons for holding on to a belief. What he hopes to supply is a *logos* that gives *the reason why*.

We have here a second and a third point of distinction between knowledge and belief (even true belief). Knowledge, unlike (true) belief, “stays put” because it involves the reason why.

And this leads to a final difference. In the *Timaeus*, Plato tells us that the one [knowledge] is implanted in us by instruction, the other [belief] by persuasion; . . . the one cannot be overcome by persuasion, but the other can. (*Timaeus* 51e)⁴

The instruction in question will be an explanation of the reason why. But what is persuasion? Plato seems to have in mind here all the tricks and techniques of rhetoric. If you *know* something, he is saying, you will understand why it is so. And that understanding will protect you from clever fellows (advertisers, politicians, public relations experts) who use their art to “make the weaker argument appear the stronger.” Opinion or mere belief, by contrast, is at the mercy of every persuasive talker that comes along. If you believe something but don't clearly understand the reason why it is so, your belief will easily be “overcome” by persuasion. Compare yourself, for instance, to the blind

woman on the the road. She might easily be persuaded to go straight ahead, for she lacks a reason for turning where she does.

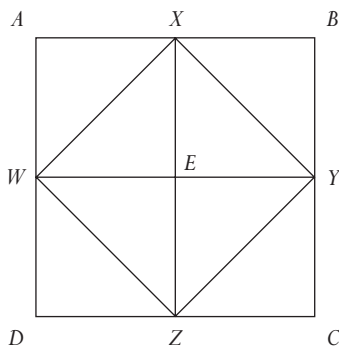
As you can see, Plato draws a sharp line between opinion and knowledge. We can summarize the distinction in a table.

<i>Opinion</i>	<i>Knowledge</i>
is changeable	endures or stays put
may be true or false	is always true
is not backed up by reasons	is backed up by reasons
is the result of persuasion	is the result of instruction

So far even Sophists need not quarrel; they could agree that such a distinction can be made. But they would claim that all we ever have are opinions. We can perhaps understand what it would be to have knowledge, but it doesn't follow that we actually have any. So Plato has to move to his second task; he has to demonstrate that we actually know certain things.

WE DO KNOW CERTAIN TRUTHS

Plato's clearest examples are the truths of mathematics and geometry. Think back to the slave boy and the problem of doubling the area of a square.* The correct solution is to take the diagonal of the original square as a side of the square to be constructed. That solution can be seen to be correct because an "account" or explanation can be given: the reason why. Now look at the following diagram.



The reason why the square $WXYZ$ is double the original square $WEZD$ is that it is made up of four equal triangles, each of which is the same size as one-half the original. Because four halves make two wholes, we have a square twice the size of $WEZD$. This *logos* gives the reason why this is the correct solution. Once you (or the slave boy) understand this rationale, you cannot be persuaded to believe otherwise. What we have here, then, is an opinion that is true, will stay put, is backed up by reason, and is the result of instruction. In other words, we have not just opinion—we have knowledge.



"Knowledge, in truth, is the great sun in the Firmament. Life and power are scattered with all its beams."

Daniel Webster (1782–1852)

This example (and innumerable others of the same kind can be constructed) is absolutely convincing to Plato. There can be no doubt, he thinks, that this solution is not just a matter of how it seems to one person or another. About these matters cultures do not differ.* There is no sense in which man is the "measure" of this truth. It is not conventional or up to us to decide; we *recognize* it. Relativism, at least as a general theory, is mistaken. Skepticism is wrong. We do have knowledge of the truth.

But two important questions are still unsettled. First, what exactly do we have knowledge about when we know that this is the correct solution to the problem? Socrates probably drew the squares in the sand. Are we to suppose that he drew so accurately that the square made on the diagonal was really twice the area of the original? Not likely. The truth the slave boy came to know, then, is not a truth about that sand drawing. What is it about, then? Here is a puzzle. And Plato's solution to this puzzle is the key to understanding his whole philosophy.

The second question is whether this kind of knowledge can be extended to values and morality.

*See p. 133.

*Compare Socrates on what the gods do not quarrel about (*Euthyphro* 7b,c).

Can we know that deception is unjust with the same certainty as that a square on the diagonal is twice the size of an original square? We address the first of these questions now and come back to the second later.

-
1. What are Plato's goals? What does he aim to do?
 2. Distinguish knowledge from opinion.
-

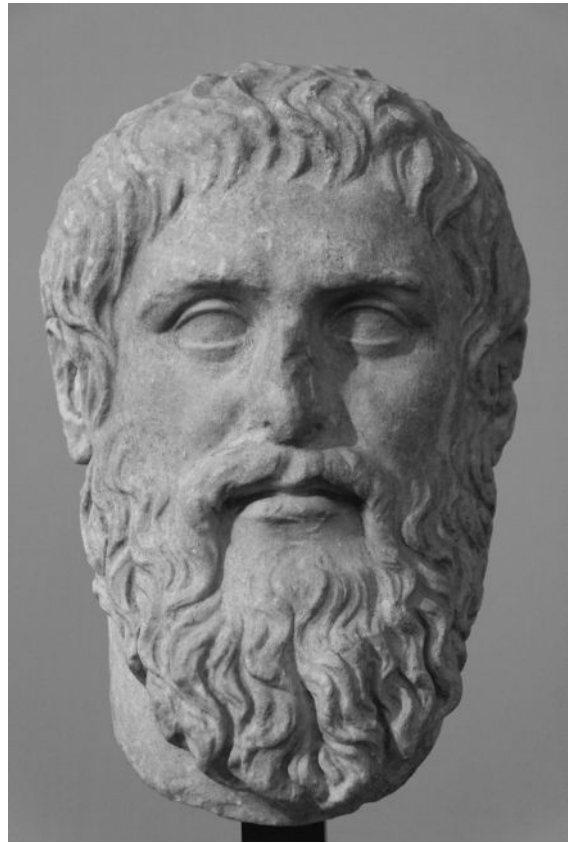
THE OBJECTS OF KNOWLEDGE

Plato would say that Socrates' sand drawing is not the object of the slave boy's knowledge. Let's make sure we see Plato's point here.

The slave boy's knowledge, being about something far more exact than Socrates' drawing, is not about that drawing, nor can it be derived from the drawing itself. In fact, we could never even know that any square we could draw or make or see or touch is exactly square. The senses (sight, hearing, and the rest) never get it right, Plato tells us; they are not clear or accurate. We grasp the truth only through reasoning—through a *logos*.

Here Plato agrees with Parmenides, who admonishes us not to trust our senses but to follow reasoning alone.* In this sense, Plato too is a rationalist. You should be able to see, from the example we have considered, why he thinks this is the only way to proceed if we want genuine knowledge.

You should also be able to see that Plato agrees with Heraclitus about the world revealed to us through the senses.† Consider the drawing of the square again. Suppose Socrates had drawn the two squares to exactly the right size. What is to prevent them, once drawn correctly, from turning incorrect in the very next moment? Suppose a breeze blows some sand out of place in one moment and back into place the next? It seems like a continual flux. And that is just what Heraclitus thinks it is. But our solution doesn't shift in and out of truth that way. It "stays put." Once again, the truth we know cannot be about



"So the philosopher, who consorts with what is divine and ordered, himself becomes godlike and ordered as far as a man can see. . . ."

—PLATO

the world disclosed to our senses. Nothing in that world "stays put."

Interestingly, Plato holds that both Parmenides and Heraclitus are correct. They aren't in fact contradicting each other, even though one holds that reality is unchangeable and the other that reality is continually changing. Both are correct because each is talking about a different reality. The one is revealed to us through the senses, the other through reasoning. You are familiar with the reality of Heraclitus; it is just the everyday world we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. The other world is not so ordinary, and we must say more about it.

We need to go back to the question, what is our truth about the square *true of*? If it is not about

*You might like to review briefly what Parmenides says; see p. 25.

†See p. 17–19.

any square you could see or touch, what then? Plato's answer is that it is a truth about the Square Itself. This is an object that can be apprehended only by the intellect, by thinking and reasoning. Still, it is an object, a reality; why should we suppose that the senses are our only avenue to what there is? It is, moreover, a public object, for you and I (and indeed anyone) can know the same truths about it. In fact, it is more public than sense objects. The square I see as red you may see as green, but everyone agrees that a square may be doubled by taking its diagonal as the base of another square.

Here is another feature of the Square Itself. It is not some particular square or other. It is not, for instance, one with an area of 4 rather than 6 or 10 or 19⁵/₈. The doubling principle works for *any* square. So if our truth is a truth about the Square Itself, this must be a very unusual object! It must be an object that in some sense is *shared* by all the particular squares that ever have been or ever will be.

Here we are reminded of what Socrates is looking for. Remember that when Socrates questions Euthyphro, he isn't satisfied when presented with an *example* of piety. What he wants is something common to all pious actions, present in no impious actions, and which accounts for the fact that the pious actions are pious. He wants, he says, the "form" of piety.* Plato takes up the term **Form** and uses it as the general term for the objects of knowledge. In our example, what we know is something about the Form of the Square. We may use the terms "Form of the Square" and "the Square Itself" interchangeably. What we can know, then, are Forms (the Square Itself, the Triangle Itself) and how they are related to each other.

About the world of the senses, Plato tells us, no knowledge in the strict sense is possible. Here there are only opinions. Because the Square Itself does not fluctuate like visible and tangible squares, it can qualify as an object of knowledge.

Up to this point we have traced Plato's reasoning about the Forms on the basis of the assumption

that we do have some knowledge. Let us recapitulate the major steps.

- Knowledge is enduring, true, rational belief based on instruction.
- We do have knowledge.
- This knowledge cannot be about the world revealed through the senses.
- It must be about another world, one that endures.
- This is the world of Forms.

Let us call this the **Epistemological Argument** for the Forms. Epistemology, you may recall, is the fancy term for the theory of knowledge—what knowledge is and what it is about.* And Plato has here concluded from a theory of what knowledge is that its objects must be realities quite different from those presented by the senses. These are realities that, like Parmenides' One, are eternal and unchanging, each one forever exactly what it is.

This very statement, however, reveals that Parmenides was not wholly right. For there is not just one Form. There is the Square Itself, the Triangle Itself, the Equal Itself, and, as we shall see, the Just Itself, the Good Itself, and the Form of the Beautiful as well. The reality that is eternal is not a blank One but an intricate, immensely complex pattern of Forms. This pattern is reflected partly in our mathematical knowledge. It is what mathematics is about.

This Epistemological Argument is one leg supporting the theory of Forms, but it is not the only one. Before we consider further the nature of Forms and their function in Plato's thought, let us look briefly at two more reasons why Plato believes in their reality.

In a late dialogue where Socrates is no longer the central figure, Plato has Parmenides say,

I imagine your ground for believing in a single form in each case is this. When it seems to you that a number of things are large, there seems, I suppose, to be a certain single character which is the same when you look at them all; hence you think that largeness is a single thing. (*Parmenides* 132a)

*See *Euthyphro* 6d–e.

*See "A Word to Students."

Socrates agrees. What we might call the **Metaphysical Argument*** for the Forms goes like this. Consider two things that are alike. Perhaps they are both large or white or just. Think of two large elephants, Huey and Gertrude. They have a certain “character” in common. Each is large. Now, what they have in common (largeness) cannot be the same as either one; largeness is not the same as Huey and it is not the same as Gertrude. Nor is it identical with the two of them together, since their cousin Rumble is also large. What they share, then, must be a reality distinct from them. Let us call it the Large Itself. Alternatively, we could call it the Form of the Large.

This argument starts not from the nature of knowledge, but from the nature of *things*. That is why we can call it a “metaphysical” argument. A similarity among things indicates that they have something in common. What they have in common cannot be just another thing of the same sort as they are. Gertrude, for example, is not something that other pairs of things could share in the way they can share largeness; each of two other things can be large, but it is nonsense to suppose that each can be Gertrude. What Gertrude and Huey have in common must be something of another sort altogether. It is, Plato holds, a Form.

Finally, let us look at a **Semantic Argument** for the Forms. Semantics is a discipline that deals with words, in particular with the meanings of words and how words are related to what they are about. In the *Republic* we read that

any given plurality of things which have a single name constitutes a specific type [Form]. (*R* 596a)

The interesting phrase here is “have a single name.” What Plato has in mind here is the fact that we have names of several different kinds. The word “Gertrude” names a specific elephant. The word “elephant” is also a name, but it picks out every elephant that ever has been or ever will be. Why do we use a single name for all of those creatures? Because, Plato suggests, we are assuming that one Form is common to them all. Just as the name

“Gertrude” names some particular elephant, the name “elephant” names the Form Elephant—what all elephants have in common. Whenever we give the same name to a plurality of things, Plato tells us, it is legitimate to assume that we are naming a Form.

What we have in Plato’s philosophy is a single answer to three problems that any philosophy striving for completeness must address. Let us summarize.

- *Problem One.* Assuming that we do have some knowledge, what is our knowledge about? What are the objects of knowledge? Plato’s answer is that what we know are the Forms of things.
- *Problem Two.* The particular things that we are acquainted with can be grouped into kinds on the basis of what they have in common. How are we to explain these common features? Plato tells us that what they have in common is a Form.
- *Problem Three.* Some of our words apply not to particular things but to all things of a certain kind. How are we to understand the meaning of these general words? Plato’s theory is that these general terms are themselves names and that what they name is not a particular sensible thing but a Form.

THE REALITY OF THE FORMS

We have, then, a number of lines of investigation—epistemological, metaphysical, and semantic—all of which seem to point in the same direction: In addition to the world of sense so familiar to us, there is another world, the world of Forms. The Forms are not anything we can smell, taste, touch, or see, but that is not to say they are unreal or imaginary. To suppose that they must be unreal if our senses do perceive them is just a prejudice; we could call it the Bias toward the Senses. But Plato believes he has already exposed this as a mere bias.*

Consider again the problem of doubling the size of a square. In the *Republic* Socrates imagines that he is questioning someone who only has opinion but thinks it is knowledge:

“But can you tell us please, whether someone with knowledge knows something or nothing?” You’d better answer my questions for him.

*For an explanation of the term “metaphysics,” see “A Word to Students.”

*Here again Plato agrees with Parmenides. For Parmenides’ critique of the senses, see pp. 23–25.

My answer will be that he knows something. . . .
 Something real or something unreal?
 Real. How could something unreal be known?
 (R 476e)

You can't know what *isn't*, Plato tells us, for the simple reason that in that case there isn't anything there to know. You can only know what *is*.^{*} In other words, if you do know something, there must be something in reality for you to know. In the case of doubling the square, what you know concerns a set of Forms and their relations to each other. So there must be Forms; they cannot be merely unreal and imaginary.

There is a further and more radical conclusion. The Forms are not only real; they are also more real than anything you can see or hear or touch. What is Plato's argument for this surprising conclusion? The Forms, Plato argues, are more real than anything you can experience by means of your senses because, unlike sensible things, they are unchangeably what they are—forever. Even if every square thing ceased to exist, the Square Itself would remain. In comparison to the Forms, Helen and Gertrude—and just and pious actions, too—are only partly real. They have some reality; they are not nothing. But they are less real than the Forms, for they do not endure. For that reason we can have no knowledge of them, only opinion. They don't "stay put" long enough to be known. As Plato charmingly puts it, these things "mill around somewhere between unreality and perfect reality" (R 479d).

Plato thinks that in a sense there are two worlds. There is the world of the Forms, which can be known, but only by reasoning, by the intellect. This is the most real world. And there is the world of the many particular, ever-changing things that make up the flux of our lives. These can be sensed; about them we may have opinions, but they cannot

be known. This world is real, but less real than the world of the Forms.

If we grant that Plato is right to this point (and let us grant it provisionally), we now must insist on an answer to a further question: How are the two worlds related? With this question we arrive at the most interesting part of Plato's answer to sophistic skepticism and relativism.

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1. In what way does Plato agree with Parmenides? With Heraclitus?
 2. Be sure you can sketch the three lines of argument for the reality of the Forms: epistemological, metaphysical, and semantic.
 3. If the objects of knowledge are the Forms, what are the objects of opinion?
 4. Why does Plato think the Form of Bicycle is *more real* than the bicycle I ride to work?
-

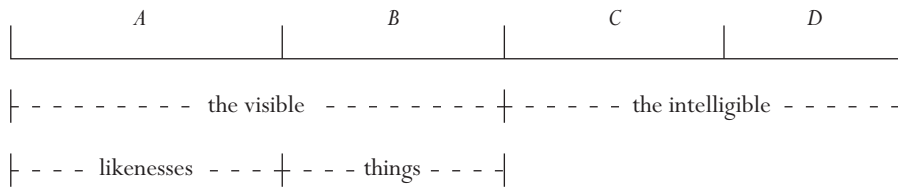
The World and the Forms

If Plato is right, reality is not what it seems to be. What we usually take as reality is only partly real; reality itself is quite different. For convenience's sake, let us use the term "the world" to refer to this flux of things about us that appear to our senses: rivers, trees, desks, elephants, men and women, runnings, promising, sleepings, customs, laws, and so on. This corresponds closely enough to the usual use of that term; however, the world must now be understood as less than the whole of reality and none of it entirely real. We can then put Plato's point in this way: In addition to the world, there are also the Forms, and they are what is truly real. This much, he would add, we already know. For we have given an account (a *logos*) of the reason why we must believe in the reality of the Forms.

HOW FORMS ARE RELATED TO THE WORLD

We must now examine the relationship between the two realities. Let us begin by thinking about shadows. We could equally well consider photographs, mirror images, and reflections in a pool of water.

^{*}This is a narrower version of the Parmenidean principle that thought and being always go together (see p. 24). Plato accepts that *thought* might diverge from being, but the thought that meets the tests of *knowledge* will not. That is why we value it.



A shadow is in a certain sense less real than the thing that casts it. It is less real because it doesn't have any independent existence; its shape depends wholly on the thing that it is a shadow of (and of course the light source). Think about the shadow shapes you can make on a wall by positioning your hands in various ways in front of a strong lamp. Shaping your hands one way produces the shape of a rabbit; another way, an owl. What the shadow is depends on the shape of your hands. The shape of your hands does *not*, note well, depend on the shape of the shadow. If you turn off the lamp, your hands and their shape still exist, but the shadows vanish. This is the sense in which shadows are less real; your hands have an independent existence, but the shadows do not.

Both shadows and hands are parts of the world. So there are different degrees of reality *within* the world, too. Could we use the relationship between shadows and hands to illuminate the relationship between world and Forms? This is in fact what Plato does in a famous diagram called the **Divided Line**. Plato here calls the world “**the visible**” and the Forms “**the intelligible,**” according to how we are acquainted with them.

Well, picture them as a line cut into two unequal sections and, following the same proportions, subdivide both the section of the visible realm and that of the intelligible realm. Now you can compare the sections in terms of clarity and unclarity. The first section in the visible realm consists of likenesses, by which I mean a number of things: shadows, reflections . . . and so on.

And you should count the other section of the visible realm as consisting of the things whose likenesses are found in the first section: all the flora and fauna there are in the world, and every kind of artefact, too. (R 509e–510a)

Let us draw Plato's line, labeling as much of it as he has so far explained (p. 128).

It is important for the symbolism that the lengths of the various sections are *not equal*. These lengths are related to each other by a certain ratio or proportion: As *B* is related to *A*, and *D* to *C*, so is $(C + D)$ related to $(A + B)$. Plato intends this proportionality between the line segments to represent the fact that the intelligible world of the Forms is related to the entire visible world in exactly the same way as things within the visible world are related to their likenesses. (Note that the actual length of the sections is irrelevant. All that counts is how they are related to each other.)

Let's construct a more realistic example than shadows of hands. Imagine that we live at the bottom of a canyon. Our society has a very strong taboo against looking up, which has been handed down by our earliest ancestors from generation to generation. We do not look up to the rim of the canyon and the sky beyond. The sun shines down into the canyon during the middle part of each day, and we can see the shadows of the canyon walls move across the canyon floor from west to east. Eagles live high up in the canyon wall, but they never come down to the canyon floor, preferring to forage for their food in the richly supplied plains above. We have never seen an eagle, nor are we likely to.

We do see the shadows of eagles as they glide from one wall of the canyon to the other. Sometimes the eagles perch directly on the edge of the canyon wall and cast shadows of a very different shape, of many different shapes, in fact; sometimes they perch facing west, sometimes north, and so on. We do not know that these are eagle shadows, of course, for we are not acquainted with eagles. All we know are the shadows.

Could we have any reliable beliefs about eagles? We could. If we collected all the shadow shapes that we had seen, we could get a pretty good idea of what an eagle looks like and at least some idea

of its behaviors. We might even get a kind of science of eagles on this basis; from certain shadows we might be able to make predictions about the shapes of others, and these predictions might often turn out to be true. The concept “eagle” would be merely a construct for us, of course; it would be equivalent to “that (whatever it is) which accounts for shadows of this sort.” We would think of eagles as the things that explain such shadows, the things making the shadow-patterns intelligible. But we would never have any direct contact with eagles.

One day, an eagle is injured in a fight and comes fluttering helplessly down to the canyon floor. This has never happened before. We catch the injured bird and nurse it back to health. While we have it in our care, we examine it carefully. We come to realize that this is the creature responsible for the shadows we have been observing with interest all these generations. We already know a good bit about it, but now our concept of “eagle” is no longer just a construct. Now we have the *thing* in our sight, and we can see just what features of an eagle account for that shadow science we have constructed. We can say that this creature explains the shadows we were familiar with; it makes it intelligible that our experience of those shadows was what it was; now we understand why those shadows had just the shapes they did have and no others.

We can also say that this great bird is what produces these shadows; we now see that the shadows are caused by creatures like this; birds of this kind are responsible for the existence of those shadows. So we are attributing two kinds of relations between eagles themselves and their shadows, which we’ll call the relations of **Making Intelligible** and of **Producing**.

Remember now that our example has been framed entirely within the sphere of the world, what Plato calls “the visible.” So we have been discussing what falls only within the *A* and *B* portions of the Divided Line. Now we need to apply the relations between *A* and *B* to the relations between (*A* + *B*) and (*C* + *D*). In other words, we need now to talk about the relationship between the world and the Forms, between “the visible” and “the intelligible.”

Let us return to our example. While we have the eagle in our care, we examine it carefully, take measurements and X rays, do behavioral testing, and come to understand the bird quite thoroughly. What do we learn? We learn a lot, of course, about this particular eagle (we have named him “Charlie”), but we are also learning about the *kind* of creature that produces and makes intelligible the shadows we have long observed. So we are learning about eagles in general. It is true that if we generalize from this one case only, we may make some mistakes. Charlie may in some respects not be a typical eagle, but we can ignore this complication for the moment.

If we are learning about eagles, not just about Charlie, then we could put it this way: We are getting acquainted with what makes an eagle an eagle (as opposed to an owl or an egret). This is very much like, we might reflect, coming to understand what makes pious actions pious. Socrates says that he wants to know not just which actions are pious, you remember, but what it is that *makes* them pious rather than impious. He wants to understand the Form of the Pious. So we can say that we are coming to know the Form of the Eagle. This Form is what explains or makes intelligible the fact that this particular bird is an eagle. We might go as far as to say that it is what makes Charlie an eagle; his having this Form rather than some other is responsible for the fact that Charlie is an eagle.

It may be that Charlie is not a perfect eagle. And further acquaintance with eagles would doubtless improve our understanding of what makes an eagle an eagle, of those characteristics that constitute “eaglehood.” If we were to improve our understanding of the Eagle Itself, we might well reach the same conclusion we reached about squares: that no visible eagle is a perfect example of the type or Form. Still, any particular eagle must have the defining characteristics of the species; it must, Plato says, *participate* in the Form Eagle, or it wouldn’t be an eagle at all.

What is this “participation” in a Form? We can now say that it is strictly analogous to the relationship between eagle shadows and actual eagles. Actual eagles participate in the Form Eagle in this sense: The Form makes the actual eagle intelligible

and accounts for its existence as an eagle. So again there are two kinds of relationships, this time between the Form Eagle and particular eagles: the relationships of Making Intelligible and of Producing. The relationship on the Divided Line between $(A + B)$ and $(C + D)$ is indeed analogous to the relationship between A and B .

We should remind ourselves, too, that Forms have a kind of independence actual eagles lack. Should an ecological tragedy kill all the eagles in the world, the Form Eagle would not be affected. We might never again see an eagle, but we could still think about eagles; we could, for instance, regret their passing and recall what magnificent birds they were. The intelligible has this kind of superiority to the visible: it endures. And this, Plato would conclude, is a sign that the Form (the object of thought) is more real than those things (the objects of sight) that participate in it. In Forms we have the proper objects of knowledge, which must itself endure.

LOWER AND HIGHER FORMS

Let us return to the Divided Line. We need to note that the section of the Line representing the Forms is itself divided. There are, it seems, two kinds of Forms, just as there are two kinds of things in the visible world (likenesses and things). We need to understand why Plato thinks so and why he thinks this distinction is important.

He takes an example from mathematics to explain the leftward portion of the intelligible section of the line (C).

I'm sure you're aware that practitioners of geometry, arithmetic, and so on take for granted things like numerical oddness and evenness, the geometrical figures, the three kinds of angle, and any other things of that sort which are relevant to a given subject. They act as if they know about these things, treat them as basic, and don't feel any further need to explain them either to themselves or to anyone else, on the grounds that there is nothing unclear about them. They make them the starting points for their investigations. (R 510c, d)

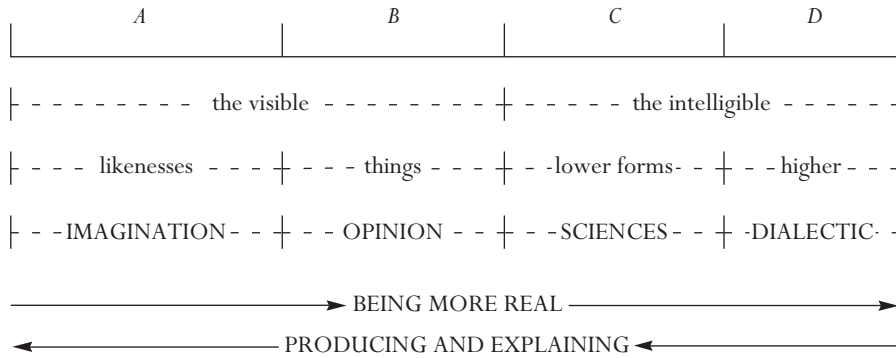
The important idea here is “taking for granted.” When we thought about doubling the square, we

took the ideas of Square, Triangle, Double, and Equal for granted. Operating in section C of the divided line, we used these Forms as “starting points” for thinking about the square Socrates drew in the sand.

Actually, the movements go like this: Beginning with the sand square, we hypothetically posit Forms to account for it. That is, we move *rightward* on the line from the visible to the intelligible. Then, taking these Forms for granted, we produce an explanation of the visible phenomenon. Explanation moves *leftward*. But we can now see that the Forms we posit as hypotheses—the Square, the Triangle, etc.—themselves need to be explained. And so we need to move rightward again, this time into the highest section of the line. Think about the Square again. The Square is *explained and produced* by Forms like Plane, Line, Straight, Angle, and Equal. (A square is a plane figure bounded by four equal straight lines joined by right angles.) In this kind of reasoning, reasoning that explains a Form, there is no reliance on sensory input. In moving to section D we move from Forms to more basic Forms based on intellect alone.

So the Forms in D make intelligible the Forms in C. Again, explanation goes right to left. But there must come a point where this pattern of explanation cannot be used anymore, where making intelligible can't operate by appealing to something still more basic. When you get to the end of the Divided Line, whatever is there will serve as the explanation for everything to the left of it. But that must be intelligible in itself.

Plato calls the construction of lower Forms “science.” The scientist examines the actual things in the visible world (Charlie or the sand square) and posits explanations of them in terms of hypothetical Forms. Things that explain shadows are now treated by the scientist just as the shadows were—as likenesses of something still more real, to be explained by appeal to Forms. A Form loses its merely hypothetical character when it is explained in terms of higher Forms. We then understand why that Form must be as it is. And this purely conceptual process of moving from Forms to higher Forms, and eventually to the highest



Form—the First Principle—Plato calls “dialectic” (see *R* 511b,c).*

Dialectic, then, is a purely intellectual discipline, no longer relying on the world of sense at all. It is a search for the ultimate presuppositions of all our hypothetical explanations and proceeds solely through awareness of Forms. If by such dialectical reasoning we should come to an ultimate presupposition, we will, Plato assures us, have discovered “the starting point for everything” (*R* 511b).

We obviously need to explore what Plato has to say about this Starting Point. But first let us amplify our understanding of the Divided Line (see the following chart) by adding some further characterizations. Notice the difference in labels given to the sections of the line on the second and third levels down. The second level characterizes reality in terms of what it is. These labels are *metaphysical* in nature. The third level (written in capital letters) characterizes reality in terms of how it is apprehended, so these labels have an *epistemological* flavor to them. (The first level is also epistemological, but less fine-grained than the third.) Here we see how intimately Plato’s theory of knowledge is related to his theory of reality. We add two directional indicators to show that things get more real as you progress along the line from *A* to *D* and that items to the right are responsible for the existence of items to the left and explain them.

*Note that the term “dialectic” is used in a narrower sense here than that discussed in connection with Socratic question-and-answer method. For a comparison, see pp. 96–97.

The sciences, we can now say, are only stages on the way to true and final understanding. They are not yet “that place which, once reached, is traveller’s rest and journey’s end” (*R* 532e). The sciences do grasp reality to some extent; but because they do not themselves lead us to the Starting Point, Plato thinks scientists still live in a kind of dream world. “There’s no chance of their having a conscious glimpse of reality as long as they refuse to disturb the things they take for granted and remain incapable of explaining them” (*R* 533c).

It is for dialectic to give this reasoned account of first things. Its quest for certainty causes it to uproot the things it takes for granted in the course of its journey, which takes it towards an actual starting-point. When the mind’s eye is literally buried deep in mud, far from home, dialectic gently extracts it and guides it upwards. (*R* 533c–d)

Let us note that dialectic, in leading us to the Starting Point, is supposed to give us certainty. This is very important to Plato; indeed, the quest for certainty is a crucial theme in most of Western philosophy. Why should Plato suppose that acquaintance with the Starting Point will be accompanied by certainty, by “traveller’s rest and journey’s end”? Because it is no longer hypothetical. The truth of the Starting Point need no longer be supported by principles beyond itself. It does not cry out for explanation; it does not beckon us on beyond itself. Its truth is evident. To see it—with “the mind’s eye”—is to understand. Here we need no longer anxiously ask, “But is this really

true?” Here we know we are not just dreaming. Here the soul can “rest.”*

THE FORM OF THE GOOD

The examples we have considered recently—doubling the square, Charlie, and the Forms they participate in—are examples from mathematics and natural science. But we should not forget that there are other Forms as well: Piety, Morality, Beauty, and the Good. We’ll soon explore the dialectic showing that the Form of Morality participates in the Form of the Good and say something about Beauty. But if we want to illuminate Plato’s Starting Point, we shall have to look directly to the Form of the Good.

Let us begin by asking why Plato should think of Goodness Itself as that Form to which dialectic will lead us. As we consider this, we should remember that in moving higher and higher on the Divided Line we are always gaining clearer, less questionable explanations of why something is the way it is.

In the dialogue *Phaedo*, Plato relates a conversation that Socrates had with his friends on the day of his death. At one point Socrates says,

When I was young . . . I was remarkably keen on the kind of wisdom known as natural science; it seemed to me splendid to know the reasons for each thing, why each thing comes to be, why it perishes, and why it exists. (*Phaedo* 96a)

He relates that he was unable to make much progress toward discovering those causes and became discouraged until hearing one day someone read from a book of Anaxagoras.† Socrates heard that Mind directs and is the cause of everything.

Now this was a reason that pleased me; it seemed to me, somehow, to be a good thing that intelligence should be the reason for everything. And I thought that, if that’s the case, then intelligence in ordering all things must order them and place each individual thing in the best way possible; so if anyone wanted

to find out the reason why each thing comes to be or perishes or exists, this is what he must find out about it: how is it best for that thing to exist, or to act or be acted upon in any way? (*Phaedo* 97c–d)

Socrates procured the books of Anaxagoras and read them eagerly. But he was disappointed. For when it came down to cases, Anaxagoras cited as causes the standard elements of Greek nature philosophy—air and water and such.

In fact, he seemed to me to be in exactly the position of someone who said that all Socrates’ actions were performed with his intelligence, and who then tried to give the reasons for each of my actions by saying, first, that the reason why I’m now sitting here is that my body consists of bones and sinews, and the bones are hard and separated from each other by joints, whereas the sinews, which can be tightened and relaxed, surround the bones, together with the flesh and the skin that holds them together; so that when the bones are turned in their sockets, the sinews by stretching and tensing enable me somehow to bend my limbs at this moment, and that’s the reason why I’m sitting here bent this way. (*Phaedo* 98c–d)

Are these facts about his body the true explanation of why Socrates is sitting there in prison? It does not seem to Socrates to even be the right kind of explanation. These considerations do not even mention

the true reasons: that Athenians judged it better to condemn me, and therefore I in my turn have judged it better to sit here, and thought it more just to stay behind and submit to such penalty as they may ordain. . . . Fancy being unable to distinguish two different things: the reason proper, and that without which the reason could never be a reason! (*Phaedo* 98e–99b)

Why is Socrates sitting in prison? The true explanation is that the Athenians decided it was better to condemn him and that Socrates has decided that not escaping was for the best. The behaviors of the various bodily parts are not irrelevant, but they are not the “true reason.” They are just conditions necessary for that real reason to have its effect. We do not get a satisfactory explanation until we reach one that mentions what is *good*, or *better*, or *best*.

*Compare Heraclitus on how the many who do not recognize the *logos* live as though they were asleep, lost in a dream-world of their own making. See p. 20.

†A pre-Socratic nature philosopher. You may recall that Socrates mentions him in the speech at his trial: *Apology* 26d.

This suggests that explanations in which we can “rest” must be framed in terms of what is good. Because explanations proceed by citing Forms, the ultimate explanation of everything must be in terms of the **Form of the Good**. The Form of the Good, then, must play the part of the Starting Point. In the final analysis, to understand why anything is as it is, we must see that it is so because it participates in this Form, because it is good for it to be so.

That is why Plato thinks the Form of the Good is the Starting Point. But what is it? To call this Starting Point the Form of the Good is not very illuminating. It doesn’t tell us any more than Socrates knows about the pious at the beginning of his examination of Euthyphro. Socrates knows that he is looking for the Form of the Pious, but he also knows that he doesn’t know what that is. In just this sense, we might now ask Plato, “What is this Form which plays such a crucial role? Explain it to us.”

At this point, Plato disappoints us; he tells us plainly that he cannot give such an explanation.* He says that “our knowledge of goodness is inadequate” (R 505a). When Socrates is pressed to discuss it, he says, “I’m afraid it’ll be more than I can manage” (R 506d). But he does agree to describe “something which seems to me to be the child of goodness and to bear a very strong resemblance to it” (R 506e).

Consider sight, Plato suggests. What makes sight possible? Well, the eyes, for one thing. But eyes alone see nothing; there must also be the various colored objects to be seen. Even this is not enough, for eyes do not see colors in the dark. To eyes and objects we must add light. Where does light come from? From the sun. It is the sun, then, that is

the child of goodness I was talking about. . . . It is a counterpart to its father, goodness. As goodness stands in the intelligible realm to intelligence and the things we know, so in the visible realm the sun stands to sight and the things we see. . . .

*This reticence on Plato’s part contrasts dramatically with the confidence many have since displayed in giving us their accounts of what is good. These accounts, of course, do not all agree with one another.

What I’m saying is that it’s goodness which gives the things we know their truth and makes it possible for people to have knowledge. It is responsible for knowledge and truth, and you should think of it as being within the intelligible realm, but you shouldn’t identify it with knowledge and truth, otherwise you’ll be wrong: for all their value, it is even more valuable. (R 508b–509a)

Knowledge, truth, and beauty are all good things. For Plato this means that they participate in the Form of the Good. This Form alone makes it intelligible that there should be such good things. You might ask in wonderment, why is there such a thing as knowledge at all? What accounts for that? If Plato is right here, you will not find a satisfactory answer to your question until you discover why it is for the best that knowledge should exist; and discovering that is equivalent to seeing its participation in the Form of Goodness Itself.

However, although knowledge is a good thing, Plato cautions us that it must not be thought of as identical with Goodness. The Form of the Good surpasses all the other Forms as well as the visible world in beauty and honor. If we think again about the Divided Line, we can now say that the Form of the Good is at the point farthest to the right of that Line, at the very end of section *D*. It makes intelligible everything to the left of it.

This ultimate Form not only makes everything else intelligible, but also is responsible for the very existence of everything else.

I think you’ll agree that the ability to be seen is not the only gift the sun gives to the things we see. It is also the source of their generation, growth, and nourishment. . . .

And it isn’t only the known-ness of the things we know which is conferred upon them by goodness, but also their reality and their being, although goodness isn’t actually the state of being, but surpasses being in majesty and might. (R 509b)

Just as the is responsible for the world of sight, is actually its cause, so the Form of the Good is the cause of the reality of everything else; it both *produces* and *makes intelligible* everything that is.

Let us pause here and see what Plato takes himself to have accomplished. He has refuted the skeptics, he believes, by proving that we do

have knowledge. He has unified Parmenides' and Heraclitus' conflicting views by showing that, while the sensory world is in constant flux, there is another world, the world of the Forms, that is eternal and unchanging. And he has refuted the atomists' view of the world as a purposeless, mechanical swirl of atoms amid the void by showing that the Forms transcend the material world and, through their participation in the Form of the Good, give the world purpose and value. Science, pursued to its basic presuppositions, reveals a world with a moral and religious dimension, albeit of a far more rationalistic kind than that depicted by Homer.

Coming to understand and appreciate all of this, however, is no easy feat, as Plato illustrates in his most famous story, the **Myth of the Cave**.

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1. Draw Plato's Divided Line and explain what each of its parts represents. (Close the book, then try to draw and label it.)
 2. What two relationships exist between a Form and some visible thing that "participates" in it?
 3. What is the distinction Plato draws between "science" and "dialectic," and how does this relate to the distinction between hypotheses and first principles?
 4. What is the argument that purports to show that the Starting Point—the rightmost point on the Divided Line—is the Form of the Good?
 5. How do Plato's arguments up to this point help him achieve his aims?
-

The Love of Wisdom

There is a progress in the soul that corresponds to the degrees of reality in things. This idea is indicated in the various sections of the Divided Line. Contemplating the images of worldly things is analogous to the use of *imagination*; indeed, mental images are quite like shadows and mirror images in their dependence on things. About things and events in the world we can have probable beliefs or *opinions*. When we reason about them we are hypothesizing Forms; here is the domain of *science*. Finally, we reach *understanding* through the process of dialectic, which takes

us upward to the highest Forms on which all the others depend.

We can think of this progress as progress toward **wisdom**.

WHAT WISDOM IS

A wise person would understand everything in the light of the Forms, particularly the Form of the Good. To produce such wise individuals is the aim of education. Plato illustrates the progress toward wisdom in a dramatic myth told in the seventh book of the *Republic*. As you read it, keep the Divided Line and the analogy of the sun in mind.

"Imagine people living in a cavernous cell down under the ground; at the far end of the cave, a long way off, there's an entrance open to the outside world. They've been there since childhood, with their legs and necks tied up in a way which keeps them in one place and allows them to look only straight ahead, but not to turn their heads. There's a firelight burning a long way further up the cave behind them, and up the slope between the fire and the prisoners there's a road, beside which you should imagine a low wall has been built—like the partition which conjurers place between themselves and their audience and above which they show their tricks."

"All right," he said.

"Imagine also that there are people on the other side of this wall who are carrying all sorts of artefacts, human statuettes, and animal models carved in stone and wood and all kinds of materials stick out over the wall; and as you'd expect, some of the people talk as they carry these objects along, while others are silent."

"This is a strange picture you're painting," he said, "with strange prisoners."

"They're no different from us," I said. "I mean, in the first place, do you think they'd see anything of themselves and one another except the shadows cast by the fire on to the cave wall directly opposite them?"

"Of course not," he said. "They're forced to spend their lives without moving their heads."

"And what about the objects which were being carried along? Won't they only see their shadows as well?"

"Naturally."

"Now, suppose they were able to talk to one another: don't you think they'd assume that their words applied to what they saw passing by in front of them?"

“They couldn’t think otherwise.”

“And what if sound echoed off the prison wall opposite them? When any of the passers-by spoke, don’t you think they’d be bound to assume that the sound came from a passing shadow?”

“I’m absolutely certain of it,” he said.

“All in all, then,” I said, “the shadows of artefacts would constitute the only reality people in this situation would recognize.”

“That’s absolutely inevitable,” he agreed.

“What do you think would happen, then,” I asked, “if they were set free from their bonds and cured of their inanity? What would it be like if they found that happening to them? Imagine that one of them has been set free and is suddenly made to stand up, to turn his head and walk, and to look towards the firelight. It hurts him to do all this and he’s too dazzled to be capable of making out the objects whose shadows he’d formerly been looking at. And suppose someone tells him that what he’s been seeing all this time has no substance, and that he’s now closer to reality and is seeing more accurately, because of the greater reality of the things in front of his eyes—what do you imagine his reaction would be? And what do you think he’d say if he were shown any of the passing objects and had to respond to being asked what it was? Don’t you think he’d be bewildered, and would think that there was more reality in what he’d been seeing before than in what he was being shown now?”

“Far more,” he said.

“And if he were forced to look at the actual firelight, don’t you think it would hurt his eyes? Don’t you think he’d turn away and run back to the things he could make out, and would take the truth of the matter to be that these things are clearer than what he was being shown?”

“Yes,” he agreed.

“And imagine him being dragged forcibly away from there up the rough, steep slope,” I went on, “without being released until he’s been pulled out into the sunlight. Wouldn’t this treatment cause him pain and distress? And once he’s reached the sunlight, he wouldn’t be able to see a single one of the things which are currently taken to be real, would he, because his eyes would be overwhelmed by the sun’s beams?”

“No, he wouldn’t,” he answered, “not straight away.”

“He wouldn’t be able to see things up on the surface of the earth, I suppose, until he’d got used

to his situation. At first, it would be shadows that he could most easily make out, then he’d move on to the reflections of people and so on in water, and later he’d be able to see the actual things themselves. Next he’d feast his eyes on the heavenly bodies and the heavens themselves, which would be easier at night: he’d look at the light of the stars and the moon, rather than at the sun and sunlight during the daytime.”

“Of course.”

“And at last, I imagine, he’d be able to discern and feast his eyes on the sun—not the displaced image of the sun in water or elsewhere, but the sun on its own, in its proper place.”

“Yes, he’d inevitably come to that,” he said.

“After that, he’d start to think about the sun and he’d deduce that it is the source of the seasons and the yearly cycle, that the whole of the visible realm is its domain, and that in a sense everything which he and his peers used to see is its responsibility.”

“Yes, that would obviously be the next point he’d come to,” he agreed.

“Now, if he recalled the cell where he’d originally lived and what passed for knowledge there and his former fellow prisoners, don’t you think he’d feel happy about his own altered circumstances, and sorry for them?”

“Definitely.”

“Suppose that the prisoners used to assign prestige and credit to one another, in the sense that they rewarded speed at recognizing the shadows as they passed, and the ability to remember which ones normally come earlier and later and at the same time as which other ones, and expertise at using this as a basis for guessing which ones would arrive next. Do you think our former prisoner would covet these honours and would envy the people who had status and power there, or would he much prefer, as Homer describes it, ‘being a slave labouring for someone else—someone without property,’ and would put up with anything at all, in fact, rather than share their beliefs and their life?”

“Yes, I think he’d go through anything rather than live that way,” he said.

“Here’s something else I’d like your opinion about,” I said. “If he went back underground and sat down again in the same spot, wouldn’t the sudden transition from the sunlight mean that his eyes would be overwhelmed by darkness?”

“Certainly.”

“Now, the process of adjustment would be quite long this time, and suppose that before his

eyes had settled down and while he wasn't seeing well, he had once again to compete against those same old prisoners at identifying those shadows. Wouldn't he make a fool of himself? Wouldn't they say that he'd come back from his upward journey with his eyes ruined, and that it wasn't even worth trying to go up there? And wouldn't they—if they could—grab hold of anyone who tried to set them free and take them up there, and kill him?"

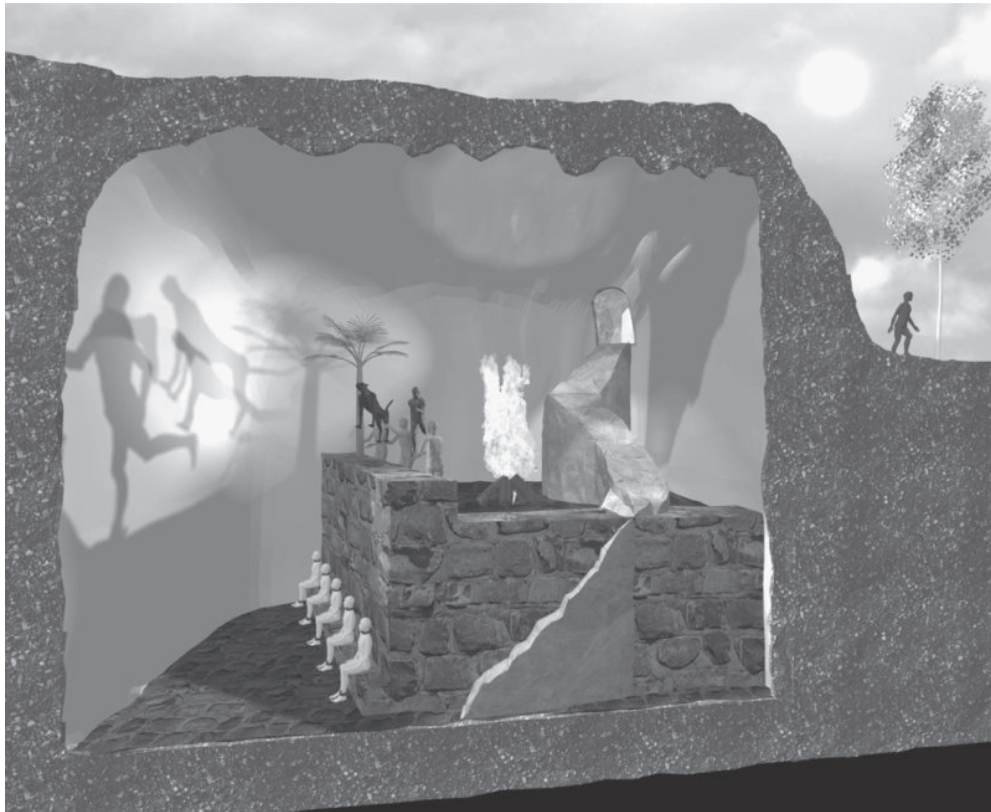
"They certainly would," he said. (R 514a–517a)

Any such myth is subject to multiple interpretations. But let us see if we can, in light of what we know of Plato so far, identify the various stages of the ascent to wisdom. The people fettered in the cave, seeing only the shadows of things, are like those who gain their understanding of things from the poets, from Homer and Hesiod. Or, in our day, they are like those who get their impressions

of the world by paying attention to the media—to movies, to the soaps, to headlines shared on social media. They see only images of reality—reflections, interpretations.

Those who climb up to the wall, on which are carried various items casting the shadows, are like those who can look directly on things in the visible world. The fire, I think, represents the physical sun, lighting up these perceptible realities so they can be apprehended. Looking on them directly reveals how fuzzy and indistinct the shadows of them on the wall actually were.

But to really understand these things it is necessary to climb higher, out of the cave altogether. This move is like the transition on the Divided Line between the visible world and the intelligible world; it is the transition from things to Forms. The sun outside the cave represents the Form of



The Divided Line



the Good, just as it does in the **Analogy of the Sun**. First our adventurer can only see the lower Forms, reflections of the “Sun.” But gradually, through dialectic, he can come to see the Form of the Good itself.

And what would happen if our adventurer returned to cave to tell the captives what he had seen? What would happen if someone who saw things as they really were and understood their participation in Goodness tried to tell those who had not ventured beyond the sensible world? Such a person would be mocked and maybe even killed. (Can there be any doubt that Plato is thinking of Socrates here?)

To love wisdom is to be motivated to leave the Cave. At each stage, Plato emphasizes how difficult, even painful, the struggle for enlightenment is. It is much easier, much more comfortable, to remain a prisoner in relative darkness and occupy oneself with what are, in reality, only shadows—content to be entertained by the passing show of images.

Indeed, the prisoners in the cave are not happy to hear that they suffer from an illusion. They are comfortable in the cave, enjoying its pleasures. What could motivate them to turn their souls toward reality and engage in a struggle that Plato warns is both difficult and dangerous? We need now to talk about the **love of wisdom**.

LOVE AND WISDOM

The theme of Plato’s dialogue *Symposium*, from which Alcibiades’ tribute to the character of Socrates was taken,* is love. After dinner each guest is obliged to make a speech in praise of love. When Socrates’ turn comes, he protests that he cannot make such a flattering speech as the others have made, but he can, if they like, tell the truth about love.† They urge him to do so.

*Review pp. 93–95.

†This should remind you of the contrast Socrates draws between rhetoric and his own plain speaking at the very beginning of the *Apology*. About love, it must be noted that the Greeks had distinct words for several different kinds of love; in this their language was more discriminating than ours. The kind of love Socrates is here discussing is *eros*, from which our term “erotic” is drawn.

Socrates claims to have learned about love from a wise woman named **Diotima**, who instructed him by the same question-and-answer method he now uses on others.* We’ll abbreviate the speech in which Socrates relates her instruction, keeping the question-and-answer mode. This very rich discussion of love is found in *Symposium* 198a–212b.

Q: Is love the love of something or not?

A: Of something.

Q: Does love long for what it loves?

A: Certainly.

Q: Is this something that love has, or something love lacks?

A: It must be what love lacks, for no one longs for what he or she has.

Q: What does love love?

A: Beauty.

Q: Then love must lack beauty?

A: Apparently so.

Q: Is love ugly, then?

A: Not necessarily. For just as opinion is a middle term between ignorance and knowledge, so love may be between beauty and ugliness.

Q: Is love a god?

A: No. For the gods lack nothing in the way of beauty or happiness. For that reason, the gods do not love beauty or happiness either. Nor do the gods love wisdom, for they are wise and do not lack it.

Q: What is love, then?

A: Midway between mortals and the gods, love is a spirit that connects the earthly and the heavenly. [Think of the world and the Forms.]

Q: What is the origin of love?

*Plato is known to have taught at least two women students, and he depicts two women as philosophers in his Socratic dialogues. Diotima is one of them. While the fact that no other mention of her survives from her own time has led some people to believe that she is a purely fictional character, other scholars argue that she was a historical person, like most of the other characters in Plato’s dialogues. See Mary Ellen Waithe, “Diotima of Mantinea,” in *A History of Women Philosophers*, vol. 1, ed. Mary Ellen Waithe (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 83–116. On the role of women in ancient Greek philosophy, see Kathleen Wider, “Women Philosophers in the Ancient Greek World: Donning the Mantle,” *Hypatia* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1986).

A: Love is the child of Need and Resourcefulness (the son of Craft). It is a combination of longing for what one does not have and ingenuity in seeking it.

Q: But what, more exactly, is it that love seeks?

A: Love seeks the beautiful. And the good.

Q: To what end?

A: To make them its own.

Q: And what will the lover gain by making the beautiful and the good his own?

A: Happiness.

Q: Does everyone seek happiness?

A: Of course.

Q: Then is everyone always in love?

A: Yes and no. We tend to give the name of love to only one sort of love. Actually, love “includes every kind of longing for happiness and the good.” So those who long for the good in every field—business, athletics, philosophy—are also lovers.

Q: For how long does a lover want to possess that good that he or she longs for?

A: Certainly not for a limited time only. To think so would be equivalent to wanting to be happy for only a short time. So the lover must want the good to be his or hers forever.

Q: How could a mortal attain this?

A: By becoming immortal.

Q: So a mortal creature does all it can “to put on immortality”?

A: Evidently.

Q: Could this be why lovers are interested not just in beauty but in procreation by means of such beauty?

A: Yes. It is by breeding another individual as like itself as possible that mortal creatures like animals and humans attain as much of immortality as is possible for them. Such a creature cannot, like the gods, remain the same throughout eternity; it can only leave behind new life to fill the vacancy that is left in its species by its death.

Q: Is there any other way to approach immortality?

A: Yes, by attaining the “endless fame” that heroes and great benefactors of humankind attain. Think, for example, of Achilles and Homer and Solon.

Q: So some lovers beget children and raise a family, and others “bear things of the spirit . . . wisdom and all her sister virtues,” especially those relevant to “the ordering of society, . . . justice and moderation”?

A: Yes. And the latter will be especially concerned to share these goods with friends and, with them, to educate each other in wisdom.

Q: Is there a natural progression of love?

A: Yes.

At this point, we need to hear Plato’s words themselves. Diotima is speaking as if someone were to be initiated into a cult devoted to love.

Well then, she began, the candidate for this initiation cannot, if his efforts are to be rewarded, begin too early to devote himself to the beauties of the body. First of all, if his preceptor instructs him as he should, he will fall in love with the beauty of one individual body, so that his passion may give life to noble discourse. Next he must consider how nearly related the beauty of any one body is to the beauty of any other, when he will see that if he is to devote himself to loveliness of form it will be absurd to deny that the beauty of each and every body is the same. Having reached this point, he must set himself to be the lover of every lovely body, and bring his passion for the one into due proportion by deeming it of little or of no importance.

Next he must grasp that the beauties of the body are as nothing to the beauties of the soul, so that wherever he meets with spiritual loveliness, even in the husk of an unlovely body, he will find it beautiful enough to fall in love with and to cherish—and beautiful enough to quicken in his heart a longing for such discourse as tends toward the building of a noble nature. And from this he will be led to contemplate the beauty of laws and institutions. And when he discovers how nearly every kind of beauty is akin to every other he will conclude that the beauty of the body is not, after all, of so great moment.

And next, his attention should be diverted from institutions to the sciences, so that he may know the beauty of every kind of knowledge. . . . And, turning his eyes toward the open sea of beauty, he will find in such contemplation the seed of the most fruitful discourse and the loftiest thought, and reap a golden harvest of philosophy, until, confirmed and strengthened, he will come upon one single form of knowledge, the knowledge of the beauty I am about to speak of.

And here, she said, you must follow me as closely as you can.

Whoever has been initiated so far in the mysteries of Love and has viewed all these aspects of the

beautiful in due succession, is at last drawing near the final revelation. And now, Socrates, there bursts upon him that wondrous vision which is the very soul of the beauty he has toiled so long for. It is an everlasting loveliness which neither comes nor goes, which neither flowers nor fades, for such beauty is the same on every hand, the same then as now, here as there, this way as that way, the same to every worshiper as it is to every other. (*Symposium* 210a–211a)

These are the steps, Plato tells us, that a resourceful lover takes. It is important to recognize that he sees these as making up a natural progression; there is nothing arbitrary about this series. In discussing these stages, let us remember that one can love in ways other than sexual. A lover, then, is someone who lacks that which will make him or her happy. What will make the lover happy is to possess the beautiful and the good—forever. For that the lover yearns. It is the lover’s resourcefulness, propelled by longing, that moves the lover up the **ladder of love**. At each rung the lover is only partially satisfied and is therefore powerfully motivated to discover whether there might be something still more satisfying.

Being in the world, the lover naturally begins in the world. His or her first object is some beautiful body. But he or she will soon discover that the beauty in this body is not unique to that individual. It is shared by every beautiful body. What shall the lover do then? Although Plato does not say so explicitly, we might conjecture that at this point it is easy for the lover to go wrong by trying to possess each of these bodies in the same way as he or she longed to possess the first one—like Don Juan. We might think of it like this. Don Juan (with 1,003 “conquests” in Spain alone) has moved beyond the first stage of devotion to just one lovely body. He now tries to devote to many the same love that he devoted to the one. This is bound to be unsatisfying; if a single one does not satisfy, there is no reason to think that many will satisfy.

How does Plato describe the correct step at this point? The lover of “every lovely body” must “bring his passion for the one into due proportion by deeming it of little or of no importance.” Rather than trying to multiply the same passion many times, the discovery of beauty in many bodies must

occasion what we might call a “sublimation” of the original passion. It must be transferred to a more appropriate kind of object. Indeed, it is at this point that the lover first becomes dimly aware of the Form of Beauty.* The resourcefulness of love makes it clear that only this sort of object is going to satisfy; only this sort of object endures.

The lover, moreover, discovers that a beautiful soul is even more lovely than a beautiful body, finding it so much more satisfying that he or she will “fall in love with” and “cherish” a beautiful soul even though it is found “in the husk of an unlovely body.” (Could Plato here be thinking of the physical ugliness of Socrates?) The lover will then come to love *all* beautiful souls.

The next step is to “contemplate the beauty of laws and institutions.” Presumably the transition from lovely individual souls to a pleasing social order is a small one. What explains the existence of lovely souls? They must have been well brought up. And that can happen only in a moderate, harmonious, and just social order. The beauty of a good state comes into view, and we move one more step away from the original passion for an individual beautiful body; when this stage is reached, the lover “concludes that beauty of the body is not, after all, of so great moment.”

Once in the sphere of “spiritual loveliness,” the lover comes to long for knowledge. Why? It is not difficult to see why if you keep the Divided Line in mind. What is it that makes intelligible and produces good social institutions? Surely they must be founded not on opinion, but on knowledge. Plato speaks movingly here of “the beauty of every kind of knowledge” and supposes that the lover—not yet satisfied—will explore all the sciences. Here the lover will find an “open sea of beauty,” in contemplation of which he or she will be able to bring forth “the most fruitful discourse and the loftiest thought, and reap a golden harvest of philosophy.”

*Recall the doctrine of learning by recollection (p. 134). The beautiful individual is the “occasion” for recollecting what the soul previously knew, Beauty Itself. Only by a prior acquaintance with this Form can the lover recognize the beloved as beautiful.

But even this is not the last stage. And we must note that Diotima cautions Socrates at this point to “follow . . . as closely as you can.” The final stage, then, must be difficult to grasp. Indeed, those who have not attained it might well be unable to appreciate it fully. It is, in fact, a kind of mystical vision of the Form of Beauty Itself.* Note the rapturously emotional language Plato uses here. Presumably he is describing an experience that he himself had, one to which he ascribes a supreme value.

It is called a “wondrous vision,” an “everlasting loveliness.” Like all the Forms, the Form of Beauty is eternal. The religious character of the vision is indicated by the term “worshiper,” which Plato applies to the lover who attains this “final revelation.”



“Beauty crowds me till I die.
Beauty mercy have on me
But if I expire today
Let it be in sight of thee—”

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886)

We began this discussion of love to find an answer to a question. Why, we wondered, would anyone be motivated to leave the Cave and make the difficult ascent to the sunlight, leaving behind the easy pleasures of worldly life? We now have Plato’s answer. It is because we are all lovers.† We all want to be happy, to possess the beautiful and the good, forever. This is what we lack and long for. And to the extent of our resourcefulness, we will come to see that this passion cannot be satisfied by one beautiful body or even of many. We will be drawn out of the Cave toward the sun, toward the beautiful and the good in themselves, by the very nature of love. Plato is convinced that within each

of us there is motivation that, if followed, will lead us beyond shadows to the Forms.

In Plato’s discussion of the love of wisdom we have an example of dialectic at work—the very dialectic that occupies the fourth section on the Divided Line. We see Plato exploring the nature of *eros*, teasing out of the Form of Love its intimate connections with the Forms of Knowledge and Beauty. In one sense we all know beauty when we see it. But if we truly understand *eros*, Plato tells us, we will see that its combination of need and resource must lead us beyond its immediate objects to the highest levels of intellectual activity and spirituality.

Wisdom, which for Plato is equivalent to seeing everything in the light of the Forms, particularly in the light of the highest Forms of Beauty and Goodness, is something we all need, lack, and want. Wisdom alone will satisfy. Only wisdom, where the soul actually participates in the eternity of the Forms, will in the end bring us as close to immortality as mortals can possibly get.

But this conclusion is not yet quite accurate. As stated, it assumes the Homeric picture of human beings as mortal through and through. This is not Plato’s considered view, and we need now to inquire into his theory of the soul.

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1. Relate the Myth of the Cave.
 2. What is love (*eros*)?
 3. Why would a lover of beauty ultimately seek wisdom?
-

The Soul

Plato thought about his central problems throughout a long life. And it is apparent, particularly in his doctrine of the **soul**, that his thought developed complexities unimagined early on. Scholars dispute whether Plato’s later thought on this is in conflict with his earlier thought, but there is clearly at least a tension between the earlier and the later views. In this introductory treatment we will ignore these problems, presenting a picture of the soul that will be oversimplified and less than complete but true in essentials to Plato’s views on the subject.⁵

*The language Plato uses to describe this experience is remarkably similar to the language of Christian mystics describing the “beatific vision” of God.

†Actually, this is not quite Plato’s view. He thinks there are distinctly different sorts of people, and only some of them are lovers of wisdom. But we take here the more democratic view and give everyone the benefit of the doubt!

THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL

At the end of his defense before the jury, Socrates concludes that “there is good hope that death is a blessing.” He thinks one of two things must be true: Either death is a dreamless sleep, or we survive the death of the body and can converse with those who died before. But he does not try to decide between them.*

Plato offers arguments to demonstrate that the latter is the true possibility—that the soul is immortal. We find such an argument in the story of Socrates and the slave boy.† According to Socrates, the boy is able to recognize the truth when it is before him because he is remembering or recollecting what he was earlier acquainted with. But if that is so, then he—or rather his soul—must have existed before he was born and in such a state that he was familiar with the Forms. Similarly, in judging two numbers to be equal we are using a concept that we could not have gained from experience, for no two worldly things are ever exactly equal. Plato concludes that

it must, surely, have been before we began to see and hear and use the other senses that we got knowledge of the equal itself, of what it is, if we were going to refer the equals from our sense-perceptions to it, supposing that all things are doing their best to be like it, but are inferior to it. (*Phaedo* 75b)

If we had knowledge of the Equal “before we began to see and hear and use the other senses,” then we must have been acquainted with this Form before our birth.

We may have doubts about the adequacy of this argument for the preexistence of the soul; if we could give another explanation of how we come to know the truth or of how we develop ideal concepts such as “equal,” it might be seriously undermined. But even if it were a sound argument, it would not yet prove that the soul is immortal. For even if our souls do antedate the beginnings of our bodies, it is still possible that they dissipate when our bodies do (or some time after). In that case, the soul would still be mortal.

*See *Apology* 40a–41c.

†In *Meno* 82b–86b.

Plato considers this possibility, but he has other arguments. Recall Socrates in his prison cell. Why is he there? As we have seen, it is not because his body has made certain movements rather than others—or at least this is a very superficial explanation. Socrates is still in prison because he has thought the matter through (with Crito) and as a result has decided not to escape.

Now Plato contrasts two kinds of things: those that move only when something else moves them and those that move themselves. To which class does the body belong? It must, Plato argues, belong to the first class; for a corpse is a body, but it doesn’t move itself. The difference between living and nonliving bodies is that the former possess a principle of activity and motion within themselves. Such a principle of energy, capable of self-motion, is exactly what we call a soul. So a soul is essentially a self-mover, a source of activity and motion. It is because Socrates is “besouled,” capable of moving himself, that he remains in prison. No explanation that does not involve Socrates’ soul can be adequate. Therefore, his remaining in prison cannot be explained by talking only about his body, for the body is moved by something other than itself.

It is precisely because the body is not a self-mover that it can die. The body must be moved either by a soul or by some other body. But if the soul is a self-mover, if it is inherently a source of energy and life, if it does not depend on something outside itself to galvanize it into action—then the soul cannot die.

All soul is immortal, for that which is ever in motion is immortal. But that which while imparting motion is itself moved by something else can cease to be in motion, and therefore can cease to live; it is only that which moves itself that never intermits its motion, inasmuch as it cannot abandon its own nature; moreover this self-mover is the source and first principle of motion for all other things that are moved. (*Phaedrus* 245c)

The argument seems to be that life—a principle of self-motion—is the very essence of the soul. Because nothing can “abandon its own nature,” the soul cannot die.

If the soul is a source of energy distinct from the body, if it survives the body's decay, and if the soul is the essential self, then Socrates was right in not being dismayed at death. But Plato goes further. It must be the task of those who love wisdom to maximize this separation of soul from body even in this life. As we have seen, it is not through the body that we can come to know the reality of the Forms. The body confuses and distracts us. Only the intellect can lead us through the sciences, via dialectic, to our goal: the Beautiful and the Good. And intellect is a capacity of the soul.

It follows that those who seek to be wise should aim at

the parting of the soul from the body as far as possible, and the habituating of it to assemble and gather itself together, away from every part of the body, alone by itself, and to live, so far as it can, both in the present and in the hereafter, released from the body, as from fetters. (*Phaedo* 67c–d)

If we understand by “the world” what we indicated previously, then it is accurate to say that Plato's philosophy contains a drive toward otherworldliness. Raphael was thus right to paint Plato pointing upward. Our true home is not in this world but in another. The love of wisdom, as he understands it, propels us out and away from the visible, the changeable, the bodily—out and away from the world. It is true that one who has climbed out of the Cave into the sunlight of the Forms may return to the darkness below, but only for the purpose of encouraging others to turn their souls, too, toward the eternal realities.

Yet this is not a philosophy of pure escape from the world. The otherworldly tendency is balanced by an emphasis on the practical, this-worldly usefulness of acquaintance with the Forms. To see this practical side of Plato at work, we must talk about the internal structure of the soul.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE SOUL

When a subject is both difficult and important, Plato often constructs an analogy or a myth. The analogy of the sun presented the Form of the Good. The struggle toward wisdom is the subject of the

Myth of the Cave. And to help us comprehend the soul, Plato tells the **Myth of the Charioteer**.*

As to soul's immortality then we have said enough, but as to its nature there is this that must be said. What manner of thing it is would be a long tale to tell, and most assuredly a god alone could tell it, but what it resembles, that a man might tell in briefer compass. Let this therefore be our manner of discourse. Let it be likened to the union of powers in a team of winged steeds and their winged charioteer. Now all the gods' steeds and all their charioteers are good, and of good stock, but with other beings it is not wholly so. With us men, in the first place, it is a pair of steeds that the charioteer controls; moreover, one of them is noble and good, and of good stock, while the other has the opposite character, and his stock is opposite. Hence the task of our charioteer is difficult and troublesome. (*Phaedrus* 246a–b)

We are presented with a picture of the soul in three parts, two of which contribute to the motion of the whole and one whose function is to guide the ensemble. The soul is not only internally complex, however; it is beset by internal conflict. The two horses are of very different sorts and struggle against each other to determine the direction the soul is to go. For this reason, “the task of our charioteer is difficult and troublesome.”

In the *Republic*, Plato tells a story to illustrate one type of possible conflict in the soul.

Leontius the son of Aglaeon was coming up from the Piraeus, outside the North Wall but close to it, when he saw some corpses with the public executioner standing near by. On the one hand, he experienced the desire to see them, but at the same time he felt disgust and averted his gaze. For a while, he struggled and kept his hands over his eyes, but finally he was overcome by the desire; he opened his eyes wide, ran up to the corpses, and said, “There you are, you wretches! What a lovely sight! I hope you feel satisfied!”

Now what it suggests . . . is that it's possible for anger to be at odds with the desires, as if they were different things. (*R* 439e–440a)

This story also gives us a clue to further identification of the two horses in the Myth of the

*The image Plato uses here may well have been suggested by chariot racing in the Olympic games.

Charioteer. The ignoble, unruly steed is desire, or appetite. Leontius *wants* to look at the corpses. Though he struggles against it, he is finally “overcome by the desire.”

This desire is opposed by what Plato calls the “spirited” part of the soul, which corresponds to the noble horse. When we call someone “animated” (in the sense this has in ordinary speech), we are calling attention to the predominance of “spirit” in that person. Children “are full of spirit from birth,” Plato tells us. Spirit puts sparkle in the eyes and joy in the heart. Spirit makes us angry at injustice; it drives the athlete to victory and the soldier to battle. It is, Plato tells us, “an auxiliary of the rational part, unless it is corrupted by bad upbringing” (R 440e–441a).

The two horses, then, represent desire and spirit. What of the charioteer? Remember that the function of the charioteer is to guide the soul. What else could perform this guiding function, from Plato’s point of view, but the rational part of the soul? Think of a desperately thirsty man in the desert. He sees a pool of water and approaches it with all the eagerness that deprivation can create. But when he reaches the pool, he sees a sign: “Danger: Do not drink. Polluted.” He experiences conflict within. His *desire* urges him to drink. But *reason* tells him that such signs usually indicate the truth, that polluted water will make him very ill and may kill him, and that if he drinks he will probably be worse off than if he doesn’t. He decides not to drink. In this case, it is the rational part of him that opposes his desire. His reason guides him away from the water and tries to enlist the help of spirit to make that decision effective.

Desire, spirit, and reason, then, make up the soul. Desire *motivates*, spirit *animates*, and reason *guides*. In the gods, these parts are in perfect harmony. The charioteer in a god’s soul has no difficulty in guiding the chariot. In humans, though, there is often conflict, and the job of the rational charioteer is hard.*

*Recall the saying by Democritus, the atomist: “It is hard to fight with desire; but to overcome it is the mark of a rational man.” See p. 33.



“Where id was, there shall ego be.”

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939)

Plato supposes that any one of these parts may be dominant in a given person. This allows for a rough division of people into three sorts, according to what people take pleasure in:

We found that one part is the intellectual part of a person, another is the passionate [spirited] part, and the third has so many manifestations that we couldn’t give it a single label which applied to it and it alone, so we named it after its most prevalent and powerful aspect: we called it the desirous part, because of the intensity of our desires for food, drink, sex, and so on, and we also referred to it as the mercenary part, because desires of this kind invariably need money for their fulfilment. . . .

Now, sometimes this intellectual part is the motivating aspect of one’s mind; sometimes—as circumstances dictate—it’s one of the other two. . . .

Which is why we’re also claiming that there are three basic human types—the philosophical, the competitive, and the avaricious. (R 580d–581c)

Plato uses the idea of three kinds of human beings in his plan for an ideal state, as we’ll see. But first we need to examine his views on how the various parts of the soul *should* be related. This will allow us to see the practical use to which Plato thinks the Forms can be put.

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1. What argument is offered for the soul’s immortality?
 2. Why does Plato advocate a separation of the soul and the body, even in life?
 3. What are the parts of the soul? What are their functions?
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MORALITY

Plato believes that he has met the challenge of skepticism. We do have knowledge; knowing how to double the square is only one example of innumerable other things we either know or can come to

know. Relativism is also a mistake, he thinks; for the objects of such knowledge are public and available to all. It is by introducing the Forms that he has solved these problems. They are the public, enduring objects about which we can learn through reasoning and instruction. They are the realities that make intelligible all else and give even the fluctuating things of the world such stability as they do have.

We might not be satisfied yet, however. We might say, “That’s all very well in the sphere of geometry and the like, but what about ethics and politics? Is there knowledge here, too?” And we might remind Plato of Socrates reminding Euthyphro that even the gods dispute with each other—not about numbers, lengths, and weights, but about “the just and the unjust, the beautiful and the ugly, the good and the bad” (*Euthyphro* 7d). If we are to meet the challenge of skepticism and relativism, we must do it in this sphere, too. Can we *know*, for instance, that justice is good rather than bad? Are there public objects in this sphere, too, about which rational persons can come to agreement? Or, in this aspect of human life, is custom “king of all”?* Is it true here, as the Sophists argue, that *nomos* rules entirely, that morality, for example, is merely conventional? Unless this challenge can be met, Plato has not succeeded. Skepticism and relativism, ruled out of the theoretical sphere, will reappear with renewed vigor in our practical life. And Plato will neither be able to prove that Athens was wrong to have executed Socrates nor be convincing about the structure of a good state.

Plato makes the problem of morality one of the main themes in the *Republic*. He is asking the Socratic question: What is morality? For Plato, this is equivalent to asking about the Form of Morality. The particular question is this: Is the **Form of the Moral** related to the Form of the Good? And if so, how? To put it in more familiar terms, is morality something good or not?† Remembering that

for Socrates the good is always some sort of *advantage*, we can ask: Will I be *better off* being moral than being immoral? Again Plato takes us up the Divided Line, this time with a dialectic designed to show us that the answer is yes, that being moral is indeed something good—and good by nature, not by convention.

As we have seen, Antiphon argues that conventional morality, which forbids deception, stealing, and breaking contracts, may not be in the interest of the individual. When it is not to his advantage, he says, there is nothing wrong with violating the conventional rules, following the law of self-preservation, and being (in the conventional sense) immoral. If you can deceive someone and get away with it when it is to your advantage, that is what you should do.

Plato always tries to present his opponents’ views in a strong way, and in the *Republic* we find **Thrasymachus**, another Sophist, arguing the case. Because, he claims, the rules of morality are purely conventional and are made by those with the power to make them, it will seldom be to the advantage of an individual to be moral.* Thrasymachus addresses Socrates:

In any and every situation, a moral person is worse off than an immoral one. Suppose, for instance, that they’re doing some business together, which involves one of them entering into association with the other: by the time the association is dissolved, you’ll never find the moral person up on the immoral one—he’ll be worse off. Or again, in civic matters, if there’s a tax on property, then a moral person pays more tax than an immoral one even when they’re both equally well off; and if there’s a hand-out, then the one gets nothing, while the other makes a lot. And when each of them holds political office, even if a moral person loses out financially in no other way, his personal affairs deteriorate through neglect, while his morality stops him making any profit from public funds, and moreover his family and friends fall out with him over his refusal to help them out in unfair ways; in all these

*Quoted by Herodotus from Pindar, after he tells the story of the Greeks and Indians before Darius (p. 63). Review the *nomos/physics* controversy that follows.

†This is Nietzsche’s question, too. But unlike Plato, he answers no. See pp. 578–581.

*This principle is sometimes humorously called “The Golden Rule: He who has the gold, makes the rule.” Another version of it is the principle that might makes right.

respects, however, an immoral person's experience is the opposite. . . .

So you see, Socrates, immorality—if practised on a large enough scale—has more power, licence, and authority than morality. (R 343d–344c)

From Thrasyachus' point of view, being moral is "sheer simplicity," whereas being immoral is "sound judgment" (R 348c–d). When the question is, "How anyone can live his life in the most rewarding manner?" (R 344e), Thrasyachus answers: Be immoral!

Now Plato accepts this as the right question, but he thinks Thrasyachus gives the wrong answer. Which life is the most worthwhile? Which kind of life is advantageous to the one who lives it? That is indeed the question. But how shall we answer it?

Here is a clue. As we saw in our discussion of love, everyone desires to be happy. No one doubts that what makes you truly happy (enduringly happy) is good. So it looks like **happiness** is one thing that everyone admits is good by nature (*physis*); it isn't just by convention (*nomos*) that we agree on that. This suggests a strategy that could counter the argument of Thrasyachus. If Plato could show that being moral is in your long-term interest because it is the only way to be truly happy, Thrasyachus would be defeated.

But is the moral person the happy person? That question is posed in a radical way by another participant in the dialogue of the *Republic*, **Glaucon**, who tells the following story. It is about an ancestor of **Gyges**.

He was a shepherd in the service of the Lydian ruler of the time, when a heavy rainstorm occurred and an earthquake cracked open the land to a certain extent, and a chasm appeared in the region where he was pasturing his flocks. He was fascinated by the sight, and went down into the chasm and saw there, as the story goes, among other artefacts, a bronze horse, which was hollow and had windows set in it; he stopped and looked in through the windows and saw a corpse inside, which seemed to be that of a giant. The corpse was naked, but had a golden ring on one finger; he took the ring off the finger and left. Now, the shepherds used to meet once a month to keep the king informed about his flocks, and our protagonist came to the meeting wearing the ring. He was sitting down among the others,

and happened to twist the ring's bezel in the direction of his body, towards the inner part of his hand. When he did this, he became invisible to his neighbours, and to his astonishment they talked about him as if he'd left. While he was fiddling about with the ring again, he turned the bezel outwards, and became visible. He thought about this and experimented to see if it was the ring which had this power; in this way he eventually found that turning the bezel inwards made him invisible, and turning it outwards made him visible. As soon as he realized this, he arranged to be one of the delegates to the king; once he was inside the palace, he seduced the king's wife and with her help assaulted and killed the king, and so took possession of the throne. (R 359d–360b)

Would you want a ring like this? How would you use it? You are invited to imagine a situation in which you could avoid any nasty consequences for behaving unjustly; all you have to do is use the ring. You could behave as badly as you like while invisible and no one could pin it on you. You would never be caught or punished. If you took a fancy to something, you could just take it. If you wanted to do something, nothing would prevent you. In a situation like this, what would be the best thing to do? What use of the ring would bring the greatest advantage?

On the one hand, if being moral is worthwhile only because of its consequences, then removing the consequences would diminish the worth of being a moral person; you might as well be unjust and satisfy your desires. On the other hand, if being moral is the true good, good in itself, then it would be better to refrain from unjust actions; it would be more advantageous not to steal, kill, or commit adultery, even if you could get away with it. Your life would be better being moral, even though you would have to do without some of the things that would please you.

Glaucon challenges Socrates to prove that being a moral person is something good in itself, not good just because it usually brings good consequences in its wake. He imagines two extreme cases:

Our immoral person must be a true expert. . . . [He] must get away with any crimes he undertakes in the proper fashion, if he is to be outstandingly immoral; getting caught must be taken to be a sign

of incompetence, since the acme of immorality is to give an impression of morality while actually being immoral. So we must attribute consummate immorality to our consummate criminal, and . . . we should have him equipped with a colossal reputation for morality even though he is a colossal criminal. He should be capable of correcting any mistakes he makes. He must have the ability to argue plausibly, in case any of his crimes are ever found out, and to use force wherever necessary, by making use of his courage and strength and by drawing on his fund of friends and his financial resources.

Now that we've come up with this sketch of an immoral person, we must conceive of a moral person to stand beside him—someone who is straightforward and principled, and who . . . wants genuine goodness rather than merely an aura of goodness. So we must deprive him of any such aura, since if others think him moral, this reputation will gain him privileges and rewards, and it will become unclear whether it is morality or the rewards and privileges which might be motivating him to be what he is. We should strip him of everything except morality, then, and our portrait should be of someone in the opposite situation to the one we imagined before. I mean, even though he does no wrong at all, he must have a colossal reputation for immorality, so that his morality can be tested by seeing whether or not he is impervious to a bad reputation and its consequences; he must unswervingly follow his path until he dies—a saint with a lifelong reputation as a sinner. When they can both go no further in morality and immorality respectively, we can decide which of them is the happier. (R 361a–d)

Perhaps the just man languishes in prison, dirty, cold, and half-starved; all he has is justice. The unjust man, meanwhile, revels in luxuries and the admiration of all. The challenge is to show that the one who does right is, despite all, the happier of the two—the one who has the best life. If Plato can demonstrate this, he will have shown that morality, not immorality, participates in the Form of the Good. It is this bit of dialectic we now want to understand.

We should note at this point, however, that we have so far been discussing whether morality has the advantage over immorality without being very clear about the nature of morality. So we now have to address this Socratic question directly: What is it to be moral?

To answer this question, Plato draws on his description of the soul. As we have seen, there are three parts to the soul: reason, spirit, and appetite. Each has a characteristic function. In accord with its function, each has a peculiar excellence. Just as the function of a knife is to cut, the best knife is the one that cuts smoothly and easily; so the excellence of anything is the best performance of its function. What are the functions of the various parts of the soul?

The function of appetite or desire is to motivate a person. It is, if you like, the engine driving the whole mechanism forward. If you never *wanted* anything, it is doubtful that you would ever *do* anything. So appetite is performing its function and doing it well when it motivates you strongly to achievement.

Spirit's function is to animate life, so that it amounts to more than satisfying wants. Without spirit, life would perhaps go on, but it wouldn't be enjoyable; it might not even be worth living. Spirit is "doing its thing" if it puts sparkle into your life, determination into your actions, and courage into your heart. It supplies the pride and satisfaction that accompany the judgment that you have done well, and it is the source of indignation and anger when you judge that something has been done badly.

It is the task of the rational part of the soul to pursue wisdom and to make judgments backed by reasons. It performs this task with excellence when it judges in accord with knowledge. The rational part of the soul, then, works out by reasoning the best course of action. Its function is to guide or rule the other two parts. Desire, one could say, is blind; reason gives it sight. Spirit may be capricious; reason gives it sense.

Just as the body is in excellent shape when each of its parts is performing its function properly—heart, lungs, digestive system, muscles, nerves, and so on—so the whole soul is excellent when desire, spirit, and reason are all functioning well. The excellent human being is one who is strongly motivated, emotionally vivacious, and rational. Such a person, Plato believes, will also be happy.

For what is the source of unhappiness? Isn't it precisely a lack of harmony among the various parts of the soul? Desire wants what reason says it may not have. Spirit rejoices at what reason advises

against. These are cases in which the parts of the soul are not content to perform their proper function. One wants to usurp the function of another. When, for example, you want what reason says is not good for you, it may be that your desire is so great that it overrides the advice given. In that case, desire takes over the guiding function that properly belongs to reason. But then you will do something unwise; and if it is unwise, you will suffer for it. And that is no way to be happy.

On the assumption that we all want to be happy and that being happy is what is good, the good life for human beings must be one in which each part of the soul performs its functions excellently—where reason makes the decisions, supported by spirit, and desire is channeled in appropriate directions. The good and happy person is the one who is internally harmonious. Though we do not all realize it, this internal harmony among the parts of the soul is what we all most want; for that is the only way to be happy.

But what does this have to do with morality? We can answer this question if we think again of an unharmonious soul. Suppose that desire, for instance, overrides reason. It wrongs reason, displacing it from its rightful place as a guide. It is not too much to say that it does reason an *injustice*. So there is a kind of justice and injustice in the individual soul, having to do with the way its parts relate to each other. Let us then speak of *justice in the soul*. In a just soul desire, spirit, and reason all do their thing without overreaching their proper bounds.

Given what we have just said about happiness, it is clear that justice in the soul correlates with happiness and injustice (internal conflict) with unhappiness. Insofar as we are internally just, we will be happy. Now happiness, we said, is something good by nature; everyone naturally desires to be happy. It follows that justice in the soul is also something good by nature. If we were wise, we would seek our happiness by trying to keep our souls harmonious, by promoting justice in the soul.

What Thrasymachus claims, of course, is not that injustice in the soul is a good thing but that our lives will be better if we are unjust in the community. He no doubt thinks that you can be internally happy and externally immoral. What Plato needs to

demonstrate is that this combination won't work, that there is a strict correlation between *justice in the soul* and *morality in the community*. Will the internally just person also be externally just? Will a just soul naturally express itself by keeping promises, refraining from stealing and deception, respecting the rights of others? That's the question. To put it another way, Will the person who behaves immorally in the community find it impossible to be just (and therefore happy) within herself?

Near the end of the *Republic* Plato has Socrates construct an imaginary model of the mind to address this question.

“Make a model, then, of a creature with a single—if varied and many-headed—form, arrayed all around with the heads of both wild and tame animals, and possessing the ability to change over to a different set of heads and to generate all these new bits from its own body.”

“That would take some skilful modelling,” he remarked, “but since words are a more plastic material than wax and so on, you may consider the model constructed.”

“A lion and a man are the next two models to make, then. The first of the models, however, is to be by far the largest, and the second the second largest.”

“That's an easier job,” he said. “It's done.”

“Now join the three of them together until they become one, as it were.”

“All right,” he said.

“And for the final coat, give them the external appearance of a single entity. Make them look like a person, so that anyone incapable of seeing what's inside, who can see only the external husk, will see a single creature, a human being.”

“It's done,” he said.

“Now, we'd better respond to the idea that this person gains from doing wrong, and loses from doing right, by pointing out to its proponent that this is tantamount to saying that we're rewarded if we indulge and strengthen the many-sided beast and the lion with all its aspects, but starve and weaken the man, until he's subject to the whims of the others, and can't promote familiarity and compatibility between the other two, but lets them bite each other, fight, and try to eat each other.”

“Yes, that's undoubtedly what a supporter of immorality would have to say,” he agreed.

“So the alternative position, that morality is profitable, is equivalent to saying that our words and behaviour should be designed to maximize the control the inner man has within us, and should enable him to secure the help of the leonine quality and then tend to the many-headed beast as a farmer tends to his crops—by nurturing and cultivating its tame aspects, and by stopping the wild ones growing. Then he can ensure that they’re all compatible with one another, and with himself, and can look after them all equally, without favouritism.”

“Yes, that’s exactly what a supporter of morality has to say,” he agreed. (R 588b–589b)

Plato uses this image to show the *identity* of the harmonious, internally just person and the moral person who does what is right. To do wrong to others is to allow the beast within to rule, to allow it to overwhelm the man within (who represents reason). But that means that the internal parts of the soul are no longer fulfilling their respective roles, but struggling for dominance. Harmony, and therefore happiness, is destroyed and the good is lost.*

The internally just person, in contrast, fostering the excellent functioning of each part of the soul in inner harmony, allows the man within to master the beast and tame the lion. The various parts are “compatible with one another.” The external result of this inner harmony is a moral life, for the beast will not wildly demand what reason says it is not proper to want.

Can there be any profit in the immoral acquisition of money, if this entails the enslavement of the best part of oneself to the worst part? . . . [And] do you think the reason for the traditional condemnation of licentiousness is the same—because it allows that fiend, that huge and many-faceted creature, greater freedom than it should have? . . .

And aren’t obstinacy and bad temper considered bad because they distend and invigorate our leonine . . . side to a disproportionate extent? . . .

Whereas a spoilt, soft way of life is considered bad because it makes this part of us so slack and loose that it’s incapable of facing hardship? (R 589da–590b)

*Compare this to Heraclitus’ aphorism on p. 21, where he says that what impulse wants it buys “at the expense of the soul.” Giving in to impulse is—in terms of Plato’s image—feeding the beast. The beast grows strong at the expense of the lion and the man.

You can go through a list of the vices and show, Plato believes, that in each case they result from feeding the monster or from letting the lion run amok. The moral virtues, however, are exactly the opposite.



“It is with our passions, as it is with fire and water, they are good servants but bad masters.”

Aesop (620–560 B.C.)

Here, then, is Plato’s answer to Thrasymachus and to the challenge posed by Glaucon. The immoral man does not have the advantage after all. If we reason carefully about it, Plato says, we can see that it is more profitable to be moral because immorality entangles one’s soul in disharmony. And disharmony in the soul is unhappiness. And a life of unhappiness is not the good life.

