

Greeks Bearing Gifts

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The ancient Greeks were not the first civilization in the west, but they made such immense contributions to art, architecture, science, politics, warfare, education, poetry, history, and philosophy that many discussions of these subjects, even today, begin with them. Until the twentieth century, when eastern religion and philosophy began to make a major impact, western thought had two roots: the Greek and the Biblical. Some thinkers tried to synthesize these traditions in various ways. Others saw an antithesis between them and sought to be consistent with one or the other.

Although I greatly admire the creative brilliance of the Greek thinkers, I believe it is a serious mistake to adopt their worldviews or to try to synthesize their thinking with the worldview of the Bible. The Greeks and the biblical writers did explore many common themes: God and gods, the nature of reality, the origin of the world, human nature, wisdom, knowledge, ethics, politics, even salvation. We can still learn much from the Greek discussions of these topics. But the ancient wariness about “Greeks bearing gifts” should be applied to the study of Greek worldviews.¹ The chief benefit in studying Greek thought is to understand better the philosophical and cultural consequences of rejecting biblical theism.

The word “rejecting” may seem harsh. Did the Greeks have access to Scripture? And if not, how could they have rejected it? The early Christian writer Justin Martyr thought that Plato got the idea for his Demiurge (a godlike figure in the dialogue *Timaeus*) from the writings of Moses. Justin’s hypothesis is historically unlikely, and it is a symptom of Justin’s overestimation of the coherence between Platonism and the Bible. But whatever we may say about the commerce in ideas between Greece and the near east, the Bible does tell us that the Greeks, like all people, had the resources for formulating a theistic worldview. According to Rom. 1:18-23,

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and

¹ The phrase “beware of Greeks bearing gifts” paraphrases text from Virgil’s *Aeneid* and other sources. The allusion is to the Trojan horse. The Greeks sent a huge wooden horse as a supposed gift to the Trojans. After it was brought into the city, Greek soldiers emerged from the wooden structure, wreaking havoc.

exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

So Paul says that all people, Greeks included, know the biblical God, based on his revelation in creation. Yet they rejected this knowledge and came to worship images of created things.

The same Paul once visited Athens and found it “full of idols” (Acts 17:16). He preached there to an audience that included Epicurean and Stoic philosophers and concluded by demanding their repentance for the sin of idolatry. Actually, neither the Epicureans nor the Stoics had much use for the traditional Greek gods. But Paul evidently believed that Stoic materialistic pantheism and Epicurean atomism were no better than the worship of Zeus and Apollo. The world is not governed by impersonal fate (Stoicism) or by impersonal (occasionally random) movements of atoms (Epicurus), but by a personal God who “has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” (verse 31). When Paul said this, some mocked, some withheld judgment, and a few believed.

The biblical God tolerates no rivals. It is wrong to worship Baal, Moloch, Dagon, Marduc, Zeus, Apollo, or Aphrodite. It is also wrong to regard the natural order as absolute, as an uncreated, self-sufficient reality. For both the “religious”² and the “secular” alternatives deny God the worship due to him alone. In this sense, both the materialistic Stoics and Epicureans and the spiritualistic Plato are idolaters.

Greek Worldviews: One and Many

We sometimes speak of “Greek philosophy” or even “Greek thought” as if it represented a single worldview. But at first glance at least there seem to be vast disagreements among the Greek thinkers. Besides the disagreement between materialists and spiritualists, we note that Homer and Hesiod believed in the traditional gods; Heraclitus, Xenophanes and Epicurus had little use for them. Parmenides believed that nothing changes, Heraclitus that everything changes—well, almost everything. Plato despised sense-experience; Heraclitus, the Stoics, and Epicurus affirmed it. Protagoras denied, and Plato affirmed, the possibility of objective knowledge. Parmenides and Plotinus believed that reality is a perfect oneness; Democritus and Epicurus believed that the world was irreducibly plural. Epicurus advised people to avoid politics; the Stoics encouraged such involvement. The tragedians and Stoics were fatalists; the Epicureans were not.

² I put “religious” in quotes, for in a larger sense all worldviews are religious, even those called “secular.” A person’s religious faith is his “ultimate concern” (Paul Tillich), the passion or allegiance that governs his life, whether or not he expresses that faith in ceremonial rites.

But the Greeks had much in common. First of all, none believed in the God of the Bible, despite the revelation of God to them mentioned earlier. None of the Greek philosophers even considered the theistic worldview, so far as we can tell from their writings. Since the theistic hypothesis was excluded from the outset, the Greek thinkers had the common task of explaining the world without reference to the biblical God, that is, of explaining the world by means of the world.

Unbelief in the biblical God meant also that the human mind had to do its work without help from any higher mind. Anaxagoras did teach that the world was directed by *nous* (mind). But, according to Plato's *Apology*, Socrates expressed his disappointment that Anaxagoras didn't make much use of this idea. Nor did Heraclitus, who taught that the world was ordered by *logos* (word or reason). Aristotle also believed in a higher mind, the Unmoved Mover: a being whose entire activity consists in thinking about his own thoughts. But this god did not reveal his thoughts to Aristotle. Rather, it is a hypothesis of Aristotle's own reason and thus an idol.

To consider the issue more broadly: none of the Greeks believed that the world was created and directed by a personal supreme (absolute) being. The idea of an absolute being who is also personal is virtually unique to the Bible.³ Hinduism, like Aristotle and Plato, teaches the existence of an absolute being, but that being (like those of the philosophers) is impersonal. The Homeric gods (as those of the Canaanites and other polytheists) are personal, but they are not absolute. Only the biblical God is both absolute and personal.⁴

The Greek Way of Worship

In Greek religion, the absolute was fate, sometimes symbolized by the three women ("fates") who together weave and terminate the fabric of human life,⁵ but literally impersonal. The tragic heroes of Aeschylus and Sophocles are propelled by fate to transgress the proper boundaries of human life, whereupon they are destroyed, again, by fate. The dictates of fate may agree with those of morality in some measure; but not necessarily. Fate is an impersonal force like gravity or electricity, and even the gods are subject to it.

³ I say "virtually" to interject a note of caution. I have not studied all the religions and the philosophies of the world so as to prove the negative proposition that no other worldview includes a personal absolute. But I do believe this generalization is true. Scripture itself teaches that idolatry is universal among fallen people. God's revelation and grace, revealed only through the Gospel of Christ, are the necessary antidote.

⁴ The god of Islam is absolute, and is often presented as personal. But (1) this emphasis comes ultimately from the Bible, from Mohammed's respect for the "peoples of the book." (2) Muslim theology compromises absolute-personality theism when it takes divine predestination in a fatalistic sense and when it presents its god as a super-transcendent being about whom nothing may truthfully be said in human language.

⁵ Clotho spun the thread, Lachesis measured it, and Atropos cut it.

Dooyeweerd says that the older, pre-Homeric Greek religion

...deified the ever-flowing stream of organic life, which issues from mother earth and cannot be bound to any individual form. In consequence, the deities of this religion are amorphous. It is from this shapeless stream of ever-flowing organic life that the generations of perishable beings originate periodically, whose existence, limited by a corporeal form, is subjected to the horrible fate of death, designated by the Greek terms *anangke* or *heimarmene tuche*. This existence in a limiting form was considered an injustice since it is obliged to sustain itself at the cost of other beings so that the life of one is the death of another. Therefore all fixation of life in an individual figure is avenged by the merciless fate of death in the order of time.⁶

He later describes the “central motive” of this religion as “that of the shapeless stream of life eternally flowing throughout the process of birth and decline of all that exists in a corporeal form.”⁷

For the tragedians, however, fate governs not only life and death, but the rest of life as well. A fate that governs birth and death must govern all the events leading to birth and death. But then how can we reconcile such a comprehensive fatalism with the amorphousness of the stream of life? One of these, it seems, will have to yield to the other. Maintaining both leads to an unstable worldview. And neither fate nor the “shapeless stream” gives any meaning to the historical process. Things happen just because they happen (the shapeless stream) or because they were made to happen (fate), for no rational or moral purpose. We often draw a contrast between fatalistic worldviews and worldviews based on chance; but in the end these coincide: Both leave history meaningless and human beings helpless. Both types of worldview present a world that is not governed by purpose, goodness, or love.

But gradually the old nature-religion gave way to the religion of the Olympian gods. The transformation was not too great, for the gods were basically personifications of the various forces of nature: Poseidon of the sea, Hades of the underworld, Apollo of the sun, Hephaestus of fire, Demeter of the earth, and so on. Then the gods became patrons of human activities: Hera of marriage, Ares of war, Athena of education, Artemis of the hunt, Aphrodite of love, Hermes of commerce, etc.⁸ Zeus was the most powerful, but not all-powerful. He had a father and mother, the Titans Cronos and Rhea. He gained knowledge by consulting the fates and suffered irrational fits of jealousy and rage.

⁶ Herman Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought* (Nutley, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960), 39.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ One is reminded of how the later church appointed dead saints as patrons of human endeavors.

Dooyeweerd describes this “younger Olympian religion” as “the religion of form, measure and harmony.”⁹ The Olympians lived far above the “shapeless stream of life.” So worship of these gods became the official religion of the Greek city-states who, of course, preferred order to chaos. Apollo especially became the embodiment of orderliness. But “in their private life the Greeks continued to hold to the old earthly gods of life and death.”¹⁰

Dionysus, god of wine and revelry, was one of the Olympian gods, but not one honored much by Homer or by the politicians. For his worship was an intentional violation of the form, order, and structure: a religion of drunken revelry, of sexual orgy. So Dionysus, for all his Olympian transcendence, came to be seen as the patron of the old religion, the religion of shapelessness, of chaos.

