Odyssey of the West II
A Classic Education through the Great Books
From Athens to Rome and the Gospels

COURSE GUIDE

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Featuring Kim J. Hartwick, Joel F. Richeimer, and Lawrence H. Schiffman
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TIMOTHY B. SHUTT has taught at Kenyon College, famed for splendid teaching, literary tradition, and unwavering commitment to the liberal arts for twenty years. No teacher at Kenyon has ever been more often honored, both by the college and by students, for exceptional skills in the classroom and as a lecturer. His courses in Kenyon’s interdisciplinary Integrated Program in Humane Studies and in the Department of English alike have always been heavily oversubscribed, and he lectures on Homer, Plato, Aristotle, the Bible, the Greek historians, Virgil, and Dante every year to a packed house.

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Introduction

 Odyssey of the West II continues the great voyage of discovery begun in the first volume of this course. By examining the Greek historians and philosophers, and then moving on to the great Roman poets and the books of the Christian Bible, the roots of Western culture come clear. Through discussion of these works, the esteemed professors who lend their insight to these lectures impart not only a better understanding of the past, but of our culture today as well.

 This course was inspired by the introductory course of instruction in the Integrated Program in Humane Studies at Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio: an elective, double-credit, interdisciplinary overview of Western culture from its Middle Eastern origins to the present. The course addresses in chronological sequence a series of major works that have shaped—and indeed, questioned—the ongoing development of Western thought both in its own right and in cultural dialogue with other traditions. In the process it likewise engages many of the most perennial and far-reaching questions that we face, even still, in our daily lives.
If Herodotus is the “father of history”—and in many senses he is just that—then his successor, Thucydides, is the “historian’s historian.” For no historical work ever written, it would be fair to say, has been more influential or more admired than Thucydides’s *The Peloponnesian War*, left as a very extensive, book-length fragment at Thucydides’s death in his mid-sixties around the year 395 CE. Thucydides himself calmly anticipates his study’s enduring worth and reputation, as he writes, “The absence of romance in my history will, I fear, detract somewhat from its interest; but if it be judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the understanding of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it, I shall be content. In fine, I have written my work, not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time” (1.22.4). And that is just what it has proved to be.

Thucydides has gained all but universal admiration for his scrupulous and painstaking methodology—“far from permitting myself to derive” my narrative of events “from the first source that came to hand,” he writes, “I did not even trust my own impressions” but instead assessed all available data from any source whatsoever “by the most severe and detailed tests possible” (1.22.2). And he has been celebrated likewise for shrewd and clear-sighted political analysis. Indeed, Thucydides is as much a favorite of political philosophers as of historians and is just as influential in that field as in the field of history—as the first and perhaps the most persuasive student of what the Germans call “macht politik,” or “power politics.” In this regard Thucydides makes fruitful use of a technique that he takes from Herodotus and in his turn bequeaths to many other ancient Greek and Roman historical writers—that of composing appropriate speeches for historical figures who appear in his narration, designed, as he puts it, to say “what was in my opinion demanded” by the occasion when the recorded speech was given, always, “of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what” was “really said” (1.22.1). The upshot is that Thucydides is able in the speeches that he preserves for us—and they are many and eloquent—to give us his own far-seeing and often rueful assessment of the political forces and influences actually at work at each given moment, overt, covert, or otherwise. The effect is often chilling, as when early on he attributes to an unnamed “Athenian envoy” at Sparta the following sentiments in a discussion that precedes the actual outbreak of the Peloponnesian War. “It has always been the law,” says the Athenian envoy in response to various complaints about overbearing Athenian behavior, “that the weaker should be subject to the stronger,” and “justice,” to make the matter explicit, “is a consideration which no one ever
yet brought forward to hinder his ambition when he had the chance of gaining anything by might” (1.76.2). The rest of Thucydides’s narrative chronicles in pitiless detail the results—for Athens, for Sparta, and for their allies—of operating on the basis of such a ruthless and unbridled view of things.

Here, contrary to our own expectations based on the fundamental character of Athens and Sparta respectively—and doubtless to the Athenian Thucydides’s own dismay (despite the self-contained reticence of his narrative), it is the Athenians who offend more grievously and more consistently than the Spartans. And pay the price.

Thucydides himself was an Athenian with distinguished antecedents. He was a relative of Miltiades, the victor at Marathon in the Persian Wars, and likewise of Miltiades’s son Cimon, the most prominent Athenian commander and among the most prominent political figures of the period between the Persian and Peloponnesian Wars that marked the glorious cultural high-water-mark of ancient Athens. Early in the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides himself served as an Athenian “strategos” or general until he was bested by the Spartan Brasidas, who was all-around, perhaps, the most estimable commander of the entire war (not “to have been a match for Brasidas,” as the Oxford Classical Dictionary drily puts it, does not prove Thucydides “a bad soldier”). But bad soldier or no, after the mid-420s, Thucydides’s military career as a commander was over. He was, in fact, exiled—the Athenians were very harsh toward unsuccessful generals, and, frequently, to successful ones too who didn’t please them—and watched the rest of the war as an interested, and often enough, one assumes, an appalled spectator from the sidelines.

The spectacle was, indeed, appalling, as over the course of nearly thirty years Athens and Sparta and their allies very nearly destroyed one another in a conflict that even at the time seemed to many debasing, fratricidal, and misguided, and which left the entire Hellenic world fatally weakened and vulnerable. Athens never again regained its former glory, and after a brief moment of triumph, Sparta—and then Thebes—followed her into sharp decline. The ultimate beneficiary was the Macedon of Philip and his son Alexander—and in the very long term, two centuries and more later, the expanding power of Rome.

Despite his unprecedented fidelity to the facts as he was able to perceive them, Thucydides structures his account in something not unlike tragic terms. Democratic, imperial Athens, mistress of the so-called Delian League, originally founded to counter the power of Persia, and ultimately a de facto Athenian empire, is at the outset of the conflict, as Pericles famously claims in his celebrated “funeral oration” “the school of Hellas” (2.41.1)—and thereby of the world in terms of intellectual and artistic achievement and, not least, in terms of political organization as well. The Athenian democracy was, by our own standards, sharply limited, excluding women, aliens, and slaves (of whom there were many), but even so was more inclusive and vigorous than anything of the sort that the world had yet seen. But for that very reason, Thucydides implies, it fatally overreached itself, most notably in the Sicilian expedition (415–413), when already embroiled with Sparta and Sparta’s allies, the Athenians attempted to subdue Syracuse, a city effectively as populous and prosperous as Athens herself, as part of a scheme that, according
to Thucydides, was aimed long-term at something not far short of world con-
quest. After Syracuse, the whole of Sicily—and Carthage and Italy. And so
on. It ended in disaster.