Justice in the soul, then, is correlated with a moral life. When each part of the soul is justly “doing its thing”—reason making the decisions, supported by the lion of the spirit and a domesticated appetite—a person’s external actions will be morally acceptable actions. As we have seen, justice in the soul is happiness, and happiness is a natural good—good by *physis*, not just by *nomos*. So an attempt to understand the Form of Morality takes us necessarily to the Form of the Good. It is best to be moral, even though we suffer for it. And Plato can think he has given us a *logos* that supports Socrates’ claim that it is worse to *do* injustice than to *suffer* it. Socrates believed this with full conviction; Plato thinks we can know it is true. The advantage lies with the moral person.

The argument is complex, but the heart of it is straightforward. Let us set down the key notions in this bit of dialectic.

1. Moral actions flow from a soul in harmony.
2. A harmonious soul is a happy soul.
3. Happiness is a natural good.
4. So morality is itself a natural good. (This follows from 1, 2, and 3.)
5. So acting morally is not good simply for its consequences, but is something good in itself.

Plato claims that by such dialectical reasoning we can have knowledge in the sphere of practice as well as in the theoretical sphere. Such dialectic, he believes, has defeated the skepticism and relativism of the Sophists and vindicated the practice of his master, who went around “doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul” (*Apology* 30b).

-
1. What question does the Ring of Gyges story pose?
 2. What is happiness? Unhappiness?
 3. What is the psychology of the just person? Of the unjust person?
 4. How is justice in the soul related to moral behavior in the community? Relate this to the image of the man, the lion, and the monster.
-

The State

We will not discuss Plato’s views of the ideal state in any detail, but we must note several political implications of doctrines we have already canvassed. Like his views on the soul, his views on an ideal community developed throughout his lifetime, and his later thought manifests some deep changes in attitude and outlook. We will simplify by focusing on several famous doctrines of the middle-period *Republic*.

Plato sees a parallel between the internal structure of a soul and the structure of a community. Just as the parts of the soul have distinctive functions, individual men and women differ in their capacities and abilities. They can be grouped into three classes: (1) Some will be best fitted to be laborers, carpenters, stonemasons, merchants, or farmers; these can be thought of as the *productive* part of the community; they correspond to the part of the soul called “appetite.” (2) Others, who are adventurous, strong, and brave, will be suited to serve in the army and navy; these form the *protective* part of the state, and they correspond to spirit in the soul. (3) The few who are intelligent, rational, self-controlled, and in love with wisdom will be suited to make decisions for the community; these are the *governing* part; their parallel in the soul is reason.

To this point, we have more or less been taking for granted that the search for wisdom is open to everyone. But this is not Plato’s view. Like Socrates, Plato contrasts the few who know with the many who do not. A basic principle for Plato’s ideal state is that there are only a few who are fit to rule. Obviously, Plato is consciously and explicitly rejecting the foundations of Athenian democracy as it existed in his day, where judges were selected by lot rather than by ability and where laws could be passed by a majority of the citizens who happened to show up in the Assembly on any given day. It is *not* the case, Plato urges, that everyone is equally fit to govern. Where democracy is the rule, rhetoric and persuasion carry the day, not reason and wisdom.

He is not in favor of tyranny or despotism, either; we can think of these as forms of government where the strong rule through power alone. Nor does he favor oligarchy, or rule by the wealthy. Who, then, are these “few” who are fit to be rulers? Consider again the harmonious, internally just soul. In such a soul, reason rules. So in the state,

Unless communities have philosophers as kings, . . . or the people who are currently called kings and rulers practise philosophy with enough integrity . . . there can be no end to political troubles, . . . or even to human troubles in general, I’d say. (*R* 473c–d)

The **philosopher kings** will be those who love wisdom and are possessed of the ability to pursue it, those who have the ability to *know*. Because, as we have seen, knowledge is always knowledge of the Forms, philosopher kings will be those who have attained such knowledge, especially knowledge of the Forms of Justice and Morality and the Form of the Good. For how can one rule wisely unless one knows what is good for the community and what is right?

This is supported by an analogy, some form of which Plato uses again and again:

Imagine the following situation on a fleet of ships, or on a single ship. The owner has the edge over everyone else on board by virtue of his size and strength, but he’s rather deaf and short-sighted, and his knowledge of naval matters is just as limited. The sailors are wrangling with one another because each of them thinks that he ought to be the

captain, despite the fact that he's never learnt how, and can't name his teacher or specify the period of his apprenticeship. In any case, they all maintain that it isn't something that can be taught, and are ready to butcher anyone who says it is. They're for ever crowding closely around the owner, pleading with him and stopping at nothing to get him to entrust the rudder to them. Sometimes, if their pleas are unsuccessful, but others get the job, they kill those others or throw them off the ship, subdue their worthy owner by drugging him or getting him drunk or something, take control of the ship, help themselves to its cargo, and have the kind of drunken and indulgent voyage you'd expect from people like that. And that's not all: they think highly of anyone who contributes towards their gaining power by showing skill at winning over or subduing the owner, and describe him as an accomplished seaman, a true captain, a naval expert; but they criticize anyone different as useless. They completely fail to understand that any genuine sea-captain has to study the yearly cycle, the seasons, the heavens, the stars and winds, and everything relevant to the job, if he's to be properly equipped to hold a position of authority in a ship. . . . When this is what's happening on board ships, don't you think that the crew of ships in this state would think of any true captain as nothing but a windbag with his head in the clouds, of no use to them at all?

. . . I'm sure you don't need an analysis of the analogy to see that it's a metaphor for the attitude of society towards true philosophers. (*R* 488a–489a)

We need to make explicit something that Plato takes for granted here. This analogy assumes that there is a body of knowledge available to the statesman similar to that utilized by the navigator. It assumes that this can be taught and learned and that it involves some theory that can be applied by the skilled practitioner. Clearly, the knowledge of statecraft involves acquaintance with the Forms.

In a similar way, Plato compares the statesman to a doctor (*Gorgias* 463a–465e). We would never entrust the health of our bodies to just anybody. We rely on those who have been trained in that craft by skilled teachers. Furthermore, just as not everyone is by nature qualified to be a doctor, not everyone is fit to rule. Because the education

necessary to reach the higher level of the Forms is rigorous and demanding, only a few will be able to do it. And for that reason, government in the best state will be by the few: the few who are wise.

We still need, however, to ask about the many. If only the few will ever make it to wisdom, what are the many to do? If they cannot *know* the good, how can they be depended on to *do* the good? And if they do not do the good, won't the state fall apart in anarchy and chaos?

The state can be saved from this fate by the principle that, for purposes of action, right opinion is as effective as knowledge. If you merely believe that the cliff is directly ahead and as a result turn left, you will avoid falling over just as surely as if you knew that it was. The problem, then, is to ensure that the large majority has correct beliefs. They may not be able to follow the complicated dialectical reasoning demonstrating the goodness of morality, but they should be firmly persuaded that it pays to be moral.

Such right opinion is inculcated in the young by education, which is directed by the guardians or rulers, who know what is best. There are detailed discussions in the *Republic* about what sort of stories the young should be told and what sort of music should be allowed. Music and stories should both encourage the belief—which Plato thinks can be demonstrated dialectically to the few—that the best and happiest life is a life of moderation and rational self-control, a moral life.

There is in Plato's state, then, a distinct difference between the few and the many. The latter are brought up on a carefully censored educational regime; it would not be unfair to call the diet offered to the many propaganda, for it is persuasive rather than rational. The few, of course, are those who know what is best, for they have attained knowledge of the Forms. They arrange the education of the others so that they will attain as much goodness as they are capable of.



"But who is to guard the guards themselves?"

Juvenal (late first, early second century)

Those who find these antidemocratic consequences disturbing have reason to go back to their presuppositions. We will find subsequent philosophers raising serious questions both about the Forms and about Plato's view that some—but not all—of us are capable of knowing them.

-
1. Who should rule in the state? And why?
 2. Explain the analogy of the navigator.
 3. How will “the many” be “educated” in Plato's ideal republic?
-

Problems with the Forms

Plato offers a complete vision of reality, including an account of how knowledge is possible, an ethics that guides our practical lives, and a picture of an ideal community. As we have seen, all these aspects of reality involve the Forms. The Forms are the most real of all the things there are. They serve as the stable and enduring objects of our knowledge. They guide our goals, our behaviors, and our creative drives. And knowledge of them is the foundation for a good state.

But are there such realities? It is not only the political consequences that lead people to raise this question. It is raised in Plato's own school, and serious objections are explored—and not satisfactorily answered—by Plato himself in a late dialogue, the *Parmenides*. Here the leading character is made out to be Parmenides himself, the champion of the One, from whom Plato undoubtedly derives his inspiration in devising the doctrine of the eternal and unchanging Forms.

Parmenides examines the young Socrates:

I imagine your ground for believing in a single form in each case is this. When it seems to you that a number of things are large, there seems, I suppose, to be a certain single character which is the same when you look at them all; hence you think that largeness is a single thing.

True, he replied.

But now take largeness itself and the other things which are large. Suppose you look at all these in the same way in your mind's eye, will not yet

another unity make its appearance—a largeness by virtue of which they all appear large?

So it would seem.

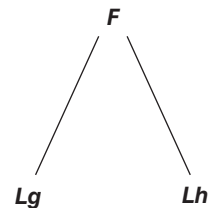
If so, a second form of largeness will present itself, over and above largeness itself and the things that share in it, and again, covering all these, yet another, which will make all of them large. So each of your forms will no longer be one, but an indefinite many. (*Parmenides* 131e–132b)

The argument begins with a statement we used before when the Forms were introduced.* But then an unacceptable conclusion is derived. Let us see if we can follow the argument.

Think again about Gertrude and Huey, the two elephants. Both are large. Let the small letters *g* and *h* represent Gertrude and Huey. Let the capital letter *L* represent the property they share of being large.† Then we have

Lg Lh

According to Plato's view of the Forms, this common feature means that Gertrude and Huey “participate” in a Form—the Large. Let's represent this Form by *F*. So we add the following to our diagram:



It is the Form *F* that *makes* the two elephants large and makes it intelligible that they are just what they are—that is, large.

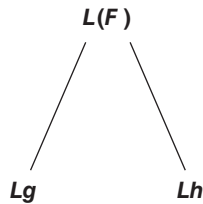
Now Plato also regularly thinks of the Forms as *possessing* the very character that they engender in the particulars. Or, to put it the other way around, he says that individual things “copy” or “imitate” the Form. When writing about the Form of Beauty, for example, Plato says that it is in itself beautiful, that

*See p. 153.

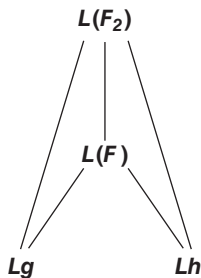
†We here use a convention of modern logicians, for whom small letters symbolize individuals and large letters represent properties or features. The property symbols are written to the left of the individual symbols.

it exemplifies “the very soul of the beauty he has toiled for so long,” that it possesses “an everlasting loveliness.”* Particular individuals are beautiful just to the extent that they actually have that Beauty which belongs in preeminent fashion to the Form.

If that is right, then Largeness must itself be large. So we have to add this feature to our representation:



But now a problem stares us in the face: Now the Form and the two elephants all have something in common—Largeness. And according to the very principle Plato uses to generate the *F* in the first place, there will now have to be a *second F* to explain what the first *F* shares with the individuals! And that, of course, will also be Large. So we will have to put down:



And now you can probably see how this is going to go. There will have to be a third *F*, a fourth, a fifth, and so on and on and on. We will no longer have just one Largeness, but two, three, four. . . . As Plato acknowledges through the character of Parmenides, each Form “will no longer be one, but an indefinite many.” We are on the escalator of an *infinite regress*.

Moreover, at any stage of the regress what is real is supposed to depend on there already being a level above it, which explains the features at that stage. So this is what philosophers call a *vicious*

infinite regress. For any stage to exist, there must actually be an infinite number of stages in reality, on which its existence depends. We thought we were explaining something about Gertrude and Huey. But this explanation now dissipates itself in the requirement for a never-ending series of explanations—and all of exactly the same sort. This is bad news for Plato’s theory of Forms.

Still further, this argument can be applied to any characteristic whatever. It is traditionally formulated in terms of the Form of Man. Heraclitus and Socrates are both men; so there must be a Form of Man to explain this similarity. If that Form is itself a man, you have a third man. In this guise the argument has a name. It is called the **Third Man Argument**.

The Forms are posited to explain the fact of knowledge, the meaning of general terms, and the common features of individuals.* But the Third Man Argument shows that—on principles accepted by Plato himself, at least in his middle period—the Forms do *not* explain what they are supposed to explain.

Like all such paradoxes, this indicates that something is wrong. But it does not itself tell us *what* is wrong. Some solution to the problem is needed. As we will see, Aristotle offers a solution.

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1. Explain the threat posed to Plato’s philosophy by the Third Man Argument.
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FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

1. How persuaded are you by Plato’s arguments for the reality of intelligible Forms? If you are not convinced, try to formulate your objections to these arguments in such a way that Plato would have to pay attention.
2. Consider someone you know whom you regard as an exceptionally good person. How much does this person resemble Plato’s portrait of the just person? How is he or she different?

*See p. 167.

*Review pp. 153–154.

3. Would you characterize Plato's views about a good state as elitist or just realist? Justify your answer with a bit of dialectical reasoning.

KEY WORDS

epistemology	Myth of the Cave
metaphysics	wisdom
knowing	Analogy of the Sun
believing	love of wisdom
Form	Diotima
Epistemological	ladder of love
Argument	soul
Metaphysical Argument	Myth of the Charioteer
Semantic Argument	Form of the Moral
Divided Line	Thrasymachus
the visible	happiness
the intelligible	Glaucon
Making Intelligible	Gyges
Producing	philosopher kings
dialectic (Plato's)	Third Man Argument
Form of the Good	

NOTES

1. Quotations from Plato's *Phaedo*, trans. David Gallop (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), are cited in the text by title and section numbers.
2. Plato, *Meno*, trans. Robin Waterfield, in *Meno and Other Dialogues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
3. Quotations from Plato's *Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), are cited in the text using the abbreviation *R*. References are to section numbers.
4. Quotations from Plato's *Timaeus*, *Parmenides*, *Symposium*, and *Phaedrus*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), are cited in the text by title and section numbers.
5. A discussion of these problems may be found in W. K. C. Guthrie, "Plato's Views on the Nature of the Soul," in *Plato II: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Gregory Vlastos (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 230–243.

CHAPTER

9

ARISTOTLE

The Reality of the World

The year was 384 B.C. Socrates had been dead for fifteen years; Plato had begun his Academy three years earlier. In northern Thrace, not far from the border of what Athenians called civilization, a child was born to a physician in the royal court of Macedonia. This child, named Aristotle, was destined to become the second father of Western philosophy.

At the age of eighteen Aristotle went to Athens, where bright young men from all over desired to study, and enrolled in the Academy. He stayed there for twenty years, as a student, researcher, and teacher, until the death of Plato in 347 B.C. He then spent some time traveling around the Greek islands, studying what we would call marine biology. He returned briefly to Macedonia, where he tutored the young prince Alexander, later called “The Great” for completing his father’s ambition of conquering and unifying the known world, including the Greek city-states.

By 335, Aristotle was back in Athens, where he founded a school of his own, the Lyceum. When Alexander died in 323, Aristotle fled—lest, he said, the Athenians “should sin twice against

philosophy.”¹ He died the following year at the age of sixty-three.

Aristotle and Plato

Let us begin by comparing Aristotle and his teacher, Plato.² First, Plato was born into an aristocratic family with a long history of participation in Athenian political life. Aristotle’s father was a doctor in the Macedonian court. These backgrounds symbolize their different interests and outlook. The influence of Plato on Aristotle’s thought is marked; still, Aristotle is a quite different person with distinct concerns, and his philosophy in some respects takes quite a different turn. That Aristotle’s hand is stretched out horizontally in Raphael’s painting symbolizes perfectly the contrast with Plato. Here are some comparisons.

In general, Plato tends toward otherworldliness in a way that Aristotle does not. Plato yearns to transcend the Heraclitean flux of the material world and reach the unchanging, eternal, genuinely real world of the Forms. To philosophize, for Plato, is to die away from sense and desire.



Aristotle regards the concrete particulars of the world as real and worthy of our attention, studying snails and octopuses alongside metaphysics and ethics. Philosophy, for Aristotle, offers not an escape from the world but an understanding of it.

Relatedly, Plato locates a person's true self in the soul, not the body, which is merely a temporary vessel for the soul to inhabit. Our souls possess knowledge of the Forms before we are born, and with determination, intelligence, and virtue, we can enjoy a blessed communion with the Forms after death. Aristotle's view of human beings is more complicated, though his main theme is simple. Man is a "rational animal," with a physical body that is an integral part of the self. Humans have a soul in some sense, for Aristotle, but the soul is not some ghostly entity that can exist separate from the body; it is, as we shall see, the "form" of the body. What we get in Aristotle is a (basically) this-worldly account of the soul.*

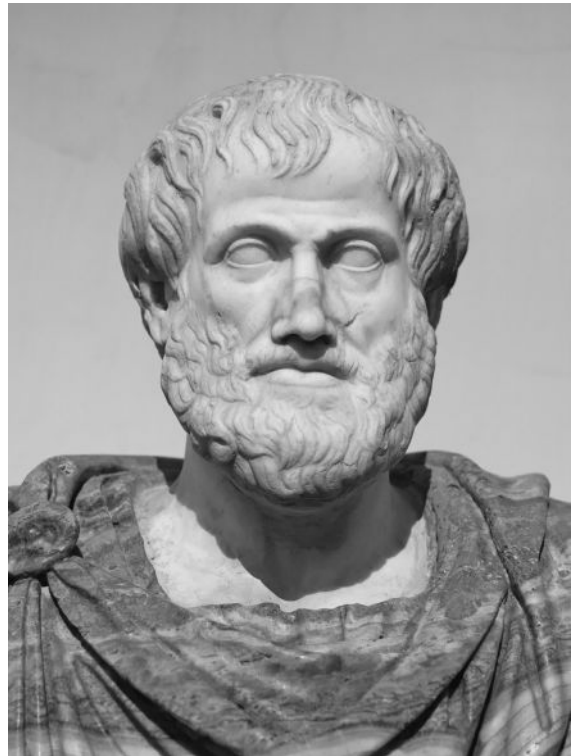
The two thinkers focus on different objects of knowledge. True knowledge, for Plato, is knowledge of the Forms, which can be attained only through reason—and, when you get far enough up the hierarchy of the Forms, through a somewhat mystical direct intellectual perception. This, perhaps, is why Plato offers us in crucial places his memorable myths and analogies to point us in a direction where we might be able to see for ourselves what language cannot describe. Aristotle, more down to earth, believes that language is capable of expressing the truth of things and that the senses, although not sufficient by themselves, are reliable avenues along which to pursue knowledge of the changing world about us.

Plato fixates on the Forms because they provide his solution to the problem of Protagorean relativism and skepticism. He is convinced that it was the Sophists who had really killed Socrates, not the particular members of the jury, for sophistic relativism had led the jurors to decide as they did. The Forms, the dialectic about morality, the subordination of everything else to the Form of the Good, and his outline of an ideal state offered a cure for this civic

sickness. In a sense, refuting the Sophists is Plato's *one* problem, which drives everything else. To that problem Aristotle seems almost oblivious. Perhaps he believes Plato has succeeded, leaving him free to confront other problems. But there is probably more to it. As a biologist, he knows that not every opinion about crayfish, for example, is equally good, so he isn't overwhelmed by the arguments of the skeptics. The only problem, philosophically speaking, is to analyze the processes by which we attain knowledge of the world and to set out the basic features of the realities disclosed.

This difference carries over into the two thinkers' approaches to ethics. Plato wants and thinks we can, through knowledge of the Forms, get the same kind of certainty in rules of behavior that we have in mathematics.

Characteristically, Aristotle is less inclined to make such grandiose claims. In matters of practical



"It is those who act rightly who get the rewards and the good things in life."

*There is a complication here that should be noted. See the discussion of *nous* later in this chapter.

decision, he thinks, we are not likely to get the same certainty we can get in mathematics, but we can still discuss particular virtues and the conditions under which it is reasonable to hold people responsible for the exercise of these virtues, without ever appealing to the Form of the Good.

The Greek poet Archilochus had written in the seventh century,

The fox knoweth many things, the hedgehog one great thing.³

Two quite different intellectual styles are exemplified by Plato and Aristotle. Plato is a man with one big problem, one passion, one concern; everything he touches is transformed by that concern. Aristotle has many smaller problems. These are not unrelated to each other, and there is a pattern in his treatment of them all. But he is interested in each for its own sake, not just in terms of how they relate to some grand scheme. Plato is a hedgehog. Aristotle is a fox.

It is easy to overdraw this contrast, however. There is an important respect in which Aristotle is a “Platonist” from beginning to end. Despite his interest in the changeable sensory world, Aristotle agrees with his teacher without qualification that knowledge—to be knowledge—must be certain and enduring. For both Plato and Aristotle, knowledge is knowledge of unchanging, eternal forms.* But they understand the forms differently—and thereon hangs the tale to come.

Logic and Knowledge

The Sophists’ claim to teach their pupils “to make the weaker argument appear the stronger” has been satirized by Aristophanes, scorned by Socrates, and repudiated by Plato. But until Aristotle does his work in logic, no one gives a good answer to the question, Just what makes an argument weaker or stronger anyway? An answer to this question is essential for appraising the success of either the

Sophists or those who criticize them.* Unless you have clear criteria for discriminating weak from strong arguments, bad arguments from good, the whole dispute remains in the air. Are there standards by which we can divide arguments into good ones and bad ones? Aristotle answers this question.

He does not, of course, answer it once and for all—though for two thousand years many people will think he very nearly has. Since the revolution in logic of the past hundred years, we can now say that Aristotle’s contribution is not the last word. But it is the first word, and his achievement remains a part of the much expanded science of logic today.

It is undoubtedly due in part to Aristotle’s ability to produce criteria distinguishing sound arguments from unsound ones that he can take the sophistic challenge as lightly as he does. To Aristotle, the Sophists can be dismissed as the perpetrators of “sophisms,” of bad arguments dressed up to look good. They are not such a threat as they seem, because their arguments can now be *shown* to be bad ones.

But it is not mainly as an unmasker of fraudulent reasoning that Aristotle values logic.† Aristotle thinks of logic as a *tool* to be used in every intellectual endeavor, allowing the construction of valid “accounts” and the criticism of invalid ones. As his universal intellectual tool, logic is of such importance that we need to understand at least the rudiments of Aristotle’s treatment of the subject.

It will be useful, however, to work toward the logic from more general considerations. We need to think again about *wisdom*.

Aristotle begins the work we know as *Metaphysics* with these memorable words:

All men by nature desire to have knowledge. An indication of this is the delight that we take in the senses; quite apart from the use that we make of them, we take delight in them for their own sake,

*Compare the later Mohists’ work in logic and epistemology as a response to the sophistry of the School of Names in ancient China. See pp. 82–83.

†Aristotle does not himself use the term “logic,” which is of a later origin. What we now call “logic” is termed by his successors the “organon,” or “instrument” for attaining knowledge.

*Note that “form” is here uncapitalized. We will use the capitalized version, Form, only when referring to Plato’s independent, eternal reality. For Aristotle’s forms, an uncapitalized version of the word will do.

and more than of any other this is true of the sense of sight. . . . The reason for this is that, more than any other sense, it enables us to get to know things, and it reveals a number of differences between things. (*M* 1.1)⁴

This delight is characteristic even of the lower animals, Aristotle tells us, though their capacities for knowledge are more limited than ours. They are curious and take delight in the senses and in such knowledge as they are capable of. Some of the lower animals, though not all, seem to have *memory*, so that the deliverances of their senses are not immediately lost. Memory produces *experience*, in the sense that one can learn from experience. Some of the animals are quite good at learning from experience. Humans, however, are best of all at this; in humans, *universal judgments* can be framed in *language* on the basis of this experience. We not only see numerous black crows and remember them but also form the judgment that all crows are black and use this statement together with others to build up a knowledge of that species of bird.

We regard those among us as wisest, Aristotle says, who know not only that crows are black but also why they are so. Those who are wise, then, have knowledge of the *causes* of things, which allows them to use various arts for practical purposes (as the doctor is able to cure the sick because she knows the causes of their diseases). Knowing the causes, moreover, allows the wise person to teach others how and why things are the way they are.

Wisdom, then, either is or at least involves knowledge. And knowledge involves both *statements* (*that* something is so) and *reasons* (statements *why* something is so). Furthermore, for the possession of such statements to qualify as wisdom, they must be true. As Plato has pointed out, falsehoods cannot constitute knowledge.

Aristotle intends to clarify all this, to sort it out, put it in order, and show how it works. So he has to do several things. He has to (1) explain the nature of *statements*—how, for instance, they are put together out of simpler units called *terms*; (2) explain how statements can be *related* to each other so that some can give “the reason why” for others; and (3) give an account of what makes statements *true* or *false*. These tasks make up the logic.

TERMS AND STATEMENTS

When Aristotle discusses **terms**, the basic elements that combine to form **statements**, he is also discussing the world. In his view, the terms we use can be classified according to the kinds of things they pick out. He insists that things in the world can *be* in a number of different ways.* Correlated with the different kinds of things there are—or different ways things can be—are different kinds of terms. These kinds, called **categories**, are set out this way:

Every uncombined term indicates substance or quantity or quality or relationship to something or place or time or posture or state or the doing of something or the undergoing of something. (*C* 4)

Aristotle gives some examples:

- substance—man or horse
- quantity—two feet long, three feet high
- quality—white or literate
- relationship—double, half, or greater
- place—in the Lyceum, in the marketplace
- time—yesterday or last year
- posture—reclining at table, sitting down
- state—having shoes on, being in armor
- doing something—cutting, burning
- undergoing something—being cut, being burned

He does not insist that this is a complete and correct list. But you can see that categories are very general concepts, expressing the various *ways* in which being is manifested. Such distinctions exist and must be observed.

None of these terms is used on its own in any statement, but it is through their combination with one another that a statement comes into being. For every statement is held to be either true or false, whereas no uncombined term—such as “man,” “white,” “runs,” or “conquers”—is either of these. (*C* 4)

Neither “black” nor “crow” is true or false. But “That crow is black” must be one or the other. Terms combine to make statements. For example,

*One of the mistakes made by Parmenides and others, he claims, is failing to recognize that being comes in kinds.

we might combine terms from the preceding list to make statements such as these:

- A man is in the Lyceum.
- A white horse was in the marketplace yesterday.
- That man reclining at a table was burning rub-bish last year.

Terms can be combined in a wide variety of ways, but there are, Aristotle believes, certain standard and basic forms of combination to which all other combinations can be reduced. This means there are a limited number of basic forms that statements can take.

The clue to discovering these basic forms is noting that every statement is either true or false. Not every *sentence* we utter, of course, is either true or false. “Close the door, please” is neither. It may be appropriate or inappropriate, wise or foolish, but it isn’t the right kind of thing to be true or false. It is not, Aristotle would say, a *statement*. Aristotle’s own example is a prayer; it is, he says, “a sentence, but it is neither true nor false” (I 4).

Statements (the kinds of things that can be true or false) *state* something. And they state something *about* something. We can then analyze statements in two parts: there is the part indicating what we are talking about, and there is the part indicating what we are saying about it. Call the first part the *subject* and the second part the *predicate*. Every statement, Aristotle believes, can be formulated to display a pattern in which some term plays the role of subject and another term the role of predicate. It will be convenient to abbreviate these parts as *S* and *P*, respectively.

Not every term, however, can play both roles. This fact is of great importance for Aristotle, for it allows him to draw a fundamental distinction on which his whole view of reality is based.

What is most properly, primarily, and most strictly spoken of as a substance is what is neither asserted of nor present in a subject—a particular man, for instance, or a particular horse. (C 5)

Look back to the list of terms on page 185. There is one kind of term that stands out from the rest: **substance**. Although there are several kinds of substance (as we shall see), the kind that is “properly, primarily, and most strictly” called substance

is distinguishable by the kind of role the term for it can play in statements—or rather, the kind of role it *cannot* play. Terms designating such substances can play the role only of subject, never of predicate. They can take only the *S* role in statements, not the *P* role.

Consider the term “Socrates.” This term indicates one particular man, namely Socrates himself. And it cannot take the *P* place in a statement; we can say things about Socrates—that he is wise, or snub-nosed—but we cannot use the term “Socrates” to say something about a subject. We cannot, for example, say “Snub-nosed is Socrates,” except as a poetic expression for “Socrates is snub-nosed.” In both expressions, “Socrates” is in the *S* place and “is snub-nosed” is in the *P* position. In both, “is snub-nosed” is used to say something about Socrates. It is not *spatial* position in the sentence that counts, then, but what we could call *logical* position. In a similar way, it is clear that Socrates cannot be “present in” a subject, in the way the color blue can be present in the water of the Aegean Sea or knowledge of Spanish can be present in those who know the language.

Things *are*, Aristotle holds, in all these different ways. Some things have being as qualities, some as relations, some as places, and so on. But among all these, there is one *basic* way in which a thing can be: being an individual substance, a thing, such as Socrates. All the other ways of being are parasitic on this. They are all characteristics of these basic substances; our terms for them express things we can say *about* these primary substances. For example, we can say that Socrates is five feet tall (Quantity), that he is ugly (Quality), that he is twice as heavy as Crito (Relationship), that he is in prison (Place), and so on. But that about which we say all these things, of which they all are (or may be) true, is some particular individual. And that Aristotle calls **primary substance**.

The reason why primary substances are said to be more fully substances than anything else is that they are subjects to everything else and that all other things are either asserted of them or are present in them. (C 5)

It is clear that Aristotle will reject the Platonic Forms. We shall explore what he says about the

Forms more fully later, but here he says that those things which are “more fully substances than anything else” are particular, individual entities such as this man, this horse, this tree, this snail. These are not shadows of more real things, as Plato held; they are the most real things there are. Everything else is real only in relation to them.

For now, however, we want to concentrate not on this metaphysical line of reasoning, but on the logical. Let us review. The wise person is the one who knows—both what is and why it is. Such knowledge is expressed in statements. Statements consist of terms put together in certain ways. All of them either are already or can be reformulated to be subject–predicate statements, in which something is said about something. And the ultimate subjects of statements are primary substances.

Before we leave this topic, we need to note a complication. We can say, “Socrates is a *man*.” This conforms to our *S–P* pattern. But we can also say, “*Man* is an animal.” This seems puzzling. How could “man” play the role of both *P* (in the first statement) and *S* (in the second)? If primary substances (individual things) are the ultimate subjects of predication, shouldn’t we rule out “Man is an animal” as improper? Yet it is a common kind of thing to say; indeed, biology is chock full of such statements!

Aristotle solves this problem by distinguishing two senses of “substance.”

But people speak, too, of secondary substances, to which, as species, belong what are spoken of as the primary substances, and to which, as genera, the species themselves belong. For instance, a particular man belongs to the species “man,” and the genus to which the species belongs is “animal.” So it is these things, like “man” and “animal,” that are spoken of as secondary substances. (C 5)

Individual humans, he notes, belong to a *species*: the species man. And each man, each human, is a kind of animal. So “animal” is a *genus*, under which there are many species: humans, lions, whales, and so on. In a sense, then, species and genera are substances, too. They are substances by virtue of expressing the essential nature of primary substances (the individual people, lions, whales). A genus or species, Aristotle holds, has no reality apart from the particular things that make it up, but we can

think of it as a derivative kind of substance about which we can say many interesting things. Terms for **secondary substances**, then, can also play the *S* role in a statement.

-
1. What is *logic for*?
 2. What is a “category”? Give some examples.
 3. What makes a statement different from a term?
 4. What two roles can terms play in statements?
 5. What distinguishes primary substance from all the other categories?
 6. What kind of thing is *most real* for Aristotle?
Contrast with Plato.
-

TRUTH

So far Aristotle has been dealing with issues of *meaning*. We turn now to what he has to say about **truth**. In one of the most elegant formulations in all philosophy, using only words any four-year-old can understand, Aristotle defines truth.

To say that what is is not, or that what is not is, is false and to say that what is is, or that what is not is not, is true. (M 4.7)

Note that truth pertains to what we say. Grass is green. To say of it that it is green is to say something true about it. To say that it is not green—red or blue, perhaps—is to say something false. Contrariwise, Socrates was not beautiful. If we say that he was not beautiful, we speak truthfully, whereas if we say that he was beautiful, we speak falsely. Truth represents things as they are. Falseness says of them that they are other than they are. This view of truth is not the only possible one.* We should, therefore, have a name for it. Let us call it the **correspondence** theory of truth, because it holds that a statement is true just when it “corresponds” to the reality it is about. We can also call it the classical view of truth.

*For other views of truth, see Hegel’s claim that the truth is not to be found in isolated statements, but is only the *whole* of a completed system of knowledge (“Reason and Reality: The Theory of Idealism,” in Chapter 21), and the pragmatist view that truth consists of all that a community of investigators would agree on if they inquired sufficiently long (Chapter 25, pp. 599–601).



“Truth is truth to the end of reckoning.”

*William Shakespeare, Measure for Measure,
act 5, scene 1*

REASONS WHY: THE SYLLOGISM

We can now say that the wise person is able to make true statements about whatever subject she discusses. But she is able to do more than that; she is able to “give an account” of *why* what she says is true. In Aristotle’s terminology, she is able to specify the *causes* of things.

With this we come to logic proper, the study of *reason-giving*. In saying why a certain statement is true, the wise person offers other statements. Will these constitute good reasons for what she claims to know or not? If she is truly wise, they presumably will; but to discover whether someone is wise, we may have to decide (1) whether what she says is true and (2) whether the reasons she offers for what she says actually support her claim. Giving a reason is giving an **argument**: offering premises for a conclusion. Perhaps it will be only a weak argument, perhaps a strong one. How can we tell? Aristotle insists that we cannot determine the strength of an argument based on how far it convinces us, or even most people. To Aristotle, the Sophist’s reliance on persuasiveness as the key to goodness in argument must seem like Euthyphro’s third answer to Socrates’ questions about piety—that it gives at best a property of good arguments, not the essence of the matter. Aristotle is trying to find what it is about an argument that explains why people should—or should not—be convinced.

Remember that for Aristotle all statements have an *S–P* form; they say something about something. Such statements may either affirm that something is the case (“Grass is green”) or deny it (“Socrates was not beautiful”). Call the former affirmative statements and the latter negative statements.

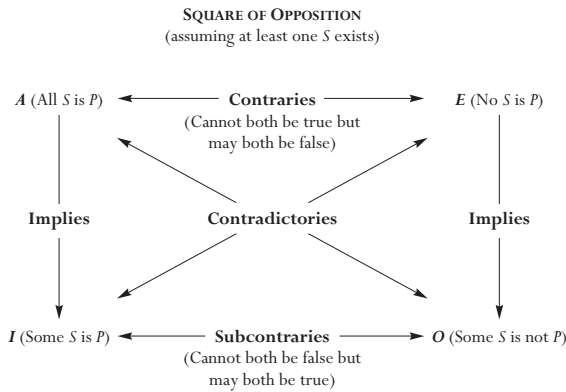
Moreover, *S–P* statements about secondary substances may be about every instance of a kind (“All whales are mammals”) or only about *some* instances (“Some dogs are vicious”). The former statements can be called *universal*, because they predicate

something of each and every item talked about; each and every whale, for instance, is said to be a mammal. The latter statements can be called *particular*; our example does not say something about each and every dog, only about one or more dogs. These distinctions give us a fourfold classification of statements. It will be useful to draw a chart, with some examples of each.

	Affirmative	Negative
Universal	All men are mortal. (All <i>S</i> is <i>P</i>)	No men are mortal. (No <i>S</i> is <i>P</i>)
Particular	Some men are mortal. (Some <i>S</i> is <i>P</i>)	Some men are not mortal. (Some <i>S</i> is not <i>P</i>)

There are some interesting logical relationships among these statement forms. For example, a universal affirmative statement is the *contradictory* of a particular negative statement. To say that these are contradictories is to say that if either of them is true, the other must be false; and if either is false, the other must be true. (Look at the following chart and check whether this is so.) Universal negatives and particular affirmatives are likewise contradictories. The two statements at the top of the Square of Opposition (universal affirmative and negative) cannot be true together, but they can both be false. Analogously, the two statements at the bottom (particular affirmative and negative) can be true together, but they cannot both be false. For ease of reference, each of the statement forms is assigned a letter: *A*, *E*, *I*, or *O*.

Inferences in this square are called “immediate” inferences because they go from one statement directly or immediately to another. There are also “mediate” inferences, and to these we must now turn. Such inferences constitute arguments in which reasons are given to support a conclusion. For instance, suppose that someone claiming to be



wise asserts, "All men are mortal." Remembering that wisdom includes not only knowing truths but also knowing their causes or reasons, we ask her why this is so. In response, she says, "Because all animals are mortal, and all men are animals." She has given us an argument.

All animals are mortal.
 All men are animals.
 Therefore: All men are mortal.

Aristotle calls this kind of argument a **syllogism**. Every syllogism is made up of three statements. In the three statements are three terms (here the terms are "man," "animal," and "mortal"), two terms in each statement. Two of the statements, called the **premises**, function as reasons for the third, called the **conclusion**.

Consider the terms that occur in the conclusion; each of these occurs also in just one of the premises. And the third term, which Aristotle calls the **middle term**, occurs once in each of the premises. It is the middle term that links the two terms in the conclusion. The fact that the middle term is related to each of the others in a certain specific way is supposed to be the *cause* or the *reason why* the conclusion is true.

One of Aristotle's greatest achievements is the realization that what makes a syllogism good or bad not only has nothing to do with its persuasiveness, but also has nothing to do with its subject matter. Its goodness or badness as a piece of reason-giving is completely independent of what it is about. It is not because it is about men and animals rather than gods and spirits that it either is or is not successful.

Its success is wholly a matter of its form.* In evaluating a syllogism, we might as well use letters of the alphabet in place of meaningful terms. In fact, this is what Aristotle does. How good an argument is, then, depends only on how terms are related to each other, not on what they are about.

We can represent the relevant structure or form of this example in the following way, using S for the subject of the conclusion, P for its predicate, and M for the middle term that is supposed to link these together.

All M is P .
 All S is M .
 Therefore: All S is P .

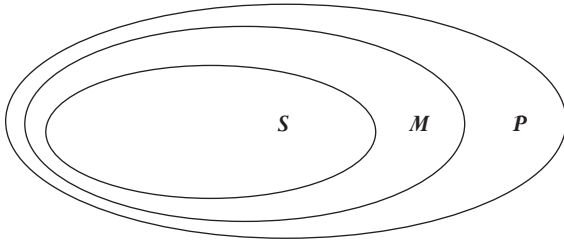
Remember, all that matters is how the terms are related to each other, not what the terms mean. If our original argument was a good one, any other argument that has this same form will also be a good one. What counts is form, not content.

But what is it for *any* argument to be good? Let us remind ourselves of the purpose of giving arguments in the first place. The point is to answer *why*. Any good argument, then, must satisfy two conditions: (1) The reasons offered (the premises) must be *true*; and (2) the *relation* between the premises and the conclusion must be such that *if* the premises are true, the conclusion can't possibly be false.† When an argument satisfies the second condition (if the premises are true, the conclusion *must* be true) it is **valid**. Note that an argument may have that part of logical goodness we call validity even though its premises are false. A poor argument fails to satisfy at least one of these conditions: Either (1) the premises are *not true* or (2) the relation between premises and conclusion is not such as to *guarantee* the truth of the conclusion when the premises are true.

*Form is here contrasted with content, or subject matter; it is not the Platonic contrast between the ultimate reality and the world of the senses.

† Note that we are talking about *deductive* arguments here. There are also *inductive* arguments, in which the tie between the premises and the conclusion is a looser one; the premises in an inductive argument give some reason to believe the conclusion, but they fall short of guaranteeing its truth.

Now we can ask, is the syllogism above a good argument? It should be obvious that it is. (Not all syllogisms are so obviously either bad or good; Aristotle uses obviously good ones like this as axioms to prove the goodness of less obvious ones.) If it is not obvious, it can easily be made so. Remembering that correctness is a matter of *form*, not content, let us take the terms as names for shapes. Then we can represent the argument in the following way:



By looking at these shapes, we can now see that if all of *S* is included in *M*, and all of *M* is included in *P*, then all of *S* must be included in *P*. It couldn't be any other way. But that is exactly what a good argument is supposed to do: to show you that, given the truth of the premises, the conclusion must also be true. It gives you a reason why the conclusion is true. So this argument form is a valid one. Since our original argument (1) is an instance of this valid form and (2) has true premises, it is a good argument.

Let us consider another syllogism:

No sparrows are mammals.
No mammals are plants.
Therefore: No sparrows are plants.

Each of these statements is true. But is this a *valid* argument? Do the reasons offered *make true* the conclusion? No. It has this form:

No *S* is *M*.
No *M* is *P*.
Therefore: No *S* is *P*.

If that is a valid argument form, then any other argument having that form must be correct. This suggests a method of testing for goodness in arguments. Try to find another argument that has the same form as this one but that has true premises and a false conclusion. If you can, you have shown

that these reasons do *not* guarantee the truth of the conclusion. The middle term is not doing its job of linking the subject and the predicate of the conclusion. So the argument is not a good one. Can we find such an argument? Easy.

No Toyotas are Ferraris.
No Ferraris are inexpensive.
Therefore: No Toyotas are inexpensive.

You can see (check to be sure you do) that this argument has the same form as the argument about sparrows. But here, although the premises are both true, the conclusion is false. In a valid argument, however, the conclusion *must* be true if the premises are true. So this argument is not valid. The reasons offered do not give us the *reason why* the conclusion is true (since it *isn't* true). Since it is form that accounts for goodness in arguments, then if this argument is no good, neither is the one about sparrows—even though the conclusion in that example happens to be true. That is the problem; it just *happens* to be true; it is not true *because* the premises are true. So the argument doesn't do the job that arguments are supposed to do. It doesn't give the *reason why*.

On the basis of fairly simple examples such as these, Aristotle develops a complex system of logic. He tries to set out all the correct and all the incorrect forms of reasoning.* The result is a powerful tool both for testing arguments and for constructing arguments that tell us the cause or reason why things are as they are. In its latter use, logic is called *demonstration*. What can be demonstrated, we can know.

KNOWING FIRST PRINCIPLES

Can everything knowable be demonstrated? Can we give reasons for everything? Aristotle's answer is no:

For it is altogether impossible for there to be proofs of everything; if there were, one would go on to

*Aristotle is mistaken in thinking that syllogisms of this sort exhaust the forms of correct reasoning; we now know that there are many more correct forms. He also neglects, or gives an inadequate picture of, so-called inductive reasoning. But his achievement is impressive nonetheless.

infinity, so that even so one would end up without a proof. (*M* 4.4)

Giving a proof for a statement, as we have seen, means constructing a syllogism; that means finding premises from which the statement logically follows. But we can ask whether there is also a proof for these premises. If so, other syllogisms can be constructed with these premises as their conclusions. But then, what about the premises of these syllogisms? This kind of questioning, like the child's "why?" can go on indefinitely. And so we will continue to be unsatisfied about the truth of the statement we were originally seeking reasons to believe. But this means, as Aristotle says, that "it is impossible for there to be proofs for everything."

The chain of demonstrations must come to an end if we are to have knowledge. But where can it end? Socrates has an answer to this question.* If, as he thinks, our souls existed before we were born and had lived in the presence of the truth, then we might be able to "recollect" the truth when we were reminded of it, recognizing it immediately rather than learning it through demonstration. But Aristotle cannot use this Socratic solution. As we'll discover, he sees no reason to believe that our souls existed before we were born, nor does he think there are independently existing Forms we could have been acquainted with.

So Aristotle is faced with this problem: Since not everything can be known by demonstration, how do we come to know that which cannot be demonstrated? To avoid an infinite regression, we need starting points for our proofs.

The starting point of demonstration is an immediate premise, which means that there is no other premise prior to it. (*PA* 1.2)

We can call these immediate premises **first principles**. Since all knowledge must rest on these starting points, we must be more certain of them than of anything else.

Since we know and believe through the first, or ultimate, principles, we know them better and believe in them more, since it is only through them that we

know what is posterior to them. . . . This is because true, absolute knowledge cannot be shaken. (*PA* 1.2)

This means that we must be more certain about what makes something an animal than about what makes something a monkey; in geometry, we must know the definition of line with greater clarity than that of isosceles triangle.

But how are such principles to be known? We can't just start from nothing and—by a leap—get to knowledge. In this respect Socrates was right.

All instruction and all learning through discussion proceed from what is known already. (*PA* 1.1)

This seems paradoxical. It is as though we were required to know *something* prior to our coming to know *anything*. But this is impossible.

The key to resolving the paradox, Aristotle holds, is the recognition that things may be "known" in several senses. What Aristotle does is to show how knowledge of these first principles *develops*. This is a characteristically Aristotelian tactic. Instead of saying that we either know or we don't know, Aristotle shows us how knowledge develops from implicit to more and more explicit forms. What is presupposed is not full-blown, explicit, and certain knowledge, but a series of stages, beginning in a *capacity* of a certain sort—namely, perceiving.

Aristotle agrees with Plato that perceiving something is not the same as knowing it. The object of perception is always an individual thing, but knowledge is of the universal; perception can be mistaken, but knowledge cannot. But these facts don't lead Aristotle, as they lead Plato, to disparage the senses, to cut them off from reality, and to install knowledge in another realm altogether. Perception is not knowledge, but it is where knowledge begins. (It is surely of crucial importance to note here that when Plato thinks of knowledge, his first thought is of mathematics; when Aristotle thinks of knowledge, his first thought is of biology.)

We noted earlier that some animals have memory in addition to their faculties of sense perception. Thus they can retain traces of what they perceive. These traces build up into what Aristotle calls "experience." And experience is the source of

*Discussed on pp. 133–134.

a *universal*, a sense of the unity of the many things encountered.

Clearly it must be by induction that we acquire knowledge of the primary premises, because this is also the way in which sense-perception provides us with universals.⁵

How do we come to know the first principles, from which demonstrations may then proceed? By **induction**, Aristotle tells us. Imagine the biologist observing creatures in a tidal pool. At first, she can distinguish only a few kinds, those very different from each other. As she keeps watching closely, new differences (as well as new similarities) become apparent. She begins to group these creatures according to their similarities, bringing the Many under a variety of Ones. Then all these Ones are united under further universal principles, until finally all are classified under the One heading of “animals.” “Is this like the one I saw a moment ago? Yes. So there is that kind; and that is different from this kind. Still, they are alike in a certain respect, so they may be species of the same genus.” Eventually, the biologist comes to group the creatures according to characteristics they do and do not share with each other. Her perception provides her with “universals” under which she groups or organizes the various kinds of things that she has been observing.

These universals provide something like definitions of the natural kinds of things that exist. The wider one’s experience of a certain field, the more firmly these inductive definitions are grounded. The first principles of any field are arrived at in this way. Thus we can come to know what a plant is, what an animal is, what a living being is. And these definitions can serve as the starting points, the ultimate principles of any science.

Not everything, as we have seen, can be known by demonstration. What cannot be demonstrated must be grasped some other way. That way is induction from sense perceptions. But what is there in us that is capable of such a grasp? On the one hand, it is clearly not the senses, or memory, or even experience. On the other hand, it is not our reasoning ability, for the capacity in question has nothing to do with proof. Aristotle uses a term for

this capacity of ours that has no very adequate English counterpart: *nous*. It is sometimes translated as “mind” and sometimes as “intuition”; the English term “mind” seems too broad and “intuition” too vague. *Nous* is the name for that ability we have to grasp first principles by abstracting what is essential from many particular instances present to our senses.*

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1. What is truth?
 2. What is an argument? A syllogism? A middle term?
 3. What is required in a good argument?
 4. What is a first principle? Why are first principles needed? How are they known?
 5. Do Aristotle’s reflections on first principles do anything to resolve the puzzle about the slave boy and the preexistence of the soul? Explain.
-

The World

Aristotle discusses his predecessors often and in detail.[†] He believes that something can be learned from all of them and that by showing where they go wrong we can avoid their mistakes and take a better path. Such a dialectical examination of the older philosophers does not amount to knowledge, for it is neither demonstration of a truth nor insight into first principles. But it clears the ground for both and is therefore of considerable importance.

His fundamental conviction about the work of his predecessors is that they go wrong by not *observing* closely enough. With the possible exception of Socrates and some of the Sophists, they had all been searching for explanations that would make the world intelligible. But these explanations either are

*Do we really have such a faculty? Can we get certainty about premises from which the rest of our knowledge can be logically derived? Modern philosophy from the seventeenth century on will be preoccupied with these questions. What if we can’t? Are we thrown back again into that sophistic skepticism and relativism from which both Plato and Aristotle thought they had delivered us? See, for example, Montaigne, who thinks we are (“Skeptical Thoughts Revived,” in Chapter 16), and Descartes, who is certain we are not (*Meditations*).

[†]In, for example, *Physics* I and *Metaphysics* I. The book you are now reading is itself an example of the Aristotelian conviction expressed in the next sentence.

excessively general (Thales' water, Anaximander's Boundless, and the rather different *logos* of Heraclitus) or seem to conclude that there is no intelligibility in the world at all (Parmenides condemns the world to the status of mere appearance, and Plato believes only the Forms are completely intelligible). Even Democritus, who was from a theoretical point of view superior to all but Plato, misses the intelligibility in the observable world and tries to find it in the unobservable atoms.

Aristotle, drawing on his own careful observations, is convinced that the things that make up the world have principles of intelligibility *within* them.* To explain their nature, their existence, and the changes they regularly undergo, it is necessary only to pay close attention to *them*. The world as it offers itself to our perception is not an unintelligible, chaotic flux from which we must flee to find knowledge. It is made up of things—the primary substances—that are ordered; the principles of their order are internal to them, and these principles, through perception, can be known.

NATURE

What Aristotle calls “**nature**” is narrower than what we have been calling “the world.” Within the world there are two classes of things: *artifacts*, which are things made for various purposes by people (and by some animals), and *nature-facts*. There are beds, and there are boulders. These two classes differ in important respects. The basic science concerned with the world (what Aristotle calls “physics”) deals with boulders, but only in a derivative sense with beds. Aristotle draws the distinction in the following way:

Of the things that exist, some exist by nature, others through other causes. Those that exist by nature include animals and their parts, plants, and simple bodies like earth, fire, air, and water—for of these and suchlike things we do say that they exist by nature. All these obviously differ from things that have not come together by nature; for each of

*In this regard, Aristotle is carrying on the tradition begun by Thales but improving on it by making explanations more specific and detailed. See the discussion of Thales' remark, “All things are full of gods,” p. 10.

them has in itself a source of movement and rest.

This movement is in some cases movement from place to place, in others it takes the forms of growth and decay, in still others of qualitative change. But a bed or a garment or any other such kind of thing has no natural impulse for change—at least, not insofar as it belongs to its own peculiar category and is the product of art. (*PH* 2.1)

Of course, beds and garments change, too. But they change not because they are beds and garments but because they are made of natural things such as wood and wool. It is by virtue of being wood that the bedstead develops cracks and splinters, not by virtue of being a bedstead. The sword rusts not because it is a sword but because it is made of iron.

Nature, then, is distinguished from art and the products of art because it “has in itself a source of movement and rest.” We should note that Aristotle understands “movement” here in a broad sense: there is (1) movement from place to place, also called local motion; (2) growth and decay; and (3) change in qualities. (We usually call only the first of these “movement.”) Natural things, then, change in these ways because of what they are. An artifact like a bed may move from place to place, but only if someone moves it; it does not grow or decay; and any change in its qualities is due either to some external activity (someone paint his bed red) or to a property of the natural substance it is made of (the wood in the bedstead fades from dark to light brown). By contrast, a beaver moves about from place to place on its own, is born, matures, becomes wiser with age, and dies because this is the *nature* of beavers.

Nature, then, is the locus of change. Aristotle is convinced that if we observe closely enough, we can understand the principles governing these changes. Nature is composed of primary substances that are the *subjects* of change. They change in two ways: (1) they come into being and pass away again; (2) while in existence, they vary in quality, quantity, relation, place, and so on. About natural substances we can have knowledge. And because Aristotle agrees with his teacher Plato that knowledge is always knowledge of the real, it follows that nature is as real as anything could be!

THE FOUR “BECAUSES”

The wise person, as we have seen, knows not only what things are but also why. Aristotle sees that all his predecessors are asking why things are the way they are and giving these answers: because of water, because of the Boundless, because of opposition and the *logos*, because of atoms and the void, because of the Forms. What none of them sees is that this is not one question but four distinct questions.

Some people regard the nature and substance of things that exist by nature as being in each case the proximate element inherent in the thing, this being itself unshaped; thus, the nature of a bed, for instance, would be wood, and that of a statue bronze. (PH 2.1)

People who think this way identify the substance of a thing—its nature—with the element or elements it is made of. Thales, for instance, thinks that the nature of all things is water; everything else is non-essential, just accidental ways in which the underlying substance happens, for a time, to be arranged. The underlying substratum, however, is eternal; that is the real stuff!

Those who think this way are taking the why-question in one very specific sense. They answer, “Because it is made of such and such stuff.” Aristotle does not want to deny that this is one very proper answer to the why-question. Why is this statue what it is? Because it is made of bronze. The answer points to the *matter* from which it is made. Let us call this kind of answer to the why-question the **material cause**. Material causes, then, are one type of causation.

But citing a material cause does not give a complete answer to the why-question. That should be obvious enough; lots of bronze is not formed into statues. Consider some wood that has not been made into a bed. We could call such wood a “potential bed,” but it is not yet a *bed*. It is the same, he says,

with things that come together by nature; what is potentially flesh or bone does not yet have its own nature until it acquires the form that accords with the formula, by means of which we define flesh and bone; nor can it be said at this stage to exist by nature. So in another way, nature is the shape and

form of things that have a principle of movement in themselves—the form being only theoretically separable from the object in question. (PH 2.1)

Bone is what accords with “the formula” for bone—the definition that sets out the essential characteristics of bone. The elements of which bone is composed are not yet themselves bone; they are at best potential bone and may be formed into bone. In the case of bronze, there is no statue until it takes the shape of a statue. So here is another reason why a thing is the thing it is: It satisfies the requirements for being that sort of thing.

Aristotle here uses the term “form” both for the shape of something simple like a statue and for the definition of more complex things like bone. This is in accord with the usage for the term that comes down from Socrates and Plato. However, Aristotle adds this qualification: “the form being only theoretically separable from the object in question.” He means that we can consider just the form of some substance independent of the material stuff that makes it up; but we must not suppose on that account that the form really is separable from the thing. Aristotle’s forms are not Plato’s Forms. The form of a thing is not an independent object, but just its-having-the-characteristics-that-make-it-the-thing-that-it-is.



So we can answer the why-question in a second way by citing the form. Why is this bit of stuff

bone? Because it has the characteristics mentioned in the definition of bone. Aristotle calls this the **formal cause**.

But there must be something else, particularly in cases where a substance such as a mouse or a man comes into being. There is the material stuff out of which mice and men are made, and each has its proper form. But what explains the fact of their *coming to be*?

Thus, the answer to the question “why?” is to be given by referring to the matter, to the essence, and to the proximate mover. In cases of coming-to-be it is mostly in this last way that people examine the causes; they ask what comes to be after what, what was the immediate thing that acted or was acted upon, and so on in order. (*PH* 2.7)

Here is a third answer to the why-question. This answer names whatever triggered the beginning of the thing in question, what Aristotle calls the “proximate mover.” This sense of cause comes closest to our modern understanding of causes. For Aristotle, though, such causes are always themselves substances (“man generates man”), whereas for us causes tend to be conditions, events, or happenings. This cause is often called the **efficient cause**.

There is one more sense in which the why-question can be asked. We might be interested in the “what for” of something, particularly in the case of artifacts. Suppose we ask, “Why are there houses?” One answer is that cement and bricks and lumber and wallboard exist. Without them (or something analogous to them) there wouldn’t be any houses. This answer cites the material cause. Another answer is that there are things that satisfy the definition for a house, an answer naming the formal cause. A third answer cites the fact that there are house builders—the efficient cause. But even if we had all these answers, we might want to know why there are houses in the sense of what purpose they serve, what ends they satisfy.

Why are there houses? To provide shelter from the elements for human beings. It is because they serve this purpose that they exist; the materials for houses might exist, but they would not have come together in the sort of form that makes a house a

house. When we answer the why-question in this way, Aristotle says we are giving the **final cause**.*

It is clear, then, that there are causes, and that they are as many in number as we say; for they correspond to the different ways in which we can answer the question “why?” The ultimate answer to that question can be reduced to saying what the thing is . . . or to saying what the first mover was . . . or to naming the purpose . . . or, in the case of things that come into being, to naming the matter. . . . Since there are these four causes, it is the business of the natural scientist to know about them all, and he will give his answer to the question “why?” in the manner of a natural scientist if he refers what he is being asked about to them all—to the matter, the form, the mover, and the purpose. (*PH* 2.7)

IS THERE PURPOSE IN NATURE?

The last “because” is the most controversial. We say there is a purpose for artifacts (houses, for example), but only because human beings have purposes. We need, want, desire shelter; so we form an intention to make shelters. We think, plan, and draw up a blueprint, then gather the materials together and assemble a house. But the crucial thing here is the intention—without that, no houses. To say that there are final causes in nature seems like imputing intentions to nature. We might be able to answer the question, What is a sheep dog for? because sheep dogs serve our purposes. But does it even make sense to ask what *dogs* are for?⁶

Yet Aristotle holds seriously that the question about final causes applies to nature-facts just as much as to artifacts. There may be some things that are accidental byproducts (two-headed calves and such), and they may not have a purpose. Such accidents, he says, occur merely from “necessity.” But accidents apart, he thinks nature-facts are inherently purposive.

Aristotle does not think that there are *intentions* resident in all things; intentions are formed after deliberation, and only rational animals can deliberate. But that does not mean that nature in general

*Compare Socrates’ answer to the question about why he is in prison, pp. 160–161.

is devoid of *purposes*, for the concept of purpose is broader than that of intention.

Things that serve a purpose include everything that might have been done intentionally, and everything that proceeds from nature. When such things come to be accidentally, we say that they are as they are by chance. (*PH* 2.5)

But why couldn't everything in nature happen by chance, without purpose? This is what Democritus thinks the world is like—the accidental product of the necessary hooking up of atoms.* Why is that a mistake?

Aristotle has two arguments. (1) He draws on his close observations of nature to conclude that

all natural objects either always or usually come into being in a given way, and that is not the case with anything that comes to be by chance. (*PH* 2.8)

Chance or accident makes sense only against a background of regularity, of what happens “either always or usually.” Roses come from roses and not from grains of wheat; therefore, a rose coming from a rose is no accident. But since everything must occur either by chance or for a purpose, it must happen for some purpose. (2) Art (meaning something like the art of the physician or house builder) either completes nature or “imitates nature.” But there is purpose in art, so there must be purpose in nature as well.†

TELEOLOGY

The idea that natural substances are *for* something is called **teleology**, from the Greek word *telos*, meaning end or goal. We can get a better feel for this by thinking about a concrete example. Consider a frog. Let it be a common leopard frog such as children like to catch by the lake in the summertime. We can consider the frog from two points of view: (1) at a given time we can examine a kind of cross section of its history, and (2) we can follow its development through time.

At the moment when he is caught by little Johnny, the frog has certain characteristics. Johnny might list them as spottedness, four-leggedness, and hoppiness. A biologist would give us a better list. This “what-it-is” the frog shares with all other frogs; it is what makes it a frog rather than a toad or a salamander. This is what Aristotle calls its form.

But of course it is one particular frog, the one Johnny caught this morning. It is not “frog in general” or “all the frog there is.” What makes it the particular individual that it is? Surely it is the matter composing it; this frog is different from the one Sally caught, because even though they share the same form, each is made up of different bits of matter.

So in a cross section it is possible to distinguish form from matter. But now let us look at the history of the frog. Every frog develops from a fertilized egg into a tadpole and then into an adult frog. At each of these temporal stages, moreover, one can distinguish form and matter. The egg is matter that satisfies the definition for eggs; the tadpole has the form for tadpoles; the frog satisfies the formula for frogs. These stages are related in a regular, orderly way. As Aristotle puts it, this development is something that happens “always or usually.” There is a determinate pattern in this history. And it is always the same.

In the egg, Aristotle will say, there is a potentiality to become a frog. It won't become a toad. It has, so to speak, a direction programmed into it. There is a goal or end *in* the egg, which is what determines the direction of development. The term for this indwelling of the goal is **entelechy**. The goal, or *telos*, is present in the egg. The goal (being a frog) is not present in actuality, of course—otherwise, the egg would not be an egg but already a frog. The egg has *actually* the form for an egg, but the form frog is there *potentially*. If it were not, Aristotle would say, the egg might turn into anything! (Note that the final cause toward which the egg and tadpole develop is itself a form; the goal is to actualize the form of a frog.)

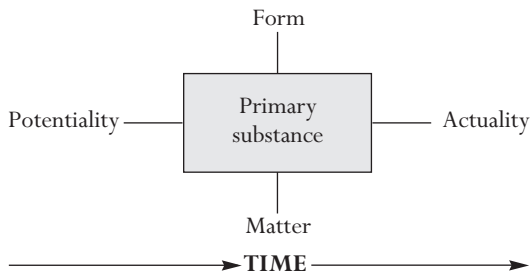
This indwelling of the end, entelechy, is what Aristotle means by the purpose that is in natural things. Such things have purpose in the sense that there is a standard direction of development for them; they move toward an end. Earlier forms of a substance are already potentially what they will

*See pp. 30–31.

†Are these sound arguments? A key move in the development of modern science is their rejection. See pp. 355–356.

actually become only later. The tadpole is the potentiality of there being an actual frog. The frog is the actuality the tadpole tends toward.

Science, Aristotle says, can grasp not only the nature of static and eternal things, but also the natural laws of development. These laws are universals, too. Knowledge is always of the universal, of forms; in this Plato was right. But the forms are not outside the natural world; they are within it, guiding and making intelligible the changes that natural substances undergo either always or usually. The concepts of the four causes, plus actuality and potentiality, are the tools by which science can understand the natural world.



Once again we see a philosopher forging linguistic tools to make intelligible what seemed unintelligible to earlier thinkers. Parmenides, working only with concepts of being and not being, argued that change was impossible.* Aristotle uses the concepts of potentiality and actuality to discern universal laws governing orderly and intelligible change. Philosophy is argument and reason-giving. But it is also creation and invention, requiring the imagination to envision new conceptual possibilities.

1. How do nature-facts differ from artifacts? In what ways are they similar?
2. Explain each of the four causes.
3. How are Aristotle's forms both like and unlike Plato's Forms?
4. Describe how Aristotle uses the concepts of form/matter and actuality/potentiality to gain an understanding of the natural world, for example, of a frog.

*See p. 25.

First Philosophy

It is from a feeling of wonder that men start now, and did start in the earliest times, to practice philosophy. (*M* 1.2)

Practicing philosophy, Aristotle makes clear, is not the basic activity of human beings. They must first see to the necessities of life, and only when these are reasonably secure will they have the leisure to pursue wisdom.

Whereas some kinds of knowledge have practical benefits, Aristotle believes that the pursuit of knowledge “for its own sake” is “more than human, since human nature is in many respects enslaved” (*M* 1.2). So much of our activity is devoted to the necessities of just staying alive that we are enslaved to the needs of our own nature. The knowledge that does nothing more than satisfy wonder, in contrast, is more than human because it would be free from this bondage. It is akin to the knowledge god would have. In our quest for such “divine” knowledge, we would have as our main concern those things that are “first” or “primary” or independent of everything else. We could call such a search “**first philosophy.**”

Familiar as we are with the world of nature, we wonder now whether that is all there is.

If there is no other substance apart from those that have come together by nature, natural science will be the first science. But if there is a substance that is immovable, the science that studies it is prior to natural science and is the first philosophy. . . . It is the business of this science to study being qua being, and to find out what it is and what are its attributes qua being. (*M* 6.1)

Biology, we might say, studies *being qua* (as) *living being*; or to put it another way, the biologist is interested in *what there is* just insofar as it is *alive*. There are many sciences, theoretical and practical, each of which cuts out a certain area of what there is—of being—for study. Each science brings its subject matter together under some unifying first principles. And this question must inevitably arise: Is there some still higher unity to what there is? Is being *one*? Is it unified by some principles that are true of it throughout?

If so, this too must be an area of knowledge, and the wise person's wonder will not be satisfied until it is canvassed and understood. This science would be concerned with the characteristics or attributes of being in an unqualified sense: of being qua being. If there is such a science, it is "first" in the sense that it would examine the principles taken for granted by all the special sciences. It would ask about the ultimate causes of all things. If, says Aristotle, natural substances are the only ones there are, then natural science will be this first science or philosophy. But if there are other substances—ones not subject to change—then the science that studies those will be first philosophy.* So first philosophy, also called **metaphysics**, looks for the ultimate principles and causes of all things. What are they?

NOT PLATO'S FORMS

Aristotle rejects Plato's answer to this question, which is that the Forms are the cause of all things. Not only are the Forms subject to the Third Man problem, but also they present many other difficulties.† Let us briefly explore some of them.

1. The things of this world are supposed to derive their reality from their "participation" in the Forms. But nowhere does Plato explain just what this "participation" amounts to. Without such an account, however, all we have are "empty phrases" and "poetic metaphors" (*M* 1.9).

2. The Forms are themselves supposed to be substantial realities—indeed, the most real of all the things there are. Aristotle comments,

In seeking to find the causes of the things that are around us, they have introduced another lot of objects equal in number to them. It is as if someone who wanted to count thought that he would not be able to do so while the objects in question were

relatively few, and then proceeded to do so when he had made them more numerous. (*M* 1.9)

To say that the Form Human is the cause of humans is simply to multiply the entities needing explanation. If it is difficult to explain the existence and nature of human beings, it is certainly no easier to explain the existence and nature of humans-plus-the-Form-Human.

3. The Forms are supposed to be what many individuals of the same kind have in common. Yet they are also supposed to be individual realities in their own right. But, says Aristotle, these requirements conflict. If, on the one hand, the Forms are indeed individual substances, it makes no sense to think of them being shared out among other individual substances.* If, on the other hand, they are universal in character (nonindividual), there is no sense in thinking of them as things that exist separately from particulars. Being-a-man, Aristotle holds, is realized not in a substantial Form independent of all men, but precisely and only in *each individual man*. Because the "friends of the Forms" are unable to explain how such substances are both individual and universal,

they make them the same in form as perishable things (since we know them), talking of "the man himself" and "the horse itself," just adding the word "self" to the names of sensible objects. (*M* 7.16)

But this is useless as an explanation.

4. Finally, there is no way to understand how the Forms, eternally unchanging, account for changes. They are supposed to be the first principles and causes of whatever happens in the world. But

one is most of all bewildered to know what contribution the forms make either to the sensible things that are eternal or to those that come into being and perish; for they are not the cause of their movement or of any change in them. (*M* 1.9)

By "the sensible things that are eternal," Aristotle means the things in the natural world whose movement is (as he thought) regular and everlasting: the sun, moon, and the fixed stars. How can eternally

*Aristotle seems to be assuming here that the cause that accounts for the entire world of changing substances cannot itself just be a changing substance; if it were, it would itself need accounting for. So it must be—if it exists—something unchanging. If nature is defined as the sphere of those things that change because of a source of movement or change within them, an ultimate, unchanging cause of natural things would be beyond nature.

†Review the Third Man Argument on pp. 179–180.

*Review the discussion of substance on pp. 186–187.

stable Forms explain change either in these things or in the even more unstable items on earth?

Aristotle's critical appraisal of his master's metaphysics leads to a thoroughgoing rejection of the Forms. The fundamental things that exist have to be *individual* things and exist *independent* of other things. Plato's Forms do not satisfy either requirement. The Forms are supposed to be the common features of things that are individual, but such features, Aristotle believes, have no independent being; they depend for such being as they have on individual substances (of which they are the qualities, relations, and so on). The sensible things of nature, humans and beavers, surely exist; but being mortal and having a broad, flat tail are qualities existing only as modifications of these. Whether anything beyond these individual entities exists is still an open question. But if it does, it too will be substantial, individual, and capable of independent existence. It will not be a "common feature" of individual things.*

WHAT OF MATHEMATICS?

The most convincing arguments for the Forms seem to be mathematical in nature. Socrates is not talking about his sand figure, so Plato concludes that Socrates is talking about the Square Itself, the Triangle Itself, and the Equal. Aristotle wishes to avoid drawing this conclusion. So how does he deal with mathematics?

The natural scientist, in studying changeable things, deals with subjects like the shape of the moon and the sphericity of the earth.

Such attributes as these are studied by mathematicians as well as by natural scientists, but not by virtue of their being limits of natural bodies. The mathematician is not interested in them as attributes of whatever they are attributes of, and so he separates them. For these attributes can be conceptually separated from movement, without this separation making any difference or involving any false statement. (*PH* 2.2)

*We can think of these reflections as a critique of Plato's Metaphysical Argument for the Forms (see p. 154). In the following section, Aristotle examines the Epistemological Argument.

The crucial point is that we can "conceptually" separate attributes of things and consider them on their own, without supposing that they must be independent things. To use one of Aristotle's favorite examples, consider a snub nose. As a natural thing, a nose is a compound made up of form and matter; as such, it is of interest to the natural scientist but not to the mathematician. What makes it "snub," though, is its being curved in a certain way. And we can consider the curve alone, abstracting away from the matter in the nose. When we do this, we are taking up the mathematician's point of view. But the fact that we can adopt this viewpoint does not mean that Curvedness exists independent of noses. There need be no Form of the Curve to make mathematics intelligible.

There is no argument, Aristotle holds, from knowledge in mathematics to the reality of Platonic Forms independent of the world of nature. Mathematics is a science that, like natural science, has the world of nature as its only object. But it does not study it *as nature*; it studies only certain abstractions from natural things, without supposing that such abstractions are themselves things.

SUBSTANCE AND FORM

When we considered Aristotle's categories, it was already apparent that certain terms were more basic than others.* These terms picked out substances and could play only the subject role in a statement. Now Aristotle reinforces this conclusion, looking more directly at things themselves.

There are many ways in which the term "being" is used, corresponding to the distinctions we drew earlier, when we showed in how many ways terms are used. On the one hand, it indicates what a thing is and that it is this particular thing; on the other, it indicates a thing's quality or size, or whatever else is asserted of it in this way. Although "being" is used in all these ways, clearly the primary kind of being is what a thing is; for it is this alone that indicates substance. . . . All other things are said to be only insofar as they are quantities, qualities, affections, or something else of this kind belonging to what is in this primary sense. (*M* 7.1)

*See pp. 185–186.

We can ask many different questions about any given thing: How old is it? How large is it? What color is it? What shape is it? Is it alive? Does it think? Answers to each of these questions tell us something about the thing in question, describing a way the thing *is*, saying something about its *being*. But one question, Aristotle argues, is basic, namely, *What is it?* We may learn that it is thirty years old, six feet tall, white, fat, and thinking of Philadelphia, but until we learn that it is a *man* all these answers hang in the air. Aristotle puts it this way: that answer gives us the “substance.” And substance is *what is*, in the basic, fundamental, primary sense.

This is the first answer to the metaphysical question about being qua being. For something to be, in the primary sense, is for it to be a substance. Whatever exists is dependent on substance. But more must be said. What is it that makes a given object a substance?

If we think back to the discussion of nature, we recall that natural things are composed of matter and form (the latter being expressed in a formula or definition). Could it be the matter that makes an object a substance? No. Matter, considered apart from form, is merely potentially something. If you strip off all form, you are tempted to say that what is left is sheer, undifferentiated, characterless something. But even that would be wrong, because every “something” has some character or form that differentiates it from something else. This “prime matter” can’t be anything at all, on its own. It cannot have an independent existence; it exists only *as formed*. So matter cannot be what accounts for, or what makes or causes, something to be a substance. For what accounts for something being a substance must be at least as substantial as the substances it produces.

What of the other alternative? Could it be form that makes a portion of being into a substance? In a series of complex arguments, Aristotle argues that this is in fact the case. But not just any form makes the substance *what it is*. The form responsible for the substantiality of substances he calls the **essence** of the thing. *Essences* are expressed by definitions telling us *what things are*.

Johnny’s frog may weigh five ounces, but weighing five ounces is not part of the essence of

that frog. The proof is that if the frog eats well and gains weight, it does not cease to be a frog. What makes it a frog remains the same whether it weighs five, six, or seven ounces. The definition of frog allows a variation in many of the qualities and quantities Johnny’s frog might have. But not in all. It could not cease to be amphibious and still be a frog. Amphibiousness is part of the essence of what it is to be a frog. All natural things (and artifacts, too), Aristotle holds, have an essence: a set of characteristics without which they would not be the things they are.

Why, for instance, are these materials a house? Because of the presence of the essence of house. One might also ask, “Why is this, or the body containing this, a man?” So what one is really looking for is the cause—that is, the form—of the matter being whatever it is; and this in fact is the substance.
(*M* 7.17)

We are, remember, looking for first principles and causes. We want to know what it is that makes a bit of matter what it is. We know that natural things are substances; they can exist independently and individually. But what makes this bunch of bricks a house, this mass of protoplasm a human? The answer is that each satisfies the definition of the essence of that thing. The presence of the essence house in the one case and the essence human in the other is the *cause* of each one being what it is.

So here we come to a second answer. Even more basic than substances composed of form and matter is the form itself. The cause of something could not be less real than the thing itself. So we find Aristotle asserting that this form—essence—is the very substance of substance itself.

In a way, this should be no surprise. Thinking back to the account Aristotle gives of natural substances, we can see how prominent form is. There are four causes, four explanations of why something is the particular substance it is. The material cause cannot be fundamental, as we have seen. But think about the other three: the form or essence of the thing; the final cause or goal, which is itself a form; and the efficient cause. Even this latter must involve a form, for it must be something actual, and actualities always embody form; as Aristotle

likes to say, “man begets man.” From all three points of view, then, form is the principal cause of the substantiality of things.

Aristotle gives us a simple example. Consider a syllable, *ba*. What makes this a syllable? There is the “matter” that makes it up: the elements *b* and *a*. But it is not the matter that makes these into the syllable *ba*, for these elements might also compose *ab*. So it must be the form. Moreover, the form cannot itself be an element, or we would need to explain how it is related to the *b* and the *a* (that is, we would have the Third Man problem). So the form must be something else.

But this “something else,” although it seems to be something, seems not to be an element; it seems in fact to be the cause of . . . that [the *b* and the *a*] being a syllable . . . ; in each case it is the thing’s substance, since that is the ultimate cause of a thing’s being. (*M* 7.17)

So form is the substance of things. But substance is what can exist independently and as an individual entity. This raises a very interesting possibility. Might there be substances that are not compounds of matter and form? Might there be substances that are *pure forms*?

All of nature is made up of material substances in which matter is made into something definite by the presence of form within it. But might there be something more fundamental than nature itself, in just the way that form is more basic than the compounds it forms? If there were any such substances, knowledge of them might be what the wise person seeks. Wisdom is knowing the being and causes of things. If there were substances of pure form, they would be less dependent and more basic than the things of nature, since even natural things depend on form for their substantiality. Knowledge of such “pure” substances would therefore be the knowledge most worth having, the most divine knowledge. We need now to explore this possibility.

PURE ACTUALITIES

If there are such purely formal substances, without any matter, they would be pure *actualities* as well. They couldn’t involve any “might bes,” for the principle of potentiality is matter and they

would have no matter. Nor could such substances admit of any change, for every change is a movement from something potential to something actual (for example, from tadpole into frog). But then it would be *eternal* as well.

These would therefore be the *best* things. Why? Think again about natural things, for example, the frog that Johnny caught. When is that frog at its very best? Surely when it is most froggy—hopping around, catching flies, doing all the things frogs most typically do. It is not at its best when it has a broken leg, nor when it is feeling listless, nor when it is a mere tadpole. In Aristotle’s terms, the frog is best when the form that makes it a frog (the essence) is most fully actualized in the matter—when it most fully is *what it is*. If there are substances lacking matter and potency altogether, substances that are fully actual, then they must be the best substances. For they cannot fail to display all the perfection of their form.

But are there any such substances—perfect, immaterial, and eternal—pure actualities without the possibility of change? If so, what are they like?

GOD

In the world of nature, the best things would be those that come closest to these ideals. Aristotle believes these are the heavenly bodies that move eternally in great circles. They change their positions constantly, but in a perfectly regular way, without beginning or ending.* But even such eternal motion is not self-explanatory.

There is something that is always being moved in an incessant movement, and this movement is circular . . . : and so the first heaven will be eternal. There must, then, be something that moves it. But since that which is moved, as well as moving

*His reasons for thinking so are complex, involving a theory of the nature of time; we will not discuss that theory here. It can be found in *Physics* IV, 10–14. His theory was combined with the astronomy of the second-century Alexandrian, Ptolemy, and was to dominate scientific thinking until the beginnings of modern science in the sixteenth century. For a fuller discussion of this Aristotelian/Ptolemaic theory of the universe, see “The Celestial Spheres” in Chapter 14 (p. 299) and “The World God Made for Us” in Chapter 16.

things, is intermediate, there must be something that moves things without being moved; this will be something eternal, it will be a substance, and it will be an actuality. (*M* 12.7)

Think about baseball. A bat may impart movement to a ball, but only if put into movement by a batter. The bat is what Aristotle calls an “intermediate” mover; it moves the ball and is moved by the batter. The batter himself is moved to swing the bat by his desire to make a hit. Aristotle would put it this way: Making a hit is the final cause (the goal) that moves him to swing as he does. So the batter himself is only an “intermediate” mover. He moves as he does for the sake of making a hit. The goal of making a hit in turn exists for the sake of winning the game, which has as *its* goal the league championship. In the world of baseball, the ultimate final cause putting the whole season in motion is the goal of winning the World Series. Each batter is striving to embody the form: Member of a Team That Wins the World Series.

Let’s return to the world of nature, containing the eternal movements of the heavenly bodies. Is there any ultimate mover here? There must be, Aristotle argues; otherwise we could not account for the movement of anything at all. Not all movers can be “intermediate” movers. If they were, that series would go on to infinity, but there cannot be any actually existing collection of infinitely many things. There must, then, be “something that moves things without being moved.”*

Moreover, we can know certain facts about it. It must itself be eternal because it must account for the eternal movement of the heavenly bodies and so cannot be less extensive than they are. It must be a substance, for what other substances depend on cannot be less basic than they are. And, of course, it must be fully actual; otherwise, its being what it is would cry out for further explanation—for a mover for it.

What kind of cause could this **unmoved mover** be? Let’s review the four causes. It clearly

couldn’t be a material cause, since that is purely potential. It couldn’t be an efficient cause, for the eternal movement of the heavens does not need a temporal trigger. It is not the formal cause of a compound of form and matter because it contains no matter. It could only be a final cause. This conclusion is driven home by an analogy.

Now, the object of desire and the object of thought move things in this way: they move things without being moved. (*M* 12.7)

Our baseball example already indicated this. What sets the whole baseball world in motion is a goal, namely, winning the World Series. Within the world of baseball, there is no further purpose. It moves the players, managers, umpires, and owners, but without being moved itself.* It is “the object of desire and thought” and functions that way as a final cause. It is what they all “love.”

The final cause then moves things because it is loved, whereas all other things move because they are themselves moved. . . . The first mover, then, must exist; and insofar as he exists of necessity, his existence must be good; and thus he must be a first principle. . . .

It is upon a principle of this kind, then, that the heavens and nature depend. (*M* 12.7)

The ultimate cause of all things is a final cause; it is what all other things love. Their love for it puts them in motion, just as the sheer existence of a bicycle stimulates a boy or girl into activity, delivering papers, mowing lawns, and saving to buy it. As the object of desire and love, this first mover must be something good. Can we say anything more about the nature of this unmoved mover?

Its life is like the best that we can enjoy—and we can enjoy it for only a short time. It is always in this state (which we cannot be), since its actuality is also pleasure. . . . If, then, God is always in the good state which we are sometimes in, that is something to wonder at; and if he is in a better state than we are ever in, that is to be wondered at even more.

*This is a form of argument that looks back to Anaximander (see p. 11) and forward to Saint Thomas Aquinas (see his first and second arguments for the existence of God, pp. 320–322).

*You may object that there are further goals: fame, money, and so on. And you are right. But that just shows that the “world” of baseball is not a self-contained world; it is not *the* world, but has a place in a wider setting.

This is in fact the case, however. Life belongs to him, too; for life is the actuality of mind, and God is that actuality; and his independent actuality is the best life and eternal life. We assert, then, that God is an eternal and most excellent living being, so that continuous and eternal life and duration belong to him. For that is what God is. (*M* 12.7)

There must be such an actuality, Aristotle argues, to explain the existence and nature of changing things. As the final cause and the object of the “desire” in all things, it must be the best. What is the best we know? The life of the mind.* So God must enjoy this life in the highest degree.

God, then, is an eternally existing, living being who lives a life of perfect thought. But this raises a further problem. What does God think about? Aristotle’s answer to this question is reasonable, but puzzling, too.

Plainly, it thinks of what is most divine and most valuable, and plainly it does not change; for change would be for the worse. . . . The mind, then, must think of itself if it is the best of things, and its thought will be thought about thought. (*M* 12.9)

It would not be appropriate for the best thought to be about ordinary things, Aristotle argues. It must have only the best and most valuable object. But that is itself! So God will think only of himself. He will not, in Aristotle’s view, have any concern or thought for the world. He will engage eternally in a contemplation of his own life—which is a life of contemplation. His relation to the world is not that of *creator* (the world being everlasting needs no efficient cause), but of *ideal*, inspiring each thing in the world to be its very best in imitation of the divine perfection. God is not the origin of the world, but its goal. Yet he is and must be an actually existing, individual substance, devoid of matter, and the best in every way.

God, then, is to *the* world as winning the World Series is to the “world” of baseball. He functions as the unifying principle of reality, that cause to which all other final causes must ultimately be referred. There is no multitude of ultimate principles, no

*This is discussed in more detail later in this chapter. See “The Highest Good.”

polytheism. The world is one world. As Aristotle puts it,

The world does not wish to be governed badly. As Homer says: “To have many kings is not good; let there be one.” (*M* 12.10)

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1. What is “first” philosophy? Is there another name for it?
 2. List four criticisms of Plato’s doctrine that the Forms are the most real of all things.
 3. How does Aristotle’s understanding of mathematics tend to undermine Plato’s epistemological argument for the Forms?
 4. In what way is substance the primary category of being?
 5. What is an essence?
 6. In what ways is form the most basic thing in substances?
 7. What is God like? What kind of cause is God?
-

The Soul

Plato locates the essence of a person in the soul, an entity distinct from the body. Souls exist before their “imprisonment” in a body and survive the death of the body. The wise person tries to dissociate himself as much as possible from the harmful influences of the body. The practice of philosophy is a kind of purification making a soul fit for blessedness after death.

Aristotle rejects the otherworldliness implicit in such views. One of the causes of such otherworldliness, Aristotle holds, is a too-narrow focus.

Till now, those who have discussed and inquired about the soul seem to have considered only the human soul; but we must take care not to forget the question of whether one single definition can be given of soul in the way that it can of animal, or whether there is a different one in each case—for horse, dog, man, and god, for instance. (*PS* 1.1)

The term “soul” is the English translation of the Greek *psyche*. And that is the general word applied to life. So, things with *psyche*—ensouled things—are living things. But not only humans are alive. Aristotle is raising the question whether soul or life or *psyche* is something shared in common among

all living things. If you think only about the life characteristic of humans, you might well think of soul as something quite other than nature; but if you observe the broader context, you may end up with a very different account of soul. Again we see Aristotle the biologist at work, trying to organize and classify all living things, humans being just one species among many.

LEVELS OF SOUL

There is “one definition of soul in the same way that there is one definition of shape” (*PS* 2.3). Just as there are plane figures and solid figures, and among the latter there are spheres and cubes, so souls come in a variety of kinds.

We must, then, inquire, species by species, what is the soul of each living thing—what is the soul of a plant, for instance, or what is that of a man or a beast. (*PS* 2.3)

The general definition of soul involves life: “that which distinguishes what has a soul from what has not is life” (*PS* 2.2). But souls differ from one another in their complexity, with more complex kinds of souls building on simpler kinds. Aristotle distinguishes three general levels of soul: that of plants, that of beasts, and that of humans.

The most fundamental of these forms is that of the plants, for clearly they have within themselves a faculty and principle such that through it they can grow or decay in opposite directions. For they do not just grow upwards without growing downwards; they grow in both directions alike, and indeed in every direction . . . for as long as they can receive nourishment. This nutritive faculty can be separated from the other faculties, but the other faculties cannot exist apart from it in mortal creatures. This is clear in the case of plants, since they have none of the other faculties of the soul. (*PS* 2.2)

Nutritive soul, the capacity to take in nourishment and convert it to life, is basic to all living things. Plants, however, do not share the higher levels of soul. They live and reproduce and so have a kind of soul, but without the capacities of movement, sensation, and thought.

We should pause a moment to consider reproduction. Why do plants (as well as animals)

reproduce? We know that for Aristotle the answer is incomplete if it makes no mention of the final cause. What is the final cause for reproduction?

The most natural function of any living being that is complete, is not deformed, and is not born spontaneously is to produce another being like itself . . . so that it may share, as far as it can, in eternity and divinity; that is what they all desire, and it is the purpose of all their natural activities. (*PS* 2.4)

This is an application of the principle uncovered in first philosophy. There is an eternal unmoved mover—the final cause of whatever else exists—and the fact that living things reproduce can be explained by their “desire” to share, as far as possible, the eternity and divinity that caps off the universe. Each thing imitates God in the way possible for it, striving to come as close as mortal beings can come to a kind of eternity.*

More complex forms of soul are built on the nutritive soul and are never found in nature without it. The next level can be called the level of **sensitive soul**; it belongs to the animals.

Plants possess only the nutritive faculty, but other beings possess both it and the sensitive faculty; and if they possess the sensitive faculty, they must also possess the appetitive; for appetite consists of desire, anger, and will. All animals possess at least one sense, that of touch; anything that has a sense is acquainted with pleasure and pain, with what is pleasant and what is painful; and anything that is acquainted with these has desire, since desire is an appetite for the pleasant. (*PS* 2.3)

Animals, then, have sensations and desires in addition to the faculties of nutrition and reproduction.

Finally, there is **rational soul**, soul that has the capacity to think. Among naturally existing species, it seems to be characteristic only of human beings.

In general, then, there are three kinds or levels of soul: nutritive, sensitive, and rational. They correspond to three great classes of living things: plants, animals, and human beings. They are related in such a way that higher kinds of soul incorporate the lower, but the lower can exist without the higher.

*Compare Plato’s discussion of love, pp. 165–168.

SOUL AND BODY

How are souls related to bodies? Can we give the same sort of answer for each of the kinds of soul? Plato, concentrating on human beings, holds that souls are completely distinct entities, capable of existence on their own. That is not so plausible in the case of plant and animal souls. What does Aristotle say?