The Olympian religion improved somewhat on the older one by providing some meaning to history, some reason why things happen as they do. Now, not only impersonal fate, or the chaotic life stream, but rational thought, the thinking of the gods, became part of the process. Yet ultimately history was still in the hands of irrational fate, which was superior to the gods, and of the stream of life, over which the gods had little control.

Both the old religion and the Olympian religion, therefore, have pessimistic implications for human life. Human beings are essentially pawns, or fate, of chaos, and/or of the Olympians. Unlike the God of the Bible, none of these elements of Greek religion has a moral character, nor is any of these beings “a very present help in trouble” (Ps. 46:1).

Philosophy, the New Religion

A new movement began around 600 B.C., when some thinkers began to try to understand the world without the help of religion. These were called philosophers, lovers of wisdom. There had been wisdom teachers earlier in the ancient world, in Egypt, Babylon, and elsewhere. The wisdom literature in Scripture (Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes) is similar to extra-biblical wisdom literature in many ways, but, unlike it, the biblical wisdom teachers declare that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Ps. 111:10, Prov. 9:10, 15:33; compare Eccl. 12:13).

What distinguishes the Greek philosophers from the Greek religions and from other ancient wisdom teachers is their insistence on the supremacy of human reason, what I shall call rational autonomy. Wisdom teachers in other cultures treasured the traditions of fathers and mothers, the teachers of past generations (as in Prov. 1:8-9, 2:1-22, 3:1-2, etc.) They saw themselves as collectors and guardians of such traditions, occasionally adding something, and passing on the collection to their sons and daughters. The philosophers,

⁹ Op. cit., 40.

¹⁰ Ibid.

however, wanted to accept nothing on the basis of tradition. Though Parmenides and Plato occasionally resorted to myth, they considered mythological explanations second best and in the end rationally inadequate. Reason must be autonomous, self-authenticating, subject to no standards other than its own.

Though the philosophers disagreed on much, they all agreed that the good life was the life of reason.¹¹ To them reason, not the fear of the Lord, was the beginning of wisdom. As such, for them, reason itself became something of a god, though they did not describe it as such: an object of ultimate allegiance, the ultimate standard of truth and falsity, of right and wrong.

The philosophers' attitudes toward the traditional Greek religion, therefore, ranged from ridicule (Xenophanes) to genial acceptance (Epicurus, who affirmed belief in the gods but denied that they caused anything to happen on earth). Socrates, considered the most admirable model of the philosophic temperament, was executed for his failure to believe in the gods of Athens, as well as for corrupting the youth.

A Survey of Greek Philosophy

But we must now look at the philosophers more specifically and in roughly chronological order. Note in the following discussion some themes that will apply to most all the individual figures, some of which I have mentioned already: (1) the supreme authority of human reason, (2) the consequent attempt to make rational claims about the nature of *all* reality, (3) the consequent claim that all reality is basically one, but (4) the continuing problem of dualism: the antagonism between impersonal fate and the shapeless stream of life. And (5) the shapeless stream challenges the power of reason to grasp reality. The philosophers try to deal with this problem in various ways, without compromising their fundamental allegiance to autonomous reason. But (6) the philosophers' inability to maintain the rationality of their enterprise indicates failure of their attempt to understand the world autonomously. For in the end we must conclude that they have set themselves an impossible task: imposing autonomous reason on an essentially irrational world. (7) These difficulties invalidate much of what they say about the soul, ethics, and society.

The Milesians

We have only fragments of the teachings and writings of the first group of Greek philosophers, named for their city, Miletus, in Asia Minor. Most of what we

¹¹ The sophists of the fifth century (Protagoras, Gorgias, Thrasymachus) and the skeptics of the later Academy (Pyrrho, Timon, Arcesilaus) denied the possibility of knowing objective truth. But (paradoxically) they offered rational arguments for this conclusion. They never considered abandoning reason. For Plotinus, ultimate knowledge is mystical, not rational. But the path to mystical experience is rational. For him (also paradoxically) it is reason that teaches us how to transcend reason.

know about them comes from other writers, particularly Aristotle, who were not entirely sympathetic. Still, it is less important for us to know what these philosophers actually said or meant than to know how they were understood by later thinkers; for it was by these later interpretations that the Milesians influenced the history of philosophy.¹²

Thales (approximately 620-546 BC) taught that “all is water” and that “all things are full of gods.” Anaximenes (d. 528 BC) believed that “all is air.” Anaximander (610-546) taught that “all is indefinite” (*apeiron*, boundless). To understand this, it helps to remember that the Greeks in general thought the universe consisted of four elements, earth, air, fire, and water. So the Milesians were seeking to discover which of these, if any, was the fundamental one, the element of the elements, the basic constitution of the universe.

So they sought answers to three questions that continue to be of interest to scientists and philosophers: (1) what is the fundamental nature of reality? (2) where did everything come from? (3) how did the universe get to be as it is?

For Thales, (1) the fundamental nature of the universe is water. That is the essence of everything, what everything really is, despite appearances to the contrary. (2) Everything came from water and will return to water. (3) The world developed out of water by various natural processes. Perhaps by saying that “all things are full of gods” he meant to indicate that these natural processes were governed by thought or mind in some way.

Anaximenes thought similarly about air, doubtless provoking arguments about whether water or air was the most plentiful element, the element most able to account for other phenomena, etc. For him, the diversity in reality results from the condensation and rarefaction of air. Heraclitus would later make the case for fire. To my knowledge, nobody hypothesized the primacy of earth, perhaps because earth seemed to be less changeable than the others. Anaximander believed that none of the four elements could explain the variety of the world, so he said the essence of things was a substance without a definite nature (in that sense “unbounded”) that takes on limitations to create the visible world.

Commentators sometimes describe the Greek philosophers as children looking at the world in wonder. This picture, however, is far from that of the apostle Paul, who, in the passage I quoted earlier, says that those without the biblical God are suppressing the truth in unrighteousness. It is hard not to sympathize with Thales and his colleagues as they forge ahead to look at the world in a new way. We cannot hold against them the fact that modern science

¹² Similarly in regard to other thinkers discussed in this essay. For the most part I shall be assuming traditional interpretations of these thinkers, even though I know that many of these are controversial among specialists. I cannot here enter into detailed interpretative controversies, and I think the traditional interpretations tell us the nature of the impact these philosophers have had upon later history.

has transcended their perspectives. But if we consider seriously what they are doing, we may evaluate their work differently.

Thales' statement that all is water does not arise from what we would call scientific research. Doubtless Thales' observations influenced his view: the vast amount of water in the world, the need of water to sustain life, etc. But the "all" goes far beyond any possible observations. It is the language of a man sitting in an armchair, dogmatically asserting what the whole universe must be like. The "all"-statements of these thinkers represent human reason vastly exceeding its limits. This is rationalism, an awe over the power of reason that turns it into a god.

On the other hand, water (and air, and even more obviously the "boundless") represents the "shapeless stream" of the old religion. Water moves in waves and currents. It cannot be leashed or controlled. There is a randomness about it that calls in question the power of reason to give an account of it. Thales' statement about everything being "full of gods" may be an attempt to give a rational direction to the random flow. But that raises further questions: are the gods, too, made of water? If not, then his hypothesis fails to explain "all." If they are water, then they, like Zeus and Apollo, are victims of the flowing stream, not controllers of it. And we cannot ignore the fact that on Thales' basis the human mind, too, is water. My thoughts are essentially waves and wavelets, occurrences that just happen to take place in the movements of my inner sea. So why should we think that one wave is more true than another, more valid, more illuminating, more profound? Mechanistic natural processes can account for waves, but they cannot account for the truth or falsity of human thoughts.

So Thales is an extreme rationalist, whose worldview calls his reason in question. He is both a rationalist and an irrationalist. He calls to mind Cornelius Van Til's philosophical reading of Genesis 3: Our mother Eve was faced with two claims. God told her she would die from eating the fruit. Satan told her she would not die, but would become as God. Eve should have disregarded Satan's claim at the outset. Instead, she asserted her own right to make the final judgment (rationalism). But this claim presupposed that God did not exist as the ultimate determiner of truth and meaning, and that therefore there was no absolute truth (irrationalism). Van Til says that every unbeliever is caught in this tension between rationalism and irrationalism. Some emphasize the former, others the latter. But when they get uneasy with one, they leap to the other.¹³ I shall mention this pattern with other Greek philosophers. I mention it, not just as a fact of possible interest, but to show that the main inadequacies of Greek philosophy, in the end, are not to be blamed on primitive science, incomplete observations, or

¹³ Van Til's discussion can be found in his *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (No place of publication listed: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 41-71. For his application to Plato, see Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (No place of publication listed: Den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1969), 14-55. Cf. my *Cornelius Van Til: an Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1995), 231-38 and passim.

remediable logical mistakes, but from religious rebellion. These thinkers all absolutize the human intellect, but their nontheistic worldviews call the intellect itself into question.

The Milesians' epistemological failure is linked to a metaphysical failure. For the "all" of the Milesians excludes the biblical relation between creator and creature. If all is water, then God, if he exists, is also water, and we are water. There is no fundamental difference between him and us. God and the world are one stuff. There is no creation. God has no intrinsic sovereignty over the world. The Milesians' scheme, therefore, rules out the biblical God. And if the biblical God is the only possible ground of meaning or truth in the world, the Milesians also rule out meaning and truth.