Even so, the Athenians held on, and under the immensely charismatic and
competent—and immensely problematic—Alcibiades (who had originally
served as a commander of the Sicilian expedition, and then, after falling under
a capital charge in Athens, defected to Sparta and advised the Spartans how
to ensure its defeat) even mounted a comeback. But in the end, thanks to
Persian money, Spartan resilience and (by comparison at least) Spartan self-
control, and their own chronic overreaching and bad judgment, the Athenians
were defeated. Thucydides himself lived to see the end, but his narrative
breaks off six years before the final fatal battle at Aegospotamae, when a
Spartan fleet under Lysander caught the Athenian fleet on the beach and
destroyed it. (Alcibiades himself, who had returned to Athens and mounted the
comeback, found himself once again out of favor, and had in fact warned the
Athenian commanders at Aegospotomoi of their peril, but they had under-
standably had more than enough of him at that point and foolishly chose to
stay just where they were.) In any case, and to our loss, after 411, when
Thucydides concludes his narration, it was left to others to finish the story.
Questions

1. What technique did Thucydides take from Herodotus?
2. In Thucydides’s view, why did Athens overreach itself?

Suggested Reading


Other Books of Interest

Thucydides’s *Peloponnesian War* trails off to its conclusion in narrating the events of the summer of 411 with Athens on the rebound in her long war against Sparta and others after the disasters of the Sicilian expedition and Alcibiades himself, astonishingly, ready to reassume command of the Athenian fleet. The eighth and final book of Thucydides’s history shows signs of still awaiting revision, and his composition goes no further, though in fact, as we have seen, the war continued for half a decade and more longer. Others accordingly took up the task of completing Thucydides’s narration. Contemporary critics tend most to value the fragmentary works of other ancient historians, but the work that has survived more or less complete—and not as redaction or a reworking at the hands of a later author—is the *Hellenica* or *A History of My Times* of Xenophon (early 420s to the late 350s). Xenophon is most celebrated, as it happens, for another work, the *Anabasis* or *The Expedition of Cyrus*, which recounts his postwar adventures as a mercenary commander in the employ of the Persian Cyrus during the course of Cyrus’s failed attempt to displace his brother as great king of Persia and, more memorably, during the aftermath, as Xenophon helped lead the mercenaries back home. Xenophon himself was an Athenian aristocrat and, during his youth, a companion of Socrates. The political turmoil in Athens, which was ferocious, and his own conservative and pious temperament made him a man of marked Spartan sympathies, however, and in the end he became a close personal friend of the Spartan king Agesilau, who settled him on a comfortable estate near Olympia in the northwest Peloponnese. It is accordingly to Xenophon that we can most conveniently, if perhaps not most reliably, turn for an account of the Athenian disaster at Aegospotomoi, where the Athenian fleet was destroyed, and of the aftermath, when Lysander and the Spartans besieged Athens, and forced her surrender, resisting requests from Thebes and Corinth that Athens be absolutely destroyed.

Spartan hegemony, though, proved temporary, and within a generation Epaminondas and Pelopidas of Thebes put an end to Spartan domination at the battles of Leuctra in 371 and Mantinea in 362. But the power of Thebes too proved ephemeral, and the ultimate victors were Philip and Alexander of Macedon, who in 338 at Chaeronea put an end not only to the power of Thebes, but, in effect, put an end to the age of the independent Greek city-state, or *polis*.

Even in Athens’s darkest hours, however, during the Peloponnesian War, her culture remained, in many respects at least, vibrant as ever. The tragedians Sophocles and Euripides continued their work, and so too did the great
master of the so-called “Old Comedy,” Aristophanes (from 460–50 to ca. 386). The comedies of Aristophanes, in their fierce topicality—Aristophanes has no visible qualms about no-holds-barred personal attacks—their cheerful outrageousness, their verbal inventiveness, and their exuberant sexuality and, at times, scatology as well, stand as the most unmistakable testimony to the freedom and energy of Athenian public life, even under severe cultural duress. In our own time, there is nothing much like them, though an X-rated, libelous skit on Saturday Night Live, conducted in large part in animal suits, with other characters wearing large and erect artificial phalluses where appropriate, might suggest a bit of the tone.

The works of the later comic master, Menander, who flourished a century or so later, are a good deal tamer, and if less admired by critics, have proved in the long term more influential. Roman drama—Plautus and Terence—stems more or less directly from Menander, and his works show a marked affinity with what we know today as the “situation comedy,” a perennial mainstay of stage, film, and television alike.

What is most distinctive, however, about the period of Athens’s political decline is the rise to full maturity of philosophy in the person of the great masters, Plato (ca. 428/7–ca. 348/7) and Aristotle (384–322), and of Plato’s mentor, Socrates (469–399). Socrates himself, more or less on principle, wrote nothing, but Plato (and in his own way, Xenophon) rectified the deficiency, and the works of Plato in particular and of his own student, Aristotle, remain to this very day, two millennia and more after their composition, as influential as any philosophical works ever written.

It is not, though, that Plato and Aristotle or even Socrates had no antecedents. They most certainly did, though of two rather different kinds. The “pre-Socratic” philosophers, as they are called, began their work, by and large, in Ionia, in what is now western Turkey and in the Aegean islands offshore. And it was work of immense subsequent importance, for they were the first that we know of who sought to understand the natural world by means of systematic rationality, giving birth in the process not only to philosophy, but to what we think of as science as well. First among them, or first that we know of, is Thales of Miletus (ca. 625–545), who is famous not only for his observation of an eclipse taking place on May 28, 585, but for his surmise that the underlying substrate of the natural world was water. The great intellectual departure here, of course, was not so much Thales’s espousal of water (though he certainly could have done worse), but rather the formulation of the question; no one, so far as we know, had sought to think of such things as “underlying substrates.” His successors came up with other answers, air, the “unlimited,” fire, or nous or mind, or even number, or even “atoms,” depending on their own presuppositions, but what proved most influential was simply the effort to conceive of things in non-mythological terms, on the basis of plausibility—of making sense—if not necessarily on the basis of evidence.

The other group influencing Socrates and Plato and their posterity was the “sophists” (“wisdom” is in Greek “sophia”—hence too “philosophy,” or “love of wisdom”). The sophists, though, had rather different aims than the Ionians and those who undertook similar pursuits. Effective public speaking had an
importance in the ancient world, and in Athens (and later Rome) in particular, which made of rhetoric effectively the capstone of elite education. And the sophists were in the first instance teachers of rhetoric, the key to success in the law-courts and the assembly. In this sense the sort of education that the sophists offered was eminently practical, and sophists of high reputations gained very high fees. Sophistical training was worth the money, or so the ambitious clearly believed.

Socrates was himself often considered a sophist, though we are told that he refused any fees at all. And his aim was quite different from that of his peers. They were interested in persuasiveness and power. Socrates was interested in truth, and in particular—and in sharp contrast to the concerns of his Ionian forebears—in human and moral truth. What is justice? What is the good? And, by implication, how should we live? Such were the questions that engaged Socrates.