Actually, Aristotle gives two answers, and that fact has generated much subsequent debate. There is a general answer and an answer that pertains specifically to the rational form of soul. Let's look first at the general answer.

It is probably better to say not that the soul feels pity or learns or thinks, but that man does these things with his soul; for we should not suppose that the movement is actually in the soul, but that in some cases it penetrates as far as the soul, in others it starts from it; sensation, for instance, starts from the particular objects, whereas recollection starts from the soul and proceeds to the movements or their residues in the sense organs. (PS 1.4)

This view of soul is one that firmly embeds soul in the body and makes us unitary beings. It is not the case that certain operations can be assigned to the soul and certain others to the body. It is not the soul that feels or learns or thinks while the body eats and walks; it is the *person* who does all these things. It would be no more sensible, Aristotle holds, to say that the soul is angry than that the body weaves or builds. Neither souls nor bodies do these things; human beings do them all. Sensation is not something the soul accomplishes; it cannot occur at all without a body, sense organs, and objects to which those sense organs are sensitive. Recollection has its effects in bodily movements (remembering an appointment makes you run to catch the bus). A person is *one being* with *one essence*.

But what exactly is a soul, and how is it related to a body? We must remind ourselves of the results of Aristotle's investigations of being qua being. The basic things that exist are substances, and in natural substances there is a material substratum that is actualized—made into the substance it is—by a form.

The soul, then, must be a substance inasmuch as it is the form of a natural body that potentially possesses

life; and such substance is in fact realization, so that the soul is the realization of a body of this kind. (PS 2.1)

Remember that “form” does not stand for shape (except in very simple cases) but for the essence, the definition, the satisfaction of which makes a thing the substance it is. Remember also that form is the principle of actualization or realization; it is what makes a bit of matter into an actual thing. And remember that form is itself substance: the very substance of substances.

Now you can understand Aristotle's view of soul as “the form of a natural body that potentially possesses life” and as the “realization of a body of this kind.” An ensouled body is capable of performing all the activities that are appropriate to that kind of being; it feeds itself and perhaps sees, desires, and thinks. And its being capable of those activities is the *same* as its having certain essential characteristics, which is the same as its having a form of a certain kind.

Think of the body of Frankenstein's monster before it was jolted into life. It was initially a mosaic of body parts—matter of the right *kind* to carry out the activities of a living thing, but not actually living. What the tragic doctor provided for the body was a soul. But what is that? He didn't plug a new thing into that body; he just actualized certain potentialities the body already had. The doctor made it able to walk and eat, to see and talk, to think. Having a soul is just being able to do those kinds of things. A soul, then, is just a form for a primary substance, not a separate entity in itself.

It should be no surprise, then, to hear Aristotle say, rather offhandedly,

We do not, therefore, have to inquire whether the soul and body are one, just as we do not have to inquire whether the wax and its shape, or in general the matter of any given thing and that of which it is the matter, are one. (PS 2.1)

This problem, which so occupies Plato and for which he constructs so many proofs, is simply one that we do not have to inquire into! The answer is *obvious*, as obvious as the answer to the question whether the shape of a wax seal can exist independent of the wax.

Aristotle briefly indicates how this view works in practice. Consider anger. Some people define anger as a disposition to strike out or retaliate in response to some perceived wrong. Its definition therefore involves beliefs, desires, and emotions—all mental states of one sort or another. Others say that anger is just a bodily state involving heightened blood pressure, tensing of muscles, the flow of adrenaline, and so on. Nothing mental needs to be brought into its explanation. What would Aristotle say? He contrasts the viewpoint of the natural scientist with that of the “logician,” by which he means one who seeks the definition of such states.

The natural scientist and the logician would define all these affections in different ways; if they were asked what anger is, the one would say that it was a desire to hurt someone in return, or something like that, the other that it was a boiling of the blood and the heat around the heart. Of these, one is describing the matter, the other the form and the definition; for the latter is indeed the definition of the thing, but it must be in matter of a particular kind if the thing is going to exist. (*PS* 1.1)

If Aristotle is right, psychology and physiology in fact study the same thing. The former studies the form, and the latter the matter. From one point of view anger is a mental state, from the other a physical state. There need be no quarrel between the psychologist and the physiologist. Certain kinds of physical bodies have capacities for certain kinds of activities, and the exercise of those activities is their actuality and form; it is their life—their soul.*

This, then, is Aristotle’s general account of the relation of soul and body. Souls are the forms (the essential characteristics) of certain kinds of bodies, and as such they do not exist independent of bodies. This means, of course, that a soul cannot survive the death of the body to which it gives form any more than sight can survive the destruction of the eyes.

This general account, however, stands in tension with his account of the rational soul, or perhaps just a part of the rational soul, to which we now turn.

*This paragraph has a very contemporary ring to it. It expresses a view called “functionalism,” the dominant theory of mind in recent cognitive science. See pp. 735–738.

Nous

For the most part, Aristotle’s account of the soul is thoroughly “naturalistic.” Soul is just how naturally existing, living bodies of a certain kind function; it is not an additional part separable from such bodies. In this regard, things with souls are thoroughly embedded in the world of nature. But can this naturalistic form-of-the-body account be the *complete* story about soul? Or could it be that a part of some souls—of rational souls—has an independent existence after all?

Sensation is passive, simply registering the characteristics of the environment, but thinking seems to be more active; otherwise mirrors and calm pools would be thinking about what they reflect. Consider, for example, using induction to grasp the first principles of natural kinds.* We aren’t simply absorbing what comes in through the senses, but actively observing, noting, classifying things. Thinking is *doing* something. Aristotle’s word for this active capacity of ours is *nous*. And the question is whether *nous* (translated below as “mind”) can be adequately understood as nothing more than one aspect of the human form.

There is the mind that is such as we have just described by virtue of the fact that it becomes everything; then, there is another mind, which is what it is by virtue of the fact that it makes everything; it is a sort of condition like light. For in a way light makes what are potentially colors become colors in actuality. This second mind is separable, incapable of being acted upon, mixed with nothing, and in essence an actuality. (*PS* 3.5)

Here Aristotle distinguishes between two aspects of *nous* itself. There is the side of *nous* that “becomes everything.” What he means by this is that the mind can adapt to receive the form of just about anything; it is flexible, malleable, open to being written on. But there is also the side of *nous* that “makes everything.” Mind lights things up, makes them stand out clearly. Here is an example that may help. Think of daydreaming. Your eyes are open, and there is in your consciousness

*Review the discussion of induction on pp. 191–192.

a kind of registration of everything in your visual field, but you aren't paying it any heed. Your mind is "elsewhere," and you don't *know* what is before you. Suddenly, however, your attention shifts and what has been present all along is noted. Actively paying attention makes what was just potentially knowable into something actually known—just as light makes colors visible, although the colors were there all along before they were lighted up.

According to Aristotle's principles, only an actuality can turn something that is potentially *X* into something actually *X*. So active *nous* must be an actual power to produce knowledge from the mere registrations of passive *nous*. In fact, Aristotle concludes that the active and passive powers of *nous* are distinct and separable. Sometimes he goes so far as to speak not just of two powers, but of two minds.

The second mind, he says, is "mixed with nothing" and "separable" from the first. To say it is mixed with nothing must mean that it is a pure form unmixed with matter. If you think a moment, you should be able to see that it must be a pure form if it can actualize *everything*; if it were mixed with matter, it would be some definite thing and would lack the required plasticity. The eye, for instance, is a definite material organ. As such, its sensitivity is strictly limited; it can detect light, but not sounds or tastes. The ear is tuned to sounds alone and the tongue restricted to tastes. If *nous* is not limited in this way, it seems that it cannot be material. If it is not material, it cannot be a part of the body. And if it is not part of the body, it must be a separable entity.

There is another reason Aristotle believes that active *nous* must be an actuality separate from the body. He cannot find any "organ" or bodily location for this activity. Sight is located in the eyes, hearing in the ears, and so on. But where could the faculty of knowing be? Reflecting on his general view of the soul, Aristotle writes,

Clearly, then, the soul is not separable from the body; or, if it is divisible into parts, some of the parts are not separable, for in some cases the realization is just the realization of the parts. However, there is nothing to prevent some parts being separated, insofar as they are not realizations of any body. (PS 2.1)

Sight is the "realization" of the eye. But what part of the body could have as its function something as infinitely complex as thinking and knowing? The seat of sensation and emotions, Aristotle thinks, is the heart. When we are afraid or excited we can feel our heart beating fast. The brain he considers an organ for cooling the body. (This is wrong, but not implausible; one of the best ways to keep warm on a cold day is to wear a hat.) Without knowledge of the microstructure of the brain, it must have seemed to him that there is nothing available in the body to serve as the organ of thought, so the active part of *nous* must be separable from the body.

It is not only separable, Aristotle holds; it is also

immortal and eternal; we do not remember this because, although this mind is incapable of being acted upon, the other kind of mind, which is capable of being acted upon, is perishable. But without this kind of mind nothing thinks. (PS 3.5)

Why should active *nous* be eternal? Because it is not material; it is not the form of a material substance (i.e., of part of the body). It is rather one of those substantial forms that can exist separately. Lacking matter, it also lacks potentiality for change and is fully and everlastingly what it is. If *nous* is eternal and immortal, it must, like the soul of Socrates and Plato, have existed prior to our birth. But, Aristotle insists, we do not *remember* anything we know before birth—because there is nothing there to remember. Active *nous*, remember, is like the light. It lights up what the senses receive, making actual what is so far only a potentiality for knowledge. But it is not itself knowledge; it only produces knowledge from material delivered by the senses.* And before birth there were no senses or sense organs to produce

*Immanuel Kant's view of the relation between concepts and percepts is very similar to this account of *nous*. Like *nous*, concepts alone cannot give us any knowledge; they structure, or interpret, or "light up" the deliverances of the senses; knowledge is a product of the interplay of "spontaneous" conceptualization and "receptive" sensation. (See pp. 476–479.) It is also interesting to compare this discussion of *nous* with Heidegger's view of the "clearing" in which things become present. See "Modes of Disclosure" in Chapter 27.

this material. Aristotle cannot accept the Socratic and Platonic doctrine of recollection as an explanation of knowing.

For similar reasons, it does not seem that *nous* can be anything like personal immortality, in which an individual human being survives death and remembers his life. Active *nous*, in fact, seems impersonal.

A number of questions arise, but Aristotle does not give us answers. Is *nous* numerically the same thing in all individuals, or is there a distinct *nous* for each person? What is the relation between *nous* and God, to which it bears some striking resemblances? How, if *nous* is independent and separable, does it come to be associated with human souls at all?

These questions give rise to a long debate, partly about what Aristotle means, partly about what truth there is to all this. In the Middle Ages, for instance, Jewish, Muslim, and Christian thinkers, trying to incorporate Aristotle into a broader theological context, wrestled determinedly with these problems. But for our purposes it is enough to register his conviction that there is something about human beings, and particularly about them as knowers, that cannot be accounted for in purely naturalistic terms. There is a part of the soul that is, after all, otherworldly.

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1. What is Aristotle's objection to Plato's account of the soul?
 2. Characterize the three levels of soul.
 3. Why do living things reproduce? (Compare Plato on love.)
 4. How is a soul related to a body? Be sure you understand the concepts of "substratum," "realization," and "formal substance."
 5. Why does Aristotle think there is something (*nous*) about human souls that is eternal?
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The Good Life

Aristotle's views on the good life for human beings, like his views of knowledge, reality, and human nature, resemble Plato's views in some ways and differ from them in others. While they agree on many substantive points, such as the importance

of traditional virtues like moderation, justice, and courage, they approach ethics in very different ways. Whereas Plato seeks a science of ethics based on the Form of the Good, Aristotle sees ethics as more of an art than a science. It requires a different sort of wisdom—wisdom about choice, character, and action—that pertains to particulars rather than unchanging universal truths. Given this emphasis, Aristotle insists that ethics will never attain the precision or certainty available in theoretical knowledge:

Our treatment will be adequate if we make it as precise as the subject matter allows. The same degree of accuracy should not be demanded in all inquiries any more than in all the products of craftsmen. Virtue and justice—the subject matter of politics—admit of plenty of differences and uncertainty. . . .

Then, since our discussion is about, and proceeds from, matters of this sort, we must be content with indicating the truth in broad, general outline. . . . The educated man looks for as much precision in each subject as the nature of the subject allows. (*NE* 1.3)

The point of studying ethics and politics, then, is not knowledge in the strict sense, for like Plato, Aristotle believes that genuine knowledge requires certainty. Instead, studying ethics has a more practical payoff.

We are not studying in order to know what virtue is, but to become good, for otherwise there would be no profit in it. (*NE* 2.2)

What is it, then, to "become good," and how can we do so?

HAPPINESS

Aristotle begins his main treatise on ethics, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, with these words:

Every skill and every inquiry, and similarly, every action and choice of action, is thought to have some good as its object. This is why the good has rightly been defined as the object of all endeavor. (*NE* 1.1)

Whenever we do something, we have some end in view. If we exercise, our end is health; if we study,

our end is knowledge or a profession. And we consider that end to be good; no one strives for what he or she considers bad.*

Now, if there is some object of activities that we want for its own sake (and others only because of that), and if it is not true that everything is chosen for something else—in which case there will be an infinite regress, that will nullify all our striving—it is plain that this must be the good, the highest good. Would not knowing it have a great influence on our way of living? Would we not be better at doing what we should, like archers with a target to aim at? (NE 1.2)

We often do one thing for the sake of another. But this cannot go on forever, or there will be no point to anything we do. What we want to find is some end that we want, but not for the sake of anything else: something we prize “for its own sake.” That would be the highest good, since there is nothing else we want that *for*. If we can identify something like that and keep it clearly before our eyes, as an archer looks at the target while shooting, we will be more likely to attain what is truly good.

Is there anything like that?

What is the highest good in all matters of action? As to the name, there is almost complete agreement; for uneducated and educated alike call it happiness, and make happiness identical with the good life and successful living. They disagree, however, about the meaning of happiness. (NE 1.4)

Aristotle’s term for happiness is *eudaemonia*. Whether “happiness” is the best English translation for this term is unclear. A better alternative might be “well-being,” and some speak of human “flourishing.” In any case, it is clear that *eudaemonia* is not merely a matter of *feeling* happy; Aristotle, as much as Socrates, wants to distinguish being happy

*This is true in general. Both Socrates and Plato, however, hold it is universally true. For that reason, they hold that if we know what is good, we will do what is good. But Aristotle believes there are exceptions when people can act contrary to what they themselves consider their best judgment. Euripides expresses this Aristotelian view in *Hippolytus*, and Saint Paul and Augustine both agree with Aristotle that such inner conflict is possible. See pp. 260 and 277–282.

from just feeling happy.* In this book, we will follow the major tradition, however, and speak of what all of us desire as happiness.

Everyone wants to be happy. And the question, “Why do you want to be happy—for what?” seems to be senseless. This is the end, the final goal. Money we want for security, but happiness for its own sake. Yet, for us as well as for Aristotle, there is something unsatisfying about this answer, something hollow. For we immediately want to ask: “What is happiness, anyway?”

Many people, Aristotle notes, think that happiness is pleasure and live as though that were so. But that cannot be correct. For the good of every creature must be appropriate to that creature’s nature; it couldn’t be right that the good life for human beings is the same as “the kind of life lived by cattle” (NE 1.4). It is true that “amusements” are pleasant and that they are chosen for their own sake. Within limits, there is nothing wrong with that. But

it would be absurd if the end were amusement and if trouble and hardship throughout life would be all for the sake of amusing oneself. . . . It would be stupid and childish to work hard and sweat just for childish amusement. (NE 10.6)†

Other people think that happiness is a matter of fame and honor. Again, there is something to be said for that; it is more characteristically human than mere pleasure. Aristotle does not want to deny that honor is something we can seek for its own sake; still

it seems to be more superficial than what we are looking for, since it rests in the man who gives the honor rather than in him who receives it, whereas our thought is that the good is something proper to the person, and cannot be taken away from him. (NE 1.5)

Here Aristotle is surely drawing on the tradition of Socrates, who believes that “the many” could neither bestow the greatest blessings nor

*See Socrates making this distinction in his trial speech, *Apology* 36e, and p. 134.

†Contemporary American culture sometimes makes one think that we are making this Aristotelian mistake on a massive scale.

inflict the greatest harms.* The highest good, happiness, must be something “proper to the person” that “cannot be taken away.” The problem with honor and fame—or popularity—is that you are not in control of them; whether they are bestowed or withdrawn depends on others. If what you most want is to be popular, you are saying to others: “Here, take my happiness; I put it into your hands.” This seems unsatisfactory to Aristotle.



“Popularity? It is glory’s small change.”

Victor Hugo (1802–1885)

How, then, shall we discover what happiness is?

We might achieve this by ascertaining the specific function of man. In the case of flute players, sculptors, and all craftsmen—indeed all who have some function and activity—“good” and “excellent” reside in their function. Now, the same will be true of man, if he has a peculiar function to himself. Do builders and cobblers have functions and activities, but man not, being by nature idle? Or, just as the eye, hand, foot, and every part of the body has a function, similarly, is one to attribute a function to man over and above these? In that case, what will it be? (NE 1.7)

The eye is defined by its **function**. It is a thing for seeing with; an eye is a good one if it performs that function well—gives clear and accurate images. A woman is a flutist by virtue of performing a certain function: playing the flute. A good flutist is one who plays the flute excellently, and that is in fact what each flutist aims at. Again we see that the good of a thing is relative to its proper function. Moreover—and this will be important—the flutist is *happy* when she plays excellently.

This suggests to Aristotle that if human beings had a function—not as flutists or cobblers, but just in virtue of being human—we might be able to identify the good appropriate to them. He thinks we can discover such a function.

The function of man is activity of soul in accordance with reason, or at least not without reason.

(NE 1.7)

Let’s examine this statement. Aristotle is claiming that there is something in human beings analogous to the function of a flutist or cobbler: “activity of soul in accordance with reason.”* What does that mean? And why does he pick on that, exactly?

If we are interested in the function of a human being, we must focus on what makes a human being human: the soul. As we have seen, soul is the realization of a certain kind of body; it is its life and the source of its actuality as an individual substance. It is the *essence* of a living thing. A dog is being a dog when it is doing essentially doglike things. And human beings are being human when they are acting in essentially human ways. Now what is peculiarly characteristic of humans? We already know Aristotle’s answer to that: Humans are different from plants and the other animals because they have the *rational* level of soul. So the function of a human being is living according to reason, or at least, Aristotle adds, “not without reason.” This addition is not insignificant. It means that although an excellent human life is a rational one, it is not limited to purely intellectual pursuits. There are excellences (virtues) that pertain to the physical and social aspects of our lives as well. The latter he calls the *moral virtues*.

Furthermore, although the function of the cobbler is simply to make shoes, the best cobbler is the one who makes excellent shoes. As Aristotle says, “Function comes first, and superiority in excellence is superadded.” If that is so, then

the good for man proves to be activity of soul in conformity with excellence; and if there is more than one excellence, it will be the best and most complete of these. (NE 1.7)

Doing what is characteristic of humans to do, living in accord with reason, and in the most excellent kind of way, is the good for humans. And if

*In one important respect, Aristotle is Plato’s faithful pupil. Look again at the functions of the soul for Plato (pp. 170–171). Which one is dominant?

*See *Apology* 30d, *Crito* 44d.



that is the human being's good, then it also constitutes human happiness. One of us used to have a big black Newfoundland dog named Shadow, a wonderful dog. When was Shadow happiest? When he was doing the things that Newfoundlands characteristically do—running along between the canal and the river, retrieving sticks thrown far out into the water. He loved that, he was *good* at it, and you could see it made him happy. It is the same with human beings, except that humans have capacities that Shadow didn't have.

It seems as though everything that people look for in connection with happiness resides in our definition. Some think it to be excellence or virtue; others wisdom; others special skill; whereas still others think it all these, or some of these together with pleasure, or at least not without pleasure. Others incorporate external goods as well. (NE 1.8)

Happiness is not possible without excellence or virtue (*areté*), any more than a flutist is happy over a poor performance. It surely includes wisdom, for excellent use of one's rational powers is part of being an excellent human being. Special skills are almost certainly included, for there are many necessary and useful things to be done in a human life, from house building to poetry writing. And it will include pleasure, not because pleasure is itself the good—we have seen it cannot be that—but because the life of those who live rationally with excellence is in itself pleasant.

The things thought pleasant by the vast majority of people are always in conflict with one another, because it is not by nature that they are pleasant; but those who love goodness take pleasure in what is by nature pleasant. This is the characteristic of actions in conformity with virtue, so that they are in themselves pleasant to those who love goodness. Their life has no extra need of pleasure as a kind of wrapper; it contains pleasure in itself. (NE 1.8)



"In the long run men hit only what they aim at."

Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862)

Does a happy life “incorporate external goods as well,” as some say? Aristotle's answer is, yes—at least in a moderate degree.

It is impossible (or at least not easy) to do fine acts without a supply of “goods.” Many acts are done through friends, or by means of wealth and political power, which are all, as it were, instruments. When people are without some of these, that ruins their blessed condition—for example, noble birth, fine children, or beauty. The man who is quite hideous to look at or ignoble or a hermit or childless cannot be entirely happy. Perhaps this is even more so if a man has really vicious children or friends or if they are good but have died. So, as we have said, happiness does seem to require this external bounty. (NE 1.8)

A certain amount of good fortune is a necessary condition for happiness. One would not expect the Elephant Man, for example, to be entirely happy, or a person whose children have become thoroughly wicked. This means, of course, that your happiness is not entirely in your own control. To be self-sufficient in happiness may be a kind of ideal, but in this world it is not likely to be entirely realized.

One point needs special emphasis. The happy life, which is one and the same with the good life, is a life of *activity*. Happiness is not something that happens to you. It is not passive. Think about the following analogy:

At the Olympic games, it is not the handsomest and strongest who are crowned, but actual competitors,

some of whom are the winners. Similarly, it is those who act rightly who get the rewards and the good things in life. (*NE* 1.8)

Happiness is an *activity* of soul in accord with excellence.

And finally, Aristotle adds, “in a complete life.” Just as one swallow does not make a summer, so “a short time does not make a man blessed or happy” (*NE* 1.7). There is a certain unavoidable fragility to human happiness.

There are many changes and all kinds of chances throughout a lifetime, and it is possible for a man who is really flourishing to meet with great disaster in old age, like Priam of Troy. No one gives the name happy to a man who meets with misfortune like that and dies miserably. (*NE* 1.9)

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1. Why does Aristotle say that ethics cannot be an exact science?
 2. Why does Aristotle think happiness is the highest good?
 3. Why cannot pleasure be the essence of happiness? Why not honor or fame?
 4. How does the idea of function help in determining the nature of happiness?
 5. What is the function of human beings? What is their good?
 6. How does pleasure come into the good life?
-

VIRTUE OR EXCELLENCE (*ARETÉ*)

The good for human beings, then, is happiness, and happiness is the full development and exercise of our human capacities “in conformity with excellence.” But what kind of thing is this excellence? How is it attained? Is there just one excellence which is appropriate to human beings, or are there many? We often speak of the “virtues” in the plural—courage, moderation, justice, temperance, and so on; are these independent of one another, or can you be an excellent human being only if you have them all? These are the questions we now address. (We shall speak in terms of “**virtues**” for the time being and postpone the question about their unity.)

1. In considering what kind of thing a virtue is, Aristotle notes that it is for our virtues and vices

that we are praised and blamed. A virtue, then, cannot be a simple emotion or feeling, for two reasons: (1) we are blamed not for being angry, but for giving in to our anger, for nursing our anger, or for being unreasonably angry, and those things are in our control; and (2) we feel fear and anger without choosing to, but the virtues “are a sort of choice, or at least not possible without choice” (*NE* 2.5). Nor can the virtues be mere capacities; again, we are called good or bad not because we are *capable* of feeling angry or *capable* of reasoning, but because of the ways we use these capacities.

But if the virtues are not emotions or capacities, what can they be? Aristotle’s answer is that they are *dispositions* or **habits**. To be courageous is to be disposed to do brave things. To be temperate is to have a tendency toward moderation in one’s pleasures. These dispositions have intimate connections with choice and action. People who never do the brave thing when they have the opportunity are not brave, no matter how brave they happen to feel. And the person who just happens to do a brave thing, in a quite accidental way, is not brave either. The brave person acts bravely whenever the occasion calls for it; and the more the person is truly possessed of that virtue, the more easily and naturally courageous actions come. There is no need to engage in fierce internal struggles to screw up the courage to act rightly.

So this is the answer to the first question. To have a virtue of a certain kind is to have developed a habit of choosing and behaving in ways appropriate to that virtue.

2. How are the virtues attained? They are not innate in us, though we have a natural capacity for them. They are, Aristotle tells us, learned. And they are learned as all habits are learned, by practice.

Where doing or making is dependent on knowing how, we acquire the know-how by actually doing. For example, people become builders by actually building, and the same applies to lyre players. In the same way, we become just by doing just acts; and similarly with “temperate” and “brave.” (*NE* 2.1)

This leads, moreover, to a kind of “virtuous circle.”

We become moderate through abstaining from pleasure, and when we are moderate we are best able to abstain. The same is true of bravery. Through being trained to despise and accept danger, we become brave; we shall be best able to accept danger once we are brave. (NE 2.2)

So we learn these excellences by practicing behavior that eventually becomes habitual in us. And if they can be learned, they can be taught. Socrates seems forever unsure whether human excellence is something that can be taught.* Aristotle is certain that it can be and tells us how.

The point is that moral virtue is concerned with pleasures and pains. We do bad actions because of the pleasure going with them, and abstain from good actions because they are hard and painful. Therefore, there should be some direction from a very early age, as Plato says, with a view to taking pleasure in, and being pained by, the right things. (NE 2.3)

A child can be taught virtue—moderation, courage, generosity, and justice—by associating pleasures with them and pains with their violation—by rewarding and punishing. A child needs to be taught to find pleasure in virtuous behavior and shame in vice. If we can teach a person to build well or to play the lyre well in this way, we can also teach the more specifically human excellences. Why should we teach these virtues to our children? Aristotle has a clear answer: If they find pleasure in the most excellent exercise of their human nature, they will be happier people. Such happy people are also the virtuous and good, for the good person is the one who takes pleasure in the right things.

3. Our third question is whether virtue is one or many. Can a person be partly good and partly bad, or is goodness all or nothing? Plato and Socrates are both convinced that goodness is one. For Plato, knowledge of the Form of the Good is the only secure foundation for virtue; and that Form is *one*. Whoever grasped it fully would be good through and through. We might expect Aristotle to be more pluralistic. In fact, he

says that Socrates and Plato are in one sense right and in one sense wrong. There are indeed many virtues, and they can perhaps even exist in some independence of each other. Often, a brave man is not particularly moderate in choosing his pleasures; James Bond would be an example. But in their perfection, Aristotle holds, you can't have one virtue without having them all. What will the brave man without moderation do, for example, when he is pulled in one direction by his bravery and in another by some tempting pleasure? Won't his lack of moderation hamper the exercise of his courage?

The unity of human excellence in its perfection is a function of the exercise of reason. If you follow reason, you will not be able to develop only one of these virtues to the exclusion of others. This use of reason Aristotle calls *practical sense* or **practical wisdom**. “Once the single virtue, practical sense, is present, all the virtues will be present” (NE 6.13).

To this “single virtue,” which provides the foundation and unity of all the rest, we now turn.

THE ROLE OF REASON

Happiness is living the life of an excellent human being; you can't be an excellent human being unless you use your rational powers. But how, exactly, does Aristotle think that rationality helps in living an excellent life?

Let us consider this first: it is in the nature of things for the virtues to be destroyed by excess and deficiency, as we see in the case of health and strength—a good example, for we must use clear cases when discussing abstruse matters. Excessive or insufficient training destroys strength, just as too much or too little food and drink ruins health. The right amount, however, brings health and preserves it. So this applies to moderation, bravery, and the other virtues. The man who runs away from everything in fear, and faces up to nothing, becomes a coward; the man who is absolutely fearless, and will walk into anything, becomes rash. It is the same with the man who gets enjoyment from all the pleasures, abstaining from none: he is immoderate; whereas he who avoids all pleasures, like a boor, is a man of no sensitivity.

*See *Meno* and pp. 99 and 133.

Moderation and bravery are destroyed by excess and deficiency, but are kept flourishing by the mean. (*NE* 2.2)

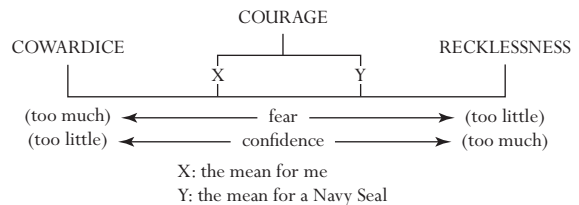
We can think of an emotion or an action tendency as laid out on a line, the extremes of which are labeled “too much” and “too little.” Somewhere between these extremes is a point that is “just right.” This point Aristotle calls “**the mean.**” It is at this “just right” point that human excellence or virtue flourishes. To possess a virtue, then, is to have a habit that keeps impulse and emotion from leading action astray.

In feeling fear, confidence, desire, anger, pity, and in general pleasure and pain, one can feel too much or too little; and both extremes are wrong. The mean and good is feeling at the right time, about the right things, in relation to the right people, and for the right reason; and the mean and the good are the task of virtue. (*NE* 2.6)

Think about bravery, surely one of the virtues. Aristotle’s analysis says that bravery lies on a mean between extremes of fear and confidence. If we feel too much fear and too little confidence, we are paralyzed and cannot act rightly; we are cowards. If we feel too little fear and are overconfident, we act foolishly, recklessly. At each extreme, then, there is a vice, and the virtue lies in a mean between these extremes. But it doesn’t lie exactly in the middle. What is courageous in any given circumstance depends on the facts.

Consider this example. You are walking down a dark and lonely street, and you feel a pointed object pressed into your back and hear the words, “Your money or your life.” What would be the brave thing for you to do? Turn and try to disarm the thug? Try to outrun him? If you are like most people, either action would be foolhardy, rash, stupid. There would be no taint of cowardice in you if you meekly handed over your wallet, especially because it is not worth risking your life over the money in your wallet. If you happen to be a Green Beret or a Navy Seal in a similar situation, someone superbly trained in hand-to-hand combat, however, then disarming your attacker would not be rash or reckless. What counts as extreme will depend, then, on facts about

who is facing danger, what kind of danger he or she is facing, what he or she is seeking to protect by facing danger, and so on. These facts will differ from case to case, and so what is courageous will differ from case to case.



Or let’s think about being angry; again, it is a matter of degree. You can have too much anger (like Achilles) or too little (simply being a doormat for everyone to walk over). Each of these is a vice, wrathfulness at the one extreme and subservience at the other. The virtue (which, in this case, may not have a clear name) lies at the mean between these extremes. Aristotle doesn’t intend to say that we should always get only moderately angry. About certain things, in relation to a given person, and for some specific reason, it might be the right thing to be very angry indeed. But in relation to other times, occasions, persons, and reasons, that degree of anger may be excessive. We should always seek the mean, but what that is depends on the situation in which we find ourselves. All of the virtues, Aristotle says, can be given this sort of analysis.

Notice that this is not a doctrine of *relativism* in the Sophist’s sense. It is clearly not the case that if Jones thinks in certain circumstances that it’s right to get angry to a certain degree, then it *is* (therefore) right—not even for Jones. Jones can be mistaken in his judgment. True, there is a certain relativity involved in judgments about the right; and without careful thought, this might be confusing. But it is an *objective* relativity; what is right depends on objective facts—on actual facts about the situation in which Jones finds himself. It is those facts that determine where the mean lies, not what Jones thinks or feels about them.



“The fact that a good and virtuous decision is context-sensitive does not imply that it is right only *relative* to, or *inside*, a limited context, any more than the fact that a good navigational judgment is sensitive to particular weather conditions shows that it is correct only in a local or relational sense. It is right absolutely, objectively, from anywhere in the human world, to attend to the particular features of one’s context; and the person who so attends and who chooses accordingly is making . . . the humanly correct decision, period.”

Martha Nussbaum (b. 1947)

Finding the mean in the situation is the practical role of *reason* in ethics. The virtuous or excellent person is the one who is good at rationally discovering the mean relative to us with regard to our emotions, our habits, and our actions. How much, for instance, shall we give to charity? About these things we deliberate and choose. Because these are matters of degree and because the right degree depends on our appreciation of subtle differences in situations, being truly virtuous is difficult. As Aristotle says,

going wrong happens in many ways, . . . whereas doing right happens in one way only. That is why one is easy, the other difficult: missing the target is easy, but hitting it is hard. (NE 2.6)

This is why it is a hard job to be good. It is hard to get to the mean in each thing. It is the expert, not just anybody, who finds the center of the circle. In the same way, having a fit of temper is easy for anyone; so is giving money and spending it. But this is not so when it comes to questions of “for whom?” “how much?” “when?” “why?” and “how?” This is why goodness is rare, and is praiseworthy and fine. (NE 2.9)



“Wickedness is always easier than virtue; for it takes the shortcut to everything.”

Samuel Johnson (1709–1784)

If you are good at using your reason to find the mean, you have *practical wisdom*. (The Greek word is *phronesis*.) Because virtue or excellence lies in the mean, and the mean is determined by reasoning, we can now also say that virtue is “disposition *accompanied* by right reason. Right reason, in connection with such matters is practical sense” (NE 6.13).

Aristotle does not give a formula or an algorithm to use in making choices. He apparently thinks that no such formula is possible in practical matters pertaining to particular choices. If a formula were possible, ethics could be a science rather than an art.* Nonetheless, there is a kind of standard for judging whether the right thing is being done. That standard is the virtuous and good person.

Protagoras holds that “man is the measure of all things.” We have seen how this leads to a kind of relativism; if Jones thinks something is good, then it is good—to Jones. Aristotle disagrees and argues in this way: We do not take the word of someone who is color-blind about the color of a tie; in the same way, not everyone is adept at judging the goodness of things. Protagorean relativism is a mistake because it is not everyone, but only the good person, who is the “measure of each thing.” In every situation, virtuous and good actions are defined by the mean. The mean is discovered by “right reason” or practical wisdom. So the “measure” of virtue and goodness will be the person who judges according to practical wisdom.

You might still want to ask, But how do we recognize these practically wise persons? To this question Aristotle has no very clear answer.† Again, there is no formula for recognizing such persons. But that need not mean we cannot in general tell who they are. They tend to be those persons, we might suggest, to whom you would turn for advice.

*We will see that some later writers on ethics, the utilitarians, for example, try to supply such a formula (p. 547). Kant also tries to find a single principle from which the right thing to do can be derived. See p. 489.

†Compare Augustine, who does have a clear answer to this question, pp. 283–284.

RESPONSIBILITY

The virtues, as we have seen, are dispositions to choose and behave in certain ways, according to right reason or practical wisdom. If we have these dispositions, we are called good; if we lack them, we are called bad. It is for our virtues and vices that we are praised and blamed. But under certain conditions, praise or blame are inappropriate. Let's call these "excusing conditions."

Aristotle is the first to canvass excusing conditions systematically and so to define when persons should not be held responsible for their actions. This is an important topic in its own right, useful "for those who are laying down laws about rewards and punishments" (*NE* 3.1). It has, moreover, been discussed in a variety of ways by subsequent philosophers. So we must look briefly at the way Aristotle begins this conversation.

Praise and blame are accorded to voluntary acts; but involuntary acts are accorded pardon, and at times pity. (*NE* 3.1)

Aristotle assumes that in the normal course of events most of our actions are voluntary. Occasionally, however, we do something involuntarily, and then we are pardoned or pitied. What conditions qualify an action as involuntary? He identifies two excusing conditions: compulsion and ignorance. Let us briefly discuss each one.

When someone acts under compulsion we mean, says Aristotle, that

the principle of action is external, and that the doer . . . contributes nothing of his own—as when the wind carries one off somewhere, or other human beings who have power over one do this. (*NE* 3.1)

Now, having your ship driven somewhere by a storm or being tied up and carried somewhere are particularly clear cases. If something bad should happen as a result of either of these, no one would blame you for it, for "the principle of action is external."

There are more debatable cases. For example, we would normally blame a ship's captain who lost his cargo by throwing it overboard. But if he threw it overboard during a storm to save his ship,

we might excuse him, saying that the storm forced him to do it. Yet we can't say that he contributed "nothing of his own." He did make the decision; in that respect, the action was voluntary. Still, because this is what "all people of sense" would do in those circumstances, the captain is pardoned. Aristotle concludes that though such actions are voluntary if considered as particular acts, they are involuntary when considered in context—for no one would ordinarily choose them. And that is the ground on which we excuse the captain from blame.

Again Aristotle insists that we not try to find a precise formula for deciding such cases. He stresses how difficult such decisions may be.

There are times when it is hard to decide what should be chosen at what price, and what endured in return for what reward. Perhaps it is still harder to stick to the decision.

It is not easy to say if one course should be chosen rather than another, since there is great variation in particular circumstances. (*NE* 3.1)

Only by applying practical wisdom can we discern whether something was done by compulsion.

Let us consider the second condition. What sort of ignorance excuses us from responsibility? It is not, Aristotle says, ignorance of what is right. Those who do not know what is right are not ignorant, but wicked! We do not excuse people for being wicked. (Here is the source of the adage that ignorance of the law is no excuse.)

If ignorance of the right does not excuse, neither does ignorance of what everybody ought to know. But

ignorance in particular circumstances does—that is, ignorance of the sphere and scope of the action. . . . A man may be ignorant of *what* he is doing: e.g., when people say that it "slipped out in the course of a conversation"; or that they did not know these things were secret . . . or like the man with the catapult, who wanted "only to demonstrate it," but fired it instead. Someone, as Merope does, might think his son an enemy; or mistake a sharp spear for one with a button. . . . One might give a man something to drink, with a view to saving his life, and kill him instead. (*NE* 3.1)

It is ignorance about particular circumstances that makes an action involuntary and leads us to excuse the agent from responsibility. In such cases, a person can say, If I had only known, I would have done differently. The mark of whether that is true, Aristotle suggests, is regret. If someone does something bad through ignorance and later regrets doing it, that is a sign that she is not wicked. It shows that she would indeed have done otherwise if she had known. And in that case she can truly be said to have acted involuntarily and deserve pardon.

Again, there are difficult cases. What about the person who acts in ignorance because he is drunk and is not in a condition to recognize the facts of the case? Here Aristotle suggests that it is not appropriate to excuse him, because he was responsible for getting himself into that state. The same is true for someone ignorant through carelessness; that person should have taken care. Here is, perhaps, a harder case.

But perhaps the man's character is such that he cannot take care. Well, people themselves are responsible for getting like that, through living disorderly lives: they are responsible for being unjust or profligate, the former through evildoing, the latter through spending their time drinking, and so on. Activity in a certain thing gives a man that character; this is clear from those who are practicing for any contest or action, since that is what they spend their time doing. Not knowing that dispositions are attained through actually doing things is the sign of a complete ignoramus. (NE 3.5)

No one, Aristotle suggests, can be that ignorant.

This provides the main outlines of Aristotle's views on **responsibility**. We can see that he assumes people must normally be held responsible for what they do, that compulsion and ignorance may be excusing conditions, and that he is rather severe in his estimation of when these conditions may hold. Although Aristotle does not explicitly say so, it is a fair inference that he considers the acceptance of responsibility and the sparing use of excuses to be a part of the good life. By our choices and actions we create the habits that become our character. And so we are ourselves very largely responsible for our own happiness or lack thereof.



"Oh well," said Mr. Hennessy, "We are as th' Lord made us." "No," said Mr. Dooley, "lave us be fair. Lave us take some iv the blame ourselves."

Finley Peter Dunne (1876–1936)

THE HIGHEST GOOD

When Aristotle defines the good for human beings as "activity of soul in conformity with excellence," he adds that "if there is more than one excellence, it will be the best and most complete of these." We need now to examine what the "best and most complete" excellence is.

The best activity of soul must be the one that activates whatever is best in us. And what is that? Think back to Aristotle's discussion of the human soul. It incorporates the levels of nutrition and reproduction, sensation, and reason. At the very peak is *nous*, or mind: the nonpassive, purely active source of knowledge and wisdom that is the most divine element in us.

Thus, the best activity is the activity of *nous*. And such activity should be not only the highest good but also the greatest happiness for a human being. The activity of *nous*—discovering and keeping in mind the first principles of things—Aristotle calls "**contemplation**." The life of contemplation is said to be the very best life partly because it is the exercise of the "best" part of us and partly because we can engage in it "continuously." But this life is also the most pleasant and the most self-sufficient. For these reasons it is the happiest life.

We think it essential that pleasure should be mixed in with happiness, and the most pleasant of activities in accordance with virtue is admittedly activity in accordance with wisdom. Philosophy has pleasures that are marvelous for their purity and permanence. Besides, it is likely that those who have knowledge have a more pleasant life than those who are seeking it. Sufficiency, as people call it, will be associated above all with contemplation. The wise man, the just, and all the rest of them need the necessities of life; further, once there is an adequate supply of these, the just man needs people with and towards

whom he may perform just acts; and the same applies to the temperate man, the brave man, and so on. But the wise man is able to contemplate, even when he is on his own; and the more so, the wiser he is. It is better, perhaps, when he has people working with him; but still he is the most self-sufficient of all. (NE 10.7)

Aristotle dismisses honor as a candidate for the good, you will recall, on the grounds that it is too dependent on others. What is truly good, it seems, must be more “proper to the person, and cannot be taken away.” The same point is here used to recommend the life of contemplation as the very best life, for it is more “self-sufficient” than any other, less dependent on other people. The other virtues need the presence of other people for their exercise, while the wise man can engage in contemplation “even when he is on his own.” And to Aristotle this seems to recommend such a life as the very best.*

Aristotle does not deny that there are good human lives that are noncontemplative. Ordinary men and women, not devoting themselves to science and philosophy, can also be excellent human beings—and therefore happy. But only those fortunate enough to be able to devote themselves to intellectual pursuits will experience the very best life—that pinnacle of human happiness which is most like the happiness of God. We see clearly that Aristotle’s ethics (and classical Greek ethics in general) is an ethics of self-perfection, or self-realization. There is not much in it that recommends caring for others for *their* sakes.†

This attitude underlies the rational justification for being virtuous in both Plato and Aristotle. They try to show that we should be just and moderate because, to put it crudely, it *pays*. True, neither argues that the consequences of virtue will necessarily be pleasing. Glaucon’s picture of the

perfectly moral and perfectly immoral men had ruled out that sort of appeal. Happiness is not related to virtue as a paycheck is related to a week’s work. The relation for both Plato and Aristotle is internal; the just and virtuous life is recommended because it is in *itself* the happiest life (though they also believe that *in general* its consequences will be good). Although Aristotle always thinks of the good of a person as essentially involving the good of some community, and especially as involving friends, it remains true nonetheless that individuals are primarily interested in their own happiness. This may, we might grant, be a stimulus to achievement, but there is not much compassion in it.

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1. What *kind* of a thing is a virtue? Can virtue be taught? How?
 2. Is virtue just one? Or are there many virtues?
 3. Explain Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean.
 4. Why is it “a hard job to be good”?
 5. What is practical wisdom?
 6. What is “the measure of all things,” so far as goodness goes?
 7. What conditions, according to Aristotle, excuse a person from responsibility? Explain each.
 8. Does having a bad character excuse a person? Explain.
 9. What is the very best life?
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FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

1. In your view, does Aristotle’s logic do anything to undercut the relativism spawned by the Sophists’ teaching of rhetoric? Explain your answer.
2. Keeping in mind Aristotle’s doctrine of how soul and body are related, try to construct an Aristotelian account of *fear*. (Hint: You will have to consider both mental and physical factors and how they are related.)
3. Write a short paragraph giving an Aristotelian account of the virtue of moderation.
4. We read that young people attracted to gang life are seeking “respect.” Write an Aristotelian critique of this motivation.

*Contemplation, for Aristotle, is not what is often called “meditation” these days. It is not an attempt to empty the mind, but an active life of study to uncover the wonder and the whys of things.

†Such compassion, or caring, under the names of “love” and “charity” (*agape*, not *eros*) comes into our story with the Christians. See pp. 257 and 260.

KEY WORDS

terms	efficient cause
statements	final cause
categories	teleology
substance	entelechy
primary substance	first philosophy
secondary substances	metaphysics
truth	essence
correspondence	unmoved mover
argument	God
syllogism	nutritive soul
premises	sensitive soul
conclusion	rational soul
middle term	<i>eudaemonia</i>
valid	function
first principles	virtues
induction	habits
<i>nous</i>	practical wisdom
nature	the mean
material cause	responsibility
formal cause	contemplation

NOTES

1. Quoted from Ps. Ammonius, *Aristotelis Vita*, in W. D. Ross, *Aristotle* (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), 14.
2. We are indebted here to Marjorie Grene's excellent little book, *A Portrait of Aristotle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 38–65.
3. Quoted in J. M. Edmonds, *Elegy and Iambus with the Anacreontea II* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1931), 175.
4. All quotations from Aristotle's works are from *The Philosophy of Aristotle*, ed. Renford Bambrough (New York: New American Library, 1963), unless noted otherwise. Within this text, references to specific works will be as follows (numerical references are to book and section numbers).
C: Categories
I: On Interpretation
M: Metaphysics
PA: Posterior Analytics
PH: Physics
PS: Psychology
NE: Nicomachean Ethics
5. As quoted in Grene, *Portrait of Aristotle*, 105.
6. We owe this example to J. L. Ackrill, *Aristotle the Philosopher* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 42.



CHAPTER

10

CONFUCIUS, MENCIUS, AND XUNZI

Virtue in Ancient China

In the West, the story of ancient philosophy revolves around three central characters: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. In China, the story of ancient Confucian philosophy features another famous trio: Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi. There were other influential philosophers in each tradition, such as the Stoics in the West and Hanfeizi and Zhuangzi in China, but these philosophers exerted an especially profound influence on the course of Western and Chinese civilization, respectively.

In this chapter, we survey the central ideas of Confucius and their development by Mencius and Xunzi, all of whom focused primarily on moral and political concerns. The Confucians, like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, understand morality in terms of virtue. But while their understanding of virtue resembles the Greeks' in some ways, it differs markedly in others.

Confucius

Confucius was born in 552 or 551 B.C. under circumstances that gave no hint of how profoundly he would shape Chinese civilization. Some traditional

accounts credit him with royal ancestors in the state of Song, but by the time of his great grandfather, the family had moved to the small state of Lu in what is now eastern China. The family settled near the city of Qufu, where it fell into poverty. Ancient sources say that he grew up impoverished and, as a young man, supported himself with various menial jobs.

Despite such humble beginnings, Confucius acquired a deep knowledge of genteel traditions that were already ancient by the time he was born. These included the rituals and stories of the Zhou dynasty and of the earlier sage kings.* According to Confucius, this first stage of his development took fifteen years:

At fifteen, I set my mind upon learning; at thirty, I took my place in society; at forty, I became free from doubts; at fifty, I understood Heaven's Mandate; at sixty, my ear was attuned; and at seventy, I could follow my heart's desires without overstepping the bounds of propriety. (*Analects* 2.4)¹

*For background on the Zhou dynasty and the sage kings, see pp. 75–76.



“The gentleman cherishes virtue, whereas the petty person cherishes physical possessions.”

—CONFUCIUS

When, upon completing his initial education, he “took his place in society,” Confucius established himself as a person of some repute in his native state of Lu. He became part of a rising social class of scholar-officials known as *shi*, who advised various hereditary rulers during the later Zhou dynasty. Confucius held a government position in Lu at some point, but political chaos there forced him to travel from state to state struggling to find a ruler who would put his ideas into practice. By 484 B.C., having failed to convince any ruler to follow his philosophy, Confucius returned to Lu, where he spent the rest of his days teaching and (according to tradition) editing or compiling books that later became the Confucian classics. His disciples came to call him Kongzi, which means “Master Kong.” He died in 479 B.C., a decade before Socrates was born, presumably unaware that his life’s work would transform China forever.

THE WAY OF CONFUCIUS

After Confucius died, his students compiled his sayings, along with various anecdotes about him, into a collection known as the *Analects*. One rarely finds in the *Analects* the sort of dialectical or discursive reasoning so common in Greek philosophy. In this respect, the *Analects* resembles Heraclitus’ aphorisms more than it resembles Plato’s dialogues or Aristotle’s treatises. Each

passage presents one or more ideas—sometimes clearly, sometimes cryptically—but understanding those ideas and the reasoning behind them requires reading different passages together. Taken together, the *Analects* provide the first expression in China of a rational, systematic set of answers to distinctively philosophical questions—in this case, questions about how to live and how to organize society. Works more paradigmatically philosophical in style appear soon afterward in China, both reacting to and building on the views laid out in the *Analects*.

Given Confucius’ long quest to find rulers to put his teachings into practice, you might expect the *Analects* to focus on practical questions of government. So it might surprise you to discover that the book focuses mainly on being a good person, on the finer points of rituals and etiquette, and on the various social relationships that people occupy. For Confucius, however, these topics lie at the very heart of good government.

The most fundamental thing a ruler needs to do, according to Confucius, is to be virtuous. The central virtue in Confucius’ thought is called *rén*, which is a notoriously difficult word to translate into English. In the centuries before Confucius, the word referred to the ideal demeanor and behavior of a Chinese aristocrat; it meant something like “manliness” or “nobility.” Confucius elevates it to an overarching virtue and transforms it into something grander than it had been. Some translators have rendered it as “humaneness” or “human-heartedness,” others as “authoritative conduct” or “comprehensive virtue,” and still others simply as “Goodness.” We will adopt this last translation, since loving, cultivating, and manifesting *rén* is what it takes, according to Confucius, to be a good person.

Cultivating and manifesting genuine Goodness involves cultivating and manifesting various subsidiary virtues, such as dutifulness, understanding, righteousness or integrity, benevolence, trustworthiness, filial piety, and ritual propriety. We cultivate these virtues, according to Confucius, through a lifelong process of assiduous **moral self-cultivation** that requires learning, reflection, and deliberate effort to put

Confucian teachings into practice.* One of Confucius' prominent disciples explains his own process this way:

Master Zeng said, "Every day I examine myself on three counts: in my dealings with others, have I failed in any way failed to be dutiful? In my interactions with friends and associates, have I in any way failed to be trustworthy? Finally, have I in any way failed to repeatedly put into practice what I teach?" (*Analects* 1.4)

Another disciple cites one of the *Odes* as inspiration. The *Odes* is a set of ancient Chinese poems that Confucians regard as a storehouse of wisdom.

Zigong says, "An ode says,
'As if cut, as if polished;
As if carved, as if ground.'
Is this not what you have mind?"

The Master said, "Zigong, you are precisely the kind of person with whom one can begin to discuss the *Odes*. Informed as to what has gone before, you know what is to come." (*Analects* 1.15)

Zigong's point is that cultivating virtue is a slow process requiring patience and diligence, like polishing ivory or cutting and grinding stone. Confucius makes the point himself in his statement that it took until the age of seventy before he could "follow [his] heart's desires without overstepping the bounds of propriety."



"There's only one corner of the universe you can be certain of improving, and that's your own self."

Aldous Huxley (1894–1963)

The Confucian virtues are not an assorted grab bag of admirable character traits, to be cultivated one by one. They are aspects of a systematic view about how to live. Confucius explains to his disciple Zeng Shen:

*Compare Socrates on virtue as knowledge (pp. 99–100) and Aristotle on the development of virtue as the formation of habits (pp. 212–213).

"Master Zeng! All that I teach can be strung together on a single thread."

"Yes, sir," Master Zeng responded.

After the Master left, the disciples asked, "What did he mean by that?"

Master Zeng said, "All that the Master teaches amounts to dutifulness tempered by understanding." (*Analects* 4.15)

And what, for Confucius, is dutifulness? We find an answer to this question in a discussion about Ziwen, a famous government official from the seventh century B.C.

Zizhang said, "Prime Minister Ziwen was given three times the post of prime minister, and yet he never showed a sign of pleasure; he was removed from this office three times, and yet never showed a sign of resentment. When the incoming prime minister took over, he invariably provided him with a complete account of the official state of affairs. What do you make of Prime Minister Ziwen?"

The Master said, "He certainly was dutiful."
"Was he not Good?"

"I do not know about that—what makes you think he deserves to be called Good?" (*Analects* 5.19)

Dutifulness, we learn, involves doing one's best to carry out one's responsibilities, whatever they may be. We also see in this passage that while dutifulness is central to comprehensive virtue, it alone is not sufficient to be Good.

What of understanding? Consider Confucius' response to a question from his disciple Zigong:

Zigong asked, "Is there one word that can serve as a guide for one's entire life?"

The Master answered, "Is it not 'understanding'? Do not impose upon others what you yourself do not desire." (*Analects* 15.24)

Understanding, then, is the ability to understand how you yourself would feel in another's situation and so refrain from doing to others what you would not want done to you.* Thus, while dutifulness requires carrying out one's responsibilities conscientiously, "tempering" that dutifulness

*Compare to Jesus' proclamation that loving your neighbor means that "as you wish that men would do to you, do so to them." See pp. 257.

with understanding means carrying them out in ways that account for particular circumstances and individuals.

A person's responsibilities, for Confucius, arise from the particular social relationships they occupy, most of which Confucius understands to be hierarchical and asymmetrical, so that each person in the relationship has different responsibilities. Among the most important of these relationships is that between children and parents. A person's responsibilities toward his or her parents are embodied in the important virtue of **filial piety**, which involves respect, obedience, and care. Confucius explains filial piety in various ways.

Meng Yizi asked about filial piety. The Master replied, "Do not disobey." (*Analects* 2.5)

The Master said, "In serving your parents you may gently remonstrate with them. However, once it becomes apparent that they have not taken your criticism to heart you should be respectful and not oppose them, and follow their lead diligently without resentment." (*Analects* 4.18)

Meng Wubo asked about filial piety. The Master replied, "Give your parents no cause for anxiety other than the possibility that they might fall ill." (*Analects* 2.6)

Ziyou asked about filial piety. The Master said, "Nowadays, 'filial' means simply being able to provide one's parents with nourishment. But even dogs and horses are provided with nourishment. If you are not respectful, wherein lies the difference?" (*Analects* 2.7)

Zixia asked about filial piety. The Master said, "It is the demeanor that is difficult. . . . When wine and food are served, elders are given precedence, but surely filial piety consists of more than this." (*Analects* 2.8)

These passages introduce another key Confucian idea. In insisting that filial piety requires more than carrying out your responsibilities toward your parents, Confucius highlights that manifesting the virtue of filial piety requires carrying out those responsibilities with a certain demeanor and having a certain attitude. It requires fulfilling your responsibilities sincerely and out of respect for your parents, rather than just out of a sense of duty. This idea pervades Confucian thought on virtue: being virtuous is about more than going through the

motions—it is more than just doing the things that virtuous people do.*

Taken together, these passages suggest a certain picture of the virtuous person: A virtuous person has carefully cultivated the tendency to fulfill his or her responsibilities to others conscientiously, with the right attitude, and with sympathetic understanding for other people.

RITUAL PROPRIETY

Confucius also gives another explanation of the path to Goodness—an explanation that seems, at first, to be at odds with his claim that dutifulness tempered by understanding is the "single thread" on which all his moral teachings can be strung.

Yan Hui asked about Goodness.

The Master said, "Restraining yourself and returning to the rites constitutes Goodness. If for one day you managed to restrain yourself and return to the rites, in this way you could lead the entire world back to Goodness. The key to achieving Goodness lies within yourself—how could it come from others?"

Yan Hui asked, "May I inquire into the specifics?"

The Master said, "Do not look unless it is in accordance with ritual; do not listen unless it is in accordance with ritual; do not speak unless it is in accordance with ritual; do not move unless it is in accordance with ritual."

Yan Hui asked, "Although I am not quick to understand, I ask permission to devote myself to this teaching." (*Analects* 12.1)

Here we have another distinctively Confucian idea—adherence to the **rites** or rituals. Painting a complete picture of Confucian Goodness requires understanding how this idea fits together with his basic picture of virtue. The basic idea of ritual is familiar enough in Western culture. Certain kinds of activities are to be done in certain ways: religious ceremonies follow set conventional patterns; so do funeral services, weddings, graduations, and birthdays; and even many of our

*Compare Aristotle on choosing virtuous actions for the right reason and doing them in the right way. See pp. 213–215.

daily interactions, such as greetings, goodbyes, meals, and conversations, are guided by conventions that specify right and wrong ways of doing things. In the West, however, we usually think of the rules for daily interactions as a matter of etiquette more than a question of morality. We say that someone who follows these rules has “good manners.” Furthermore, we usually separate the rules of etiquette from the conventions for things like funerals and religious ceremonies. Confucius, however, lumps the rules for formal ceremonies and the rules for everyday behaviors together in the single category of ritual.

Confucius sees the proper performance of ritual as central to Goodness partly because the rites offer specific ways of carrying out your responsibilities to other people. Consider some contemporary Western examples: Bringing a small gift to a dinner party, such as a dessert or a bottle of wine, demonstrates your appreciation of your host’s hospitality. Starting an email to a person you have never met with “Yo, what’s up?” can convey a lack of respect. Dressing appropriately for a funeral signals your sorrow and your sympathy for the deceased’s loved ones; wearing a Hawaiian shirt and cracking jokes during the funeral would normally signal a lack of those things.

Furthermore, the proper performance of ritual helps you cultivate virtue by restraining unvirtuous tendencies, channeling your efforts at virtue in the right direction, and making social interactions run more smoothly.

The Master said, “If you are respectful but lack ritual you will become exasperating; if you are careful but lack ritual you will become timid; if you are courageous but lack ritual you will become unruly; and if you are upright but lack ritual you will become inflexible.” (*Analects* 8.1)

As with the virtues, the proper performance of ritual requires having the right attitude.

The Master said, “Someone who lacks magnanimity when occupying high office, who is not respectful when performing ritual, and who remains unmoved by sorrow when overseeing mourning rites—how could I bear to look upon such a person?” (*Analects* 3.26)

“Sacrifice as if they were present” means that, when sacrificing to the spirits, you should comport yourself as if the spirits were present.

The Master said, “If I am not fully present at the sacrifice, it is as if I did not sacrifice at all.” (*Analects* 3.12)

Furthermore, the proper performance of ritual involves intelligent, flexible behavior that flows from a sincere appreciation for and understanding of the rites. Thus, even though Confucius believes that the rules for carrying out your responsibilities were laid down long before he was born, there is some room for deviation as the circumstances require.

The Master said, “A ceremonial cap made of linen is prescribed by the rites, but these days people use silk. This is frugal, and I follow the majority. To bow before ascending the stairs is what is prescribed by the rites, but these days people bow after ascending. This is arrogant, and—though it goes against the majority—I continue to bow before ascending.” (*Analects* 9.3)

The correct performance of the rites depends ultimately on a sincere expression of the emotions and virtues that each specific rite is intended to convey or cultivate. Only when you understand the “roots” of each ritual can you know which deviations from the standard rules are acceptable.

Lin Fang asked about the roots of ritual.

The Master exclaimed, “What a noble question! When it comes to ritual, it is better to be spare than extravagant. When it comes to [rituals related to] mourning, it is better to be excessively sorrowful than fastidious.” (*Analects* 3.4)

The proper performance of ritual, then, requires conscientious application of the rules of ritual, all while appreciating the purpose of the rules and adjusting one’s behavior to the circumstances as necessary. Thus, even this “key to achieving Goodness” can be seen as a matter of dutifulness tempered by understanding.

GOOD GOVERNMENT

We are now in a position to see why Confucius, who spent his life trying to promote good government, devoted so much of his teaching to the

cultivation of personal virtue. A genuinely Good person would conscientiously and intelligently carry out his or her responsibilities based on a sympathetic understanding of others' situations and a deep appreciation of the proper way to do things. If rulers and their ministers behaved this way, Confucius believed, then the common people would prosper and be virtuous themselves. Social harmony would prevail. Thus, for Confucius, virtue turns out to be the solution to the most vexing problem of his time: the social and political chaos of the later Zhou dynasty.*

Yet, when asked what he would do first if given a position in government, Confucius offers a surprising answer.

Zilu asked, "If the Duke of Wei were to employ you to serve in the government of his state, what would be your first priority?"

The Master answered, "It would, of course, be the rectification of names."[†]

Zilu said, "Could you, Master, really be so far off the mark? Why worry about rectifying names?"

The Master replied, "How boorish you are, Zilu! When it comes to matters that he does not understand, the gentleman should remain silent. If names are not rectified, speech will not accord with reality; when speech does not accord with reality, things will not be successfully accomplished. When things are not successfully accomplished, ritual practice and music will fail to flourish; when ritual and music fail to flourish, punishments and penalties will miss the mark. And when punishment and penalties miss the mark, the common people will be at a loss as to what to do with themselves. This is why the gentleman only applies names that can be properly spoken and assures that what he says can be properly put into action. The gentleman simply guards against arbitrariness in his speech. That is all there is to it." (*Analects* 13.3)

We might wonder, with Zilu, why the **rectification of names** is of paramount importance

*On the political situation in Confucius' time, see Chapter 5 (pp. 76).

[†]The term that is translated as "rectification of names" literally means something like "making names correct." As we saw in Chapter 5, the topic of "names" fascinated ancient Chinese philosophers. See pp. 80–81.

in government. The answer lies in understanding another surprising passage from the *Analects*:

Confucius said of the Ji Family, "They have eight rows of dancers performing in their courtyard. If they can condone this, what are they *not* capable of?"

How could Confucius be so incensed about how many rows of dancers someone had in their courtyard? It is because by having eight rows of dancers, the Ji family was violating the rites. The Ji family controlled Confucius' home state of Lu, but the head of the Ji family was not a king; he was merely a minister to the duke of Lu, who was himself subordinate to the reigning Zhou dynasty king. The rites dictate that only a king can have eight rows of dancers. For the head of the Ji family to have eight rows of dancers, then, is for him to act as if he were king. If he acts as if he were king, then he will not be fulfilling his responsibilities toward either his immediate ruler, the duke of Lu, or the Zhou king; in turn, neither the duke nor the king could fulfill his responsibilities toward his subjects. This makes social harmony impossible.

Rectifying names, then, means ensuring that everyone is carrying out their respective roles properly. Someone who bears the title of "minister" in the king's government should act like a minister; whoever bears the title of "king" should act like a king; whoever is called a "father" should act like a father, and so on. And since a "true king" will carry out his responsibilities conscientiously and virtuously, in accordance with the rites, once names are rectified, everyone will be acting virtuously.

Furthermore, Confucius believes that this process can begin at the top, as it were, with the rulers and ministers themselves. Their virtue will act as an inspiration and example for the common people, who will follow suit, ushering in an era of peace, stability, and prosperity. When kings and ministers rule virtuously, Confucius believes, they will have no need for coercion and harsh punishments. Thus, when asked about governing, Confucius offers the following advice:

Ji Kangzi asked, "How can I cause the common people to be respectful, dutiful, and industrious?"

The Master said, "Oversee them with dignity, and the people will be respectful; oversee them

with filiality and kindness, and the people will be dutiful; oversee them by raising up the accomplished and instructing those who are unable, and the people will be industrious.” (*Analects* 2.20)

Duke Ai asked, “What can I do to induce the common people to be obedient?”

Confucius replied, “Raise up the straight and apply them to the crooked, and the people will submit to you. If you raise up the crooked and apply them to the straight, the people will never submit.” (*Analects* 2.19)

Ji Kangzi asked Confucius about governing, saying, “If I were to execute those who lacked the Way in order to advance those who possessed the Way, how would that be?”

Confucius responded, “In your governing, Sir, what need is there for executions? If you desire goodness, then the common people will be good. The Virtue of a gentleman is like the wind, and the Virtue of a petty person is like the grass—when the wind moves over the grass, the grass is sure to bend.” (*Analects* 12.19)

The “Virtue” of this last passage is more than virtue in the ordinary sense. The word “Virtue” here translates a Chinese word *dé*, which signifies a special sort of charisma radiating from a morally good leader—a quality so powerful that, according to Confucius,

One who rules through the power of Virtue [*dé*] is analogous to the Pole Star: it simply remains in its place and receives the homage of the myriad lesser stars. (*Analects* 2.1)

The *Analects*, then, offers a systematic view of what it would take to restore the lost Golden Age: If rulers become Good by cultivating the virtues, including dutifulness, understanding, and the proper performance of ritual, their example and their actions will bring their ministers and the common people into harmony with one another.

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1. How is the virtue of filial piety related to Goodness, according to Confucius?
 2. What are the rites? What role do they play in Confucius’ theory of virtue?
 3. What does Confucius mean by the “rectification of names”? Why is that the first thing that Confucius would pursue if given a position in government?
 4. Why, according to Confucius, is it important for rulers to be virtuous?
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Mencius

While Plato studied directly with Socrates, the connection between Confucius and the next great Confucian thinker, Mencius, is less direct. Confucius’ disciples took it on themselves to transmit the Master’s teachings to the next generation, and their disciples continued that tradition. Roughly a century after Confucius’ death, Confucius’ grandson or one of his grandson’s disciples took on a pupil named Meng Ke, who would eventually come to be known as Mengzi or “Master Meng.” We do not know exactly when Mencius lived, but he was probably born in the early fourth century B.C. and lived a long life, making him a contemporary of Plato and Aristotle. Mencius spent his life trying to convince rulers of the chaotic Warring States period to adopt the Confucian way, much as Confucius had done generations earlier. Mencius’ thought is recorded in a book called the *Mengzi*. Like the *Analects*, it consists of a loosely organized collection of sayings and anecdotes. Many of these are considerably longer than the passages in the *Analects* and offer more systematic, discursive reasoning than we find in Confucius. Like Confucius, Mencius is mainly interested in virtue and good governance, and his views on these topics resemble Confucius’ own. By Mencius’ day, however, the great conversation of Chinese philosophy had developed considerably, and so he devotes significant effort to defending the Confucian outlook against more recent competitors. Mencius also takes a keen interest in another philosophical innovation that would become a hallmark of Chinese thought: the question of human nature.

DIFFERENTIATED LOVE

Mencius identifies two rival schools of thought as particularly pernicious and sets himself the task of arguing against them. The first school is that of Mozi, who famously advocated a doctrine of “mutual care” or “impartial concern,” according to which each person ought to show equal and impartial concern for everyone.* The second consists of

*See pp. 78–80.



“Benevolence is simply being human. The Way is simply to harmonize with benevolence and put it into words.”

—MENCIOUS

followers of a fourth-century philosopher named Yang Zhu, who seems to have taught that each person should strive to protect his or her own person and that, at least in the chaos of the Warring States period, this meant withdrawing from public life. Mencius complains that

the doctrines of Yang Zhu and Mozi fill the world. If a doctrine does not lean toward Yang Zhu, then it leans toward Mozi. Yang Zhu is “for oneself.” This is to not have a ruler. Mozi is “impartial caring.” This is to not have a father. . . .

If the Ways of Yang Zhu and Mozi do not cease, and the way of Kongzi [Confucius] is not made evident, then evil doctrines will dupe the people and obstruct benevolence and righteousness. If benevolence and righteousness are obstructed, that leads animals to devour people, and then people will begin to devour one another. Because I fear this, I preserve the Way of the former sages, fend off Yang

Zhu and Mozi, and get rid of specious words, so that evil doctrines will be unable to arise. (*Mengzi* 3B9)²

Mengzi said, “Yang Zhu favored being ‘for oneself.’ If plucking out one hair from his body would have benefited the world, he would not do it. Mozi favored ‘impartial caring.’ If scraping himself bare from head to heels would benefit the whole world, he would do it.” (*Mengzi* 7A26)

Yang Zhu errs, according to Mencius, in attaching too much weight to one’s own interests. Mencius takes Yang Zhu to be selfish. Those who follow Yang Zhu’s advice will not fulfill their responsibilities to their superiors.

Mozi errs, according to Mencius, by going to the opposite extreme. Rather than focusing too narrowly on one’s own interests, Mozi demands that we give *everyone’s* interests equal weight. Mencius regards this as both unrealistic and immoral. It is unrealistic because, as Mencius scoffs at a Mohist rival, it is implausible to think that “one’s affection for one’s own nephew is like one’s affection for a neighbor’s baby” (*Mengzi* 3A5). It is immoral because the truly virtuous person demonstrates different levels of concern and love for different people. On the Confucian view, one’s love and concern ought to radiate out from oneself like ripples in a pond, strongest near the center and weakening gradually as one moves away.

Mengzi said, “Gentlemen, in relation to animals, are sparing of them but are not benevolent toward them. In relation to the people [in their society], they are benevolent toward them but do not treat them as kin. They treat their kin as kin, and then are benevolent toward the people. They are benevolent toward the people, and then are sparing of animals.” (*Mengzi* 7A45)

The correct view, then, is somewhere between Yang Zhu’s and Mozi’s. But as Mencius says after condemning Yang Zhu’s and Mozi’s extreme position, adhering slavishly to the mean between selfishness and selflessness is not good enough.

Zimo [unlike Yang Zhu and Mozi] held to the middle. Holding to the middle is close to [the Way]. But if one holds to the middle without discretion, that is the same as holding to one extreme. What I

dislike about those who hold to one extreme is that they detract from the Way. They elevate one thing and leave aside a hundred others. (*Mengzi* 7A26)*

The sort of “discretion” that Mencius has in mind comes through in a parable that Mencius relates about Emperor Shun, an ancient sage renowned for his filial piety. Shun’s younger brother, Xiang, was “consummately lacking in benevolence,” not to mention respect for his elder brother, whom he repeatedly tried to kill. But whereas Shun executed other ministers and rulers for lacking benevolence, he made Xiang the ruler of a territory called Youbi. This, Mencius explains, is because

benevolent people do not store up anger nor do they dwell in bitterness against their younger brothers. They simply love and treat them as kin. Treating them as kin, they desire them to have rank. Loving them, they desire them to have wealth. [Shun] gave [Xiang] Youbi to administer to give him wealth and rank. If he himself was the [emperor], and his young brother was a common fellow, could this be called loving and treating as kin? (*Mengzi* 5A3)

Thus, whereas Mencius accepts Shun’s decision to execute unbenevolent ministers, he takes Shun’s familial relationship with Xiang to justify not only a stay of execution but also an elevation to power and wealth. Still, it would not have been right for Shun to elevate familial responsibilities and leave aside his other responsibilities. So, Shun arranged it so that

Xiang did not have effective power in his state. [Shun] instructed officials to administer the state and collect tribute and taxes. . . . So could Xiang have succeeded in being cruel to his subjects? Nonetheless, Shun desired to see him often. Hence, Xiang came to court as constantly as a flowing spring. (*Mengzi* 5A3)

By keeping Xiang away from Youbi and restricting his actual powers there, Shun balanced his duties to his younger brother with his royal responsibilities to the common people of Youbi. This nicely illustrates the Confucian doctrine of

differentiated love: in contrast to the self-interested Yangists and the impartial Mohists, Confucians will give preferential treatment to those closest to them, especially their own family members, but they will still extend some degree of love and concern to everyone.



“Then, too, there are a great many degrees of closeness or remoteness in human society. To proceed beyond the universal bond of our common humanity, there is the closer one of belonging to the same people, tribe, and tongue . . . but a still closer social union exists between kindred.”

Cicero (106–43 B.C.)

HUMAN NATURE IS GOOD

Mencius also wades into another debate that had arisen since Confucius’ time: the goodness or badness of human nature. By the fourth century B.C., a number of positions on this matter had been staked out. For instance, a philosopher named Gaozi held that human nature is neither good nor bad.

Mengzi debated Gaozi, who said, “Human nature is like a willow tree; righteousness is like cups and bowls. To make human nature benevolent and righteous is like making a willow tree into cups and bowls.” (*Mengzi* 6A1)

Gaozi means that just as being a cup or a bowl is not part of a willow tree’s nature, so benevolence and righteousness are not part of human nature. But just as people can, through deliberate effort, shape the branches of a willow tree into cups or bowls, so they can, through deliberate effort, shape themselves to become benevolent and righteous. But there is nothing in human nature, according to Gaozi, that inclines it toward virtue.

Gaozi said, “Human nature is like swirling water. Make an opening for it on the eastern side, then it flows east. Make an opening for it on the western side, then it flows west. Human nature not

*Compare with Aristotle’s view on using practical reason to correctly identify the mean with respect to each virtue. See pp. 213–215.

distinguishing between good and not good is like water not distinguishing between eastern and western.” (*Mengzi* 6A2)

Other philosophers had held that “human nature can become good, and it can become not good” and still others that there “are [human] natures that are good, and there are natures that are not good” (*Mengzi* 6A6). Mencius disagrees with all of these positions. In replying to Gaozi’s comparison with swirling water, he says,

Water surely does not distinguish between east and west. But doesn’t it distinguish between upward and downward? Human nature being good is like water tending downward. There is no human who does not tend toward goodness. There is no water that does not tend downward.

Now, by striking water and making it leap up, you can cause it to go past your forehead. If you guide it by damming it, you can cause it to remain on a mountaintop. But is this the nature of water? It is only that way because of the circumstances. When humans are caused to not be good, it is only because their nature is the same way. (*Mengzi* 6A2)

To make sense of Mencius’ position, we need to answer three questions. What does Mencius mean by “**human nature**”? In what sense is there “no human who does not tend toward goodness”? And if all humans naturally tend toward goodness, how do we explain the fact that many people are not virtuous?

With respect to the first question, Mencius means that all humans intrinsically have certain emotions that, under favorable circumstances, will lead them toward goodness and that when someone does not develop into a good person, this is because of unfavorable circumstances, not some fault in their nature. Each person’s innate tendencies toward goodness, then, are like water’s tendency to flow downward. It is not inevitable that people will become good or that water will flow downward. Furthermore, when people become bad, it is no more because their natures have become bad than that water’s natural tendencies change when it is dammed atop a mountain.

To put this in terms of Mencius’ favorite metaphor for human nature, all people are born with emotional tendencies that are like newly sprouted

plants. Given an appropriate environment, with good soil and adequate water and sun, sprouts will naturally grow into healthy plants. Likewise, given an appropriate environment, with economic security and a loving family living in a stable, flourishing society, people will naturally grow into good people.* These inborn emotional capacities and their natural course of development, then, are what Mencius means by human nature.

What of the second question? Now that we understand what Mencius means by human nature, what is he saying when he says that it is good? He means that our inborn tendencies direct us toward certain virtues.

Humans all have the feeling of compassion. Humans all have the feelings of disdain. Humans all have the feeling of respect. Humans all have the feeling of approval and disapproval. The feeling of compassion is benevolence. The feeling of disdain is righteousness. The feeling of respect is propriety. The feeling of approval and disapproval is wisdom. Benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are not welded to us externally. We inherently have them. (*Mengzi* 6A6)

Mencius takes four virtues—benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom—to be of the first importance. To have them is to be a good person. Thus, the “**four sprouts**” of compassion, disdain, respect, and approval or disapproval are the roots of virtue and goodness. If they are cultivated and given an appropriate setting in which to develop, people will naturally grow into virtue.

Why, then, do so many people fail to be virtuous? Mencius explains this through the allegory of **Ox Mountain**.

Mengzi said, “The trees of Ox Mountain were once beautiful. But because it bordered on a large state, hatchets and axes besieged it. Could it remain verdant? Due to the respite it got during the day or night, and the moisture of rain and dew, there were sprouts and shoots growing there. But oxen and sheep came and grazed on them. Hence, it was as if it were barren. Seeing it barren, people believed that there had never been any timber there. But could this be the nature of the mountain?”

*Compare Aristotle on nature, entelechy, and potentiality (pp. 196–197, 199–200).

“When we consider what is present in people, could they truly lack the hearts of benevolence and righteousness? The way that they discard their genuine hearts is like the hatchets and axes in relation to the trees. With them besieging it day by day, can it remain beautiful? With the respite it gets during the day or night . . . their likes and dislikes are sometimes close to those of others. But then what they do during the day again fetters and destroys it. If the fettering is repeated . . . then one is not far from an animal. Others see that he is an animal, and think that there was never any capacity there. But is this what a human is like inherently?”

“Hence, if it merely gets nourishment, there is nothing that will not grow. If it merely loses its nourishment, there is nothing that will not vanish.” (*Mengzi* 6A8)

Bad people are bad, then, not because of their nature, but because outside influences prevent their “sprouts” from developing properly or because they have failed to cultivate their natural tendencies in the proper way.

What reason do we have to believe Mencius’ view, aside perhaps from a desire to take an optimistic view of ourselves and the people around us? Mencius argues that we can see our natural tendencies toward goodness in certain actions and impulses. His arguments focus mainly on benevolence, which he takes to be the most important of the four cardinal virtues. (In fact, the word we have been translating as “benevolence” in discussing Mencius is *ren*, which Confucius uses to mean “Goodness” or “comprehensive virtue.” While Mencius understands *ren* much more narrowly in terms of helping others achieve what is good in life and avoid what is bad, he shares Confucius’ view that the person who manifests *ren* will also manifest all of the virtues.*)

Mencius asks us to imagine a small child who is about to fall into a well. Anyone who sees this, he claims,

would have a feeling of alarm and compassion—not because one sought to get in good with the child’s parents, not because one wanted fame among one’s

neighbors and friends, and not because one would dislike the sound of the child’s cries.

From this we can see that if one is without the feeling of compassion, one is not human. . . . The feeling of compassion is the sprout of benevolence. (*Mengzi* 2A6)

Mencius also tells a story about a ruler named King Xuan. The king witnessed an ox that was about to be sacrificed. Feeling compassion for it, the king ordered that it be spared, but allowed for a sheep to be sacrificed instead. Mencius explains to the king that his feeling sorry for the ox proves that he has a natural tendency to feel compassion. If only he could extend that compassion, not only to the sheep—which the king could sacrifice because he had not seen it—but also to his people, then he would be truly benevolent. Actions like this, Mencius is suggesting, reveal our inner capacity for goodness, and it is through the cultivation of and reflection on those feelings that we grow into virtue.

-
1. What is the Confucian doctrine of “differentiated love?” Why, according to Mencius, is it better than the doctrines of Mozi and Yang Zhu?
 2. What does Mencius mean by “human nature?” In what sense is human nature good, according to Mencius?
 3. What point is Mencius making with the allegory of Ox Mountain?
 4. In your own words, restate Mencius’ arguments for his claim that human nature is good.
-

Xunzi

The third great Confucian in ancient China was Xunzi, who takes a very different view of human nature from most of his predecessors. Whereas Gaozi argued that human nature has no tendency toward either good or evil and Mencius argued that human nature is good, Xunzi declares that “human nature is bad.” The book that records Xunzi’s ideas, the *Xunzi*, says,

People’s nature is bad. Their goodness is a matter of deliberate effort. Now people’s nature is such that they are born with a fondness for profit in them. If they follow along with this, then struggle and

*Compare Aristotle’s view on the unity of the virtues. See p. 213.

contention will arise, and yielding and deference will perish therein. They are born with feelings of hate and dislike in them. If they follow along with these, then cruelty and villainy will arise, and loyalty and trustworthiness will perish therein. They are born with desires of the eyes and ears, a fondness for beautiful sights and sounds. If they follow along with these, then lasciviousness and chaos will arise, and ritual and *yi* [righteousness], proper form and order, will perish therein. Thus, if people follow along with their inborn dispositions and obey their nature, they are sure to come to struggle and contention, turn to disrupting social divisions and order, and end up becoming violent. (*Xunzi* 23)³

People's bad nature not only leads them away from virtue and righteousness, but also undermines the stability and prosperity of society.

Humans are born having desires. When they have desires but do not get the objects of their desire, then they cannot but seek some means of satisfaction. If there is no measure or limit to their seeking, then they cannot help but struggle with each other. If they struggle with each other then there will be chaos, and if there is chaos then they will be impoverished.* (*Xunzi* 19)

Fortunately, people are not irredeemably bad. Anyone can become good, says Xunzi, through proper training by good teachers and "deliberate effort" at moral self-cultivation. In fact, he claims that

among all people, no one fails to follow that which they approve and to abandon that which they do not approve. For a person to know that there is nothing as great as the Way and yet not follow the Way—there are no such cases.† (*Xunzi* 22)

Thus, proper training and deliberate effort are both necessary and sufficient for becoming good. In this way, his view differs not only from Mencius', but also from Gaozi's view that people are morally directionless by nature and other ancient Chinese thinkers' view that some people are good by nature and others bad.

*Compare to Thomas Hobbes' view of human nature and its connection to a state of nature in which life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." See pp. 410–413.

†Compare to Socrates' view that anyone who knows the right thing to do will do the right thing. See pp. 99–100.

Before we turn to consider what kind of training Xunzi recommends, it is worth noting an important way in which Xunzi's view is not as diametrically opposed to Mencius' as it might appear. Mencius conceived of human nature as including that which develops naturally from certain inborn emotional tendencies. Thus, when someone learns to be good by extending their natural feelings of compassion, shame, and so on, this reveals the inherent goodness of their nature, according to Mencius. But Xunzi conceives of human nature more narrowly as including only the dispositions, desires, and abilities that people have at birth. As we saw, these include "a fondness for profit," "feelings of hate and dislike," and "desires of the eyes and ears" for "beautiful sights and sounds." Xunzi does not count anything that people have to learn or work at as part of their nature.

We might be tempted to say that Mencius and Xunzi are simply talking past each other—that they are only disagreeing about the meaning of the term "human nature" rather than about human nature itself. Xunzi does not see it this way. He takes their disagreement to be important because of his views about language, which he develops in response to the philosophical innovations of the School of Names and Zhuangzi.* He accepts Zhuangzi's insight that the meaning of a word is a matter of convention. In keeping with his knack for turning his rivals' ideas against them, however, Xunzi argued that the existing conventions had been established long ago by the sage kings and that deviating from these conventions leads to misunderstandings and chaos. He cites the chicanery of the School of Names as an example and uses his sophisticated philosophy of language to resolve the paradoxes they raised.† Within his own Confucian tradition, Xunzi alleged that Mencius had misused the term "human nature" and that this leads him to misguided prescriptions about how to cultivate virtue. In other words, it is because he misunderstands the term "human nature" that Mencius misunderstands how people become good. By attending carefully

*See pp. 80–81 and 83–86.

†See pp. 80–81.

to the proper use of words—by “rectifying names,” as Confucius puts it—we can avoid such mistakes.

There is a further reason why Mencius and Xunzi are not merely talking at cross purposes when they argue over whether “human nature is good” or “human nature is bad.” Recall that, for Mencius, part of what it means to say that “human nature is good” is that we have innate, virtuous dispositions that merely need to be given the right environment to naturally reach their full potential. In contrast, Xunzi describes our innate dispositions as almost exclusively self-interested.

If he rejects Mencius’ proposal to simply give people a healthy environment in which their moral sprouts can grow into genuine virtue, what does Xunzi propose instead? Xunzi argues that we need to transform our nature through deliberate effort. Whereas Mencius looks to nature and agriculture for metaphors for self-cultivation, Xunzi looks to crafts and industry.

Through steaming and bending, you can make wood as straight as an ink-line into a wheel. And after its curve conforms to the compass, even when parched under the sun it will not become straight again, because the steaming and bending have made it a certain way. (*Xunzi* 1)

We cannot do this on our own, according to Xunzi. Instead, we need to make use of the wisdom that people have accumulated over generations of deliberate effort.

I once spent the whole day pondering, but it was not as good as a moment’s worth of learning. I once stood on my toes to look far away, but it was not as good as the broad view from a high place. . . . One who makes use of a chariot and horses has not thereby improved his feet, but he can now go a thousand [miles]. One who makes use of a boat and oars has not thereby become able to swim, but he can now cross rivers and streams. The gentleman is exceptional not by birth, but rather by being good at making use of things. (*Xunzi* 1)

The way to learn this accumulated wisdom and develop one’s ability to put it into practice is to find good teachers and carefully adhere to the rites, which the sages of old established as the proper conventions for guiding personal conduct.

Indeed, the earliest sage kings created order out of social chaos by developing rites that would tame and correct people’s desires and dispositions. After explaining how people’s bad nature once created chaos and poverty, Xunzi says,

The former kings hated such chaos, and so they established rituals and *yi* in order to divide things among people, to nurture their desires, and to satisfy their seeking. They caused desires never to exhaust material goods, and material goods never to be depleted by desires, so that the two support each other and prosper. This is how ritual arose.* (*Xunzi* 19)

Ritual, according to Xunzi, accomplishes four main things. First, as Confucius taught, ritual cultivates proper desires and dispositions in people who follow it. It does this both by inculcating new dispositions and by restraining our ignoble, natural ones. For instance, ritual propriety demands that people defer to their elders and serve them, even when doing so goes against their inborn dispositions. Observing this aspect of ritual cultivates attitudes of respect and deference and restrains selfish impulses. In this way, ritual makes people virtuous.

Second, ritual regulates and guides people’s emotions in the moment, in addition to helping them develop the right attitudes over the long run. Xunzi gives a detailed example in which he explains how Confucian funerary practices elicit the proper emotions of sadness and respect for a deceased parent or ruler.

The standard practice of funeral rites is that one changes the appearance of the corpse by gradually adding more ornamentation, one moves the corpse gradually further away [during the long period of lying in state before burial], and over a long time one gradually returns to one’s regular routine. Thus, the way that death works is that if one does not ornament the dead, then one will come to feel disgust at them, and if one feels disgust, then one will not feel sad. If one keeps them close, then one will become casual with them, and if one becomes casual with them, then one will grow tired of them. If one grows tired of them, then one will forget one’s place, and if one forgets one’s place, then one will not be respectful. (*Xunzi* 19)

*Compare to Hobbes’ account of how people escape from the chaotic state of nature. See pp. 413–415.

Third, ritual gives people appropriate and publicly recognized ways of expressing their emotions and attitudes. Having publicly recognized ways of conveying these things is important to ensure proper communication between persons, and it is part of being virtuous. Thus, observing the existing conventions, as laid down by the kings of old, is as important to Xunzi as observing the conventions they established for the use of words.



"You can't be truly rude until you understand good manners."

Rita Mae Brown (b. 1944)

Last but not least, because ritual demands different things of people in different social roles, it establishes and clarifies social distinctions. Society can only function smoothly, on Xunzi's view, when each person knows his or her place and fulfills the responsibilities that come with his or her social role. Thus, by reinforcing those roles and directing people in carrying out their responsibilities, ritual promotes social stability. In this way, ritual makes society more secure and prosperous.

Thus, ritual plays an essential role in achieving the twin goals of Confucian philosophy: virtuous people and a harmonious society. Neither Mencius nor Confucius would disagree with this, even if they would not always agree with Xunzi's reasoning. In the end, despite their sharp disagreements, Mencius and Xunzi both represent developments of a single Confucian intellectual tradition—a tradition that would soon emerge as the dominant voice in the great conversation in Chinese culture.