Heraclitus (525-475)

Heraclitus, who lived in Ephesus, not far from Miletus, thought that the most fundamental element was fire, the most dynamic and changeable of the four. But he was less concerned with identifying the fundamental substance than with describing the pervasiveness of change, with the ways in which fire changes into other things and others into still others. He is often quoted as saying "You cannot step in the same river twice," meaning that when you step in the second time, you are stepping into different waters. Since the waters are different, it is a different river. Actually, what he said was this: "On those stepping into rivers staying the same, other and other waters flow."¹⁴ The river says the same, but the waters constantly change. Evidently his view was that the elements of things are indeed constantly changing, but such change makes it possible for sameness to occur at other levels of reality.¹⁵

So the world is constantly changing, but somehow these changes occur in regular patterns. If absolutely everything was in constant change, rational thought would be impossible. For rational thought requires stability: objects that remain themselves long enough to be examined. Horses must remain horses, houses houses, people people, rivers rivers.

The source of stability Heraclitus called the *logos*, probably the first philosophically significant use of this term. *Logos* has a variety of meanings: word, reason, rational account. Heraclitus believes in a principle governing change, to keep that change within rational bounds.

We can take Heraclitus's philosophy as common sense. When we look at the world, nothing seems to be perfectly at rest. Everything moves and changes,

¹⁴ Diels, Hermann and Walther Kranz. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (Zurich: Weidmann, 1985) DK22B12. Translated by Daniel W. Graham in "Heraclitus," in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/h/heraclit.htm>. I have inserted a comma for clarification.

¹⁵ See Daniel W. Graham, *Ibid.*

even if ever so slightly. Yet there is enough stability that we can talk about rivers, horses, houses, people, and many other things. The question is whether Heraclitus sheds any light on this change and stability. To say that there is a logos is to say that the stability in the world must have a source. But what is that source? Is logos really an explanation of anything, or is it just a label for an unknown? Heraclitus's writings are paradoxical, multi-layered, full of symbols. They are fascinating, but in the end it just isn't clear (to me, at least) what he is trying to tell us.

We do see here another assertion of the Greek rationalism in the logos. Reason must be our guide, Heraclitus tells us, even if we don't see how it can be reliable. Rationality must exist, not only in our minds, but as an aspect of the universe. But he thus invokes reason, in effect, by an act of faith. On the other hand, the changing flux amounts to irrationalism. For Heraclitus virtually concedes that reason cannot deal with reality unless it is somehow constant. But at the elemental levels, reality is anything but constant. Yet, rationalistically, he tries to develop a rational analysis of the elemental change.

Like the Milesians, Heraclitus rejects biblical theism and therefore the one who originates and sustains change. He is left with a world that is *somehow* changing and a rational constancy that is *somehow* there. The God who alone can give meaning to constancy and change is not a part of Heraclitus's philosophy.

Parmenides (510-430, approx.)

Parmenides, who lived in Elea in southern Italy, agreed with Heraclitus that reasoning requires something changeless. So, swinging 180 degrees from Heraclitus, he denied the existence of change altogether. He wrote a poem describing an encounter with a goddess, who reveals to him that "Being is." The goddess, however, does not deliver this revelation on her own authority, but rather appeals to reason as a properly philosophical goddess should do.¹⁶

"Being is" means that nothing can change from what it "is" to what it "is not." Red cannot change to green, for then red would be changing into non-red, or non-green would be changing into green. And how can that be? Where does the green come from, if the previous state is non-green? So change cannot be real. It must be an illusion.

¹⁶ Parmenides is usually considered a follower of the religious teacher Xenophanes (570-475) who rejected the Olympian gods in favor of a kind of pantheistic monism. Parmenides' "Being" is roughly equivalent to Xenophanes' god.

Indeed, the very idea of “nonbeing” must be rejected. There is no change from nonbeing to being, for there is no such thing as nonbeing. Nonbeing simply is not. Similarly, non-red, non-green, and all other negative expressions.¹⁷

What is the real world, then? Parmenides tries to describe what a world would be like without nonbeing, and therefore without change. It is ungenerated, homogeneous, solid, symmetrical, spherical. If it is not homogeneous, for example, it must be a combination of one element and what it is not: e.g. water and non-water. But that cannot be. Similarly with the other characteristics Parmenides ascribes to reality.

This worldview, however, which Parmenides calls the “way of truth,” is so far from common sense that it gives us no help in living in the world of our experience. It requires us to reject our experience to a drastic extent. Parmenides’ poem does, however, also include an elaborate cosmology, which the goddess calls the “way of belief.” This cosmology includes change and is very different from the “way of truth.” Most likely, Parmenides regards the “way of belief” as an error to be rejected. But he may also have intended for us to use the “way of belief” as a practical guide, as a way to think about the world that our senses present to us.

Parmenides is perhaps the most consistent rationalist in the history of philosophy. He said that there is no difference between “what is” and “what can be thought.” So that, having determined what can be thought by human reason, he thought he had discovered the true nature of the world. In the service of reason he was willing to deny almost entirely the testimony of our senses, asserting the existence of a world vastly different from anything we have seen or heard. But what happens to reason in this unchanging world? Human reason is temporal, or seems to be. We think one thought after another. Our minds experience change, even in our most intellectual activities. How can we think at all, if we cannot advance from less adequate to more adequate ideas? So Parmenides’ rationalism actually invalidates reason, leading to irrationalism. Perhaps Parmenides knew this and provided the “way of belief” as an alternative philosophy, to account for the structure of our sense experience.¹⁸ Then we can see rationalism in Parmenides’ “way of truth,” irrationalism in his “way of belief.” On this understanding, Parmenides would have anticipated Plato’s distinction between the world of Forms, which really is, and the world of our sense experience, which is less knowable and less real.

¹⁷ Critics of Parmenides have pointed out that there is a difference between existential (e.g. “horses are” = “horses exist”) and the predicative (“horses are mammals”) senses of the verb “to be.” Parmenides evidently confuses these. It is obviously contradictory to say that “Being is not,” for in that phrase *Being* refers to existence. It is not obviously contradictory to say “the horse is not green,” for “is” in that sentence is used predicatively rather than existentially.

¹⁸ Plato also introduced myths (as in *Republic* and *Timaeus*) to deal with subjects his philosophy was unable to treat adequately. We might compare here the “custom” of David Hume, the “practical reason” of Immanuel Kant, the “mystical” of Wittgenstein.

Again we must ask how Parmenides' thought might have been different had he started with the existence of the biblical God and listened to his revelation.

The Atomists

Parmenides is classified as a "monist," someone who believes that the universe is basically one. Indeed, Parmenides systematically excluded all diversity from the world in his attempt to exclude "nonbeing." In the "way of truth," here cannot be different things, one that is red (for instance) and one that is not.

Other philosophers have been pluralists, maintaining that the universe is fundamentally many, rather than one. In ancient Greece, those who argued this position most thoroughly were the atomists, Empedocles (major work around 450), Anaxagoras (500-428), Leucippus (5th century), Democritus (460-360), and Epicurus (341-270).¹⁹

Empedocles thought that the world was originally something like Parmenidean Being: one, homogeneous, etc. But the opposing forces of Love and Strife start things in motion, separating out the four elements, and combining them in different ways. The four elements are "roots" of all reality, in effect the atoms, the basic stuff of which everything is made.

For Anaxagoras, there was an indefinite number of elements. Fire could not produce earth, he thought, unless there was some earth already in fire. Nor can a person's bread become muscle and hair unless there are little bits of muscle and hair in the bread already. Anaxagoras also taught the existence of *nous* or mind, a principle that maintains the rationality of change, similar to Heraclitus's *logos* and Empedocles's love and strife. Socrates complained in Plato's *Apology* that he had hoped to find in Anaxagoras some account of how mind directed the world, but he was disappointed to find in his writings only mechanistic explanations of nature.

Empedocles and Anaxagoras are called "qualitative atomists." That is, they believe that the world is made up of elements with different qualities, either four (Empedocles) or indefinitely many (Anaxagoras). The elements are unchanging, somewhat like Parmenidean Being. But reality as a whole changes by the varying combinations of these elements.

Leucippus, Democritus, and Epicurus were "quantitative atomists." Their atoms, or elements, all had the same qualities, except for size and shape (Democritus) or weight (Epicurus). These atoms moved through space and collided with one another to form objects. On this view, reality consists entirely of atoms and empty space.

¹⁹ The atomists were pluralists only in a sense. They were monists in that like Thales they believed there was only one kind of thing in the world, namely atoms.

Since the atoms of Epicurus had the quality of weight, they tended to fall in one direction, a sort of cosmic “down.” Normally they fell in lines parallel to one another. How, then, did they ever collide to form objects? Epicurus posited that occasionally an atom would “swerve” from the vertical path. The swerve is entirely uncaused, and accounts for the formation of objects. It also accounts for human free choice. Human beings are able to act apart from causal determination, for the atoms of their bodies sometimes swerve inexplicably.

Epicurus is probably the first philosopher to identify human freedom with causal indeterminacy, and to make this indeterminacy the basis of moral responsibility. This view of freedom is sometimes called libertarianism or incompatibilism.²⁰ A number of theologians have advocated free will in this sense, including Pelagius, Molina, Arminius, and the recent open theists.²¹ But the question must be posed: how does the random swerve of atoms in my body make my acts morally responsible? If I walk down the street and some atoms in my head swerve and collide, making me rob a bank, why am I to blame? I didn’t make them swerve; indeed, the swerve had no cause at all. It seems more plausible to say that the swerve *happened* to me, and therefore that I am *not* responsible for its consequences. It is like a chemical imbalance in my brain, making me do strange things. It is an odd kind of determinism, rather than freedom. Should we not say, then, that such a swerve precisely *removes* our responsibility?

The question of responsibility leads us to think of ethics. Writing after the time of Plato and Aristotle, Epicurus is eager to apply his atomism to moral questions. One wonders indeed what sort of ethics can emerge from such a thoroughgoing materialism?