Not that he claimed to know the answers. Indeed, he quite explicitly claimed that he didn’t. He was reputedly—on the authority of the Delphic Oracle, no less—the wisest man in Greece. But if so, he contended, with delicious irony, it was only because he knew what he didn’t know. And on that account he devoted his life to questioning those who purportedly knew better. This is a procedure, the famous “Socratic method,” which is I think sometimes misunderstood. In asking questions, Socrates did indeed seek to reveal the inadequacy of his interlocutors’ preconceptions. But the destruction of such misapprehensions was not, I think, for Socrates an aim in and of itself. Instead, I think, rather like a Zen master, his aim was by undermining misapprehensions to let the truth, indeed the Form of the Good, to shine through. He was seeking—and seeking for his students—a sort of moral and intellectual enlightenment, and in that sense as well coming to know by intuition, by mystic apprehension, if you will, what neither he nor anyone else could come to know by tradition or by any other means—to know, in short, what he did not know.
Questions

1. What characterized the comedies of Aristophanes?
2. What is most distinctive about the period of Athens’s decline?

Suggested Reading


Other Books of Interest


Plato's Significance

Plato is considered one of the greatest philosophers. Alfred North Whitehead, one of the great philosophers of the twentieth century, said that all of philosophy is just a footnote to Plato. Even if one disagrees with that claim, it is indisputable that not only philosophy, but science and Christianity were deeply transformed by Plato. The scientific revolution was led by Galileo, a Platonist; the creation of Christianity as we know it was the intersection of Judeo-Christian thinking and Platonism through the works of Augustine; modern logic was developed by Gottlieb Frege and Kurt Godel, two Platonists; the mystical tradition in Christianity is neo-Platonist and the list goes on.

Plato did not write ordinary books. He wrote dialogues, something similar to miniature plays, where the main character is usually Socrates, his teacher. Typically, Socrates would corner someone in the market place, someone who claimed to know the truth on some matter.

Socrates then, through question and answer, would show that the person knew less than they claimed. He actually showed something more: the person did not know what he actually thought. The person was unreflective.

Plato’s dialogues are usually divided into three periods: the early dialogues, the middle dialogues, and the later dialogues. The early dialogues are critical of various philosophical positions. And scholars treat the early dialogues as the views of the historic Socrates. The middle dialogues present Plato's own views. The later dialogues are Plato’s responses to various criticisms and modifications of his views. We will examine in this lecture the Euthyphro, an early dialogue.

Plato's Writings As Art

The Euthyphro, like almost all of Plato’s writings, is not just a work of philosophy. It is a work of art that can be read and enjoyed as literature. It is a great read. However, we are going to ignore the literary features of the text and narrow in on the purely philosophical points.

We see that even in this earliest of dialogues, where Plato’s ideas are not fully developed, Plato is making profound points. You will see why Plato has the reputation he does.

The Setting

In this dialogue, like most, Plato states his views through Socrates. Socrates meets Euthyphro at the courthouse. Euthyphro is bringing legal charges
against his father. Socrates is shocked. How can you bring charges against your own father? Euthyphro explains that his father murdered a slave and it is the pious thing to do. Socrates then begins to question Euthyphro on the nature of piety. After all, Euthyphro must be an expert in piety to be so confident to bring his own father to court. The dialogue is between Euthyphro and Socrates on the nature of piety, but really it is on something much deeper. It is on the nature of ethics.

**Ethical Reductionism**

Plato only hints at his own views in this dialogue. The dialogue is primarily critical: Plato is attacking other positions. But his view is that ethics (and in fact normativity, something broader than ethics) is metaphysically basic, that ethics is part and parcel of the very structure of reality. What that means will become clearer later.

Plato is attacking ethical reductionism. Ethical reductionism is a view familiar to all of us. It was popular in ancient Greece. It is popular today. It is simply the view that ethical claims, however important, can be explained by something deeper, by something more basic. What? Well, for some it is religion, God; for others, it is science or nature. Obviously, neither of those views treats ethics as metaphysically basic.

Let’s consider religious ethical reductionism first. It has a name. It is now called “Divine Command Theory.” It says that something is good just in the case God commands it. If God says stealing is wrong, then stealing is wrong. If God says stealing is right, then stealing is right. God determines what is right and what is wrong.

Plato says that can’t be what the good is. The good can’t be what God commands.

Take, for instance, the statement, “God is good.” Every religious person believes that. It is an important religious claim. But it can’t be taken for granted. After all, many people deny it. For instance, Mark Twain in his essay “Thoughts on God,” asked what you would think if you discovered that your neighbor invented the mosquito, the insect that has caused untold misery on millions of humans and millions of animals. Wouldn’t you say that your neighbor is horrible? Don’t you have more morality than that person? Well, what does that tell you about the inventor of the mosquito?

Mark Twain is not denying God exists; he is denying that God is good.

The religious person is saying that Mark Twain is wrong: God is good. So the claim that “God is good” is a substantive claim. But if the Divine Command Theory is true, if “good” just means what God commands, then what does “God is good” mean?

Plato claims: it means nothing interesting. It would just mean “God likes God.” And that is not what the religious person wants to say. The religious person wants to say, “No, God is good.” But to say that reveals that they have an understanding of the good independent of what God commands. They have a grasp of what is good (independent of God) so they can, in effect, judge God and say He is good and that Mark Twain is wrong.
You can’t reduce the good to what God commands. At this point, Plato is only hinting at his main thesis, that the idea that good is more basic than even what God commands.

This argument has had tremendous influence on Christian and Jewish thinking.

Here Plato makes a very important distinction. He wants to distinguish between two claims: the Divine Command Theory (the reductionist claim) from the claim that we should obey God because God knows the good.

Here is how Plato puts it: “Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?”

Does God love the good because it is good or is something good because God loves it?

Plato has no problem at all with the claim that God loves the good because it is good, he has a problem with the reductionist claim that something is good because God loves it.

Plato uses the same argument for other versions of ethical reductionism. One popular version of ethical reductionism is that ethical concepts are reduced to natural concepts. For instance, the good is the natural. So someone might advertise a product as all natural, as if to say it is good.

Plato is going to ask the same question. Can something be natural and not good? Can something be good and not natural? If so, then the good is not the same as natural.

Being eaten alive by a crocodile is certainly natural, but it is not good (at least not for us). Hemlock and arsenic are “all natural,” but they are not good. Likewise polio vaccinations, umbrellas, and warm winter coats are all unnatural, but they are good.

Clearly, we have a grasp of the concept of “good” independent of the concept “natural.” You can’t explain or reduce the good to the natural. Plato runs this argument against all attempts of ethical reductionism. We have an independent grasp of the good. If that is true, then he is well on his way to arguing that the good is metaphysically basic.

What motivates ethical reductionism is the desire for a simpler, easier world. The good turns out to be complicated, hard to grasp. We will see why later. So wanting a simpler world, we replaced the concept of “good” with a simpler concept like “the natural.” But, Plato argues, that won’t work.