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1. In what sense does Xunzi think that "human nature is bad"?
 2. How does Xunzi's idea of human nature differ from Mencius'?
 3. How do people become good, according to Xunzi?
 4. What role(s) does ritual play in Xunzi's ethical and political philosophy?
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The Confucians' Legacy

The Warring States period in which Mencius and Xunzi lived saw vigorous debate between rival intellectual schools. The period came to a climactic close in 221 B.C., in part through the influence of a school we have not yet discussed. This school, known as **legalism**, shared Xunzi's view that human nature is bad. Two of the most famous proponents of legalist thought, Li Si and Han Fei, are even said to have studied with Xunzi. But unlike Xunzi, legalists thought that human nature could not be reformed; people were irredeemably self-interested. Rather than place their hopes in the appearance of some virtuous ruler who could reform the people, they argued that the only recipe for social stability was a strong state with a powerful army that governed the populace under a strict, impersonal rule of law. The state of Qin adopted legalist policies during the fourth century B.C. In the late third century, when Li Si was serving as its prime minister, Qin conquered all of China, re-unifying the empire for the first time in centuries. In 221 B.C., the king of Qin founded the Qin dynasty and declared himself emperor. Li Si became prime minister and extended his legalist philosophy across all of China. Thus, at the end of the Warring States period, it may have seemed that legalism had emerged triumphant.

It would not last. The Qin dynasty collapsed after just fifteen years, toppled by a popular revolt against its harsh rule. In its place rose the Han dynasty. To distance themselves from their Qin predecessors, the Han emperors repudiated legalism and adopted a version of Confucianism that combined the ideas of many different schools of thought. Over four centuries of Han rule, Confucianism became even more deeply embedded in Chinese culture. From China, it would spread to other parts of East Asia, especially Korea and Japan. Mohism virtually disappeared with the end of the Warring States period. Philosophical Daoism diminished in prominence for centuries, though a religious strand of Daoist thinking remained popular. So, despite legalism's brief ascendancy, Confucianism would ultimately triumph in the competition among the Hundred Schools.

Even centuries later, with Daoism resurgent and Buddhism gaining a foothold in China,* Confucian ethical and political views continued to thrive. During the Song dynasty (A.D. 960–1279), a resurgence in Confucian thought, known as neo-Confucianism, ushered in another great era of philosophical activity. The great neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi established a set of four Confucian classics as the canon of Chinese philosophical thought. Two come from the ancient *Book of Rites*. The other two are the *Analects* and the *Mengzi*. Right up until the end of the imperial age in China, in 1912, anyone aspiring to political office in China had to master these texts. It is therefore hard to exaggerate the influence that the Confucians had over the development of Chinese thought and culture. It may even exceed the influence of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in the West.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

1. What are some examples of rituals, in the Confucian sense, that you think are important in your culture today? Do you think adhering to those rituals is an important part of being a good person? Why or why not?

*On Buddhism and its legacy in China, see pp. 38–45 and 53.

2. What do you think about the Confucian doctrine of differentiated love? Is it an accurate account of how people actually behave? Is it a good account of how they should behave?
3. Do you agree more with Mencius or Xunzi about human nature? Why?

KEY WORDS

<i>Analects</i>	<i>dé</i>
<i>rén</i>	differentiated love
moral self-cultivation	human nature
<i>Odes</i>	four sprouts
filial piety	Ox Mountain
rites	legalism
rectification of names	

NOTES

1. Quotations from Confucius, *Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2003). References are to book and chapter numbers.
2. Quotations from Mencius, *Mengzi: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Bryan W. van Norden (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2008). References are to book and chapters numbers.
3. Quotations from Eric L. Hutton, *Xunzi: The Complete Text* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

CHAPTER

11

EPICUREANS, STOICS, AND SKEPTICS

Happiness for the Many



It is customary to discuss the development of ancient philosophy after Aristotle in terms of three schools, or movements of thought. We will follow this practice, looking at a few central tenets of these schools to see how they addressed some new problems facing people of those times.

These new problems arose from changes in the social and religious climate of the ancient Mediterranean world. The era of the city-state was fading. After the war between Athens and Sparta, the regions of Greece engaged in a long series of struggles to achieve dominance, and some, Thebes and Macedonia, for instance, managed it for a time (see Map 1). The constant warfare eroded the belief that a city could be an arena for living a good life. People lost confidence in it, retreating into smaller units and leaving the politics of cities to be settled by rather crude military types. (The Epicureans, as we'll see, are prominent among those who seek their happiness not as citizens but as members of a smaller voluntary community.) Under Philip of Macedon and his son Alexander, vast territories

were conquered and unified politically.* And finally Rome established her dominance over the entire Mediterranean basin, bringing a kind of stability and enforced peace to the region. The Romans were good administrators and warriors and contributed much in the sphere of law but not much original philosophy.

With the loss of confidence in the cities went a loss of faith in the gods of the cities. In the era of empires, Athena seemed too restricted even for Athens. The Olympians had apparently failed, and their authority waned. It is true that the Romans took over the Greek pantheon and gave the old gods new names (Jove, Juno, Venus), but the vigor of the religion was gone. This didn't mean, however, that religion was dead or dying—far from it. The old religions of the earth (religions of fertility, ancestor worship, and ecstasy), suppressed for a time by the Homeric gods of the sky, had never disappeared. Now they flourished with new vigor. To

*For Alexander, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_the_Great.

this was added a flood of religious cults and ideas from the East, all seeming to promise what the new age demanded. There was a proliferation of initiations into sacred and secret mysteries, of mediators and saviors, and of claims to esoteric knowledge.

Politicians, of course, turned religion to their own ends, accepting (and encouraging) the accolades of divinity people laid on them. Alexander was proclaimed a god; his successors liked the status it gave them and continued the practice.

The world seemed hostile and society brutal. People had lost control and grasped desperately at almost any promise to reestablish it. Fortune and chance themselves came to seem divine and were worshiped and feared. Astrology, never a force in the Golden Age of Greece, “fell upon the Hellenistic mind,” Gilbert Murray says, “as a new disease falls upon some remote island people.”¹ The stars were thought to be gods, the planets living beings (or controlled by living beings).^{*} Their positions in the heavens were consulted as signs of things happening and to happen on earth. The heavens were thought to be populated by myriads of spirits, powers, principalities, demons, and gods, and one never knew when they would cause some fresh disaster.

The tradition established by Thales and his successors, never widespread, was impotent to stop all this. Rational criticism had not completely disappeared, but it must have seemed to many thinkers that they were in a new dark age. People were anxious and afraid.

What could those who wished to carry on the enterprise of the nature philosophers, of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, do to stem the tide? Let us look first at Epicurus.

The Epicureans

It is not possible for one to rid himself of his fears about the most important things if he does not

^{*}The philosophers were, perhaps, not altogether blameless in this. It was common to ascribe greater perfection to the heavenly bodies in their eternal course than to the changeable world we live in. And more than one philosopher spoke of them as divine. In Plato’s later political thought, the supreme object of worship for the masses was to be the sun.

understand the nature of the universe but dreads some of the things he has learned in the myths.

Therefore, it is not possible to gain unmixed happiness without natural science. (*PD* 12.143)²

This passage strikes the key notes in the philosophy of **Epicurus** (341–270 B.C.). The aim of life is happiness. Happiness depends above all on ridding oneself of fears. And the basis for the removal of fear is science. We want to examine what fears Epicurus thinks stand in the way of happiness, what he thinks happiness is, why an understanding of the universe will help, and what kind of science will give us this understanding.

According to Epicurus,

pleasure is the beginning and end of the blessed life. We recognize pleasure as the first and natural good; starting from pleasure we accept or reject; and we return to this as we judge every good thing, trusting this feeling of pleasure as our guide. (*LM* 129a)

The Greek word translated as pleasure is *hedone*, and the viewpoint expressed in the preceding passage is therefore called **hedonism**. As we have seen, Aristotle considers the view that pleasure is the good and rejects it.^{*} He argues that something we share with the lower animals could not be the distinctively human good. But Epicurus is unmoved. Just look about you, he seems to be saying. Every living thing takes pleasure as a natural good; it is clearly one thing that is good not by convention but by *physis*. It is the ground of what we accept and reject, of what we pursue and avoid. And if we want to judge the goodness of some course of action, we ask whether there is more pleasure than pain involved in pursuing it.

He does not claim that this is the way it should be but that this is how it is. Good and evil are measured by this standard of pleasure and pain. It is no use, Epicurus might say, to complain that this is unworthy of human beings; this is the way we are made—all of us. This fact levels things out and defeats the elitism of the philosophers. Perhaps only a few are capable of the tortuous dialectic that leads to the vision of the Form of the Good. Not many can live the life of divine contemplation that

^{*}See p. 209.

Aristotle recommends as the highest good. But a pleasant life is available to all.

It is in terms of pleasure and pain, then, that we must understand happiness.* The happy life is the pleasant life. And philosophy, Epicurus holds, is the study of what makes for happiness—nothing more, nothing less.

Let no young man delay the study of philosophy, and let no old man become weary of it; for it is never too early nor too late to care for the well-being of the soul. The man who says that the season for this study has not yet come or is already past is like the man who says it is too early or too late for happiness. (*LM* 122)

But what, exactly, can philosophy do for us to make us happy? Contrary to Aristotle's view, the pursuit of philosophy is not in itself the recipe for the happy life. Philosophy is basically a tool for Epicurus. Though philosophical discussion with a group of friends is one of the great pleasures in life, Epicurus recommends only those parts of philosophy that serve the end of happiness. As he says,

do not think that knowledge about the things above the earth, whether treated as part of a philosophical system or by itself, has any other purpose than peace of mind and confidence. This is also true of the other studies. (*LP* 85b)

Epicurus' single-minded practicality brushes to one side all that does not serve his goal. So we should not expect much from him in the way of new developments in science, logic, or epistemology; indeed, his contributions in these areas are mostly secondhand, as we will see. But in ethics he has some originality and has had some influence.

The study of philosophy can do two things for us. It can free us from certain fears and anxieties that spoil our happiness, and it can provide directions for maximizing pleasure in life. Let us look at each of these in turn.

Some pains and displeasures are natural and cannot always be avoided, such as illness and separation from loved ones because of death. Such pains, Epicurus says, must be endured, but the intense

pains typically do not last very long, and those that last a long time are usually not very intense (*PD* 4; *VS* 4). Other pains are due to certain *beliefs* we hold, and for these there is a sure remedy: change these beliefs. Philosophy can help with this because the beliefs that cause us distress are *false*. So we can rid ourselves of these pains by a true apprehension of *the way things are*.*

What are these false beliefs that distress us? In the main, they are beliefs about **the gods** and beliefs about **death**. About the gods, people are misled by the “myths,” as Epicurus calls them, which permeate the cults of popular religion. The heart of such myths is that the gods take an interest in human affairs, meddling in the universe to make things happen according to their whims, and so need to be appeased if things are not to go badly with us. Such beliefs fill us with dread, Epicurus believes, because we never know when some god or demon is going to crush us—perhaps for no reason we can discern at all. So we anxiously inquire of the prophets, soothsayers, astrologers, and priests about what went wrong or whether this is a good time to do so-and-so and, if not, whether we can do something to make it a good time. (Usually, of course, we can, to the benefit of the “sage” in question.) Fear of the gods, then, is one of the most potent spoilers of contentment.

The other fear concerns death. It is the same anxiety that pulls Hamlet up short and prevents him from taking his own life:

To die, to sleep;

To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause.³

Tradition was full of dreadful stories of the fates of the dead. Lucretius lists some of them: Tantalus, frozen in terror, fears the massive rock balanced above him; Tityos is food for the vultures; Sisyphus

*This theme is taken up in the nineteenth century by the utilitarians. See Chapter 23.

³In the first century B.C., the Roman poet Lucretius wrote a long poem popularizing the views of Epicurus. Its title in Latin is *De Rerum Natura* (“on nature”). We borrow the phrase “the way things are” from Rolfe Humphries' version of that title in his very readable translation (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969).

must forever roll his rock up the hill, only to see it crash down again; and so on (*WTA*, pp. 114–115).⁴

The good news Epicurus proclaims is that none of this is true. As Lucretius put it,

Our terrors and our darkneses of mind
Must be dispelled, not by the sunshine's rays,
Not by those shining arrows of the light,
But by insight into nature, and a scheme
Of systematic contemplation.

—*WTA*, p. 24

What wonderful “insight into nature” will dispel such terrors? It is nothing new; we are already familiar with it, but not exactly in this guise. What the Epicureans have in mind is the **atomism** of Leucippus and Democritus.* Why do they choose atomism as the philosophy that tells us “the way things are”? They never make that very clear. One suspects that Epicurus and Lucretius see atomism as particularly serviceable in the role of terror dispeller.

Let us remind ourselves of a few of the main points of atomism:

- Atoms and the void alone exist.
- The common things of the world, including living things, are temporary hookings together of atoms.
- The soul is material, made of very fine atoms, and is therefore mortal.
- Whatever happens is mechanistically determined to happen according to the laws by which atoms combine and fall apart again.

Epicurus accepts atomism as an account of the way things are, except for a slight but crucial modification to the fourth point. The universal determinism envisaged by Democritus is modified so that our free will to act can be salvaged.† After all, if we were not free, how could we follow the prescriptions for happiness Epicurus sets out? Although the atoms mostly follow strictly determined mechanistic paths, *sometimes*, he holds, they

“swerve” unaccountably. Lucretius presents the argument:

If cause forever follows after cause
In infinite, undeviating sequence
And a new motion always has to come
Out of an old one, by fixed law; if atoms
Do not, by swerving, cause new moves which
break

The laws of fate; if cause forever follows,
In infinite sequence, cause—where would we get
This free will that we have, wrested from fate,
By which we go ahead, each one of us,
Wherever our pleasures urge? Don't we also
swerve

At no fixed time or place, but as our purpose
Directs us?

—*WTA*, p. 59

With this alteration, the rest of atomist metaphysics is acceptable to Epicurus. How, exactly, does this “insight into nature” dispel the terrors of religious myths?

The gods exist, Epicurus maintains, but being immortal and eternally blessed, they take no interest in human affairs.

That which is blessed and immortal is not troubled itself, nor does it cause trouble to another. As a result, it is not affected by anger or favor, for these belong to weakness. (*PD* 1)

How, after all, could the gods be blessed if they had to worry about what Jones is going to do tomorrow? Furthermore, to poke around in the world, changing this and adjusting that, would jeopardize the gods' immortality, for they could not help but be affected by their interventions; the gods, like everything else, consist of atoms, and such bumps and bruises are what shake the atoms loose and lead to disintegration and death.

The heavenly bodies, moreover, are not demons or divinities that rule our destinies. Sun and moon, planets and stars are composed of atoms and the void just like everything else. Their behavior can be explained in exactly the same kinds of ways we explain familiar phenomena on earth. So it is inappropriate—ignorant—to look to the heavens for signs and portents, to go to astrologers for predictions, and try to read the riddle of the future

*You may find it helpful to review that philosophy, looking especially at pp. 28–33.

†Look again at p. 31 to see what problem atomism poses for free will.

in the stars. After summarizing some of the traditional stories of the gods, Lucretius says,

All this, all this is wonderfully told,
A marvel of tradition, and yet far
From the real truth. Reject it—for the gods
Must, by their nature, take delight in peace,
Forever calm, serene, forever far
From our affairs, beyond all pain, beyond
All danger, in their own resources strong,
Having no need of us at all, above
Wrath or propitiation.

—WTA, p. 70

So much, then, for fear of the gods. What of death? If atomism is correct, soul and body dissipate together in the event we call death. So there is no future life to look forward to. In what is probably Epicurus' best known saying, he draws the moral.

Accustom yourself to the belief that death is of no concern to us, since all good and evil lie in sensation and sensation ends with death. . . . Death, the most dreaded of evils, is therefore of no concern to us; for while we exist death is not present, and when death is present we no longer exist. It is therefore nothing either to the living or to the dead since it is not present to the living, and the dead no longer are. (LM 124b–125)

Good and evil, of course, are pleasure and pain. These are the sources of happiness and unhappiness. Fear of death is predicated on the assumption that we will experience these sensations after death and perhaps be wretchedly unhappy. But that makes no sense at all, for when we are, death is not, and when death is, we are not. What, then, is there to fear? Death “is of no concern to us.” Epicurus adds that it is also foolish to quake in *anticipation* of death. For what isn't painful when it is present should cause no pain when it is anticipated.



“After the game, the king and the pawn go
into the same box.”

Italian proverb

Such “insight into nature” can remove at least certain virulent strains of unhappiness from our

lives. This is the negative benefit philosophy can confer, but it is not yet enough for happiness. We need also to know how to *live well*. And here too Epicurus gives guidance. The key point is clearly put in the following passage:

For the very reason that pleasure is the chief and the natural good, we do not choose every pleasure, but there are times when we pass by pleasures if they are outweighed by the hardships that follow; and many pains we think better than pleasures when a greater pleasure will come to us once we have undergone the long-continued pains. . . . By measuring and by looking at advantages and disadvantages, it is proper to decide all these things; for under certain circumstances we treat the good as evil, and again, the evil as good. (LM 129b–130a)

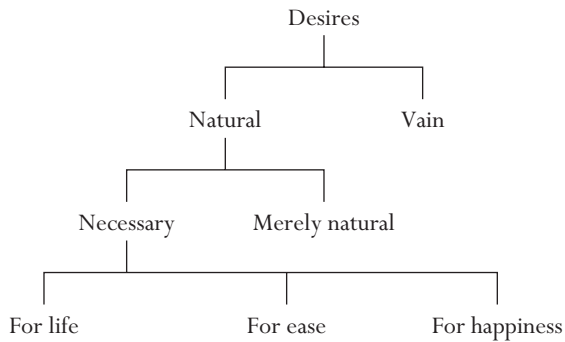
The terms “Epicurean” or “hedonist” nowadays suggest someone who is a glutton for pleasures of every kind and indulges to excess in the satisfaction of every desire. This is a complete distortion of the philosophy of Epicurus; in his view, there is no better way to secure for yourself a life of misery than such sensual indulgence. If what you want is pleasure—the most pleasure—then you must be prudent in your pursuit of it.

When we say that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasure of the profligate or that which depends on physical enjoyment . . . but by pleasure we mean the state wherein the body is free from pain and the mind from anxiety. Neither continual drinking and dancing, nor sexual love, nor the enjoyment of fish and whatever else the luxurious table offers brings about the pleasant life; rather it is produced by the reason which is sober, which examines the motive for every choice and rejection, and which drives away all those opinions through which the greatest tumult lays hold of the mind. (LM 131b–132a)

To implement these principles, we must distinguish different sorts of **desire**.

You must consider that of the desires some are natural, some are vain, and of those that are natural, some are necessary, others only natural. Of the necessary desires, some are necessary for happiness, some for the ease of the body, some for life itself. (LM 127b)

The classification of desires, then, looks like this:



Let us fill in each of these categories with some plausible examples:

- vain desires: luxuries, designer clothing, being thin, keeping up with the Joneses
- merely natural desires: sexual desire (natural but not necessary)
- necessary for life: food, drink, shelter
- necessary for ease: a bed
- necessary for happiness: friendship

Philosophy makes clear that not all desires are on a par and that satisfying some of them costs more than it is worth. That is surely the case, Epicurus believes, with vain desires. It is likely to be the case with the merely natural desires; at least it is clear that following every sexual passion is a sure prescription for unhappiness. The point is that if we want to be happy, the crucial step is to control and limit our desires—if possible to those which are necessary. Epicurus recommends the simple life, as the following sayings make clear:

Natural wealth is limited and easily obtained; the wealth defined by vain fancies is always beyond reach. (*PD* 15.144)

Nothing satisfies him to whom what is enough is little. (*VS* 68)

To be accustomed to simple and plain living is conducive to health and makes a man ready for the necessary tasks of life. It also makes us more ready for the enjoyment of luxury if at intervals we chance to meet with it, and it renders us fearless against fortune. (*LM* 131a)

“A human being has a natural desire to have more of a good thing than he needs.”

Mark Twain (1835–1910)

So this hedonist, who finds pleasure to be the only natural good, values the old Greek virtue of moderation after all. Now, however, it is recommended on the grounds that it will give us the pleasantest life possible. What of the other **virtues**, of justice, for instance? Justice is not something good in itself, Epicurus argues, taking the view that Glaucon and Adeimantus urge against Socrates (*PD* 31–38).^{*} Justice arises when people make a “compact” together not to injure one another, and it is reasonable to be just as long as that compact pays off—in increased pleasure, of course. Justice, then, is wholly a matter of *nomos* for the Epicureans. It is true that justice and the other virtues are praised, but only as means to a happy life for the individual.

The virtue of **friendship**, by contrast, is held in the highest esteem among the Epicureans. They are famous for it. Epicurus established in Athens a “garden” in which his followers lived, sharing work, study, and conversation. In this garden and in similar communities across the ancient world, men—including at least some women and slaves—cultivated this virtue. Friendship, they believed, is the key to the highest blessings this life holds. As Epicurus says,

Friendship dances through the world bidding us all to waken to the recognition of happiness. (*VS* 52)

This blessing, Epicurus assumes, is open to all who pursue their pleasures with prudence and moderation. So, he assures us, happiness is not restricted to the few. The many, too, may participate.

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1. Why does Epicurus fasten on pleasure as the good?
 2. For what kinds of pain is there a remedy? What is it?
 3. What, according to the Epicureans, are the false beliefs about the gods, and how do these false beliefs distress us?

^{*}See *Republic*, Book II, and pp. 173–174.

4. What false beliefs about death distress us, according to the Epicureans?
5. How is atomism “corrected”?
6. How does the wise person sort out and deal with desires?
7. What is the Epicurean view of moderation? Of justice? Of friendship?

The Stoics

Although in many respects the Stoics are consciously opposed to the main principles of the Epicureans, the two schools share one core belief: that philosophy is to serve the aim of promoting the best and happiest life a human being could live. In the service of that goal, the Stoics not only developed an important approach to ethics, but also made original contributions to logic, set forth a detailed theory of knowledge, and spent considerable effort on theories of the nature of the universe. We’ll touch on those other contributions, but we will concentrate on the Stoics’ views about the good life.

Stoicism began with Zeno of Citium, a city in Cyprus.* Like several other important figures in this tradition, he was not a native Greek, though he came to Athens as a young man (in about 320 B.C.), studied there, and taught there until his death, about 260 B.C. The fact that Stoic teachers came from areas that Plato and Aristotle would have regarded as barbarian is a sign that times had changed for philosophy. Stoic doctrines from the first had a universality about them that reached beyond the parochial concerns of any city or nation; in this way, they were both a reflection of the enlarged political situation and an influence on it. Socrates had thought of himself as a citizen of Athens. The Stoics considered themselves citizens of the world.

The universality of Stoicism appears in another way. It appealed to members of all social classes. Its leading figures include a freed slave, Epictetus (c. A.D. 51–135), and the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 121–180).

*Note that this is not the Zeno of the paradoxes, the associate of Parmenides.

Let us begin with some reflections on happiness. Stoic ideas of **happiness** owe much to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, all of whom argue that what makes for a truly good life cannot depend on anything outside ourselves.* Stoics carry this ideal of self-sufficiency to the extreme by claiming that absolutely nothing that happens to the wise can disturb their calm happiness. This may seem a startling suggestion.†

How can this be? Epictetus puts his finger on the crux of the matter:

What upsets people is not things themselves but their judgments about the things. For example, death is nothing dreadful (or else it would have appeared dreadful to Socrates), but instead the judgment about death that it is dreadful—that is what is dreadful. So when we are upset or distressed, let us never blame someone else but rather ourselves, that is, our own judgments. (*E* 5)⁵

What makes you unhappy? Suppose you learn that someone you trusted has been spreading nasty lies about you. Friends abandon you and acquaintances begin to avoid you. Would this make you unhappy? Most of us would probably say yes.

But, the Stoic urges, think more carefully. It can’t really be these events as so far described that make you unhappy. What if you didn’t care about such things? Then they wouldn’t make you unhappy.

This kind of thought experiment, the Stoic believes, proves that what happens to you can never *make* you unhappy. What makes you unhappy is “the judgment” you make on what happens to you: that this is important, terrible, and distressing. If that is so, then your happiness is not beyond your control. Nothing can make you unhappy unless you allow it to do so. Your happiness is entirely up to you.

*Socrates holds that a good person cannot be harmed (*Apology* 41c–d) and Plato argues that happiness is a condition of the harmonious soul. Aristotle claims that “the good is something proper to the person and cannot be taken away from him” (see p. 209).

†Compare Aristotle, p. 211. As you study Stoicism, ask yourself: Is this an improvement on Aristotle, who holds that there is nonetheless some element of fortune in our happiness?

To understand this in depth, we need to appreciate a crucial distinction:

Some things are up to us and some are not up to us. Our opinions are up to us, and our impulses, desires, aversions—in short, whatever is our own doing. Our bodies are not up to us, nor are our possessions, our reputations, or our public offices, or, that is, whatever is not our own doing. The things that are up to us are by nature free, unhindered, and unimpeded; the things that are not up to us are weak, enslaved, hindered, not our own. So remember, if you think that things naturally enslaved are free or that things not your own are your own, you will be thwarted, miserable, and upset, and will blame both gods and men. But if you think that only what is yours is yours, and that what is not your own is, just as it is, not your own, then no one will ever coerce you, no one will hinder you, you will blame no one, you will not accuse anyone, you will not do a single thing unwillingly, you will have no enemies, and no one will harm you, because you will not be harmed at all. (E 1)⁶

This distinction between what is and what is not within our power makes possible the remarkable claims of the Stoic. When are we happy? When we get what we desire. Suppose now that we set our heart on the things that are beyond our power—a beautiful body, fame, wealth, professional success. Reflection will surely convince you that these things are at best only partly in our power; circumstances must cooperate if they are to be ours. If these are what we really want, disappointment is sure to follow. If we don't get them, we will be unhappy. If we do get them, we will be anxious lest we lose them. And neither disappointment nor anxiety is part of a happy life.

What, then, is within our control? “Your way of dealing with appearances” (E 6), Epictetus answers. What appears in the world is not in our control, but how we deal with it is. How we view appearances, our opinions about them, whether we desire or fear them—all this is within our power. This is our proper area of concern. Of anything beyond this sphere, we should be prepared to say, “You are nothing in relation to me” (E 1).



“The last of the human freedoms is to choose one’s attitudes.”

Victor Frankl (1905–1997)

What this means in practice can be gathered from several examples.

A little oil is spilled, a little wine is stolen: say, “This is the price of tranquility; this is the price of not being upset.” Nothing comes for free. When you call the slave boy, keep in mind that he is capable of not paying attention, and even if he does pay attention he is capable of not doing any of the things that you want him to. But he is not in such a good position that your being upset or not depends on him. (E 12)

A person’s master is someone who has power over what he wants or does not want, either to obtain it or take it away. Whoever wants to be free, therefore, let him not want or avoid anything that is up to others. Otherwise he will necessarily be a slave. (E 14)

It is possible to learn the will of nature from the things in which we do not differ from each other. For example, when someone else’s little slave boy breaks his cup we are ready to say, “It’s one of those things that just happen.” Certainly, then, when your own cup is broken you should be just the way you were when the other person’s was broken. Transfer the same idea to larger matters. Someone else’s child is dead, or his wife. There is no one who would not say, “It’s the lot of a human being.” But when one’s own dies, immediately it is, “Alas! Poor me!” But we should have remembered how we feel when we hear of the same thing about others. (E 26)

Suppose now that we have, through long practice (for this is what it would take), gotten to the point where we always make the distinction. We never set our hearts on the things that are not in our power to control. It seems we have gotten ourselves into a serious difficulty. Having enough food to eat (to take just one example) is not something entirely within our control. Are we not to desire food? And if not, how are we to live? Or should we simply starve, virtuous to the end? Is there a way they can solve this problem?

The solution lies in the Stoics' positive advice: *to keep our wills in harmony with nature* (*E* 4, 6, 13, 30; and *M* 2.9). To understand this, we have to explore what the Stoics mean by “**nature**.” We need not go into the details of their nature philosophy, but the central idea is crucial.

Whatever exists, according to the Stoics, is material or corporeal. Our only certainties come from sense experience, and sense experience always reveals the material. But like Heraclitus, they hold that the material world is ordered by a rational principle, a *logos*.^{*} This principle, which (like Heraclitus) they sometimes call the fiery element, is not just a passive pattern in things; it is the ordering of the world by and for a reason.[†] As the ordering principle of the world, it is appropriately called divine.

Thus **God**, for the Stoics, is not like the distant, indifferent gods of the Epicureans. Nor is the Stoic God like the unmoved mover of Aristotle, independent and self-sufficient, related to the world only as an ideal that the world tries to emulate. The Stoics conceive of God (whom, again like Heraclitus, they are willing to call Zeus) as *immanent* in the world.[‡] Every material being has a divine element within it. So the Stoics are committed to a version of **pantheism** (God is all and all is God), though the term “God” emphasizes the *ordering* and the term “nature” the *ordered* aspects of things.

This commits the Stoics to believing in Destiny or Fate. Whatever happens happens of necessity. But this is not a cause for despair, since Destiny is the same as Divine Providence. Whatever happens is determined by the divine reason, and so it must happen for the best.[§]

Although “whatever will be, will be,” it does not follow that we can simply drift. Your attitude toward what happens makes an enormous difference, for on that your happiness or unhappiness depends.

Do not seek to have events happen as you want them to, but instead want them to happen as they do happen, and your life will go well. (*E* 8)

If we are to be happy, then, we must keep our wills in harmony with nature. And we now can see that this is identical with keeping our wills in harmony with both reason and God, for nature is the sphere of events governed by the benevolent purpose of a rational deity.



“Never does nature say one thing and wisdom another.”

Juvenal (late first, early second centuries)

Now we can see how the Stoics address the problem raised earlier. Everything in nature contains its own ordering principle in harmony with the great order of the whole. In living things there is a natural tendency toward certain ends—self-preservation in particular, together with all that serves that end. This is part of the Divine Providence. Denying these *natural* tendencies, then, would certainly not keep one's will in harmony with nature!

So the Stoics eat when hungry, drink when thirsty, and do what is necessary to preserve themselves from the weather. But, and this point is crucial, they pursue these natural goals with **equanimity**, not being disturbed if their quest for them is frustrated. Thus, Epictetus advises that

you must behave as you do at a banquet. Something is passed around and comes to you: reach out your hand politely and take it. It goes by: do not hold it back (*E* 15).

In regard to what is natural to a living being, the Stoics distinguish what is *preferred*, what is *shunned*, and what is *indifferent*. We humans “prefer” not only food and shelter, but also skills, knowledge, health, reputation, and wealth. We “shun” their opposites, and we find many things “indifferent”; about them we simply don't care. The natural tendencies in human beings determine what falls in one class or another.

So there is nothing wrong with pursuing what is preferred. Where people go wrong, however, is in

^{*}See pp. 19–20.

[†]See p. 20.

[‡]See p. 20.

[§]Compare Heraclitus again, p. 20.

MARCUS AURELIUS

Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 121–180) was emperor of Rome for nineteen years. Late in life, while leading an army in the far north, he recorded his most intimate thoughts in a journal. The journal has come down to us as a small volume called *Meditations*, divided into twelve books, each made up of numbered paragraphs, often in no direct relation to each other. Marcus died in the army camp of an infectious disease. Here are a few samples of Stoic thought as filtered through the mind of an emperor.

A little flesh, a little breath, and a Reason to rule all—that is myself. (2,2)

Hour by hour resolve firmly, like a Roman and a man, to do what comes to hand with correct and natural dignity, and with humanity, independence, and justice. Allow your mind freedom from all other considerations. (2,5)

Remembering always what the World-Nature is, and what my own nature is, and how the one stands in respect to the other—so small a fraction of so vast a Whole—bear in mind that no man can hinder you from conforming each word and deed to the Nature of which you are a part. (2,9)

If the power of thought is universal among mankind, so likewise is the possession of reason, making us rational creatures. It follows, therefore, that this reason speaks no less universally to us all with its “thou shalt” or “thou shalt not.” So then there is a world-law; which in turn means that we are all fellow-citizens and share a common citizenship, and that the world is a single city. (4,4)

What does not corrupt a man himself cannot corrupt his life, nor do him any damage either outwardly or inwardly. (4,8)

Your mind will be like its habitual thoughts; for the soul becomes dyed with the colour of its thoughts. (4,16)

My own nature is a rational and civic one; I have a city, and I have a country; as Marcus I have Rome, and as a human being I have the universe; and consequently, what is

beneficial to these communities is the sole good for me. (6,44)

All things are interwoven with one another; a sacred bond unites them; there is scarcely one thing that is isolated from another. Everything is coordinated, everything works together in giving form to the one universe. The world-order is a unity made up of multiplicity: God is one, pervading all things; all being is one, all law is one (namely, the common reason which all thinking creatures possess) and all truth is one—if, as we believe, there can be but one path to perfection for beings that are alike in kind and reason. (7,9)

Do not indulge in dreams of having what you have not, but reckon up the chief of the blessings you do possess, and then thankfully remember how you would crave for them if they were not yours. At the same time, however, beware lest delight in them leads you to cherish them so dearly that their loss would destroy your peace of mind. (7,27)

Universal Nature’s impulse was to create an orderly world. It follows, then, that everything now happening must follow a logical sequence; if it were not so, the prime purpose towards which the impulses of the World-Reason are directed would be an irrational one. Remembrance of this will help you to face many things more calmly. (7,75)

Nothing can be good for a man unless it helps to make him just, self-disciplined, courageous, and independent; and nothing bad unless it has the contrary effect. (8,1)

Despise not death; smile, rather, at its coming; it is among the things that Nature wills. (9,3)

The sinner sins against himself; the wrongdoer wrongs himself, becoming the worse by his own action. (9,4)

Quotations are from *Meditations*, Maxwell Staniforth, trans. (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1964); numbers are to book and paragraph.

attributing some *absolute value* to these things. And the mark of this wrong turn is their reaction when they do not get what they want: distress, resentment, and unhappiness. The wise person, by contrast, “uses such things without requiring them.”⁷ This attitude enables the equanimity of the Stoics, in which nothing that happens can destroy their calm. The Stoic attaches absolute value to only one thing: the harmony of the will with nature. In comparison with that, even the things “preferred” seem only indifferent.

This means that the only true good is **virtue**: a life in harmony with nature, reason, and God. Stoics and Epicureans carry on a running battle over just this point. The Epicureans, of course, hold that the only good is pleasure, and everything else (including virtue) is good only in relation to that. Stoics typically respond in an extreme fashion, denying not only that pleasure is the one true good, but also that it is even in the realm of the “preferred.” Pleasure, according to the Stoics, is *never* to be pursued; it is not an appropriate end at all.

The Epicureans argue, as we have seen, that pleasure is the root of all our choosing. The Stoics reply that our natural tendencies are for the acquisition of certain *things*, such as food, which is necessary for self-preservation. They do not deny that eating when hungry is pleasurable, but the pleasure is an *accompaniment* to the eating, not the end sought. Pleasure on its own won’t keep you alive! People go wrong exactly here, in seeking the byproduct instead of the end—a sure recipe, the Stoics think, for disaster. A virtuous person will in fact lead a pleasant life. But if she makes the pleasant life her object, she will miss both virtue *and* the pleasure that accompanies it!

There are two corollaries to the view that only virtue is the good. First, the only thing that counts in estimating the goodness of an action is the **intention** of the agent. An action is an attempt to change the world in some way; whether the action succeeds depends on circumstances beyond the actor’s control; and so the goodness or badness of the *person* or the *action* cannot depend on the action’s outcome. But this means that a judgment on the agent must be a judgment on the agent’s intention. Cleanthes gives the example of two slaves sent out to find someone. One slave searches diligently but

fails to find him. The other loaf about and runs into him by accident. Which is the better man (*SES* 264)? The Stoic has no doubt about the answer and takes it to show that results are to be considered indifferent. What counts is the state of your will; that is in your control, and that is what is absolutely good or bad. So the entire concentration of life must be put into the effort to set your will in harmony with nature. The outcome must be nothing to you.

This leads us to the second corollary. The important thing is to do one’s **duty**. The notion of “duty” has not played a large role to this point. We hardly find it in Socrates or Plato, or Aristotle, or Epicurus. These philosophers are asking, What is the best life for a human being to live? They never imagine that it might be a duty or an obligation to lead such a life. It is just a question of what the prudent or wise person would do. Why, we might wonder, does the notion of duty suddenly come to prominence in Stoic thought?



“Happiness and moral duty are inseparably connected.”

George Washington (1732–1799)

It has a natural home here because of the connection between the divine, rational principle that providentially guides the course of the world and the notion of *law*. It is law that shows us our duties. The principles governing the world are not only descriptions of how the world inevitably *does* go; they express how things, according to their natures, *should* go. So they take on for us the aspect of law reflected in civil law: they prescribe to us our duties and obligations. This notion of **natural law** (a concept we owe largely to the Stoics) is obviously a development of Heraclitean ideas about the *logos*. If we behave in certain ways, consequences—determined by the ordering principles of the world—necessarily follow. For example, if you smoke cigarettes for a while, you will become addicted. Since addictions are bad—they hand control of your life over to something “not your own”—understanding the order of the world is also understanding that you have a duty not to smoke.

The Stoics devote considerable attention to duties, distinguishing several classes of duties and examining particular cases. We need not explore the details, but we should note the one duty that is clear and always overriding: the duty to harmonize our intentions with the law of nature. This is the duty to be virtuous or to perfect ourselves. And this means that we must concern ourselves above all with the things in our power—with our beliefs, attitudes, and desires. Everything else must be, as Epictetus says, nothing to us in comparison. We began the discussion of Stoic thought by considering happiness. But now we can see that if we devote ourselves to virtue, to doing our duty, our happiness will take care of itself.*

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1. On what distinction does Stoicism rest? Explain how making this distinction is the key, for the Stoic, to both happiness and freedom.
 2. How are God and nature related? What of evil?
 3. What does it mean to keep one's will in line with nature?
 4. Why doesn't a Stoic starve to death?
 5. What is virtue, according to the Stoics?
 6. Explain the Stoic critique of Epicurean philosophy.
 7. Why does the Stoic believe intention is more important than results in evaluating the worth of a person?
 8. What is it about the Stoic view of nature that makes duty an important notion?
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The Skeptics

What has **skepticism** to do with happiness? We are apt to suppose that someone who doesn't know, or at least thinks he doesn't know, must on that account be *unhappy*. Aristotle, who holds that all men by nature desire to know, would surely think so. Moreover, we are almost all brought up as believers in something or other. Belief is as natural to us as breathing. What sense could it make to suspend all our beliefs, to get rid of that habit?

*Compare this thought with what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount: "Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you as well" (Matt. 6:33).

And how could that make us happy? The ancient skeptics give some surprising answers to these perplexing questions.

Again we shall simplify, this time by focusing on the most radical group of skeptics, named after a shadowy fourth-century figure **Pyrrho**.^{*} From what little we know of him, it seems that Pyrrho is interested only in the practical question of how best to live. He exhibits a principled disinterest in speculative or scientific philosophy. His pupil Timon reportedly said that the nature of things is "**indeterminable**," meaning that we cannot determine that things are more like this than they are like that.⁸ But why not? Let us review a little of the story we have been telling.

Since Parmenides, Greek thinkers had distinguished between things as they appear to us and things as they are in themselves. Appearances, after all, may deceive us: The straight oar in water looks bent; square towers in the distance look round; honey tastes bitter to a sick person; and so on. Many thinkers turned to reason or intelligence to discern reality, with varying results. Parmenides concludes that reality is the One. Democritus argues that it is atoms and the void. For Plato, the independent world of eternally unchanging Forms constitutes the really real. And for Aristotle, reality consists of individual substances that are composites of matter and form.

It is partly this diversity of answers that motivates the Pyrrhonists, who like to gather examples of disagreement among the philosophers. But sheer disagreement does not prove that nothing can be

^{*}One fascinating biographical tidbit is that Pyrrho allegedly accompanied Alexander the Great on his forays into northwestern India. There, it is said, Pyrrho encountered Indian philosophers and adopted some of their ideas. Although it is possible that Greek intellectuals had some exposure to Indian philosophical ideas before this, Pyrrho appears to represent the earliest case of direct causal influence of Indian thought on Greek thought. See Christopher I. Beckwith, *Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017). On the more general question of Indian influence on ancient Greek thought, listen to Peter Adamson and Jonardon Ganeri, "Looking East: Indian Influence on Greek Thought," *History of Philosophy in India*, February 4, 2018, <https://historyofphilosophy.net/india-greece>.

known about reality; some one of these views may well be correct and the others mistaken; or perhaps none of them is correct, but some future development of them might be. And we might come to know that. To support the claim that the nature of things is “indeterminable,” we must say more.

The later Pyrrhonists systematize the arguments in favor of skeptical conclusions in a number of types or *modes* of reasoning. Our best source for these is a Greek physician, **Sextus Empiricus**, who lived in the second century A.D. Let us survey several of these modes.

The first mode stresses that the sense organs of animals differ from species to species. His arguments are rather primitive, since not much was known about the details of animal sense organs until recent times. But we can think of the registration of the world in the many-faceted eye of a fly, in the echolocation of a bat, and in what the frog’s eye tells the frog’s brain.⁹ Cats see much better in the dark than we do, and dogs smell many things that escape our senses. In terms like these, we can understand what Sextus says:

But if the same things appear different owing to the variety in animals, we shall, indeed, be able to state our own impressions of the real object, but as to its essential nature we shall suspend judgment. For we cannot ourselves judge between our own impressions and those of the other animals, since we ourselves are involved in the dispute and are, therefore, rather in need of a judge than competent to pass judgment ourselves. . . . If, then, owing to the variety in animals their sense-impressions differ, and it is impossible to judge between them, we must necessarily suspend judgment regarding the external underlying objects.¹⁰ (*OP* 1.59–61)

Here we have some of the key notions of skepticism. Because objects appear differently to creatures with different sense organs, we cannot confidently judge that these objects really are as they appear to us. If they appear one way to us and another way to the bat or fly or frog, it would be arbitrary to pick one of those ways rather than another and say that is how the “external underlying objects” are. The result is that we must “**suspend judgment.**”

The second mode concerns differences among human beings, especially concerning objects of

choice. He quotes poets and dramatists who exclaim about the variations in human preferences and adds,

Seeing, then, that choice and avoidance depend on pleasure and displeasure, while pleasure and displeasure depend on sensation and sense-impression, whenever some men choose the very things which are avoided by others, it is logical for us to conclude that they are also differently affected by the same things, since otherwise they would all alike have chosen or avoided the same things. But if the same objects affect men differently owing to the differences in the men, then, on this ground also, we shall reasonably be led to suspension of judgment. For while we are, no doubt, able to state what each of the underlying objects appears to be, relatively to each difference, we are incapable of explaining what it is in reality. For we shall have to believe either all men or some. But if we believe all, we shall be attempting the impossible and accepting contradictories; and if some, let us be told whose opinions we are to endorse. (*OP* 1.87–88)

The message is the same; we must suspend judgment. What does that mean? It means that we do not say either yes or no; we do not affirm or deny any proposition about the real nature of the underlying objects.

Note carefully that we *can* state what the object *appears* to be. We just refrain from making any further judgments. In terms of the appearance/reality distinction, the skeptic restricts himself to appearance. He is forced to this by the considerations in the “modes,” of which we have examined only two. Some of the others concern the differences among our own organs of sense, the dependence of appearances on differing circumstances, and the differences in customs and laws.

There are also more formal modes, standard ways of criticizing the arguments of the philosophers. A skeptic considers someone who affirms what is not evident *dogmatic*; and any claim about how things *really* are, independent of their appearance to our senses, is a claim about the nonevident. To be **dogmatic**, in this sense, is to claim to know something for which you have no evidence. So all the other schools of philosophy, with their theories about the reality beyond the appearances, are classified as dogmatic by the skeptics.

One of these more formal modes is based on an “infinite regress” argument and another on the charge of “circular reasoning.” Suppose claim *A* is supported by claim *B*. The skeptic will ask what supports *B*. If *B* is supported by *C*, and *C* by *D*, and so on forever, we have an **infinite regress**. If *B* is supported by *C* and *C* by *A*, we have **circular reasoning**, for the argument leads back to where we began. In neither case can we claim to know that *A* is true.

Here is an example of Sextus using these modes. Suppose some “dogmatic” philosopher (a Platonist, perhaps, or a Stoic) has made some claim about the real nature of an object.

The matter proposed is either a sense-object or a thought-object, but whichever it is, it is an object of controversy; for some say that only sensibles are true, others only intelligibles, others that some sensibles and some intelligible objects are true. Will they then assert that the controversy can or cannot be decided? If they say it cannot, we have it granted that we must suspend judgement. . . . But if they say that it can be decided, we ask by what is it to be decided? For example, in the case of the sense-object . . . is it to be decided by a sense-object or a thought-object? For if they say by a sense-object, since we are inquiring about sensibles that object itself also will require another to confirm it; and if that too is to be a sense-object, it likewise will require another for its confirmation, and so on ad infinitum. And if the sense-object shall have to be decided by a thought-object, then, since thought-objects also are controverted, this being an object of thought will need examination and confirmation. Whence then will it gain confirmation? If from an intelligible object, it will suffer a similar regress ad infinitum; and if from a sensible object, since an intelligible was adduced to establish the sensible and a sensible to establish the intelligible, the Mode of circular reasoning is brought in. (*OP* 1.170–72)

The key question here is, “By what is it to be decided?” To use Protagoras’ term, what is the “measure” we are to judge by? These modes attempt to show that the question cannot be satisfactorily answered, for the answer either will itself be subject to that same question (infinite regress) or will assume what is to be proved (circular reasoning). The moral is the same: We must suspend judgment.

All the various modes circle around a central point, which can be called the problem of the **criterion**. Claims to knowledge are a dime a dozen; the Hellenistic world, as we have seen, is filled with them (just as ours is). The problem we face is how to decide among them. By what mark or standard or criterion are we to decide where truth and knowledge really lie? Different philosophers, as we have seen, offer different solutions, but the skeptics argue that this is an insoluble problem: *No* satisfactory criterion is to be found. In a chapter called “Does a Criterion of Truth Really Exist?” Sextus Empiricus writes,

Of those, then, who have treated of the criterion some have declared that a criterion exists—the Stoics, for example, and certain others—while by some its existence is denied, as by . . . Xenophanes of Colophon, who say—“Over all things opinion bears sway”;^{*} while we have adopted suspension of judgement as to whether it does or does not exist. This dispute, then, they will declare to be either capable or incapable of decision; and if they shall say it is incapable of decision they will be granting on the spot the propriety of suspension of judgement, while if they say it admits of decision, let them tell us whereby it is to be decided, since we have no accepted criterion, and do not even know, but are still inquiring, whether any criterion exists. Besides, in order to decide the dispute which has arisen about the criterion, we must possess an accepted criterion by which we shall be able to judge the dispute; and in order to possess an accepted criterion, the dispute about the criterion must first be decided. And when the argument thus reduces itself to a form of circular reasoning, the discovery of the criterion becomes impracticable, since we do not allow them to adopt a criterion by assumption, while if they offer to judge the criterion by a criterion we force them to a regress ad infinitum. And furthermore, since demonstration requires a demonstrated criterion, while the criterion requires an approved demonstration, they are forced into circular reasoning. (*OP* 2.18–20)

Let us note several points in this passage. First, any claim that some principle is a criterion for truth itself needs to be supported. We shall need

^{*}See pp. 16–17.

a criterion to decide whether that support is successful. And any attempt to provide such a criterion will either be forced into the infinite regress of criteria by which to decide criteria by which to decide . . . or be circular, begging the question in favor of some assumed criterion. We can represent the argument by a flow chart. (See the figure on page 250.)

No matter which alternatives we choose, the result is the same. And if we suspend judgment about a criterion, it follows that judgment is suspended about each and every claim to knowledge; for each claim to know depends on there being a criterion by which it is singled out as true knowledge. So if we cannot solve the problem of the criterion, we must suspend judgment generally.



“I was gratified to be able to answer promptly.
I said, ‘I don’t know.’”

Mark Twain (1835–1910)

Second, note that Sextus does *not* claim there is no criterion of truth; about that very question—is there or is there not a criterion?—the Pyrrhonian skeptic suspends judgment. There is a kind of skeptic who claims that nothing can be known. This kind is subject to a devastating counter: He can be asked how he knows *that*. But Sextus is careful not to make any such claim. He does not know whether anything can be known. If he is pushed back a step and asked whether he knows that he does not know, he will presumably confess that he doesn’t. His attitude throughout is one of *noncommitment* to any knowledge claims that concern how things really are.

The argument about the criterion seems like a very powerful argument indeed. It sweeps the board clean.*

But this leads to a pressing question: How then can we live? If we make no judgments about the world we are in, won’t we be paralyzed? To eat bread rather than a stone seems to depend on a

judgment that bread will nourish you and a stone will not. *Can* we suspend judgments like that?

Remember that skeptics do not deny **appearances**. Skeptics claim that we can live, and live well, by restricting ourselves to how things seem. Though there may not be a criterion to distinguish reality from appearance, there is a criterion for life and action. Sextus tells us that this practical criterion

denotes the standard of action by conforming to which in the conduct of life we perform some actions and abstain from others. . . . The criterion, then, of the Sceptic School is, we say, the appearance, giving this name to what is virtually the sense-presentation. For since this lies in feeling and involuntary affection, it is not open to question. . . .

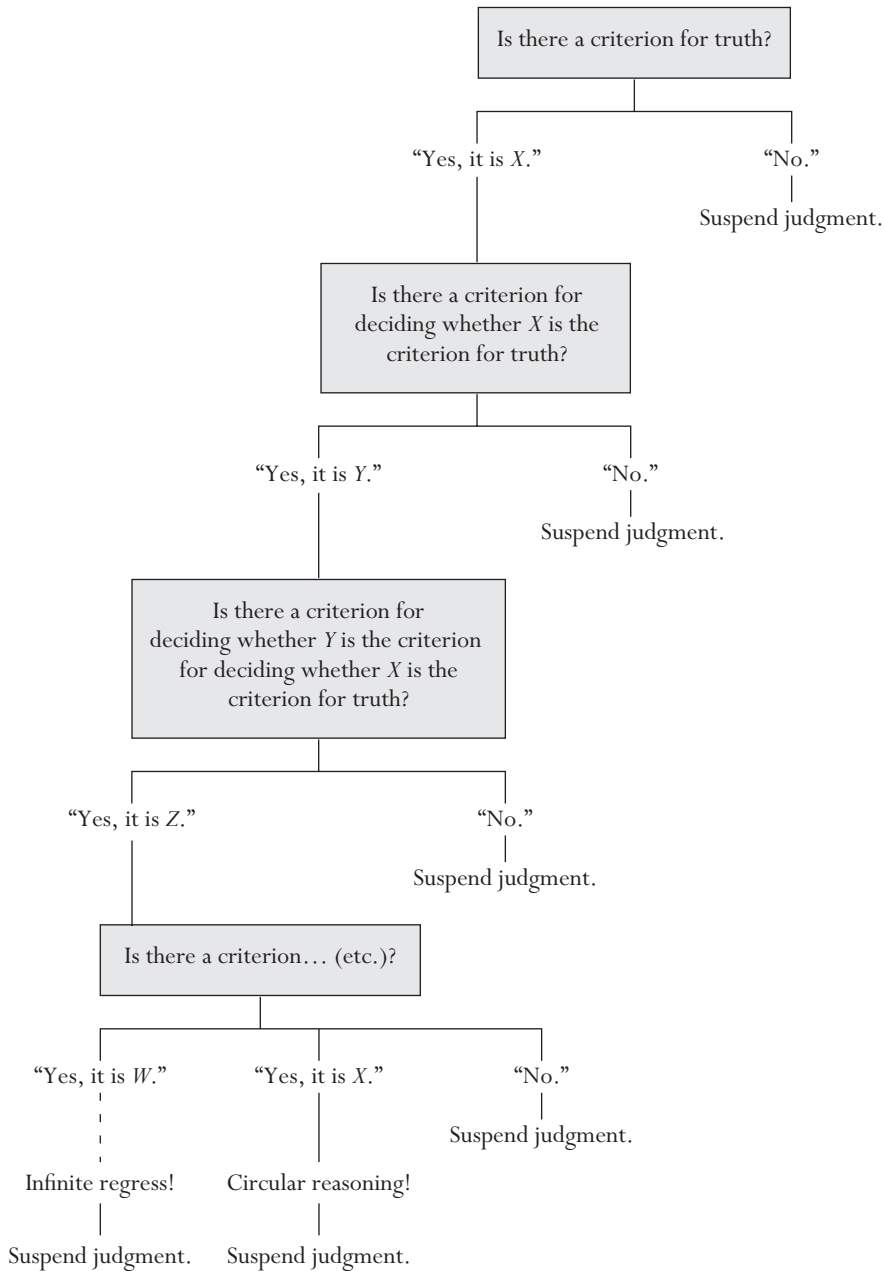
Adhering, then, to appearances we live in accordance with the normal rules of life, undogmatically, seeing that we cannot remain wholly inactive. (OP 1.21–23)

Sextus was a physician, a member of a school of medicine that followed similar principles. These doctors were unwilling to speculate about the “real” nature of diseases. They restricted themselves to what they observed, to appearances. If they observed that certain symptoms responded to certain medicines, they noted and remembered this. If they observed that diet positively affected the outcome of a certain disease, they prescribed that diet for that disease. It was, we might say, empirical medicine rather than speculative. If medicine can be done in this way, then why can’t life be lived according to the same principles?*

So skeptics can eat what experience has shown to be connected with health and behave in ways correlated with positive outcomes. We do not pronounce things to be truly good or truly bad, for about such claims we suspend judgment. But it is beyond question that bread *appears* to nourish us and scarcely less so that obedience to the law *appears* to be profitable. In the matter of behavior,

*One might question, of course, how successfully medicine can be done on such a restricted empirical base. Modern medicine does not restrict itself to what is observable but makes use of the theoretical constructions of modern science. Does the same hold for principles of living?

*Compare Montaigne, pp. 350–353.



we conform to the customs of the land in which we live, for these customs express what appears to our fellow citizens to be good. We live “in accordance with the normal rules of life,” but “undogmatically,” not claiming that this is somehow the absolutely best or right thing to do.

Thus, the relativism against which Plato struggles and which Aristotle thinks he has overcome is reborn. It is not reborn as a doctrine claiming to be the truth about matters, for no such claims are made. But since things may appear differently to different people or cultures, a *practical relativism* is the result.

On what grounds could skeptics recommend their views? There are two. One amounts to the argument that there really is no alternative. Every nonskeptical view founders in one way or another on the problem of the criterion. The other brings us back to the connection between skepticism and happiness. As long as we seek certainty about the true nature of things, we will be in doubt; as long as we are in doubt, we will be perturbed; as long as we are perturbed, we will be unhappy. So the key to quietude and happiness is to give up the search for certainty. We must cease to be dogmatists and become skeptics.

For the man who opines that anything is by nature good or bad is for ever being disquieted; when he is without the things which he deems good he believes himself to be tormented by things naturally bad and he pursues after the things which are, as he thinks, good; which when he has obtained he keeps falling into still more perturbations because of his irrational and immoderate elation, and in his dread of a change of fortune he uses every endeavor to avoid losing the things which he deems good. On the other hand, the man who determines nothing as to what is naturally good or bad neither shuns nor pursues anything eagerly; and in consequence, he is unperturbed. (*OP* 1.27–28)

This quietude, or tranquility of soul, is what the skeptic means by happiness. Or, if happiness is more than this, it is at least a necessary condition for happiness; without it no one can be happy. Though no one can escape trouble entirely, most people are doubly troubled, once by the pain or suffering and once by two further beliefs: that this is something bad or evil they are undergoing and that either they do not (in some absolute sense) deserve it or—worse yet—that they do. The skeptic at least does not suffer these further agonies. So the skeptics recommend the suspension of judgment about all claims to truth on the grounds that doing so provides a basis on which a happy life can be built.

These may seem rather minimal claims and their kind of happiness rather a pale one. It seems to be a retreat of some magnitude from the “high” view of happiness expressed, for instance, by Aristotle: activity of soul in accord with excellence. But perhaps

the times did not realistically allow for more—for most people. Furthermore, the problem of the criterion remains; unless this can be solved, maybe no more can reasonably be expected. This is a very real problem with which numerous future philosophers struggle.*

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1. What should we conclude from an examination of (a) differences in sense organs among animals; and (b) differences in taste among humans?
 2. About what kind of thing does the skeptic “suspend judgment”? What does that term mean?
 3. What is it to be “dogmatic”?
 4. How does the skeptic use infinite regress and circular reasoning arguments?
 5. What is the problem of the criterion? (Study the flow chart carefully.)
 6. By what practical criterion does the skeptic live?
 7. Why does the skeptic recommend suspending judgment as a key to happiness?
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FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

1. Evaluate Epicurus’ reasons for thinking that pleasure is the good for human beings in the light of (a) Aristotle’s reasons for thinking that this could not possibly be correct and (b) the Stoic critique of this claim. Who do you think has the best of the argument here? Why?
2. Apply the problem of the criterion (with its considerations of infinite regress and circular reasoning) to Aristotle’s theory of knowledge in terms of deduction, induction, and first principles. Can Aristotle survive such a critique? If you think he can, try to say how. If not, why not?
3. If you consider the popular culture of our day, would you say it is Platonistic, Aristotelian, Epicurean, Stoic, or skeptical? Or is it just in large measure unwise?

*See, for example, Augustine (pp. 267–269) and particularly René Descartes (*Meditation III*) and Hegel (pp. 498–502).

KEY WORDS

Epicurus	virtue
hedonism	intention
the gods	duty
death	natural law
atomism	skepticism
desire	Pyrrho
virtues	indeterminable
friendship	Sextus Empiricus
Stoicism	suspend judgment
happiness	dogmatic
nature	infinite regress
<i>logos</i>	circular reasoning
God	criterion
pantheism	appearances
equanimity	

NOTES

1. Gilbert Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion* (New York: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1955), 139. We are indebted to this source for numerous points in this section.
2. All quotations from Epicurus' works are from *Letters, Principal Doctrines, and Vatican Sayings*, trans. Russel M. Geer (Indianapolis, IN: Library of Liberal Arts, 1964). Within this text, references to specific works will be as follows: *PD*, *Principal Doctrines*; *LM*, *Letter to Menoecus*; *LP*, *Letter to Pythocles*; and *VS*, *Vatican Sayings*.
3. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 3, scene 1, lines 64–68.
4. Quotations from Lucretius, *The Way Things Are*, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), are cited in the text using the abbreviation *WTA*. References are to page numbers of this edition.
5. Quotations from *The Handbook of Epictetus*, trans. Nicholas P. White (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1983), are cited in the text using the abbreviation *E*.
6. See also Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Maxwell Staniforth (New York: Penguin Books, 1964), 6.41. Quotations from this work are hereafter cited in the text using the abbreviation *M*.
7. Attributed to Chrysippus by Eduard Zeller in *Stoics, Epicureans, and Skeptics* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), 284–285. Subsequent quotations from this work are cited in the text using the abbreviation *SES*.
8. Charlotte L. Stough, *Greek Scepticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 17.
9. There is a well-known study of interest in this connection: "What the Frog's Eye Tells the Frog's Brain," by J. Y. Lettvin, H. R. Maturana, W. S. McCulloch, and W. H. Pitts, *Proceedings of the Institute of Radio Engineers* 47 (1959): 1940–1951.
10. Quotations from Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955), are cited in the text using the abbreviation *OP*.



CHAPTER

12

JEWES AND CHRISTIANS

Sin, Salvation, and Love

In Chapter 1 we sketched the religious and cultural traditions of the ancient Greeks. This was not philosophy, but the ground from which Greek philosophy grew. We noted then that we would need to examine another prephilosophical tradition if we are to understand medieval and later Western philosophy. In this short chapter, we look at the early Judeo-Christian tradition.

Background

Jesus, whom the Christians call “Christ” or “Messiah” (meaning “the anointed one”), was a Jew. So were his first followers; Christianity is a modification of the Jewish heritage. Thus, to understand the Christians, we must sketch something of the history in terms of which they understood themselves. Their history is the history of the Hebrew people. Let us outline, then, certain central convictions that grow out of that history and that the Christians take for granted.

Of the very first importance is the conviction that there is *one God*. We may be able to trace some development of this concept—from a kind of tribal deity, to a God superior to the gods of

their neighbors, to one having the exclusive claim to worship—but by the time of the great prophets from the eighth to the sixth centuries B.C., it was already clear to the Hebrews that all other “gods” were mere pretenders, “idols” that it was sinful to reverence.*

Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel
and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts:

“I am the first and I am the last;
besides me there is no god. . . .

“To whom will you liken me and make me equal,
and compare me, that we may be alike?

Those who lavish gold from the purse,
and weigh out silver in the scales,
hire a goldsmith, and he makes it into a god;
then they fall down and worship!

They lift it upon their shoulders, they carry it,
they set it in its place, and it stands there;
it cannot move from its place.

If one cries to it, it does not answer
or save him from his trouble.”

—Isa. 44:6, 46:5–7¹

*Compare Xenophanes, pp. 13–14, who is writing at about this same time.

The one true god differs from idols in all these respects. He is not made by men; he cannot be seen or touched; he is not restricted to any one place; he responds when you cry to him. As “the first and the last,” he is eternal. He alone is worthy of worship and reverence.

God is the creator of the entire visible universe. The world is not eternal, as Aristotle thinks; nor is it God or an aspect of God, as the Stoics believed. God precedes and transcends the world, which is, however, wholly dependent on his power. The first words in the Hebrew scriptures are

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Gen. 1:1)

Moreover, God is entirely good, righteous, just, and holy. And this goodness is transmitted to the **creation**; on each of the “days” of creation, after God made light, the heavens, dry land, vegetation, animals, and human beings, we read that “God saw that it was good.” Finding the world to be good, the Hebrews have a positive attitude toward it; the world is not something to escape from; it is not some shadowy image of true reality, as it is for Plato. It is in this world that we have a home; it is here that God has put us; it is here that our tasks and purposes are to be accomplished and our happiness achieved. The shadowy existence in the underworld after death is not anything to desire.*

But this task and happiness are complicated by the fact of sin. In the well-known story of the first man and woman, we read that human beings have succumbed to the temptation to “be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:5). Not content with their status, wanting to play God themselves, humans have made themselves corrupt. Of the first pair of brothers, one murders the other. And so it has been ever since.

The rest of the Hebrew scriptures concerns a series of attempts to remedy this situation. They tell the story of how God, sometimes directly and

sometimes through representatives, acts to reestablish his rule in a community of righteousness and justice. It is often understood in terms of the concept of the “**Kingdom of God.**” This story expresses the self-understanding of Jews and Christians alike.

A central episode in this story comes when God calls a certain man, Abram (later called **Abraham**), to leave his home, his culture, his nation, and to venture to a new land.

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.” (Gen. 12:1–2)

The Hebrew people identify themselves in terms of this promise and burden. They trace their heritage back to Abraham and believe that they play a special role in the history of the world: It is their privilege—and responsibility—to be agents for the reestablishment of God’s kingdom on earth. They consider that they have a covenant with God, the terms of which are to reverence him, obeying him only, establishing justice among themselves, and so be a blessing to the rest of corrupt mankind—who can learn from them the blessings of righteousness.

A second crux is the **Exodus**. After some generations, the children of Abraham, faced with famine in Palestine, move to Egypt. Eventually they are enslaved there and spend “four hundred years” suffering considerable oppression. Against all odds, they leave Egypt under the guidance of **Moses** and reestablish themselves in the land promised to Abraham. This event, which leaves an indelible mark on the national character, is the sign and seal of their mission.

During the Exodus, the Hebrews receive **the Law** (“Torah”) at Mount Sinai. What has distinguished the Jews to this day is the continuous possession of that Law, which begins with these words:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me.

—Exod. 20:2–3

*See, for instance, Psalms 39:3 and 88:3–5, 10–12. Compare also Homer’s Achilles on p. 7. Belief in a “resurrection of the body” grew among Jews in the several centuries before Jesus, however. In Jesus’ time, one party, the Sadducees, held out against the belief. See Mark 12:18–27.

The Law goes on to forbid misusing God's name, killing, adultery, theft, false witness, and covetousness and to require keeping a Sabbath day holy and honoring one's parents. These statutes are well known as the Ten Commandments. But the Law also states in great detail how the people of God are to live, specifying dietary and health rules, principles of reparation for wrongs done, and regulations for religious observances.

The life of the Hebrew people remains precarious after their return from Egypt. They achieve some years of security and prosperity in the time of David and Solomon.* But thereafter it is a struggle to keep the community together. Surrounded by hostile nations, dominated for a time by the powerful Assyrians, exiled to Babylon, conquered by Alexander's armies, and finally made a province of the Roman Empire, they fight tenaciously for their heritage. They are constantly falling away from the Abrahamic covenant and the Law, if we are to judge by the succession of prophets who condemn their waywardness and call them back again to God. Still, despite the people's "hardness of heart," as the prophets call it, there is truth in the boast of Josephus, the first-century A.D. Jewish historian:

Throughout our history we have kept the same laws, to which we are eternally faithful.²

During the period of foreign domination there grows up an expectation that God will send someone to establish God's kingdom of righteousness among men. This agent of God is sometimes conceived in terms of a political liberator who will expel the oppressors and restore the ancient kingdom of David; sometimes he is conceived in more cosmic and apocalyptic terms, as one who will rescue the faithful few and destroy the wicked. This hoped-for figure is given a variety of titles: Son of David, Son of Man, Messiah.

It is into this context that Jesus is born. Jesus is called by all these titles and often calls himself "Son of Man." Christians will look back particularly to Isaiah's prophecy about a "Suffering Servant" who

will create the kingdom not by might, but by bearing the burdens of the people.

He was despised and rejected by men;
 a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
 and as one from whom men hide their faces
 he was despised, and we esteemed him not.
 Surely he has borne our griefs
 and carried our sorrows;
 yet we esteemed him stricken,
 smitten by God, and afflicted.
 But he was wounded for our transgressions,
 he was bruised for our iniquities;
 upon him was the chastisement that made us
 whole;
 and with his stripes we are healed.
 All we like sheep have gone astray;
 we have turned every one to his own way;
 and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.
 —Isa. 53:3–6

These words are applied to the life, and particularly to the death, of Jesus. We now turn to Jesus himself to see what leads so many to think of him in these terms.

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1. How do prophets differ from philosophers?
 2. What are the characteristics of God, according to the Judeo-Christian tradition?
 3. What is the significance of God's call to Abraham? Of the Exodus?
-

Jesus

In the earliest Gospel* Mark introduces **Jesus**, after his baptism by John, with these words:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." (Mark 1:14–15)

*The word "gospel" means "good news." The four accounts we have of the life of Jesus (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) are called Gospels because they present the good news that God has fulfilled his promises to Abraham in the life and death of Jesus. It should be noted that each of these accounts is written by someone who believes that Jesus is Lord, Savior, and the expected Messiah. We have no hostile or even neutral accounts of his life.

*This apex of the nation's power corresponds roughly to the time of the Trojan War.

That which the prophets foretold is now “at hand.” The “kingdom of God” is about to be established, and Jesus sees himself as the one to do it.

That the kingdom is indeed at hand is manifest in the healing miracles of Jesus. According to the gospel writers, Jesus cures leprosy, gives sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf, casts out demons, and even brings the dead back to life. These miracles are signs of God’s presence and power.

The attitude and behavior of Jesus bear out his sense of a new beginning. He is without any class consciousness, associating with poor and rich, learned and ignorant, righteous and sinner alike. A common complaint among those who carefully observe the Law is that he associates with undesirables. He does not do so, of course, to sanction their sin, but to lead them to righteousness, as the following parable illustrates.

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

So he told them this parable: “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” (Luke 15:1–7)

Absolute indifference to wealth and worldly goods is characteristic of both his life and his teaching. Of himself he says,

Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head. (Luke 9:58)

And he emphasizes repeatedly that attachment to riches will keep one out of the kingdom.* A wealthy man asks him what he must do to inherit

eternal life. Jesus replies that he must keep the commandments. The man says he has done so all his life. Then,

Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said to him, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” At that saying his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions.

And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!” (Mark 10:21–23)

There are many sayings to the same effect. To be part of the kingdom of God requires absolute singleness of mind; care for possessions distracts one from that intensity.

And he said to him, “Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” (Luke 12:15)

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon [riches].

“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? . . . Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.” (Matt. 6:24–33)

What kind of righteousness does Jesus have in mind? When a lawyer asks him what to do to inherit eternal life, Jesus answers,

“What is written in the law? How do you read?” And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him,

*Compare Socrates’ voluntary poverty and the way he describes his divine mission in *Apology* 29d–30b.

“You have answered right; do this, and you will live.” (Luke 10:26–28)

The key to the righteousness of the kingdom is **love**. But “love,” of course, is a word with many meanings.* What does it mean here? With reference to God, it means a kind of undivided and absolute devotion; it is the appropriate response to the creator who provides for us. This devotion to God has a corollary: that we love our “neighbors” as ourselves. No better explanation of this requirement can be given than the one Jesus gives to the lawyer who asks, “Who is my **neighbor**?”

“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion, and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed mercy on him.” And Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10:30–37)†

Several things in this famous parable of the good Samaritan merit comment. First, note that Jesus does not exactly answer the question he is asked, “Who is my neighbor?” Rather, he answers the question, “What is it to *act* as a neighbor?” The lawyer’s reaction to the story shows that he knows enough about *how to be a neighbor* that putting off action until he

has clarified the concept of *what a neighbor is* just constitutes rationalization and evasion of responsibility.* So the closing line directs the lawyer’s attention to himself: Do likewise—see that *you* act as a neighbor. This redirecting of attention from externals to the condition of one’s own heart is quite characteristic of Jesus.

Second, note that the key word here is “compassion.” Jesus is explaining the second part of the Law. To love your neighbor as yourself is to have compassion, to “feel with” your fellow human being, and to act in accord with that feeling. Just as we feel our own desires, anxieties, pains, and joys, so are we to “feel with” the desires, anxieties, pains and joys of others. And as we act to fulfill the intentions that grow out of these self-directed passions, so, like the Samaritan, must we act to satisfy the needs of others.

And as you wish that men would do to you, do so to them. (Luke 6:31)

Love, understood in this way, strikes a new note in the story of Western philosophy. It is a conception quite foreign to the Greek philosophers. For them the basic human problem focuses on the control of the passions; by and large, they ascribe the locus of control to reason. Plato sees it as a struggle to subjugate the beast within, Aristotle as a matter of channeling the passions by means of virtuous habits. The Stoics almost recommend the elimination of feelings altogether.† For all of them, the goal is finding the best possible way to live. And though the Platonic wise man will return to the cave to try to enlighten those still in bondage, none of them would say that the best way to live necessarily involves feeling for others just as we feel for ourselves. What Jesus recommends is not the control or extinction of passion, but its *extension*; it is in

*See the discussion of love in Plato’s *Symposium* (pp. 165–166). The word the New Testament writers use for love is *agape*. It is interesting to compare the *eros* that Socrates extols with the *agape* that, Jesus holds, is the key to the kingdom of God.

†Note the three types and their response to the injured man. The priest represents the religious leadership; Levites were lay assistants to the priests; and Samaritans were foreigners who were despised by the Jews.

*Compare Augustine on the priority of will over intellect, p. 289.

†The Stoics, for example, oppose pity. In considering what behavior is appropriate when someone is weeping, Epictetus advises us not to be overcome; we should remember that his weeping has its source not in what has happened but in the view he takes of it. We may, perhaps, go as far as to moan with him, but Epictetus says, “Be careful not to moan inwardly” (*The Handbook of Epictetus* 16).

universal compassion that we will find the kingdom of God. And though the Stoics do think of all men as brothers, not even they would say this:

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. (Luke 6:27)

We do seem to have something genuinely new here.*

A corollary to this love is a new virtue: humility. **Humility** is conspicuously lacking from the Greek lists of virtues, but it is nearly the very essence of perfection according to Jesus. For humility is the opposite of pride, and **pride** is the very root of sin. It is pride—wanting to be like God—that leads to the sin of Adam. Pride sets human beings against each other; the proud man, glorying in his superiority, cannot consider his neighbor equal in importance to himself and so cannot love as Jesus requires.

Pride, particularly pride in one's righteousness, is the attitude most at variance with the kingdom of God.

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18:9–14)†

*It seems new, at least, to the Western tradition. Compare Jesus' teachings on this point to the Four Divine Abidings in Buddhist thought (p. 40), the "impartial concern" of the Mohists (pp. 78–80), and the importance of understanding others in the Confucian tradition (p. 222).

†The Pharisees claimed that they observed all the details of the Law. Tax collectors, working for the Roman occupiers, were generally despised; and it is true that many of them were corrupt. A "tithe" is one-tenth of one's income, which is what the Law required to be given for religious and charitable purposes.

Jesus denounces those—usually the wealthy and powerful—who consider themselves righteous but do not act as neighbors should act. Like Socrates, he thereby incurs hostility among those in a position to do him harm. Unlike Socrates, of course, he does not do so by asking questions. Like the prophets of old, Jesus thunders out condemnation; and it is not a claim to know that he tries to undermine, but pretensions to righteousness.* Here is an example.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. (Matt. 23:27–28)

His antagonism to mere outward observance leads him to internalize the Law. About the Law he speaks with authority, contrasting the *words* of the Law, which can be kept simply by behaving in certain ways, with the *spirit* of the Law, which requires an attitude of love. For example,

You have heard that it was said to the men of old, "You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment." But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment. (Matt. 5:21–22)

You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matt. 5:27–28)

This attitude toward the Law brings him into conflict with the authorities. He seems to them to take the Law lightly; on several occasions, for example, they clash with him on the details of Sabbath observance. He is, moreover, popular among the common people and must seem to be undermining the authority of the Jewish leaders. They determine to put him to death.

Because of Roman law, they cannot execute Jesus themselves. So after a trial in the religious

*This difference, while significant, may be diminished by the observation that for Socrates virtue is knowledge. So one who claims to know what piety is, for example, would also—in Socrates' eyes—be claiming to be pious.

court in which he is convicted for blasphemy (putting himself in the place of God), the Jewish leaders bring him before the Roman governor, Pilate. Here he is accused of treason, of setting himself up as king of the Jews (a charge of blasphemy would not have impressed this cosmopolitan Roman). Pilate reluctantly accedes to their demands, and Jesus is crucified.

Each of the four Gospels ends with an account of the discovery, on the third day after Jesus' death, of an empty tomb and of numerous appearances of Jesus to his disciples. His followers come to believe that he has risen from the dead. And they take this as a sign that he is indeed God's anointed, the suffering servant who takes upon himself the sins of the world, thereby bringing in the kingdom of God in an unexpectedly spiritual way. Their response is to set about making disciples of all nations.

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1. How, according to Jesus, are we to love God? Our neighbor?
 2. Do the Christians present new virtues?
 3. Christians accept as a fact that Jesus rose from the dead. What do they think that means for us?
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The Meaning of Jesus

We have noted that the Gospels are written by believers; they are shot through with the significance his followers attribute to Jesus after their experience of his resurrection. But it will be useful to discuss more explicitly how his life and death are interpreted. For this purpose, we will look particularly at the Gospel of John and at some letters written by the greatest of the early missionaries, Paul.

John begins his Gospel with a majestic prologue.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. . . .

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. . . . And from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace

and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known. (John 1:1–3, 14–18)

Notice the exalted conception of Jesus we have here. John identifies Jesus with the **Word** itself—the *logos*, the wisdom through which all things are made. This *logos* was “in the beginning” with God (a phrase meant to recall the first line of Genesis). Though this Word exists beyond the world, it enters the world through Jesus, enlightening all and bringing those who are willing into the family of God.

John reports Jesus expressing these ideas in various ways. Jesus says, “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). He says, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). He calls himself “the light of the world” (John 8:12), “the bread of life” (John 6:48), and “the good shepherd” who “lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11).

If Jesus is the manifestation of God in the world, what do we learn of God from him?

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:16–17)

The God whom Jesus reveals is not Aristotle's unmoved mover, thinking true thoughts about himself. Nor is he akin to the indifferent gods of the Epicureans. The message is that God is Love, that he cares for us and will save us from our sinfulness through his Son Jesus, who took our sin upon himself in his death. The life and death of the Christ manifest the extremity of that Love and serve, in turn, as a model for life in the kingdom of God.

What is required is a “new birth,” not of flesh and the will of man, but “of God.”* And this new life—this is the gospel—is now available to all by trust in Jesus, the Christ.

Paul was a Jew who at first vigorously opposed the new “sect” of Christians. While engaged in persecuting them, he saw a vision of Jesus and

*See Jesus' conversation with the Jewish leader Nicodemus in John 3:1–15.

was converted, after which he devoted his life to spreading the gospel. He traveled extensively, establishing churches all over Asia Minor and Greece. He visited Athens and argued there with both the Jews and the philosophers, appalled by the “idolatry” he found there and preaching the one creator God and Jesus who rose from the dead.*



“The whole of history is incomprehensible without the Christ.”

Ernest Renan (1823–1892)

Paul comes to believe it is hopeless to try to attain the righteousness of the kingdom of God by observing the Law; no doubt this reflects in part his own zealous efforts before his conversion. All men, Paul holds, are inextricably caught in the web of sinfulness and cannot by their own (sinful) efforts “justify” themselves before the righteous judge. But what we cannot do for ourselves God has graciously done for us through Jesus.

For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. (Rom. 3:20–22)

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death. (Rom. 8:1–2)

Having been freed from the burden of the Law and no longer needing to prove ourselves righteous, says Paul, allows us to participate in the Spirit of Christ, loving our neighbors and serving their needs. It really is Jesus, then, who has brought in the kingdom of God. All who believe in him be raised to a blessed life with him.

We close our consideration of Christian teaching with these words from another author.

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love remains in death. Any one who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth. (1 John 3:14–18)

1. What does it mean when John calls Jesus “the *logos*”? Relate this to Heraclitean and Stoic views.
2. How, according to Paul, can we be “justified” before God, the judge?
3. *Why* should we love our neighbors as ourselves?

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

You should now have a fairly clear understanding of how Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and the Stoics envision the good life. Choose one of these philosophies and work out a comparison (both similarities and differences) between it and the Christian view of the good life.

KEY WORDS

God	Jesus
creation	love
Kingdom of God	neighbor
Abraham	humility
Exodus	pride
Moses	Word
the Law	

NOTES

1. Biblical quotations in this text are taken from the Revised Standard Version.
2. Josephus, *Against Apion* 200:20; quoted in C. K. Barrett, ed., *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents* (London: S.P.C.K., 1956), 202.

*See Acts 17:16–34.

CHAPTER

13

AUGUSTINE

God and the Soul



Our story has reached a crucial turning point: on the cusp of the early medieval period, the philosopher and theologian Augustine (A.D. 354–430) melded the heritage of the Greek philosophers with early Christian thought. Both of these traditions are given a unique stamp by Augustine’s penchant for introspection, his passionate search for happiness, and the impress of his undeniably powerful mind. He would himself say that if he had contributed anything of value, it was due entirely to the grace of God. This would not be merely an expression of modesty; Augustine believes it to be the literal truth. Whether we agree with that or not, we can fairly say that no one else did as much to shape the intellectual course of the next thousand years of European thought.

Augustine’s thought is so entangled with his life experiences that we need to understand something of his life.¹ There is no better introduction to his early years than his own *Confessions*, in which he reflects—before God but also before us all—on his youthful waywardness. By the time he wrote this reflective look at his life (in 397), he was

forty-three years old and had been a Christian for eleven years, a priest for eight years, and a bishop for two. We cannot hope here to imitate the richness of these meditations but will try just to get a feel for how he saw his life from the point of view he had reached.

Augustine was born in northern Africa, which had been Roman for many generations but was always precariously perched between the sea and the barbarian interior. Christianity had taken root there but, despite its legitimation by the emperor Constantine in 325, was still in competition with the old pagan beliefs and ways. Augustine was the child of a Christian mother, Monica, and a pagan father who converted to Christianity before he died. Monica was the stronger influence, convinced all her life that her son would be “saved.” But it was Patricius, his father, who resolutely determined that Augustine should be educated; he studied literature and rhetoric and, for a while, the law. His education was intense but narrow, concentrating on the masters of Latin style and consisting of enormous amounts of memorization of, for example, Virgil’s *Aeneid*. He read very little philosophy.

Meanwhile, he lived the life of pleasure. The bishop he became, looking back on those days, puts it this way:

I cared for nothing but to love and be loved. But my love went beyond the affection of one mind for another, beyond the arc of the bright beam of friendship. Bodily desire, like a morass, and adolescent sex welling up within me exuded mists which clouded over and obscured my heart, so that I could not distinguish the clear light of true love from the murk of lust. Love and lust together seethed within me. In my tender youth they swept me away over the precipice of my body's appetites and plunged me in the whirlpool of sin. (C 2.2)²

His “whirlpool of sin” involved more than just sex. He is almost more perplexed over a single act that comes to represent for him the puzzling nature of human wickedness. He, together with some companions, had shaken down an enormous quantity of pears from a neighbor's tree and had stolen them away. And why did they steal the pears? Did they need them? No. Did they eat them? No. They threw them to the pigs.

Why, then, did they steal the pears? This is what puzzles Augustine. In a judicial inquiry, he notes, no one is satisfied until the motive has been produced: a desire of gaining some good or of avoiding some evil. But what was the good gained here? What evil was avoided? He concludes: “our real pleasure consisted in doing something that was forbidden” (C 2.4). But why was that a pleasure? Augustine's reflective answer is that the act was, in a perverse sort of way, an imitation of God; it was an attempt to exercise a liberty that belongs to God alone: that of being unconstrained by anything outside himself (C 1.6). No one, Augustine felt, was going to make rules for *him* to live by. We come, then, even in this simple teenage prank, to Augustine's analysis of the root of the human predicament: **pride**.



“Perverseness is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart.”

Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849)

He also notes that he surely would not have stolen the pears on his own.

It was not the takings that attracted me but the raid itself, and yet to do it by myself would have been no fun and I should not have done it. This was friendship of a most unfriendly sort, bewitching my mind in an inexplicable way. For the sake of a laugh, a little sport, I was glad to do harm and anxious to damage another; and that without a thought of profit for myself or retaliation for injuries received! And all because we are ashamed to hold back when others say “Come on! Let's do it!” (C 2.9)

This power of the group to incite to evil deeds is expressed also in the following passage, in which Augustine sets out a very common experience of the young.

I was so blind to the truth that among my companions I was ashamed to be less dissolute than they were. For I heard them bragging of their depravity, and the greater the sin the more they gloried in it, so that I took pleasure in the same vices not only for the enjoyment of what I did, but also for the applause I won.

Nothing deserves to be despised more than vice; yet I gave in more and more to vice simply in order not to be despised. If I had not sinned enough to rival other sinners, I used to pretend that I had done things I had not done at all, because I was afraid that innocence would be taken for cowardice and chastity for weakness. (C 2.3)

It is clear that the Christian bishop at age forty-three does not take lightly the peccadilloes of his youth. It is not prudishness that accounts for this, however; it is a considered judgment that pursuing such desires is a sure way to miss true happiness. But the young Augustine had a long way to go before he would see things this way.

He took a mistress, to whom he was apparently faithful for many years. They had a son. Augustine completed his education and became a teacher of rhetoric and literature, first in the provincial north African town of Thagaste and then in Carthage, the great city of Roman Africa. He was an able teacher and earned a reputation, for which he was most eager.

But he was eager for something else as well. At nineteen, he read a (now lost) work by Cicero,

the great orator, which contains an exhortation to study philosophy. Augustine was carried away:

The only thing that pleased me in Cicero's book was his advice not simply to admire one or another of the schools of philosophy, but to love wisdom itself, whatever it might be, and to search for it, pursue it, hold it, and embrace it firmly. (C 4.4)

The young Augustine embraced this love of wisdom with a “blaze of enthusiasm.” But where to look? He knew very little of classical philosophy, which is what Cicero surely had in mind. In Augustine's circle in late fourth-century Africa, it was Christ who was portrayed as “the wisdom of God”; so Augustine turned to the Bible. But he was greatly disappointed. Not only did it seem to lack the polish of the best Roman poets, but also its conceptions seemed crude and naive to him. In Genesis, after Adam and Eve had disobeyed God, we read that they “heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the cool of the day.” What a way to think of God!

Moreover, Christianity seemed unable to solve a great puzzle, which was to perplex Augustine for many years. Christians proclaimed God to be both almighty and perfectly good. But if this is so, where does evil come from? If the answer is the devil, the question can be repeated: Where does the devil come from? If from God, then God is the source of evil. And if God is almighty, where else could the devil come from? But God is good; so how could he be the source of evil?

It may be useful to set the problem out in a more formal way.

1. If God is omnipotent (all powerful), omniscient (all knowing), and perfectly good, then there can be no evil, because
 - a. being all-powerful, he *could do* something about any existing evil,
 - b. being all-knowing, he *would know* about any existing evil, and
 - c. being perfectly good, he *would want to eliminate* any existing evil.
2. But there is evil.
3. Therefore God is either
 - a. not all-powerful (He *can't* do anything about the evil), or

- b. not all-knowing (He could do something if only he *knew* about it), or
- c. not perfectly good (He does know and could do something, but He *doesn't care*)—or
- d. some combination of a, b, and c.

Augustine could not see that the Christians had any satisfactory answer to this puzzle, traditionally called “the **Problem of Evil.**” You should be able to see that it is quite a formidable problem. The argument looks valid; that is, if its premises are true, it looks as though the conclusion will have to be true. So that leads us to ask whether the premises are true. Obviously, there are two main possibilities here. We could argue that premise 1 is false; or we could argue that premise 2 is false. Roughly speaking, Augustine tries out each of these possibilities.

The first possibility was represented for him by a popular movement in his day called “**Manicheanism.**” Augustine was a “hearer” (more than an outsider, but less than a full member) among the Manichees for nine years.

Manicheanism was a sect founded by the Babylonian Mani in the third century. Mani synthesized themes from the Persian religion of Zoroastrianism and Christianity. Manicheanism is often thought of as one of the many “heresies” prevalent during the first centuries of the Christian era, as the church tried to sort out an orthodox view of revealed truth. Religious authorities executed Mani in A.D. 277, which only helped spread the sect more widely.

The complex doctrines of the sect combine astrology, half-digested bits of natural science, and borrowings from traditional religions. But the key beliefs are simple and provide a solution of sorts to the problem of evil. The reason there is evil in the world, say the Manichees, is that there is *no omnipotent good power*. Rather, there are two equal and opposed powers, one good and one evil. It has always been this way, they say, and will always be so. So you can see that the Manichees deny the antecedent in the first premise.

This opposition, moreover, is not just “out there” in the world. It resides in each of us, since we are ourselves a battleground between good and evil. That may not sound very profound; but the

Manichees explain this dichotomy in a particular way. The good part of ourselves is the soul (composed of the light), and the bad part is the body (composed of the dark earth). A human being is literally part divine and part demonic.