Essentially, Epicurus’s ethic is that we should avoid pain and seek pleasure (which he defines as the absence of pain). Unlike the Cyrenaics and some later Epicureans, Epicurus distinguishes short-term from long-term pleasures and teaches that on the whole a quiet, peaceful, contemplative life is the most pleasurable. This view of ethics is called hedonism, from the Greek word meaning pleasure. But there are several problems with it: (1) In the normal sense of “pleasure,” there are many things that human beings value more. One example is sacrificing one’s life to save the life of another. Epicurus gives us no good reason to pursue pleasure rather than some other value. (2) If we define *pleasure* so broadly as to include all other values, including self-sacrifice, then it loses its meaning. It doesn’t distinguish pleasurable from non-pleasurable activities. (3) Even if it is true that people value pleasure in some sense above all else, it is a logical jump to say that we *ought* to value pleasure above all else. But

²⁰ It is called incompatibilism, because it is incompatible with determinism. Other views of freedom are compatible with determinism. For example, the view called “compatibilism” is the view that freedom is simply doing what you want to do.

²¹ I have criticized libertarianism extensively in my *No Other God: a Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2001) and in *Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2002).

the *ought* is what ethics is all about. I doubt that anyone can derive an ethical ought from a materialistic philosophy. Matter in motion simply cannot tell us what we ought to do.

Atomism, then, tries to account for everything by matter, motion, and chance. If Thales was unable to account for human thought by means of water, how can the atomists expect to account for it by means of nondescript bits of matter in motion? The atomists are rationalistic in trying through their reason to reduce all reality to its smallest components. But, having done that, they have left us little if any reason to trust our minds. So rationalism and irrationalism again combine. The problem becomes even more difficult when we try to account for human responsibility and moral obligation on a materialistic basis.

The religious roots of all this become especially clear in Epicurus's writings, for he is most explicit in wanting to exclude the supernatural from any role in the world. But without a personal God, how can one account for the validity of thinking and the authority of moral principles?

Pythagoras (572-500)

We know little of the specific views held by Pythagoras, but he influenced a school of thought that in turn influenced other philosophers. Plato visited the Pythagorean religious community in southern Italy and reworked many of their ideas in his own writings. The Pythagoreans followed a religion known as Orphism, which taught that the human soul was a divine being imprisoned in the body. On their view the soul undergoes reincarnation until it is purified sufficiently to return to the divine realm. Our souls are divine because they are rational; so salvation comes through knowledge. Thus, the Pythagoreans followed the common Greek emphasis on the autonomy of the intellect. They also divided human beings into three classes: lovers of wisdom, lovers of honor, and lovers of gain, which may be the source for Plato's similar threefold distinction in the *Republic*. And they developed an elaborate cosmology, similar to that of Anaximander and of Parmenides' "way of belief."

However, we remember Pythagoras chiefly for his work in mathematics, including the Pythagorean Theorem found in every high school geometry book. That theorem tells us that in a right triangle the square of the hypotenuse is the sum of the squares of the other two sides. In a right triangle whose sides measure 3, 4, and 5 inches, the squares of the shorter sides would be 9 and 16, equaling 25, the square of the longer side. Pythagoras and/or his disciples also most likely discovered that harmonious combinations of musical notes arise from different vibrations related by simple fractions. If A on the scale is 440 vibrations, the next higher octave is 880, and so on.

These data may have suggested to the Pythagoreans that everything in the universe can be described as the application of a mathematical formula.

Hence the slogan “all is number,” reflecting the “all” formulae of the Milesians. Since everything is the outworking of a mathematical formula, mathematics is the most ultimate reality. This was the Pythagorean version of the common Greek theme that reason is the nature of reality as well as the nature of thought.

The Pythagoreans, however, did not ask, so far as we can tell, where the formulae came from. The existence of such formulae would seem to be a remarkable fact. Indeed it should have suggested a personal creator, for the natural home of numbers and formulae is in the mind of a person. For the Pythagoreans, numbers “just are.” They exist as brute facts. For the Pythagoreans no more than other Greeks were willing to acknowledge a rational person higher than themselves. The greatest mind is the mind of the human mathematician.

But the cost of this rationalism is the loss of cogency. If mathematical formulae just are, why should we trust them? Is it perhaps an accident that mathematical formulae neatly apply to right triangles and some musical intervals? And by what process do abstract numbers get converted into concrete things? Like other Greek philosophers, the Pythagoreans’ rationality terminates in irrationality.

The Sophists

The Sophists were traveling educators in fifth and fourth century Greece who traveled from one city to another teaching young men the skills needed for success in public life: rhetoric, grammar, history, science, art, and the virtues of character that lead to public admiration. These teachers had many clients, for the traditional aristocracy was losing ground to the mercantile class, creating opportunities for upwardly mobile sons of wealthy families. Also, there was much political upheaval, raising philosophical questions about the ground and legitimacy of political rule.²²

Thus philosophy took a new turn. No longer were philosophers mainly concerned with the structure of the natural world. Now human nature and the problems of human society became prominent.

If one’s main concern is getting along with various political factions, then relativism will have a strong appeal, as we know from contemporary politics. If there is no absolute or objective truth, no truth that everyone must acknowledge, then one’s convictions are free to move here and there, with every wave of political opinion. So it is not surprising that the Sophists were relativists.

We learn about them mainly through the dialogues of Plato, an unsympathetic witness, to be sure, but most likely a fair one. The sophist

²² For more extensive discussion of the political and social background of Sophism, see Gordon H. Clark, *Thales to Dewey* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), 46-48.

Protagoras, for example, advocated acceptance of traditional ways of thinking, not because they were true, but because we need to use them to gain power and acceptance. Gorgias denied the existence of objective truth and so wanted to substitute rhetoric for philosophy. Thrasymachus taught that “justice is the interest of the stronger,” so that laws are (and should be) means by which the strong keep the masses subordinate. Callicles held, on the contrary, that laws are the means used by the masses to check the power of the strong.²³ Critias, later described as the cruelest of the thirty tyrants, said that a ruler must control his subjects by encouraging fear of nonexistent gods.

Socrates, as Plato presents him in the same dialogues, replies that indifference or hostility to objective truth is unacceptable. For one thing, the Sophists themselves are making assertions of fact. If there is no objective truth, then the Sophists’ positions are not objectively true, and there is no reason for anyone to listen to them. This argument has been a standard answer to relativism ever since, and we still hear it used over against, for example, contemporary postmodernism.

Further, Socrates argues, justice cannot merely be the interest of the stronger. For the interest of the stronger is not what makes it *just*, as opposed to unjust. There must be some other quality that *defines* justice, that serves as a criterion to evaluate the conduct of rulers.

Thus Socrates refutes the irrationalism of the Sophists, or rather shows that such irrationalism is self-refuting. But the Sophists were also rationalists in the typical Greek way. Protagoras said that “man is the measure of all things.” This statement expresses the Sophists’ irrationalism: reality is what any man thinks it is. But it is also rationalistic, for it makes human reason the ultimate criterion of truth and falsity, right and wrong. One asks, how could Protagoras *know* this, especially given his overall relativism? He asserts rational autonomy arbitrarily. That is, he asserts rationalism irrationalistically, as he asserts irrationalism rationalistically—by the measure of his own mind.

No other course was open to the Sophists, for they were skeptical about the traditional gods and would not consider the God of biblical theism.

Socrates (470-399)

But Socrates did more than refute the Sophists. He is a figure of such towering importance that all of the other thinkers discussed to this point traditionally bear the label “pre-Socratic.” He is a major saint in the religion of

²³ The distinction between Thrasymachus and Callicles reminds us of the differing attitudes of Marx and Nietzsche to Christianity. Marx considered Christianity an “opiate” by which the strong kept the poor in their place. Nietzsche considered it a “slave religion” by which lesser people inhibited those with ability and power. That such opposite conclusions can be derived from the same (relativistic) premises indicates some problem with the premises themselves.

philosophy, a martyr. He was executed in 399 by the Athenian state for disbelief in the official gods²⁴ and for corrupting the youth.

Socrates is revered, not so much for his ideas (which are hard to disentangle from those of his student Plato, our major source of information about him), as from his way of life, his style of argument, his passion for truth. Having rejected the relativism of the Sophists, he insisted on getting to the roots of philosophical questions, exploring first here, then there. And he insisted on living in accord with his philosophy. He refused opportunities to escape death, wanting to show himself loyal to the government of Athens.

The Oracle at Delphi, he says, told him he was the wisest of men because he alone was aware of his own ignorance. So he sought out people who he thought might be able to answer important questions, and he interrogated them rigorously. He regularly exposed flaws in the reasoning of the experts. Then he sought to define terms: what is justice, really? What is virtue? Characters in the dialogue would bring up examples of these qualities, but Socrates wanted to know more than examples. What is common to the examples of justice that makes them just? Usually, his interrogation yielded nothing definitive. But his use of dialogue (the technical term is dialectic) as a way of finding truth has inspired philosophers and other educators for centuries. Hence all disciplines have adopted his slogan, "The unexamined life is not worth living."

For Socrates, however, the use of dialogue was subordinate, as a source of truth, to something inward, to the human soul itself. He claimed that within him was a *daimon*, a divinity, and he believed that everyone could find the truth by looking within. So another Socratic slogan is "Know yourself."

Dialectic and introspection together, then, constitute the Socratic epistemology. The emphasis on dialectic renews the Greek rationalistic tradition. The emphasis on introspection, however, locates truth in individual subjectivity.²⁵ This subjectivism is uncomfortably like that of the Sophists. If we are not to dismiss it as irrationalistic, we need to know how human subjectivity is related to the objective world, and to the Author of truth.

Plato (427-347)

Plato was the greatest student of Socrates and one of the greatest philosophers of all time. The greatest philosophers (among whom I include Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant, and Hegel) tend to be those who bring together many ideas that at first seem disparate. As an example: Parmenides said that Being is fundamentally changeless; Heraclitus that the elements of reality are in constant change. Plato's genius is to see truth in both of these accounts and to bring them

²⁴ Though Plato says that one of his last acts was to ask someone to deliver a cock to Asclepius, the god of healing.