Ethical Non-Cognitivism

The fact that ethical reductionism does not work is not enough to show that Plato’s view is right, that ethics is basic to the very structure of reality. Maybe the reason why ethical reductionism does not work, maybe the reason we can’t reduce ethics to nature or religion, is because ethical statements are neither true nor false. Maybe, they are just the expression of our feelings. Maybe they are not any deeper than that.

This view is called “ethical non-cognitivism.” By “non-cognitive,” we mean there is nothing to know about ethics, no cognition. Under this view, facts are
real, they are solid. And people have emotional reactions to facts. They call those emotional reactions "values." Values are nothing more than that. That is why you can’t explain them by anything deeper. There is not really that much to explain.

When someone says that chocolate ice cream is good, we all recognize that is not a very deep thought. It is just a feeling. The ethical non-cognitivist is saying, in effect, that it is no different than if someone says that capital punishment is good. They are just feelings being elevated.

There were two reasons why people supported ethical non-cognitivism in Plato’s day and in ours. They are the same two reasons.

The first is that values are just too weird to be real. Do they grow on trees? Can you touch them? If values are anything, they are just our feelings. This is sometimes called the “ontological queerness” objection. Values are ontologically queer. Plato does not deal with this argument in the *Euthyphro*.

But he does deal with the second argument for ethical non-cognitivism in this dialogue. The ethical non-cognitivist argues that no one gets angry over facts. If we have a dispute over facts, we just resolve the dispute. But if we have a dispute over values, such as abortion, capital punishment, or gay marriage, those disputes go on forever. Of course, they go on forever, claims the ethical non-cognitivist, because there is no way to resolve them. How could we resolve a dispute when there is no truth to the matter? It is just people’s feelings.

Basically, the argument for ethical non-cognitivism comes down to this: ethical disputes are endless. Factual disputes come to an end. That shows that facts are real and that ethics is not deep.

This is how Plato represents the ethical non-cognitivist argument: “And what sort of difference creates enmity and anger? Suppose for example that you and I, my good friend, differ about number; do differences of this sort make us enemies and set us at variance with one another? Do we not go at once to arithmetic, and put an end to them by sum?”

And then Plato says, what do people fight over? “They have differences of opinion . . . about good and evil, the just and the unjust, honorable and the dishonorable . . .” about ethics.

But then Plato asks, does everyone believe this, whether this is really true? Plato asks Euthyphro in the courts, “do they admit their guilt, Euthyphro, and yet say they ought not to be punished?” And Euthyphro, says, “No, they do not”—not realizing the implications of what he is saying. Then Plato says, “Then there are some things which they do not venture to say and do: for they do not venture to argue that the guilty are to be unpunished, but they deny their guilt, do they not?” And Euthyphro says yes.

What is Plato saying here? If you examine ethical debates closely, so-called ethical disputes are not about ethics at all! They are disputes about the nature of reality, the metaphysical structure of the world. They are over the facts of reality.

Take, for example, a dispute between a traditional Hindu and a meat eater. Plato is asking, How should we describe this debate? Should we say that the
debate is over whether one is either for or against eating one's dead grandmother? Or should we say the debate is over whether or not the soul of one's grandmother enters a cow? Is the debate over ethics or over what happens to the soul after death? If scientists would invent a Soul-a-Meter that tracks the soul after it leaves the body and if they discovered that the souls of humans enter cows, I would predict that cow eating would dramatically decline. The debate between the traditional Hindu and the meat eater is not an ethical one—where ethics is seen as divorced from reality. The debate is a metaphysical one—on the very nature of reality.

This same kind of analysis can be applied across the board. Did Hitler say he favored killing innocent people? Or did Hitler say he thought that Jews, Gypsies, and others were not human beings?

If you look closely at ethical disputes, something deep is at play. Plato is claiming that ethical disputes are really disputes about the nature of reality, about contrasting visions of how the world is. They are not the expressions of feelings. They are deeper.

Ethical non-cognitivism treats ethics as about feelings, something quite separable from the world. For Plato ethics is about how you see the world in its most basic way. We will see that Plato is going to argue that ethical non-cognitivism and ethical reductionism hold untenable views about the very nature of reality.

At this point in the dialogue, Euthyphro is no longer sure what he thinks or even what he thought. He was so sure before and now it seems he realizes he did not really know what he was talking about. Socrates ends the dialogue by begging Euthyphro to please tell him what piety is; after all, Euthyphro is an expert. Euthyphro responds, "Another time, Socrates; for I am in a hurry, and I must go now." The dialogue ends with Socrates chasing after Euthyphro, begging for wisdom.
Questions

1. What characterized each of the three periods of Plato’s dialogues?
2. What argument of Plato’s had a tremendous influence on Christian and Jewish thinking?

Suggested Reading


Other Books of Interest


In this beautifully written, entertaining and profound dialogue, Socrates meets Theaetetus, a sixteen-year-old math whiz, who is a pupil of Socrates’s mathematician friend, Theodorus. Theodorus begins the dialogue, telling Socrates, “Socrates, I have become acquainted with a very remarkable Athenian youth, whom I commend to you as well as worthy of your attention. If he had been a beauty I should have been afraid to praise him, lest you suppose that I was in love with him; but he is no beauty, and you must not be offended if I say that he is very like you; for he has a snub nose and projecting eyes, although these features are less marked in him than in you. Seeing then that he has no personal attractions, I may freely say, that in all of my acquaintance . . . I never knew anyone who has his natural gifts.”

Socrates wants to meet Theaetetus. They engage in a typical Socratic conversation. The topic moves to what is the nature of knowledge. And Theaetetus offers an answer: knowledge is experience. Basically, Theaetetus gives the American common sense answer: all knowledge is based on sense experience. This view has a name. It is called “empiricism.” It is the view that really all you know is what you know through your senses, your eyes, ears, tongue, touch, and so on. This view is anti-metaphysical, where metaphysics means something like knowledge beyond experience.

The arch empiricist was David Hume, who presented the view in its clearest form. Hume ended his celebrated work, the Enquiry, by saying that if you come across a book that is not based on experience, it is sophistry and illusion. You should burn it. For Hume, metaphysics is not just a philosophical error—it is the cause of human suffering. The justifications for slavery, kings, and religious wars are metaphysical. They are not justified by experience. According to Hume, we should restrict our beliefs to what we can experience. We should be modest in our beliefs. And we all would be better off for that.

“It would be a singular thing, my lad, if each of us was, as it were, a wooden horse, and within us were seated many separate senses, since manifestly these senses unite into one nature, call it soul or what you will; and it is with this central form through the organs of sense that we perceive sensible objects.”

~Socrates, Theaetetus 184d,1–5
Plato is the grand metaphysician. He believes both that reality is more than our experience and we can know that reality. So he has to show what is wrong with empiricism. This dialogue, the *Theaetetus*, is the classic attack on empiricism.