I have known my soul and the body that lies upon it,
That they have been enemies since the creation of
the worlds. (*MP*, p. 49)³

In fact, the entire earth is the province of the evil power, since evil resides in matter as such. We are, however, essentially *souls*; and as souls we experience ourselves to be under the domination of a foreign power—matter, the body, the world. The “gospel” of the Manichees is that we can be saved from the domination of the evil power—matter—if we come to *know who we are*.

Manicheism, then, claims to solve the *theoretical* problem of evil by the postulation of the two powers—denying the infinite perfection of God—and the *practical* problem of evil by the doctrine that the soul is essentially good, untouched by the evil of the body. If only you can come to identify yourself with your soul, you will experience “salvation” from the evil. Augustine apparently felt that this solution freed him from his theoretical perplexities and allowed him to think of himself as “essentially good.” This, then, was the first “wisdom” that he embraced in his enthusiasm for the truth.

He noticed, however, that some of the doctrines were obscure and that others seemed to conflict with the best astronomical knowledge of the day. When one of the Manichean “Elect,” a certain Faustus, came to Carthage, Augustine determined to inquire about these things. On examination it became obvious that Faustus was not wise.* So Augustine was disappointed a second time; neither Christianity nor Manicheism seemed to offer the wisdom he was seeking.

Moreover, he found Manichean views unhelpful in a practical sense. Their key to salvation lay in knowledge, in a recognition of the true nature of the self as good. But this didn’t seem to help one change one’s life. It was too passive. (It may have

been his experience as a Manichee that led to his later view that the root of sin lies not in the intellect but in the *will*.) The bishop he became reflects on his experience:

I still thought that it is not we who sin but some other nature that sins within us. It flattered my pride to think that I incurred no guilt and, when I did wrong, not to confess it so that you [God] might bring healing to a soul that had sinned against you. (Psalm 41:4) I preferred to excuse myself and blame this unknown thing which was in me but was not part of me. The truth, of course, was that it was all my own self, and my own impiety had divided me against myself. My sin was all the more incurable because I did not think myself a sinner. (*C* 5.10)

Eventually, Augustine drifted away from the Manichees, but these notions of pride, guilt, and a divided self remained with him.

He began to read the philosophers and found himself attracted to skepticism. He left Africa and went to Rome, where again he taught rhetoric and literature. He was recommended to the more attractive post of professor of rhetoric in Milan, where he was joined by his widowed mother; with her, he attended Christian services conducted by the bishop of Milan, Ambrose. **Ambrose** was an immensely learned man, far more learned in the traditions of the Greek church fathers and Greek philosophy than Augustine (whose Greek skills were always imperfect). Through Ambrose, Augustine began to discover the possibility of a Christianity that was not naive and crude but that could bear comparison with the best thought of the day.

What made the Christianity of Ambrose a revelation to Augustine, who had, in a sense, been familiar with Christianity since his childhood? There seem to have been three things. (1) There was the idea of God and the soul as *immaterial* realities. Augustine had found great difficulty in thinking of either as other than some sort of *body*, even if very ethereal bodies. (Recall that the Manichees thought of God and the soul as light.) But if God is a body, God cannot be everywhere present (and this idea fits with the Manichean dualism of two equal and opposite realities). If God is an immaterial spirit, however, then he is not excluded by the material world and he can be omnipresent. (2) Ambrose

*Compare Socrates asking questions in Athens: *Apology* 21b–22c.



"I was in love with beauty of a lower order and it was dragging me down."

—ST. AUGUSTINE

was not afraid to plunder the Greek philosophical tradition, which had often emphasized immaterial reality, for help in making Christianity intelligible. (3) Ambrose offered allegorical interpretations to Scripture, particularly to the Old Testament. Taken allegorically rather than literally, many passages ceased to offend and took on the aspect of conveying deep spiritual truths.

Augustine began to study the Bible seriously for the first time and to read philosophy. The Bible spoke of the Wisdom of God, and philosophers loved wisdom. Could Christianity contain the truth the philosophers were seeking? He began to suspect so. He grew more sure of it and then became virtually certain.

Yet he hesitated. What would happen if he became a Christian? In Augustine's view, this was a serious matter. His life would have to change drastically, for he was still preoccupied with worldly things: his career, his reputation, and sex. His mistress had returned to Africa, and marriage with an heiress was being arranged. Would he have to give all this up? Augustine was never one for half measures, and it seemed to him that he would. But could he? He procrastinated. The bishop he had become expresses the agony of that time in the following way:

I was held fast, not in fetters clamped upon me by another, but by my own will, which had the strength of iron chains. The enemy held my will in his power and from it he had made a chain and shackled me. For my will was perverse and lust had grown from it, and when I gave in to lust habit was born, and when I did not resist the habit it became a necessity. These were the links which together formed what I have called my chain, and it held me fast in the duress of servitude. But the new will which had come to life in me and made me wish to serve you freely and enjoy you, my God, who are our only certain joy, was not yet strong enough to overcome the old, hardened as it was by the passage of time. So these two wills within me, one old, one new, one the servant of the flesh, the other of the spirit, were in conflict and between them they tore my soul apart. (C 8.5)

The *perversity of the will*, which leads to *lust*, which leads to *habit*, which becomes a virtual *necessity*, forms a chain that will play a crucial role in Augustine's analysis of what is wrong with human beings and how it can be cured.



"Nothing is stronger than habit."

Ovid (43 B.C.–A.D. 17)

In a dramatic experience, which Augustine relates in the *Confessions*, the chain of necessity was broken. After hearing from a traveler the stories of several others who had renounced the world and devoted themselves to God, Augustine rushed into a garden in a tumult. "My inner self," he says,

“was a house divided against itself.” “I was my own contestant.”

I felt that I was still the captive of my sins, and in my misery I kept crying, “How long shall I go on saying ‘tomorrow, tomorrow’? Why not now? Why not make an end of my ugly sins at this moment?”

I was asking myself these questions, weeping all the while with the most bitter sorrow in my heart, when all at once I heard the sing-song voice of a child in a nearby house. Whether it was the voice of a boy or a girl I cannot say, but again and again it repeated the refrain “Take it and read, take it and read.” At this I looked up, thinking hard whether there was any kind of game in which children used to chant words like these, but I could not remember ever hearing them before. I stemmed my flood of tears and stood up, telling myself that this could only be a divine command to open my book of Scripture and read the first passage on which my eyes should fall. . . .

So I hurried back to the place where Alypius was sitting, for when I stood up to move away I had put down the book containing Paul’s Epistles. I seized it and opened it, and in silence I read the first passage on which my eyes fell: Not in reveling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, arm yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ; spend no more thought on nature and nature’s appetites. (Romans 13:13, 14) I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled. (C 8.12)

Augustine had found the **wisdom** he had been searching for.

He gave up his career and his prospects for marriage. He retired for some months with some friends and his mother to a retreat where he studied and wrote. On Easter Day in 387, he was baptized by Ambrose, thus making his break with “the world” public. Not long thereafter, his mother having died, he returned to Africa, was made a priest (somewhat against his will), and in 391 was ordained bishop of Hippo, a city on the Mediterranean coast of Africa.

Thereafter he was engaged in practical affairs of the church: in serving as a judge (one of the tasks of a bishop in those days), in controversies to define

and defend the faith, and in much writing. There are, of course, the sermons. But there are also letters and pamphlets and book after book in which Augustine explores the meaning of the faith he had adopted. In these the theme is—again and again—to try to *understand* what he has *believed*. For Augustine, faith must come first; understanding may follow (though on some difficult topics, such as the Trinity, even understanding will be only partial).* This order of things may seem strange to some of us. We may think that unless we understand first, we will not know what it is that we are believing. But it is a reflection of Augustine’s conviction that will is more fundamental than intellect and that only if the will is first directed by faith to the right end will the intellect be able to do its job rightly.†

With this point we are ready to leave the life of Augustine and focus on his philosophy. It is characteristic of Augustine’s thought that we cannot do so without at the same time discussing his theology, or doctrine of God. For wisdom, Augustine is convinced, is *one*. And that means that philosophy and theology, understanding and faith, science and religion are inextricably bound together. What the lover of wisdom wants is the truth. And the truth is God. And God is most fully known by faith in Christ. We will not do full justice to this unity, but in selecting out certain themes that are of particular philosophical interest, we will try to keep in mind the whole context in which they play their part for Augustine. Part of Augustine’s legacy is just this unity of thought. It sets the intellectual tone in the West for a thousand years.

*Here is an analogy to Augustine’s motto, *faith seeking understanding*. Suppose you are unable to solve a certain mathematical problem. Then you are given the answer. *Believing* that this is the correct answer, you are now able to work back and *understand* why it is correct.

†Think about Socrates. We said that to benefit from a conversation with Socrates, you had to be a person of a certain *character*. The arrogant, the proud, the self-satisfied would only be humiliated. (See pp. 96–97.) Augustine agrees that character is more fundamental than intellect. But whereas Socrates thinks of virtue or character as a matter of knowledge, for Augustine it is a matter of faith, or commitment.

-
1. Explain what Augustine thinks we should learn from the adventure of the pears.
 2. What advice of Cicero's shaped Augustine's life?
 3. What problem made Augustine dissatisfied with Christianity?
 4. How did the Manichees explain evil? Where is evil located? Where is good located?
 5. For what reasons did Augustine become dissatisfied with the Manichees?
 6. Describe the links in the chain leading to the bondage of the will.
 7. What, according to Augustine, is the relation between belief and understanding?
-

Wisdom, Happiness, and God

Augustine takes for granted that philosophy, the pursuit of wisdom, has just one aim: happiness. This was the common assumption in late antiquity, shared by the Epicureans, the Stoics, and the skeptics. Augustine had little interest in nature philosophy and eventually turned away from it as Socrates had done.* It could not make one happy.

What does interest Augustine intensely is the soul, for happiness and unhappiness are clearly conditions of the soul. How does Augustine understand **happiness**? That soul is happy which possesses what it most desires, *provided* that it most desires what wisdom approves.

Just as it is agreed that we all wish to be happy, so it is agreed that we all wish to be wise, since no one without wisdom is happy. No man is happy except through the highest good, which is to be found and included in that truth which we call wisdom. (*FCW* 2.9.102–103)

You cannot be happy unless you have what you desire; yet having what you desire does not guarantee happiness, for you must desire the right things. Certain things, if they are desired and attained, will produce misery rather than happiness. Augustine knows this from bitter experience.

Moreover, the appropriate objects of desire must be things that cannot be taken away from us

against our will, and they must be enduring.† If they could be taken away from us, we could not be secure in the enjoyment of them; and if they could fade or disappear on their own, we would fear their prospective loss even if we had them. What makes for happiness must *last*. These are among the truths that wisdom teaches.

But again we need to backtrack a bit. For, as we have seen, some philosophers—the skeptics—doubt whether any such truths can be known. Augustine himself had been attracted to **skepticism** for a time and saw that he had to refute it for anything else to stand firm. So we must take another logical step backward.

Can the skeptical objections be met? Augustine believes they can be met, and decisively so. Although we can be deceived by the senses and can make purely intellectual mistakes, there are three things we know with absolute certainty:

The certainty that I exist, that I know it, and that I am glad of it, is independent of any imaginary and deceptive fantasies.

In respect of these truths I have no fear of the arguments of the Academics.* They say, “Suppose you are mistaken?” I reply, “If I am mistaken, I exist.” A non-existent being cannot be mistaken; therefore I must exist, if I am mistaken. Then since my being mistaken proves that I exist, how can I be mistaken in thinking that I exist, seeing that my mistake establishes my existence? Since therefore I must exist in order to be mistaken, then even if I am mistaken, there can be no doubt that I am not mistaken in my knowledge that I exist. It follows that I am not mistaken in knowing that I know. For just as I know that I exist, I also know that I know. And when I am glad of those two facts, I can add the fact of that gladness to the things I know, as a fact of equal worth. For I am not mistaken about the fact of my gladness, since I am not mistaken about the things which I love. Even if they were illusory, it would still be a fact that I love the illusions. (*CG* 11.27)

Knowledge and certainty are possible; skepticism is mistaken. Truth is available to us, at least to this

†This is by now a familiar point. See, for instance, pp. 209–210.

*The Academics were members of the Academy after Plato who turned to skepticism.

*See *Apology* 19c–d and p. 160.

small extent. And notice what this truth is about: his own existence, his thought, and his feelings. In short, the first thing we know for certain concerns ourselves and, in particular, the soul.*

The next question is whether we can know *more* than this. Like the Platonic philosophers, Augustine turns to mathematics. Imagine a circle, from the center of which two radii are drawn to the circumference. Let the points at which the radii meet the circle be as close together as you like; it will still be the case that these two lines meet only at that point which is the center. You cannot draw it to look this way (try!), but it is true nonetheless.† Furthermore, we know that between any two such lines, no matter how close together they are, innumerable other lines—or even another circle—can be drawn. This is true, and we know it to be true (SO 20.35). And this truth is not something private to any one of us. It is knowledge common to all.

Whatever I may experience with my bodily senses, such as this air and earth and whatever corporeal matter they contain, I cannot know how long it will endure. But seven and three are ten, not only now, but forever. There has never been a time when seven and three were not ten, nor will there ever be a time when they are not ten. Therefore, I have said that the truth of number is incorruptible and common to all who think. (FCW 2.7.82–83)

Augustine concludes that mathematical truth exists and we can know it.

Perhaps, however, we grant that there is mathematical truth but doubt that there is such a thing as practical truth—truth about how to be happy, about the highest good. But, Augustine asks,

Will you deny that the incorrupt is better than the corrupt, the eternal better than the temporal, the inviolable better than the violable? (FCW 2.10.114)

Here is a truth that seems as secure to Augustine as the truths of mathematics. How, for example, could the beauty of a flower that lasts for a day be

as good as an equivalent beauty that lasts for two days? And how could that be as good as the same beauty lasting forever? But this, notice, is a truth about what is “better,” and so it has direct practical implications. Whatever is the highest good, whatever will actually fulfill the desire for happiness, must be the best of all possible things—incorruptible, eternal, inviolable. Otherwise, even if we possessed it, it could be taken away from us without our consent. To settle for less than such a good is to resign ourselves to unhappiness.

But if this is *true*, then this **truth** is itself eternal—as unchanging a truth as seven plus three makes ten. And it is a truth common to and knowable by all. Furthermore, their existence does not depend on either me or you. We do not *decide* their truth; we *acknowledge* it as something beyond and superior to ourselves.

When a man says that the eternal is more powerful than the temporal, and that seven plus three are ten, he does not say that it ought to be so; he knows it is this way, and does not correct it as an examiner would, but he rejoices as if he has made a discovery.

If truth were equal to our minds, it would be subject to change. Our minds sometimes see more and sometimes less, and because of this we acknowledge that they are mutable. Truth, remaining in itself, does not gain anything when we see it, or lose anything when we do not see it. It is whole and uncorrupted. With its light, truth gives joy to the men who turn to it, and punishes with blindness those who turn away from it. (FCW 2.12.134–35)

Let us review. We want to be happy, and to find happiness we desire to be wise. Wisdom will tell us what the highest good is. Possession of this good will make us happy. Such a good must be eternal, available to all, and superior to ourselves. But we have now found something with precisely those characteristics: truth itself.*

We possess in the truth, therefore, what we all may enjoy, equally and in common; in it are no defects or limitations. For truth receives all its lovers without arousing their envy. It is open to all, yet it is always chaste. No one says to the other, “Get back!

*At the beginning of modern philosophy in the seventeenth century, this theme will be picked up by René Descartes. See *Meditation II*.

†Compare discussion of Socrates’ sand drawings on pp. 152–153.

*The common, public nature of truth is stressed also by Plato. See pp. 151–152.

Let me approach too! Hands off! Let me also embrace it!" All men cling to the truth and touch it. The food of truth can never be stolen. (FCW 2.14.145)

Truth is something we cannot lose against our will. And since it is superior to our minds, it is a candidate for being the highest good and the source of our happiness.

Now we can *understand* (not just believe) why God must be brought into the picture. Think back to what Augustine claims to know: he exists, he lives, and he knows and feels. These facts are ordered in a kind of hierarchy. The latter facts presuppose the former; you cannot live unless you exist, and you cannot know and feel unless you are alive. Moreover, this is a hierarchy of value, for it is better to be alive than just to exist, and it is better to know and feel than just to live. These are the reasons we judge plants superior to rocks, animals to plants, and ourselves to all. At the top of this hierarchy is our own rational nature, by which we judge the rest and guide our own behavior. This is best of all among the things of experience. But what if there were something superior even to this? Would it not be right to acknowledge that as *God*, particularly if it were shown to be eternal and immutable?

But this is just what Augustine claims already to have shown! Truth itself exists. It is immutable and eternal. And it is superior to our reason. By definition, **God** is "that to whom no one is superior" (FCW 2.6.54).^{*} So we can now say that, on the assumption that there is nothing superior to the truth, the truth itself is God. If there should exist something superior to the truth, then that is God. On either hypothesis, God exists! As Augustine puts it in a dialogue with a friend,

You granted . . . that if I showed you something higher than our minds, you would admit, assuming that nothing existed which was still higher, that God exists. I accepted your condition and said that it was enough to show this. For if there is something more excellent than truth, this is God. If there is not, then truth itself is God. Whether or not truth

^{*}This idea is the root from which a much more sophisticated and complex proof will be drawn by Anselm of Canterbury. See Chapter 15.

is God, you cannot deny that God exists, and this was the question with which we agreed to deal. (FCW 2.15. 153–154)



"Truth—is as old as God—
His Twin Identity
And will endure as long as He
A Co-Eternity—"

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886)

Again let's set out the structure of the argument:

1. God is (by definition) that to whom there is nothing superior.
2. Truth exists and is superior to us.
3. If nothing is superior to truth, then God = truth and God exists.
4. If there is something superior even to truth, then God is that thing, and God exists.
5. Either 3 or 4.
6. So God exists.

To this demonstration his friend, Evodius, exclaims,

I can scarcely find words for the unbelievable joy that fills me. I accept these arguments, crying out that they are most certain. And my inner voice shouts, for truth itself to hear, that I cling to this: not only does good exist, but indeed the highest good—and this is the source of happiness. (FCW 2.15.156)

Since his experience in the garden Augustine has believed this, and now he also understands it in a way that satisfies his reason. But one's reason is not unaffected by one's will and desires; without a will to truth, even the best rational demonstration may fail to convince. As we'll see, in a certain sense Augustine holds that *will* is basic.

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1. How are wisdom and happiness related?
 2. What is Augustine's argument against the Sceptics?
 3. What shows that truth is superior to ourselves?
 4. What is Augustine's argument for the existence of God?
 5. What is the essence of God?
-

God and the World

Augustine has come to believe in the God of the Christians. Here, he is convinced, is wisdom and the path to happiness. But he needs also to understand what he has come to believe. He has discovered a rational proof that God exists. Could reason, employed in support of faith, also understand how this world is related to God?

Here too Augustine draws extensively but critically from the wisdom of the philosophers, especially from the Platonists. For as Augustine reads them, they express in a perfectly rational way, without relying on the authority of revelation, ideas that mesh remarkably well with the Scriptures. To see how, it will be useful to take a detour to the views of Plotinus (A.D. 204–270), the main source for **Neoplatonism**. This tradition, within which Augustine himself must be counted a distinguished figure, lasted well into the eighteenth century.

THE GREAT CHAIN OF BEING

Plotinus blends mystical insight and rational elaboration, the latter largely dependent on Plato. Mystical experience, which Plotinus is clearly familiar with, has certain characteristics that reappear in all ages and cultures. It is an experience of a particularly powerful and persuasive sort in which the focus is an absolute unity. The multiplicity of things disappears; one is no longer able even to distinguish oneself from other objects. Mystics talk of this experience in terms of identity of the self with “the All,” with “the One,” or with “God.” It is accompanied by an absolutely untroubled bliss.

Plotinus knows such experience firsthand, so he is certain that there is another, better reality than the one we ordinarily experience. When he tries to express this reality, he speaks in terms of **the One**. About this One, Plotinus holds, we can literally say nothing, for to predicate any properties of it would be to imply some multiplicity in it, some division. It is “ineffable.” We cannot even say that it *is*. It resides in a majesty *beyond being*.^{*} Plotinus allows

that it can be given names, but none of these should be understood literally; they are at best hints that point in a certain direction. Some of these names are “Unity,” “the Transcendent,” “the Absolute,” “the Good,” and “the Source.”^{*}

Like Plato’s Form of the Good, the One is the source of whatever else exists. But at this point, we must ask: why should anything else exist? The One is absolutely self-sufficient; it needs nothing. But this is precisely the key. To make it clear, Plotinus uses a pair of analogies.

Picture a spring that has no further origin, that pours itself into all rivers without becoming exhausted of what it yields, and remains what it is, undisturbed. The streams that issue from it, before flowing away each in its own direction, mingle together for a time, but each knows already where it will take its flood. Or think of the life that circulates in a great tree. The originating principle of this life remains at rest and does not spread through the tree because it has, as it were, its seat in the root. The principle gives to the plant all its life in its multiplicity but remains itself at rest. Not a plurality, it is the source of plurality. (*EP*, p. 173)⁴

The One is like the spring that, being itself full and lacking nothing, gives of itself without ever diminishing itself; or like the originating principle of life in a great tree that remains at rest in the root, though the whole tree pulses with life. Plotinus thinks of all reality as an **emanation** from the One. To use another analogy, it is like the light that streams from the candle, while the light of the flame remains undiminished.

Note that this is the old problem of the one and the many: whence this plurality of beings, this multiplicity all about us? The answer is, they originate in the One.[†] If we ask why there are so *many*, the

^{*}Compare the terminology in the *Star Wars* movies.

[†]See the earlier discussion of this same problem by Heraclitus (pp. 19–20), Parmenides (p. 22), and Plato (p. 155ff.). At the very beginning of the process of emanation, Plotinus holds, the One produces an image of itself in which it knows itself. He calls this reflective image “Intelligence.” Intelligence in turn produces “Soul,” the principle of life. Augustine reads this as a pagan version of the Christian Trinity: the One = the Father, the Creator; the Intelligence = the Word, Wisdom, the Christ; and the Soul = the Holy Spirit.

^{*}Compare Plato on the Form of the Good (p. 160), various Indian philosophies in Chapter 3, and Laozi’s understanding of the *Dào* (p. 88–89).

answer is that there must be as many as possible, for the One is ungrudging in its giving.

Every nature must produce its next, for each thing must unfold, seedlike, from indivisible principle into a visible effect. Principle continues unaltered in its proper place; what unfolds from it is the product of the inexpressible power that resides in it. It must not stay this power and, as though jealous, limit its effects. It must proceed continuously until all things, to the very last, have within the limits of possibility come forth. All is the result of this immense power giving its gifts to the universe, unable to let any part remain without its share. (EP, p. 68)

Just as there are all possible degrees of brightness in the emanation of light from a candle, until it vanishes at last in the darkness, so there will be found all degrees of being, intelligibility, and life in the world. Reality is partitioned in graded steps, which are, however, infinitely close to each other. No degree can be lacking; every possible level of being is represented, from the complete self-sufficiency of the One to vanishingly small realities near absolute nothingness. In the world as we see it, being and nothingness are mixed in all degrees.

We get the picture of a **Great Chain of Being**, an image that is to be enormously influential for centuries.* How does Augustine make use of these ideas in trying to understand what he has come to believe about God and the world?

First we must note that, as a Christian, Augustine rejects one aspect of Plotinus' thought. A Christian believes the world was *created*, and creation is distinct from emanation. Creation is a free act, voluntarily chosen; there is no necessity in it. Emanation, by contrast, is a necessary and continuous process. In the emanation picture, moreover, the *substance* of the world is not distinct from its source; the one flows indiscernibly into the other. Everything partakes of divinity. But in a creation scenario, there is discontinuity; what is created does *not* have the same substance as the creator has. Augustine agrees with Plotinus that the world

is not a self-sufficient reality, that it depends for both its being and its character on a deeper reality. But the nature of that dependence is altogether different.

How are we to understand the creation of the world? It could not be like the creation of buildings by stonemasons or of sculptures by artists. For in these cases people merely give new shape and form to existing realities, rather than creating new realities. That is exactly what we discover in Genesis 1:3, where we read, "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light."

You did not work as a human craftsman does, making one thing out of something else as his mind directs. . . . Nor did you have in your hand any matter from which you could make heaven and earth, for where could you have obtained matter which you had not yet created, in order to use it as material for making something else? Does anything exist by any other cause than that you exist?

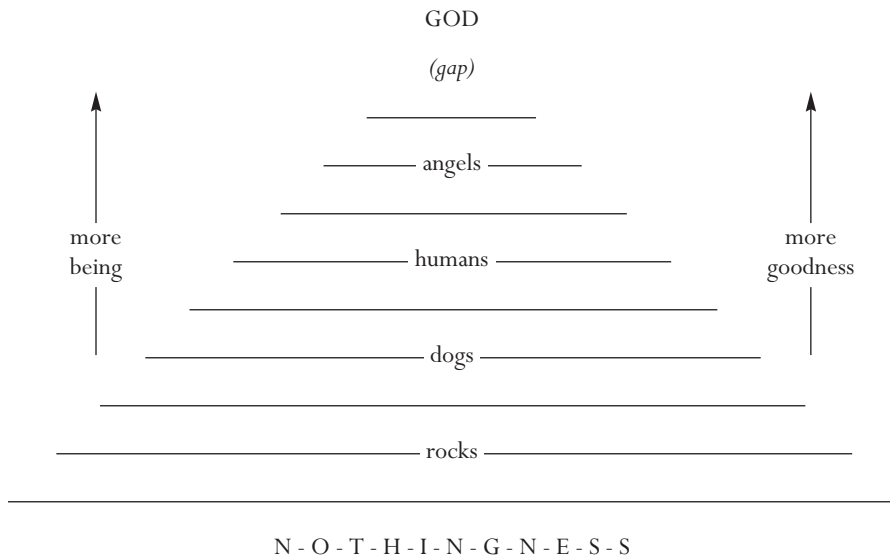
It must therefore be that you spoke and they were made. (Ps. 33:9) In your Word alone you created them. (C 11.5)

Other than God himself, there is nothing but what he has made—again a rejection of Manichaeism, according to which the powers of light and darkness, good and evil, are equally eternal and uncreated. God "spoke" and the heavens and the earth *were*. Remember that in this context "your Word" represents not a spoken word but the *logos*, the Wisdom of God, the second person of the Trinity, who is "with God" and "is God," as John's Gospel tells us. It is through this rational, intelligent, and ultimately loving Word that God makes all things *ex nihilo*, or *out of nothing*. The world, then, is entirely, without any exception, dependent on God.

Because the world is created through Wisdom (compare Plotinus' Intelligence, Plato's Forms), the world is a rational and well-ordered whole. Here again the philosophers confirm the biblical tradition. In the Genesis story we read that God looked at what he had made and "saw that it was good." How could it be otherwise, since God himself is good? For Augustine, as for Plotinus and Plato, there is a direct correlation between being and goodness. The more being something has

*For a fascinating study of the history of this idea, see Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936).

The Great Chain of Being



(which means, of course, the more self-sufficient and eternal it is), the better it is. God, being completely self-sufficient and eternal, is completely good. The created world is less good than God. But still it is *good*. From the premise that the world is less good than God, one cannot conclude that it is therefore *bad*.

Here again Augustine parts company from the Manicheans. The source of evil is not to be found in body or matter, for these are creations of God and so are good. Not everything created is equally good, of course. As we have already seen, life is better than mere existence and intellect better than mere life. In fact, Augustine follows Plotinus here and urges that there is a continuous gradation of goodness in things. The Great Chain of Being reaches from the most insignificant bits of inanimate matter through primitive life forms, to rational creatures like ourselves, and beyond to the angels. That this is a chain of *being* can be seen from the following examples.

A dog does not have language, but you do. So, compared to you, there is something lacking in the dog. You have an ability, the power to utter truths and falsehoods, which the dog just

does not have. So there is *more to you* than there is to the dog; you have more of being, and the dog has less.

Or imagine a professor standing at a chalkboard, eraser in hand. Suddenly, she wheels about and hurls the eraser at the board. You are surprised—perhaps puzzled. But you don’t think any the less of her or her character because of it. Then she says, “Imagine now that instead of an eraser in my hand it had been a kitten. . .” The situation would be altogether different, and her character would drop precipitously in your estimation. Why? Because a kitten is higher on the Chain of Being than an eraser? Perhaps you, too, believe in the great chain.

The second example makes clear that the chain is not only a chain of being, but also a hierarchy of value. So value and being correlate: the more being, the more goodness. And the great ladder reaches from sheer nothingness at the bottom (no being, no value) to God at the top (supreme being, supreme value). Even the lowest degree of existence, however, has its correlative degree of goodness. Nothing God has made is to be despised.

HYPATIA OF ALEXANDRIA



While Augustine is now the best known of the fourth-century Neoplatonists, in his own day that honor belonged to a woman named Hypatia of Alexandria (c. 350–415). Alexandria was the intellectual capital of the Western world at the time, and Hypatia was among its most famous minds. Her main intellectual contributions were in mathematics and astronomy, but she was also widely known as a great teacher of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy. Toward the end of her life, tensions between Christians and pagans roiled the city. In A.D. 415, a mob of Christian zealots pulled the pagan philosopher from her carriage and beat her to death.

EVIL

Having abandoned Manicheism, Augustine once again faces the problem of evil. If God is good and the material world is good, where does evil come from?

He tackles the problem in two parts by distinguishing **moral evil**, which depends on the free choices of rational agents, and **natural evil**, such as illness or any other bad thing that does not depend on rational agents' free choices. We will postpone consideration of moral evil until we have a better understanding of Augustine's views on human nature. But we can state Augustine's view of natural evil quite simply: Natural evil does not exist! You can see that Augustine now proposes to solve the problem as we stated it on page 263 by denying the *second* premise. This allows him to continue to assert the first premise and to deny the conclusion.

Augustine does not wish to deny that we experience some things as evil. He denies only that evil is a *reality*. If you were to make a list of all the things there *are*—solar systems, chairs, lobsters,

volcanoes, enchiladas—evil would appear nowhere on that list. Nor would anything on the list be evil—insofar as it is. Being, remember, is goodness. Insofar as something *is*, then, it is *good*. What we *call* evil is just a *lack* of the being that something should have. Evil is the *privation of good*.

For as, in the bodies of animate beings, to be affected by diseases and wounds is the same thing as to be deprived of health, . . . so also of minds, whatever defects there are are privations of natural good qualities, and the healing of these defects is not their transference elsewhere, but that the defects which did exist in the mind will have no place to exist, inasmuch as there will be no room for them in that healthiness. (*AE* 2.10–25)

There is a kind of primitive magic that “cures” by moving the disease or wound out of the body and into, for example, a tree. From Augustine's perspective, this misconceives the nature of the problem. For a disease or wound is not a “thing,” having some reality of its own, nor is healing “re-moving” that thing. Disease is just the privation of

healthiness, and healing is restoring the body to that condition of health (of being and goodness) in which there will be nothing lacking, leaving “no room” for the defect.

Augustine is again making use of Plotinus here. For if we equate goodness and being, we must also equate evil and nothingness. And, as Parmenides already taught us, nothing *is not*. So ignorance is not a reality, but just the lack of knowledge; it is knowledge that is the reality and, therefore, good. Nor is weakness a reality, but simply the absence of strength; strength—that good thing—is the reality.

Since all created things are arranged in degrees of reality, they all participate to some degree in nothingness. Does this mean that they are all evil to some degree? True, they do not have the full degree of being and goodness that belongs only to God, but we ought not to call them “evil” on that score. It is irrational to complain that created things are not as good as God; to do so is tantamount to wishing that only God should exist and that there should be no created world at all! Created being is necessarily finite, inevitably limited. There is always much that any created thing *is not*. If it were not so, it would itself be God! For what makes the world distinct from God is precisely its admixture of nonbeing. The very *being* of created things, remember, is good to some degree; and isn’t it better that the created world exist rather than not? It adds to the sum total of being and goodness in reality.

If, by contrast, you complain not that some created thing could have been perfectly good, but that it could have been better than it is, your complaint is equally irrational. For there is already in existence something better than that; and to wish the thing you complain about to be better is to wish it not to be what it is, but to be that other thing (see *FCW* 2.5).

The conclusion is that evil can exist only where there is good. To put it another way, evil depends on good. Whatever is, insofar as it is, is good; and if there is evil in it, the reason is only that it—like all things less than God—has some part in nothingness as well as being. But no aspect of its nature can be evil per se.

TIME

The world’s temporality also puzzles Augustine. How does the changeable, impermanent creation come from an eternal, unchangeable God? There is an additional sting in the problem of time for Augustine because the Manichees target time as an irrational element in the orthodox notion of creation. They ask the Christians what they take to be an unanswerable question: What was God doing before he made the world? Without an answer, there seems to be something irrational about believing in creation, as opposed to Manichean belief in the *eternal* conflict of light and darkness.

Apparently there was a snappy answer in circulation.

My answer to those who ask “What was God doing before he made heaven and earth?” is not “He was preparing Hell for people who pry into mysteries.” This frivolous retort has been made before now, so we are told, in order to evade the point of the question. But it is one thing to make fun of the questioner and another to find the answer. So I shall refrain from giving this reply. (C 11.12)

Augustine’s answer is, rather, a long and famous meditation on the nature of time and eternity. In it he establishes his view of God and God’s relation to the created world. Let us see if we can follow his reasoning.

The first point is that God’s **eternity** is not to be understood as everlastingness. God is not eternal in that he outlasts all other things; he is eternal in that he is not located in time at all. Those who imagine that God was idle through countless ages before engaging in the work of creation should think again.

How could those countless ages have elapsed when you, the Creator, in whom all ages have their origin, had not yet created them? What time could there have been that was not created by you? How could time elapse if it never was?

You are the Maker of all time. If, then, there was any time before you made heaven and earth, how can anyone say that you were idle? You must have made that time, for time could not elapse before you made it.

But if there was no time before heaven and earth were created, how can anyone ask what you were doing “then”? If there was no time, there was no “then.”

Furthermore, although you are before time, it is not in time that you precede it. If this were so, you would not be before all time. It is in eternity, which is supreme over time because it is a never-ending present, that you are at once before all past time and after all future time. . . . You made all time; you are before all time; and the “time,” if such we may call it, when there was no time was not time at all. (C 11.13)

So time was created along with the world. God did not create the world at a given time, since before the creation, time itself did not exist.

What, then, is time? It is something we are all intimately familiar with. But in a much-quoted sentence, Augustine says,

I know well enough what it is, provided that nobody asks me; but if I am asked what it is and try to explain, I am baffled. (C 11.14)

We can divide time into the **past**, the **present**, and the **future**. Since the past no longer exists and the future does not yet exist, the only aspect of time that actually exists is the present. This seems simple enough, but it creates profound puzzles.

Consider what we call a “long time.” It seems evident that only what exists can be long. What does not exist cannot be either long or short, any more than it can be sweet or smell of roses. A “long time,” then, cannot include the past or present, since neither of those exists. A long time must exist entirely in the present.

Let us, Augustine says, “see if our human wits can tell us whether present time can be long” (C 11.15). A century is surely a long time. Can that exist in the present? Suppose we are in the first year of the century; then ninety-nine years are still in the future—and these *are not yet*. Perhaps only a year, then, can be in the present. But suppose it is April. Three months have passed, and eight are yet to come; so most of the year either *is no more* or *is not yet*. Most of the year does not exist, and what does not exist cannot be long.

This thought experiment can be repeated, as you can readily see, for months, days, hours, minutes, seconds, until this conclusion is forced on us:

The only time that can be called present is an instant, if we can conceive of such, that cannot be divided even into the most minute fractions, and a point of time as small as this passes so rapidly from the future to the past that its duration is without length. For if its duration were prolonged, it could be divided into past and future. When it is present it has no duration. (C 11.15)

The present is just that knife edge where *what is not yet* becomes *what is no longer*, where the future turns into the past. The present itself “has no duration.” So the present could not possibly be long. Where, then, does the time we call “long” exist? It cannot exist in the past or in the future, as we have seen. But now we see that it cannot exist in the present either. You can see why Augustine is baffled.



“Where is it, this present? It has melted in our grasp, fled ere we could touch it, gone in the instant of becoming.”

William James (1842–1910)

Nonetheless, with prayers to God for help, Augustine presses on. It is evident that we are aware of different periods of time; and we can compare them in length to each other. How do we do this? We can see only what exists. We may predict the future and make inferences about the past, but since only the present exists, it is only the present we can be aware of. How, then, are we aware of times that do not exist? Augustine again looks into his soul.

When we describe the past correctly, it is not past facts which are drawn out of our memories but only words based on our memory-pictures of those facts, because when they happened they left an impression on our minds, by means of sense-perception. My own childhood, which no longer exists, is in past time, which also no longer exists. But when I remember those days and describe them, it is in the

present that I picture them to myself, because their picture is still present in my memory. (C 11.18)

Augustine concludes that though there are three times, they are not—strictly speaking—past, present, and future. If we speak accurately, we should speak of a *present of things past* (the memory), a *present of things present* (direct awareness), and a *present of things future* (which he calls expectation). These times exist in the mind, nowhere else.

It is in my own mind, then, that I measure time. I must not allow my mind to insist that time is something objective. . . . I say that I measure time in my mind. For everything which happens leaves an impression on it, and this impression remains after the thing itself has ceased to be. It is the impression that I measure, since it is still present, not the thing itself, which makes the impression as it passes and then moves into the past. When I measure time it is this impression that I measure. . . .

It can only be that the mind, which regulates this process, performs three functions, those of expectation, attention, and memory. The future, which it expects, passes through the present, to which it attends, into the past, which it remembers. (C 11.27–28)

This clinches the argument. Time has no meaning apart from the mind, so it must have come into being along with creation. Our minds are not eternal; they are part of creation. In possessing these powers of expectation, attention, and memory, our minds are the locale where time realizes itself. Our minds are in this respect a faint image of the mind of God, which also sees past, present, and future. But unlike us, God, who lives in that “never-ending present,” sees all time “at once.”

If there were a mind endowed with such great power of knowing and foreknowing that all the past and all the future were known to it as clearly as I know a familiar psalm, that mind would be wonderful beyond belief. We should hold back from it in awe at the thought that nothing in all the history of the past and nothing in all the ages yet to come was hidden from it. It would know all this as surely as, when I sing the psalm, I know what I have already sung and what I have still to sing, how far I am from the beginning and how far from the end. But it is unthinkable that you, Creator of the universe,

Creator of souls and bodies, should know all the past and all the future merely in this way. Your knowledge is far more wonderful, far more mysterious than this. It is not like the knowledge of a man who sings words well known to him or listens to another singing a familiar psalm. While he does this his feelings vary and his senses are divided, because he is partly anticipating words still to come and partly remembering words already sung. It is far otherwise with you, for you are eternally without change, the truly eternal Creator of minds. (C 11.31; see also CG 11.21)

Time is indeed puzzling, and Augustine expresses the perplexities as well as anyone ever has. The puzzle matters deeply to Augustine because it concerns the relation between God and the Soul, the two foci of wisdom that bear on human happiness. Augustine’s meditations on time reaffirm the sharp line of distinction between creation—even including its highest part, the mind—and God who created it. We are not divine or parts of the divine.* We, together with the whole temporal order, are absolutely dependent on God for our very being. Still, our relation to time is part of the image of God within us. Unlike God, we are in time; yet, like God to some degree, we are above it. God sees all time in a single moment. We cannot do that, but we do measure time and are aware of past, present, and future.

You should be able to see a correlation between being more like God in relation to time and our place on the Great Chain of Being. A stone, we think, has no temporal horizon at all; a honey bee is somewhat more open to past, present, and future; and a dog still more so, but less than we. (Wittgenstein once remarked that a dog can expect his master, but can he expect him *next week*?) Moreover, our relation to time, and particularly to our future, is the foundation for our free will, our responsibility, and our hope of happiness.

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1. What are the characteristics of mystical experience?
 2. What does Plotinus mean by “emanation”?

*Here Augustine agrees with Homer and disagrees with both the Manichees and more respectable philosophies such as Stoicism (see p. 243).

3. What is the Great Chain of Being? How are being and goodness related?
 4. Explain what is meant by “creation *ex nihilo*.”
 5. How does Augustine solve the problem of natural evil?
 6. In what sense is God eternal, according to Augustine?
 7. What is puzzling about past, present, and future?
 8. How does Augustine resolve the puzzles about time?
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Human Nature and Its Corruption

What is man? He is a creature of God, like all other creatures. If we look to the biblical story of creation, we are told that God “formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (Gen. 2:7). It seems that human beings are here conceived as material beings—living bodies. Perhaps it is possible to understand the “breath of life” as the creation of an immaterial soul, but this seems strained. The Platonistic tradition, however, is unequivocal: A person is an immaterial soul, who may for a time inhabit a body.

Augustine’s thought about human nature is thus pulled in two directions as he tries to reconcile these traditions. In trying to remain true to the biblical tradition, he emphasizes that a human being is a unitary being: one thing. God did not create a soul when he took up the dust of the earth; he created *man*. But Augustine also believes in the soul and accepts Platonic arguments about its immateriality and its distinctness from the body. But if man is one thing, how can he be composed of two things? Aristotle solves this problem by considering the soul to be the form of a certain kind of living body; in the thirteenth century Thomas Aquinas will adapt this solution in his Christian Aristotelianism. But Augustine, drawing on the Platonic tradition, cannot take this line. The result is an uneasy compromise. Man is one being, created by God, but he is composed of both body and soul, each a distinct created being.

How, then, are soul and body related to each other? Augustine tries to answer this question in the very definition of a soul.

But if you want a definition of the soul, and so ask me—what is the soul? I have a ready answer. It seems to me to be a special substance, endowed with reason, adapted to rule the body. (*GS* 13)

So a soul is, by its very nature, suited to “rule the body” by virtue of possessing reason. Clearly, the soul and its powers are superior to the body. This fact is crucial to Augustine’s view of the human predicament—of what stands in the way of our happiness and how we may after all attain it.

We are created by God and so, by nature, are something good. Yet on all sides we find ourselves involved in evil. We are created in the image of God’s justice, yet we act unjustly. We are created for happiness, but we find ourselves miserable. Why? The biblical answer is that we have sinned. This seems precisely the right answer to Augustine. But, again, he wants to understand what that means. Augustine’s analysis of sin and the way to blessedness draws on his own experience. But to understand that experience he needs to come to terms with freedom and responsibility, with God’s grace and foreknowledge, and above all with the nature of the will. These are perhaps the most original and penetrating parts of Augustine’s philosophy.

Augustine takes the biblical story of Adam and Eve’s sin quite literally. Though they were created good and lived happily in the Garden, the serpent tempts them to disobey God, and they do. God punishes them by driving them from the Garden, making them subject to death and struggle. Their descendants inherit this status, called **original sin**, from the moment of their birth. Its characteristics are ignorance (i.e., lack of wisdom) and what Augustine calls “concupiscence,” or wrong desire. If Augustine is right, we are in trouble from the very start of our lives. Look, he says, at infants.

It can hardly be right for a child, even at that age, to cry for everything, including things which would harm him; to work himself into a tantrum against people older than himself and not required to obey him; and to try his best to strike and hurt others who know better than he does, including his own parents, when they do not give in to him and refuse to pander to whims which would only do him harm.

This shows that, if babies are innocent, it is not for lack of will to do harm, but for lack of strength.

I have myself seen jealousy in a baby and know what it means. He was not old enough to talk, but whenever he saw his foster-brother at the breast, he would grow pale with envy. . . . it surely cannot be called innocence, when the milk flows in such abundance from its source, to object to a rival desperately in need and depending for his life on this one form of nourishment. (C 1.7)

Innocence and guilt, it should be noticed, are to be found not in outward actions but in desires, in such things as jealousy and the “will to do harm.” It is this condition of the heart, much more than the actions that flow from it, that is the essence of **sin**. Babies may be “innocent” in a shallow sense, but only because they lack the ability to do what they very much want to do. As Augustine allows, babies tend to grow out of crying and throwing tantrums. But this does not mean that their desires change; it may only mean that their concupiscence takes on more sophisticated and socially acceptable forms.



“In Adam’s fall
We sinned all.”

The New England Primer

To understand how sin originated in a world that was created good, we must understand its elements. Sin clearly has something to do with the motivation for action. Whatever we do, Augustine says, is done from a desire for something. These desires Augustine calls “**loves**.” We seek to delight in possessing the object of our love. If we think that wealth will make us happy, we love riches, and so we are moved by this love to acquire wealth.

Remember that reality is ordered in a Great Chain of Being, reaching from God down to the merest speck of existence. Things higher up the chain, having greater value, should be loved more than those lower on the chain. If our loves were rightly ordered, they would match the order of value in things themselves. This means that God, who is perfect being and goodness, should be

loved most of all and all the rest of creation in appropriate degrees corresponding to their goodness. In fact, the injunction of Jesus to love God absolutely, “with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind,” corresponds to the absolute value to be found in God. The rule to love our neighbors as ourselves also fits this ordering rule, for each of us has the same degree of value. Those who are perfectly virtuous—that is, righteous—have their loves rightly ordered. They love all things appropriately, in accord with their worthiness to be loved.

Sin, we can now say, is **disordered love**. It is loving things inappropriately, loving more what is of lower value and loving less what is of higher or highest value. Since our loves move us to action, these sinful desires produce wicked acts: murder, theft, adultery, deception, and so on. For example, Jane loves money and is willing to kill her aged aunt to get it. What this means is that she loves money (which is less valuable) more than she loves the person who has it (who is more valuable). Her desires are not ordered correctly, and the result is wickedness.

We have not yet plumbed the depths of sin, however. Two errors must be avoided. First, we may think that sin is just a *mistake*—a failure to recognize the true ordering of value in the world. This is akin to the view of Socrates, who holds that virtue is knowledge and vice ignorance.* The person who acts wrongly, according to this view, simply doesn’t *know* what is right. Augustine agrees that there is a kind of ignorance involved in sin. But it is not *simple* ignorance, for he holds that the light of Wisdom has “enlightened every man,”† and the rules of righteousness are written in the human heart. So if we are ignorant, we are *willingly* ignorant. We don’t *want* to see the truth. Sin, then, is not just ignorance. Socrates and Plato are on that score too optimistic; education alone will not solve the problem. Instead, overcoming sin requires *conversion*. And that concerns the **will**.

*See pp. 99–100.

†John 1:9.

The second error is to suppose that sin might be something that just *happens* to us. Our wickedness and disordered loves may be just bad luck—the luck of a bad upbringing, for example—and for luck no one is to blame. A key aspect of the notion of sin, however, is that we are to blame for it. For our sins we are punished, and justly so. Therefore something must be missing in this analysis.

We need to bring in the aspect of *will*. Augustine does this by offering an analysis of four basic emotions: desire, joy, fear, and grief.

The important factor in those emotions is the character of a man's will. If the will is wrongly directed, the emotions will be wrong; if the will is right, the emotions will be not only blameless, but praiseworthy. The will is engaged in all of them; in fact they are all essentially acts of will. (CG 14.6)

To desire something is not just to have a tendency to acquire it. To desire is to *consent* to that tendency, to give in to it, to say yes to it—in short, to *will* it. In a similar way, to fear something is not just to be disposed to avoid something, perhaps with a feeling of panic added. To be afraid is to “disagree” that something should happen, and that disagreement is an act of will. What are joy and grief? They, too, are acts of will, joy being consent in the attainment of something desired and grief disagreement in the possession of something feared. In general, Augustine says that

as a man's will is attracted or repelled in accordance with the varied character of different objects which are pursued or shunned, so it changes and turns into feelings of various kinds. (CG 14.6)

We noticed at various points the prominence that Augustine gives to the concept of will. Here we see why. It is the character of the human will that accounts for emotions and actions alike. We may be motivated by our loves, but in the last analysis, these loves come down to will. And for what we will we are responsible. The will is *free*.

Sin, then, for which we are properly held responsible, is a matter of the will having gone wrong. As Augustine puts it,

When an evil choice happens in any being, then what happens is dependent on the will of that being;

the failure is voluntary, not necessary, and the punishment that follows is just. (CG 12.8)

Note that this account does not locate sin in the body, as the Manichees do, but in the soul—precisely in that superior part of the human being that mirrors most clearly the image of God. The soul, which by means of reason is “fit to rule the body,” consents instead to be the body's slave, preferring what is less good to what is better.

But now we must face the question, How can this happen in a world created by a good God? Here we discover the second part of Augustine's solution to the problem of evil. The first part, you will remember, consisted in arguing that natural evil is not a reality but simply the privation of goodness. Whatever exists is good, simply in virtue of its *being*. How, then, can we explain moral evil, where it looks as though the bad will is itself a positive reality?

The first thing to be established is that the will is itself a good thing. This is easily done, not only from the principle that all created things are good, but also from the reflection that without free will no one can live rightly. To live rightly is to choose to live rightly; no one can choose rightly without a free will; and since living rightly is acknowledged to be a good, the necessary condition for that good must itself be good (FCW 2.18.188–190).

There are, Augustine tells us, three classes of goods. There are great goods, such as justice, the mere possession of which guarantees a righteous life. There are lesser goods, such as wealth and physical beauty, which, though good, are not essential to the highest goods of happiness and a virtuous life. And then there are intermediate goods. Of these intermediate goods we can say that their possession does not guarantee either virtue or happiness, yet without them no one can be virtuous or happy. Such an intermediate good is free will. Whether it leads to happiness depends on what we do with it; and that is up to us.

Augustine thinks it obvious that the human race has misused its free will; prizing lesser goods over greater, we have sought our happiness where it is not to be found. How are we to understand that?

The will . . . commits sin when it turns away from immutable and common goods, towards its private good, either something external to itself or lower than itself. It turns to its own private good when it desires to be its own master; it turns to external goods when it busies itself with the private affairs of others or with whatever is none of its concern; it turns to goods lower than itself when it loves the pleasures of the body. Thus a man becomes proud, meddlesome, and lustful; he is caught up in another life which, when compared to the higher one, is death. (FCW 2.19.199–200)

The result of such “turning away” from the higher goods and “turning toward” the lower is *pride*, *meddlesomeness*, and *lust*. When we value most highly the goods we can all have in common—such as justice, love, and truth—peace reigns in our community. When our loves are fastened on lower goods—such as money, power, and fine possessions—the result is discord and strife, for if you have something of this sort, I do not have it—and often enough, I want it. Proud, meddlesome, and greedy individuals will never be at peace with one another.*

Pride, however, is more than the result of sin. It is the very root of sin itself.† Why did the first couple disobey God’s command? Augustine emphasizes that it was not because the command was difficult to obey; in fact, nothing was easier. They simply had to refrain from eating the fruit of one of the many bountiful trees in the Garden. In no way did they *need* to eat that piece of fruit. Why, then, did they disobey? The words of the serpent that tempted them suggest the answer. He said, “God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:5). This is the key. They wanted to be “like God.” It is only because their wills had

already “turned away” from a determination to be obedient to the truth that the temptation had any power over them.

It was in secret that the first human beings began to be evil; and the result was that they slipped into open disobedience. For they would not have arrived at the evil act if an evil will had not preceded it. Now, could anything but pride have been the start of the evil will? For “pride is the start of every kind of sin.” (Ecclesiasticus 10:13) And what is pride except a longing for a perverse kind of exaltation? For it is a perverse kind of exaltation to abandon the basis on which the mind should be firmly fixed, and to become, as it were, based on oneself, and so remain. This happens when a man is too pleased with himself: and a man is self-complacent when he deserts that changeless Good in which, rather than in himself, he ought to have found his satisfaction. . . .

This then is the original evil: man regards himself as his own light, and turns away from that light which would make man himself a light if he would set his heart on it. (CG 14.13)

Pride, then, caused man’s fall. Trying to lift ourselves above the place proper to us in the Chain of Being, we seek to become “like God.” But in trying to rise above our place, we fall into anxiety and concern for our own well-being, which we ourselves now have to guarantee. Not content with the true goods that are available to all, we find ourselves engaged in ruthless competition with others for the lower goods. Our loves settle on the things of this world, and greed, lust, and covetousness reign among our desires. No longer are our wills ordered according to the worthiness of goods to be desired.

The sin of pride shows itself also in the fact that the first couple, when confronted with their disobedience, make excuses:

The woman said, “The serpent led me astray, and I ate,” and the man said, “The woman whom you gave me as a companion, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.” There is not a whisper anywhere here of a plea for pardon, nor of any entreaty for healing. (CG 14.14)

One of the manifestations of sin is a refusal to admit that it is sin. Neither of the first humans would admit to sin; each tried to pin it on someone else.

*Compare this to Thomas Hobbes’ account of the origins of strife on pp. 410–412.

†Note that in attacking pride Augustine is not recommending obsequiousness, or slavishness, or a groveling, fawning, or cringing attitude. There is a proper self-respect that each of us both needs and deserves. We are all creatures of God with a place on the Chain of Being; so each of us has an intrinsic value, and it is as bad to deny that as to claim more than is our due. Compare Augustine’s pride to the Greek *hubris*, the sort of arrogance that puts oneself in the place of God. (See p. 7.)

The root of sin, then, is pride—setting ourselves up as the highest good when the highest good is rather something we should acknowledge as above us. Pride is the sixteen-year-old Augustine posing as the arbiter of right and wrong when stealing and trashing his neighbor’s pears. Pride is the will turning away from God and to itself, resulting in a set of disordered loves.

Suppose we ask, What causes that? Why does that happen? God, after all, created us good. We have free will, to be sure, but why do we use our freedom in that way?

If you try to find the efficient cause of this evil choice, there is none to be found. For nothing causes an evil will, since it is the evil will itself which causes the evil act; and that means that the evil choice is the efficient cause of an evil act, whereas there is no efficient cause of an evil choice. . . . It is not a matter of efficiency, but of deficiency; the evil will itself is not effective but defective. For to defect from him who is the Supreme Existence, to something of less reality, this is to begin to have an evil will. To try to discover the causes of such defection . . . is like trying to see darkness or to hear silence. . . .

No one therefore must try to get to know from me what I know that I do not know. (CG 12.6–7)

We can understand Augustine’s argument in this way. Suppose that there were an answer to the question, Why do we sin? Suppose that we could find some *X* that is the cause of the will’s turning away from the highest good. Then that *X* would—since it has being—be something good. But something good cannot cause something evil. So there cannot be such a cause in being.

Yet we must remember that created wills, living in time and subject to change, are a mixture of being and nonbeing. If the will, like God’s will, were unmixed with nothingness, then it could not fall. So there is a “cause” for sin in the sense that the incomplete being of the will is a *necessary condition* for sin. This is what Augustine calls a “deficient” cause and compares to darkness or silence, which are merely the absence of light and sound, respectively. A deficient cause is the absence of the fullness of being that would make sin impossible. The presence of such a deficient cause does not guarantee

that the will turns away from God; it just makes that turning possible. So if we ask, then, what does cause the turning away of the evil will, the answer, literally, is *nothing*. The act is voluntary. For Augustine, this means that it cannot have an efficient cause. If it had an efficient cause it would occur necessarily and not be subject to just punishment.* Again, Augustine relies on the Neoplatonic idea of the Chain of Being to solve this problem.

He has not yet solved it completely, however. Recall his doctrine of God. God exists “all at once” in a timeless eternity and “sees all things in a single moment.” But that means that God knew—or foreknew—even before man was created that man would sin. So it was true that Adam was going to sin even before he chose to sin. And if that is so, did he really have any choice? Doesn’t God’s foreknowledge take away man’s free will?

Clearly Augustine needs to affirm both; free will is necessary for responsibility, and God’s foreknowledge is a necessary consequence of his perfection. Can Augustine have it both ways? “It does not follow,” he says,

that there is nothing in our will because God foreknew what was going to be in our will; for if he foreknew this, it was not nothing that he foreknew. Further, if, in foreknowing what would be in our will, he foreknew something, and not nonentity, it follows immediately that there is something in our will, even if God foreknows it. Hence we are in no way compelled either to preserve God’s prescience by abolishing our free will, or to safeguard our free will by denying (blasphemously) the divine foreknowledge. We embrace both truths, and acknowledge them in faith and sincerity, the one for a right belief, the other for a right life. . . . The fact that God foreknew that a man would sin does not make a man sin; on the contrary, it cannot be doubted that it is the man himself who sins just because he whose prescience cannot be mistaken has foreseen that

*Here we meet for the first time a theme that will puzzle philosophers down to the present day: Does responsibility require exemption from the causal order of the world? Augustine thought the answer was an obvious yes. For other views, see Aristotle (pp. 216–217), David Hume (“Rescuing Human Freedom,” in Chapter 19), and Immanuel Kant (pp. 492–494).

the man himself would sin. A man does not sin unless he wills to sin; and if he had not willed to sin, then God would have foreseen that refusal. (CG 5.10)

If God foresees that I am going to freely will something, then I will undoubtedly will that thing freely. But it would be a crazy mistake, Augustine thinks, to conclude that this somehow robs me of my free will. How could it not be my will if what God infallibly foresees is that I am going to exercise my will? So Augustine does not see that there is any conflict between God’s omniscience and individual freedom.

Augustine’s analysis of the human predicament, then, reveals us to be in a pretty sorry state. We are proud, determined to be masters of our own destiny, turned away from the highest goods and anxiously devoted to the lower; our desires are not ordered by the order of objective value in things. Furthermore, we are continually turning away from the source of our being. And we cannot escape responsibility for this descent into evil, with all its consequences, both personal and social.

Is there any way out of this desperate plight?

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1. How, for Augustine, are soul and body related?
 2. What is “original” sin? We often say babies are “innocent.” What does Augustine think?
 3. What is “sin”? How is the will involved in it?
 4. If the will is a good thing, why does it go bad?
 5. In what way is pride the root of sin?
 6. How does Augustine reconcile free will with God’s foreknowledge?
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Human Nature and Its Restoration

Sin diminishes the very being of human beings; they become smaller—more ignorant, weaker, and less in control of themselves. It divides their very will. With one part of the mind they continue to acknowledge the truth of God and the righteousness of his law (since they cannot entirely put out the light that enlightens everyone); but with another

part they love what is of lesser value. This was Augustine’s own experience before his conversion. He often quotes a passage from Saint Paul to the same effect.

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . . I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. (Rom. 7:15, 18–20)

Augustine is convinced that this condition is so desperate that none of us can rescue ourselves from it.*

For by the evil use of free choice man has destroyed both himself and it. For as one who kills himself, certainly by being alive kills himself, but by killing himself ceases to live, and can have no power to restore himself to life after the killing; so when sin was committed by free choice, sin became victor and free choice was lost. (AE 9.30)

Here, however, is the point where the distinctive “gospel” of Christianity comes into its own. What we cannot do for ourselves, God has done for us through his Son Jesus, who took on himself the sins of the world. All that is required is to trust, by faith, that God has forgiven and received us, despite our turning away, and we will be healed.

This may seem simple enough. But once again there are problems in trying to understand it. We cannot save ourselves from our disordered loves, precisely because our loves are disordered. It would be as impossible as trying to lift ourselves off the ground by wrapping our arms around our own chests and lifting. The restoration of human nature—its re-creation—is no more possible for us than its original creation. So God has to do it. And he has in fact done it in Christ. All we need is to accept it by faith.

But is faith itself within our power? Saying yes to God’s offer of forgiveness and healing seems like an act of will. Yet we have seen that our wills are divided against themselves. How then can

*See again Augustine’s theory of the “chain” that sin forms, by which the soul becomes enslaved and loses its ability to do even what it truly wants to do (pp. 265–266).

we wholeheartedly will to have faith? It seems impossible.

Our salvation (a life of ordered love) must then depend entirely on God's grace; it is not something we can do on our own. And yet accepting God's offer of salvation must be entirely up to us, for without our freely turning to the grace that is offered, it is also impossible. In a section of the *Confessions* where Augustine records his continuing struggles to get his loves in order, he says over and over,

Give me the grace to do as you command, and command me to do what you will! (C 10.29, 31, 37)

This phrase perfectly expresses that paradoxical combination of reliance on God's grace and determination to will the right that Augustine discovers when he tries to *understand* what he has come to *believe* in becoming a Christian. Our salvation—happiness, blessedness—is up to us. Yet it is wholly a product of God's grace; we have nothing that we have not received.

Let us say a bit more about the life in which Augustine claims to have found both wisdom and happiness. What is it like to live as a Christian? As we have seen, Augustine's theory of motivation holds that we are moved by our various "loves." Our loves are expressions of the will as we desire a variety of presumed goods. Since it is the interior life that really counts, the quality of our lives will be determined by the nature of our loves.

As we have seen, things in the world are ordered in value according to their place in the Great Chain of Being. And the degree of value a thing possesses determines its worthiness to be loved. Happiness and virtue (which coincide as surely for Augustine as they do for Plato or the Stoics) consist in "**ordered love**," where our loves are apportioned according to the worth of their objects.

He lives in justice and sanctity who is an unprejudiced assessor of the intrinsic value of things. He is a man who has an ordinate love: he neither loves what should not be loved nor fails to love what should be loved; he neither loves more what should be loved less, loves equally what should be loved less or more, nor loves less or more what should be loved equally. (OCD 1.27)

But we can now add two further distinctions.

Here is the first one. Some things are to be **used**, whereas others are to be **enjoyed**. And some may be both used and enjoyed.

To enjoy something is to cling to it with love for its own sake. To use something, however, is to employ it in obtaining that which you love, provided that it is worthy of love. For an illicit use should be called rather a waste or an abuse. (OCD 1.4)

What is appropriately loved *for its own sake*? For Augustine there can be just one answer: God. In loving the eternal truth, wisdom, and goodness of God we find blessedness. Here alone we can *rest*, content at last; for there exists no higher good to be enjoyed than the creator and restorer of our human nature. As Augustine says in a famous phrase,

You made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you. (C 1.1)*

The enjoyment we seek is a never-ending delight in the object of our love, which nothing but the highest and eternal good will provide. All other things are to be used in the service of that end so that we may find the blessedness of that enjoyment. Even other humans, though we are to love them as we love ourselves, are not to be loved *for their own sake*. To do so would be a kind of idolatry, an attempt to find our end, our "rest" in them rather than in the source of all good. Delight in friends and neighbors—or in our own talents and excellences—must be a delight that always turns to gratitude by being referred to the One who provides it all.

We can see now that Augustinian Christianity is totally different from that "trading skill" piety Socrates rejects in the *Euthyphro* (see 13a–15b and p. 115). Like much religious practice in our day, *Euthyphro* seeks to *use* the gods to attain what he *enjoys*. And he "turns away" from the question that Socrates says is the crucial one: What is that good *X* the gods accomplish through our service to them? Augustine absolutely rejects the notion that we can "use" what is highest for our own ends or "trade" our sacrifice and prayer for blessings from on high.

*Compare Plato on "traveller's rest and journey's end," pp. 159–160.

Whatever good we have is a gift from God; we have nothing to trade with! God is to be sought not for the sake of some worldly advantage, but for his own sake. We don't treat God as a means to some further end. In God we "rest." God is to be *enjoyed*. And you can see that Augustine has an answer to Socrates' question. The good *X* in question is the *transformation of our desire-structure* so that our ordered loves enjoy and use each thing appropriately. The point of piety is not to get what we want from God, but to allow God to change us so that we don't want the same things anymore.

The second distinction corresponds to that between enjoyment and use. Augustine divides love into two kinds: charity and cupidity.

I call "charity" the motion of the soul toward the enjoyment of God for his own sake, and the enjoyment of one's self and of one's neighbor for the sake of God; but "cupidity" is a motion of the soul toward the enjoyment of one's self, one's neighbor, or any corporeal thing for the sake of something other than God. (*OCD 3.10*)

From cupidity comes both **vice** (by which Augustine means whatever corrupts one's own soul) and **crime** (which harms someone else). We try to enjoy what should only be used and destroy both ourselves and others. Greed, avarice, lust, and gluttony are all forms of cupidity. **Cupidity** is disordered love.

Charity, by contrast, is ordered love, directed toward enjoying God and all other things only in God. If charity is the motivation for one's life, all will be well. "Love, and do what you will," Augustine tells us.⁵ You can do whatever you want, provided that your motivation is charity. Charity will motivate us to behave appropriately to all things (i.e., in accord with their actual value). From charity will flow all the virtues: temperance, prudence, fortitude, and justice.*

We must never assume, however, that what motivates us is pure charity. Augustine's own

*Compare Aristotle on the unity of the virtues, p. 213. There is much similarity between his view and that of Augustine. But there is one great difference: For Augustine, charity (the source of the virtues) is a result of God's grace, not something we have in our control.

self-examination revealed the cupidity that remained in his life even as a Christian bishop. The Christian may be "on the way" toward the blessedness of truly ordered loves but cannot expect to find it entire until the resurrection of the dead.

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1. Why, according to Augustine, can we not save ourselves?
 2. What is virtue? How is it related to grace?
 3. What can we properly enjoy? What can we properly use?
 4. Contrast Augustine's notion of piety with the piety described in *Euthyphro* 13a–15b.
 5. What are the two kinds of love?
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Augustine on Relativism

As we have seen, Augustine argues against skepticism. And everything we have seen so far should lead us to conclude that he is completely opposed to relativism as well. No believer in God could accept Protagoras' saying that *man* is the measure of all things. There is indeed a "measure," a standard by which to judge. But it could not be any created thing, much less a human being whose valuations are determined by a set of disordered loves.† Moreover, if the doctrine of relativism is that (1) Jones can judge some particular action to be right, (2) Smith can judge that very same action to be wrong, and (3) both Jones and Smith are correct, then Augustine is certainly not a relativist.

Nonetheless, there is a sense in which Augustine can admit a good deal of what the relativist wishes to urge. Part of what makes relativism plausible are the differences in customs among the nations.‡

†Again, a comparison with Aristotle is instructive. Aristotle also disagrees with Protagoras; for him the "measure" is the good man (see p. 215), not just *any* man. Augustine might not disagree with this in principle, but he would ask, Where is this good man to be found? Among men, he would say, there is but one without sin—the Christ, the incarnation of the Wisdom of God, the *logos*. He can be the "measure." Aristotle's "good man" might have many virtues, but from Augustine's point of view, he is puffed up with pride—which undermines them all.

‡Recall the example of the Greeks before Darius cited by Herodotus (see p. 63) and the judgment that custom is king over all.

Another part of its plausibility is the conviction (which most people share) that it is usually wrong to lie, or steal, but not always. Augustine does justice to both these intuitions by recognizing that particular actions are always done out of particular *motivations* and in particular *circumstances*, which must both be taken into account when judging the act. Remember Augustine's rule: Love and do what you will. One crucial fact in the evaluation of all actions concerns the way they are motivated: Is the motivation charity or cupidity? A second crucial fact is an appraisal of what the circumstances require.

These principles give Augustine great flexibility with regard to outward behavior while rigorously constraining judgment about motives. Externally considered, one and the same act may be right in one circumstance and wrong in another. Think about a lie that consists simply in replying yes to a question. This may be wrong if it is said to gain an unfair advantage for oneself, but right if it is the only way to save a life. Without a full knowledge of both motivation and circumstances, we should be very cautious about pronouncing judgment. As we shall see in the next section, there is even one sense in which such judgment is reserved to God.

In pointing to these two factors, Augustine makes a significant contribution to the debate about **relativism**. While allowing considerable relativity to moral judgments, Augustine is saved from a complete relativism by (1) the Neoplatonic conviction that reality itself is ordered in value, corresponding to the degrees of being, and (2) the thesis about motivation. It is not merely by a conventional agreement that eternal things are of more value than temporal things. Nor is it just *nomos* to praise charity and condemn lust, greed, and hatred. Here we reach values that cannot be relativized. The command of Jesus to love God without reserve and our neighbors as ourselves is *absolute*. Augustine goes as far as to say, "Scripture teaches nothing but charity, nor condemns anything except cupidity, and in this way shapes the minds of men" (*OCD 3.10*).

Similar considerations apply to justice. Some men, he says,

misled by the variety of innumerable customs, thought that there was no such thing as absolute justice but that every people regarded its own way

of life as just. . . . They have not understood, to cite only one instance, that "what you do not wish to have done to yourself, do not do to another"* cannot be varied on account of any diversity of peoples. When this idea is applied to the love of God, all vices perish; when it is applied to the love of one's neighbor, all crimes disappear. For no one wishes his own dwelling corrupted, so that he should not therefore wish to see God's dwelling, which he is himself, corrupted. And since no one wishes to be harmed by another, he should not harm others. (*OCD 3.14*)

In effect, then, Augustine makes two moves: (1) he breaks up the question about whether values are relative by saying that some are and some are not; and (2) he locates those that are not in the realm of motivation. Augustine is certainly not a relativist, but neither is he a simple absolutist. The subtlety of his analyses of the interior life serve him in good stead in advancing the conversation at this point.

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1. How can one and the same behavior be sometimes right and sometimes wrong?
 2. Contrast Augustine's view of relativism with that of Protagoras.
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The Two Cities

There is an old joke that there are just two kinds of people in the world: those who think that there are just two kinds of people and those who don't. Augustine is emphatically a member of the first group. The two kinds are the saved and the damned, those destined for eternal blessedness in heaven and those to be punished for their sins in hell.

But, as you might expect, Augustine's view is more sophisticated and subtle than that bare statement suggests. It is set forth in a book of more than a thousand pages that presents us with an entire philosophy of history. In *The City of God* he brings together all he has learned in the forty and more years since first dedicating himself to the search for wisdom. Here he provides a unified interpretation of human history from creation to the end of the world.

The occasion for writing this magnum opus was the sack of Rome by a Gothic army under the

*Luke 6:31 and Matt. 7:12. See pp. 256–257.

leadership of Alaric in August of A.D. 410. The late Roman Empire had been harried by barbarians from the north and east for some time, but for a barbarian army to take Rome, the “eternal city,” was a profound shock to every Roman citizen, Christian and pagan alike. People asked: “How could this happen?” Jerome, who had translated the Bible into Latin, wrote, “If Rome can perish, what can be safe?”⁶

Augustine’s answer distinguishes “two cities,” an **earthly city** and a **heavenly city**. The goal of each city is the same: peace. Members of the earthly city seek peace (harmony and order) in this life: such a peace is a necessary condition for happiness, the ultimate end of all men. For this reason states and empires are established, the noblest of them all (in Augustine’s view) being the Roman Empire. It is noblest in this respect: It succeeded in guaranteeing the earthly peace of its citizens better and for a longer time than any other state known to Augustine.

Yet see to what a pass it had come! Why? To answer this question Augustine reaches back into his theory of motivation and applies its insights to Roman history. What motivated the founders of Rome and all its greatest statesmen? Like Homer’s heroes, they wanted *glory*.*

They were passionately devoted to glory; it was for this that they desired to live, for this they did not hesitate to die. This unbounded passion for glory, above all else, checked their other appetites. They felt it shameful for their country to be enslaved, but glorious for her to have dominion and empire; and so they set their hearts first on making her free, and then on making her sovereign. (CG 5.12)

The best among the Romans directed this quest for glory into the “right path”; it “checked their other appetites,” and they were exemplars of virtue, “good men in their way,” as Augustine puts it (CG 5.12). Those virtues (personal moderation and devotion to the good of their country) led to Rome’s greatness. The passion for glory can yield magnificent results, as Augustine acknowledges:

By such immaculate conduct they laboured towards honours, power and glory, by what they took to be

the true way. And they were honoured in almost all nations; they imposed their laws on many peoples; and today they enjoy renown in the history and literature of nearly all races. (CG 5.15)

And, Augustine adds (quoting from Matt. 6:2), “they have received their reward.”

The passion for glory, however, is a peculiarly unstable motivation; it can lead as easily to vice and crime as to virtue. Since the glory sought is the praise and honor of others, what happens when the others honor wealth and domination more than moderation and justice? The result is obvious. In fact, the earthly city is always a mix of virtue and vice—precisely because it is an *earthly* city. The aim of its citizens is to *enjoy* what they should only *use*: earthly peace, possessions, and bodily well-being. Since these are exclusive goods (if I possess an estate, you necessarily do not possess it), any earthly city is bound to generate envy and conflict and to tend toward its own destruction.*

We see then that the two cities were created by two kinds of love: the earthly city was created by self-love reaching the point of contempt for God, the Heavenly City by the love of God carried as far as contempt of self. In fact, the earthly city glories in itself, the Heavenly City glories in the Lord. The former looks for glory from men, the latter finds its highest glory in God, the witness of a good conscience. The earthly lifts up its head in its own glory, the Heavenly City says to its God: “My glory; you lift up my head.” In the former, the lust for domination lords it over its princes as over the nations it subjugates; in the other both those put in authority and those subject to them serve one another in love, the rulers by their counsel, the subjects by obedience. The one city loves its own strength shown in its powerful leaders; the other says to its God, “I will love you, my Lord, my strength.” (CG 14.28)

Pursuing earthly goods for their own sake is self-destructive, for it leads to competition, conflict, and

*It is the hope of Karl Marx and the communists that such envy and conflict can be overcome in *this* world; the key, they believe, is overcoming private property, so that the ground of envy is undercut. See Chapter 22. Augustine would have considered this naive.

*See pp. 6–7.

disaster. That is why Rome fell. Rome was not, as some Christians held, particularly wicked; in fact, its empire was a magnificent achievement, characterized by the real, though flawed, provision of peace and order for its citizens. But it reaped the inevitable consequence of earthly cities that cherish earthly glory.

Members of the heavenly city realize that here in this world they have no continuing home; they look for the fulfillment of their hopes in the life to come. Here they have a taste of blessedness, and through God's grace a beginning of true virtue can begin to grow on the ground of charity. But the culmination of these hopes lies beyond.

Nonetheless, citizens of the heavenly city duly appreciate the relative peace provided by the earthly city and contribute to it as they can. While on earth they consider themselves resident aliens and follow the laws and customs of the society they are dwelling in, to the extent that doing so is consistent with their true citizenship. They *use* the arrangements of their society, but they do not settle down to *enjoy* them.

However, it would be incorrect to say that the goods which [the earthly] city desires are not goods, since even that city is better, in its own human way, by their possession. . . . These things are goods and undoubtedly they are gifts of God. (CG 15.4)

So, with respect to laws that establish “a kind of compromise between human wills about the things relevant to mortal life,” there is “a harmony” between members of the two cities. It is only when the earthly city tries to impose laws at variance with the laws of God that citizens of the heavenly city must dissent (CG 19.17).

There are, then, two kinds of people, distinguished by their loves. But this very fact—that it is motivation that makes the difference—removes the possibility that anyone can with certainty sort people into one class or the other. We might think Augustine would be tempted to equate membership in the church with citizenship in the heavenly city, but he does not. The church is, collectively, the custodian of the truth about God; individuals are another matter. We can tell who is on the church rolls, but we cannot tell for certain who is a member of the City of God. Only God can judge that.

Among the professed enemies of the City of God, Augustine tells us,

are hidden future citizens; and when confronted with them she must not think it a fruitless task to bear with their hostility until she finds them confessing the faith. In the same way, while the City of God is on pilgrimage in this world, she has in her midst some who are united with her in participation in the sacraments, but who will not join with her in the eternal destiny of the saints. . . .

In truth, these two cities are interwoven and intermixed in this era, and await separation at the last judgment. (CG 1.35)

This epistemological obscurity concerning the saints (for us, though not for God) is a direct consequence of the fact that people's motivations and desires that make the difference. Behavior is always ambiguous; once more it is the will that tells.

We shall not pursue the details of Augustine's interpretation of history in these terms. It is enough to say that *The City of God* understands human history as *meaningful*. It is not, as a distinguished historian once said, “just one damn thing after another.” It has a narrative unity; there is plan and purpose in it; and the story found in the Christian Scriptures provides the key.* History is about God's calling citizens of a heavenly city out of the sinful world. These will eventually enjoy blessedness in perfect peace with one another and rest in enjoyment of the one eternal good. For Augustine, all of history must be seen in relation to that end.

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1. What distinguishes the two cities from one another?
 2. Why are we unable to tell with certainty who belongs to each city?
-

Augustine and the Philosophers

Augustine melds two traditions, the classical and the Christian. Tensions show up at various points in Augustine's work, but the degree of success he achieves makes him a peculiarly important figure

*Review the major “chapters” in this story by looking again at Chapter 12.

and one of the most influential contributors to the conversation still to come.

He is convinced that truth is one and that both philosophers and prophets have made important contributions to our understanding of it. But there is never any doubt which tradition has priority when there is a conflict: Augustine is first, last, and always a Christian, convinced that the one and only wisdom is most fully revealed in the Christ. He has put us in a good position to sketch some broad contrasts between classical and Christian philosophy.

REASON AND AUTHORITY

Augustine is no despiser of reason. Not for him the *credo quia absurdum est* of some church fathers.* He wants to understand what he believes and thinks this can, to a large extent, be done through reason.

Nevertheless, belief has the priority. It must have, for rational understanding could never by itself discover the truth about the Word becoming flesh or about the Trinity. These things must be believed on the **authority** of the prophets and apostles who bear testimony to them. This authority is founded on eyewitnesses and is handed on in the church. The key that unlocks the mystery of life is *revealed*, not *discovered*. As Augustine never tires of saying, unless you believe, you will not understand.

The following example may make this relation of belief and understanding clearer to you. Imagine a young woman who has listened only to rock music. Now put her in a concert hall where Beethoven's violin concerto is being performed. She is not likely to get much out of it, but should she believe that there is something of great value going on in that hall? At that point she could accept that this is superb music only by relying on authority. But there is such authority—that of musicians, music critics, and music lovers over nearly two centuries. Augustine would say that it is reasonable for her to believe this on the basis of such authority. This belief not only

is reasonable, but also may lead her to listen to the concerto again and again, until she eventually comes to the point where she understands for herself how magnificent it is.⁷ Belief, Augustine holds, often properly precedes understanding.

Greek philosophy, by contrast, takes the opposite point of view: Unless I understand, the philosopher says, I will not believe. The extreme case is, of course, the skeptic, who, applying this exact principle, suspends judgment about virtually everything. But Xenophanes already set the pattern:*

The gods have not revealed all things from the beginning to mortals; but, by seeking, men find out, in time, what is better.

Having shaken themselves loose from their own tradition, from Homeric authority, philosophers on the whole are convinced that there is no alternative to trying to achieve wisdom on our own. And part of this pattern is the value they put on human excellence in the search for truth, on self-sufficiency, and on pride in one's attainments.

Here we have one of the great watersheds in the quest for wisdom: Is wisdom something we can *achieve*, or is it something we must *receive*? Augustine is convinced that we must receive it because of the absolute distinction between God and humans (we are too limited to discover truth on our own), sin (we are too corrupted to do it), grace (God provides it for us), and gratitude and humility (the appropriate responses to the situation).

INTELLECT AND WILL

Greek philosophers tend to see human problems and their solution in terms of ignorance and knowledge. This is particularly clear in Socrates, for whom virtue or excellence *is* knowledge. But the pattern is very broad, reflected in the importance of education for Plato's guardians, of practical wisdom and contemplation for Aristotle, and of knowledge of reality (in their different theories) by Epicureans and Stoics. Roughly, the pattern takes

*"I believe because it is absurd." This formula is attributed to Tertullian, a Christian writer of the second century.

*Review the discussion of the whole passage from which these words are taken, pp. 16-17.

this form: Inform the intellect and the rest of life will take care of itself.*

Augustine, expressing both the Christian tradition and his own experience, disagrees. Intellect may well be impotent—or worse—unless the will is straightened out. The basic features of human life are desire and love, which are matters of the will. What is needed is not (at first) education, but *conversion*; not inquiry, but *faith*.

Again we have a watershed, which correlates fairly well with the first one. The Christian philosopher believes that we cannot rely on reason alone; its use depends on the condition of the will, and the will is corrupted. On this view, our predicament is a deep one; we are not in a position to help ourselves out of it, but—this is crucial—help is available. From the point of view of the Greek philosophers, the human predicament may be serious, but well-intentioned intellectual work will lead us out of it. Reason can master desire.

There is a sense, then, in which Christian thinkers are more pessimistic about humanity than the Greek philosophers.

EPICUREANS AND STOICS

We can cap this contrast by noting Augustine's criticisms of several pagan philosophies that may be serious rivals to Christianity's claim to wisdom. Platonism is the one Augustine thinks nearest the truth, but the Platonists go wrong in allowing worship of powers greater than human beings but inferior to God. Augustine concedes that there are such powers (whether called angels, demons, or gods) but insists that devotion, prayer, and worship belong only to God.

Augustine's interest in Epicurean and Stoic philosophers is sharpened because Saint Paul is alleged to have debated with them in Athens (see Acts 17:18). Moreover, between them they seem to cover neatly the this-worldly possibilities for happiness, the Epicureans seeking it in the pleasures of a material world and the Stoics in the virtues of the soul.

*The contrast, put this baldly, is overdrawn. For Plato's view of education, the *love* of the good is a crucial factor, and this isn't just a matter of intellect. Still, there is something essentially right about it.

Recall that Epicurus and Lucretius hold that there is no sense in which we survive our physical death; the soul is as physical as the body and disperses when the body disintegrates. Augustine combines this view with their hedonism and concludes that they recommend nothing but the pursuit of bodily pleasures.* He ascribes to them the slogan, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we shall die," which expresses a hedonist's determination to experience as much bodily pleasure as possible before death extinguishes all sensation.

This doctrine, Augustine says, is "more fitting for swine than for men." Even worse, it is a doctrine that will inevitably lead to injustice and the oppression of the poor (SS 150). And the reason is by now a familiar one: They are trying to enjoy what should only be used and as a result are dominated by their disordered loves. Epicureanism in this life makes sense only if they are right about consciousness ending in the grave, and of course Augustine is convinced that cannot be right.

The Stoics, who locate happiness in the virtues of the soul, are considered more worthy opponents. Augustine cannot help admiring their courage and steadfastness. But Augustine is convinced that the Stoics have not found the key to blessedness. The Stoics' aim is to live in harmony with nature.† Recall the advice of Epictetus: "Do not seek to have events happen as you want them to, but instead want them to happen as they do happen, and your life will go well." Augustine caustically asks,

Now is this man happy, just because he is patient in his misery? Of course not! (CG 14.25)

It is real happiness that we are interested in, not just contentment with what the world happens to dish out; the Stoic version of happiness is just a makeshift second best. True happiness is delight in the possession of the highest good, to which only the Christian has the key.

*Is this justified? Compare Epicurus on pp. 239–240.

†This concept is discussed on pp. 243–245.

But, Augustine suggests, what else could you expect? The Stoic, like the Epicurean, “puts his hope in himself” (SS 150). This is simply another display of pride, which is the root of human trouble in the first place. From Augustine’s point of view, even the virtues of the pagans are but “splendid vices.”

Thus Augustine, though a great admirer of pagan learning, is also one of its most severe critics. He brings to the fore a number of “choice points” in which the Christian tradition differs from non-Christian rational philosophy. These traditions differ in their conceptions of God and of God’s relation to the world; they differ about appeal to authority, about the priority of will or intellect in human nature, about whether pride is a virtue or a vice; and they differ in their conceptions of love. The general pattern on these issues that Augustine sets will dominate Western philosophy for a thousand years.

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1. What tension exists between reason and authority? Between intellect and will?
 2. What is Augustine’s critique of the Epicureans? Of the Stoics?
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FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

1. Compare Socrates’ view that no one ever knowingly does wrong with Augustine’s contrary conviction. Which do you think is nearer the truth? Why?
2. State as clearly as you can Augustine’s charge that the philosophers are guilty of pride. Then try to defend philosophy against that charge. Which position do you think has the stronger arguments?

KEY WORDS

pride	wisdom
Problem of Evil	happiness
Manicheanism	skepticism
Ambrose	truth

God	loves
Neoplatonism	disordered love
Plotinus	will
the One	ordered love
emanation	use
Great Chain of Being	enjoyment
<i>ex nihilo</i>	vice
moral evil	crime
natural evil	cupidity
eternity	charity
past	relativism
present	earthly city
future	heavenly city
original sin	authority
sin	

NOTES

1. An excellent and readable biography is *Augustine of Hippo* by Peter Brown (London: Faber and Faber, 1967). A classic discussion of his philosophy is Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine* (London: Victor Gollanz, 1961).
2. References to the works of Augustine are as follows:
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 - CG*: *The City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1972).
 - OCD*: *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson Jr. (New York: Macmillan, 1958).
 - SO*: *The Soliloquies of St. Augustine*, trans. Rose Elizabeth Cleveland (London: Williams and Norgate, 1910).
 - T*: *The Teacher*, and *GS*, *The Greatness of the Soul*, in *Ancient Christian Writers*, ed. Johannes Quasten and Joseph C. Plumpe (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1964).
 - AE*: *Saint Augustine’s Enchiridion*, trans. Ernest Evans (London: S.P.C.K., 1953).
 - SL*: *The Spirit and the Letter*, trans. John Burnaby, vol. 8 of *The Library of Christian Classics* (London: SCM Press, 1955).
 - SS*: *Selected Sermons of St. Augustine*, ed. Quincy Howe Jr. (London: Victor Gollanz, 1967).

3. Quotations from a *Manichean Psalmbook* in Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, are cited in the text using the abbreviation *MP*. References are to page numbers.
4. Quotations from *The Essential Plotinus*, ed. Elmer O'Brien (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1980), are cited in the text using the abbreviation *EP*. References are to page numbers.
5. Quoted in Gilson, *Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine*, 140.
6. Quoted in Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 289.
7. The example is adapted from Jerry P. King, *The Art of Mathematics* (New York: Plenum Press, 1992), 138.
8. Quoted in John Manley Robinson, *An Introduction to Early Greek Philosophy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), 56.

CHAPTER

14

PHILOSOPHY IN THE ISLAMIC WORLD

The Great Conversation Spreads Out

What distinguishes a conversation from a series of speeches is that participants in a conversation respond to one another. What makes Western philosophy a single conversation and what distinguishes it from other philosophical conversations is that the philosophers involved are responding, in one way or another, to a particular tradition of thought that first arose in ancient Greece.¹ Up to this point in our story, everyone participating in that conversation has been part of the Greco-Roman world. In the centuries after Augustine's death, however, the conversation that first arose in the Greek colonies of Asia Minor would migrate to new lands—including lands that are not typically considered part of the West. Thinkers in Italy and then northern Europe would eventually reengage with it, but not before it had been transformed by the philosophers who carried it through the intervening centuries. While these post-Augustinian thinkers continue to explore classical philosophical topics, such as the problem of the one and the many, they also apply the tools of Greek philosophy to more characteristically medieval themes: the relationship

between reason and revealed religion, the nature and origin of the universe, and the nature of the soul. In this chapter, we will explore those themes mainly through the thought of four great Muslim philosophers: al-Kindī, al-Fārābī, Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā), and al-Ghazālī.