²⁵ So Socrates has been compared to Søren Kierkegaard.

together in a broader systematic understanding. Similarly, Plato provides distinct roles for reason and sense experience, soul and body, concepts and matter, objects and subjects, and, of course, rationalism and irrationalism.

Plato's epistemology begins with the observation that we can learn very little from our sense organs. So far, he agrees with the Sophists. Our eyes and ears easily deceive us. But the remarkable thing is that we have the rational ability to correct these deceptions and thus to find truth. It is by our reason also that we form concepts of things. We have never, for example, seen a perfect square. But somehow we know what a perfect square would be like, for we know the mathematical formula that generates one. Since we don't learn the concept of squareness by sense experience; we must learn it from reason. Similarly concepts of treeness, horseness, humanity, justice, virtue, goodness, etc. We don't see these, but somehow we know them.

These concepts Plato calls *Forms* or *Ideas*. Since we cannot find these Forms on earth, he says, they must exist in another realm, a world of Forms, as opposed to the world of sense. But what are Forms, exactly? In reading Plato we sometimes find ourselves thinking of the form of treeness as a perfect, gigantic tree somewhere, which serves as a model for all trees on earth. But that can't be right. Given the many different kinds of trees, how could one tree serve as a perfect model for all of them? And even if there were a gigantic tree somewhere, how could there be a gigantic justice, or virtue, or goodness? Further, Plato says that the Forms are not objects of sensation (as a gigantic tree would be). Rather they are known through intelligence alone, through reason. Perhaps Plato is following the Pythagoreans here, conceiving the Forms as quasi-mathematical formulae, recipes that can be used to construct trees, horses, virtue, and justice as the Pythagorean theorem can be used to construct a triangle. I say "quasi," because Plato in the *Republic* said that "mathematicals are a class of entities *between* the sensibles and the Forms."²⁶ Nevertheless, he does believe that Forms are real things and are the models of which things on earth are copies.

The Forms, then, are perfect, immaterial, changeless, invisible, intangible objects. Though abstract, they more real than the objects of our sense experience, for only a perfect triangle, e.g., is a real triangle. And the Forms are also more knowable than things on earth. We may be uncertain as to whether a particular judge is just, but we cannot be uncertain as to the justice of the Form Justice. As such, the Forms serve as models, exemplars, indeed criteria for earthly things. It is the Forms that enable us to know the earthly things that imitate them. We can know that someone is virtuous only by comparing him with the norm of Ideal Virtue.

The Forms exist in a hierarchy, the highest being the Form of the Good. For we learn what triangles, trees, human beings, and justice are when we learn

²⁶ Diogenes Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 20. Allen's further comments on this issue are helpful.

what each is “good for.” Everything is good for something, so everything that exists participates in the Form of the Good to some extent. The world of Forms, therefore, contains not only formulae for making objects, but also norms defining the *purposes* of objects.

In *Euthyphro*, Socrates argues that piety cannot be defined as what the gods desire. For why should they desire it? They must desire it because it is good. So piety is a form of goodness, and goodness must exist independently of what gods or men may think or say about it. So it must be a Form. We should note, however, that if courage, virtue, goodness, etc. are abstract forms, then they have no specific content. To know what is good, for Plato, is to know the Form of Goodness. But Goodness is what all individual examples of goodness have in common. How, then, does it help us to know specifically what is good and what is bad?

Any time we try to define Goodness in terms of specific qualities (justice, prudence, temperance, etc.) we have descended to something less than the Form of Goodness. The Form of Goodness serves as a norm for human goodness, because it is utterly general and abstract. Any principle that is more specific is less normative, less authoritative. Such is the consequence of trying to understand goodness as an abstract Form rather than, as in biblical theism, the will of a personal absolute.²⁷

The world of sense experience is modeled upon the world of Forms. Plato’s *Timaeus* is a sort of creation account in which the Demiurge, a godlike figure, forms matter into patterns reflecting the Forms, placing his sculpture into a “receptacle” (presumably, empty space). The Demiurge is very different from the God of the Bible, for he is subordinate to the Forms and limited by the nature of the matter. The matter resists formation, so the material objects cannot be perfect, as the forms are. So the Demiurge must be satisfied with a defective product. It is not clear whether Plato intended this story to be taken literally. He sometimes resorted to myth when he could not come up with a properly philosophical account of something. But it is significant that he saw the need for some means to connect the Forms with the sensible world. And it is significant that he made that connection personal rather than impersonal.

But how do we know the Forms, located as we are in this defective, changing world? Here Plato reflects the subjectivism of the Sophists and Socrates: we look within. We find within ourselves recollections of the Forms. Recollections? Then at one time we must have had experience of the Forms. When? Not in this life, where our experiences are limited to imperfect and

²⁷ And if anyone asks the relation of goodness to the God of the Bible, the answer is as follows: (1) Goodness is not something above him, that he must submit to; (2) nor is it something below him, that he could alter at will, but (3) it is his own nature: his actions and attributes, given to human beings for imitation. “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt. 5:48).

changing things, but in another life before this one. So Plato embraces the Pythagorean-Orphic doctrine of reincarnation. We lived once in a world in which the Forms were directly accessible to us. Then we “fell” from that existence into the sense-world, into bodies. Our knowledge of the Forms remains in memory, but sometimes it has to be coaxed out of us by Socratic questioning. One famous example is in Plato’s *Meno*, where Socrates asks questions of an uneducated slave boy, leading him to display a knowledge of geometry nobody expected him to have.

The world of sense is not strictly knowable. Plato compares it to the shadows cast by a fire in a cave. Prisoners chained in the cave all their lives can see the shadows, but they mistake them for the Truth, so in fact they know virtually nothing. Their notions are “conjecture,” not “knowledge.” We can move beyond conjecture to “belief” by distinguishing between images (like shadows and pictures) and actual objects. Thus we come to know the visible world. But we do not “understand” the visible world until we see the things of the world as instances of general concepts. Thus we move from conjecture, to belief, to understanding. Pure knowledge is still a fourth stage: intuitive vision of the Forms. The first two stages Plato calls “opinion,” the last two “knowledge.” The first two come through sense experience, the last two through reason. Our sense-experience is illumined by the sun; our knowledge of the intelligible world is illumined by the Form of the Good.

In *Phaedrus*, Plato considers knowledge from another perspective: knowledge is motivated by love. In beautiful objects,²⁸ we see an echo of true beauty, and we are moved by passion to seek the Form of Beauty itself. Here is another example of the Greek focus on inwardness. People have sometimes said that the search for knowledge must be disinterested, without passion. Although Plato advocated the dominance of intellect over the appetites, he saw a positive use of the passions, even in philosophy.

Since we once lived apart from the body in the world of the Forms, it must be the case that the human soul can exist separately from the body. In *Phaedo*, as Socrates prepares for death, he bases his hope for immortality on this epistemological argument. Plato divides the soul into three parts. The lowest is the appetitive, which seeks physical necessities and pleasures. Next higher is the spirited, which includes anger, ambition, desire for social honor, etc. The highest is the rational, which seeks knowledge for its own sake.²⁹ We can see how, with a bit of emendation, these divisions correspond to the later common distinction between emotions, will, and intellect, respectively. They correspond even more closely to Freud’s distinction between id (appetitive), ego (spirited) and superego

²⁸ His example is the beauty of a boy, as a pederastic love interest. As many Greek thinkers, Plato favored homosexual relationships between men and boys, another indication of how far the Greeks were from the biblical revelation. Paul’s argument in Rom. 1 presents homosexuality as a particularly vivid example of the depths to which people fall when they reject God’s revelation.

²⁹ In *Phaedo*, the soul is only the higher part, but in *Phaedrus*, the soul includes all three parts, even prior to its bodily existence.

(rational). In *Phaedrus*, Plato sees the spirited part as a driver with two horses, white (the rational) and black (the appetitive). The spirited is swayed, sometimes by the appetitive, sometimes by the rational. The more it subordinates its appetites to its intellect, the better off it will be.

But Plato's major interest, like that of Socrates, was to tell us how to live. His metaphysics and epistemology are all a prelude to his ethics and political theory. But it is in these areas that he is most disappointing. His Socrates discusses at length the nature of justice and courage, but comes to no firm conclusion. He does conclude that the definition of virtue is knowledge. One never does wrong except out of ignorance. If one knows what is right, he will necessarily do it. But most of Plato's readers through the centuries (including his pupil Aristotle) have dismissed this statement as naïve, and Christians have found it superficial in comparison with the Bible's view of human depravity.

And if virtue is knowledge, knowledge of what? Knowledge of the Good? But *good* is more difficult to define than virtue is. Like all Forms, it is abstract. So how can it settle concrete ethical disputes, such as whether abortion is right or wrong? For Plato, to live right is to know the Good. But to say that is to leave all specific ethical questions unanswered.

Plato did come to some specific recommendations in the area of politics. But these recommendations have been almost universally rejected. In the *Republic*, he divides the body politic into groups corresponding to the divisions of the soul. In his ideal state, the peasants are governed by the appetitive soul, the military by the spirited, and the rulers by the rational. So the rulers of the state must be philosophers, those who understand the Forms. Such a state will be totalitarian, claiming authority over all areas of life. The upper classes will share their women communally, and children would be raised by the rulers. Art will be severely restricted, because it is a kind of shadow of which one can have only conjecture, the lowest form of opinion. Images detract from knowledge of Beauty itself (the Form) and they can incite to anarchy. Donald Palmer says that Plato's *Republic* "can be viewed as a plea that philosophy take over the role which art had hitherto played in Greek culture."³⁰

Most all modern readers look at these ideas with distaste. Where did Plato get them? It would not be credible for him to claim that he got them by contemplating the Good. Rather, the whole business sounds like special pleading. Plato the philosopher thinks that philosophers should rule. He is rather like a Sophist here, claiming to be the expert in the means of governance. But he certainly has not shown that philosophers in general have any of the special qualities needed to govern. And the Sophists denied what Plato claims: access to absolute truth. We may applaud Plato's rejection of relativism. But his absolutism is what makes him a totalitarian. He thinks the philosophers have Knowledge, so they must rule everything.