Plato’s first move is to argue that a consistent empiricism leads to relativism. By “consistent” he means an empiricism where one thinks out its consequences. Plato does not think most people realize the implications of what they believe. But if empiricists did, they would see that they are relativists.

By “relativism,” he means the common view that all knowledge is indexed to one’s group. So for instance, ethical relativism holds that one’s ethical views are true only for the group that you belong to. According to relativists, of course, when they see a conflict, their reaction is always the same. No one is really wrong. Relativists explain to the conflicting parties what you say is true for you and what the other side says is true for them. All beliefs are indexed to the speaker. Relativism is of course an anti-metaphysical point of view. If there was a metaphysical truth, then someone would simply be wrong.

To get relativism from empiricism is not very difficult. All you need to show is that experience varies. As Socrates says, “. . . do you even feel sure that anything appears to another human being the same as it appears to you?” We don’t all experience the world the same way. If knowledge is based solely on experience and if experience varies among people, then relativism would be true.

We know that experience does vary. Some people are color blind; some people experience synesthesia (they taste colors); some people have mystical experiences; some people are schizophrenic. So Plato has an easy time showing that a consistent empiricism leads to relativism.

Plato’s second move is to claim that relativism leads to a dilemma. This is called the “dilemma critique.” It is still routinely cited today to show that relativism can’t be right. Plato confronts the relativist with a dilemma. Take the statement that the relativist believes in, namely, “relativism is true.” If that statement is understood relativistically, then that statement is simply true for the relativist. It is simply indexed to his or her group. It is not really true. But then it is not interesting. It is only an interesting claim if it is understood non-relativistically as a deep metaphysical truth about the nature of reality. For the statement “relativism is true” to be interesting, it has to be a statement about the world, a metaphysical statement, not merely about the speaker. But that is precisely what relativism denies. There is no way to state relativism without violating the very strictures of relativism.

Plato could stop there and end the dialogue. But he doesn’t. Instead he makes a third move. Plato claims that empiricism and thus relativism has a hidden commitment to metaphysics. That is to say, there is a secret metaphysics lurking inside empiricism and relativism. If that is true, that would be damning. The whole purpose of empiricism and thus relativism is that we don’t need metaphysics, we can’t know metaphysics, and we should rid metaphysics from our lives.

Plato wants to show that empiricism and relativism are not just committed to metaphysics, but an incoherent metaphysics. Plato does this by considering
statements about the future. There are of course explicit statements about the future, such as, I say that it is going to rain Friday. But there are also implicit statements about the future in almost everything we say. If I say that this is a podium, I am saying that it will not bite me, it will not walk away, it will not get offended. All are claims about the future. If you think about it—much of what we say has future implications.

Now let’s say, I say it will rain on Friday. The relativist will quickly correct me and say, “When you said it will rain on Friday, what you should have said, is that it will rain on Friday for you. That is all you can really mean.”

Okay. Friday comes along. And let’s say, it does not rain. What is the relativist supposed to say? It looks like I am just flat wrong. But the relativist can’t say that. The relativist would have to say that the statement “it will rain Friday” was true for me when I said it.

But Plato asks, How is that possible? It would only be possible if the world was in some kind of flux, if the world had no fixed properties. But that is a metaphysical claim about the true nature of reality. For the empiricist and the relativist, the “I” who said it will not rain on Friday cannot be the same “I” who is standing in the rain on Friday—if relativism is true.

Consistent empiricists like Hume acknowledge this. For instance, Hume, in his great classic, *The Treatise on Human Nature*, points out that a consistent empiricism denies the existence of an “I.” But later, when he published his more popular and shorter, *Enquiry*, he decided to leave that controversial section out.

Plato again could have stopped there. After all, he argued that empiricism leads to relativism, that relativism is incoherent, and that empiricism and relativism are in fact committed to a metaphysics—the very thing that empiricists and relativists want to stop. All of these claims seem to refute empiricism. But Plato pushes on. Plato’s fourth move in the *Theaetetus* is to show that the empiricist metaphysics makes language impossible.

The metaphysics behind empiricism is that everything is in flux. That is the only way to make my statements to be true for me at the time I spoke. My language and my thoughts refer to my momentary experience and your language and your thoughts refer to your momentary experience. But if that is true, then we are not communicating at all. Each of us is locked in our momentary, fluctuating, private world.

For Plato this is absurd. It is one thing to say that communication sometimes breaks down. It is another to say that we do not communicate at all.

At this point, Plato offers an alternative metaphysics that shows how communication, thought, and understanding are possible. That is his positive account and the topic of our next lecture.
1. What is metaphysics for Hume?
2. Why does Plato claim that empiricism and relativism have a hidden commitment to metaphysics?

Suggested Reading


Other Books of Interest

The heart of Plato’s thought is his “Theory of Forms.” Sometimes, it is called the “Theory of Ideas” or simply “Platonism.” It is his metaphysical alternative to empiricism. It is worth repeating that Plato’s thought is more than the Theory of Forms. He has a theory of justice, a theory of education, a theory of the ideal state, and views on how to live one’s life and a host of other topics. None of those are simply reducible to the theory of forms, though the theory of forms plays a role in each of them.

The theory of forms reduced to its basics is simply this: The world is composed of more than simply the mental-type things (like beliefs, desires, feelings) and more than the physical-type things (like tables, trees, and mountains). In addition, there are abstract entities. There are things in the world that lack spatial and temporal properties, but are objective. Reality is more than the mental and the physical. These abstract entities have explanatory power. Furthermore, they are not just abstract, they are normative. By “normative,” I mean that they are action guiding; they tell you not just how the world is, but how it should be.

In short, Plato is saying that reality at its deepest level has an abstract normative structure. We saw this hinted at in the Euthyphro, that even God operates in that structure. We saw this hinted at in the Theaetetus; a world without that structure is incoherent.

So what can be explained by the theory of forms that can’t be explained by empiricism or relativism or naturalism or materialism?

According to Plato—a lot. Consider the letter “A.” Think of a particular letter A in a book; it has a particular size, color, font, chemical composition. Now think of the spoken letter A. It does not have a size, color, font, or chemical composition. It has a certain volume, accent, tempo, and so on. Now what do the two A’s have in common? The answer is nothing physical. What makes them the same letter? And do you see the particular A? Here is an experiment you can do. The next time you read a book, have someone show you various fonts, and ask you what font the book was written in. You can’t tell, even though you have been staring at the book for hours. You did not see the particular A’s. You saw the type A, the category A.

Here is what Plato is claiming; if you saw the world as tokens, as particular events, you would not see at all. The world would not be intelligible. Each leaf would be something different from every other leaf. You don’t see thousands of particular leaves, you see a tree. You don’t see the variations of color on a wall, you see a blue wall.
Or consider Einstein’s equation, $E=MC^2$. We all know it or at least we are all familiar with it. But where is it? It is not in this book. I can’t destroy it by destroying this book. It is not in my mind. It does not go away if I forget it. If it is physical, it must be somewhere in particular. If it is mental, it must be subjective. But it is neither subjective nor somewhere in particular. It is everywhere and nowhere. It is abstract. According to Einstein, everything around us, the light bulb illuminating this room, the heater heating this room, my ability to convert food to energy, are all instances of this formula, this Form, instances that have nothing physically in common. But they are instances of the same abstract relationship.