A Sea Change in the Mediterranean Basin

To understand the next part of the great conversation, we need to understand the historic cultural and political shift that occurred in the Mediterranean and Middle East between the fifth and eighth centuries. By the time of Augustine's death in A.D. 430, the Roman Empire had converted to Christianity and fractured into two parts. The Western Roman Empire, with its capital in Rome, finally collapsed in A.D. 476. The glory of Rome faded as the early Middle Ages settled over western Europe. But the Eastern Roman Empire—often known as the **Byzantine Empire** because its capital, Constantinople, had once been called





MAP 3 *Expansion of the Caliphate*

Byzantium—survived for another thousand years or so. The Greek language predominated there, making it easy for the Byzantines to carry on the study of Western philosophy. Working primarily in Alexandria and Athens, prominent Neoplatonists like the pagan **Simplicius** (c. 490–c. 560) and the Christian **John Philoponus** (c. 490–c. 570) taught and wrote commentaries on ancient texts, including many of Aristotle’s works. By the early seventh century, however, this tradition faltered and began to disappear. The great conversation had all but died out in its native land.

Just as the philosophical traditions of Greece were vanishing from the Byzantine Empire, however, a new intellectual and political force arose in the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula. A new religion, **Islam**, emerged when, according to Muslim belief, God revealed the Qur’ān to his final prophet, **Muhammad** (c. 570–632). Muslims regard the **Qur’ān**, the holy scripture of Islam, as the direct word of God, transmitted through Muhammad in a series of revelations between about 610 and 632. During that time, Muhammad unified the Arab tribes and established political control over most of the Arabian Peninsula. In the decades after his death, a series of four **caliphs**—literally,

the “successors” of Muhammad who served as both religious and political leaders—quickly conquered much of the Middle East, subduing the Persian Empire and capturing Syria, Egypt, and other lands from the Byzantines. The Umayyad family seized control in 661 and continued the Arab expansion. By the middle of the eighth century, the Umayyad caliphs had assembled the largest empire the world had yet seen, stretching from the Atlantic coasts of North Africa and Europe all the way to the Indian subcontinent. In 750, the Umayyads were overthrown by another Arab family, the Abbasids, who established Baghdad as their capital. This multiethnic, polyglot empire, known as the Abbasid **caliphate**, united people of many different cultures and religions under a single ruler. Although real power would soon devolve from the caliphs to a constellation of regional rulers, this initial unification would spur a flowering of arts, science, and philosophy.

Given the importance of Islam to this part of our story, it is worth saying something about its main tenets. According to Muslim belief, Muhammad is the last of a long line of prophets that included Jesus and the Hebrew prophets of the Torah. Accordingly, Islam shares many beliefs with

Christianity and Judaism, including the belief in a single, all-powerful, all-knowing, benevolent God who created and sustains the universe; the belief that each human has an individual, immortal soul; and the belief that God established laws for humans to follow. Islam departs from Christianity and Judaism, however, on several crucial points of doctrine. One important example is that Muslims do not regard any of the prophets as divine. Whereas Christians believe that Jesus was God incarnate, Muslims believe that Muhammad, Jesus, and the other prophets were mortals who received and transmitted God's word. As the Muslim declaration of faith says, "There is no god but God. Muhammad is the messenger of God." More generally, the principle of *tawhīd*—that God is One, an absolute unity—is central to Islam. Jews and Christians also believe in just one God, of course, but Muslims have often accused Christians of straying from this belief by embracing the idea of the Holy Trinity, according to which God is mysteriously complex, comprising three aspects or "persons": Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Because of this sharp contrast between Islam and Christianity, the principle of *tawhīd* would figure prominently in early Islamic philosophy.

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1. What are main tenets of Islam? How do they resemble those of Christianity and Judaism? How do they differ?
 2. What is the principle of *tawhīd*? Why do Muslims understand it as contrasting with Christian doctrine?
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Al-Kindī, the "Philosopher of the Arabs"

As the Arab conquests swept through the Mediterranean and Middle East in the seventh and eighth centuries, the caliphs began amassing libraries of books written in the many languages spoken throughout their empire as well as books collected from even farther afield in India and China. By the early ninth century, the Abbasid caliphs had established Baghdad as an important cultural and intellectual center. Many of the greatest minds of

the empire flocked there, and the caliphs commissioned them to translate the world's knowledge into Arabic.

The libraries of Baghdad contained, among a great many other books, many works of Greek science and philosophy. Many of these books had been preserved by dissident Christians, who had fled to the fringes of the theologically rigid Byzantine Empire and beyond into western Persia. These dissidents continued to study and teach Aristotle's logical works and various Neoplatonic commentaries on Aristotle. Christian and Muslim translators rendered these and other Greek works into Arabic, where they came to the attention of Abu Yūsuf Ya'qūb **al-Kindī** (c. 800–c. 870).

As the brilliant scion of a prominent Arab family, al-Kindī was well positioned to serve as an ambassador for Greek thought in the Muslim world. He produced important and original philosophy, earning himself the nickname "the philosopher of the Arabs." But his most important contribution to the great conversation was getting the Muslim world to take Greek philosophy seriously. He famously wrote,

We must not be ashamed to admire the truth or to acquire it, from wherever it comes. Even if it should come from far-flung nations and foreign peoples, there is for the student of truth nothing more important than the truth, nor is the truth demeaned or diminished by the one who states or conveys it; no one is demeaned by the truth, rather all are enabled by it. (*On First Philosophy* I.4)²

To claim that the ancient Greeks had indeed conveyed "the truth," al-Kindī had to show that Greek philosophy did not conflict with the revealed truth of Islam. So, like many of his Christian predecessors in Alexandria and Athens and his eventual successors in medieval Europe, al-Kindī set out to reconcile philosophy with religion—and, indeed, to show that philosophy provided additional avenues for knowing and understanding what religion had already revealed.

One of his priorities is to substantiate the Islamic doctrine that God is the eternal, unitary creator of the universe. In his greatest work, *On First Philosophy*, he goes about this in a rigorous but

roundabout way by taking up the old Greek problem of the one and the many.

Let us now discuss the number of ways that “one” is said. We say that “one” is said of everything united, but also of anything that is not said to be “many.” It is thus said in many ways, including genus, form, individual, difference, proper accident, and common accident. (*On First Philosophy* XI.1)

Each of these things is sometimes called “one,” as when we regard giraffes as a single genus, but al-Kindī argues that they are all, in fact, many. Each genus contains many species—if not actually, then potentially. (Notice how much Greek metaphysical terminology al-Kindī adopts.) Each species contains many individuals. Even individuals are only one “by convention,” since they too could be divided into parts. Accidental properties of objects, such as the purple of a giraffe’s tongue, are many because they occur in many individuals. And yet, it is not simply a mistake to call each of these “one” thing, for they cannot plausibly be conceived as “multiplicity without unity.” Al-Kindī summarizes a series of dense arguments for this claim as follows:

Hence it has been shown that it is impossible even that some things are only multiplicity, because it is impossible that anything be only multiplicity. For, either it is something or not. If it is something then it is one [thing] . . . so it is a multiplicity and not a multiplicity, and this is an impossible contradiction. So it is impossible that some things are only multiplicity without unity. (*On First Philosophy* XIV.11)

The idea here is that for anything that seems to be multiple, we can find some term that collects it together into one thing. Thus, nothing can exist *only* as a multiplicity. Nor is it tenable to think that our world consists only in a unity, as Parmenides did.* Following his favorite tactic of arguing by *reductio ad absurdum*,† al-Kindī begins by assuming that there is no multiplicity.

We say that, if there is only unity without multiplicity, there is no contrariety. For the contrary has something other than it as its contrary. But otherness occurs in at least two things, and two is a multiplicity. If there is no multiplicity there is then no contrariety, but if there is contrariety then there is multiplicity. But contrariety does exist, so multiplicity does as well. But we have supposed that it does not . . . and this is an impossible contradiction. So it is impossible that there is no multiplicity. (*On First Philosophy* XV.1)

The argument is dense, but let us consider it step by step to see if we can follow al-Kindī’s reasoning.

1. There is no multiplicity. (starting assumption)
2. If there is no multiplicity, there is no contrariety because
 - a. something can only be contrary to something *other* than itself, and
 - b. this requires the existence of two things, and
 - c. if there are at least two things, then there is multiplicity.
3. Contrariety does exist. (assumption)
4. There is multiplicity. (from 2 and 3)
5. There is multiplicity and there is no multiplicity. (from 1 and 4)
6. So premise 1 cannot be true. (by 5 and the principle of *reductio ad absurdum*)
7. So there is multiplicity.

Notice that in this argument al-Kindī simply takes it for granted that the contrariety that appears all around us is real. As we have seen, the Eleatic philosophers of ancient Greece denied this.* They might have been more easily moved by the series of similarly dense arguments by which al-Kindī claims to show that nothing can be unity without multiplicity if it has a beginning, middle, and end; if it is describable by geometry; or if it moves or changes in terms of any of the Aristotelian categories. These arguments, too, take the form of *reductio ad absurdum*. Al-Kindī seems to have developed

*See p. 22.

†See pp. 27–28 for a discussion of this form of argument, which begins by assuming the opposite of what it wants to prove and proceeds to derive a contradiction from that assumption.

*In particular, Parmenides and his student Zeno argued that only the One exists (pp. 22–28). Al-Kindī would not have had access to their writings, though he may have known their ideas through Aristotle’s *Physics*.

his fondness for this tactic by reading an Arabic translation of Euclid's geometrical treatise, the *Elements*. Like many Western philosophers before and after him, al-Kindī's passion for philosophy seems to have grown from an interest in geometry and mathematics.

The one and the many, al-Kindī concludes, underpin all physical things. This leaves him with a problem, however, for it seems to conflict with the fundamental principle of *tawhīd*—the absolute Oneness of God. The solution to this problem lies in the fact that al-Kindī's arguments against unity without multiplicity all rely on features of the various terms of Aristotelian logic, such as genus, species, and the categories. Working backward, then, al-Kindī argues that none of those terms applies to the "true One."

Therefore, the true One possesses neither matter, form, quantity, quality, nor relation. Nor is it described by any of the other terms [of Aristotle's logic]: it has no genus, no specific difference, no individual, no proper accident, and no common accident. It does not move, and is not described through anything that is denied to be one in truth. It is therefore pure unity alone, I mean nothing other than unity. (*On First Philosophy* XX.2)

In other words, one cannot apply any of the terms of Aristotelian logic to God. By this circuitous route, al-Kindī arrives at a deeply Neoplatonic view of God* that supports the central Islamic teaching that God is One.

From these ideas about the one and the many, it is a short step for al-Kindī to show that God created and sustains all things. Each thing that exists has an element of unity in it. That is what makes it a single thing. And anything that has unity must receive that unity from something that is essentially unitary—that is, God. For good measure, al-Kindī also proves that the universe has not always existed and thus that it, too, was created. He offers several distinct arguments for this claim, the clearest of which begins from an argument that time had a beginning.

Now let us make clear in another way that time cannot be actually infinite, either past or future. We say that before every segment of time there is [another] segment, until we reach a segment of time before which there is no other segment. . . . It cannot be otherwise. For, if it could be otherwise, every segment of time would be followed by another segment, to infinity. In that case we could never reach a specified time, because from infinitely long ago up until this given time is a duration equal to the duration from this given time, all the way back in time to infinity. If [the duration] from infinity to a determined time were known, then [the duration] from this known time back along an infinity of time would [also] be known. Then the infinite would be finite, and this is an impossible contradiction.

Also, if one does not reach the determined time, such that one reaches a prior time, and a time prior to that, and a time prior to that, and likewise to infinity, and if the [whole] distance of infinite cannot be traversed, nor its end reached, then infinite time cannot be traversed at all so as to reach a determined time [such as the present]. But a determined time is in fact reached. So necessarily the [given] time is not preceded by infinity, but rather by the finite. There cannot, however, be a body without duration. So the being of the body is not infinite; rather, the being of the body is finite, and it is impossible that there be a body that has always existed (*On First Philosophy* VIII.1–2)

Since what has not always existed is originated—that is, brought-to-be—and being-brought-to-be occurs through what has unity in its essence, the entire universe was brought-to-be by God, the true One. Thus, al-Kindī uses the tools of Aristotelian philosophy to argue against Aristotle, who affirms the eternity of the world, and in favor of Islam, which denies it.

One more feature of al-Kindī's philosophical thought deserves special mention: his ideas about how we come to grasp universals. Aristotle believed that the rational part of the soul possessed a special power to abstract universals from the sensible objects that it perceived. It is through this power that the soul comes to understand abstract ideas of, say, a genus or a species.* Al-Kindī broadly

*Plotinus argued that we cannot say anything about the One, since to do so would imply that it is not truly One. See p. 270.

*See the discussion of Aristotle's views on induction (p. 192) and *nous* (p. 206–208).

shares this view, with one important modification: Those abstract ideas are already being thought about by a separate and purely immaterial intellect, called the **Active Intellect**. This intellect is distinct both from God and from human souls, but al-Kindī never illuminates us as to its exact nature. He extracts the idea of the Active Intellect from an obscure passage in Aristotle and gives it a prominent role in human thought. According to al-Kindī, a human soul comes to understand an abstract idea only when it receives that idea from the Active Intellect. Al-Kindī does not explain how this happens, but he maintains that once it does happen, the human soul stores the idea in itself to be recalled as needed. Appropriately enough, al-Kindī’s interpretation of the Active Intellect would pass into Islamic intellectual consciousness, to be recalled later and elaborated on by many of his successors. To understand it more deeply, we must turn to the next great philosopher in the Islamic tradition.

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1. What is al-Kindī’s argument that Muslims should study the works of Greek philosophy?
 2. How does al-Kindī defend the doctrine of *tawhīd*?
 3. In your own words, explain al-Kindī’s argument that the world is created rather than eternal.
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Al-Fārābī, the “Second Master”

While al-Kindī laid the foundation for philosophy in the Muslim world, the first great systematic philosopher of the Islamic Golden Age was Abū Naṣr **al-Fārābī** (c. 870–c. 950), whose logical acumen and reputation among his successors earned him the moniker of “the Second Master.” (The first “master” was Aristotle.) For someone of such enduring fame, we know surprisingly little about his life. He hailed from central Asia, of either Turkic or Persian ancestry, but spent his professional life mainly in Baghdad, the Byzantine Empire, Egypt, and Damascus. His voluminous writing ranged over nearly every area of philosophy, including logic, the history of philosophy, philosophy of religion, philosophy of language, epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and political

philosophy; and he also took a keen interest in music, composing an important treatise called the *Great Book of Music*.

RELIGION AS SUBORDINATE TO PHILOSOPHY

Like al-Kindī, al-Fārābī takes a keen interest in the relationship between philosophy and revealed religion. Unlike al-Kindī, al-Fārābī sets philosophy above religion. According to al-Fārābī,

Religion is opinions and actions, determined and restricted with stipulations and prescribed for a community by their first ruler, who seeks to obtain through their practicing it a specific purpose with respect to them or by means of them. (*Book of Religion* §1)³

In the case of Islam, the “first ruler” is Muhammad, who determines the opinions and actions of his followers through revelation.

If the first ruler is virtuous and his rulership truly virtuous, then in what he prescribes he seeks only to obtain, for himself and for everyone under his rulership, the ultimate happiness that is truly happiness; and that religion will be virtuous religion. (*Book of Religion* §1)

The “ultimate happiness” at which the virtuous ruler aims cannot “come to be in this life, but rather in a life after this one, which is the next life” (*Enumeration of the Sciences* 5.1). The opinions the ruler teaches to lead his followers to that happiness concern two things.

Some of the opinions in virtuous religion are about theoretical things and some about voluntary things.

Among the theoretical are those that describe God, may He be exalted. Then there are some that describe the spiritual beings, their ranks in themselves, their stations in relation to God, may He be exalted, and what each one of them does. Then there are some about the coming into being of the world, as well as some that describe the world, its parts, and the ranks of its parts . . . how the things the world encompasses are linked together and organized and that whatever occurs with respect to them is just and has no injustice; and how each one of them is related to God, may he be exalted, and to the spiritual beings. Then there are some about the coming into

being of the human being and the soul occurring in him, as well as about the intellect. . . . Then there are some that describe what prophecy is and what revelation is like and how it comes into being. Then there are some that describe death and the afterlife and, with respect to the afterlife, the happiness to which the most virtuous and the righteous proceed and the misery to which the most deprived and the profligate proceed. (*Book of Religion* §2)

In addition to teaching correct opinions about the nature of the cosmos, virtuous religion correctly specifies the actions that people should perform, such as the way to worship God and praise the prophets, the way to act toward other human beings, and so on. So far, there is nothing unusual in this account of religion: A prophet receives a revelation from God about the nature of the cosmos and humanity's place in it and communicates that revelation to others.

However, al-Fārābī insists that these “two parts of which religion consists are subordinate to philosophy” because only philosophy offers genuine *knowledge* of them. Religion's role—and especially the role of the theologians and jurists who defend, explain, and apply it through dialectic and rhetoric—is to ensure that everyone can believe and act rightly, even if they lack the philosophical training to achieve genuine knowledge of the nature of the universe and right action. Thus,

most people who are taught the opinions of religion and instructed in them and brought to accept its actions are not of such a station [as to understand what is spoken about only in a philosophic manner]—and that is either due to [their] nature or because they are occupied with other things. Yet they are not people who fail to understand generally accepted or persuasive things. For that reason, both dialectic and rhetoric are of major value for verifying the opinions of religion for the citizens and for defending, supporting, and establishing those opinions in their souls, as well as for defending those opinions when someone appears who desires to deceive the followers of the religion by means of argument, lead them into error, and contend against the religion. (*Book of Religion* §6)

Thus, the purpose of religion, according to al-Fārābī, is to enable people who are incapable of

philosophy to enter heaven and avoid hell by ensuring that they have right opinions about God, the universe, and the proper way to live. Furthermore, this is necessary because most people cannot follow the philosophical demonstrations by which one can achieve genuine knowledge of these things. The implication is that virtuous religion and true philosophy cannot conflict, for they are merely different ways of reaching the same truths.

To understand why al-Fārābī thinks that only philosophy can produce genuine knowledge, we need to understand his theory of knowledge. But to understand his theory of knowledge, we first need to understand his cosmology.

EMANATION AND THE ACTIVE INTELLECT

In explaining the structure and origin of the universe, al-Fārābī blends Neoplatonic ideas with Islamic doctrine. God is an absolute unity, just as Plotinus says of the One. God created all things, as Islam affirms. But whereas the Qur'ān depicts an act of voluntary creation, al-Fārābī follows the Neoplatonists in describing creation as a process of emanation from the One.* God, al-Fārābī says, is an immaterial thinking being. Indeed, he is “thought thinking itself,” as Aristotle says. From God emanates a second immaterial entity—another pure intellect, which thinks about both itself and God. From this intellect arises a third immaterial intellect, from the third a fourth, and so on until we come to the tenth intellect. Each of these intellects is an immaterial, thinking being. Each of the last eight, al-Fārābī believed, was associated with (but distinct from) a specific heavenly body: the tenth with the moon, the rest with the planets, the sun, and the so-called sphere of fixed stars. From the tenth intellect comes the material world, which unlike the immaterial intellects, is subject to change, growth, generation, and decay. Here lies all matter and so all material things, including humans.

The tenth intellect in this series of emanations occupies a special place in al-Fārābī's philosophy.

*See p. 270.

THE CELESTIAL SPHERES

Philosophical books were not the only Greek works translated into Arabic. Scholars also translated Greek mathematics, medicine, astronomy, and more, and the Islamic golden age witnessed important advances in all those fields. We can better appreciate al-Fārābī’s vision of the cosmos by understanding how Greek, Roman, and Islamic astronomers understood the physical structure of the universe.

By Aristotle’s day, the Greeks had already understood that earth was a sphere. One of Plato’s other students, Eudoxus, had developed an elaborate model of the universe in which earth sat, unmoving, at the center of the universe, surrounded by layers of concentric **celestial spheres** in which the moon, the sun, the planets, and the fixed stars were embedded like jewels in a series of hollow crystal balls. The moon, for instance, resides in a crystalline sphere that surrounds earth, which is in turn surrounded by a second sphere for Mercury, and so on. The fixed stars sit in the outermost sphere.

Later astronomers developed similar but more complex theories. Recognizing, for instance, that the planets sometimes appear to reverse their

course across the sky, they postulated more complex mechanisms involving dozens of spheres. For instance, they proposed that Mercury is not actually embedded in the second sphere; it is embedded in a smaller sphere that is *connected* to the second sphere, but rotates independent of it to account for Mercury’s occasional retrograde motion. In the second century A.D., the great Egyptian astronomer **Ptolemy** built on these ideas to devise a model of the cosmos that was good enough to make accurate predictions of eclipses and of the movements of celestial bodies.*

Muslim thinkers adopted this **Ptolemaic model** of the universe and refined it still further, while retaining the basic picture of a stationary earth at the center of a layered, spherical universe. Thus, when al-Fārābī writes of “higher” and “lower” intellects associated with the various planets, he has in mind spheres that are literally higher or lower in relation to earth.

*For helpful animations of the Ptolemaic model, see Dennis Duke, “Almagest Planetary Model Animations,” n.d., available online at <https://people.sc.fsu.edu/~dduke/models.htm>.

This is the Active Intellect. Like al-Kindī, al-Fārābī takes the Active Intellect to play an essential role in human thought. The Active Intellect understands and contains within it all Aristotelian forms, both the forms of the higher intellects and the forms of all things that are or could be in the material world. The human intellect comes to grasp these forms only when the Active Intellect illuminates it. Until then, the rational part of the human soul remains merely a “potential intellect.” Al-Fārābī compares this process to the process by which the sun makes objects visible to the eye. In the darkness, the eye has the potential to see, but vision becomes actual only when the sun illuminates the objects before it. Similarly, the human intellect has the potential to grasp forms, but that intellectual

capacity becomes actual only through the agency of the Active Intellect.*

CERTITUDE, ABSOLUTE CERTITUDE, AND OPINION

With the idea of the Active Intellect in mind, we are ready to consider al-Fārābī’s epistemology. For al-Fārābī, only certain kinds of beliefs can count as knowledge, and then only if they are acquired in a particular way. He calls the highest form of knowledge “absolute certitude.” We can achieve absolute

*Compare to Plato’s analogy between the sun and the Form of the Good (p. 161) and Aristotle’s description of *nous* as a light that makes colors visible (p. 206).

certitude only about statements that are essentially, necessarily, and permanently true. Furthermore, we can only know such a statement if we *know* that it is essentially necessarily and permanently true. This is a high standard for knowledge. Ordinary humans can only meet that standard by learning something through logical demonstrations. (Prophets, as we'll see, are a different story.) Thus, for al-Fārābī as for Plato and Aristotle, the highest form of knowledge involves scientific demonstrations of truths about abstract universals, not about the changeable, contingent features of the world.* This is where the Active Intellect comes in. We acquire our understanding of universals from the Active Intellect, and so it is only through the Active Intellect that we can have genuine knowledge of anything at all.

What of prophets? Al-Fārābī does not pretend that Muhammad or the other prophets acquired their beliefs through logical demonstration, but he does want to claim that they know things. How is this possible? To answer that question, we must delve into al-Fārābī's metaphysics and cosmology.

Al-Fārābī also appeals to the Active Intellect to explain the knowledge of the prophets. All human souls, according to al-Fārābī, have an imaginative faculty, which is intermediate between the sensitive and the rational parts of the soul. The Active Intellect can illuminate the imaginative faculty, too, which is what al-Fārābī takes to be happening when people dream. Some humans, however, have an especially keen imaginative faculty. The Active Intellect imparts visions to such humans that give them a special kind of knowledge, including knowledge of God. These are the prophets, who come to know God not through the rational demonstrations of philosophy, but through the revelatory visions of the imagination. They use the symbolic images from these visions as a way to communicate what they know to others. Through them, the masses can acquire right opinions and learn right actions.

Still, because ordinary humans do not have direct access to the prophet's imaginative insights, but can only learn from the prophet's words and deeds,

beliefs acquired by religious teaching cannot rise to the level of absolute certitude: When we accept something on the basis of religious teaching, we have not demonstrated its necessity, and so cannot know it in the strictest sense. For ordinary humans, genuine knowledge comes only through careful reasoning.

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1. What is the relationship between philosophy and religion, according to al-Fārābī?
 2. What does al-Fārābī say is the purpose of religion?
 3. What is the Active Intellect? Where does it come from?
 4. What is required for a belief to count as knowledge, according to al-Fārābī?
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Avicenna, the "Preeminent Master"

No one in the history of the world, perhaps, had yet come as close to achieving al-Fārābī's philosophical ideal as the man who would pass into history as the "Preeminent Master," Abū 'Alī al-Husayn **ibn Sīnā**, more commonly known in English as **Avicenna** (980–1037). Avicenna achieved such philosophical heights in part because of his early skill as a medical doctor, which earned him an invitation to the royal palace in Bukhara to treat the emir of the Sāmānid Empire. (During Avicenna's youth, the Sāmānid Empire controlled the eastern part of the Islamic world, even though nominal authority still remained with the Abbasid caliphs in Baghdad. Their capital, Bukhara, is in central Asia, in what is now Uzbekistan.) The grateful emir rewarded sixteen-year-old Avicenna with access to the royal library, which contained room after room, each devoted to a particular science. Amid the chests of books, stacked atop one another, Avicenna completed his philosophical education on his own. In addition to Islamic treatises on astronomy, mathematics, philosophy, and so on, he pored over the works of Aristotle, rewriting each argument in strict syllogistic form.* In this way, he came to a deep and thorough understanding of

*For Plato's views on these matters, see pp. 152–153. For Aristotle's, see pp. 190–192.

*On syllogistic arguments, see pp. 188–190.

Aristotelian philosophy. On the basis of this understanding, Avicenna constructed his own highly original philosophical system that is deeply indebted to Aristotle but infused with Neoplatonic and Islamic elements. His greatest work, *The Healing*, expresses this comprehensive system in its entirety, including logic, physics, mathematics, and metaphysics.

EXISTENCE AND ESSENCE

Because Avicenna’s metaphysical views are so heavily influenced by Aristotle, it is worth reviewing some of the main features of Aristotelian metaphysics.*

We can remind ourselves of these features by considering an example. Think of a horse. Avicenna and Aristotle both say that a horse is a *substance*—that is, a complex item composed of form and matter. The *form* accounts for its being a horse rather than something else, and the *matter* makes it the particular horse it is. The form of the horse does not have any being outside of or beyond horses, as Plato had thought, but exists only in actual tangible, sensible horses. Its form as a horse is its *essence*—what it is, its defining characteristics. It is horses and the like—substances—that make up reality. This view is sometimes called **hylomorphism**, from the Greek words for matter (*hyle*) and form (*morphe*).

Such a substance does not, however, have only essential properties—its “horsiness,” so to speak. A horse can be white or black, fast or slow, in the barn or out at pasture. The medievals call these properties “accidents” or “incidental properties,” to distinguish them from a horse’s essential properties. Aristotle refers to incidental properties in terms of categories such as quantity, quality, relation, position, and so on. Such properties can change without changing the essential nature of the horse they qualify. As a horse ages, it may grow grayer, thinner, and slower. If, by contrast, a horse should lose its essential properties, it would no longer be a horse. Like essential properties, accidental properties have their being only in some

substance. No such thing as *white* exists on its own, though there are *white horses*.*

We can address the question of why horses and other substances are the way they are in terms of Aristotle’s four causes: (1) the *formal cause* or the formula that makes it the kind of thing it is; (2) the *material cause*—the stuff making it up; (3) its *efficient cause*, or the trigger that brought it into being at a given time; and (4) the final cause, the end or goal it is driving toward. In addition, we can explain change in substantial entities in terms of the principles of *potentiality* and *actuality*. Any change is a shift from potentially being so-and-so to actually being so-and-so.

Matter is the principle of potentiality in the horse and form is the principle of actuality. For instance, the fertilized egg of a mare is not yet a horse, but, Aristotle would say, it is matter for becoming a horse. It is actually an egg (embodies the form of an egg), but it is also potentially a horse. That bit of matter has within it a *telos*—a dynamism that, if all goes normally, will result in its coming to embody the form of a horse in actuality.

Avicenna shares all these metaphysical principles with Aristotle. You then might ask, Why should we pay any separate attention to Avicenna? Why not be content with the metaphysics of the ancient philosopher? Because Avicenna sees, or thinks he sees, that Aristotle misses something—something fundamental, far-reaching, and extremely important. Strange as it may seem at first, what Aristotle overlooks is *existence*.



“A wise man’s question contains half the answer.”

Solomon Ibn Gabirol (c. 1021–c. 1058)

Perhaps it would be better to say that Aristotle takes existence for granted. Remember that when he is pursuing what he calls “first” philosophy, he

*We do this briefly here. A more extended look back at pp. 192–203 might be helpful.

*In his book on the *Categories*, Aristotle himself uses the example of a horse to explain these ideas and lists whiteness as an example of an accident. This is an interesting coincidence in light of the classic sophistical paradox in Chinese philosophy that “a white horse is not a horse.” See p. 81.

notes that form is prior to substances; it is form that makes a substance real. Form is what *actualizes*, what transforms a potentiality into some existing, substantial thing. For that reason he calls form the substance of substance itself. Form brings existence along with it.

When Aristotle asks about how a particular substance comes into being, his answer is in terms of efficient causation by a prior actuality, an earlier substance, itself made what it is by form. Aristotle's god is a cause of motion, not existence. And we don't have to ask whether this god exists; that he is form without matter settles the question.

Individual things within the world—this or that horse, for instance—require an efficient cause for their beginning to be at a certain time; but as a whole, no efficient cause is required for the world. It has its being eternally. It's just there. Why? Because of form. Existence (actuality) and essence (form) simply make a package. It follows from this, and from the fact that whatever exists has some form or other, that there could be no further question about existence.

Avicenna, however, detects a problem here. When we think about something, such as humans or horses, we are thinking of the thing's essence. This is true even when we think about things that do not exist, such as centaurs, the mythical half-horse-half-human creatures of Greek legend. After hearing someone describe a centaur, a child might grasp the form or essence of a centaur and then come to wonder whether centaurs really exist. What the child wants to know is not whether the *form* of the centaur exists. She knows it does, for she has it in her mind. Instead, she wants to know whether that form has combined with matter anywhere out there in the world to create a living, breathing centaur. This perfectly reasonable question only makes sense, however, if essence and existence are distinct. Existence, then, is not something to be taken for granted. Nor is it an automatic consequence of form. Existence, wherever we find it in the natural world, is *something added*.*

*Following Avicenna, the great Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas will pick up this distinction between essence and existence and use it in similar ways.

THE NECESSARY EXISTENT, GOD

Having distinguished essence from existence, Avicenna turns to the possibility that there could be something whose existence is part of its essence. Because it would be inconceivable for such a thing not to exist, it would exist *necessarily*—and not because some other necessary thing necessarily caused it to exist, but rather because it is **necessary in itself**. If there is no absurdity in supposing that some thing exists or does not exist, then Avicenna calls it “possibly existent.” Most things are like this: you, this book, centaurs, and even Avicenna himself. In fact, we might wonder whether *everything* is only possibly existent. Avicenna thinks not. He thinks he has a proof that there is a **necessary existent**, a thing that is necessary in itself. Furthermore, he thinks he can prove that this necessary existent is God.

Undoubtedly there is existence, and all existence is either necessary or possible. If it is necessary, then in fact there is a necessarily existent being, which is what is sought. If it is possible, then we will show that the existence of the possible terminates in a necessarily existent being. (*The Salvation*, Metaphysics II.12)⁴

Consider, Avicenna says, the totality of all things that are merely possible, rather than necessary. To say that something's existence is possible in itself, as opposed to necessary in itself, is to say that its essence does not require its existence. Its existence must therefore be added to it by something else; it must be caused to exist. Thus,

if the totality is something existing possibly in itself, then the totality needs for existence something that provides existence, which will be either external or internal to the totality.

If it is something internal to it, then one of its members is something existing necessarily, but each one of them exists possibly—so this is a contradiction. Or it is something existing possibly and so is a cause of the totality's existence, but a cause of the totality is primarily a cause of the existence of its members, of which it is one. Thus, it would be a cause of its own existence, which is impossible. . . .

The remaining option is that [what gives existence to the totality] is external to it, but it cannot

be a possible cause, since we included every cause existing possibly in this totality. So since [the cause] is external to it, it also is something existing necessarily in itself. Thus, things existing possibly terminate in a cause existing necessarily. (*The Salvation*, Metaphysics II.12)

Although the argument, as Avicenna lays it out here, is complex, the basic idea is this: Consider the set of all possible things. Since those things are (merely) possible in themselves, they each need something to cause them to exist. Could that cause be something in the set itself? No. For if it were, the set would cause itself. Inconceivable! So it must be outside the set. But if it is something outside the set of all (merely) possible things, then it must be necessary in itself. Thus, from the fact that things exist, we can infer that there is *something* that is necessary in itself.

This marks a clear departure from Aristotle. In saying that the necessary existent, whatever it is, causes the world to exist, Avicenna is saying that the world itself has an efficient cause, which Aristotle rejected. To a Muslim—or a Christian, for that matter—that efficient cause is clearly God.

Avicenna still has a long way to go to *prove* that the necessary existent is the God of the Qur’ān. So far he has proven only that there is *at least one* necessary existent and that if there are any things whose existence is only possible in themselves, this existent is the cause of at least some of those things. To complete his proof of God’s existence, Avicenna sets out to establish each of God’s attributes, one by one: The necessary existent is unique, perfect, immaterial, and unitary, that it caused the universe to exist, and so on. We need not concern ourselves with the details of these proofs here. Suffice it to say that Avicenna believes he can derive, from the very idea of a necessary existent, all of God’s essential attributes, as described in the Qur’ān.

One implication of this view is that everything that exists, exists necessarily. God is the cause of all things, and everything about God is necessary. Thus, for each thing that he caused to exist, he caused it necessarily. So we were mistaken, in a sense, to suggest that you, this book, and Avicenna might not have existed. This book is not necessary *in itself*, of course, but it is what Avicenna calls

necessary through a cause or necessary through another. Everything that exists, except for the necessary existent, God, is like that: necessary through another.

God’s necessity has other, more dangerously unorthodox implications, too. Avicenna endorses the Qur’ānic view that God is the cause of the world. But because Avicenna, like Aristotle, conceives of God as unchanging, he insists that God cannot cause the world in the way that, say, a spark causes fire. That is, God cannot create the universe *at a moment in time*, for this would entail that at some moment, God changes from having not created the world to having created it. The universe must, therefore, be eternal. This puts Avicenna in an awkward position. Muslim theologians and philosophers had long fretted about Aristotle’s arguments for the eternity of the universe precisely because it seems that if the universe is eternal, then it cannot have been created. Muslim philosophers had considered the view that time is created along with the universe,* but Avicenna rejects that option in favor of a system very much like al-Fārābī’s, which allows him to maintain that the universe is both eternal and created. On this view, the universe, complete with celestial spheres, emanates necessarily from God. This cascade of emanations does not happen in time, and yet God is still the cause of it all. Avicenna compares this to a hand turning a key: Even though the turning of the hand and the turning of the key occur simultaneously, the first causes the second.

Avicenna draws one more controversial conclusion from the idea that God is unchanging. Consider the fact that a particular Newfoundland dog, Shadow, used to live with one of the authors of this book. When you learned this fact, you changed in one tiny way: You changed from not knowing that fact to knowing it. God, however, does not change, and so it might seem that God cannot know such facts about particular things. Rather, God can only know eternal truths about universals. How can we reconcile this with the Qur’ānic view that God knows everything and that “not even the

*Compare this to Augustine’s view on the matter (pp. 274–276). Augustine’s works were unknown in the medieval Islamic world.

weight of a dust speck, whether in the heavens or on Earth, escape His notice”? Avicenna admits that this “is one of those wonders that requires a subtle genius to understand” (*The Salvation*, *Metaphysics*, II.18.5). The explanation, in unsubtle form, is that God knows everything about the material world because of his perfect knowledge of universals. Avicenna compares this to the way someone might deduce an eclipse from a perfect knowledge of the heavenly bodies and their motions. Since these are eternal and unchanging, on Avicenna’s view, it is possible to know eternally that a particular eclipse will occur at a particular time. All of God’s knowledge of events in the material world is like that.

THE SOUL AND ITS FACULTIES

Avicenna relies on his “subtle genius” to resolve another tension between his Neoplatonist-inflected Aristotelian metaphysics and his Muslim faith. This tension relates to the human soul. Following Aristotle, Avicenna understands the soul as the form of a living thing. And like Aristotle, Avicenna maintains that the soul has three parts: the vegetative, animal, and rational.* But like al-Fārābī, Avicenna takes forms, including the form of a human, to reside in the Active Intellect. An individual thing, such as a person, comes to exist when appropriately prepared matter receives a form from the Active Intellect. Only then does the individual person acquire his or her form, which is his or her soul. Notice, however, that the Active Intellect has only a single, universal form for all humans; it does not contain a separate form for each person who is born. And since the form *is* the soul, this means that separate souls do not exist prior to the form’s union with a particular bit of matter. Each person’s soul, in other words, only comes into existence when the person is born; it does not exist eternally.

This is not in itself a problem, from a Muslim perspective. The worry arises when we ask what happens when the body dies. Aristotle maintained that while most of the soul ceases to exist upon the death of the body, a certain part of the rational soul survives. Indeed, Aristotle maintained that

this part of the soul, *nous*, is immortal and eternal, existing before the body is born and remaining after it dies. For Aristotle, however, the survival of *nous* does not seem to secure any sort of personal immortality or afterlife.* Avicenna has already rejected the idea that any part of the individual soul exists before birth, but he believes that it does survive after death. Furthermore, he needs the soul to maintain its individuality in the afterlife.

To do this, Avicenna elaborates on and extends Aristotle’s idea of *nous* in various ways. First, he argues that the rational part of the soul is an immaterial substance, rather than something imprinted in matter, as the vegetative and animal parts of the soul are. He offers various arguments for this. Some are based on the fact that the rational part of the soul can understand universals, which matter cannot do. His most famous argument, however, is one that he describes as

a pointer that serves [both] as an alert and reminder by hitting the mark with anyone who is at all capable of catching sight of the truth on his own. . . . So we say that it has to be imagined as though one of us were created whole in an instant but his sight is veiled from directly observing the things of the external world. He is created as though floating in air or in a void but without the air supporting him in such a way that he would have to feel it, and the limbs of his body are stretched out and away from one another, so they do not come into contact or touch. Then he considers whether he can assert the existence of his self. He has no doubts about asserting his self as something that exists without also [having to] assert the existence of any of his exterior or interior parts, his heart, his brain, or anything external. He will, in fact, be asserting the existence of his self without asserting that it has length, breadth, or depth, and, if it were even possible for him in such a state to imagine a hand or some other extremity, he would not imagine it as a part of his self or as a necessary condition of his self. . . . Thus, what [the reader] has been alerted to is a way to be made alert to the existence of the soul as something that is not the body—nor in fact *any* body—to recognize it and be aware of it. (*Healing*, “The Soul,” I.7.7)

*On Aristotle’s view of the soul, see pp. 203–204.

*See pp. 206–208.

This hypothetical person, whom modern scholars dubbed the **Flying Man**, would grasp the fact of his own existence based solely on his experience of self-awareness. Moreover, he would recognize the existence of his own soul as something distinct from and independent of the existence of his body.* Since this part of his soul can exist independent of his body, it can survive the death of his body.

This still leaves Avicenna with the problem of showing that individual souls retain their individuality after the death of the body. If their union with the body is what initially distinguished them from other souls, how can they remain distinct when separated from the body? The answer, according to Avicenna, is that once a soul has acquired its individuality through union with matter, it always retains its awareness of itself as a distinct entity. It will always be *this* soul, the one that was conjoined to *that* body and had *those* experiences and thoughts. This makes it distinct from all other souls, dissolving the worry that it will merge back into a universal form in the Active Intellect.

Avicenna also extends Aristotle’s theory of soul in other ways, especially in terms of the faculties of the soul. In addition to positing various inner senses, such as the imagination, Avicenna develops a detailed account of the theoretical intellect, which is for understanding what is true or false. (He contrasts this with the practical intellect, which is for understanding what is good or evil.) It is through the theoretical intellect that we come to have knowledge of the world.

As an Aristotelian, Avicenna maintains that genuine knowledge rests on philosophical demonstrations using syllogisms. We build up our knowledge by reasoning from things we know to things we did not yet know. Such a process must begin somewhere. Avicenna identifies various starting points. Some universals, such as existence and necessity,

are acquired as soon as the soul becomes conscious of itself, even if we may sometimes need someone to bring them to our attention. We grasp the concept of existence, for instance, when we reflect on our own existence when imagining the Flying Man. Some statements are self-evident and graspable without any demonstration. Avicenna’s examples are “our belief that the whole is greater than the part and that things equal to one thing are equal to one another” (*The Healing*, “The Soul,” I.5.15).

Other starting points we must acquire from experience. Here, too, Avicenna extends Aristotle’s theory. He recognizes Aristotelian induction as a source of our foundational beliefs, but he regards it as importantly limited.* When we perceive many instances of the same type, our mind extracts the universal form that they share in common, on the basis of which we come to accept various statements about that type of thing. Avicenna gives the example of seeing different people and extracting from our various perceptions of them the universal form of *personhood*. Although we all form beliefs on this basis, it cannot provide genuine knowledge. Genuine knowledge, for Avicenna as for Aristotle, is knowledge of necessary truths. But when we perceive particular members of a species, we perceive both their essential features (such as their rationality, in the case of humans) and their nonessential features (such as their skin color), and unless we already grasp the universal form of the species, we have no way to distinguish between them. Thus, even if by happenstance we did extract only the essential features from our perceptions, we could not know that we had done so. Induction, Avicenna concludes, cannot provide the foundations for genuine knowledge.

To overcome this problem, Avicenna introduces the more rigorous notion of **methodic experience**, which somewhat resembles scientific experimentation. Methodic experience is experience of one thing following another over many repetitions, either always or with few (and hopefully explicable) exceptions. Avicenna’s examples are that magnets attract iron and that ingesting the scammony plant

*The Flying Man argument is often compared to Descartes’ famous *cogito* (pp. 373), but this comparison is misleading. Although they share some superficial similarities, the two arguments serve very different purposes. Avicenna is considering the relationship between the mind and the body, whereas Descartes is looking for an indubitable starting point to overcome skepticism.

*See p. 192.

rids the body of excess bile.* Doctors had observed this effect of scammony over many cases, finding few, if any, exceptions. If the connection between ingesting scammony and purging bile were accidental, rather than somehow connected to the essential nature of scammony, then we would not expect to find such a firm connection between the two. This is not foolproof, of course. And it can deliver nothing more than “conditional universal knowledge,” since methodic experience can show only that the connection exists in the conditions in which it was observed. Avicenna acknowledges, for instance, that his knowledge of scammony’s medicinal powers extends only to “the scammony in [his] country” (*The Healing*, “Book of Demonstration,” I.9.11). Thus, Avicenna concludes,

the difference between what is acquired by perception and what is acquired by induction and methodic experience is that what is acquired by perception in no way provides a universal concept, whereas the latter two might. The difference between what is acquired by induction and what is acquired by methodic experience is that what is acquired by induction does not ensure a universal, whether conditional or not, but produces probable belief, unless it leads to methodic experience; and what is acquired by methodic experience ensures a universal with the aforementioned condition. (*The Healing*, “Book of Demonstration,” I.9.21)

These methods, then, provide the main foundations for human knowledge. Building new knowledge on those foundations, in turn, requires figuring out the connection between our existing knowledge and some new conclusion. In strict syllogistic form, grasping this connection means grasping a “middle term” that connects the conclusion’s subject to its predicate.† We recognize which universals can provide appropriate connections, according to Avicenna, through a capacity called **intuition**. Some people have a keener intuition than others, enabling them to figure things out for themselves more quickly or more thoroughly.

*The scammony plant is a type of climbing, flowering vine that grows in the eastern Mediterranean basin. Its roots react with bile in the intestines to produce a kind of laxative.

†See p. 189.

The prophets, according to Avicenna, have the keenest intuition of all, and so can grasp all knowledge in a flash of intellectual insight. As a result, the prophets’ knowledge, like the philosopher’s, is ultimately based on philosophical demonstration. The difference is that whereas Avicenna labored for years in the royal library at Bukhara to acquire his knowledge, Muhammad’s keener intuition enabled him to receive his knowledge directly from the Active Intellect.

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1. What basic phenomenon does Avicenna think Aristotle overlooked?
 2. How does the distinction between essence and existence help Avicenna prove the existence of God?
 3. What conclusions does Avicenna draw from the fact that God has all of his attributes necessarily?
 4. What is the Flying Man argument supposed to show?
 5. What is the difference between induction and methodic experience?
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Al-Ghazālī

Avicenna’s reworking of Aristotle transformed philosophy in the Islamic world. For those who came before him, studying philosophy meant studying Aristotle. For most who came after him, studying philosophy meant studying Avicenna. That earned him lavish praise, but it also attracted plenty of critics. Despite Avicenna’s attempts to reconcile his Greek metaphysics with Islam, not everyone who read his works thought he had succeeded. Among his most vocal critics was Abu Hamid Muhammad **al-Ghazālī** (1058–1111), a distinguished religious scholar and teacher from what is now northeastern Iran.

After a pair of spiritual crises in about 1090, al-Ghazālī set for himself a daunting task. Seeking knowledge of the true nature of things, he aspired to understand the true nature of knowledge. Certain knowledge, he surmised, requires a thing to be made “so manifest that no doubt clings to it, nor is it accompanied by the possibility of error and deception.”⁵ Resolving to cast aside all of his beliefs that did not meet this high standard, al-Ghazālī initially

finds himself left with but two things: his sensory perceptions and self-evident truths, such as the truth that ten is more than three. But he comes to realize that even these are suspect. His senses, for instance, sometimes deceive him: When he looks at a shadow, it appears not to move, but when he sees it in another position an hour later, he reasons that it must have been moving all along. As for self-evident truths, he muses that if reason can overturn his sensory perceptions, he cannot be sure that some higher authority may not overturn his own reasoning. He may one day awaken to some higher state and recognize that everything he believed was an illusion, just as the dreamer awakens to recognize that he has merely been dreaming. (Avicenna himself had suggested that we may recognize new truths once our souls escape the distorting confines of our bodies.) Thus, no matter how self-evident some truth seems to be, he cannot rule out the possibility that he has made some kind of error.*

Trapped in this skeptical quagmire, al-Ghazālī concluded that no philosophical demonstrations would suffice to escape. For any demonstration would require him to affirm its premises and to recognize that those premises entailed its conclusion. But his skeptical thoughts had foreclosed certainty about both those things. He escaped this brooding skepticism, he says, only because God cast a light into his heart that revealed the truth to him and restored his belief in his senses and intellect.

Having escaped from skepticism, al-Ghazālī began an earnest study of various ways of attaining knowledge. He studied two kinds of Islamic theologians, including those whom al-Fārābī had disdained. He also studied the mystical traditions of Sufism. The Sufis were Muslims who pursued knowledge of God through practices designed to achieve a higher state of consciousness. Like many Christian mystics, early Sufis practiced a rigorous asceticism, rejecting worldly things and looking inward to find God. Following a twelve-year foray into Sufi asceticism, al-Ghazālī concludes that through sufficiently rigorous mystical practice, humans can, in fact, achieve an immediate

experience of nearness to God and that, through this experience, we can learn things that cannot be expressed in words.*

In addition, al-Ghazālī studied the philosophers, from ancient Greece down to Avicenna. While he allows that some of what they say is correct, especially concerning mathematics and logic, he condemns them all for being “infidels and irreligious men.” Mentioning al-Fārābī and Avicenna by name, he argues that they do not count as Muslims because they deny basic tenets of the faith: the resurrection of the body, the createdness of the universe, and God’s knowledge of particulars. Furthermore, he insists that they often fall short of the demonstrative certainty to which they aspire. He concludes that even by their own standards, and even setting aside the skeptical worries that had plagued him earlier, the philosophers cannot deliver the knowledge that al-Ghazālī sought.

During the course of this study, al-Ghazālī sets out to refute “the philosophers” in a book known as *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. In practice, his target is almost invariably Avicenna. Having absorbed the philosophers’ methods, he argues skillfully against twenty propositions, including the three mentioned above as disqualifying Avicenna from being a true Muslim. In some of these discussions, he aims to prove “the philosophers” wrong. In others, he aims only to prove that their arguments fail and so cannot provide the genuine knowledge at which philosophy aims. They need revelation after all.

A particularly interesting example will serve to illustrate al-Ghazālī’s approach. Avicenna holds that causes produce their effects necessarily. Taking this as an affront to God’s unlimited power, al-Ghazālī writes,

The connection between what is habitually believed to be a cause and what is habitually believed to be an effect is not necessary, according to us. But [with] any two things, where “this” is not “that” and “that” is not “this” and where neither the affirmation of the one entails the affirmation of the other nor the

*Compare al-Ghazālī’s skeptical reasoning to Descartes’ in the first *Meditation*.

*Compare to the epistemological claims of the Vedic and Buddhist philosophers in Chapter 3.

negation of the one entails negation of the other, it is not a necessity of the existence of the one that the other should exist, and it is not a necessity of the nonexistence of the one that the other should not exist—for example, the quenching of thirst and drinking, satiety and eating, burning and contact with fire, light and the appearance of the sun, death and decapitation . . . and so on to [include] all [that is] observable among connected things in medicine, astronomy, arts, and crafts. Their connection is due to the prior decree of God, who creates them side by side, not to its being necessary in itself, incapable of separation. On the contrary, it is within [divine] power to create satiety without eating, to create death without decapitation, to continue life after decapitation, and so on to all connected things. (IP 17.1)⁶

Al-Ghazālī considers two main arguments for this view. The first is that the philosophers’ claims that one thing causes another—much less that it does so *necessarily*—are simply unsupported. Although we observe, say, cotton burning when exposed to flame, such observation does not prove that it is the flame that causes the cotton to burn, rather than something else, such as God. The second argument targets philosophers who acknowledge a divine role in causation but insist that a cause has its effects necessarily. Whenever a proper set of circumstances arises, on this view, divine influence necessarily produces the appropriate effect. But this, al-Ghazālī argues, is an unacceptable limitation on God’s freedom and power. For surely, he contends, it is possible for God to choose to create one thing without the other at a particular moment in time, even if, in practice, God rarely chooses to do so. As a result of God’s regularity in creating both together,

the continuous habit of their occurrence repeatedly, one time after another, fixes unshakably in our minds the belief in their occurrence according to past habit.* (IP 17.15)

At stake here is an understanding of God’s perfection and omnipotence. Avicenna counts it as part of God’s perfection that both his attributes

and his actions are necessary. On this view, we do not deny his omnipotence when we say that God could not have done otherwise, for in saying that, we are simply saying that God could not fail to be perfect. Al-Ghazālī, by contrast, counts it as part of God’s perfection that he has ultimate freedom and power. To understand his omnipotence in such a limited way as to think that he could not stop a flame from burning cotton is to deny him perfect freedom and power.

It is worth noting that al-Ghazālī does not take a definite position here about how causation works. His argument is consistent with the view that, say, flames *normally* cause cotton to burn without God’s assistance, but that God can intervene to prevent this from happening in particular cases. But it is also consistent with the view that God actively intervenes in every instance, voluntarily creating the burned cotton every time cotton comes into contact with flame. This reflects al-Ghazālī’s larger project in his *Incoherence of the Philosophers*: He aims to undermine the philosophers’ pretensions to knowledge, not to provide philosophical demonstrations of his own. While he sketches some striking philosophical positions along the way, his is primarily a critical undertaking.

Ironically, however, his mission of undermining Avicenna may have backfired. Al-Ghazālī presents the *Incoherence* as a critique of philosophy as a whole. In practice, he offers a critique of certain parts of Avicenna’s thought. The implicit suggestion is that Avicenna embodies the whole of philosophy—or, at least, the best that it has to offer. In the eastern reaches of the Muslim world, future generations seem to take this implicit suggestion more seriously than they take al-Ghazālī’s critique. In the end, then, al-Ghazālī may have further cemented Avicenna’s position as the “preeminent master” of philosophy in the Islamic world.

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1. What argument does al-Ghazālī give for doubting the things he learns by reasoning?
 2. What is al-Ghazālī’s argument against Avicenna’s claim that everything happens by necessity?
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*Compare to David Hume’s view of causation (pp. 445–451).

MAIMONIDES (MOSES BEN MAIMON)

This formative period for Islamic philosophy also boasted its share of Jewish philosophers, such as Saadia Gaon and Solomon ibn Gabirol. The most important of these was **Maimonides** (1135–1204), who was born in the territory of **al-Andalus**, which covered modern-day Spain and Portugal. Al-Andalus was home to a thriving philosophical and intellectual community, but Maimonides does not get to remain there for long. In 1148, a new dynasty, the Almohads, captures his hometown of Córdoba as part of their gradual conquest of al-Andalus. The Almohads reject the established custom of allowing non-Muslims to practice their own faiths, and so Maimonides' family flees to Morocco rather than be forcibly converted to Islam. Maimonides eventually moves to Cairo, where he serves as physician to the vizier of Saladin, ruler of Egypt. He writes extensively on medicine and Jewish law, but his most influential philosophical work is the *Guide for the Perplexed*.

The *Guide* is addressed to those intellectuals who are in perplexity over apparent contradictions between Scripture and the best science and philosophy of the day. The latter he takes to be represented by Aristotle, especially as understood by his Muslim interpreters. He agrees with Avicenna that being and essence are separable, but holds that the celestial spheres and the Intelligences governing them are created by God *ex nihilo*, not emanations

from the very substance of God himself. This allows him to deny that everything happens necessarily in this world, thus making room for free will, evil, and miracles.

As to whether the universe is eternal, he holds that this cannot be proved either way, but that on either assumption the existence of God can be demonstrated. We know God exists, but we know of his nature only what we can learn from his works. So the study of these works by way of natural science yields such knowledge as we can have of the divine nature. However, because all language is derived from our experience of the natural world, he holds that none of our words can apply literally to God, who infinitely exceeds his creation. We can, then, say what God is *not*, but never positively what God *is*. Thus Maimonides is one of the principal sources for the tradition of *negative theology*.

Maimonides believes that the highest perfection possible for a human being is to know God and to love him. Because we know God only through his works, the pursuit of science and metaphysics is, as Aristotle said, the best and happiest life. It also provides as much of immortality as is possible for us, since what will be preserved after death is the knowledge we have acquired. In the greatest human beings, however, this theoretical life can be combined with practical influence in the community, as is proved by the greatest of the prophets, Moses.

The Great Conversation in the Islamic World

The Muslim thinkers of the ninth through the twelfth century would extend and shape the influence of Greek thought over a large part of the globe. Philosophy continued to thrive throughout the Islamic world long after this period, with Avicenna's thought dominating philosophical work for centuries. If we define Western philosophy as philosophy that grows out of the thought of ancient Greece, then the responses to Avicenna constitute

a distinct branch of Western philosophy—a rich, post-Avicennan conversation involving hundreds of philosophers spanning many generations, carried on more or less separate from the one that would dominate Europe from the late medieval period on.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

1. The philosophers discussed in this chapter offer different views about the relationship between reason and revealed religion. Do you think any of them is correct? Why or why not?

2. Do you think Avicenna's proof of the existence of God is faulty? If so, what is wrong with it?
3. Do you find Avicenna's conception of God's omnipotence more compelling than al-Ghazālī's or vice versa? Why?

KEY WORDS

Byzantine Empire	Ptolemy
Simplicius	Ptolemaic model
John Philoponus	Avicenna (ibn Sīnā)
Islam	hylomorphism
Muhammad	necessary in itself
Qu'rān	necessary existent
caliph	Flying Man
caliphate	methodic experience
<i>tawḥīd</i>	intuition
al-Kindī	al-Ghazālī
Active Intellect	Maimonides
al-Fārābī	al-Andalus
celestial spheres	

NOTES

1. For a discussion of this way of determining what counts as Western philosophy, see Peter Adamson, "Out of Europe," *Philosophy Now* 116 (2016), https://philosophynow.org/issues/116/Out_of_Europe.
2. Quotations from Peter Adamson and Peter E. Pormann, *The Philosophical Works of al-Kindī* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2012).
3. Quotations from al-Fārābī's *Book of Religion* and *Enumeration of the Sciences* are from Al-Fārābī, *Alfarabi: The Political Writings*, trans. Charles E. Butterworth (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).
4. Quotations from Jon McGinnis and David C. Reisman, eds., *Classical Arabic Philosophy: An Anthology of Sources* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2007).
5. Al-Ghazālī, *Freedom and Fulfillment*, trans. Richard J. McCarthy (Boston: Twayne, 1980), 7.
6. Quotations marked *IP* are from Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans. Michael E. Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2000).

CHAPTER

15

ANSELM AND AQUINAS

Existence and Essence in God and the World



Augustine's influence in Western philosophy and theology was so great that when Peter Lombard, about A.D. 1150, collected notable sayings of the church fathers in the *Book of Sentences*, 90 percent of the quotations were from Augustine's writings.¹

After the fall of Rome, intellectual work in Latin-speaking Europe was carried on largely within the church. It was churchmen who preserved libraries, copied manuscripts, and wrote books. Over most of this work presided the Augustinian spirit, with its convictions that Wisdom is one, that Scripture and Reason are essentially in harmony, and that the interesting and important topics are God and the soul. For more than five hundred years, the churchmen carried out their work with limited access to ancient Greek thought and in isolation from the philosophers in the Islamic world.

Later medieval European philosophy, from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries, is exceedingly rich and inventive, in part because of the translation of Greek and Islamic learning into

Latin during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. For the purposes of this selective introduction, however, we focus on two examples: a famous argument put forward by Anselm of Canterbury and—at considerably more length—the Christian Aristotelianism of Thomas Aquinas. Anselm and Aquinas, both made saints of the church after their deaths, exemplify some of the best, though by no means the only, European philosophy of this period. The chapter closes by considering some doubts that were raised about the confident claim that reason and faith are harmonious, doubts that look forward to the birth of self-conscious modern philosophy.

Anselm: On That, Than Which No Greater Can Be Conceived

In about three pages, **Anselm** (A.D. 1033–1109) sets forth an argument concluding not only that God exists but also that he exists “so truly” that we cannot even *conceive* that he doesn't. This apparently

simple, yet deeply perplexing argument is known to history as the **ontological argument**.*

Anselm, who eventually rose to become archbishop of Canterbury, was obviously a man of deep faith. But as someone steeped in the Augustinian tradition, he wanted not only to believe, but also to understand.† As a young Benedictine monk in Normandy, he set out to determine how far reason alone, independent of Scripture, could substantiate the central doctrines of Christianity. He took himself to have proven many—but not all—of those doctrines in a book called the *Monologium*, but since it involved such complex reasoning, he began to wonder

whether there might be found a single argument which would require no other for its proof than itself alone; and alone would suffice to demonstrate that God truly exists. (*Proslogium* preface, p. 1)²

Anselm concluded that there is such an argument, and he set it out in a book with the title *Faith Seeking Understanding*.‡

The argument begins with an abstractly stated expression of the *idea* of God, a definition, if you like, of what we have in mind when we use the word “God.” **God**, says Anselm, is *that, than which*

no greater can be conceived.* Why does he use this strangely convoluted phrase, *that, than which no greater can be conceived*? Why not just say that God is the greatest being we can conceive? For one thing, Anselm doesn’t want the idea of God to be limited by what *we* may be able to conceive. Furthermore, he doesn’t want to suggest that a positive conception of God may be entirely comprehensible to us. The strange phrase pushes us out beyond everything familiar by forcing us to ask again and again, Can something greater than this be conceived?

Suppose you imagine or conceive a certain being. Now ask yourself the question, Can I conceive of something that is in some way “greater” than this? If you can, then it is not yet God that you have conceived. Think, for instance, of an oak tree. Some oak trees are great, but it is not very hard to think of something “greater” than any oak tree—something, perhaps, that can move and think. It follows that God is not an oak tree.

What if we think of a human being? Is a human being something than which no greater can be conceived? Hardly. For one thing, human beings are mortal. Surely any being not subject to death would be greater than a human. And humans have many other limitations besides mortality; we can surely conceive a being that knows more than any human knows, is more powerful than any human, is not so dependent on other things, and is not subject to the moral failures of human beings. So when we think of God, we are not thinking of a human being, but of something much greater.

Until we reach the conception of *that, than which no greater can be conceived*, we have not yet thought of God. That is what we mean when we use the word “God.”

Notice, also, that Anselm frames his idea of God in terms of the Great Chain of Being.† This Augustinian notion is so much a part of Anselm’s outlook that it is simply taken for granted. That the world is ordered by the degrees of being and value (greatness) in its various parts must seem to Anselm so obvious that it is beyond question. If you

*The term “ontological” comes from the Greek word for *being*. The argument in question was given this name in the eighteenth century by one of its critics, Immanuel Kant, because (unlike the arguments of Aquinas) it does not begin from facts about the world, but goes straight from the idea of God to a conclusion about his being. Many thinkers find it important to distinguish two, or even more, distinct arguments because at least one form of the argument is clearly invalid. Anselm himself does not do so, and we will interpret it as one argument. We will try to formulate this argument in its strongest form, while remaining fairly colloquial in manner. (Discussions of the soundness of this argument often bristle with technical-logical apparatus.)

†In light of this goal, it is important not to take Anselm’s search for a proof of God’s existence as evidence of doubt. Anselm wishes to understand what it is that he so firmly believes. Furthermore, Anselm seeks a proof that is valid quite independent of any Christian assumptions. He thinks that a good proof should convince *anyone* who reads it, including *you*, regardless of his or her faith.

‡It was later titled *Proslogium*, or *A Discourse*. This is the title under which it is now known.

*Compare Augustine’s formulation, p. 269.

†Review this Neoplatonic notion on pp. 271–272.

run up and down the chain, you find it easy to conceive of beings both lesser and greater; and your mind is inevitably carried to the idea of something that is not only actually greater than other existing things, but something than which you cannot even conceive a greater. And that, Anselm says, is what we mean by God.

But now the question arises: Is there a being answering to that conception? There really are oak trees and wolves and human beings. Is there a being than which nothing greater can be conceived?

To see how Anselm gets from this idea of God to God's reality, consider Psalm 14:1, which says, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" If this "fool" truly understands what he is saying—if the idea of God that he has in his head is the one Anselm describes—then he is saying, "That, than which no greater can be conceived does not exist." And to say this, Anselm argues, is to fall into error.

For suppose the fool were right. Then *that, than which no greater can be conceived* would exist only in his understanding and not in reality. It would exist in the same way, Anselm says, as a painting exists in the mind of a painter who changes his mind before putting brush to canvas. The painter has the painting "in his understanding," as Anselm puts it; but it does not exist also in reality.

It is easy to see how this might be the case with the painting. But can it be the case that *that, than which no greater can be conceived* exists only in the understanding? No, argues Anselm, because something that exists only in someone's understanding is not after all *that, than which no greater can be conceived*. For you can conceive of something just like it except that it exists both in the understanding and in reality.

Such a being will be "greater" in the sense that it has more powers and is less dependent on other things; it occupies a higher place on the Great Chain of Being. So it couldn't be true that *that, than which no greater can be conceived* exists only in our minds. God must exist in reality.

In fact, Anselm adds, this being exists so truly "that it cannot be conceived not to exist" (*Proslogium* 3). Most beings—trees and humans, for example—you can imagine as never having existed. Could *that, than which no greater can be*

conceived be like these beings? Could it be the sort of thing that we can conceive as not existing? Again let us suppose that it were; then it would depend on the cooperation or goodwill of other things for its existence—or maybe on sheer good luck!

But then it wouldn't be *that, than which no greater can be conceived*, for we can surely conceive a greater being than that. We can conceive of a being that is not so dependent on other things. In fact, we can conceive of a being that we cannot even *conceive* as not existing.

Hence, if that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, can be conceived not to exist, it is not that, than which nothing greater can be conceived. But this is an irreconcilable contradiction. (*Proslogium* 3)

You cannot even conceive that God does not exist. You can, of course, say the words, "There is no God"; but, Anselm says, you cannot clearly think what they mean without falling into contradiction. What is contradictory cannot possibly be true. So what the fool says is necessarily false. It follows not only that God does exist but also that it is impossible that he does not.

Here is an analogy. You can *say* that one plus one equals three, but you cannot *conceive* that it is true. If you understand what one is and what three is, and if you understand the concepts of addition and equality, then you cannot possibly believe or even understand that one plus one equals three. To try to do so would be like trying to believe that three both *is* three and also *is not* three (but two). But that is impossible, a contradiction. It is necessarily false that three both *is* and *is not* three. Just so, it is necessarily false that *that, than which no greater can be conceived* does not exist. To try to believe it is like trying to believe that *that, than which no greater can be conceived* both does exist (since it *is* that, than which no greater can be conceived) and does not exist. But you can't believe both. So, you must believe that it does exist. You cannot even truly conceive that God does not exist. That God should not exist is as impossible as that one plus one should equal three.

Why, then, does the fool say in his heart, "There is no God"? It is either because he does not

truly understand what he says or because he is a dim-witted fool who believes contradictions! The nonexistence of God is something that cannot be rationally thought.

It is little wonder that Anselm exclaims,

I thank thee, gracious Lord, I thank thee; because what I formerly believed by thy bounty, I now so understand by thine illumination, that if I were unwilling to believe that thou dost exist, I should not be able not to understand this to be true.

(*Proslogium* 4)

Even if Anselm *wanted* to disbelieve in God, he couldn't manage it. It would now be clear to him that the very sentence in which he expressed his disbelief is necessarily false, like the sentence "One plus one equals three."

Anselm's argument can be formulated in a variety of ways. Here is one way. See whether you can follow the steps, then see whether you can pick out a flaw in the argument. (Note that it is in form a **reductio ad absurdum**; look again at the discussion of this kind of argument in the section on Zeno, p. 28.)

1. God does not exist. (assumption)
2. By "God," I mean *that, than which no greater can be conceived* (NGC).
3. So NGC does not exist. (from 1 and 2)
4. So NGC has being only in my understanding, not also in reality. (from 2 and 3)
5. If NGC were to exist in reality, as well as in my understanding, it would be greater. (from the meaning of "greater")
6. But then, NGC is not NGC. (from 4 and 5)
7. So NGC cannot exist only in my understanding. (from 6)
8. So NGC must exist also in reality. (from 5 and 7)
9. So God exists. (from 2 and 8)
10. So God does not exist and God exists. (from 1 and 9)
11. So premise 1 cannot be true. (by 1 through 10 and the principle of reductio ad absurdum)
12. So God exists. (from 11)

Note that this is an argument that moves from the **essence** of God to God's **existence**. That is, it moves from our grasp of *what* God is—the

NGC—to the fact *that* God is. In a certain sense, the argument is a claim that the existence of God is *self-evident*. What that means is that it is enough to understand the conception of God to know that God must exist. Nothing else is required. God's essence *entails* God's existence. In this regard, if the argument is correct, knowing that God exists is like knowing that all bachelors are unmarried. Knowing what bachelors are (their essence) is sufficient for knowing that they are unmarried. That's entailed by the definition of "bachelor." You don't have to add anything else to get that conclusion. It's not like knowing (supposing this is true) that all bachelors are melancholy—a proposition for which we would need *evidence* about the way the world is. If Anselm is right, thinking clearly about the implications of the NGC concept is enough to guarantee the conclusion that there is a God. Just as it is necessarily false that there are married bachelors, so it is necessarily false that there is no God. As befits an argument following in the Platonistic tradition of Augustine, Anselm's argument draws a conclusion about what is eternally, genuinely, and necessarily real by looking inward at our own ideas.

Is Anselm's argument a sound one? Should we be convinced by it? Discussion since the eleventh century has been intense, beginning with Gaunilo of Marmoutiers, a monk who was Anselm's contemporary. Gaunilo, writing "in behalf of the fool," notes that he can conceive of a lost island filled with riches and delicacies, an island more excellent than any other island. This island exists in his understanding. If we follow the principle of Anselm's argument, however, the island would be still more excellent if it were in reality as well. So, the island must exist. Otherwise, any actually existing island would be more excellent than it, and it wouldn't be the island more excellent than any other. But that is absurd.

Anselm replies to this criticism by acknowledging that it would indeed be absurd to infer the actual existence of such an island from the mere conception of it. But what holds for islands doesn't hold for the singular case of *that, than which no greater can be conceived*. You can't prove the existence of a perfect island, or of Zeus or Apollo either, from the concepts that designate them. But this concept, the



MAP 4 *The Mediterranean and Europe (c. 1100)*

NGC, is unique, pointing us out beyond any finite thing. If the argument works, it works only in this one case, only for that being described by this odd phrase, *that, than which no greater can be conceived*. Neither Zeus nor perfect islands exist necessarily. But God does—or so Anselm means to convince us.

The argument has had both defenders and critics down to the present day. It is not only the conclusion that attracts attention, but also the difficult notions of existence, conceivability, possibility, and necessity. And these are notions that run deep in our conception of reality—whatever it might be like.

We will meet the argument again.*

1. What phrase does Anselm use to designate God? Why?
2. Study carefully the steps in Anselm's argument. Write down questions you have about its correctness.
3. What is Gaunilo's objection to the argument? How does Anselm reply?

*See Descartes (*Meditation V*, Chapter 17) and Kant ("The Ontological Argument," Chapter 20).

The Transfer of Learning

Anselm lived in the Abbey of Our Lady of Bec, which then was an important center of learning by European standards. In the grander scheme of things, though, it was something of a backwater, nestled in a valley in Normandy, across the English Channel from Britain. Many of the works of the Greek philosophers had been lost to Catholic Europe, having been preserved only by the Arabs and Byzantines. Furthermore, from Augustine's time until Anselm's, most philosophy and science was done elsewhere and in other languages, especially Arabic, Sanskrit, and Chinese. The Latin-speaking scholars of eleventh-century Europe therefore knew relatively little of the Greek tradition and had very little access to the vast stores of new knowledge others had accumulated in the past several centuries.

A series of military conquests in the late eleventh century brought those vast stores of knowledge within reach of the Latin West. Norman invaders seized Sicily from a Muslim emir and gradually wrested control of southern Italy from the Byzantine Empire. These

lands were eventually unified into the kingdom of Sicily. The Spanish kings of León and Castile were waging war against Muslim princes in what is now Spain. In 1085, they captured Toledo, a far greater center of learning than the abbey at Bec. At the end of the century, the First Crusade brought parts of the eastern Mediterranean under Catholic control for the first time in over four centuries.*

Translations of Greek and Islamic texts began to trickle into Latin-speaking Europe. One of the first translators, **Constantine the African** (c. 1020–c. 1098), arrived from his native Tunisia in about 1065, carrying Arabic medical texts. He soon converted to Christianity and settled at an important Benedictine monastery north of Naples called Monte Cassino, where he translated those medical texts into Latin. The texts spread far and wide through Europe, helping whet Catholics' appetite for foreign knowledge. The kingdom of Sicily soon became a thriving center of translation, from both Arabic and Greek into Latin. Further west, Muslim, Jewish, and Christian scholars set to work translating Arabic manuscripts from the vast library of Toledo. These translators rendered many works of Islamic and Jewish philosophy and science into Latin for the first time. These scholars are sometimes referred to collectively as the **Toledo School of Translators**. By the end of the twelfth century, efforts in Toledo, Sicily, and elsewhere had translated a large part of the lost Greek tradition and the new Arabic science, medicine, and philosophy.



Our books have informed us that the pre-eminence in chivalry and learning once belonged to Greece. Then chivalry passed to Rome, together with that highest learning which has now come to France.

Chrétien de Troyes (1135–1190)

*Compare Map 4 with Map 3 on p. 293 to see which territories changed hands.

It is through the efforts of these translators that the Latin West came to know the great minds of the Islamic world and many forgotten works of ancient Greek philosophy. Among these were the works of Aristotle.

Thomas Aquinas: Rethinking Aristotle

In A.D. 1225, Landulf, count of Aquino, and his wife Theodora welcomed their seventh son in a castle in southern Italy. They named him Thomas. When he was five years old, they sent him to the nearby monastery at Monte Cassino, where Constantine had begun the great translation project over a century earlier. His parents hoped that he would rise to a position of power and influence. In a sense, he exceeded their wildest expectations, though not in the way they had planned.

After nine years of schooling at Monte Cassino, young **Thomas Aquinas** relocated to Naples, where he soon entered the newly founded university. There he encountered the works of Aristotle, freshly rendered into Latin. He also encountered the newly founded Dominican order of friars. Friars were very different from settled, respectable, and often wealthy monks. Friars were itinerant preachers, going from town to town, begging for a living. They took literally Jesus' directions to his disciples in Mark 6:8, to take nothing with them except their walking sticks—"no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics." So when Aquinas decided, at the age of nineteen or twenty, to become a Dominican friar, his dismayed family kidnapped him and spirited him away to their castle.

They held Aquinas there for a year, but when his family could not induce him to change his mind, they finally released him. He studied for some years in Cologne, Germany, with a man of vast learning and Aristotelian persuasions, Albert the Great. Aquinas was rotund, a large man of slow movements, unusually quiet and calm. His fellow students began to call him "the dumb ox." His brilliance occasionally showed through, however, and on one such occasion, Albert is reported to have said, "This dumb ox will fill the whole world with his bellowing."

AVERROËS, THE COMMENTATOR

Aquinas and many of his Christian contemporaries read Aristotle side by side with the commentaries of a Muslim philosopher named Abū al-Walīd Muhammad **ibn Rushd** (1126–1198), better known in English as **Averroës**. Born into a distinguished family in Córdoba in al-Andalus, Averroës resists Avicenna’s transformative influence on Islamic philosophy. Instead, he writes voluminous commentaries on Aristotle, defending him against the criticisms of al-Ghazālī and the alleged misunderstandings of Avicenna. He is largely ignored in the Islamic world, but he exerts a significant influence on medieval Christian thinkers, who refer to him simply as “the Commentator.”

In the Latin-speaking world, Averroës was famous for—and attacked because of—the doctrine of “**double truth**,” the idea that truths from Qu’rānic revelation could contradict what philosophical reason could demonstrate and yet both be true. It is puzzling how this view came to be

attributed to him, since he explicitly denies it. He holds that the Qu’rān was revealed so that even the humblest could participate in the truth, though in its purity that truth is available only to the philosopher. When such apparent conflicts appear, he suggests that Scripture must be interpreted metaphorically.

Not everything in Averroës’ thought is easily reconciled with revealed religion, however. One of the points on which he is suspected of holding the “double truth” pertains to personal immortality. The human soul is, as Aristotle says, the form of a human body and its active intellect (*nous*) is indeed a substance; but what makes me an individual person (distinct from other humans) is not this form but the particular matter it “informs.” As form, this Intelligence is identical in all humans. When my body dies, then, *nous* continues on, but not as *mine*. Thus there is a kind of immortality, but it is strictly impersonal.

Aquinas became a priest and studied to become a master in theology. He lectured on the Bible for several years and began to write. Meanwhile, he participated in regular **disputations**, as they were called. These were debates that took a more or less standard form. A question was announced for discussion—for instance, Is truth primarily in the mind or in things? Conflicting opinions were stated, often citing some authority. These opinions would then be critically evaluated, arguments for and against each opinion being put forward. Finally, a judgment would be given by a master or a professor. Much of what Aquinas wrote is structured in a similar way. This form of presentation, which came to be known (later, with scorn) as “scholastic,” had certain advantages. It made for comprehensiveness and careful attention to detail. It depended absolutely on the ability of writers and readers to distinguish good arguments from bad. But it required enormous patience, and in the

hands of lesser intellectuals than Aquinas it often degenerated into pedantry.

Aquinas spent time not only in Paris, but also in several places in Italy—and all the time, he wrote, or rather, he dictated to a secretary, and often to more than one. It is said that like a grand master at chess who can play numerous games at once, Aquinas could keep four secretaries busy writing separate texts. His collected works are enormous and touch every philosophical and theological topic.

In December 1273, while saying Mass, Aquinas seems to have had a mystical vision. He wrote no more. When urged to return to his writing, he said that he could not, that everything he had written to that point now seemed “like straw.” He died in 1274 at the age of forty-nine. Although there was continuing suspicion of Aquinas’ reliance on Aristotle—that pagan thinker—and several of his theses were condemned by ecclesiastical

authorities, on July 21, 1323, the pope declared Aquinas a saint. Because few miracles had been attributed to him, the pope is reputed to have said, “There are as many miracles as there are articles of the *Summa*.”*

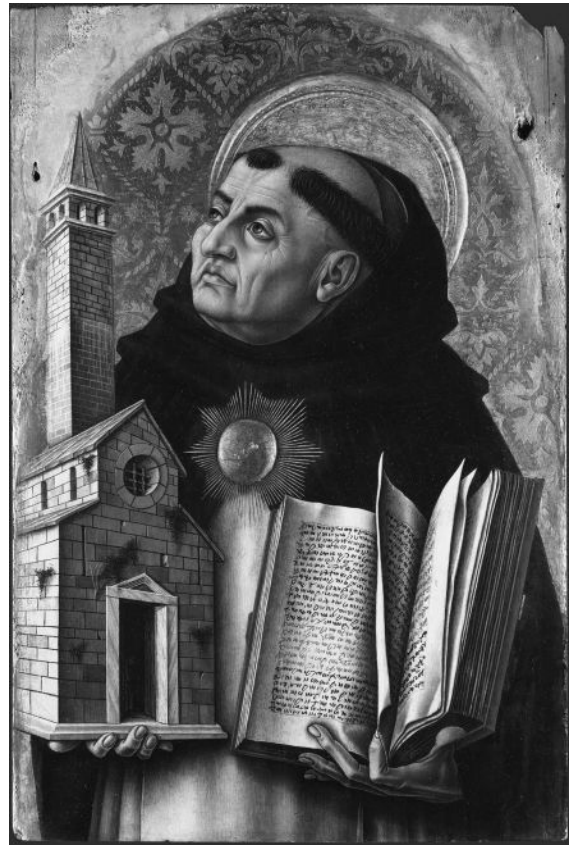
PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

Aquinas does not think of himself as a philosopher. When he talks about philosophers, he usually has in mind the ancients (Plato, Aristotle, and so on), but sometimes the more recent Muslim thinkers, such as Avicenna and Averroës. Philosophers are lovers of wisdom, Aquinas thinks, who lack the fullness of wisdom as it is revealed in Christ. Yet he has great respect for these philosophers, especially for Aristotle, whom he sometimes quotes as simply “the philosopher.” He writes about the same topics as they do, discusses them frequently, borrows arguments from them, and happily acknowledges his debt to them. Yet he never uses them uncritically. Aquinas agrees with Augustine that (1) truth is one, (2) all men have been enlightened by the word or the wisdom of God, and (3) humans, in pride, have turned away from God and from the truth. He concludes that the light of reason in sinful minds may be obscured, but it has not been wiped out. And intellect on its own can do a great deal.

In particular, Aquinas regards Aristotle as having discovered a great deal through reason alone. Of all the philosophers, it is Aristotle whom Aquinas regards as having the best arguments and the soundest overall vision. He wrote a number of careful commentaries on works by Aristotle, and when he speaks on his own behalf, Aquinas often sounds like a recording of Aristotle. As Augustine draws on the Platonists, Aquinas draws from and builds on the Aristotelians, including Muslim Aristotelians such as Avicenna and Averroës.†

*The *Summa Theologica* (*Summary of Theology*) is the major work of Aquinas’ maturity.

†Given how heavily Aquinas leans on Aristotle’s metaphysics, in particular, you may find it helpful to review Aristotle’s ideas, either in our brief review of them in the

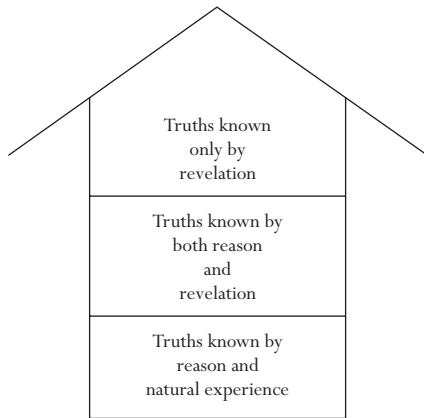


“As sacred doctrine is based on the light of faith, so is philosophy founded on the natural light of reason.”

—THOMAS AQUINAS

Revelation, then, does not displace reason, but it does build on it. Aquinas carefully distinguishes what natural human reason can do from what must be learned from Scripture. You can compare the situation, as Aquinas sees it, to a three-story house. On the bottom floor, reason and natural experience do their work without the need of any supernatural aid. On the second floor, we find things that are both revealed to us by God and demonstrable by reason. Among the truths that overlap in this way are the existence of God and the immortality of the human soul.

previous chapter (p. 301) or in our longer discussion on pp. 192–203.



It is good, Aquinas thinks, that God has revealed such truths, even though reason can access them on its own,

for otherwise they would have been arrived at only by a few, and after a long period, and then mixed with errors; more especially when we consider that man's entire salvation, which is God, depends on such knowledge. (*ST* 1a.i.1; *PT*, p. 32)³

The third floor contains truths that are beyond the capacity of natural intellect to discover, such as the internal nature of God as triune—as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and the historical fact of God's becoming incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth.

Though Aquinas always writes as a theologian, we can set out his contributions to the philosophical conversation by focusing our attention on the first and second stories of this house. We do, however, need to keep in mind his view that human beings have a supernatural end. He says,

The happiness of human beings is twofold. There is an imperfect happiness in this life of which Aristotle is speaking, consisting in the contemplation of immaterial substances to which wisdom disposes us, an imperfect contemplation such as is possible in this life, which does not know what such substances are. The other happiness is the perfect happiness of the next life, when we will see the very substance of God himself and the other immaterial substances. But what brings that happiness won't be any theoretical science, but the light of glory. (*DT*, question 6; *SPW*, p. 50)

1. How does Aquinas understand the relationship between human reason and divine revelation?

FROM CREATION TO GOD

Can we know, through reason and experience alone, that God exists? And can we know anything about what God is, about his essence? We have seen that Anselm answered both questions at once with his conception of God as *that, than which no greater can be conceived*. If we understand what God is, he argued, we must know that God is. Aquinas is, of course, familiar with this famous argument, but unlike Anselm, he does not think we should be convinced by it.

A self-evident proposition, though always self-evident in itself, is sometimes self-evident to us and sometimes not. For a proposition is self-evident when the predicate forms part of what the subject means: thus it is self-evident that human beings are animals, since being an animal is part of what being human means. . . . But if there are people to whom the meanings of subject and predicate are not evident, then the proposition, though self-evident in itself, will not be so to such people. . . .

I maintain then that the proposition *God exists* is self-evident in itself, since its subject and predicate are identical: God, I shall argue later, is his own existence. But because what it is to be God is not evident to us the proposition is not self-evident to us. It needs to be made evident by things less evident in themselves but more evident to us, namely, God's effects. (*ST* 1a.2.1; *SPW*, pp. 196–197)

Here, Aquinas is telling us that we cannot *start* where Anselm starts in his argument. Maybe we will end up in the same place, but we have to get there by another way. This is partly because Aquinas accepts the Aristotelian view of how humans acquire knowledge.* It may be appropriate for a Platonist such as Augustine or Anselm to think that we have direct insight into the essences of things (an immediate grasp of the Platonic Forms, if you will). For Aristotle and Aquinas, however, human beings are animals, and the knowledge animals have *begins* with sensation. So if we are to prove God's

*Human knowledge is discussed in more detail in the subsequent section, "Humans: Their Knowledge."

existence, we must begin with things we perceive using our senses.

Aquinas says that there are two kinds of arguments dealing with causes and effects. One begins from causes and shows why things are as they are. The other begins from effects and shows what must have been the case to bring these effects into existence. It is the latter kind of argument that we can use to prove the existence of God.

Now any effect that is better known to us than its cause can demonstrate that its cause exists: for effects are dependent on their causes and can only occur if their causes already exist. From effects evident to us, therefore, we can demonstrate something that is not self-evident to us, namely, that God exists. (*ST* 1a.22; *SPW*, p. 198)

Now Aquinas holds that the existence of God can be proved in five ways. Like Anselm's argument, these "five ways" have been subjected to exhaustive logical scrutiny, often in a forbidding forest of technical symbols. I present Aquinas' arguments in his own words and then add some interpretive remarks. In these remarks I try to present the argument in as strong and sympathetic a way as I can. You may be inclined to try to criticize these arguments, but it is important that you first understand them.

The Argument from Change

The first and most obvious way is based on change. For certainly some things are changing: this we plainly see. Now anything changing is being changed by something else. (This is so because what makes things changeable is unrealized potentiality, but what makes them cause change is their already realized state: causing change brings into being what was previously only able to be, and can only be done by something which already is. For example, the actual heat of fire causes wood, able to be hot, to become actually hot, and so causes change in the wood; now what is actually hot can't at the same time be potentially hot but only potentially cold, can't at the same time be actual and potential in the same respect but only in different respects; so that what is changing can't be the very thing that is causing the same change, can't be changing itself, but must be being changed by something else.) Again this something else, if itself changing, must be being changed by yet another thing; and this last

by another. But this can't go on for ever, since then there would be no first cause of the change, and as a result no subsequent causes. (Only when acted on by a first cause do intermediate causes produce a change; unless a hand moves the stick, the stick won't move anything else.) So we are forced eventually to come to a first cause of change not itself being changed by anything, and this is what everyone understands by *God*. (*ST* 1a.3; *SPW*, p. 200)

Change is understood to be an alteration in something, by which it becomes *actually* what it was only *potentially* until then. If the sun heats the sidewalk so that you can't stand on it with bare feet, this is a change from being actually cool (but potentially hot) to being actually hot. The world is full of such changes.

The next point is that each of these changes is brought about by something that is, in the appropriate way, *actual*. The ball thrown by the pitcher has the potential of being over the fence, but it cannot realize that potentiality by itself. It takes an actual batter swinging an actual bat and actually hitting the ball to get it actually over the fence. In the same way, wood does not actualize its potentiality for being hot on its own; it takes something actually hot to make the wood hot, too. Because nothing can be both actual and potential in the same respect, the wood cannot be at the same time merely potentially hot and actually hot, so it cannot make itself hot.

So, Aquinas tells us, nothing can change itself. Everything that is changed must be changed by another thing. But here you can see a question: What accounts for this second thing that actually brings the change about? If it is actualized by some third thing, the question repeats itself, until we come to what Aquinas calls a "first cause of change"; it changes the thing in question without itself being actualized by another.

Could this series of changes go on to infinity? Might it be that there is no first cause of change at all, nothing that is the source of change without itself being changed by some other thing? Could it be that *everything* is changed by something else, which thing in turn is itself changed by something else? This is a tricky question, on which the proof probably rests.

Aquinas answers no. He reasons that if this were true there would be no first cause of change. But if there were no first, then there would not be any secondary changers either, since each of them causes change only insofar as it is itself actualized by some prior cause. And, of course, if there were no secondary changers, there would be no change at all. But that is obviously false. We do see home runs hit and campfires started, so the series cannot go on to infinity. There must be a point where change originates. This must be something that is not merely potential, but is fully and entirely actual. Otherwise, it would need something outside itself to actualize its possibilities.