³⁰ Palmer, *Looking at Philosophy* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1988), 73.

Plato engages in special pleading, because he has no non-arbitrary way of determining what is right and wrong. But as we've seen, once one identifies Goodness as an abstract form, one cannot derive from it any specific content. So Plato's ideas about ethics and politics lack any firm basis or credibility.

The best thing that can be said of Plato is that he knew and considered seriously the criticisms that could be made against his system. He treats a number of these in the *Parmenides*, without actually answering them. In this dialogue, Parmenides asks the young Socrates whether there are Ideas (Forms) of such things as mud, hair, and filth. He might also have asked if there are Ideas of evil, of imperfection, of negation. But how can there be a Form of imperfection, if the Forms by definition are of perfection? But if there is no form of imperfection, then the Forms fail to account for all the qualities of the material world.

Another objection (called the "third man"): if the similarity between men requires us to invoke the Form Man to account for it, then what of the similarity between men and the Form man? Does that require another Form (a "third man")? And does the similarity between the first Form and the second Form require a Third, ad infinitum?

The first objection shows that the Forms are inadequate to account for experience. The second objection shows that on Plato's basis the Forms themselves require explanation, and that they are inadequate to provide that explanation themselves.

Plato also explores other objections to his theory that I can't take the time to describe here. The main problem is that the Forms cannot do their job. The Forms are supposed to be models for everything in the sensible world. In fact they are not, for perfect Forms cannot model imperfection; changeless Forms cannot model change. So the imperfection and change of the experienced world has no rational explanation. Plato tries to explain it by the story of the Demiurge in *Timaeus*. But that, after all, is myth. Plato gives us no reason to believe in a Demiurge, and in any case the Demiurge does not account for the existence of matter or the receptacle. So the changing world of matter and space is for Plato, as for Parmenides, ultimately irrational. Parmenides had the courage to say that the changing world is therefore unreal. Plato does not go quite this far; rather, he ascribed a greater *degree* of reality to the Forms than to the sense-world. But we must question Plato's assumption that there are degrees of reality. What does it mean to say that one thing is "more real" than another?

The picture should be clear by now. Though Plato is far more sophisticated than the pre-Socratics, his position, like theirs, incorporates rationalism and irrationalism. He is rationalistic about the Forms, irrationalistic about the sense world. For him, reason is totally competent to understand the Forms, incompetent to make sense of the changing world of experience. Yet he tries to analyze the changing world by means of changeless forms, an irrational

world by a rationalistic principle. Eventually, in *Parmenides*, he has the integrity to admit that his fundamental questions remain unanswered.

With Plato as with the pre-Socratics, the tension between rationalism and irrationalism has a religious root. If Plato had known the God of Scripture, he would have known in what fundamental ways our reason is competent, yet limited. And he would have understood that the world of change is knowable, but not exhaustively, because God made it that way. He would also have been able to consult God's revelation for ethical guidance, rather than teaching his students to rely on the abstract form of the Good, which has nothing specific to say to them.

Aristotle (384-322)

Aristotle, Plato's student, was certainly Plato's equal in terms of brilliance, comprehensiveness, and influence on later thought. Someone said that no pupil has had a greater teacher and no teacher a greater student.

Aristotle demythologizes Plato. He continues to distinguish between form and matter, but for him form is not found in a separate world (hence, I am no longer capitalizing the term). Rather, form is an element of things in the world we perceive.

The main category³¹ of Aristotle's philosophy is the substance. A substance is an individual thing: a rock, a tree, a table, an animal, a person. With one exception that we shall examine later, all substances contain both form and matter. In general, the matter is what something is made of: the ingredients of bread, the clay of the statue. The form is the "whatness" of a thing, the qualities that make the thing what it is: bread, tree, statue, person. The matter is the "thisness." The matter is what distinguishes one piece of bread from another, one brick from another, one person from another. Socrates and Plato share the same form, the form "man," but not the same matter. So "man" or "manness" includes both Socrates and Plato, but "this man" points to one or the other.

Form and matter are usually relative. In a brick, clay is matter and the form is its brickness, the qualities that make it a brick rather than something else. But when the brick is used to build a house, the brick itself can be considered matter and the house itself (or rather its houseness) is the form. So the brick is form in one relationship, matter in another.

Yet it seems that there must be some kind of absolute matter or "prime matter." The house is made of bricks; the bricks are made of clay; the clay is

³¹ For Aristotle, "categories" are the general types of subjects and predicates, the things we talk about and the things we can say about those subjects. He gives different lists of categories in different places in his writings, but the lists include such things as substance, quality, place, relation, time, posture, state, action, and passion.

made of various other things. Each of these can be described as a form, because each is a substance, bearing various qualities. But this sequence cannot go to infinity. Let's say that we reach the smallest possible particle, perhaps one of Democritus's atoms. What is *that* made of? Presumably a kind of matter that has no qualities, but is only a bearer of qualities. But something without qualities is not a substance. It is nothing. Thus the matter that underlies all reality, the stuff of which all reality is made, is indistinguishable from nonbeing. Aristotle avoids saying that, but the consequence is hard to avoid.

Aristotle insisted that such prime matter is not actually found in nature. In the natural world, there are only substances, and matter exists only in conjunction with form. But the problem reoccurs in every substance. For in every case we must ask, what is the form the form of? What is the stuff that the forms are attached to? And the answer must be, ultimately, nothing.

That is the main problem in Aristotle's philosophy. But we must continue to follow his thinking. For Aristotle, the combination of form and matter in individual things injects an element of purposiveness or teleology into everything. Form is what each thing is, but it is also the purpose of the thing: for Aristotle, the nature and purpose of a thing are the same. So the form of bread defines it as food, a statue as art. Recall that for Plato too, purpose and essence were closely related: everything partook of Goodness and therefore was good for something. So form is not just what things are, it is also what they should be, what they strive to be. Form is a normative category as well as a descriptive one.

So an acorn bears the form of an oak. The acorn is not presently an oak, but it has the *potentiality* to be one, and in the normal course of events it will become an *actual* oak. So potentiality and actuality are important aspects of reality for Aristotle. The form directs the matter to realize its potential. As potentiality becomes actuality, the object becomes fully formed: it becomes what it inherently is. So Aristotle says that in potentiality matter is prominent, but in actuality form is prominent.

For Aristotle, the distinction between potentiality and actuality is a general explanation (or perhaps description) of change. Change, which bewildered previous philosophers, is for Aristotle simply the movement from potentiality to actuality. When my car moves from Atlanta to Orlando, it changes from being potentially in Orlando to being actually there.

Aristotle also uses the form/matter distinction to describe human nature. For him, the soul is the form of the body. This is a radical departure from Plato, for whom the soul was quite independent of the body, though presently confined to the body. This idea would suggest that for Aristotle soul and body are inseparable and that the soul vanishes when the body dies. Certainly Aristotle doesn't affirm personal immortality as Plato does. But some interpreters think

that his epistemology, like that of Plato's *Phaedo*, contains an argument that leads from epistemology to personal immortality.

So we should look at Aristotle's epistemology. For Aristotle, there are two givens that we must start with in order to know anything. The first is the "first principles," principles of logic, as well as general propositions like "the whole is greater than any part." These first principles cannot be proven; they are known intuitively. The second given is the substance, presented by sense experience. For Aristotle, both these starting points are important. He criticizes the "definition mongers," who try to derive everything from first principles without paying attention to the facts of experience. And he criticizes those who look only at facts as "no better than plants."

Now for Aristotle the intellect has two aspects, passive and active. The passive intellect receives data from the senses. The active intellect examines, analyzes, tries to understand that data by abstracting the forms from the material things given in the data. In Plato's terms, the active intellect tries to bring conjecture to the levels of belief and understanding. For Aristotle as for Plato, true knowledge is a knowledge of form, not matter. True knowledge is an understanding of what things are.

There has been much interpretive controversy over the nature of the active intellect in Aristotle's thought. The most common understanding is that each human being has his own active intellect. But in *De Anima*, Aristotle speaks of the active intellect (as he would not speak of the individual soul) as something separable from the body. So some have thought that for Aristotle there was only one active intellect, common to mankind: either a cosmic principle of intelligence, as in Heraclitus, Anaxagoras, and Plotinus, or a kind of god.³² Perhaps Aristotle did not try to reconcile the apparent contradiction between *De Anima* and his general view of the soul.³³ But an Aristotelian who wants to make a case for personal immortality would have to begin here.

Aristotle believed that the process of movement from potentiality to actuality must begin somewhere. Each motion is caused by another. But the chain of causes cannot go back to infinity. So at some point there must be an unmoved mover who starts the process going. Like the other Greek philosophers, Aristotle did not believe the world had a beginning. So his unmoved mover is not like the biblical God, who creates the world at the first

³² For a helpful discussion of these interpretations, see Ronald Nash, *Life's Ultimate Questions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 111-112.