Here is another example, according to Plato, of something that can only be explained by the theory of forms. We are always referring to ideal limits and standards. For instance, science is not about particular things; it is about ideal normative abstract reality. Pick up a geometry book; it is about perfectly flat surfaces, ideally straight lines, infinite space. Pick up a physics book; it is about ideal gas, frictionless planes, perfectly elastic particles. Pick up an economics book; it is about rational agents with perfect information. These sciences are not about the physical world or the mental world; they are about the forms in which we understand the physical and mental world.

Here is another example. The theory of forms can best be seen in the deep abstract structure of reality. Take the cuteness ratio. The ethologist Tinbergen discovered that what we call cuteness is a mathematical ratio of chin, cheeks, forehead, and other features. Anything that instantiates that form elicits from us a cuteness reaction. We are responding to an abstract relationship. These kind of cases can be multiplied endlessly. The forms explain our behavior.

This brings us to Plato’s main point. Plato wants to argue that communication and intelligibility can only be accounted for by the forms. By “intelligibility” Plato is referring to the amazing fact that the world is understandable. It need not have been. It could have been the case that every time I look, the world seems new. But it doesn’t. I see the same type of things over and over again. By “communication,” Plato is referring to the amazing fact that I can successfully communicate with someone who has had a very different experience than me. How is that possible if all we had were our own private experiences?

So what is the theory of forms? Basically, you can think of the forms as elements as in chemistry or physics, but abstract elements. They are elements of thoughts and being. When you hear a sentence that you never heard before, you simply decompose it into the elements (forms) that you do understand. The same occurs when you enter a situation you have not been in before. The theory of forms is how we decode the world around us. And just like there are really no new chemicals, just new combinations of the same elements, the same applies to thoughts and to beings. The forms are the elements of thought and being that make the world sensible, intelligible, and communicable.

Plato makes another claim. These elements, these forms, have to be discrete, digital units. They are the unbreakable building blocks. If they were analog, that is, non-discrete, combining them would blur them. When you Xerox a Xerox of a Xerox, or make a cassette copy of a cassette copy of a
cassette copy, the signal is lost, the quality disappears. The information is not preserved. Only discrete digital preserves the information through copying. Mendel discovered the same thing in genetics. If the genes were analog, and a tall person would mate with a short person, the height of the children would be the average of the parents. But in a few generations, everyone would have the same height and features. We know that does not happen. So the genetic information must be in discrete units.

Plato made this discovery over two thousand years ago. To be able to think, one has to be able to think the same thought over time, to copy the same thought—otherwise thought would not be possible. To communicate, one has to copy a thought from one person to the next—otherwise communication would not be possible. For thoughts to be reliable, they have to be discrete. The building blocks to thought and reality are the forms.

Plato discusses various objections to the theory of forms. I want to mention a couple. First, the very idea of the forms is just too weird to be true. How can there be abstract entities in addition to the physical and mental? We saw this same issue arising in the Euthyphro when we discussed ethical non-cognitivism. Aren’t values just too weird to be real?

Plato responds with the famous cave allegory. Basically, the claim is that we are all trapped in a cave of our senses. Even what we imagine comes from our senses. But our senses are parochial—they represent only a small bit of reality. Reality is weirder than our senses and our imagination. If one is familiar with modern physics, it too is weird. But that does not mean it is false.

Another objection: if the forms are ever present and necessary for thought, how come we don’t sense the forms? Plato responds with an analogy. If I asked you what is in this room, you will tell me—a podium, some chairs, people, books. What you won’t say is the light. Because you see with the light, you don’t see the light. In fact, if you can see the light, you could not see. If I made the light so bright that you will see it, you would be effectively blind. The same is true with the forms. We think with the forms. We don’t think the forms.

Plato’s theory of the forms is an ancient theory. It was created in ancient times. But it has been developing ever since. Broadly speaking, two traditions come from it: a religious and a scientific. The religious tradition sees the forms as the thoughts of God. It has shaped Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. But there is also a scientific tradition that includes Galileo and some of the greatest logicians, such as Kurt Godel and Gottlieb Frege. The theory is ancient, but it is far from dead.
Questions

1. What is the theory of forms?
2. What two traditions come from the theory of forms?

Suggested Reading


Other Books of Interest


Today, I am supposed to introduce Aristotle’s philosophy. That’s an impossible task. No philosopher has such a comprehensive account of reality as Aristotle. Thomas Aquinas, the philosopher of the Roman Catholic Church, simply referred to Aristotle as “the philosopher.” Christianity, Islam, Judaism were all transformed by contact with this pagan thinker. Aristotle founded biology, psychology, physics, and logic. He developed a system of ethics that is still flourishing. His classic works on poetics and rhetoric are still studied and read. His logic was not improved upon until the end of the nineteenth century. The richness of Aristotle’s thought cannot be overestimated. We read some philosophers for historic reasons. We read Aristotle because he is a contemporary thinker.

To understand Aristotle’s worldview, it is helpful to contrast it with the modern world view. Modern thought, which began around 1500, was a revolt against Aristotle, or what they took to be Aristotle. Francis Bacon, René Descartes, John Locke, David Hume, Voltaire, Thomas Hobbes, and others were all anti-Aristotelians. Here is a cartoon history of modern thinking: the world is just stuff. It has no intrinsic meaning or purpose. Any meaning or purpose the world does have is projected either by God or by humans. Therefore—and here is the central claim of modern thinking—meaning or purpose requires consciousness either divine or human. A world without consciousness is a world without meaning.

Aristotle disagrees with the modern way of thinking. Meaning and purpose do not require a consciousness—something can have a purpose whether anyone knows it or not. Meaning and purpose are not projected. They are discovered. There exists natural meaning or natural purpose. Aristotle’s name for this is “naturalized teleology.” Purpose is natural, like sap is natural in trees. It is a fact about the world.

It is difficult to see purpose. It is not an isolatable property. It is not a property you find lying on the ground. It is a system property. Purpose is the name of a specific objective relation between an entity and a specific kind of system. Aristotle gives this gruesome example. If you find a hand on the ground, it is a hand in name only. A real hand is connected to a body. Notice for Aristotle, the word “hand” refers not to the physical thing (otherwise a hand on the ground would be a hand), but to the function or purpose of a hand. A hand is defined by what it is supposed to do, not by its physical properties.

A hand might be a bad example. After all, you can figure out what a hand does, its purpose, simply by looking at it. A better example might be a pancreas. A pancreas has an objective purpose. We did not decide what it was. We had to discover it. But note also in isolation a pancreas has no purpose.