“Something deeply hidden had to be behind things.”

Albert Einstein (1879–1955)

It is important to guard against a misinterpretation here. Aquinas is not thinking of a first thing in a temporal series. His argument is not that one change precedes another, a second precedes that, and so on to the beginning of the world in time. Rather, his argument concerns a nested set of necessary conditions, not a temporal series of changes. (This matters to Aquinas because he does not think reason alone can prove that the world has a beginning in time.) A necessary condition for the actualization of something is the reality of something that is not merely potential. Unless there were already something actual, no actualization of any potentiality could occur. The set of conditions cannot be infinite, so there must be some condition that is itself *sufficient* to account for the rest. There must be something, then, that exists on its own, without requiring something else to bring it into existence. This would be a completely actual first cause of change. And that, says Aquinas, is what “everyone understands by *God*.”

The Argument from Efficient Causality

In the observable world causes are found ordered in series: we never observe, nor ever could, something causing itself, for this would mean it preceded

itself, and this is not possible. But a series of causes can't go on for ever, for in any such series an earlier member causes an intermediate and the intermediate a last (whether the intermediate be one or many). Now eliminating a cause eliminates its effects, and unless there's a first cause there won't be a last or an intermediate. But if a series of causes goes on for ever it will have no first cause, and so no intermediate causes and no last effect, which is clearly false. So we are forced to postulate some first agent cause, to which everyone gives the name *God*. (*ST* 1a.3; *SPW*, pp. 200–201)

An efficient (or agent) cause, you will recall, is the trigger that sets a process going, such as the spark that produces the explosion or the wind that blows down the fence. We perceive that these efficient causes are ordered in series. We never find that something is the efficient cause of itself. The spark may cause the explosion, but it cannot be the cause of the spark. To be its own cause, it would have to preexist itself, and that is absurd. It cannot exist before it exists! The spark itself requires another efficient cause, perhaps a hammer striking a rock.

Another obvious fact is that if you take away the cause, you take away the effect: no hammer, no spark (or at least not this particular spark); no spark, no explosion (this particular explosion). What we find in the world, then, is that one cause depends on another for its existence. Again, this order need not be a temporal one. Aquinas is not trying to prove that there was a temporally first event in the world's history. Even if the world is eternal, everything in it needs an efficient cause for its very existence. We can think of this as a hierarchically ordered set of dependencies, rather than a temporally ordered series of successive events.*

Again the question arises, Could this series of dependencies be infinite? Aquinas again says no. For if the series were infinite, there would be no cause that is “first.” A “first” cause would be one on

*If you want an example of a causal relation of the efficient sort that is not temporally ordered, think of the depression of the sofa cushion, which is simultaneous with your sitting on it. Your sitting is the efficient cause of the depression in the cushion, but they happen precisely together.

which the whole causal order depended, while it depended on nothing beyond itself. If there were no such cause, Aquinas says, there would be no intermediate causes and no ultimate effects. But there are causes and effects, so there must be a first cause. And that is what “everyone gives the name *God*.”

One commentator gives a helpful analogy.⁴ Suppose you are in your car, stopped at a red light, and are hit from behind. You want to know the cause of this unfortunate event. So you get out and see that the car that hit you had itself been stopped but was hit from behind. As you look at the car behind that one, you notice that it, too, was hit from behind, and so on. Who caused your accident? *Someone* clearly did, since the pileup actually happened, and the chain of cars does not go on forever. It must be the driver of some car that hit another car, but was not himself hit, who caused each of the other cars to cause an accident, ending in yours. He produced the whole series of causes. He is the “first” cause.

The Argument from Possibility and Necessity

Some of the things we come across can be but need not be, for we find them being generated and destroyed, thus sometimes in being and sometimes not. Now everything cannot be like this, for a thing that need not be was once not; and if everything need not be, once upon a time there was nothing. But if that were true there would be nothing even now, because something that does not exist can only begin to exist through something that already exists. If nothing was in being nothing could begin to be, and nothing would be in being now, which is clearly false. Not everything then is the sort that need not be; some things must be, and these may or may not owe this necessity to something else. But just as we proved that a series of agent causes can’t go on forever, so also a series of things which must be and owe this to other things. So we are forced to postulate something which of itself must be, owing this to nothing outside itself, but being itself the cause that other things must be. (*ST* 1a.3; *SPW*, p. 201)

This argument proceeds in two stages. To understand each stage, we must be clear about what Aquinas means by things that “need not be” and things that “must be.” Both terms are applied to

entities of various sorts, and he thinks we have examples of both sorts in our experience.

A thing that need not be can be generated (can come into being) and can be destroyed again (can pass away). The plants and animals of our experience are such beings. Mountains and rivers, too, are things that need not be. There was a time when the Rockies did not exist, and eventually erosion will wear them away. The mighty Mississippi, relatively stable though it has been for eons, will disappear someday. Such beings, Aquinas would say, can suffer *essential* changes, meaning that they can come to be what they are and they can cease being that again.

Given that account, we can consider the first stage of the argument. Aquinas argues that at one time, whatever need not be was not (did not exist). This is true of the Rockies and the Mississippi. He asks us to suppose that everything were like that. Then there would have been a time when nothing existed. But if there ever had been such a time, there would be nothing now. Why? Because from nothing you get nothing. But as we can see, something does exist. So there could never have been a time when there was nothing at all. But that means that there must be things that don’t just have possible being; there must be some things that have necessary being, things that *must* be.

This, then, is the first stage of the argument. Not everything can have merely possible being, or nothing at all would exist. Some beings simply must be.

In the second stage, Aquinas admits that some of these necessary beings may owe their necessity to another necessary being. But, using the same reasoning as he used for agent causation, he argues that this series of necessary dependencies could not go on forever. So there exists something that simply *must be* (period!)—something necessarily existing that doesn’t owe its necessity to another, but is the cause of whatever is necessary in other beings. This being is in itself eternal and necessary in the most proper sense of the word.* And this being, “all men speak of as *God*.”

*Compare to Avicenna’s proof of the existence of God on pp. 302–303.

The Argument from Grades of Goodness in Things

Some things are found to be better, truer, more excellent than others. Such comparative terms describe varying degrees of approximation to a superlative; for example, things are hotter the nearer they approach what is hottest. So there is something which is the truest and best and most excellent of things, and hence the most fully in being; for Aristotle says that the truest things are the things most fully in being. Now *when many things possess a property in common, the one most fully possessing it causes it in the others: fire, as Aristotle says, the hottest of all things, causes all other things to be hot.* So there is something that causes in all other things their being, their goodness, and whatever other perfections they have. And this is what we call *God*. (ST 1a.3; SPW, p. 201)

This proof begins with the observation that the things we experience do not all have the same value. Some are better than others, some truer, some more excellent. All these comparative judgments, however, make sense only if we assume that in each case there is something that exemplifies those characteristics to a superlative degree.

Aquinas borrows the example of hot things from Aristotle: things are judged more or less hot as they more or less resemble the hotness of fire. (We know there are many things hotter than ordinary fire, but that just means we have a longer scale by which to make such comparative judgments; perhaps we would judge heat in comparison with the temperature of atomic fusion in stars and cold in comparison with absolute zero.) Something is better than another thing, then, to the extent that it more closely resembles the best. Something is truer if it is more like the truth, and so on.

But that is not the only point on which this argument rests. It is not just that the comparative degrees in such things are measured by the superlative; their very being depends on a superlative. As Aquinas says, fire is the cause of all hot things; and this must be actually existing fire. Again this is a *causal* proof. Aquinas is claiming that if there were not in existence a superlative degree of goodness, truth, and being, the existence of any lesser degree would be inexplicable. So there must be a maximum best, noblest, truest, and so on.

But since the lower degrees actually exist, the maximum must also really exist. This maximum is what explains the fact that we observe all these degrees of goodness in things: It is their cause. This maximum “best” of all things, Aquinas says, “we call *God*.”

The Argument from the Guidedness of Nature

Goal-directed behaviour is observed in all bodies in nature, even those lacking awareness; for we see their behaviour hardly ever varying and practically always turning out well, which shows they truly tend to goals and do not merely hit them by accident. But nothing lacking awareness can tend to a goal except it be directed by someone with awareness and understanding: arrows by archers, for example. So everything in nature is directed to its goal by someone with understanding, and this we call *God*. (ST 1a.3; SPW, pp. 201–202)

This proof is often called “the argument from design.” It is probably the one that turns up most often in popular “proofs” of the existence of God, and it has a famous history.* The key idea is that intelligent beings act purposefully, arranging means suitable to achieve ends they have in mind. We plant and harvest and store, for example, so that we will have food in the winter when we know there will be none to gather. We can look ahead to a situation that does not now exist and take steps to meet it satisfactorily.

This capacity is none too surprising in intelligent beings; perhaps it is even the main thing that constitutes intelligence. But when we look at the nonrational part of the world, we see the same thing. And this *is* surprising. We can hardly suppose that shaggy dogs, such as Newfoundlands, grow a thick coat in the fall and shed it in the spring because they foresee that otherwise they would be uncomfortable! Yet it is just as if they had planned that rationally.

*See particularly the discussion by David Hume (“Is It Reasonable to Believe in God?” in Chapter 19). Many people think that Darwinian modes of explanation tend to undermine the argument. A recent version of the argument, written with Darwinian evolution in mind, appears in *Darwin’s Black Box* by biochemist Michael Behe.

We see the same apparently rational planning wherever we look. Moths are camouflaged to escape predators. Early-blooming snowdrop flowers have downward-facing blossoms, as if to shield themselves from snow. And so on. Things appear as if aiming to achieve certain goals. But we cannot believe that moths and flowers are doing that planning. Someone else must be doing it for them.



“Earth, with her thousand voices, praises
God.”

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834)

Here is an analogy: People sometimes wonder whether computers are intelligent. Computers can certainly do some remarkable things: solve problems, rotate images in three dimensions on a screen, guide spacecraft. A standard reply is that though computers may look intelligent, the intelligence they display is not their own, but that of their designers and programmers. They have a “borrowed” intelligence.

Aquinas is claiming something similar for naturally existing beings. They do remarkable things, things that seem inexplicable in the absence of intelligence. We see their behavior “practically always turning out well.” We cannot believe that they are themselves intelligent. So they must be directed to their goals “by someone with understanding.”* This being, Aquinas says once more, “we call *God*.”

Aquinas thinks, then, that by such reasoning from effects to causes we can prove the existence of God. In fact these five ways do not quite do that; they do not prove that there is one unique being who has all these traits: first cause of change, first efficient cause, a necessary being, a best being, and the intelligent designer of all the rest. But Aquinas thinks this is something reason can also prove. Such proofs provide a foundation on which Aquinas thinks all reasonable people should agree. If we think about the matter carefully, he contends, we should agree that atheism is irrational. This does

not necessarily mean that every rational person will be a Christian, for some of the truths recognized in Christian faith cannot be rationally demonstrated. But the message of the Bible and the doctrines of the church can rest on this foundation.

THE NATURE OF GOD

Suppose we are convinced. We know *that* God exists. How much do we know about *what* God is? Here Aquinas is quite cautious. This is representative:

In this life we cannot see God’s substance but know him only from creatures: as their non-creaturely and transcendent cause. So this is where our words for God come from: from creatures. Such words, however, will not express the substance of God as he is in himself, in the way words like *human being* express the substance of what human beings are in themselves. (*ST* 1a.13.1; *SPW*, p. 215)

Our finite minds cannot adequately grasp what God is. Still, we are not entirely ignorant. We know that God is the cause of all the features of the world we live in, and we know that God is the source of the very existence of anything at all. So what can we say about God on that basis?

The first and most important truth we know about God is that God *is*. If we ask, “Is what?” the most fundamental answer is that God is existence, being, itself. Like Augustine, Aquinas harks back to God’s answer to Moses before the burning bush, when Moses asks who is sending him back into Egypt. God there says (Exodus 3:14), “I AM WHO I AM. . . . Say to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” But Aquinas thinks philosophical reason also must reach this conclusion. (Here we have something on the second floor of our house!)

God’s existing doesn’t differ from his substance. To be clear about this, note that when several causes producing different effects have also, besides those differing effects, one effect in common, then they must produce that common effect in virtue of some higher cause to which it properly belongs. For the effect properly belonging to a cause is determined by the cause’s own proper nature and form; so that effects properly belonging to causes of diverse nature and form must differ, and any effect produced in common must properly belong not to any

*Note the persistence of the Greek assumption that where there is order there is intelligence. See pp. 14–15.

one of them but to a higher cause in virtue of which they act. . . . Now all created causes, distinguished by the effects that properly belong to each of them, have also one effect in common, namely existence: heat, for example, causes things to be—or exist—as—hot, and builders cause there to be—or exist—houses. So they agree in causing things to exist, but differ in this: that heat causes heat and builders houses. So there must be some cause higher than all of them in virtue of which they all cause existence, a cause of which existence is the proper effect. And this cause is God. Now the proper effect of any cause issues from it by reproducing its nature. So existing must be God’s substance or nature. (DPG 7.2; *SPW*, pp. 205–206)

Because existence is (as we saw earlier) something added to essence, it cannot be just by virtue of their essence that fires or house builders produce their effects. True, their effects differ because of the kinds of things they are. But that they both bring into being something that actually exists cannot be ascribed to those kinds. That is something separate and requires a separate explanation. It must be that, in addition to being the kinds of things they are, they participate in being—which is not identical with either of them. This being, this existing, this energy or source of the existence of finite things cannot itself just be another finite thing. It is being itself. And that, Aquinas says, is the very substance of God. That’s what God is—a great, unlimited, activity of existing. So Anselm is right after all: God’s essence *is* his existence. But now we know that in a way appropriate to the kind of mind human beings have: as the cause of effects we are aware of through our senses.

Contrast this with Aristotle’s conception of God. Aristotle thought of God as a pure form existing in isolated splendor, contemplating its own contemplation. Aquinas thinks of God as an efficient cause, an agent continually bringing into existence all the many things that do exist. This is a God who is involved in the creation, a God who might well (though this has not been proved) know the number of hairs on a man’s head and be aware of the fall of every sparrow, a God who might love human beings with a love beyond all comparing. Whether we can go that far or not, this is clearly a God on whose creative activity we absolutely

depend; if for one moment God turned away from the creation, everything would disappear back into nothingness. Existence, remember, is something added to essence. And now we know that it is added by God, whose very essence is existence.

As for what else we might know about God, Aquinas says, first, that we can know a great deal about what God is not. Drawing on a long tradition of “negative theology,” Aquinas says that God is not, for instance, finite, material, potential, a tree or star, bad, and so on. We can pile on negatives, and this is useful. But no list of negative terms, no matter how long, will tell us what God *is*.

A second truth about God derives from the way we know of God at all: as the cause of effects in creatures. In the world around us, we observe many good things; in their fullness, we could call them “perfections.” Life is such a perfection, for example, or wisdom, or power. All of these derive their being from the source of all being. But we don’t merely want to say, Aquinas reminds us, that God is the *cause of life or wisdom or goodness*.^{*} We want to be able to say that in some sense, this great act of existing is itself alive and wise and good. How can we do that?

We have to acknowledge that what we mean by these terms is not derived from a direct acquaintance with God. We learn what “wise” means by experience with human or animal wisdom in this finite creaturely world, but we are also familiar with extensions of a word’s meaning. For instance, “healthy” is a term that belongs to people in its primary application, but because of cause-and-effect relations with other things, the term is extended. We call certain foods “healthy” because they contribute to health in humans. Or we call urine or blood healthy because they are a symptom or sign of health. Aquinas thinks something of the same sort is true of the words we use about God.

So creatures having any perfection represent and resemble him . . . as effects partially resemble a cause

^{*}Note that an atheistic materialist might want to acknowledge a cause for life or wisdom; she would, however, point to matter or the evolutionary process as that cause. What she would want to deny is that the cause is itself alive or wise.

of a higher kind though falling short of reproducing its form. . . . So the sort of words we are considering express God's substance, but do it imperfectly just as creatures represent him imperfectly.

So when we say *God is good* we mean neither *God causes goodness* nor *God is not bad*, but *What in creatures we call goodness pre-exists in a higher way in God*. Thus God is not good because he causes goodness; rather because he is good, goodness spreads through things. (*ST* 1a.13.2; *SPW*, p. 218)

Because the words we use of God get their original meaning from our experience in this world, they cannot mean exactly the same thing when they are applied to God. For instance, Socrates is wise and Socrates exists, but Socrates' wisdom is not the same thing as his existence. So

words expressing creaturely perfections express them as distinct from one another: *wise* for example, used of a human being expresses a perfection distinct from his nature, his powers, his existence, and so on; but when we use it of God we don't want to express anything distinct from his substance, powers, and existence. So the word *wise* used of human beings somehow contains and delimits what is meant; when used of God, however, it doesn't, but leaves what it means uncontained and going beyond what the word can express. Clearly then the word *wise* isn't used in the same sense of God and man, and the same is true of all the other words. No word, then, is said of God and creatures univocally. (*ST* 1a.13.5; *SPW*, p. 224)

A word is *univocal* when it is used with just one meaning. Aquinas denies that a word applied to both creatures and creator is used univocally. But it isn't used *equivocally*, either; that is, it's not the case that there is no connection between the meanings in the two cases, as there is between "bank" when used as a place to keep your money and "bank" as a place on which to stand while fishing. Rather,

these words apply to God and creatures by **analogy** or proportion. . . .

And this way of sharing a word lies somewhere between pure equivocation and straightforward univocalness. . . .

Whenever words are used analogically of several things, it is because they are all related to some one thing; so that one thing must help define the others. . . . In the same way then all words used

metaphorically of God apply first to creatures and then to God, since said of God they only express some likeness to creatures. Just as talking of a *smiling* meadow expresses a proportion: that flowers adorn a meadow like a smile on a man's face, so talking of God as a *lion* expresses this proportion: that God is powerful in his doings like lions in theirs. And so clearly we can't define what such words mean when used of God unless we refer to what they mean used of creatures. . . .

But, as we have seen, such names don't simply express God's causality, but his substance, for calling God *good* or *wise* doesn't only mean that he causes wisdom or goodness, but that these perfections pre-exist in him in a more excellent way. (*ST* 1a.13.5,6; *SPW*, pp. 224–227)

In this way Aquinas explains how we can talk intelligibly of God, while carefully preserving the ultimate mystery of God's being to creatures such as ourselves.

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1. Why does Aquinas not accept Anselm's ontological argument for God?
 2. According to Aquinas, from what basis must we argue if we are to prove God's existence?
 3. Be sure to grasp the main points in each of the "five ways."
 4. What is God's essence? How do we know?
 5. How does analogy work in understanding God's nature?
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HUMANS: THEIR SOULS

Aquinas takes for granted the basic concepts involved in the Great Chain of Being idea, but he elaborates the higher reaches of the chain more than Augustine did.* God, as perfect being and goodness, is at the very top of the chain, separated from the highest of created creatures by an unbridgeable gap.

Below this gap are the **angels**, purely spiritual beings defined by a form or essence, but lacking any material substratum. Lacking any matter, angels also lack what individuates material things.

*Review Plotinus and Augustine's development of the idea of the Great Chain of Being, pp. 271–272.

(Remember that what makes this frog distinct from that frog is not its form, but the fact that it is composed of different matter.) Still, an angel is not, like God, a simple existence whose essence just is its existence. Like all created beings, angels are composite; they are made up of a form or essence plus existence. This lack of material stuff in spiritual intelligences means that there cannot be more than one angel of a given kind. To put it another way, each angel is an entire species in itself, every one differing from every other in essence—differing not as this dog differs from that dog, but as dogs differ from horses.

Human beings exist on the border between such pure intelligences and the material world, sharing something with beings both above and below them on the chain. This participation in higher and lower levels of being is already summed up, Aquinas thinks, in Aristotle's formula for humans: They are *animals* (material beings) whose distinctive characteristic is *rationality* (or intelligence).

Aquinas agrees substantially with Aristotle about soul and body. Because soul is the principle of life in things, there are various levels of soul. Plants have a kind of soul, which enables them to nourish themselves, grow, and reproduce. In addition to these powers, animals have sentient (sensitive) soul—that is, abilities to see and hear and so on, together with instincts and inclinations that draw them toward and move them away from things. Humans have rational soul, adding the abilities to abstract universals, think logically, and plan future actions in the light of goals. In all these ways, **soul** is the form of a body of a particular sort.

Aquinas adamantly insists that there are *not* three souls in a human being—vegetative, sensitive, and rational—as though we were composite beings made up of three substances.

If we hold that the soul is united to the body as its substantial form, then the co-existence of several essentially different souls in the same body cannot be entertained. To begin with, an animal having several souls would not compose an essential unity, for nothing is simply one except by one form. Form gives being and unity. Were man alive by one form, namely by vegetable soul, and animal by another, namely by sensitive soul, and human by a third,

namely by rational soul, he would not be one thing simply speaking. (*ST* 1a.76.3; *PT*, pp. 204–205)

But a human being *is* one thing, and the rational soul incorporates and governs all the rest. This kind of holism means that features we in some way share with the lower animals—emotion and desire, for instance—are transformed into *human* emotion and desire. In us, emotion and desire involve conceptualizations impossible for a nonrational creature. We can, but a cat cannot, fear damage to our reputation or hope to meet someone we admire. Everything in us, even our bodily state, is affected by our dominant form, the rational form of a human soul.

We could put this point another way. The human body is not, in a living human being, a substance. Some philosophers—Plato comes to mind—have thought so and have thought of a human being as a kind of dual creature: a body conjoined for a time to a substantial soul. Aquinas will have none of this. Death is not one of the substances in a human being (the soul) departing the other (the body). A dead body is not, properly speaking, a human being, but something else entirely: a corpse. We may call it human by extension or by analogy, but because the corpse has lost the form of a human being, it is no longer literally correct to call the corpse human. A human body is not a thing on its own, but *material* for a human being, made into one substance by the human soul, which is its form.

So the human soul is the form of the human body. Further, if soul inhabited body like a sailor his ship, it wouldn't give body or its parts their specific nature; yet clearly it does since when it leaves the body the various parts lose the names they first had, or keep them in a different sense; for a dead man's eyes are eyes only in the sense that eyes in a picture or a statue are, and the same goes for the other parts of the body. Moreover, if soul inhabited body like a sailor his ship the union of body and soul would be accidental, and when death separated them it wouldn't be decomposition of a substance, which it clearly is.* (*PDS* art. 1; *SPW*, p. 188)

*Descartes, in the seventeenth century, uses this same figure, also denying that the soul is like a sailor in a ship. But he has an even harder time than Aquinas in making it stick, since he thinks the soul is a separate substance in its entirety. See pp. 395 and 399.

Despite this insistence on the unity of a human being, however, Aquinas also agrees with Aristotle that a rational soul is not *just* the form of a human body, the way the soul of a lobster is just the form of life in a lobster. There is something substantial about a human soul after all, something akin to angelic intelligences.* He agrees, moreover, for essentially the same reason: Reasoning souls

cannot share that special activity of theirs with any bodily organ, in the sense of having a bodily organ for thinking as an eye is the bodily organ for seeing. And so the life principle of a thing with understanding has to act on its own, with an activity peculiar to itself not shared with the body. And because activity flows from actuality, the understanding soul must possess an existence in and of itself, not dependent on the body. (*PDS* art. 1; *SPW*, pp. 187–188)

You can see Aquinas, like Augustine, struggling to unify two strands of thought that are not easy to harmonize. On the one hand, a man or woman is one substance, and the soul is its form. On the other hand, a human soul, by virtue of its capacity to abstract universals and reason with them, its ability to know virtually anything, is an intellectual substance in its own right, able to subsist even when the body is destroyed.†

On the one hand, a soul becomes a determinate, individual soul only by virtue of its intimate relation to the body because whatever is in a soul is conveyed there by the specific bodily sense experience of some individual human. On the other hand, it is the soul's possible subsistence without the body that gives it immortality. Although Aquinas has rational arguments for each part of this view, in the end it may be a matter of faith that these demands can be reconciled. He calls on the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body to do the job.

Firstly, if we deny the resurrection of the body it isn't easy—indeed it becomes very difficult—to defend the immortality of the soul. The union of body and soul is certainly a natural one, and any

separation of soul from body goes against its nature and is imposed upon it. So if soul is deprived of body it will exist imperfectly as long as that situation lasts. . . . Secondly, what human beings desire by nature is their own well-being. But soul is not the whole human being, only part of one; my soul is not me. So that even if soul achieves well-being in another life, that doesn't mean I do or any other human being does. (*CC* 15:17–19; *SPW*, pp. 192–193)

“My soul is not me.” This definitive rejection of Platonism means that even if my soul is a substance capable of existing after my body dies, *I* may not survive. For *my* survival, that soul must be the form of a body—my body. And to buttress this hope of immortality, Aquinas looks not to reason, but to the resurrection of Christ. Just as Christ's body was transformed into a heavenly body, so, Aquinas believes, will our bodies be also.

HUMANS: THEIR KNOWLEDGE

We have seen how humans can know something of God by (1) reasoning from effects to causes and (2) using analogies from common experience to partially describe this cause of existing things. But how do we come to have knowledge of those effects in the first place? As we have noted, knowing begins with sensing. How does sensing work? Take the eye, for example. An eye has the power to receive images of external things—their shape, color, texture, motion. These images are the sensible forms of the things we perceive.

Imagine you are stroking a cat that is purring contentedly on your lap. You see the cat stretch with pleasure, feel the softness of its fur, and hear the purr. Each of these sensible forms is received by the appropriate sense. Yet it is not three experiences you are having, but one. So these images must be united in what Aquinas (following Aristotle) calls your “common root sensitivity.” The unified complex image formed in you is a particular item that mirrors a determinate, particular substance outside you: contented Tabby at a certain moment in time. When the cat jumps off your lap, your current sensory experience changes, but something is left behind in you. The proof is that you can later remember that experience, bring its images back

*See Aristotle on *nous*, pp. 206–208.

†See the fuller discussion in the following section, “Humans: Their Knowledge.”

into consciousness, and, as it were, run the experience again. So images are stored in you somewhere; Aquinas (again following Aristotle) calls this storehouse *the imagination*.

Thus far described, our minds do not differ much from the minds of the higher animals, which also have sensitivity, imagination, and (limited) memory. But we have an additional capacity called **intellect**. Using intellect, we can form *ideas* from the images stored in imagination. And ideas are not just more images, not copies of images, but what the medievals called “universals.”* **Universals** are features of things that can be expressed in language and formulated in definitions. So while our senses can take in the sensible form of Tabby and the imagination can store that image, it is the intellect that can abstract the universal features of this cat and all other cats and formulate the *idea* of a cat.

The senses are bodily powers and know singular objects tied down by matter, whereas mind [intellect] is free from matter and knows universals, which are abstract from matter and contain limitless instances. (*ST* 1a.2ae. 2.6; *PT*, p. 231)

When this happens we have the form of the cat actually resident in the intellect itself. That’s what a concept or idea of a cat is: the actual presence in the intellect of the very *form* that makes a cat a cat—only without making the intellect into a cat because the usual *material* for cats (flesh, bone, fur) is missing.

There might be a problem here. If our intellect deals in universals such as “small domestic feline” or “rational animal,” which are true of limitless individuals, how is it possible for us to know particular things—Tabby or Socrates—that aren’t pure forms? It is, after all the *matter* composing this cat or this human that make them the particular things that they are. But matter as such is unknowable; matter is what the intellect abstracts *from*. Aquinas solves this problem by noting that sensory images have two uses. They are the originals from which knowledge starts, but they are also needed when we think about particular things. We may be

able to know a lot about cats-as-such in terms of forms or universals, but if we want to direct our thought to Tabby in particular, we need to recall an image of Tabby to tie our thought down to her. The image, remember, is as particular as the individual that produced it and will ensure that we are indeed thinking about that specific cat. Knowledge of particulars, then, is possible; it will involve both universals and images, as when we say that Tabby is gray or that Socrates is wise.

Intellect has two distinguishable operations. In the first of these the intellect enjoys a simple apprehension of some object; it grasps, more or less adequately, the *whatness* of the object, its *nature*, or what Aquinas calls its **quiddity** (from the Latin for “what it is”). So a child learns to identify a cat and distinguish it from a dog. The child’s idea of a cat is not false to the reality, but it is incomplete. An adult’s idea is more adequate and a biologist’s concept more adequate still. Our idea of what a cat is can expand and improve; typically, it does improve with continued experience of cats. In such a simple grasp of a nature, there is, properly speaking, no truth or falsity. It’s just there in the intellect. (Compare Aristotle on truth not being applicable to *terms*, but only to *statements*, p. 185.)

In the second operation, which Aquinas calls “making connections and disconnections,” the intellect unites ideas to make judgments about the things apprehended. Such judgments may be affirmative or negative. So we say, “All cats meow,” or “Socrates is not stupid.” With respect to judgments the concept of **truth** is in place.

For the meaning of true consists in a matching of thing and understanding, and matching presupposes diversity, not identity. So the notion of truth is first found in understanding when understanding first starts to have something of its own which the external thing doesn’t have, yet which corresponds to the thing and can be expected to match it. Now when articulating what things are, understanding possesses only a likeness of the external thing, just as the senses do when they take in the appearance of what they sense. But when understanding starts to make judgements about the thing it has taken in, then those are the understanding’s own judgements not found in the thing outside, yet called true judgements in so far as they match what is outside. Now

*Contrast David Hume, who thinks ideas just are faint copies of images. See pp. 443–444.

understanding makes judgements about the thing it takes in when it says something about how it is or is not, and that we call understanding making connections and disconnections. . . . So that is why truth is found first in understanding making connections and disconnections. (*PDT* 1.2; *SPW*, p. 59)

Truth, then, just as in Aristotle, is a matter of correspondence or matching between judgments made by the intellect and the thing being judged. To say “Socrates is wise” is true, provided Socrates is wise. Otherwise, the statement is false.*

There also seem to be two powers in the intellect: an active power and a receptive power. The former does the abstracting; the latter stores the abstract ideas, functioning for the active intellect as imagination does for the senses. There must be such a passive power, Aquinas argues, because we can bring back into active consideration ideas that have not been present to the conscious mind for some time; these ideas have not completely disappeared but are potentially present, ready once again to play a role in current thinking. It is the active power of intellect that Aquinas believes is not and cannot be tied down to any bodily organ. It is to this agent intellect that he looks when he searches for a proof of the immortality of the soul. But the receptive intellect is equally important, lest our minds be restricted solely to awareness of the present moment.

It is very important to note that although intellect gets its material from the images stored in imagination, it is not those images that we know (at least not in the first instance). What we know are those hylomorphic objects that produced the images—the cat, the chair, the person sitting in the chair holding the cat.† We know them by virtue of, or by means of, these images. But the images are not the primary objects of knowledge.‡ True, we can reflect on our own mental operations, draw back and pay attention to the image as such. In general, however, what we know is not limited to

the contents of our minds. We know Tabby and Socrates and the fact that fire causes water to boil. None of these is a mental phenomenon.

This, then, is the account Aquinas gives of our knowledge of the material world. All our knowledge begins with what our senses reveal about it. This explains how we can know that the premises of his arguments for the existence of God are true. We begin from simple facts about the world—that things change, that one thing causes another, and so on. Starting there, Aquinas believes we can work back to that cause, which is its own existence, and the cause of whatever else there is.

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1. On Aquinas’ view, in what sense is the Psalmist right when he says we were created “a little lower than the angels”? (Ps. 8:5)
 2. How does Aquinas explain the fact that a human being is one, unified thing?
 3. Is the soul (agent intellect) immortal? Why?
 4. What are universals? Give some examples.
 5. How does the intellect acquire universals?
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HUMANS: THEIR GOOD

Following Aristotle again, Aquinas holds that every finite substance tends naturally toward its perfection, toward realizing its potential. Actualization of a thing’s potential is in fact the *good* for that thing. This natural teleology of final causes is present even in the inanimate world, but it is strikingly apparent in animals; they are always seeking something. This is especially true of human beings, who can scarcely sit still an hour without planning what to do next. We regard what we seek—rightly or wrongly—as good, as contributing to our perfection. We want dinner, or a movie, or exercise. These things are goals that move us to action, so we go to the kitchen or head toward the theater or change into our running shoes. We choose such actions as means to reach the goal, and we wouldn’t engage in them if the goal didn’t seem good to us.

This much seems mere common sense. But Aquinas pushes these thoughts in two directions. First, suppose we ask why we want exercise. We might answer, for the sake of health, which also

*See Aristotle’s definition of truth, p. 187.

†On hylomorphism, see p. 301.

‡Contrast this “realism” about knowledge with the “empiricism” of John Locke, who says that the mind has “no other immediate object but its own ideas,” p. 422.

seems good to us. Why do we want health? It must be for the sake of some further good. That such questions can be repeated leads us to ask, Is there any goal that we want simply for itself, not for the sake of something beyond it? Like Aristotle, Aquinas says that there is and identifies the goal as happiness (*eudaemonia*) or beatitude.* Whatever else seems good to us does so because it seems either to be a part of happiness or to contribute to our happiness. That it is good to be happy or blissful is beyond proving, but also beyond question.

Second, humans differ from other animals in being able to frame ideas in terms of universal concepts. We want dinner, but that concept can be filled out in a great many ways. Do we want steak, or chicken, or vegetables? Something simple or something fancy? Dinner is good, but that rather empty concept cries out for a multitude of decisions. A sheep that is hungry and is put in a green pasture faces no such quandaries; it simply starts eating the nearest grass. The sheep's actions are fairly closely determined by what its senses reveal in its immediate environment. Human action is unlike that because our universalizing intellect presents possibilities to us. Among these possibilities we must choose. And if you think "dinner" is a concept that can be filled out in numerous ways, consider "happiness."

We all want to be happy, then—to flourish, to fare well. This is a desire implanted in us by nature; whether that *should* be our goal is not up to us. (Though we have each asked many students, neither of us has ever found a single one who confessed to having as a goal being unhappy in life!) Happiness is a natural good.† We don't consider whether to take happiness as a goal, but only how to achieve that goal. This thinking eventuates in acts of will that produce actions.

There is a desire for good in everything: good, the philosophers tell us, is what all desire. In things

*Note that happiness is no more just the *feeling* of happiness for Aquinas than it was for Socrates, Plato, or Aristotle. It is a condition of the person. Compare pp. 134, 175, and 209.

†Compare Plato's argument for morality in the *Republic*, which depends on precisely this premise. See p. 175.

without awareness this desire is called natural desire: the attraction a stone has for downwards, for instance. In things with sense-awareness it is called animal desire, and divides into capabilities of affective and aggressive feeling. In things with understanding it is called intellectual or rational desire: will. So created intellectual substances have wills. (*SCG* 2.47; *SPW*, p. 169)

Will, then, is a species of desire. It is differentiated from desire in general by being rational desire, desire that is informed by intellectual knowledge and reason. We, like sheep, may simply be attracted to food that is before us. But unlike sheep, we can also apply universal concepts in reasoning about food; we can say, "That's filled with saturated fats, and though I'm sure I would like it, I will not eat it." Such a decision, made in the light of rational knowledge, in the light of some goal that reason approves (such as health), is an act of will. Humans, by virtue of their intellectual nature, have wills.

What that means is that human beings are not at the mercy of their desires. They can choose which desires to satisfy and which to leave unsatisfied—and that means the will is free.

Things lack freedom to decide either because they lack all judgement, like stones and plants which lack awareness, or because their judgements are fixed by nature, like nonreasoning animals. . . . But wherever judgement of what to do is not fixed by nature, there is freedom to decide. And all creatures with understanding are of this sort. For understanding takes in not only this or that good but the notion of good as such. . . . So all things with understanding have freedom of will deriving from understanding's judgement, and that is freedom of decision, which is defined as free judgement of reason. (*SCG* 2.48; *SPW*, pp. 170–171)

Aquinas means that we can evaluate particular goods (such as this rich, dark, sweet, chocolate cake) in the light of "good as such" and decide in the light of our more general good whether *this* good is one that should be chosen. The fact that we can do this means we are responsible for our actions. We are not simply determined to act by our immediate surroundings.

Aquinas distinguishes between *acts of a human* and *human acts*. A man does, in a sense, grow a

beard every night. But whether he shaves it off in the morning or lets it grow is a matter for decision and the exercise of his will. Only the latter is properly called a *human act*. Why? Because only that is under the control of the form that makes him human: his rational nature. Suppose someone really would like to have a beard but his wife just hates beards. Then he must decide between incompatible goods—having a beard or pleasing his wife. He is free to decide either way. Whichever he does will be voluntary. What he decides will be willed in the light of intellectual reflection on overall goodness, and that will be not only something he is responsible for, but also a revelation of his character.

Before we discuss character (virtue and vice), however, we should ask, What makes an individual action good or bad?

We should judge actions good and bad in the same way we do things, since what things do reflects what they are. Now a thing's goodness is measured by how fully it exists; for . . . good and existent are interchangeable terms. . . . * Full human being, for example, demands a complex of soul and body endowed with every ability and organ needed for knowledge and movement, and if an individual lacks any of this he would not exist fully. As existing he would be good, but as not fully existing he would lack goodness and be called bad: thus for blind men it is good to be alive, but bad to be without sight. . . .

In a similar way then actions must be called good in so far as they exist, but in so far as they exist less fully than human actions should they will lack goodness and be called bad: if, for example, we don't do as much as we reasonably should, or do something out of place or the like. (*ST* 1a2e.18.1; *SPW*, pp. 343–344)

What actions would “exist less fully than human actions should”? Clearly, actions would not exist as fully human if they were not under the control of our intellectual, rational faculties—because those faculties are what make us distinctively human. Those actions, then, would lack goodness and would be called bad. Good actions are actions that flow from our nature, fulfilling and perfecting that nature.

*This is, you will recall, one of the principles of the Great Chain of Being idea.

This principle allows Aquinas to formulate the notion of a **natural law**. Everything in the created world, of course, expresses the divine reason, according to which it was designed. God's reason can be called an **eternal law**, and nothing can happen that is not permitted to happen by God's eternal law. In creating the world, God brought substances into being that have natures or essences of their own, and these natures incorporate within themselves something of the eternal law. A stone, for instance, naturally falls to earth. Sheep or wolves naturally act out their nature. Sheep eat grass, and wolves eat sheep; they have no choice. Human beings also have a given nature. But, as we have seen, our nature includes the capacity to formulate universals and to think about what to do in terms of them. This provides us with a freedom of action that stones and sheep and wolves lack. Unlike sheep and wolves, we can act in ways that are contrary to our nature, detrimental to it.

But we also have the capacity to know what the law of our nature is, together with a partial ability (even apart from the special grace of God) to act in accordance with it. How do we know what the natural law says? Its first principle, Aquinas tells us, is this: “Good should be done and evil avoided.” Now this is not something that can be proved from more general principles, or it wouldn't be first. It is a practical parallel to that principle of intellectual life in general, the principle of noncontradiction, which says that two contradictory propositions cannot both be true. Though it cannot be proved, there does seem to be something incoherent in its denial. Since I always act for the sake of some good, for me to say, “Let me do evil,” is equivalent to saying, “Let evil be good.”*

Beyond this self-evident principle, we know natural law by observing the natural inclinations of things. For example, all human beings experience

*Notice that the first natural law does *not* say, “What I think is good should be done and what I take to be evil should be avoided.” Aquinas does think that we have no alternative but to do the best we know, so if, after reflection, our conscience tells us to do something that is in fact wrong, that is what we should do. But that doesn't mean we are doing the right thing.

the drive to continue in existence. Our reason apprehends this universal drive as good. It is good to continue to live—so murder is wrong. And it is part of our nature to eat when hungry—so feeding the hungry is good. Humans have a natural tendency to mate and care for their children—so marriage, intended to provide a safe and lasting environment to meet these goals, is a good thing. In general, law is what reason declares to be fitting in the light of the nature of something. By using our intellect, reflecting on the nature of human beings and other essences, we can discern the image of God's eternal law that is resident in the things he has created. Aquinas believes that in addition to murder and adultery, reason tells us that drunkenness, gluttony, suicide, lying, homosexuality, and the breaking of promises are contrary to nature. The argument is that all of these, in one way or another, violate the natural inclinations of a being with a nature like ours.

Now since everything subjected to God's providence is measured by the standards of his eternal law, as we have said, everything shares in some way in the eternal law, bearing its imprint in the form of a natural tendency to pursue the behaviour and goals appropriate to it. Reasoning creatures are subject to God's providence in a special, more profound way than others, by themselves sharing the planning, making plans both for themselves and for others; thus sharing in the eternal reasoning itself that is imprinting them with their natural tendencies to appropriate behaviour and goals. And it is this distinctive sharing in the eternal law by reasoning creatures that we call the law we have in us by nature. (*ST* 1a2ae.91.2; *SPW*, p. 418)

In addition to the eternal law, which is part of the nature of God, and the natural law, which is resident in our own natures, Aquinas distinguishes two further kinds of law. The third kind is **human law**. This is law that is devised and promulgated by an authority in a community for the good of that community—or, at least, that is its essence. When human law is in accord with that goal, it mirrors the eternal and natural law. But, as humans are subject to sin—rulers no less than the rest of us—human law may deviate from natural goodness and often does. Where human law deviates from natural law,

Aquinas says, it is not truly law at all, but lawlessness. Why? Because it is not in accord with reason, which is the source of all law.

Human law, then, must meet four conditions to be true law: (1) It must issue from a legitimate authority that has responsibility for a community; (2) it must be promulgated publicly so that people can know what is and is not acceptable; (3) it must further the good of that community; and (4) it must be in conformity with reason. In terms of these criteria, Aquinas distances himself from any notion of law as simply what the sovereign declares or whatever is customarily accepted.*

Finally, there is **divine law**. This is law that is beyond our natural capacities to discover but is revealed to us in the Scriptures. An example might be the New Testament commandment to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ in order to be saved. Reason cannot figure this out for itself; but, Aquinas holds, it is necessary to enable us to reach our final bliss. Here we have something on the third floor of the house.

We can now return to the issue of character. Like Aristotle, Aquinas holds that we shape our characters by developing habits or dispositions to act in certain ways. And we build such habits by acting in those ways. These habits of character are virtues and vices. *Virtues* incline us to act in ways that reason approves of; when you have a virtue, it is easy to do what otherwise is difficult. *Vices* are contrary habits, which incline us to ignore or neglect the discernment of good by our reason.

Virtues are important to us. The reason is that, though we are naturally oriented toward bliss or happiness, it is not so clear what contributes to that blessed state. Our rational faculties have (in addition to the task of finding truth) the practical role of choosing actions suitable to promoting our blessedness. But we are not, as the angels are, pure intellectual beings. We also feel the attractions of

*Aquinas thereby aligns himself with those who claim that there is a criterion for judging human laws, from Heraclitus and Antigone through Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. He sets himself against Sophist understandings of law and justice as wholly conventional and against notions of law as simply what the ruler declares. Compare Hobbes, p. 415.

the senses and the pleasures of the body, and these animal propensities have some independence of our intellect. Thus, they need to be habituated to the good—trained, if you like, to obey their rightful master, reason. That’s just what a **virtue** is: a habit of choosing wisely in light of the ultimate end of blessedness. Aquinas, again following Aristotle, says that the soul rules the body like a tyrant. He means that if I will to raise my arm, my arm (other things being equal) simply obeys and goes up. But our desires and emotions are different; they

don’t obey my reason’s slightest signal, but have their own ways of acting, which are sometimes at odds with reason: reason rules my affections and my aggressions, Aristotle goes on to say, *democratically*, like free people are ruled, who have their own will in certain areas. (*ST* 1a2ae.56.4; *SPW*, p. 406)

As we see in this quote, Aquinas divides our desires and emotions into two large classes: the *affective* and the *aggressive*.*

The object of our affective ability [is] anything sensed as straightforwardly good or bad, pleasurable or painful. But sometimes the animal has a hard struggle attaining such good or avoiding such bad things, because they are not within its immediate power, and then good or bad, seen as challenging or requiring effort, becomes an object of our aggressive ability. . . .

. . . the function of aggressive feelings in animals is to remove obstacles preventing affective feelings from pursuing their objective, obstacles that make good difficult to attain or bad difficult to avoid. So all aggressive feelings end up in affective feeling, so that even aggressive feelings are accompanied by the affective feelings of joy or sadness. (*ST* 1a2ae.23; *SPW*, pp. 163–164)

One function of virtue is to order these emotions and desires toward the good—that is, toward blessedness. So we have, Aquinas says, a virtue specific to the affective emotions, those that are immediately attracted by pleasure and repelled by pain. This virtue is **temperance**, which brings the impulse to pursue the pleasant and avoid the

painful under the tutelage of practical reason. Temperance prevents us from indulging too much in pleasures, keeping us on an even keel and aimed at the blessed state.

With respect to the aggressive feelings, we have a second virtue: **fortitude** or *courage*. Fortitude makes us tenacious in pursuing what our reason determines to be truly good, so that we don’t give up easily in the face of obstacles. It is firmness or resolve when temptations arise to distract us from our ultimate good by promising some minor gain. Fortitude is being steadfast rather than wimpy, determined rather than reckless. It keeps us from being overpowered by fear on the one hand or being rashly bold on the other hand.

In addition to these two virtues governing our emotional life, there is **justice**, which ensures that we are not inclined to take more than our share of goods. Distributive justice does not apply so much to what we feel as to what we do. It has an intrinsic reference to others. To be just is to be fair and equitable in allotting to each person what is due to him or her. A just person, for instance, will not even be tempted to steal money lying in plain sight on someone’s desk; to a just person, the possibility of stealing simply doesn’t appear in the list of options for action. To truly have the virtue of justice is for it to be *easy* to leave the money there.

Finally, there is **prudence**, a virtue that pertains more directly to the intellect than do the others. Prudence involves habits that lead us to think again when we are being hasty and keep in mind the overall good when we are deliberating.*

These four (temperance, fortitude, justice, and prudence) do not exhaust all the virtues there are, but Aquinas calls them the **cardinal virtues**, the most important of them. If human beings were simply animal beings, with no hope of immortality, these would be sufficient to produce whatever degree of happiness is attainable in this life. If we were restricted to the first two floors of the house, there would be nothing to add. But if it is rational to believe that our good is not exhausted by such

*The traditional terms for these are the *concupiscible* and the *irascible* desires and feelings.

*Compare Aristotle on “practical wisdom,” pp. 213–214.

bliss as this life offers, blessedness also requires the **theological virtues** of faith, hope, and love.

Here Aquinas self-consciously goes beyond Aristotle. He says that Aristotle understands perfectly well what we require for *eudaemonia* (happiness). But then, confined to this world, he resigns himself to making do with less. Happiness, Aristotle says, is activity of soul, in accord with reason, over an entire lifetime, which cannot be taken away from us, together with modest external goods—the most satisfying activity being that of intellectual contemplation. But Aristotle realizes that happiness in this world is fragile, as his reference to Priam makes clear.* In this life, we are ever subject to fortune, and though he rightly says our highest happiness is in contemplation, he acknowledges that even this cannot be continuously engaged in. So if this life is all there is, we can at best approximate the goal that we all have.

What would true happiness consist in, then? It would have to be total immersion in absolute goodness forever—in the presence of and being suffused by that original energy or existence that *is* goodness and is the source of all good. That's what we all want, though we don't usually realize it. That's the goal of all our desiring. But we are talking of the mystical vision of God. Philosophy can perhaps point to that bliss, but philosophy cannot supply it. That's a gift reserved for God's grace.

Because we are not self-sufficient in our existence, Aquinas writes, we have a “twofold ultimate goal.” We are aiming at an internal perfection, which can only come when we deeply and wholeheartedly love God above all else and love our neighbors as ourselves. And we are aiming at unity with God, the source of all goodness and so also of that very perfection within.

Bliss then, the ultimate human goal, will be twofold: one within, the ultimate perfection human beings can attain, a created bliss; and one without, union with which causes that bliss within, and this is God himself, an uncreated bliss. (*CPLS* Bk. 4, 49; *SPW*, p. 328)

Now the activity of seeing God, which we hold human bliss to be, cannot be measured by time:

neither in itself, since it has no before and after, nor on the side of the seer or the seen, since both exist outside change, . . . for seeing God transcends the native power of all creatures and is something no creature can attain by nature. What properly measures it is eternity itself; and the seeing of God, bliss itself, is thus eternal life. (*CPLS* Bk. 4, 49; *SPW*, p. 332)

-
1. What is the good for humans?
 2. In what way does a human being have a will, rather than just a set of desires, like the lower animals?
 3. Is the human will free? Why?
 4. What distinguishes an act of a human being from a human act?
 5. What does Aquinas mean by the natural law? How can we know what the natural law is?
 6. Why are the virtues important to us?
 7. Explain each of the four cardinal virtues. What does each put in order? And to what end?
 8. What is the final source of blessedness for human beings?
-

Ockham and Skeptical Doubts—Again

Since Augustine rebutted skepticism in the late fourth century, there had been a broad consensus in the West that human minds were capable of knowing the truth, even if they sometimes disagreed about what constituted the truth.* God had created the world, and he created human beings in his own image. It would not have been suitable for God to mismatch reality and the mind. And Christian thinkers held that it was through Wisdom, the logos, the second person of the Trinity, that everything was created. So it was natural to suppose that the patterns in reality could be reproduced in the mind.

It is true that our minds are finite and limited. We cannot discover the whole truth on our own. But God has graciously come to our aid; he has revealed to us the truths necessary for our salvation, which are beyond our finite grasp. These revealed truths, which Catholic philosophers accepted on the authority of the Scriptures and the church, are

*See p. 212.

*Review Augustine's arguments on pp. 267–269.

not in conflict with the truths we can discover on our own. How could they be, since both come ultimately from the same God? Revealed truth supplements our rational knowledge, completes it, and provides an overall framework within which all correct believing and knowing are carried on.

We must add two further notes to this happy picture.

1. Knowledge is understood in that very strong classical sense delineated by Plato when he distinguishes it from opinion.* In medieval philosophy, the requirement that knowledge “stays put” or “endures” is understood to mean that it involves *absolute certainty*. If you *know* something, you are certain of it. As with Plato, this feature is correlated with the fact that knowledge is something for which reasons can be given. The reasons are sometimes based on logic, sometimes on experience, and sometimes on the Scriptures—often on a combination of them. But there is always “an account” that can be given.

2. Knowledge, and the certainty that goes with it, is crucially important. Your eternal salvation depends on getting it right. That is why **heresy**—erroneous belief—is so terrifying. The difference between correct, or orthodox, belief and heresy is the difference between *heaven* and *hell*. So it is not just an attempt to satisfy Aristotelian “wonder” that motivates the medieval theologians and philosophers.† Getting it right has an intensely personal and practical aspect.

All this is common ground in the thirteenth century. On these foundations Thomas Aquinas builds a remarkably comprehensive system of thought. The kind of confidence in the intellect that Aquinas expresses has perhaps not been seen since the time of Aristotle himself.

But this systematic synthesis, so marvelous in its way, was already under threat in the fourteenth century. Doubts raise their ugly heads once again: doubts not about some detail, but about the very foundation that has been taken for granted in the

centuries since Augustine. It is even more surprising to learn that these doubts have their source not, as you might suspect, among some atheist or agnostic folks who can’t accept the claims about revealed truth, but among theologians whose orthodoxy (at least on central issues) is beyond question.⁵

“I believe in one God, the Father Almighty,” begins the Nicene Creed. What does this mean? During the medieval period, God’s **omnipotence** is understood to mean that he can do anything that is not self-contradictory. He cannot make a cube with only five sides, since by definition a cube has six sides. Nor can he make something that did happen not happen; for in this case it would be true of some event *x* that *x* both happened and did not happen—and that is contradictory. But since contradictory expressions do not describe real possibilities, this is no limitation on God’s power. God can do anything that is possible. For any state of affairs that can be given a consistent description, then, God can realize that state of affairs. This doctrine is important partly because it protects the possibility of miracles.

Among those who derive some surprising consequences from this doctrine is **William of Ockham** (born in the 1280s and died about 1349). Ockham was English, taught at Oxford, and was embroiled in some nasty confrontations between his Franciscan order and the pope. Like all the major philosophers of the period, he thinks of himself first and foremost as a theologian. He is also a very acute logician, and any adequate treatment of Ockham’s thought would have to include his logic. But we will concentrate on what he says about the omnipotence of God—specifically, on the impact this doctrine has on views of the world and our knowledge of it.

Consider the following case. You are sitting at a table, in good light, looking directly at a tangerine about three feet in front of your eyes. You are wide awake, not under the influence of any drugs, and are paying attention to what is before you. This seems to be the most favorable sort of case we can imagine for knowing something. We would ordinarily say that you know that there is a tangerine on the table.

*See pp. 149–151.

†See Aristotle on wonder, p. 197.

But what does your knowledge consist in? It is clearly some state of yourself—what Ockham calls an “intuitive cognition.” In standard cases, we think, this state is caused in part by the tangerine and in part by your sense organs and intellect. The first part of the cause is a matter of how the world is—that there happens to be a tangerine on the table. The second part is a matter of how you are—where you are, whether your eyes are open, whether you have learned what a tangerine is, and so on. In the standard case, your “intuitive cognition” of the tangerine depends both on the actual existence of a tangerine on the table and on a suitable state within you. Ockham accepts this.

But now consider the impact that the doctrine of God’s omnipotence has on this case. God, remember, can do anything that is not self-contradictory. This means that he can cause to happen anything that does not have an inconsistent description. God has created a world that operates as we have described in the foregoing standard case. But could God *directly* cause you to have that “intuitive cognition” of the tangerine? In the standard case, your experience is caused by the presence of the tangerine, but could God cause this experience without the mediation of the actual piece of fruit?

He certainly could, since it is not self-contradictory to imagine him doing so. The presence of that piece of fruit on the table neither entails nor is entailed by your “intuitive cognition” of it. Either, so far as logic goes, could exist without the other. So, God could cause you to have such an experience even in the absence of the tangerine.

Evidently, then, our conviction that we *know* that the tangerine exists—even in this most favorable case—is mistaken. For knowledge, remember, involves absolute certainty that could not possibly be mistaken. But if God can produce in us the internal state that is usually caused by the tangerine even in the absence of the tangerine, there is a possibility that our “intuitive cognition” is mistaken.

At best, our belief that there is a tangerine in front of us is merely *probable* belief. It amounts to no more than what Plato calls “opinion.” But since all our knowledge of the world rests ultimately on

such favorable cases of “intuitive cognition,” the claim to know is seriously undermined.

Ockham does not draw the completely skeptical conclusion that knowledge is impossible for us. But these reflections deal a serious blow to confidence in our ability to find such absolute knowledge. And, as you can see, the blow comes from a consideration of God’s omnipotence.

A similar conclusion follows about the causality we claim to find in the world. A piece of cloth is brought near a flame and starts to burn. How are we to explain the burning? It might be possible for God to cause it directly, so that our usual account in terms of the causal efficacy of the fire would be mistaken.* Again, we can give only probable explanations of why things happen in the world. It seems that our explanations might always be mistaken. And if that isn’t skepticism itself, it moves us toward skeptical doubts, especially if one insists that knowledge must involve absolute certainty.

This produces an interesting situation. For a thousand years thinkers assumed that reason and revelation are compatible, that reason can supply foundations—with certainty—for revelation to build on. Philosophy, the pursuit of wisdom by our human wits, has been treated as the “handmaiden” of theology, which in turn is the “queen” of the sciences. And suddenly the suspicion arises that perhaps natural reason and experience are not well suited for this task!

Let us ask what effect this has on attempts to prove the existence of God. Ockham himself thinks that a certain form of proof is still possible, but let us consider some propositions put forward in the late fourteenth century by Pierre d’Ailly, a cardinal of the church. He is discussing Aristotle’s argument for a first mover (which was adapted by Aquinas in his “first way”).† And he considers what a “captious debater” could say.

*We have here an anticipation of one of the most influential of all treatments of causality, that by David Hume in the eighteenth century. Hume does not depend on the doctrine of God’s omnipotence; and the skeptical consequences are more determinedly drawn. See “Causation: The Very Idea,” in Chapter 19.

†See again pp. 320–321.

1. It is not unqualifiedly evident that something is moved; movement may be only apparent. . . .
2. Even if we grant that an object is in motion, we do not have to grant that it comes from some other object.
3. Granted that all motion originates in another thing and granting that there is no infinite series of movers, we cannot infer a first unmoved mover, for the first mover might be unmoved for the present but not absolutely unmovable.
4. We cannot exclude the possibility that there is a circularity of causes and effects, i.e., A causes B, B causes C, and C causes A.
5. We cannot be sure that there is no infinity of essentially ordered causes. For God by His absolute power could create such an infinite series.
6. It is not evident that if something exists anew, it was produced.
7. It is very difficult to explain what it means for one thing to be effected or produced by another thing.⁶

This piling up of alternative possibilities that have not been definitively excluded seriously undermines our confidence in the “proof.” At the very least, it shows us that a defender of the argument will have to do a lot more work if the argument is to succeed.

It is important to note that d’Ailly does not intend to call the existence of God into question. Far from it. We know God exists on the authority of the Scriptures and the church. Rather, such reflections serve to undermine confidence in our natural ability to substantiate such truths apart from authority—at least with the certainty necessary for faith. (The cardinal allows that a *probable* argument for God’s existence can be constructed.) Skepticism such as this, then, casts us more firmly than ever into the arms of the church, which has such truths in its care. The moral is this: Aristotle and those who, like him, rely on our natural reason should be approached with caution.

It seems then that the late Middle Ages is busily undoing the grand synthesis of classical and Christian thought of the earlier Middle Ages. When several more ingredients are added to this mix—namely, the scientific revolution, the humanism of the Renaissance, and the impact of the

Reformation on the church—the modern era in philosophy will begin.

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1. What assumptions about knowledge do thinkers in the late Middle Ages commonly make?
 2. What Aristotelian views were condemned as heretical?
 3. What effect did this condemnation have?
 4. What impact does Ockham’s reflection on God’s omnipotence have on our claim to know something?
 5. What impact does it seem to have on proofs for the existence of God?
-

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

1. If you think Anselm’s argument is faulty, write a brief explanation of what, exactly, is wrong with it.
2. What do you think about the prospects for proving that there is a God? (Don’t just react. Give a reasoned explanation for your answer.)
3. Can God make a stone so heavy that he can’t lift it? If he can’t, does that mean his power is limited?
4. If our life is limited to this world, does that mean true happiness is impossible?

KEY WORDS

Anselm	soul
ontological argument	intellect
God	universals
reductio ad absurdum	quiddity
essence	truth
existence	will
Constantine the African	natural law
Toledo School of Translators	eternal law
Thomas Aquinas	human law
disputations	divine law
Averroës (ibn Rushd)	virtue
double truth	temperance
analogy	fortitude
angels	justice
	prudence

cardinal virtues omnipotence
 theological virtues William of Ockham
 heresy

NOTES

1. Jasper Hopkins, *A Companion to the Study of St. Anselm* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1972), 17.
2. Quotations from Anselm's *Proslogium*, in *St. Anselm: Basic Writings*, trans. S. N. Deane (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1962), are cited in the text by chapter number.
3. Quotations from Thomas Aquinas are from one of the following:
St. Thomas Aquinas: Philosophical Texts, trans. Thomas Gilby (London: Oxford University Press, 1951), abbreviated as *PT*, or
Aquinas: Selected Philosophical Writings, trans. Timothy McDermott (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), abbreviated as *SPW*.

References are first to the source in Aquinas, then to page numbers in these collections. References to the works of Aquinas are as follows:

ST: Summa Theologica

DT: Commentary on Boethius' De Trinitate

DPG: Disputations on the Power of God

PDS: Public Disputations on the Soul

CC: Commentary on St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

PDT: Public Disputations on Truth

CPLS: Commentary on Peter Lombard's Sentences

SCG: Summa Contra Gentiles

4. Patterson Brown, "Infinite Causal Regression," in *Aquinas: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Anthony Kenny (London: Macmillan, 1969), 234–235.
5. We are especially indebted in this section to Julius R. Weinberg's *Short History of Medieval Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964).
6. Cited in Weinberg, *Short History of Medieval Philosophy*, 287–288.

CHAPTER

16

FROM MEDIEVAL TO MODERN EUROPE



It is not clear just when the modern era begins. But it cannot be denied that something of immense significance happens in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that changes life and thought startlingly. This turning point changes the kinds of questions that Western philosophers ask and the methods they use to answer them. To understand these later philosophers, we need to step back a bit and look at the broader changes in Europe. Though we are interested primarily in the era's intellectual ferment, we cannot help but note some of the social, political, and economic factors that make this an age of change. It is useful to start with a review of the medieval picture of the world.

The World God Made for Us

Europeans in the late Middle Ages largely shared the same picture of the world, though they differed about details.¹ The universe, they thought, is a harmonious and coherent whole, created by an infinite and good God as an appropriate home for human beings, for whose sake it was made. Furthermore, humans have secure access to knowledge of this

world and their place in it, both through divine revelation and through philosophical proof. For the Christian faithful in Latin Europe, the Catholic Church is the supreme guardian of that knowledge and Aristotle's philosophy is accepted as almost gospel truth. It is difficult for us now to put ourselves in the place of medieval men and women and to see the world as they saw it. But let us try.

It will help if we set aside all we have learned in school about the structure of the universe and attempt to recapture a more direct and naive interpretation of our experience. Consider the sky as you see it on a clear day or night. If you look *at* it, rather than *through* it, you will almost certainly conclude that it has a certain shape. It is *something*, and it has roughly the shape of an upside-down bowl. It is the roof of the earth, the "firmament" of Genesis 1 that God created to separate the primeval waters and make a place for dry land and living creatures. This view of the heavens is very common among primitive people and among children, too. We have to *learn* that the sky is not a thing.

Medieval Europeans had already progressed considerably beyond this simplistic view of the sky,

though they continued to see it as a thing whose nature is defined in relation to earth. For one thing, they had inherited the Ptolemaic model of the universe developed by the Greeks and refined in the Islamic world, according to which earth sat, unmoving, at the center of the universe, surrounded by a set of concentric spheres containing the various heavenly bodies.* Thus, for medieval Europeans, the universe literally revolves around the earth and its inhabitants.

Adding to the Ptolemaic model, medieval Christians believed that beyond the fixed stars lay a realm called the **Empyrean**, the place of perfect fire or light; it is the dwelling place of God and the destination of saved souls. (Note that heaven, in this view, has a physical location. From any place on earth, it is *up*.) By contrast, Aristotle had denied that there was anything beyond the fixed stars—no matter, no space, not even a void.

In this universe, everything has its natural place. The earth is the center toward which heavy objects naturally fall. The heavy elements, earth and water, find their natural place as near this center as they can. The lighter elements, air and fire, have a natural home between the earth and the sphere of the moon. But these four elements are continually being mixed up with one another and suffer constant change.

This change is explained by the motions of the heavens.† Aristotle supplies a mechanism to explain such change. The outermost celestial sphere rotates at great speed, as it must to return to the same position in only twenty-four hours. (Compare the speed at the inside of a merry-go-round with that at its edge.) This motion drags the sphere of Saturn (just inside it) along by friction; and this process is repeated all the way to the spheres of the sun and moon. These then produce changes in the air and on the earth: the tides, the winds, and the seasons, for example, and the generation of plants and animals. On this basis, medievals believed that signs in the heavens—comets and

eclipses, for instance—are omens that need interpretation. Virtually every astronomer is also an astrologer; as late as the seventeenth century, Kepler, recognized to possess unusually accurate astronomical data, is consulted for horoscopes, and reference to astrological phenomena is common in the work of Dante and Chaucer. Everything in the heavens is significant because it all exists for the sake of humankind.

Here we come to the heart of the medieval worldview. Earth is not only the physical center of the universe; it is also the religious center. For on this stationary globe lives the human race, made in the image of God himself, the summit of his creative work. The universe revolves around human beings figuratively as well as literally. Earth is the stage whereon humans act out the great drama of salvation and damnation. It is on Earth that humans fall from grace. It is to Earth that God's Son comes to redeem fallen men and women and lead them to that heavenly realm in which they can forever enjoy blessedness in light eternal.

The eleventh-century German philosopher **Hildegard of Bingen** (1098–1179) articulates this worldview in the course of explaining a mystical vision she claimed to experience late in her life. She describes the vision itself as a series of concentric circles, with humanity at the center:

Then a wheel of marvelous appearance became visible. . . . At the top of the wheel . . . there appeared a circle of *luminous fire*, and under it there was another circle of *black fire*. . . . Under the black circle appeared another circle as of *pure ether*. . . . Under this ether circle was a circle of *watery air*. . . . Beneath this circle of watery air appeared another circle of *sheer white clear air*. . . . Under this sheer white clear air, finally, there appeared still another *thin stratum of air*. . . . In addition, in the middle of the sphere of thin air was seen a sphere, which was equally distant all around from the sheer white and luminous air. . . . In the middle of the giant wheel appeared a human figure. . . . Above the head of this human figure the seven planets were sharply delineated from each other. Three were in the circle of luminous fire, one was in the sphere of black fire beneath it, while another three were farther below in the circle of pure ether. (*BDW II.1*)²

*Review the description on p. 299 for a more detailed picture of the Ptolemaic model of the cosmos.

†See the pre-Socratic speculations about the vortex, p. 12.

Along with the vision, Hildegard heard a “voice from the sky,” which said,

God has composed the world out of its elements for the glory of God’s name. God has strengthened it with the winds, bound and illuminated it with the stars, and filled it with the other creatures. On this world God has surrounded and strengthened human beings with all these things and steeped them in very great power so that all creation supports the human race in all things. (*BDW* II.2)

Hildegard earned her fame as a theologian—among many other things—in no small part by interpreting such mystical experiences to support and explain Catholic doctrine. Her interpretations combine Christian and Aristotelian themes. For instance, the concentric circles of Hildegard’s vision represent the medieval Christian understanding of the physical universe, but in Aristotelian fashion, she explains that the “circle of luminous fire at the top . . . indicates that fire, as the first element, is at the top because it is light” (*BDW* II.4). And most important,

Humanity stands in the midst of the structure of the world. For it is more important than all other creatures which remain dependent on that world. Although small in stature, humanity is powerful in the power of its soul. . . . Thus persons who are believers have their existence in the knowledge of God and strive for God in their spiritual and worldly endeavors. . . . It is God whom human beings know in every creature. For they know that he is the Creator of the whole world. (*BDW* II.15)

God created the universe for humanity, Hildegard is saying, and in return, human beings live to seek and exalt God.

Over two centuries later, the Italian poet Dante would express the moral implications of this view of the universe.* His great poem, *Divine Comedy*, recounts Dante’s imaginary journey across the universe, led first by Virgil and later by Beatrice. As we follow that journey we learn both physical and religious truths, inextricably linked. Let us trace the outline of that journey.

Dante begins his poem by telling us that he had lost his way and could not find it again. (Suggestion: read the poetry aloud.)

Midway life’s journey I was made aware
That I had strayed into a dark forest,
And the right path appeared not anywhere.
Ah, tongue cannot describe how it oppressed,
This wood, so harsh, dismal and wild, that fear
At thought of it strikes now into my breast.
—*Inferno* 1.1–6³

The ancient poet **Virgil** appears and offers to lead him down through hell and up through purgatory as far as the gates of heaven. There Virgil will be supplanted by another guide, as the pagan poet is not allowed into paradise. A vision of these moral and religious realities, embedded as they are in the very nature of things, should resolve Dante’s crisis and show both Dante and his readers the right path forward.

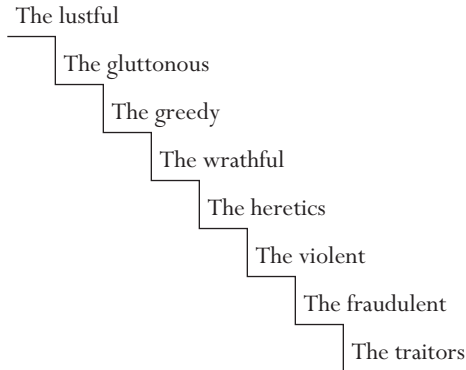
We can read this complex allegory with an eye only to the values it expresses, but there is little doubt that Dante means its cosmology to be taken with equal seriousness. The point we need to see is that, for medieval thinkers like Hildegard and Dante, the cosmos is not an indifferent and valueless place; every detail speaks of its creator, who inscribed the “right path” in its very structure.

We can do no more than sketch that structure. There are three books in the poem—*Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*—each of which explores a specific part of the physical and moral/religious universe. To begin their journey into hell (the inferno), Virgil leads Dante *down*—deep into the earth. Hell is a complex place of many layers. After an antechamber in which the indifferent reside (offensive both to God and to Satan), Dante and Virgil cross the river Acheron and find hell set up as a series of circles, descending ever deeper into the earth. As they descend through these circles, Dante finds souls that have committed ever more serious sins and suffer ever more terrible punishment amid ever more revolting conditions. The first circle is limbo, in which are found the virtuous pagans, including Homer and Aristotle; this is Virgil’s own

*Dante’s *Divine Comedy* was written in the first decades of the fourteenth century.

home. Here there is no overt punishment; only the lack of hope for blessedness.

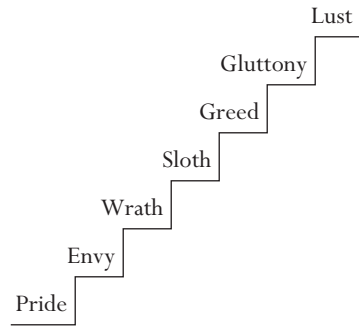
Descending from limbo, they find the damned in circles of increasingly awful punishments, corresponding to their sins:



These last are frozen up to their necks in ice at the very center of the earth, guarded by Satan—the arch traitor—in whose three mouths are the mangled bodies of Judas, Brutus, and Cassius.

From that deepest circle of hell, Virgil and Dante climb up through a passage in the earth until they come out on the opposite side from which they began. There they find themselves facing a mountain that rises to the sky. This is the mountain of purgatory, where those who will ultimately be saved are purified of their remaining faults. Here there are seven levels (corresponding to the “seven deadly sins”), each populated by persons whose loves are not yet rightly ordered.* These people have repented and will be saved, but they still love earthly things too much, not enough, or in the wrong way. From the lower levels to the higher, the unpurged sins are ranked from more to less serious, those highest on the mountain being farthest from hell and closest to heaven. Let us list them in that “geographical” order, so that we can imagine Virgil and Dante mounting from the bottom of the list to the top:

* For the concept of a proper ordering of one’s loves, see Augustine, p. 283.



Those who dwell at each level are purging their predominant passion by suffering penances of an appropriate kind. The proud, for example, are bowed down by carrying heavy stones, so that they can neither look arrogantly about nor look down on their fellows. It is worth noting that the “spiritual” sins of pride, envy, and anger are judged to be more serious (farther from heaven) than the “fleshly” sins of gluttony and lust; this ranking roughly corresponds to the evaluations of church fathers such as Augustine, for whom pride is the root of all sin.*

At the top of the purgatorial mountain, Virgil disappears, and **Beatrice**, who represents Christian love, takes his place. She transports Dante to the lowest celestial sphere, that of the moon. She answers Dante’s question about why the moon seems to have shadows on it and in the process gives a fine description of the celestial realm:

The glory of Him who moveth all that is
 Pervades the universe, and glows more bright
 In the one region, and in another less. . . .
 “All things, whatever their abode, [*Beatrice says*]
 Have order among themselves; this Form it is
 That makes the universe like unto God.
 Here the high beings see the imprint of His
 Eternal power, which is the goal divine
 Whereto the rule, aforesaid testifies.
 In the order I speak of, all natures incline
 Either more near or less near to their source
 According as their diverse lots assign.
 To diverse harbors thus they move perforce
 O’er the great ocean of being, and each one
 With instinct given it to maintain its course.”

—*Paradiso* 1.1–3, 103–114

*For Augustine on pride, see pp. 280–281.

The key notions in Dante's vision of the universe are order, harmony, justice, and, finally, love. The poem ends with Dante trying to describe, inadequately, he admits, the vision of God. This vision is both intelligible and emotional. Its object both explains the universe and draws Dante's soul toward itself. In the end, imagination fails to communicate the glory.

Such is the world for late medieval Catholics: harmonious, ordered, finite, displaying the glories of its creator. Physics, astronomy, and theology are one in a marvelous integration of life and knowledge. Everything in the universe embodies a goal and purpose set within it by the divine love, which governs all. To understand it is to understand this purpose, to gain guidance for life, and to see that absolutely everything depends on and leads to God.

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1. Describe the medieval European picture of the physical universe.
 2. Why, given that picture of the universe, is it appropriate for Virgil and Beatrice to take Dante on a tour of the world to show him "the right path"?
 3. What do the levels in hell and purgatory show us about medieval views of virtue and vice?
-

Reforming the Church

The worldview Dante expresses in his great poem was institutionalized in the church, the keeper and protector of Christian truths and the harbor of salvation for those at sea in sin. But the institutional church had strayed far from the precepts of humility and love enjoined by Jesus. It had become a means of securing worldly prestige, power, and wealth for those clever and ruthless enough to bend it to their will.

The church in the West was dominated by the papacy in Rome, whose occupants had, through the centuries, brought a great variety of incomes, privileges, and powers under their control. More than one pope during this period exceeded in influence, wealth, and power any secular prince, king, or emperor. His court was more splendid, his staff more extensive, and his will more feared than theirs. A king could torture and kill the body; but the pope

had the power to cast the soul into hell. A king who displeased the pope might find his entire land under a papal "interdict," which meant that no masses and no sacraments could be celebrated there—a dire threat indeed for those who depended on them for their eternal salvation.

No one doubts—and few doubted even then—that the church had grown corrupt. Dante had set several popes, bishops, friars, and priests in the *Inferno*. There had been numerous attempts at reform. Saint Francis and Saint Dominic had tried to recapture the purity of Christian life by establishing monastic orders that renounced wealth and power. Unfortunately, their very success ensured the acquisition of wealth and power, with all the inevitable outcomes.

Unless they could be assimilated into the structure of the church, as the monastic orders were, reformers were harshly dealt with, often on the pretense of stamping out heresy. The church regarded heresy as "the greatest of all sins because it was an affront to the greatest of persons, God; worse than treason against a king because it was directed against the heavenly sovereign; worse than counterfeiting money because it counterfeited the truth of salvation; worse than patricide and matricide, which destroy only the body." If a heretic recanted under torture, he "might be granted the mercy of being strangled before being burned at the stake."⁴ The followers of John Wycliffe in England (the Lollards) were sent to the stake in 1401. Jan (John) Hus of Bohemia was burned in 1415. Savonarola of Florence was hanged and then burned in 1498.

Meanwhile the church, clutching its pomp and privileges, went from corruption to corruption. Here are a few examples. Pope Alexander VI (1431–1503) had four illegitimate children (including Cesare and Lucrezia Borgia), though clerical celibacy was the rule. His successor, Pope Julius II, led his own troops in armor to regain certain papal territories. When Julius died, the church selected a scion of the Medici family as his successor, whereupon the new pope supposedly exclaimed, "The papacy is ours. Let us enjoy it."⁵

Albert of Brandenburg (1490–1545), already bishop of two districts, aspired to be also archbishop

of Mainz, which would make him the top cleric in Germany. The price demanded by the pope was high—ten thousand ducats. Because his parishes could not supply that fee, he paid it himself, borrowing the money at 20 percent interest from the banking house of Fugger. It was agreed that “indulgences” (more about these later) would be sold in his territories; half of the income he could use to repay the loan and half would go to Rome to help build Saint Peter’s Cathedral.

Affronts such as these called forth a steady stream of critical responses. In the eyes of many, they discredited the claim of the church to be the repository of truth about God and man. But it was not until the protests of **Martin Luther** (1483–1546) that the situation was ripe for such moral objections to make a real difference. Luther’s appeal for reform coincided with a new assertion of the rights of nations against domination by the church. Princes heard not only the cry for religious reform but also an opportunity to stop wealth and power from flowing interminably to Rome.*

Luther was a monk troubled about his sins and in mortal terror of God’s justice. His sins did not in fact seem so terrible in the eyes of the world, for he was a monk of a most sincere and strict kind. But he had early seen the point that God looks not at externals, but at motivations; and he could not be sure that his motives were pure.† No matter how much he confessed, he was never confident that he had searched out every tinge of selfishness, greed, lust, and pride. And these sins the righteous God would judge. Luther did rigorous penances, going so far as to scourge himself. But he suffered agonies of doubt and self-accusation: Had he done enough to make himself worthy of salvation?

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes,

I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God.⁶

He was assigned by his superior to study the Bible and become a professor of theology. As he wrestled with the text of the Psalms and the letters of Saint Paul, it gradually dawned on him that his anxieties about sin were misplaced. He was, to be sure, a sinner. But the righteous God, whom Luther had so much feared, had sent Jesus, his Son, the Christ, precisely to win forgiveness for such sinners. This was an undeserved gift of **grace** and needed only to be believed to be effective. Even though one was not just, God “justified” the unjust person by means of the cross and resurrection of Christ, who had taken upon himself the sins of the world. Salvation did not have to be *earned*! It was a *gift*!

I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.” Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. . . .

Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise. Later I read Augustine’s *The Spirit and the Letter*, where contrary to hope I found that he, too, interpreted God’s righteousness in a similar way, as the righteousness with which God clothes us when he justifies us.⁷

With this insight, the Reformation was born. The power of this idea was first demonstrated in relation to the indulgences being sold under the authority of the pope and Archbishop Albert of Mainz. An **indulgence** was a piece of paper assuring the purchaser of the remission of certain penalties—perhaps in this life, perhaps in purgatory, and perhaps escape from hell itself. The practice of promising such spiritual benefits in return for worldly goods can be traced back to the Crusades. Popes offered heavenly blessings in return for military service in the Holy Land against the Turks. But for those who could not serve or were reluctant to go, a payment in cash to support the effort was accepted instead. This practice had

*For the Reformation, see “Reformation,” Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reformation>.

†See the discussion of Jesus on pp. 257–260 and the similar point made by Augustine on pp. 277–278 and 283. It is perhaps significant that Luther was a monk of the Augustinian order.

proved so lucrative that, as we have seen, it was extended for other purposes—including the repayment of loans for the purchase of an archbishopric!

The set of indulgences sponsored by Albert were peddled in 1517 by a Dominican monk named Tetzel, who advertised his wares with a jingle:

As soon as the coin in the coffer rings,
The soul from purgatory springs.⁸

Although prohibited in Wittenberg, where Luther was both parish priest and teacher of theology, indulgences were sold near enough that his parishioners traveled to buy them. They came back boasting that they could now do what they liked, for they were guaranteed heaven. Luther was troubled. Was this Christianity—to buy salvation for a few gold coins? Didn't this make a mockery of repentance and the attempt to reform one's life? Indeed, didn't it make a mockery of God's grace, which was sold for worldly gain like any other commodity? On the eve of All Saints' Day 1517, Luther posted **ninety-five theses** on the door of the Castle Church. He had drafted them quickly and meant them only to form the substance of a scholarly debate among theologians. But they caused a sensation, escaped his control, and were published and disseminated widely. Among the theses were these:

27. There is no divine authority for preaching that the soul flies out of purgatory immediately the money clinks in the bottom of the chest.

. . .

36. Any Christian whatsoever, who is truly repentant enjoys plenary remission from penalty and guilt, and this is given him without letters of indulgence.

. . .

43. Christians should be taught that one who gives to the poor, or lends to the needy, does a better action than if he purchases indulgences.⁹

Let us think about thesis 27 for a moment. Here Luther says there is no “divine authority” for Tetzel's rhyme. What does he mean by this? There clearly was ecclesiastical authority for it, in the sense that the pope and an archbishop supported the sale of indulgences. But for Luther, who had spent five years trying to understand the Bible and

who knew well the works of the early church fathers, particularly Augustine, this does not settle the matter at all. Popes and councils of the church had often disagreed with one another and with the words of Scripture. So the fact that the highest church authority of the day supported the sale of indulgences does not, in Luther's eyes, make the practice *right*. Only a *divine* authority can determine that.*

What does Luther mean by “divine authority”? Above all, he means the words and deeds of Christ. But secondarily, he means the testimony of the apostles who had known Jesus or of those (like Paul) to whom Christ had specially revealed himself. So Luther appeals to the Bible, that collection of the earliest records we have of the life and impact of Jesus. This was Luther's authority, against which even the words of popes had to be measured.

It is precisely here that his conflict with the established church is sharpest. In a certain sense, the church does not deny that Scripture is the ultimate authority; however, Scripture needs to be interpreted. And the proper interpretation of Scripture, according to the church, is that given by the church itself in the *tradition* that reaches back in a long, unbroken historical sequence to the apostles. Ultimately the authority to interpret Scripture resides in the pope, the successor of the apostle Peter, of whom Jesus had said, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18).

In a great debate at Leipzig in 1519, Luther went as far as to say,

A simple layman armed with Scripture is to be believed above a pope or a council without it.

His opponent in the debate replied,

When Brother Luther says that this is the true meaning of the text, the pope and councils say, “No, the brother has not understood it correctly.” Then I will take the council and let the brother go. Otherwise all the heresies will be renewed. They have all appealed to Scripture and have believed

*Compare the speech in which Antigone defends her action defying the king's command, p. 65.

their interpretation to be correct, and have claimed that the popes and the councils were mistaken, as Luther now does.¹⁰

This exchange gives the tenor of the arguments that continued for about four years while the church was trying to decide what to do about the rebel. Luther appeals to the Scriptures against the pope and the ecclesiastical establishment. They in turn point out the damaging consequences—heresy and the destruction of the unity of Christendom—if Luther is allowed to be right.

In 1521, Pope Leo X formally excommunicated Luther from the church, making the split between “Protestants” and “Roman Catholics” official. There is much more to this story, but we have enough before us to draw some lessons relevant to our philosophical conversation.

For more than a thousand years there had been a basic agreement in the West about how to settle questions of truth. Some questions could be settled by reason and experience; the great authority on these matters for the past few centuries had been Aristotle, whom Aquinas had called simply “the philosopher.” But above these questions were others—the key questions about God and the soul and the meaning of life—which were answered by *authority*, not reason. And the authority had been that of the church, as embedded in the decision-making powers of its clergy, focused ultimately in the papacy.

When Luther challenges this authority, he attacks the very root of a whole culture. It is no wonder that he faced such opposition. His appeal to the authority of Scripture offers a different standard for settling those higher questions. And we can now see that the crisis Luther precipitates is a form of the old skeptical *problem of the criterion*, one of the deepest and most radical problems in our intellectual life.* By what criterion or standard are we going to tell when we know the truth? If a criterion is proposed, how do we know that it is the right one? Is there a criterion for choosing the criterion?

*For a discussion of the problem about the criterion, see pp. 248–250.



“By humbly raising the questions he had in 1517, and then by responding to the attacks that followed as truthfully as carefully as he could, Luther ended up cracking the great edifice of medieval Christendom in twain. And for good and for ill both, out of the opening the future itself seemed to fly.”

Eric Metaxas (b. 1963)

In the religious disputes of the following century, each side busies itself in demolishing the claims of the other side. On the one hand, Protestants show that if we accept the Catholic criterion, we can be sure of nothing because—as Luther points out—popes and councils disagree with one another. If there are contradictions in the criterion itself, how can we choose which of the contradictory propositions to accept?

Catholics, on the other hand, argue that reliance on one’s individual conscience after reading Scripture could not produce certainty, for the conscience of one person may not agree with the conscience of another. Indeed, it is not long before the Protestants are as divided among themselves as they are united in opposing the Catholics.

The consequence is that each side appeals to a criterion that is not accepted by the other side, but neither can find a criterion to decide which of these criteria is the correct one!

This quarrel is political as much as it is intellectual and religious. A series of savage and bloody quasi-religious wars ensues, in which princes try not only to secure territories, but also to determine the religion of the people residing in them.* Indeed, one outcome of these wars is that southern Germany is to this day overwhelmingly Catholic, whereas northern Germany is largely Protestant.

* Here you may be reminded of Socrates’ point in *Euthyphro* 7b–d: The gods do not quarrel about length and weight and such matters, but about good and justice. Where there are accepted criteria (rules of measurement, for instance) for settling disputes, wars are unlikely. But where there are apparently irresolvable disagreements, involving appeal to differing standards, might may seem like the only thing that *can* make right.

What the Reformation does, philosophically speaking, is to unsettle the very foundations of medieval European culture. Though the reformers only intend to call an erring church back to its true and historical foundations, the consequences are lasting divisiveness, with those on each side certain of their own correctness and of the blindness (or wickedness) of their opponents.

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1. In what ways had the church grown corrupt?
 2. What does Luther find in the New Testament that leads to his objection to indulgences?
 3. To what authority does Luther appeal?
 4. How did the challenge posed by the Reformation raise again the problem of the criterion?
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Revolutions

Like the great cathedrals of Europe, the comforting, coherent medieval view of the universe had been built up slowly over many generations. Just as the Reformation was shaking the foundations of that worldview, new intellectual currents began to erode them. These included humanism, skepticism, and a new scientific approach to the world. By the end of the sixteenth century, these currents would leave behind a vastly different intellectual landscape.

HUMANISM

That magnificent flowering of arts and letters we call the **Renaissance** is greatly influenced by the rediscovery of classical literature—poetry, histories, essays, and other writings—that followed the recovery of Aristotelian philosophy and science.* These Greek and Roman works breathe a spirit quite different from the extreme otherworldliness of monk's vows, on the one hand, and the arid disputations of scholastic theologians on the other. They present a model of style, both in language and in life, that resonates in the city-states of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy. In time,

a rather diffuse movement called **humanism** spreads northward into the rest of Europe.

Some of the humanists are churchmen, but many are not. They belong to that aristocratic stratum of society that has leisure to cultivate the arts, paint, compose, or write. They all tend to see a profound harmony between Christianity and the classics, just as Augustine and Aquinas did. But those theologians regard pagan philosophy as subordinate to Christian understanding. Even in Dante, the greatest of the pagans reside in hell, albeit in the tamest circle. Many humanists, however, equate faith with virtue and move toward a kind of universalism: The virtuous sage is blessed, whether he knows of Christ as savior or not.

In a dialogue called “The Godly Feast,” printed in 1522, **Erasmus** (the “prince of humanists”) has one of the characters say,

Whatever is devout and contributes to good morals should not be called profane. Sacred Scripture is of course the basic authority in everything; yet I sometimes run across ancient sayings or pagan writings—even the poets—so purely and reverently and admirably expressed that I can't help believing their authors' hearts were moved by some divine power. And perhaps the spirit of Christ is more widespread than we understand, and the company of saints includes many not in our calendar.¹¹

One of his partners in the conversation, on being reminded of Socrates' attitude at his death, exclaims,*

An admirable spirit, surely, in one who had not known Christ and the Sacred Scriptures. And so, when I read such things of such men, I can hardly help exclaiming, “Saint Socrates, pray for us!”¹²

In another dialogue, “The Epicurean,” Erasmus argues that those who spend their lives pursuing fine food, sex, wealth, fame, and power in a quest for pleasure actually miss the greatest pleasures: those of righteousness, moderation, an active mind, and a calm conscience. It is Epicurus, of course, who

*Contrast this with Dante's vision two hundred years earlier, in which virtuous pagans are consigned—at best—to limbo. See *Inferno*, canto IV. For the last moments of Socrates' life, see *Phaedo* 114c–118a.