³³ For epistemological reasons also, it is regrettable that Aristotle did not clarify the relation between the active intellect and the soul. If the active intellect is a cosmic principle of intelligence, how does it enter into relation with the individual person? How does the cosmic intellect illumine my mind? And if each individual has his own active intellect, how can that intellect be separable from the body while the soul is not separable?

moment of time. Rather, for Aristotle, every state of affairs at each moment is explained ultimately by a Prime Mover.³⁴

The Prime Mover³⁵ is pure form, the one exception to the rule that every substance contains both form and matter. If there were a material component in his nature, then he would have some unrealized potentiality, and that would move him toward actuality. Then he would not be unmoved. Similarly, he must not, in Aristotle's view, be influenced in any way by the world; else he will be the moved, not the mover. So this being must not know the world (since to know is to be influenced in some way by the object of knowledge), or love the world, or act in the world.

How, then, does he cause motion? Aristotle's answer is that he is supremely attractive and thus influences things in the world to turn toward him. Interpreters of Aristotle have compared the Prime Mover to a goal to which runners run, or to a magnet attracting iron to itself. This writer thinks of a rock concert, in which frenzied fans throw themselves at the performer's feet, while the performer himself remains (apparently) in a daze.

Aristotle distinguished four kinds of causation: formal, final, efficient, and material. These are "causes" in a broad sense, four ways of answering the question "why is something as it is?" They involve four meanings of the word "because." Let us see how the four causes answer the question "Why is Bill thinking?" The formal cause tells what something is: Bill thinks because he is a man. The final cause tells the purpose, the reason something happened: Bill thinks because he wants to complete his philosophy paper. The efficient cause tells what made something happen: Bill thinks because his brain generates thoughts. The material cause tells what something is made of: Bill thinks because his brain is composed of materials that generate thinking. Now on Aristotle's account, the Prime Mover causes motion as the final cause, rather than the efficient. But that leaves open the question as to what is the efficient cause of motion in the world.

What does the Prime Mover do, if he does not efficiently cause things to happen, and if he does not know or love the world? Aristotle's answer is that he thinks. One wonders why Aristotle suddenly starts using personal language here, when his argument so far proves at most an impersonal principle. But what does

³⁴ It helps to consider that causal sequences are either sequential (as one domino toppling the next, and so on) or simultaneous (as the gears of a watch moving one another alone). Aristotle's view of a chain of causes is more like the watch than like the dominos. So it is not necessarily a *temporal* sequence and does not require a first mover at the beginning of time. Rather, each event requires a Prime Mover at the very time it is taking place.

³⁵ Although Aristotle speaks of one Prime Mover as explaining all motion in the universe, he also maintains that every circular motion in the heavens requires an unmoved mover to get it started. Since he believes that the universe consists of a number of concentric spheres revolving around the earth, he postulates that there is an unmoved mover for each. So Aristotle is a philosophical polytheist.

this God think about, if not the world? Aristotle replies, he thinks of himself. But what facts about himself does he contemplate? Aristotle replies, his thoughts. The Prime Mover is “thought thinking thought.” If the Prime Mover were to think of something about himself other than his thoughts, then his thoughts would be moved by that something else. For his thoughts to be entirely unmoved, they can be caused only by themselves.

What shall we make of this? First, the Prime Mover is a quasi-philosopher. As Plato believed that philosophers should be kings, Aristotle believes that God is a philosopher. Further, though, Aristotle’s deity reduces to tautology. He cannot know the world, lest he be relative to it. His thought cannot be of anything other than itself, lest it be relative to something else. It can not be about any quality he has except his thinking, lest his thinking be moved by something else. So in the end his thought is a thought of a thought of a thought, or, to put it differently, a thought of nothing in particular.

Plato thought he had found the ultimate philosophical principle in the Form of the Good; but the Form of the Good turns out to be abstract and empty. Though bearing rational authority, it tells us nothing specific. So Aristotle’s Prime Mover: it is so abstract that its mind is virtually nothing.

We can see that Aristotle’s Prime Mover is vastly different from the biblical God. The biblical God is not only the final cause of the world, but the efficient cause as well. He is not only the logical beginning of the universe, but its temporal beginning as well. And he knows and loves the world, without endangering his own absolute nature. This is possible, because the world itself is the expression of his eternal thought. His mind contains real content, which he freely reveals to human beings.

We should also consider Aristotle’s ethics. For Aristotle, each being should act in accordance with its form, that is, its nature and purpose. He defines human beings as rational animals, so for him, as with all the Greek philosophers, the good life is the life of reason.

Reason tells us that the goal of human life is happiness. Happiness is not pleasure, at least not in the narrow sense of Epicureanism. Happiness is general well-being. Pleasure is at most a means to the end of happiness. In general, Aristotle sees the good life as contemplative, philosophical (again, Aristotle exalts his particular vocation to a universal principle).

Aristotle, like Plato, distinguishes three aspects of the soul, the vegetative, the sensitive (perhaps roughly equivalent to Plato’s “spirited”), and the rational. We share the first with plants, the second with animals; the third is unique to human beings. He also distinguishes moral from intellectual virtues. Moral virtues pertain to the will, intellectual to reason.

We learn the moral virtues, courage, temperance, and justice, from imitating others who exemplify these qualities. Such imitation leads us in time to form good habits, and those habits form a good character. The intellectual virtue is prudence, and that comes from teaching. Aristotle distinguishes philosophic wisdom (disinterested, contemplative) from practical wisdom (wisdom to make decisions leading to happiness). One who has wisdom, he thinks, will seek moderation in all things. It is often possible to determine our specific duties by calculating the mean between two extremes. For example, a buffoon makes a joke out of everything; a boor takes everything too seriously. But wit is the “golden mean” between these extremes. Aristotle didn’t offer any precise formula for defining the extremes or locating the mean. Doubtless he knew that with a bit of cleverness any act could be justified as being between two extremes (e.g. robbing one bank as the mean between robbing many and robbing none). And he did see that sometimes a right decision might be on one extreme, such as the very decision to do right rather than wrong. But he assumed that the wise man would be able to furnish a proper context for these judgments.

The State is the whole of which individuals and families are parts. Thus its interests take precedence over theirs. Yet the ruler ought to seek the happiness of his subjects. Aristotle was nothing if not balanced! Yet his impulse, like Plato’s is toward statism and totalitarianism, an impulse that may have influenced his most famous pupil, Alexander the Great.

There is a question as to how we can begin to acquire moral virtues. Aristotle teaches that we need to have virtuous dispositions to perform virtuous acts; but we need to perform moral acts in order to form the habits that produce virtuous dispositions. Aristotle is aware of this circularity and counsels readers to begin the process by doing things that “resemble” virtuous acts. But how one gets from resemblance to actuality is a mystery.

The Christian revelation has an answer: God’s grace creates moral dispositions in sinners and enables them to follow those dispositions. And it also answers another major problem in Aristotle’s ethics. For Aristotle assumes that we can learn our moral obligations simply by observing our own natures and what makes us happy. This is the root of the “natural law” tradition in ethics. But as David Hume pointed out, one cannot derive moral obligations from natural facts. One can’t infer what we *ought* to do from statements of what is the case; we cannot derive “ought” from “is.” The fact that we are rational does not prove that we ought to live according to reason; the fact that we seek happiness does not imply that we ought to seek it. Scripture points to God’s revelation as the source of our knowledge of ethical obligation. For God is both fact and value. To know him is to know at the same time the ultimate source of reality and the ultimate source of ethical obligation.

To summarize, the fundamental contrast in Aristotle’s philosophy, as in Plato’s, is that between form and matter. But form at the highest level (as

illustrated in the prime mover) is entirely contentless and abstract: a kind of “being in general.” And matter in its purest form is nonbeing. We see again the contrast between the Olympian order and the “shapeless stream” of the old religion. But in Aristotle the order is empty. He cannot really account for motion on its basis, or for ethical obligation. And the shapeless stream, in Aristotle, is more shapeless than ever. The lack of an absolute-personal God leaves Aristotle’s system in incoherence.

Stoicism

The Epicurean and Stoic schools arose during the Hellenistic period, the time when Greek culture spread throughout western and near eastern civilization. Alexander the Great (356-323), whose tutor was Aristotle, conquered most of the known world, doubtless his means of seeking happiness.³⁶ His empire broke up quickly after his early death, being divided among his lieutenants, eventually passing to the Romans. Although Greek culture attained a kind of supremacy during this time, its most creative period was past. Yet philosophical schools continued the discussions begun by their predecessors.

I discussed Epicurus with the atomists at an earlier point, so I shall here focus on the Stoics, a school founded by Zeno of Cyprus (334-262). The Stoics were materialists, teaching that only physical objects were real. But they acknowledged many differences within the broad category “matter.” The soul was made of very fine matter, rocks and dirt out of coarser matter. Even virtues are material, but they can exist in the same place as other matter, so virtues can be in the soul. Gordon Clark suggests that the Stoics’ “matter” is more like a field of force than like a hard stuff.³⁷ Or perhaps: for the Stoics, to say that something is material is simply to say that it really is, that it has being. Perhaps for them (whether or not they were aware of it), the proposition “reality is material” was tautological.

For the Stoics, knowledge begins in self-authenticating sensations. General skepticism about sense-experience defeats itself, for it can be based only on the experiences it presumes to doubt.

The world is a single reality, governed by its own world-soul. This pantheistic God rules all by natural law. As Plato’s Republic was ruled by a philosopher king, so the world of the Stoics is ruled by a divine philosopher king.

Everything happens by law, so the Stoics took a fatalistic attitude toward life. Aristotle, like present-day open theists, had said that propositions about the future were neither true nor false, because the future was not an object of knowledge. The Stoics held, on the contrary, that if I say “the sun will rise

³⁶ One wonders, however, how such conquest could be justified under the doctrine of the golden mean.

³⁷ Clark, *op. cit.*, 158-160.

tomorrow” and it does, that proposition was already true when I uttered it. Therefore, the rising of the sun *had* to happen.