You can stare at a pancreas until you are blue in your face, and you will never figure out what it does. You will need to see its role in the larger system. You must first understand the larger system.

What kind of system? Aristotle claims there are self-correcting, self-maintaining, self-adjusting systems. His example is the immune system. But one can also think of ecological systems, economic systems, or the cardiovascular system. These systems adapt and self-correct—without anyone running them. How the body heals itself, why animals move (a cat moves toward a fire when it is cold, away when it’s hot), animal migration (animals move en masse when the seasons change), maintaining a constant body temperature (through different temperatures), adaptation to change of time zones, the change of lung capacity when one changes altitude—all of these systems are overlapping and nested. None of these changes, none of this adaptive behavior, requires consciousness, either human or divine. We are embedded beings, revealing that we live in a purposeful world—naturalized teleology.

How these systems are nested is a scientific question. Heart valves are nested in the heart system, which in turn is nested in the cardiovascular system which is associated with the nervous system, the digestive system, and other systems, which are all part of the animal system, which is in turn embedded in the ecological system, the economic system, and so on.

Notice that the heart valve has a role in all of this. It either fulfils its capacity well or not so well. Objectively, there are good or bad heart valves. This is not a subjective matter. “Good” means doing your job well. “Good” and “bad” are objective terms. Science has the job of discovering what is a good or bad pancreas. That is just plain weird to modern thinking. We don’t think of science as trying to figure out what is good or bad. In the modern view, facts and values are radically separate. In the modern view, we can agree on all of the facts and disagree on the values. There is no intrinsic connection. Values, for us, are either subjective or divine.

For Aristotle, a good pancreas is neither subjectively good nor divinely good—a good pancreas is naturally good. The fact/value distinction is an error of modern thought. There exist only fact/value blends. Facts and values are intrinsically connected. He is not saying we cannot conceive of the value part of a situation separately from the factual part. We can. Just like I can conceive of the shape of the table independent of what the table is made of. But the shape does not exist independent of the table. There is just the table. The situation is a fact/value blend, though I can separate the two in my mind.

The modern person sees him or herself in a mechanical world of forces, these forces operated by meaningless, purposeless laws. We are our consciousness. I am my thoughts. I am looking upon this world.

Aristotle disagrees with all of that. You are embedded in ways you don’t know or need to know, in a network of overlapping, nested systems. I am not detached from those relations. Humans, outside of those relations, cease to be human, like a hand without a body.

For Aristotle, because we are so embedded in the world, people are sensitive detectors to their local environments. Like a heart, we need not be conscious, but like a heart we are sensitive detectors to small changes in our
environment. You know more than you can say. The skill of driving to work requires micro-adjustments. You can drive without realizing how you got to your destination.

Contrast this with the clock metaphor that is so central to the modern world view. All of the clocks around you tell the same time. They tell the same time because they are synchronized, not because they are connected to each other. They are independent of the universe. We can give a contrasting metaphor to Aristotle. We are like thermometers. Of course, he did not use that metaphor. And a thermometer is too simple, too one-dimensional. But a thermometer stands in an intimate relationship to the world. We are more like thermometers than like clocks.

Aristotle is saying that we are not radically wrong. The modern view, a view expressed by Descartes, Marx, Freud, behaviorists, and others, is one of suspicion. We are radically deceived. We are clocks disconnected from the world. But for Aristotle, we are thermometers. So for Aristotle, it is not right to be dismissive of someone’s point of view. Aristotle always begins his account with what tradition says. But Aristotle is not a relativist. The tradition is where you start. A thermometer is a good local detector, but not if it is broken or near a light bulb. Humans are good local detectors.

The job of science is telling us when something is a good detector. For instance, scientists discovered the meaning of tree rings. It has a natural meaning. But not all tree rings have that natural meaning: not trees that grow near waterfalls.

Science is figuring out what is a healthy heart, or state, or person.

Aristotle created a metaphysics that humans are deeply part of the world; the world is meaningful, but a meaning that has to be discovered. From that he created an ethics, an ethics that is very different from the modern view.
Questions

1. How did Aristotle view the fact/value distinction?
2. Why are people more like thermometers than clocks?

Suggested Reading


Other Books of Interest

Aristotle’s ethics is closely tied to his metaphysical system, how he sees us in the world. Aristotle’s ethics is not the same thing as what we mean by morality. By “morality,” we mean how not to do wrong. But what Aristotle means by “ethics” is how to live a worthwhile life.

Aristotle’s project is to try to figure out why some people live worthwhile lives, amazing lives, and why some people don’t. He does not think that there is some a priori reason. What counts as a good life depends on facts about what it is to be human. The ethics of a Martian would be very different from the ethics of a human being. For instance, Aristotle takes it as a brute fact that we are social beings that need other people, and that other people in our lives as friends is necessary to have a good life. So one-fifth of his main book on ethics is on friendship. Aristotle’s ethics is based on human experience, the history of it, and the science of it.

It is important to remember that Aristotle does not see himself at the beginning of philosophy, but he sees himself at the end of a long tradition. Aristotle thinks you are a fool if you don’t learn from this tradition, the history of human experience. If the goal is to live a good life, it is important to remember that you are not the first person to live, to get a serious illness, to fall in or out of love, to deal with the death of a loved one, to feel anxiety about your future, to have a conflict with a friend. It is foolish not to learn from the successes and failures of other people. The revolutionary ignores tradition; the conservative worships it. Aristotle does neither. For him, it is not the last word, the final word. It is the first word. It is where you start. He is critical of the tradition, but his thinking always begins there.

To understand Aristotle’s position, I decided to divide his theory into separate and distinct claims. Aristotle’s first claim is that actions are not isolatable. They are embedded in a network of in-order-to’s. I do one thing in order to do something else. His example is bridle making. I don’t make a bridle for the sake of making bridles. I make a bridle to ride a horse. I ride a horse in order to get somewhere. It is all part of a network of actions.

Aristotle’s second claim is that all of this activity is done for some end. The basic claim is this: If you don’t know where you want to go, you won’t get there. If you are not clear what all of this activity is about, you risk the possibility of living your life wrong. As Aristotle writes, “Will not the knowledge of it then have a great influence on life? Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what we should?”

Aristotle’s third claim is that all of this activity—all of the things that we do in our everyday life—is aimed at happiness. Of course, understood that way,
that is very vague and not very helpful. There are, after all, many different theories about happiness. Aristotle discusses a number of them.

So Aristotle’s fourth claim—and his central claim—is his theory of what happiness is. Aristotle makes the radical claim that we all want a specific, objective state. That state is called *eudaimonia*. *Eudaimonia* should not be translated as happiness. We have too many associations with the word “happiness.” So for instance, you can be happy one minute and unhappy the next. That is not true about *eudaimonia*—it is a lifelong state. *Eudaimonia* is sometimes translated as “flourishing.” That is better than happiness.