* For the Renaissance, see “Renaissance,” Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renaissance>.

holds that pleasure is the one true good.* It follows that the *successful* Epicurean—the one who gets the most pleasure out of life—will live righteously and moderately, preferring the approval of God to the satisfaction of bodily appetites. But these are precisely the virtues cultivated by the Christian!

If people who live agreeably are Epicureans, none are more truly Epicurean than the righteous and godly. And if it's names that bother us, no one better deserves the name of Epicurean than the revered founder and head of the Christian philosophy [Christ], for in Greek *epikouros* means “helper.” He alone, when the law of Nature was all but blotted out by sins, when the law of Moses incited to lusts rather than cured them, when Satan ruled in the world unchallenged, brought timely aid to perishing humanity. Completely mistaken, therefore, are those who talk in their foolish fashion about Christ's having been sad and gloomy in character and calling upon us to follow a dismal mode of life. On the contrary, he alone shows the most enjoyable life of all and the one most full of true pleasure.¹³

This gives us an insight into why these thinkers are called humanists.† Their concern is the development of a full and rich human life—the best life for a human being to live. Their quest is stimulated by the works of classical antiquity, which they read, edit, translate, and imitate with eagerness. They live, of course, in a culture dominated by Christianity and express that quest in basically Christian terms, but their interests focus on the human. To that end they recommend and propagandize for what they call “humane studies”: an education centering on the Greek and Latin classics, on languages, grammar, and rhetoric. They are convinced that “the classics represent the highest level of human development.”¹⁴ The ideal is a person who can embody all the excellences a human being is capable of: music, art, poetry, science, soldiery, courtesy, virtue, and piety.

*See pp. 236–237.

†Note that Erasmus here follows the lead of much Greek thought, from Homer to Epicurus. Pursuit of virtue is recommended on the basis of *self-interest*. Why be moral? Because you will be happier that way.

In 1486, a twenty-three-year-old Italian wrote a preface to nine hundred theses that he submitted for public debate. As it turned out, the debate was never held, but the *Oration on the Dignity of Man* by Giovanni **Pico della Mirandola** has seldom been equaled as a rhetorical tribute to the glory of being human. We could say it is the apotheosis of humanism. Pico finds the unique dignity of man in the fact that human beings alone have no “archetype” they are predetermined to exemplify. Everything else has a determinate nature, but it is man's privilege to be able to *choose* his own nature. He imagines God creating the world. All is complete, from the intelligences above the heavens to the lowest reaches of earth.

But, when the work was finished, the Craftsman kept wishing that there were someone to ponder the plan of so great a work, to love its beauty, and to wonder at its vastness. Therefore, when everything was done. . . . He finally took thought concerning the creation of man. But there was not among His archetypes that from which He could fashion a new offspring, nor was there in His treasurehouses anything which He might bestow on His new son as an inheritance, nor was there in the seats of all the world a place where the latter might sit to contemplate the universe. All was now complete. . . .

At last the best of artisans ordained that that creature to whom He had been able to give nothing proper to himself should have joint possession of whatever had been peculiar to each of the different kinds of being. He therefore took man as a creature of indeterminate nature and, assigning him a place in the middle of the world, addressed him thus: “Neither a fixed abode nor a form that is thine alone nor any function peculiar to thyself have we given thee, Adam, to the end that according to thy longing and according to thy judgment thou mayest have and possess what abode, what form and what functions thou thyself shalt desire. The nature of all other beings is limited and constrained within the bounds of laws prescribed by Us. Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand We have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature. We have set thee at the world's center that thou mayest from thence more easily observe whatever is in the world. We have made thee neither of heaven nor

of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honor, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer. Thou shalt have the power to degenerate into the lower forms of life, which are brutish. Thou shalt have the power, out of thy soul's judgment, to be reborn into the higher forms, which are divine."

O supreme generosity of God the Father,
O highest and most marvelous felicity of man!
To him it is granted to have whatever he chooses,
to be whatever he wills.¹⁵

Man is "maker and molder" of himself, able "to have whatever he chooses, to be whatever he wills." * Pico exclaims, "Who would not admire this our chameleon?"¹⁶ With such possibilities open to them, it is no wonder that human beings should develop in so many different ways. Along with the theme of an essential unity that runs through humanity, the diversity of individuals comes to be valued more and more. **Individualism**, the idea that there is value to sheer uniqueness, begins to counter the uniformity of Christian schemes of salvation. Portrait painters strive to capture the unique character of each of their subjects, and variety and invention flourish in music and literature.

Some of the humanists, both men and women, also begin to question traditional views about women and their role in society. In the medieval period, women were largely excluded from public and intellectual life. They could participate in the great conversation only by entering a convent, as Hildegard did. Beginning in the fourteenth century, women outside the church began publishing books on a range of topics, often anonymously. **Christine di Pizan's** *The Book of the City of Ladies*, published in 1405, offers a prominent early example. Through an allegory about a "City of Ladies" inhabited by famous women from history, di Pizan defends women against the negative depictions so common in medieval society, argues for education for women, and advocates for an expanded role for women in European society. In works like di Pizan's, the humanists begin the centuries-long

labor of freeing women from the constraints that society had imposed on them.

Finally, the humanists recapture some of the confidence that had characterized Athenians of the Golden Age. Human failings are more apt to be caricatured as foolishness (as Erasmus satirically did in *Praise of Folly*) than to be condemned as sins. And this reveals a quite different attitude and spirit. Though the humanists do not deny sin and God's grace, they tend to focus on our capability to achieve great things. As often happens in such cases, they thereby help to make great things happen.

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1. What rediscoveries stimulate the movement we know as Renaissance humanism?
 2. Describe the ideal human life, as pictured by the humanists.
 3. In what feature of human beings does Pico della Mirandola find their "dignity"?
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SKEPTICAL THOUGHTS REVIVED

Just as the recovery of Greek and Roman poetry, histories, and essays inspired Renaissance humanism, another rediscovery revived a different ancient tradition.¹⁷ In 1562 the first Latin edition of a work by Sextus Empiricus is published, and within seven years all his writings are available.* Sextus called his views "Pyrrhonism," after one of the earliest Greek skeptics, Pyrrho. In this period of intellectual upheaval, Pyrrhonism strikes a responsive chord in more than one thinker who considers that an impasse has been reached, but we will focus on just one man: Michel de Montaigne.

Montaigne (1533–1592) was a Frenchman of noble birth who, after spending some years in public service as a magistrate, retired at the age of thirty-eight to think and write. His essays are one of the glories of French literature. We are interested not in his style, however, but in his ideas—ideas that a great many people begin to find attractive in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

*Compare with the existentialism of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre in Chapter 28.

*For a discussion of the skeptical philosophy of Sextus, see Chapter 11.

His point of view comes out most clearly in a remarkable essay called *Apology for Raymond Sebond*. Sebond had been a theologian of the fifteenth century who had exceeded the claims of Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas by claiming not only that the existence and nature of God could be proved by reason, but also that rational proofs could be given for *all* the distinctive doctrines of Christianity. This is an astonishing claim; if true, it would mean that clear thinking alone would suffice to convince us all (Jews, Muslims, and pagans alike) that we should be Christians. No one had ever gone so far before. As you can imagine, Sebond attracted critics like clover attracts bees.

Montaigne's book appears to defend Sebond against his critics. ("Apology" here means "defense," as it does in the title of Plato's account of Socrates' trial.) It is an unusual defense, however; and Sebond, had he been alive, might well have exclaimed that he needed no enemies with friends like this!

Montaigne's strategy is to demonstrate that Sebond's "proofs" of Christian beliefs are not in the slightest inferior to reasons offered for any other conclusion whatsoever. He claims that Sebond's arguments will

be found as solid and as firm as any others of the same type that may be opposed to them. . . .

Some say that his arguments are weak and unfit to prove what he proposes, and undertake to shatter them with ease. These must be shaken up a little more roughly. . . .

Let us see then if man has within his power other reasons more powerful than those of Sebond, or indeed if it is in him to arrive at any certainty by argument and reason. (*ARS*, 327–328)¹⁸

Montaigne, then, is going to "defend" Sebond's claim to prove the doctrines of the faith by showing that his arguments are as good as those of his critics—because *none* of them is any good at all!

The essay is a long and rambling one, but with a method in its madness. It examines every reason that has been given for trusting our conclusions and undermines each with satire and skeptical arguments. Are we capable of knowing the truth because of our superiority to the animals? In example after example, Montaigne causes us to wonder

whether we are superior at all. Have the wise given us insight into the truth? He collects a long list of the different conceptions of God held by the philosophers and then exclaims,

Now trust to your philosophy . . . when you consider the clatter of so many philosophical brains! (*ARS*, 383)

He adds,

Man is certainly crazy. He could not make a mite, and he makes gods by the dozen. (*ARS*, 395)

Can we not at least rely on Aristotle, the "master of those who know"? But why pick out Aristotle as our authority? There are numerous alternatives.

The god of scholastic knowledge is Aristotle. . . . His doctrine serves us as magisterial law, when it is peradventure as false as another. (*ARS*, 403)

Surely, however, we can depend on our senses to reveal the truth about the world.

That things do not lodge in us in their own form and essence, or make their entry into us by their own power and authority, we see clearly enough. Because, if that were so, we should receive them in the same way: wine would be the same in the mouth of a sick man as in the mouth of a healthy man; he who has chapped or numb fingers would find the same hardness in the wood or iron he handles as does another. . . .

We should remember, whatever we receive into our understanding, that we often receive false things there, and by these same tools that are often contradictory and deceived. (*ARS*, 422–424)

Well, maybe the world around us just isn't the kind of thing we can know. But surely reason can demonstrate truth about right and wrong?

Truth must have one face, the same and universal. If man knew any rectitude and justice that had body and real existence, he would not tie it down to the condition of this country or that. It would not be from the fancy of the Persians or the Indians that virtue would take its form. . . .

But they are funny when, to give some certainty to the laws, they say that there are some which are firm, perpetual and immutable, which they call natural, which are imprinted on the human race by the

condition of their very being. And of those one man says the number is three, one man four, one more, one less: a sign that the mark of them is as doubtful as the rest. . . .

It is credible that there are natural laws, as may be seen in other creatures; but in us they are lost; that fine human reason butts in everywhere, domineering and commanding, muddling and confusing the face of things in accordance with its vanity and inconsistency. . . . *

See how reason provides plausibility to different actions. It is a two-handled pot, that can be grasped by the left or the right. (*ARS*, 436–438)

Finally Montaigne gives us a summary of the chief points of skeptical philosophy. Whenever we try to justify some claim of ours, we are involved either in a *circle* or in an *infinite regress* of reason giving. In neither case can we reach a satisfactory conclusion.

To judge the appearances we receive of objects, we would need a judicatory instrument; to verify this instrument, we need a demonstration; to verify the demonstration, an instrument: there we are in a circle!

Since the senses cannot decide our dispute, being themselves full of uncertainty, it must be reason that does so. No reason can be established without another reason; there we go retreating back to infinity. . . . †

Finally, there is no existence that is constant, either of our being or of that of objects. And we, and our judgment, and all mortal things go on flowing and rolling unceasingly. Thus nothing certain can be established about one thing by another, both the judging and the judged being in continual change and motion. (*ARS*, 454)

Montaigne remarks that if the senses do not simply record external realities (as Aristotle assumes,

using the image of a seal impressing its form on the wax), then our ideas may not correspond at all to those realities. Even worse, we are never in a position to find out whether they do or not. We may be in the position of having only pictures, without ever being able to compare these pictures to what they are pictures of. Here is that depressing and familiar image of the mind as a prisoner within its own walls, constantly receiving messages but forever unable to determine which of them to trust and utterly incapable of understanding what is really going on. This image plagues many modern thinkers.

Like all radical skeptics, Montaigne is faced with the question of how to manage the business of living. To live, one must choose, and to choose is to prefer one course as better than another. But this seems to require precisely those beliefs (in both facts and values) that skeptical reflections undermine. Montaigne accepts the solution of Protagoras and Sextus Empiricus before him of simply adapting himself to the prevailing opinions. We see, he says, how reason goes astray—especially when it meddles with divine things. We see how

when it strays however little from the beaten path and deviates or wanders from the way traced and trodden by the Church, immediately, it is lost, it grows embarrassed and entangled, whirling round and floating in that vast, troubled, and undulating sea of human opinions, unbridled and aimless. As soon as it loses that great common highroad it breaks up and disperses onto a thousand different roads. (*ARS*, 387)

. . . since I am not capable of choosing, I accept other people's choice and stay in the position where God put me. Otherwise I could not keep myself from rolling about incessantly. Thus I have, by the grace of God, kept myself intact, without agitation or disturbance of conscience, in the ancient beliefs of our religion, in the midst of so many sects and divisions that our century has produced. (*ARS*, 428)

You can see that skepticism is here being used as a defense of the status quo. Montaigne was born and brought up a Catholic. No one can bring forward reasons for deserting Catholic Christianity that are any better than Raymond Sebond's

*Note that Montaigne is making essentially the same point as Pico (p. 349). There are no determinate laws for human nature. But whereas Pico takes this to be the *glory* of man, Montaigne draws from it a *despairing* conclusion: The truth is unavailable to us.

†Here we have a statement of that problem of the criterion that was identified by Sextus. For a more extensive discussion of it, see pp. 248–250. In the Chinese tradition, Zhuangzi articulates a similar argument. See pp. 85–86.

reasons for supporting Catholic Christianity. So to keep from “rolling about incessantly,” the sensible course is to stick with the customs in which one has been brought up.* In one of his sharpest aphorisms, Montaigne exclaims,

The plague of man is the opinion of knowledge.
That is why ignorance is so recommended by our religion as a quality suitable to belief and obedience.
(*ARS*, 360)

It is not knowledge, note well, that Montaigne decries as a plague, but the opinion that one possesses it. If you are reminded of Socrates, it is no coincidence.† He was known to his admirers as “the French Socrates.”

Such is Montaigne’s “defense” of the rational theology of Raymond Sebond. In an age of social and intellectual tumult and disagreement, the view has a certain attractiveness. While despairing and pessimistic in one way, it seems at least to promote tolerance. Someone who is a Catholic in Montaigne’s sense is unlikely to have any incentive to burn someone who differs. This is no doubt one, but only one, of the reasons for the spread of Pyrrhonism among intellectuals and even among some members of the clergy.

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1. What is Montaigne’s strategy in “defending” Raymond Sebond?
 2. What does Montaigne have to say about depending on authority? Our senses? Science? Reason?
 3. How does Montaigne try to show that we are involved either in a circle or in an infinite regress?
 4. How does he recommend we live?
-

*Note how different this religiosity is from both that of the Catholic Dante (for whom the “indifferent” are rejected by both God and Satan) and that of the reformer Luther (for whom commitment and certainty are essential to Christianity). Can it count as being religious at all? What do you think?

†For the claim that Socrates is the wisest of men because he knows that he doesn’t know, see Plato’s *Apology*, 20e–23b. Socrates, however, is not a Pyrrhonian skeptic; he does not doubt that knowledge is possible; he just confesses that (with some possible few exceptions), he does not possess it.

COPERNICUS TO KEPLER TO GALILEO: THE GREAT TRIPLE PLAY*

While humanism transformed Europeans’ view of how to live, another development ushered in a new view of the universe and humanity’s place in it. This development decisively overturns the entire medieval worldview and undermines forever the authority of its philosophical bulwark, Aristotle. It is traditionally called the **Copernican revolution**. Though there were anticipations of it before **Copernicus**, and the revolution was carried to completion only in the time of Newton over a century later, it is the name of Copernicus we honor. For his work is the turning point. The key feature of that work is the displacement of the earth from the center of the universe.

We saw earlier how the centrality of the earth had been embedded in the accepted astronomical and physical theories. A stationary earth, moreover, had intimate links with the entire medieval Christian view of the significance of man, of his origins and destiny, and of God’s relation to his creation. If the earth is displaced and becomes just one more planet whirling about in infinite space, we can expect consequences to be profound. And so they are, though the more radical consequences are not immediately perceived.



“It [the scientific revolution] outshines everything since the rise of Christianity and reduces the Renaissance and Reformation to the rank of mere episodes, mere internal displacements within the system of medieval Christendom.”

Herbert Butterfield (1900–1979)

The earth-centered, multisphere Ptolemaic model of the universe had dominated astronomy and cosmology for eighteen hundred years. With a complex system of epicycles to account for the

*When your team is in the field, a triple play is a great success.

“wanderings” of the planets, it was an impressive mathematical achievement, and its accuracy in prediction was not bad. But it never quite worked. And Copernicus (1473–1543) tells us that this fact led him to examine the works of previous astronomers to see whether some other system might improve accuracy. He discovered that certain ancient thinkers had held that the earth moved.

Taking advantage of this I too began to think of the mobility of the Earth; and though the opinion seemed absurd, yet knowing now that others before me had been granted freedom to imagine such circles as they chose to explain the phenomena of the stars, I considered that I also might easily be allowed to try whether, by assuming some motion of the Earth, sounder explanations than theirs for the revolution of the celestial spheres might so be discovered.¹⁹

It is important to recognize that the heart of Copernicus’ achievement is in the mathematics of his system—in the geometry and the calculations that filled most of his 1543 book, *De Revolutionibus*. As he himself puts it, “Mathematics are for mathematicians.”²⁰ He expects fellow astronomers to be the ones to appreciate his results; from nonmathematicians he expects trouble.

We cannot go into the mathematical details. But we should know in general what Copernicus does—and does not—do. He does not entirely abolish the Ptolemaic reliance on epicycles centered on circles to account for apparent motion. His computations are scarcely simpler than those of Ptolemy. He retains the notion that all celestial bodies move in circles; indeed, the notion of celestial spheres is no less important for Copernicus than for the Ptolemaic tradition. And he accepts the idea that the universe is finite—though considerably larger than had been thought. Even the sun is not located clearly in the center, as most popular accounts of his system state.²¹

But his treatment of the apparently irregular motions of the planets is a breakthrough. The planets appear to move, against the sphere of the fixed stars, slowly eastward. But at times they reverse course and move back westward. This **retrograde motion** remains a real puzzle as long as it is ascribed to the planets themselves. But Copernicus

treats it as merely an *apparent* motion, the appearance being caused by the *actual* motion of the observers on an earth that is not itself stationary. And this works; at least, it works as well as the traditional assumptions in accounting for the observed phenomena. Moreover, it is aesthetically pleasing, unlike the inexplicable reversals of earlier theory. Copernicus’ view, though not less complex and scarcely more accurate in prediction, allows for a kind of unity and harmony throughout the universe that the renegade planets had previously spoiled. Until the availability of better naked-eye data and the invention of the telescope (about fifty years later), these “harmonies” are what chiefly recommend the Copernican system to his astronomical successors.

At first some of them simply use his mathematics without committing themselves to the truth of this new picture of the universe. Indeed, in a preface to Copernicus’ major work, a Lutheran theologian, Osiander, urges this path. Copernicus’ calculations are useful, but to give up the traditional picture of the universe would mean an overhaul of basic beliefs and attitudes that most are not ready for. So if one could treat the system merely as a calculating device, without any claims to truth, one could reconcile the best of the new science with the best of ancient traditions.*

Johannes **Kepler** (1571–1630), however, is not content with this restricted view of the theory. A lifelong Copernican, he supplies the next major advance in the system by taking the sun more and more seriously as the true center. Oddly enough, his predilection for the sun as the center has its roots not so much in observation, or even in mathematics, as in a kind of mystical Neoplatonism, which takes the sun to be “the most excellent” body in the universe.† Its essence, Kepler says,

*Here is foreshadowed one of the intense debates in current philosophy of science: Should we understand terms in explanatory theories in a “realistic” way or take such terms as mere “instruments” for calculation and prediction?

†In *Republic* 506d–509b, Plato uses the sun as a visible image of the Form of the Good (see p. 161). And in his later work *Laws*, he recommends a kind of sun worship as the heart of a state-sponsored religion.

is nothing else than the purest light, than which there is no greater star; which singly and alone is the producer, conserver, and warmer of all things; it is a fountain of light, rich in fruitful heat, most fair, limpid, and pure to the sight, the source of vision, portrayer of all colours, though himself empty of colour, called king of the planets for his motion, heart of the world for his power, its eye for his beauty, and which alone we should judge worthy of the Most High God, should he be pleased with a material domicile and choose a place in which to dwell with the blessed angels.²²

It may be somewhat disconcerting to hear this sort of rhetoric from one we honor as a founder of the modern scientific tradition; but it is neither the first nor the last time that religious or philosophical views function as a source of insights later confirmed by more exact and pedestrian methods.

Part of Kepler's quasi-religious conviction is that God's creation is governed by mathematically simple laws. This view can be traced back through Plato to the Pythagoreans, who hold (rather obscurely) that all things are numbers. In the work of Kepler and his successors, this conviction gains an unprecedented confirmation. This mathematical approach to the natural world would become a hallmark of the new science.

Drawing on more accurate data compiled by the great observer of the heavens, Tycho Brahe, Kepler makes trial after trial of circular hypotheses, always within the Copernican framework. None of them exactly fits the data. For the greater part of ten years he works on the orbit of Mars. At last, he notices certain regularities suggesting that the path of a planet might be that of an ellipse, with the sun at one of the two foci that define it. And that works; the data and the mathematical theory fit precisely.

The significance of Kepler's work is that for the first time we have a simple and elegant mathematical account of the heavens that matches the data. For the first time we have a really powerful alternative to the medieval picture of the world. Its ramifications are many, however, and will take time to draw out. Part of this development is the task of Galileo.

In 1609, **Galileo** Galilei (1564–1642) turns the newly invented telescope toward the heavens. The result was a multitude of indirect but persuasive evidences for the Copernican view of the universe. New stars in prodigious numbers were observed. The moon's cratered topography was charted, cutting against the distinction between terrestrial imperfection and celestial perfection. Sun spots were observed; it was not perfect either! And it rotated—it was not immutable! The moons of Jupiter provided an observable model of the solar system itself. The phases of Venus indicated that it moved in a sun-centered orbit.

Encouraged by the successful application of mathematics to celestial bodies, Galileo sets himself to use these same powerful tools for the description and explanation of terrestrial motion. Previous thinkers, influenced by Aristotle, had asked primarily *why* bodies move. *Why* does a rock fall to earth when unsupported? Aristotelians answered that it is *seeking its natural place*. The earth, at the center of the celestial spheres, is the **place** for heavy things. Note three things: (1) this is an explanation by appeal to a *final cause* or purpose; (2) a place has certain *essential qualities*; and (3) such an explanation gives no insight as to *how* the rock falls—no laws explaining its speed or acceleration.

The new science substitutes the concept of **space** for that of place. Space is an infinitely extended *neutral* container with a purely mathematical description. Galileo's theory of motion supplies laws that apply to *all* motion, terrestrial and celestial alike. Explanation and prediction of the rock's fall are possible for the first time. And final causes are banished. For Galileo, as for Copernicus and Kepler, the great book of nature is written in mathematical language. And we, by using that language, can understand it.

Let us set down some of the consequences of the new science. First, our sense of the size of the universe changes. Eventually it will be thought to be infinitely extended in space. This means it has *no center* because in an infinite universe every point has an equal right to be considered the center; from each point, the universe extends infinitely in every direction. As a result, it becomes more difficult to think of human beings as the main attraction in this

extravaganza, where quite probably there are planets similar to earth circling other suns in other galaxies. The universe no longer seems a cozy home in which everything exists for our sake. Blaise Pascal, himself a great mathematician and contributor to the new science, would exclaim a hundred years after Copernicus, “The eternal silence of those infinite spaces strikes me with terror.”²³

Second, our beliefs about the nature of the things in the universe change. Celestial bodies seem to be made of the same lowly stuff as we find on the earth, so that the heavens are no longer eternal, immutable, and akin to the divine. Furthermore, matter seems to be peculiarly *quantitative*. For Aristotle and medieval science alike, mathematics had been just one of the ways in which substances could be described. Quantity was only one of the ten categories, which together supplied the basic concepts for describing and explaining reality. Substances were fundamentally qualitative in nature, and science had the job of tracing their qualitative development in terms of changes from potentiality to actuality.*

But now mathematics promises a privileged way to describe and explain things. Mathematicians solved the puzzle of the heavens; it is mathematics that can describe and predict the fall of rocks and the trajectory of a cannonball. Mathematics, it seems, can tell us what *really* is. The result is a strong push toward thinking of the universe in purely quantitative terms, as a set of objects with purely quantitative characteristics (size, shape, motion) that interact with each other according to fixed laws. It is no surprise that the implications of the new science move its inventors in the direction of atomism or, as they call it, “**corpuscularism.**”† (A “corpuscle” was thought to be a tiny particle, similar to an atom in the ancient sense.)

In the third place, the new science does away with teleological explanations, or final causes. Explanations are framed in terms of mathematical laws that account for *how* it behaves. Why does it

behave in a certain way? Because it is a thing of just this precise quantity in exactly these conditions, and things of that quantity in those conditions necessarily behave in accordance with a given law. It is no longer good enough to explain change in terms of a desire to reach a body’s natural resting place.*

This way of viewing the universe puts values in a highly questionable position. If we assume that the valuable is somehow a goal, something desirable—and this is the common assumption of virtually all Western philosophers and theologians up to this time—where is there room for such goals in a universe like this? A goal seems precisely to be a final cause. But if everything simply happens as it must in the giant machine that is the universe, how can there be values, aspirations, goals?

It looks as though knowledge and value, science and religion are being pulled apart again after two thousand years of harmony. Plato, and Aristotle after him, opposes the atomism of Democritus to construct a vision of reality in which the ultimate facts are not indifferent to goodness and beauty. Christian thinkers take over these schemes and link them intimately to God. But all this, which Dante expresses so movingly, seems to be in the process of coming unstuck.

One more consequence of the new science will prove to be perhaps the most perplexing of all. Galileo sees that the quantitative, corpuscular universe throws the qualities of experience into question. If reality is captured by mathematics and geometry, then the real properties of things are just their size, shape, velocity, acceleration, direction, weight: those characteristics treatable by numbers, points, and lines. But what becomes of those fuzzy, intimate, and lovable characteristics, such as warmth, yellow–orange, or sweetness? It is in terms of such properties that we make contact with the world beyond us; it is they that delight or terrify us, attract or repel us. But what is their relation to those purely quantitative things revealed by Galilean science as the real stuff of the universe?

*See Aristotle’s development of these ideas on pp. 194–197. For Aristotle’s categories, see pp. 185–186.

†The key notions of ancient atomism are discussed on pp. 28–33.

*Compare the teleological explanations of Aristotle (pp. 194–197).

Our instinctive habit is to consider the apple red, the oatmeal hot, cookies sweet, and roses fragrant. But is this correct? Do apples and other such things really have these properties? Here is Galileo's answer:

that external bodies, to excite in us these tastes, these odours, and these sounds, demand other than size, figure, number, and slow or rapid motion, I do not believe; and I judge that, if the ears, the tongue, and the nostrils were taken away, the figure, the numbers, and the motions would indeed remain, but not the odours nor the tastes nor the sounds, which, without the living animal, I do not believe are anything else than names, just as tickling is precisely nothing but a name if the armpit and the nasal membrane be removed; . . . having now seen that many affections which are reputed to be qualities residing in the external object, have truly no other existence than in us, and without us are nothing else than names; I say that I am inclined sufficiently to believe that heat is of this kind, and that the thing that produces heat in us and makes us perceive it, which we call by the general name fire, is a multitude of minute corpuscles thus and thus figured, moved with such and such a velocity; . . . But that besides their figure, number, motion, penetration, and touch, there is in fire another quality, that is heat—that I do not believe otherwise than I have indicated, and I judge that it is so much due to us that if the animate and sensitive body were removed, heat would remain nothing more than a simple word.²⁴

Galileo is here sketching a distinction between two different kinds of qualities: those that can be attributed to things themselves and those that cannot. The former are often called **primary qualities** and the latter **secondary qualities**. Primary qualities are those that Galilean mathematical science can handle: size, figure, number, and motion. These qualities are now thought to characterize the world—or what we might better call the *objective* world—exhaustively. All other qualities exist only *subjectively*—in us. They are caused to exist in us by the primary (quantitative) qualities of things.

Heat, for example, experienced in the presence of a fire, no more exists in the fire than a tickle exists in the feather brushing my nose. If we try to use the term “heat” for something out there in the

world, it turns into “nothing but a name”—that is, it does not describe any reality, since the reality is just the motion of “a multitude of minute corpuscles.” The tickle exists only in us; and if the term “heat” (or for that matter “red” or “sweet” or “pungent”) is to be descriptive, then what it describes is also only in us. Take away the eye, the tongue, the nostrils, and all that remains is figure and motion.

Democritus, the ancient atomist, draws the same conclusion. He remarks in a poignant phrase, “By this man is cut off from the real.”* The problem that Galileo's distinction between primary and secondary qualities bequeaths to subsequent philosophers is this: If, to understand the world, we must strip it of its experienced qualities, where do those experienced qualities exist? If they exist only in *us*, what then are *we*? If they are mental, or subjective, what is the *mind*? And how is the mind related to the corpuscular world of the new science? Suppose we agree, for the sake of the mastery of the universe given us by these new conceptions, to kick experienced qualities “inside.” Then how is this “inside” related to the “outside”? Galileo, concerned as he is with the objective world, can simply relegate secondary qualities to some otherwise specified subjective realm. But the question will not go away.

It is a new world, indeed. The impact of all these changes on a sensitive observer is registered in a poem by John Donne in 1611.

And new philosophy calls all in doubt,
The element of fire is quite put out;
The sun is lost, and th' earth, and no man's wit
Can well direct him where to look for it.
And freely men confess that this world's spent,
When in the planets, and the firmament
They seek so many new; they see that this
Is crumbled out again to his atomies.
'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone;
All just supply, and all relation:
Prince, subject, father, son, are things forgot,
For every man alone thinks he hath got
To be a phoenix, and that then can be
None of that kind, of which he is, but he.
This is the world's condition now.²⁵

* See p. 32.

Here is a lament founded on the new developments. Point after point recalls the detail we have just surveyed: Pyrrhonism, secondary qualities (why is the sun, source of light, heat, and color “lost?”), the moving earth, the expanding universe, corpuscularism, and in the last few lines, the new individualism, which seems to undermine all traditional authority. The medieval world has vanished: “’tis all in pieces, all coherence gone.”

If we wanted to sum up, we could say that the new science bequeaths to philosophers four deep and perplexing problems:

1. What is the place of mind in this world of matter?
2. What is the place of value in this world of fact?
3. What is the place of freedom in this world of mechanism?
4. Is there any room left for God at all?

Responding to these questions is perhaps the major preoccupation of philosophers in the modern era.

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1. How does Copernicus resolve the puzzle about the apparent irregularity in the motions of the planets?
 2. What is the impact of a moving earth on Dante’s picture of the world?
 3. What does Kepler add to the Copernican picture?
 4. Contrast Aristotelian explanations of motion with those of Galileo.
 5. What impact does giving up final causes have on values?
 6. What happens to the qualities we think we experience in objects? Explain the difference between primary and secondary qualities.
 7. What questions does the new science pose to the philosophical quest for wisdom?
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THE COUNTER-REFORMATION

The Catholic Church does not sit idly by while these changes wash over Europe. Various streams of reform come together by the mid-sixteenth century, capped by a major assembly of Catholic luminaries at the Council of Trent in 1545. The council, meeting intermittently until 1563, both reaffirms Catholic doctrine and institutes a diverse set of reforms aimed at shoring up the

intellectual foundations and social position of the church. These efforts become known as the **Counter-Reformation**.

While we cannot survey every aspect of Catholic reform, we can consider one example that illustrates how the church adapts to the changing intellectual climate. The first is the foundation of a new religious order, the Society of Jesus, better known as the **Jesuits**. Established in 1540 by **Ignatius Loyola**, the Jesuits describe themselves as “soldiers of God” dedicated to “the progress of souls in the Christian life and doctrine and for the propagation of the faith.”²⁶ Ignatius composes a book, entitled *Spiritual Exercises*, which walks the reader through a series of reflections meant to guide the reader toward a deeper faith and a better life—reflections that, according to the Jesuits’ critics, place too much emphasis on the individual reader’s direct relationship with God and not enough on the role of the church. What most distinguishes the Jesuits, however, is that they open highly respected schools throughout Europe—and beyond—in which members of the order teach students both the new science and the classical literature that underpins European humanism. Through their teaching, the Jesuits immerse themselves and their students in the new learning of their age.²⁷

By the end of the sixteenth century, then, even the Catholic Church has entered the early modern era. Medieval Europe has vanished, swept away by an irresistible tide of intellectual and social change. Medieval Western philosophy, focused on reconciling ancient Greek philosophy with Christianity, would disappear with it, to be replaced by a new set of philosophical problems.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

Imagine that you are a philosopher living in the early seventeenth century. You are acquainted with the writings of the humanists, with Luther’s reforming views of Christianity, with Montaigne’s skeptical arguments, and with the new science. A friend asks you, “What should I live for? What is the point of life?” How do you reply?

KEY WORDS

Empyrean	Raymond Sebond
Hildegard of Bingen	Copernican revolution
Virgil	Copernicus
Beatrice	retrograde motion
Martin Luther	Kepler
grace	Galileo
indulgence	place
ninety-five theses	space
Renaissance	corpuscularism
humanism	primary qualities
Erasmus	secondary qualities
Pico della Mirandola	Counter-Reformation
individualism	Jesuits
Christine di Pizan	Ignatius Loyola
Montaigne	

NOTES

1. We are indebted for much in this chapter to the excellent book by Thomas Kuhn, *The Copernican Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957).
2. Quotations from Matthew Fox, trans., *Hildegard of Bingen's Book of Divine Works* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear, 1987) are cited in the text using the abbreviation *BDW*. References are to the chapters (listed as "Visions") and paragraph number.
3. Quotations from Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, in *The Portable Dante*, ed. Paolo Milano (New York: Penguin Books, 1947), are cited in the text by canto and line numbers.
4. Roland H. Bainton, *Christendom: A Short History of Christianity and Its Impact on Western Civilization* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 1:218.
5. Bainton, *Christendom*, 1:249.
6. Quoted in John Dillenberger, "Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings," in *Martin Luther* (New York: Anchor Books, 1962), 11.
7. Quoted in Dillenberger, *Martin Luther*, 11–12.
8. Quoted in Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (London: Hodder and Staughton, 1951), 78.
9. Martin Luther, "The Ninety-Five Theses," in Dillenberger, *Martin Luther*, 493–494.
10. Quoted in Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 117.
11. Erasmus, "The Godly Feast," in *The Colloquies of Erasmus*, trans. Craig R. Thompson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 65.
12. Erasmus, "Godly Feast," 68.
13. Erasmus, "The Epicurean," in *Colloquies*, 549.
14. Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall Jr., *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 4.
15. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, in Cassirer, Kristeller, and Randall, *Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, 224–225.
16. Pico, *Oration*, 225.
17. We rely here on Richard H. Popkin's *History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes* (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1960).
18. Quotations from Michel de Montaigne, *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, in *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1958), are cited in the text using the abbreviation *ARS*. References are to page numbers.
19. Quoted from Copernicus, *De Revolutionibus*, in Kuhn, *Copernican Revolution*, 141.
20. Quoted in Kuhn, *Copernican Revolution*, 142.
21. Kuhn, *Copernican Revolution*, 164–170.
22. Quoted in Edwin Arthur Burt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Physical Science* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1924), 48.
23. Kuhn, *Copernican Revolution*, 86.
24. Blaise Pascal, *The Pensées*, trans. J. M. Cohen (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), sec. 91, p. 57.
25. Quoted in Burt, *Metaphysical Foundations*, 78.
26. John Donne, "An Anatomy of the World," in *John Donne: The Complete English Poems* (New York: Penguin Books, 1971), 276.
27. "Regimini militantis Ecclesiae," Boston College Institute for Advanced Jesuit Studies, n.d., http://jesuitportal.bc.edu/research/documents/1540_Formula/
28. John W. O'Malley, *The Jesuits* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014): 1–26.



CHAPTER

17

RENÉ DESCARTES

Doubting Our Way to Certainty

When he is just twenty-three years old, René **Descartes** (1596–1650) experiences a vision in a dream. He writes down,

10, November 1619; I discovered the foundations of a marvellous science.¹

The “marvellous science” that he built on this foundation was analytic geometry.* The nocturnal insight that enabled it was that things describable by geometry could also be described algebraically. When we understand why such an insight would excite Descartes so much, we will be in a position to understand why he is often credited as the “father of modern philosophy.”

Descartes had received a good Jesuit education, from which he had expected to obtain “a clear and certain knowledge . . . of all that is useful in life.” Instead, he tells us,

I found myself beset by so many doubts and errors that I came to think I had gained nothing from my

attempts to become educated but increasing recognition of my ignorance. (*DM* 1.4, p. 113)²

Dissatisfied, Descartes made a bold move in his bid to “learn to distinguish the true from the false” (*DM* 1.10, p. 115).

I entirely abandoned the study of letters. Resolving to seek no knowledge other than that which could be found in myself or else in the great book of the world, I spent the rest of my youth travelling, visiting courts and armies, mixing with people of diverse temperaments and ranks, gathering various experiences, testing myself in the situations which fortune offered me, and at all times reflecting upon whatever came my way so as to derive some profit from it. (*DM* 1.9, p. 115)

In turning away from “letters”—from what others had written—and striking out to discover the truth for himself, Descartes reflects the spirit of his age. During his stint as a military engineer, he encountered a Dutchman who encouraged him to pursue mathematical solutions to problems in the new physics. Having long admired mathematics for “the certainty of its demonstrations and the evidence

*So-called Cartesian coordinates are, of course, named for Descartes.

of its reasoning,” Descartes takes up this challenge eagerly. This is why his discovery of analytic geometry excites him: Since the natural world can be geometrically represented in terms of the size, figure, volume, and spatial relations of natural things, analytic geometry promises an algebraic treatment of all of nature.* Descartes realizes he has found a new way to read the “great book of the world.”

For the rest of his life Descartes works, in constant communication with the best minds in Europe, to understand the world through the lens of mathematics. He applies his new understanding of the world to a wide variety of topics: the sun, moon, and the stars; comets; metals; fire; glass; the magnet; and the human body, particularly the heart and the nervous system (for which he gathers observations from animal bodies at a local slaughterhouse). He formulates several “laws of nature.” Here are two influential ones:

that each thing as far as in it lies, continues always in the same state; and that which is once moved always continues to move.

. . . that all motion is of itself in a straight line; and thus things which move in a circle always tend to recede from the centre of the circle that they describe. (*PP* 2.37–39, p. 267)³

Newton will later adopt both, and so they pass into the foundations of classical physics; but they were revolutionary in Descartes’ day. Both laws contradict Aristotelian assumptions built into the worldview of medieval science. It had been thought that rest (at or near the center of the universe) is the natural state of terrestrial things, while the heavenly spheres revolve naturally in perfect circles. To say that rest is not more “natural” than motion and that motion is “naturally” in a straight line is radical indeed.

Descartes applies these principles to a world that he takes to be geometrical in essence. For Descartes, bodies are sheer extended volumes. They interact according to mechanical principles that can be mathematically formulated. The paths and

positions of interacting bodies can therefore be plotted and predicted. Since extension is the essence of body, there can be no vacuum or void. (If bodies are just extended volumes, the idea of such a volume containing *no body* is self-contradictory.) So the universe is full, and motion takes place by a continual recirculation of bodies, each displacing another. Bodies near the earth fall because they are pressed down by others in the air, which in turn are being pressed down by others out to the edges of the solar system. This system forms a huge vortex bound in by the vortices of other systems, which force the moving bodies in it to deviate from otherwise straight paths into the roughly circular paths traced by the planets.*

The key idea here is that everything in the material world can be treated in a purely geometrical and mathematical fashion. Descartes vigorously promotes the new “corpuscularism.”† Though he departs from the ancient atomists in important respects, he enthusiastically adopts their mechanistic picture of the natural world.‡ He states explicitly that “the laws of mechanics . . . are identical with the laws of Nature” (*DM* 5.54, p. 139).

The radical nature of this conception can be appreciated by noting a thought experiment Descartes recommends. Imagine, he says, that God creates a space with matter to fill it and shakes it up until there is thorough chaos. If God then decreed that this matter should behave according to the laws of Nature, Descartes argues, it would eventually settle into just the sort of universe we see around us. Descartes is quick to add that he does not infer from this thought experiment that the world was actually formed in that way, only that it could have been. Careful about charges of heresy, he says it is “much more probable” that God made it just as it now is. Still, the daring conception of a universe

*The notion of a cosmic vortex, a huge, swirling mass of matter, is already found in the speculations of Anaximander; see p. 12. Compare also Parmenides’ arguments against the existence of a void, pp. 24–25.

†See p. 356.

‡For the views of the atomists, see Chapter 2. Descartes’ criticisms may be found in Part IV, CCII, of *The Principles of Philosophy*.

*In light of the overarching narrative of this book, it is worth noting that Descartes’ insight rests on a synthesis of Greek geometry, Middle Eastern algebra, and European physics.

evolving itself in purely mechanistic ways has been enormously influential; and we haven't yet finished exploring its ramifications.

This part of Descartes' work reveals the influence of the new sciences on early modern philosophy: By positing a universe where neither final causes nor God's will plays a direct role in the day-to-day operations of the universe, Descartes displaces Aristotelian and Christian metaphysics in favor of a mechanistic, corpuscular one.

The Method

While working on these physical problems, and feeling confident in his progress, Descartes asks himself why more progress hadn't been made in the past. The problem, he concludes, is not that his predecessors were less intelligent than he and his contemporaries, but that they lacked a sound *method*. They did not proceed in as careful and principled a way as they might have, leaving them mired in obscure ideas, unjustified conclusions, avoidable disagreements, and general intellectual chaos.

Descartes sets himself to draw up some rules for the direction of the intellect. These **rules of method** formulate what Descartes takes himself to be doing in his scientific work. In particular, they are indebted to his experience as a mathematician. They are not picked arbitrarily, then, but express procedures that actually seem to be producing results. If only other thinkers could be persuaded to follow these four rules, he thinks, what progress might be made!

The first was never to accept anything as true if I did not have evident knowledge of its truth: that is, carefully to avoid precipitate conclusions and preconceptions, and to include nothing more in my judgments than what presented itself to my mind so clearly and distinctly that I had no occasion to doubt it.

The second, to divide each of the difficulties I examined into as many parts as possible and as many as may be required in order to resolve them better.

The third, to direct my thoughts in an orderly manner, by beginning with the simplest and most easily known objects in order to ascend little by little, step by step, to knowledge of the most complex, and by supposing some order even among objects that have no natural order of precedence.

And the last, throughout to make enumerations so complete, and reviews so comprehensive, that I could be sure of leaving nothing out. (*DM* 2.18–19, p. 120)

He says of these four rules that he thought they would be “sufficient, provided that I made a strong and unswerving resolution never to fail to observe them” (*DM* 2.18, p. 120). They are difficult to put into practice, as any attempt to do so will convince you immediately. But let us explore their content more carefully.

The first one has to do with a condition for accepting something as true. In placing stringent demands on knowledge, it reflects the resurgent skepticism of the early modern period. Descartes warns us to avoid two things: “precipitate conclusions” (hastiness) and “preconceptions” (categorizing something before you have good warrant to do so). How do you do this? By accepting only those things that are *so clear and distinct that you have no occasion to doubt them*. Descartes obviously has in mind such propositions as “three plus five equals eight” and “the interior angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles.” Once you understand these, you really cannot bring yourself to doubt that they are true.

What do the key words “clear” and “distinct” mean? In *The Principles of Philosophy* (*PP* 1.45, p. 237) Descartes explains them as follows. Something is “clear” when it is “present and apparent to an attentive mind, in the same way as we assert that we see objects clearly when, being present to the regarding eye, they operate upon it with sufficient strength.” Seeing an apple in your hand in good light would be an example. We are not to accept any belief unless it is as clear as that.

By “distinct” he means “so precise and different from all other objects that it contains within itself nothing but what is clear.” An idea not only must be clear in itself but also impossible to confuse with any other idea. There must be no ambiguity in its meaning. Ideas must be as distinct as the idea of a triangle is from the idea of a square.

How many of *your* beliefs are clear and distinct in this way? Descartes is under no illusions about the high standard he sets for belief. In the first of his *Meditations*, he stresses just how many of our everyday beliefs his standard excludes.



“It is much easier to have some vague notion about any subject, no matter what, than to arrive at the real truth about a single question.”

—RENÉ DESCARTES

The second rule recommends **analysis**. Solving complex problems requires breaking them into smaller problems. Anyone who has tried to program a computer will have an excellent feel for this rule. Often more than half the battle is to discover smaller problems we already have the resources to solve, so that by combining the solutions to these more elementary problems we can solve the big problem. We move, by analysis, not only from the complex to the simple, but also from the obscure to the clear and distinct, and so we follow the first rule as well.

The third rule recognizes that items for consideration may be more or less simple. It recommends beginning with the simpler ones and proceeding to the more complex. Here is a mathematical example. If we compare a straight line to a curve, we can see that there is a clear sense in which the straight line is simple and the curve is not; no straight line is more or less straight than another, but curves come in all degrees. But it is possible to analyze a curve

into a series of straight lines at various angles to each other, thus “constructing” the more complex curve from the simple straights.

For Descartes, this serves as a model of all good intellectual work. There are two basic procedures: a kind of **insight** or *intuition* of simple natures (which must be clear and distinct) and then **deduction** of complex phenomena from perceived relations among the simples. A deduction, too, is in fact just an insight: insight into the connections holding among simples. Geometry, again, provides examples. We deduce theorems from the axioms and postulates, which are simply “seen” to be true; for example, through two points in a plane, one and only one straight line can be drawn. The same kind of “seeing” is required to recognize that each step in a proof is correct.

Deductions, of course, can be very long and complex, even though each of the steps is clear and distinct. That is the reason for the fourth rule: to set out all the steps completely (we all know how easily mistakes creep in when we take something for granted) and to make comprehensive reviews.

Descartes believes that by following this method we can achieve certainty about “all the things that can fall under human knowledge” (*DM* 2.19, p. 120). We will see this optimism at work when Descartes tackles knotty problems such as the existence of God and the relation between soul and body. But first we need to ask, Why does Descartes feel a need to address these *philosophical* problems at all? Why doesn’t he just stick to mathematical physics?

For one thing, he is confident that his method will allow him to succeed where so many have failed. But a deeper reason is that he needs to show that his physics is more than a fairy tale, that it is actually true of something real, that it correctly describes the world. He is quite aware of the skeptical doubts of the Pyrrhonists, of the way they undermine the testimony of the senses and cast doubt on our reasoning. In particular, he is aware of the problem of the criterion.* Unless this can be solved, no certainty is possible.

*For a discussion of this problem by the ancient Greek skeptics, see pp. 248–250. For the impact of skepticism nearer to Descartes’ time, see pp. 350–353.

Descartes thinks he has found a way to solve this problem of problems. He will outdo the Pyrrhonists at their own game; when it comes to doubting, he will be the champion doubter of all time. The first rule of his method already gives him the means to wipe the slate clean—unless, perhaps, there remains something that is *so clear and distinct that it cannot possibly be doubted*. If there were something like that (and, as we shall see, Descartes thinks that there is), the rest of the method could gain a foothold, and deductions could lead us to further truths. We could, perhaps, claw our way from the depths of doubting despair to the bliss of certainty.

This is Descartes' strategy. And it is this attempt to justify his physics that makes Descartes not just a great scientist, but a great philosopher as well. We are now ready to turn to this philosophy as expressed in the *Meditations*.

Meditations on First Philosophy

Meditations, first published in 1641, is Descartes' most famous work. We focus our attention on the text itself, as we did earlier with certain dialogues of Plato. It is a remarkably rich work, and if you come to understand it, you will have mastered many of the concepts and distinctions that philosophers use to this day. We cannot emphasize too much that in this section you must wrestle with the *text*, the words of Descartes himself. It is he who is your partner in this conversation, and you must make him speak to you and—as far as possible—answer your questions. What we do is offer some commentary on particularly difficult aspects, fill in some background, and ask some questions.

Though it is usually known just as the *Meditations*, the full title of the work is *Meditations on First Philosophy, In Which the Existence of God and the Distinction of the Soul from the Body Are Demonstrated*. The title gives you some idea what to expect. But as you will see, Descartes' experience as a mathematician and physicist is everywhere present.

Although not represented in our text, Descartes prefaces the *Meditations* with a letter to “the Wisest and Most Distinguished Men, the Dean and Doctors of the Faculty of Theology in Paris.”

The motivation behind this letter is fairly transparent. It had been just eight years since the condemnation of Galileo, whose basic outlook Descartes shares. Since the Faculty of Theology in Paris had been an illustrious one for some centuries, securing their approval would shield Descartes from Galileo's fate. The *Meditations* was examined carefully by one of the theologians, who expressed his approval, but twenty-two years later it was placed on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* of books dangerous to read.*

Descartes had also asked one of his close friends, the priest and scientist Mersenne, to circulate the text to some distinguished philosophers, who were then invited to write criticisms of it. These criticisms, including some from his English contemporary Thomas Hobbes, were printed along with Descartes' replies at the end of the volume.†

In the letter to the theologians, Descartes refers to “believers like ourselves.” He professes to be absolutely convinced that it is sufficient in these matters to rely on Scripture. But there is a problem. On the one hand, God's existence, he says, is to be believed because it is taught in Scripture. Scripture, on the other hand, is to be believed because God is its source. It is fairly easy to see that there is a rather tight circle here. It comes down to believing that God exists because you believe that God exists.

To break into the circle, Descartes thinks it necessary to *prove rationally* that God exists and that the soul is distinct from the body. His claim that reason should be able to do this is no innovation; Augustine, Avicenna, Maimonides, Anselm, Aquinas, and many others had said as much before. Descartes, however, claims to have proofs superior to any offered by these philosophers.

He refers to some thinkers who hold that it is rational to believe the soul perishes with the body. Aristotle seems in the main to think so (though he

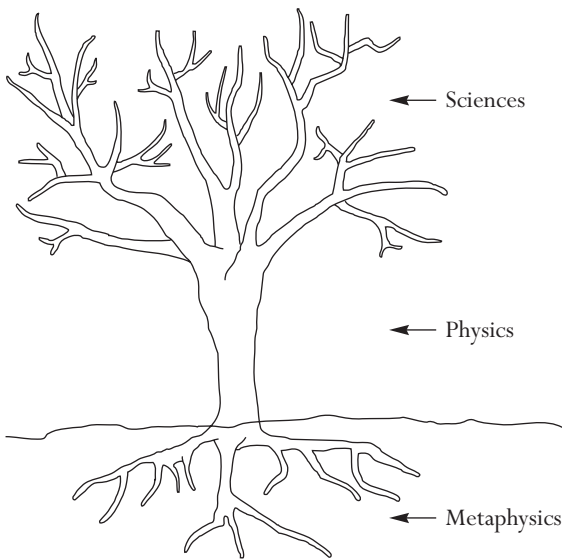
*The *Index* was created in 1571 by Pope Pius V, after approval by the Council of Trent. See p. 358.

†We discuss the views of Hobbes in the next chapter. For his criticisms of the *Meditations*, see the “Third Set of Objections” in Haldane and Ross, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, vol. 2.

waffles).^{*} Christian Aristotelians like Thomas Aquinas labor mightily, but inconclusively, to reconcile this view with the tradition of an immortal soul. Descartes thinks he has a proof of the soul that is direct, simple, and conclusive.[†] He claims, in fact, that his proofs will “surpass in certitude and obviousness the demonstrations of geometry.” A strong claim indeed! You will have to decide whether you agree.

These are meditations on **first philosophy**. This is a term derived from Aristotle, who means by it a search for the first principles of things. First philosophy is also called *metaphysics*. Descartes uses a memorable image.

Thus the whole of philosophy is like a tree; the roots are metaphysics, the trunk is physics, and the branches that issue from the trunk are all the other sciences.⁴

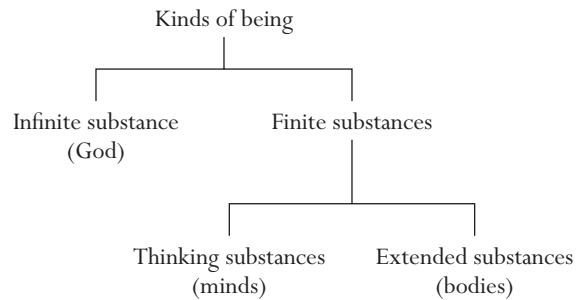


Metaphysics, then, is thought to be more fundamental even than physics. Physics and the other sciences give us detailed knowledge of material things; first philosophy inquires whether material things are the only things there are. What Descartes is seeking is a set of

^{*}For Aristotle’s view of the soul as “the form of a living human body” see pp. 205–206.

[†]Descartes tends to use the terms “soul,” “mind,” and “spirit” interchangeably. They are all terms for “the thing that thinks.” Some philosophers and theologians make distinctions among them.

concepts that will give us an inventory of the *basic kinds of being*.^{*} As it turns out, his inventory of what exists looks fairly simple. We can diagram it this way:



By itself this chart isn’t very informative. It is time to turn to the *Meditations* themselves, to see how Descartes fills in this schema and why it turns out just that way.

The full text of Descartes’ *Meditations* is represented here.⁵ After each of the six sections, you will find commentary and questions. Read through each meditation quickly. (They aren’t very long.) Then go to the discussion, moving back to the text to check your understanding. Write out brief answers to the questions. Descartes is a careful and clear writer and says exactly what he means. If you proceed in this way, you will not only learn some philosophy but also gain skill in reading a text of some difficulty—a valuable ability.

It may be helpful to have a preview of this dramatic little work. We offer an outline that sketches the progression from the first *meditation* to the last.

Meditation I. The Problem:

Can anything be known?

Meditations II–VI. The Solution: I can know . . .

- II. that I exist.
- III. that God exists.
- IV. why we make mistakes and how to avoid them.
- V. that material things *might* exist; and again, that God exists.
- VI. that material things *do* exist and are distinct from souls.

^{*}Aristotle calls such fundamental concepts “categories.” See p. 185. It is interesting to note that in 1641 all the sciences are still counted as parts of philosophy, the love of wisdom.

Meditation I: On What Can Be Called into Doubt

For several years now, I've been aware that I accepted many falsehoods as true in my youth, that what I built on the foundation of those falsehoods was dubious, and accordingly that once in my life I would need to tear down everything and begin anew from the foundations if I wanted to establish any stable and lasting knowledge. But the task seemed enormous, and I waited until I was so old that no better time for undertaking it would be likely to follow. I have thus delayed so long that it would be wrong for me to waste in indecision the time left for action. Today, then, having rid myself of worries and having arranged for some peace and quiet, I withdraw alone, free at last earnestly and wholeheartedly to overthrow all my beliefs.

To do this, I don't need to show each of them to be false; I may never be able to do that. But, since reason now convinces me that I ought to withhold my assent just as carefully from what isn't obviously certain and indubitable as from what's obviously false, I can justify the rejection of all my beliefs if in each I can find some ground for doubt. And, to do this, I need not run through my beliefs one by one, which would be an endless task. Since a building collapses when its foundation is cut out from under it, I will go straight to the principles on which all my former beliefs rested.

Of course, whatever I have so far accepted as supremely true I have learned either from the senses or through the senses. But I have occasionally caught the senses deceiving me, and it's prudent never completely to trust those who have cheated us even once.

But, while my senses may deceive me about what is small or far away, there may still be other things that I take in by the senses but that I cannot possibly doubt—like that I am here, sitting before the fire, wearing a dressing gown, touching this paper. And on what grounds might I deny that my hands and the other parts of my body exist?—unless perhaps I liken myself to madmen whose brains are so rattled by the persistent vapors of melancholy that they are sure that they're kings when in fact they are paupers, or that they wear

purple robes when in fact they're naked, or that their heads are clay, or that they are gourds, or made of glass. But these people are insane, and I would seem just as crazy if I were to apply what I say about them to myself.

This would be perfectly obvious—if I weren't a man accustomed to sleeping at night whose experiences while asleep are at least as far-fetched as those that madmen have while awake. How often, at night, I've been convinced that I was here, sitting before the fire, wearing my dressing gown, when in fact I was undressed and between the covers of my bed! But now I am looking at this piece of paper with my eyes wide open; the head that I am shaking has not been lulled to sleep; I put my hand out consciously and deliberately and feel. None of this would be as distinct if I were asleep. As if I can't remember having been tricked by similar thoughts while asleep! When I think very carefully about this, I see so plainly that there are no reliable signs by which I can distinguish sleeping from waking that I am stupefied—and my stupor itself suggests that I am asleep!

Suppose, then that I am dreaming. Suppose, in particular, that my eyes are not open, that my head is not moving, and that I have not put out my hand. Suppose that I do not have hands, or even a body. I must still admit that the things I see in sleep are like painted images which must have been patterned after real things and, hence, that things like eyes, heads, hands, and bodies are real rather than imaginary. For, even when painters try to give bizarre shapes to sirens and satyrs, they are unable to give them completely new natures; they only jumble together the parts of various animals. And, even if they were to come up with something so novel that no one had ever seen anything like it before, something entirely fictitious and unreal, at least there must be real colors from which they composed it. Similarly, while things like eyes, heads, and hands may be imaginary, it must be granted that some simpler and more universal things are real—the “real colors” from which the true and false images in our thoughts are formed.

Things of this sort seem to include general bodily nature and its extension, the shape of extended things, their quantity (that is, their size and

number), the place in which they exist, the time through which they endure, and so on.

Perhaps we can correctly infer that, while physics, astronomy, medicine, and other disciplines that require the study of composites are dubious, disciplines like arithmetic and geometry, which deal only with completely simple and universal things without regard to whether they exist in the world, are somehow certain and indubitable. For, whether we are awake or asleep, two plus three is always five, and the square never has more than four sides. It seems impossible even to suspect such obvious truths of falsity.

Nevertheless, the traditional view is fixed in my mind that there is a God who can do anything and by whom I have been made to be as I am. How do I know that He hasn't brought it about that, while there is in fact no earth, no sky, no extended thing, no shape, no magnitude, and no place, all of these things seem to me to exist, just as they do now? I think that other people sometimes err in what they believe themselves to know perfectly well. Mightn't I be deceived when I add two and three, or count the sides of a square, or do even simpler things, if we can even suppose that there is anything simpler? Maybe it will be denied that God deceives me, since He is said to be supremely good. But, if God's being good is incompatible with His having created me so that I am deceived always, it seems just as out of line with His being good that He permits me to be deceived sometimes—as he undeniably does.

Maybe some would rather deny that there is an omnipotent God than believe that everything else is uncertain. Rather than arguing with them, I will grant everything I have said about God to be fiction. But, however these people think I came to be as I now am—whether they say it is by fate, or by accident, or by a continuous series of events, or in some other way—it seems that he who errs and is deceived is somehow imperfect. Hence, the less power that is attributed to my original creator, the more likely it is that I am always deceived. To these arguments, I have no reply. I'm forced to admit that nothing that I used to believe is beyond legitimate doubt—not because I have been careless or playful, but because I have valid

and well-considered grounds for doubt. Hence, I must withhold my assent from my former beliefs as carefully as from obvious falsehoods if I want to arrive at something certain.

But it's not enough to have noticed this: I must also take care to bear it in mind. For my habitual views constantly return to my mind and take control of what I believe as if our long-standing, intimate relationship has given them the right to do so, even against my will. I'll never break the habit of trusting and giving in to these views while I see them for what they are—things somewhat dubious (as I have just shown) but nonetheless probable, things that I have much more reason to believe than to deny. That's why I think it will be good deliberately to turn my will around, to allow myself to be deceived, and to suppose that all my previous beliefs are false and illusory. Eventually, when I have counterbalanced the weight of my prejudices, my bad habits will no longer distort my grasp of things. I know that there is no danger of error here and that I won't overindulge in skepticism, since I'm now concerned, not with action, but only with gaining knowledge.

I will suppose, then, not that there is a supremely good God who is the source of all truth, but that there is an evil demon, supremely powerful and cunning, who works as hard as he can to deceive me. I will say that sky, air, earth, color, shape, sound, and other external things are just dreamed illusions that the demon uses to ensnare my judgment. I will regard myself as not having hands, eyes, flesh, blood, and senses—but as having the false belief that I have all these things. I will obstinately concentrate on this meditation and will thus ensure by mental resolution that, if I do not really have the ability to know the truth, I will at least withhold assent from what is false and from what a deceiver may try to put over on me, however powerful and cunning he may be. But this plan requires effort, and laziness brings me back to my ordinary life. I am like a prisoner who happens to enjoy the illusion of freedom in his dreams, begins to suspect that he is asleep, fears being awakened, and deliberately lets the enticing illusions slip by unchallenged. Thus, I slide back into my old views, afraid to awaken and to find that after my peaceful

rest I must toil, not in the light, but in the confusing darkness of the problems just raised.

Commentary and Questions

Note the personal, meditative character of the writing. Descartes is inviting us to join him in thinking certain things through, asking us to mull them over and see whether we agree. He is not making authoritative pronouncements. Just as he reserves the right to be the judge of what *he* should believe, so he puts you on the spot. You will have to be continually asking yourself, Do I agree with this or not? If not, why not? This familiar first-person style is quite different from most of medieval philosophy; it resembles Counter-Reformation texts such as Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* and Teresa of Ávila's popular meditation *The Interior Castle** and harks back even further to Augustine's *Confessions* in the late fourth century. Descartes is, as it were, having a conversation with himself, so the structure of *Meditation I* is dialectical: proposal, objection, reply, objection, reply. . . Try to distinguish the various "voices" in this internal dialogue.

Note that there are three stages in the "tearing down" of opinions and one principle running throughout. The principle is that we ought to withhold assent from anything uncertain, just as much as from what we see clearly to be false. This is simply a restatement of the first rule of his method but is of the greatest importance.† The three stages concern (1) the **senses**, (2) **dreams**, and (3) the **evil demon** hypothesis.

*Some scholars argue that Teresa's text, which was widely read throughout Europe in Descartes' youth, may have influenced both the form and the content of Descartes' own *Meditations*.

†A brief look back at the four rules of the method will be of use at this point. See p. 362. Following Aristotle, Aquinas had also noted that big mistakes come from small beginnings. Once, when a friend stumbled on an unusually high first step of a staircase, one of us formulated what came jokingly to be known as Norman's first law: Watch that first step; it's a big one—good advice for appraising philosophical systems. For an alternative to Descartes' view, see the critique by C. S. Peirce on pp. 596–597.

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- Q1. Aren't you strongly inclined to think, just like Descartes by the fire, that you can't deny that you are now reading this book, which is "right there" in your hands? Should you doubt it anyway?
 - Q2. What do you think of Descartes' rule that we shouldn't completely trust those who have cheated us even once? Does this rule apply to the senses?
 - Q3. Could you be dreaming right now? Explain.
 - Q4. What is the argument that even in dreams some things—for example, the truths of mathematics—are not illusory?
 - Q5. How does the thought of God, at *this* stage, seem to reinforce skeptical conclusions—even about arithmetic?*
-



"All that we see or seem
Is but a dream within a dream."

Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849)

Here Descartes avails himself of the techniques of the Pyrrhonists, who set argument against plausible argument until they find themselves no more inclined to judge one way than another. But he acknowledges that this equilibrium or suspension of judgment is difficult to achieve. "Habit" strongly inclines him to believe some of these things as "probable." Like Descartes, you almost certainly take it as *very* probable that you are now looking at a piece of paper, which is located a certain distance before your eyes, that you have eyes, and that two plus three really does equal five. And you almost certainly find it very hard *not* to believe these things. You probably find yourself so committed to them that you almost *can't* doubt them. But if Descartes is right so far, we know that we *should* doubt them. How can we overcome these habits? As a remedy against these habitual believings, Descartes determines *deliberately* (as an act of will) to suppose that all his prior beliefs are false.

*Review the consequences William of Ockham draws from the doctrine of God's omnipotence (pp. 336–337).

Q6. How does the hypothesis of the evil demon help?

Descartes now thinks that he has canvassed every possible reason for doubting. We cannot rely on our senses; we cannot even rely on our rational faculties for the simplest truths of mathematics, geometry, or logic. All our beliefs, it seems, are dissolved in the acid of skeptical doubt.

Q7. Before going on to *Meditation II*, ask yourself the question, Is there anything at all that I am *so certain* of that I could not *possibly* doubt it? (Meditate on this question awhile.)

Meditation II: On the Nature of the Human Mind, Which Is Better Known Than the Body

Yesterday's meditation has hurled me into doubts so great that I can neither ignore them nor think my way out of them. I am in turmoil, as if I have accidentally fallen into a whirlpool and can neither touch bottom nor swim to the safety of the surface. I will struggle, however, and try to follow the path that I started on yesterday. I will reject whatever is open to the slightest doubt just as though I have found it to be entirely false, and I will continue until I find something certain—or at least until I know for certain that nothing is certain. Archimedes required only one fixed and immovable point to move the whole earth from its place, and I too can hope for great things if I can find even one small thing that is certain and unshakeable.

I will suppose, then, that everything I see is unreal. I will believe that my memory is unreliable and that none of what it presents to me ever happened. I have no senses. Body, shape, extension, motion, and place are fantasies. What then is true? Perhaps just that nothing is certain.

But how do I know that there isn't something different from the things just listed that I do not have the slightest reason to doubt? Isn't there a God, or something like one, who puts my thoughts into me? But why should I say so when I may be the author of those thoughts? Well, isn't it at least the case that I am something? But I now am denying that I have senses and a body. But I stop here. For

what follows from these denials? Am I so bound to my body and to my senses that I cannot exist without them? I have convinced myself that there is nothing in the world—no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Doesn't it follow that I don't exist? No, surely I must exist if it's me who is convinced of something. But there is a deceiver, supremely powerful and cunning whose aim is to see that I am always deceived. But surely I exist, if I am deceived. Let him deceive me all he can, he will never make it the case that I am nothing while I think that I am something. Thus having fully weighed every consideration, I must finally conclude that the statement "I am, I exist" must be true whenever I state it or mentally consider it.

But I do not yet fully understand what this "I" is that must exist. I must guard against inadvertently taking myself to be something other than I am, thereby going wrong even in the knowledge that I put forward as supremely certain and evident. Hence, I will think once again about what I believed myself to be before beginning these meditations. From this conception, I will subtract everything challenged by the reasons for doubt that I produced earlier, until nothing remains except what is certain and indubitable.

What, then, did I formerly take myself to be? A man, of course. But what is a man? Should I say a rational animal? No, because then I would need to ask what an animal is and what it is to be rational. Thus, starting from a single question, I would sink into many that are more difficult, and I do not have the time to waste on such subtleties. Instead, I will look here at the thoughts that occurred to me spontaneously and naturally when I reflected on what I was. This first thought to occur to me was that I have a face, hands, arms, and all the other equipment (also found in corpses) which I call a body. The next thought to occur to me was that I take nourishment, move myself around, sense, and think—that I do things which I trace back to my soul. Either I didn't stop to think about what this soul was, or I imagined it to be a rarified air, or fire, or ether permeating the denser parts of my body. But, about physical objects, I didn't have any doubts whatever: I thought that I distinctly knew their nature. If I had tried to describe my

conception of this nature, I might have said this: “When I call something a physical object, I mean that it is capable of being bounded by a shape and limited to a place; that it can fill a space so as to exclude other objects from it; that it can be perceived by touch, sight, hearing, taste, and smell; that it can be moved in various ways, not by itself, but by something else in contact with it.” I judged that the powers of self-movement, of sensing, and of thinking did not belong to the nature of physical objects, and, in fact, I marveled that there were some physical objects in which these powers could be found.

But what should I think now, while supposing that a supremely powerful and “evil” deceiver completely devotes himself to deceiving me? Can I say that I have any of the things that I have attributed to the nature of physical objects? I concentrate, think, reconsider—but nothing comes to me; I grow tired of the pointless repetition. But what about the things that I have assigned to soul? Nutrition and self-movement? Since I have no body, these are merely illusions. Sensing? But I cannot sense without a body, and in sleep I’ve seemed to sense many things that I later realized I had not really sensed. Thinking? It comes down to this: Thought and thought alone cannot be taken away from me. I am, I exist. That much is certain. But for how long? As long as I think—for it may be that, if I completely stopped thinking, I would completely cease to exist. I am not now admitting anything unless it must be true, and I am therefore not admitting that I am anything at all other than a thinking thing—that is, a mind, soul, understanding, or reason (terms whose meaning I did not previously know). I know that I am a real, existing thing, but what kind of thing? As I have said, a thing that thinks.

What else? I will draw up mental images. I’m not the collection of organs called a human body. Nor am I some rarified gas permeating these organs, or air, or fire, or vapor, or breath—for I have supposed that none of these things exist. Still, I am something. But couldn’t it be that these things, which I do not yet know about and which I am therefore supposing to be nonexistent, really aren’t distinct from the “I” that I know to exist? I don’t know, and I’m not going to argue about it now. I can only form judgments on what I do know.

I know that I exist, and I ask what the “I” is that I know to exist. It’s obvious that this conception of myself doesn’t depend on anything that I do not yet know to exist and, therefore, that it does not depend on anything of which I can draw up a mental image. And the words “draw up” point to my mistake. I would truly be creative if I were to have a mental image of what I am, since to have a mental image is just to contemplate the shape or image of a physical object. I now know with certainty that I exist and at the same time that all images—and, more generally, all things associated with the nature of physical objects—may just be dreams. When I keep this in mind, it seems just as absurd to say “I use mental images to help me understand what I am” as it would to say “Now, while awake, I see something true—but, since I don’t yet see it clearly enough, I’ll go to sleep and let my dreams present it to me more clearly and truly.” Thus I know that none of the things that I can comprehend with the aid of mental images bear on my knowledge of myself. And I must carefully draw my mind away from such things if it is to see its own nature distinctly.

But what then am I? A thinking thing. And what is that? Something that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, and also senses and has mental images.

That’s quite a lot, if I really do all of these things. But don’t I? Isn’t it me who now doubts nearly everything, understands one thing, affirms this thing, refuses to affirm other things, wants to know much more, refuses to be deceived, has mental images (sometimes involuntarily), and is aware of many things “through his senses”? Even if I am always dreaming, and even if my creator does what he can to deceive me, isn’t it just as true that I do all these things as that I exist? Are any of these things distinct from my thought? Can any be said to be separate from me? That it’s me who doubts, understands, and wills is so obvious that I don’t see how it could be more evident. And it’s also me who has mental images. While it may be, as I am supposing, that absolutely nothing of which I have a mental image really exists, the ability to have mental images really does exist and is a part of my thought. Finally, it’s me who senses—or who

seems to gain awareness of physical objects through the senses. For example, I am now seeing light, hearing a noise, and feeling heat. These things are unreal, since I am dreaming. But it is still certain that I seem to see, to hear, and to feel. This seeming cannot be unreal, and it is what is properly called sensing. Strictly speaking, sensing is just thinking.

From this, I begin to learn a little about what I am. But I still can't stop thinking that I apprehend physical objects, which I picture in mental images and examine with my senses, much more distinctly than I know this unfamiliar "I," of which I cannot form a mental image. I think this, even though it would be astounding if I comprehended things which I've found to be doubtful, unknown, and alien to me more distinctly than the one which I know to be real: my self. But I see what's happening. My mind enjoys wandering, and it won't confine itself to the truth. I will therefore loosen the reigns on my mind for now so that later, when the time is right, I will be able to control it more easily.

Let's consider the things commonly taken to be the most distinctly comprehended: physical objects that we see and touch. Let's not consider physical objects in general, since general conceptions are very often confused. Rather, let's consider one, particular object. Take, for example, this piece of wax. It has just been taken from the honeycomb; it hasn't yet completely lost the taste of honey; it still smells of the flowers from which it was gathered; its color, shape, and size are obvious; it is hard, cold, and easy to touch; it makes a sound when rapped. In short, everything seems to be present in the wax that is required for me to know it as distinctly as possible. But, as I speak, I move the wax toward the fire; it loses what was left of its taste; it gives up its smell; it changes color; it loses its shape; it gets bigger; it melts; it heats up; it becomes difficult to touch; it no longer makes a sound when struck. Is it still the same piece of wax? We must say that it is: not one denies it or thinks otherwise. Then what was there in the wax that I comprehended so distinctly? Certainly nothing that I reached with my senses—for, while everything having to do with taste, smell, sight, touch, and hearing has changed, the same piece of wax remains.

Perhaps what I distinctly knew was neither the sweetness of honey, nor the fragrance of flowers, nor a sound, but a physical object that once appeared to me one way and now appears differently. But what exactly is it of which I now have a mental image? Let's pay careful attention, remove everything that doesn't belong to the wax, and see what's left. Nothing is left except an extended, flexible, and changeable thing. But what is it for this thing to be flexible and changeable? Is it just that the wax can go from round to square and then to triangular, as I have mentally pictured? Of course not. Since I understand that the wax's shape can change in innumerable ways, and since I can't run through all the changes in my imagination, my comprehension of the wax's flexibility and changeability cannot have been produced by my ability to have mental images. And what about the thing that is extended? Are we also ignorant of its extension? Since the extension of the wax increases when the wax melts, increases again when the wax boils, and increases still more when the wax gets hotter, I will be mistaken about what the wax is unless I believe that it can undergo more changes in extension than I can ever encompass with mental images. I must therefore admit that I do not have an image of what the wax is—that I grasp what it is with only my mind. (While I am saying this about a particular piece of wax, it is even more clearly true about wax in general.) What then is this piece of wax that I grasp only with my mind? It is something that I see, feel, and mentally picture—exactly what I believed it to be at the outset. But it must be noted that, despite the appearances, my grasp of the wax is not visual, tactile, or pictorial. Rather, my grasp of the wax is the result of a purely mental inspection, which can be imperfect and confused, as it was once, or clear and distinct, as it is now, depending on how much attention I pay to the things of which the wax consists.

I'm surprised by how prone my mind is to error. Even when I think to myself non-verbally, language stands in my way, and common usage comes close to deceiving me. For, when the wax is present, we say that we see the wax itself, not that we infer its presence from its color and shape.

I'm inclined to leap from this fact about language to the conclusion that I learn about the wax by eyesight rather than by purely mental inspection. But, if I happen to look out my window and see men walking in the street, I naturally say that I see the men just as I say that I see the wax. What do I really see, however, but hats and coats that could be covering robots? I *judge* that there are men. Thus I comprehend with my judgment, which is in my mind, objects that I once believed myself to see with my eyes.

One who aspires to wisdom above that of the common man disgraces himself by deriving doubt from common ways of speaking. Let's go on, then, to ask when I most clearly and perfectly grasped what the wax is. Was it when I first looked at the wax and believed my knowledge of it to come from the external senses—or at any rate from the so-called “common sense,” the power of having mental images? Or is it now, after I have carefully studied what the wax is and how I come to know it? Doubt would be silly here. For what was distinct in my original conception of the wax? How did that conception differ from that had by animals? When I distinguish the wax from its external forms—when I “undress” it and view it “naked”—there may still be errors in my judgments about it, but I couldn't possibly grasp the wax in this way without a human mind.

What should I say about this mind—or, in other words, about myself? (I am not now admitting that there is anything to me but a mind.) What is this “I” that seems to grasp the wax so distinctly? Don't I know myself much more truly and certainly, and also much more distinctly and plainly, than I know the wax? For, if I base my judgment that the wax exists on the fact that I see it, my seeing it much more obviously implies that I exist. It's possible that what I see is not really wax, and it's even possible that I don't have eyes with which to see—but it clearly is not possible that, when I see (or, what now amounts to the same thing, when I think I see), the “I” that thinks is not a real thing. Similarly, if I base my judgment that the wax exists on the fact that I feel it, the same fact makes it obvious that I exist. If I base my judgment that the wax exists on the fact that I have a mental

image of it or on some other fact of this sort, the same thing can obviously be said. And what I've said about the wax applies to everything else that is outside me. Moreover, if I seem to grasp the wax more distinctly when I detect it with several senses than when I detect it with just sight or touch, I must know myself even more distinctly—for every consideration that contributes to my grasp of the piece of wax or to my grasp of any other physical object serves better to reveal the nature of my mind. Besides, the mind has so much in it by which it can make its conception of itself distinct that what comes to it from physical objects hardly seems to matter.

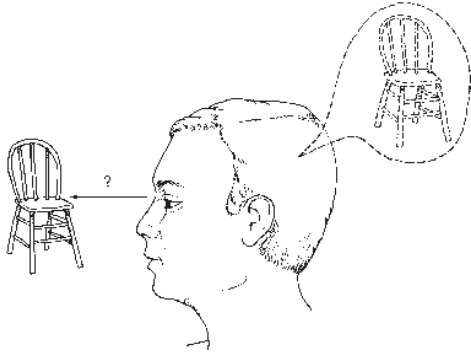
And now I have brought myself back to where I wanted to be. I now know that physical objects are grasped, not by the senses or the power of having mental images, but by understanding alone. And, since I grasp physical objects in virtue of their being understandable rather than in virtue of their being tangible or visible, I know that I can't grasp anything more easily or plainly than my mind. But, since it takes time to break old habits of thought, I should pause here to allow the length of my contemplation to impress the new thoughts more deeply into my memory.

Commentary and Questions

Descartes seems to have gotten nowhere by doubting. What to do? He resolves to press on, suspecting that the terrors of skepticism can be overcome only by enduring them to the end. The particular horror, of course, is that all our beliefs might be false—that nowhere would they connect at all with reality. If Descartes has carried us with him to this point, we know that we have lots of ideas and beliefs, but whether any one of them represents something that really *exists* seems quite uncertain. Perhaps they are just webs of illusion, like those spun by a master magician—or the evil demon.

Descartes here presents a pattern of thought that deserves a name. Let us call it the representational theory of knowledge and perception, or the **representational theory** for short. The basic ideas of this theory are very widely shared in modern philosophy. We can distinguish five points:

1. We have no immediate or direct access to things in the world, only to the world of our ideas.*
2. “Ideas” must be understood broadly to include all the contents of the mind, including perceptions, images, memories, concepts, beliefs, intentions, and decisions.
3. These ideas serve as *representations* of things other than themselves.
4. Much of what these ideas represent they represent as “out there,” or “external” to the mind containing them.
5. It is in principle possible for ideas to represent these things correctly, but they may also be false and misleading.



In *Meditation I*, Descartes draws a certain consequence of the representational theory. It seems that mind and world could be disconnected in a perplexing way, that even the most solid ideas might represent things all wrong—or maybe even not represent anything at all! This possibility, foreshadowed by the ancient skeptics and by William of Ockham in his reflections on God’s omnipotence, provokes thinkers to try to find a remedy. What we need is a bridge across the chasm between mind and world, and it is clear that it will have to be built by inference and argument. We want *good reasons* to believe that our ideas represent the “external” world truly. But the good reasons must be of a peculiar sort. We have to start this construction

*The American philosopher John Searle calls this view that we only perceive our *ideas* of objects “the greatest single disaster in the history of philosophy over the past four centuries.” In *Mind: A Brief Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 23.

project while isolated on one side, restricted in our choice of materials to those available there. It is from the vantage point of the mind that we try to stretch the girders of our argument across the gulf to the world.

We will examine Descartes’ effort to build such a rational bridge. The difficulty of that task is emphasized in the dramatic rehearsal of skeptical worries about knowledge in *Meditation I*. And we can now see that these worries hover around the representational theory. The gulf between mind and external reality seems immense.* We might remember Archimedes, who says, “Give me a lever long enough, and a place on which to rest it, and I can move the earth.” Descartes thinks that if he can find just one certainty, he might, like Archimedes, do marvels.

Q8. To what certainty does Descartes’ methodical doubt lead? Is he right about that?†

The principle “I think, therefore I am” is often referred to as the *cogito*, from the Latin “I think,” and we will use that shorthand expression from time to time. It is worth emphasizing that in the *cogito* Descartes has an example of *knowledge*, of knowledge about *reality*, and so of *metaphysical* knowledge. He has thrown the first plank of his bridge across the chasm.‡

Note that Descartes rejects the standard, long-accepted way of answering the question, What am I? (p. 369). According to a tradition stretching back to Socrates (and codified by Aristotle), the

*Other thinkers after Descartes also wrestle with this problem. Locke recognizes the gulf but papers it over, Berkeley settles down on one side of it, Hume despairs of a solution, Kant redefines the problem so as to make the gulf (partially) disappear, Hegel denies there is a gulf at all, and Kierkegaard opens it up again. The problem is not dead today.

†Descartes’ central idea here is anticipated by Augustine in his refutation of the skeptics. See pp. 267–268.

‡Compare Descartes’ *cogito* to Avicenna’s “Flying Man” argument (p. 304). Contrast both Descartes’ and Avicenna’s arguments with the Buddhist arguments for the principle of *anātman* (pp. 41–45).

way to answer such a question is to give a *definition*. The traditional way to define something will tell you (a) what *genus* it belongs to and (b) the *difference* between it and other things in that genus. Not surprisingly, this is called *definition by genus and difference*. A human being is said to belong to the genus *animal*; and the difference between a human and other animals is that a human is *rational*. Human beings, Aristotle says, are *rational animals*.

Descartes objects to such a definition because it simply calls for more definitions; you need next a definition of *animal* and a definition for *rational*. Then, presumably, you will require definitions for the terms used to define *them*. And so on.

This whole process has to come to ground somewhere. There must be some terms, Descartes thinks, that do not need definition of this sort, but whose meaning can just be “seen.” These will be the *simple* terms, from which more complex terms can be built up. We see in Descartes’ rejection of the traditional definition procedure an application of the second and third rules of his method. He is searching for something so simple, clear, and distinct that it just presents itself without any need for definition. He is looking for something **self-evident**. If that can be found, he can use it as a foundation on which to build more complex truths.

Q9. What, then, does Descartes conclude that he is?

Note that Descartes briefly considers the view that he may after all *be* a body, or some such thing, even though he does not *know* he is (p. 370).^{*} But he does not try to refute it here; that proof comes in *Meditation VI*. Here he is interested in what he knows that he *is*—not in what he can infer that he *is not*.

Q10. Why does Descartes rule out the use of the imagination in answering the question, What am I?

Q11. What is included in “thinking,” as Descartes understands the term? (See p. 370.) Note how broad the term is for him.

Q12. Suppose you feel certain that you see a cat on the mat. Is it certain that there is a cat on the mat? What, in this situation, *can* you be certain of?

How difficult it is to stay within the bounds of what we know for certain! As Descartes says, his “mind enjoys wandering.” And so it is with us. We, too, keep slipping back into the error of thinking that we know *sensible* things best—this desk, this computer keyboard, this hand. (Do you find that too?)

It is to cure this inclination to rely on the senses that Descartes considers the bit of wax. Read that passage once more (pp. 371–372). All the sensible qualities by means of which we recognize the wax can change. But we still judge that it is the same wax. What does that mean?

The distinction between *ordinary perception* and *judgment* is crucial for Descartes. It is illustrated by the hats and coats we see through the window. We say that we *see* men passing, but this is inaccurate, for they may be just robots dressed like men. What is actually happening in ordinary perception is that our intellect is drawing an *inference* on the basis of certain *data* (supplied by the senses) and issuing a judgment. Judging is an activity of the mind—indeed, as we’ll see in *Meditation IV*, of the will.

Perceiving, then, is not a purely passive registration by the senses. Implicit in all perception is judgment, or *giving assent*. In ordinary perception, these judgments are apt to be obscure, confused, and just plain wrong. But fortunately they can be corrected by the application of ideas that are clear and distinct. (These points will be crucial in *Meditation IV*, where Descartes explains how it is possible for us to err.)

With respect to the bit of wax, the moral is that it is “grasped, not by the senses or the power of having mental images, but by the understanding alone.” When based wholly on sense, our perception is “imperfect and confused.” When directed, however, to “the things of which the wax consists” (the mathematically determinable simples of extension, figure, and motion), knowledge of the wax can be *clear and distinct*.

^{*}This is the view that Thomas Hobbes urges against Descartes. See “Minds and Motives” in Chapter 18.



Both inferences seem to be correct. What reason is there to prefer Bridget's formulation?

Now we can understand why Descartes introduces the wax example. If even here knowledge cannot be found in sensation, but only in a “purely mental inspection,” then we should recognize that knowledge of *what we are* must also be approached in this way. Our tendency to think of ourselves as what we can *sense* of ourselves—these hands, this head, these eyes—is considerably undermined. Indeed, I must know myself “much more truly and certainly” even than the wax.

There follows a remarkable conclusion: “I can’t grasp anything more easily or plainly than my mind.” (What would Freud have said to that?)

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- Q13. What qualities, then, belong to the wax essentially? (Look again at the basic principles of Descartes’ physics on pp. 361–362.)
- Q14. Why is our imagination incapable of grasping these qualities of the wax? By what faculty do we grasp it?
- Q15. How does the wax example help to cure our habitual inclination to trust the senses?
- Q16. How does our language tend to mislead us?
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Meditation III: On God’s Existence

I will now close my eyes, plug my ears, and withdraw all my senses. I will rid my thoughts of the images of physical objects—or, since that’s beyond

me, I’ll write those images off as empty illusions. Talking with myself and looking more deeply into myself, I’ll try gradually to come to know myself better. I am a thinking thing—a thing that doubts, affirms, denies, understands a few things, is ignorant of many things, wills, and refuses. I also sense and have mental images. For, as I’ve noted, even though the things of which I have sensations or mental images may not exist outside me, I’m certain that the modifications of thought called sensations and mental images exist in me insofar as they are just modifications of thought.

That’s a summary of all that I really know—or, at any rate, of all that I’ve so far noticed that I know. I now will examine more carefully whether there are other things in me that I have not yet discovered. I’m certain that I am a thinking thing. Then don’t I know what’s needed for me to be certain of other things? In this first knowledge, there is nothing but a clear and distinct grasp of what I affirm, and this grasp surely would not suffice to make me certain if it could ever happen that something I grasped so clearly and distinctly was false. Accordingly, I seem to be able to establish the general rule that whatever I clearly and distinctly grasp is true.

But, in the past, I’ve accepted as completely obvious and certain many thoughts that I later found to be dubious. What were these thoughts about? The earth, the sky, the stars, and other objects of sense. But what did I clearly grasp about these objects? Only that ideas or thoughts of them appeared in my mind. Even now, I don’t deny that these ideas occur in me. But there was something else that I used to affirm—something that I used to believe myself to grasp clearly but did not really grasp at all: I affirmed that there were things besides me, that the ideas in me came from these things, and that the ideas perfectly resembled these things. Either I erred here, or I reached a true judgment that wasn’t justified by the strength of my understanding.

But what follows? When I considered very simple and easy points of arithmetic or geometry—such as that two and three together make five—didn’t I see them clearly enough to affirm their truth? My only reason for judging that I ought to