So the Stoics sought to act in accord with nature. They sought to be resigned to their fate. Their ethic was one of learning to want what one gets, rather than of getting what one wants. But they did not advocate passivity. Contrary to Epicurus, they sought involvement in public life (the emperor Marcus Aurelius was a Stoic). They taught, as did all Greek thinkers, that one should live according to reason, which is also according to nature and according to the universal structure of society. They considered human society to be a universal brotherhood.

Stoicism is one major source, after Aristotle, of natural law thinking in ethics. Again, I ask David Hume’s question: how does one reason from the facts of nature to conclusions about ethical obligation? The lack of a true theistic position made the answer to this question, for the Stoics as for Aristotle, impossible.

Even though the Stoics tried to overcome the form/matter dichotomy by making the whole world material, there remains a secondary dichotomy between the world-soul and the beings within it. The Stoics failed to answer how the world soul accounts for individual facts, or how it gives moral direction to finite creatures.

Plotinus (205-270 AD)

The school of thought begun at Plato’s Academy continued for many centuries, but it endured some radical philosophical shifts. In the third century BC, a number of its members were skeptics: Pyrrho (d. 275), Timon (d. 230), and Arcesilaus (315-241). This was odd, because Plato himself had expended considerable energy refuting skepticism. But his dialogues rarely ended with cogent definitions of philosophical terms, and the *Parmenides*, as we have seen, leaves the theory of Forms itself hanging in uncertainty. So perhaps the skeptical turn of the Academy was not entirely a surprise.

The period of “Middle Platonism” (100BC-270 AD), was a time of world-weariness. Politics and economics gave people little reason to treasure the affairs of this life, much desire to escape from it. The mystery religions and Gnosticism³⁸ offered people various means of transcending the space-time world

³⁸ Gnosticism is similar to Plotinus’s neoplatonism in many ways. In Gnosticism too, there is a scale of being. At the top there is a nameless being, connected to the material world by semi-divine intermediaries. The “fall” occurs when the least of these beings mistakenly creates a material world. We are trapped in that world and must be reabsorbed into the nameless supreme being by various intellectual and moral disciplines taught by the Gnostic teachers. However, Plotinus opposed the Gnostics. I’m inclined to regard that as a family quarrel. We can see that Gnosticism and neoplatonism represent a common way of thinking, a common worldview (with variations of course) that was in the air during the early centuries of the Christian era. The idea

and being absorbed into divinity. The Platonic school also turned in a religious direction, emphasizing Plato's teaching that the soul belonged to a world other than this one and needed to return to that world through the exercise of mind. Into this tradition came Plotinus, the founder of the movement known as "neoplatonism."

Plotinus opposes the materialism of the Epicureans and Stoics, using various arguments: Materialism cannot explain thought. Materialism cannot identify the subject of knowledge, the one who knows, the one who uses the senses to gain knowledge. As Plato said, the most real beings are immaterial, including the human soul.

Plotinus describes a chain of being with a supreme being ("the One") at the top of the scale, and descending levels in order: mind (*nous*), soul (*psyche*), and the material world. He conceives of this ladder as a downward path and an upward path.

To examine the downward path, we shall start at the top of the scale, with the highest being, the One. The One cannot be described in human words. Even the term "one" is not literally applicable. But Plotinus thinks that the idea of oneness, unity, captures much of what he wants to say about this being. The One has no qualities, no properties (else there would be a division between subject and predicate). The only way to know the One is through being mystically united to him, in a trance that itself cannot be described.

Yet, Plotinus does say a great deal about the One: that it exists, that it does not have the qualities of beings in the material world, that it is immaterial, that it is possible for souls to enter a mystical relation with it. He particularly emphasizes that the One communicates its excellence to lower beings. This communication is an emanation, like light coming from a fire. The One does not freely choose to emanate; rather it cannot help but do so.³⁹ To emanate is its nature. The emanations produce the lower beings. In the end, all reality is an emanation of the One. So in one sense all reality is divine in character. Plotinus is fundamentally a monist.

The first product of the emanation, and the second level of reality, is *nous*, or Mind. Plotinus represents it as the result of the One's thought. It corresponds to Plato's world of Forms and, perhaps, to Aristotle's active intellect. Here, some multiplicity enters in: the distinction between subject and object, the many things of which there are Ideas.

that God and man are on a continuum and we can become God by various means is still in the air today. See Peter R. Jones's comparison between Gnosticism and the "new spiritualities" in *The Gnostic Empire Strikes Back* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1992) and *Spirit Wars* (Escondido: Main Entry, 1997).

³⁹ This is in contrast with the God of the Bible. In Scripture, (1) God is not constrained to create. He creates the world freely and voluntarily. (2) The product of creation, the world, is not divine in character, not in any sense a part of God.

The third level is that of Soul (*psyche*). Mind generates objects of its thought and thus produces Soul or life. Plotinus' Soul is like Plato's Demiurge, Heraclitus's *logos*. It governs the world from within the world. Plotinus describes three aspects of Soul: (1) The world Soul (compare the Stoic World Soul), which explains motion and change. (2) the middle Soul, which gives life to particular souls, (3) the lower Soul, which gives rise to bodies. Human souls are immortal.

The fourth level is the material world. We are souls, contained in material bodies. This condition is the result of a "fall," which results because our souls have accepted the guidance of sensation and become entangled with the material.⁴⁰ Union with the body in itself is not evil, unless we linger too long in this condition. But we should seek to rise from it as soon as possible by knowledge and virtue. At the bottom level of the material world is prime matter (compare Aristotle's teaching on this). Prime matter is really nothing, or empty space (compare Plato's "receptacle"). As rays of light disappear into the darkness, prime matter represents the furthest extent of the emanation of the One.

We can ascend on the ladder of being as we first descended, being absorbed into Soul, then Mind, then the One. The method of ascent is gaining knowledge, which is also growth in virtue.

Plotinus probably noticed that Plato's Forms did not account for all reality. So he advocated a broader principle, higher than the Forms, that would account for all of reality, including mud, hair, filth, evil, negativity, and imperfection. So the One can be understood as the result of a rationalistic impulse. Plotinus commends Parmenides' statement that "to be and to be thought are the same."

Significantly, however, it turns out that the One cannot be described at all. It has no qualities. It is not tall or short, because it is the principle of tallness and shortness. It is not good or evil, because it is the principle of good and evil, and therefore beyond good and evil. It is not even literally one, for it is the principle underlying both unity and plurality. So the One explains everything, and nothing. The explanation of everything turns out to be the greatest unexplained mystery of all.

Ultimate knowledge, therefore, comes, not from reasoning, but from mysticism, from ineffable union with the One. Thus Plotinus's extreme rationalism devolves into irrationalism. As Plato's Good was empty, and Aristotle's Prime Mover a self-referential tautology (thought of thought of thought), so Plotinus' One communicates to us no knowledge at all.

⁴⁰ It is not clear in Plotinus whether or not this fall is the result of a free choice. Given that the whole movement from the One to the material world is a necessary emanation, it would seem that the fall, too, was necessary. But when speaking of the fall and redemption of the human soul, Plotinus refers to choices we make.

Conclusion

Recall the general themes I listed under the introduction to “A Survey of Greek Philosophy.” We have seen now many specific examples of the “form-matter motive” (Dooyeweerd’s phrase) that unites the various strains of Greek thought. Though very different in many ways, these philosophies all seek to understand reality without the guidance of an absolute person. Therefore they affirm the autonomy of their own reason. Yet they note as they must that their reason is fallible, not omniscient. There are areas of reality that defy rational analysis (change to Parmenides, the world of sense to Plato, prime matter for Aristotle, etc.) The Greek response to these mysteries is to say that part of the world is essentially unknowable, essentially irrational. We can’t know it, because it can’t be known.⁴¹ It is the chaos of the “shapeless stream.” It is illusion (Parmenides), nonbeing, or nothingness. But the shapeless stream is found everywhere, as Aristotle’s matter underlies all substances. So if matter is irrational, the whole universe is irrational. Thus the irrationalism of the Greeks undermines their rationalism; and when they (as Parmenides) force their way to a consistent rationalism, they end up denying the entire world of experience.

Their project was to impose autonomous reason upon an irrational world.⁴² That project was bold, but it could not hope to succeed.

The only ultimate alternative is the absolute-personality theism of Scripture. God has created a knowable world and has given human beings the power to know it. But they can never hope to know it exhaustively as He does. So there are mysteries—not because there is an irrational element in the world, not because there is an element of nonbeing that somehow is and exists in order to frustrate philosophers—but because God has hidden from us some of his rational understanding of his creation.

Combining the Christian perspective with the Greek is not advisable. We can learn today from the questions the Greeks asked, from their failures, for the insights they express in matters of detail. But we should rigorously avoid the notion of rational autonomy and the form-matter scheme as a comprehensive worldview.⁴³ Unfortunately, during the medieval period and beyond, Christian theologians relied extensively on neoplatonism and (beginning with Aquinas) Aristotelianism. Aquinas, for example, distinguished between natural reason (which operates apart from revelation) and faith (which supplements our reason with revelation). Then he referred over and over again to Aristotle as “the

⁴¹ We recall the slogan, “What my net can’t catch isn’t fish.” See Cornelius Van Til’s pamphlet “Why I Believe in God” (Philadelphia: Orthodox Presbyterian Church, undated).

⁴² As Van Til often says, imposing abstract forms on abstract particulars, stringing beads without holes.

⁴³ It is sometimes useful to distinguish form and matter on a micro-level. It is not wrong to distinguish what things are made of (matter) from what they are (form). It is wrong to try to bring all reality under this schema. For to do that would either leave God out of our world view, or would make him a form (as Aristotle), matter, or both.

Philosopher” who guides us in matters of natural reason. The problems generated by this combination of Christian and pagan thought will occupy our studies of the medieval period.

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