The claim that we all want *eudaimonia* is a peculiar claim. He is saying that really what you want is a kind of human flourishing. Of course, if I ask you what you want you will say to me, I want a sports car or a better job or even happiness. But what you really want, according to Aristotle, is *eudaimonia*, whether you know it or not.

Following Socrates, he does not think you know yourself. He does not think you know who you are. If that is true, then it is no surprise you misunderstand your own desires. You don’t want a sports car because you want a sports car. You want a sports car because you think—rightly or wrongly—it will give you a certain kind of life. But he does not think you are clear on what kind of life you really want. The key word here is really. You simply don’t know what you should want.

So what is *eudaimonia*? We can consider this his fifth claim. Well, here is an approximation. It is exercising your capacities in an excellent way. Now, there is considerable controversy on what that means. But here is one take. You have different capacities. You have an athletic dimension, an intellectual dimension, a social dimension, a sexual dimension, a spiritual dimension, an artistic dimension. Having a good life, a flourishing life, is a life where you exercise your various dimensions of your self in an excellent way. You are fully utilized. To use an American expression, you are empowered.

Aristotle’s sixth claim is that achieving *eudaimonia* is partly in your control and partly out of your control. To achieve a life worth living depends on many factors. Obviously, it is easier if one is healthy, if one is raised in a loving family, if one has sufficient income so one is not obsessed with money. If you are preoccupied by hunger or fear of violence or poverty, obviously it is going to be difficult to have a good life.

Aristotle’s next point is that character development is essential for achieving *eudaimonia*. And that is at least partly in one’s control. To achieve *eudaimonia* requires a reorganization of one’s desires. You must coordinate your desires with your long-term interests. You can think of your desires as short term and subjective. You desire a cup of coffee. You desire a trip to Italy. You can think of your long-term interests as what is objectively good for you, what will promote *eudaimonia*. I will use an un-Aristotelian example—smoking cigarettes. Obviously, he did not know about cigarettes. He is more interested in the dynamics of friendship. But smoking is a simpler case and it makes the point. If one enjoys smoking and if modern science is correct that smoking is bad for one’s health, then by smoking one is building into the architecture of one’s life the conditions for poor health. Your desires and your interests are
not in harmony. Okay, so let’s say you decide to stop smoking because you see that smoking is not in your long-term interests. But that still does not work. Suppressing your desires for your long-term interests is not the way to achieve *eudaimonia*. Walking around suppressing your desire to smoke is not a way to achieve *eudaimonia*. Your desires and your interests have to be in harmony. To achieve a harmony between your desires and your interests, you will have to change your desires. That is possible, because desires are plastic. (That is, after all, the basis of the advertising industry.) To achieve *eudaimonia*, you need to have the right desires. Obviously, it would help to be raised right (that is, to be raised with the right desires). So even here achieving *eudaimonia* is not totally in one’s hands.

Here is a variant of an example given by Aristotle. Let’s say you find a large amount of money. Let’s say millions of dollars. If you were raised right you would spontaneously return the money or give it to the police. But if you were not raised right, you will have the desire to keep the money.

Let’s say you do keep the money. What are the consequences? Do you tell your friends that you found the money? If you do, how would it change the relationships between you and your friends and family? What type of dynamics will be set off between you and them? What kind of distrust and resentment would arise? Okay, what if you decide to keep it a secret from your friends and family? Secrecy undermines the very structure of friendship. Do you quit your job? How do you explain your not working to friends, family, co-workers, the IRS? Do you keep working the job to conceal your wealth? But how does that change your relationship to the job? Doesn’t that drain all value from the job? What does it mean to live a double life? Is that a good life?

When you think through keeping the money, it is no accident that tradition tells you to return the money. But Aristotle thinks you won’t, unless you were raised right. He does not think he can convince you to return the money. You will keep the money because you think you can handle it, you think that you are different—and that is how we are all the same.

This brings Aristotle—in my counting—to his seventh point. You are not given a forced choice between keeping the money and messing up your life and returning the money and regretting it. You can reorganize your desires so that you have the proper desires. What that amounts to is the formation of habit. Aristotle is a habit theorist. What are you? To some people, they are their fantasy life. To others, they are their beliefs. To some people, they are their job or their fame or their money. To Aristotle, you are your habits. Habits and skills make up the architecture of who you are.

What are habits? They are mindless responses to the situation at hand. They take no energy to maintain. If you have the habit of looking both ways before crossing a street, you do it without thinking, without any costs, without any effort. It is automatic. Habits are freebies; they are energy free. Of course, habits are difficult to get and difficult to change. But you are your habits. As Aristotle wrote, “It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather, all the difference.”
This brings us to the next claim. We can now understand *eudaimonia* a bit better. To live a good life, a life worth living, is to have the right emotion, at the right time, at the right place in the right amount for the right reason. Aristotle is not saying you should never be angry. He is saying you should be angry in the right amount to the right person at the right time. He is not saying “love everyone.” For Aristotle, you can love too much or too little, you can love the wrong person, or you can love for the wrong reason. He is saying that there is a proper way of being hooked into the world, having the appropriate emotional life, being in tune with the world around you. And for the person who has *eudaimonia*—it is habitual. The person who finds the money returns the money out of habit, as a natural way of responding to the situation.

Aristotle’s ninth claim is that this is not a matter of reading books, including his. You can’t learn this from books or lectures, including this one. It is a matter of character development. How do you develop character? How do you find the appropriate emotional response to a situation? Beyond being raised right, which is central, you can get help from a certain kind of person—a person of practical wisdom.

There are different kinds of knowledge. Some kinds of knowledge come from books and lectures. But some kinds of knowledge you can’t get from a lecture or a book, because it is not based on general or universal claims. Rather it is based on the application of general claims to very specific situations. Consider a batting coach. Such a person might not know the physics of the trajectory of a baseball. But such a person has a sensitivity, or as Aristotle says, a perception of the particular situation (for example, you are holding your elbow too low when you swing). That person is not making a general claim that everyone holds their elbow too low when they swing. They are making an observational adjustment that applies to a very specific situation. A mentor, a teacher of musical instruments, all of these have a different kind of knowledge. To achieve *eudaimonia* requires the perceptive skills of a special kind of person who can observe you and mentor you.

People who live a life of *eudaimonia* have natural dispositions to respond to the world in an appropriate way; they are exercising their capacities in an excellent way. They are living their lives to the fullest. And according to Aristotle, that is really what you want.

This is only a very small sliver of Aristotle’s views on ethics. He has important things to say on many topics, such as the difference between voluntary and involuntary actions, on the nature of friendship, and on the role of contemplation in the good life. All of this was rejected in the modern world. Ethics as Aristotle conceived it was replaced by morality, not how to live a good life, but how to avoid doing harm. But we leave that story for future lecturers.
1. What is eudaimonia?
2. Why can some forms of knowledge not be learned from books?

**Suggested Reading**


**Other Books of Interest**


Alexander of Macedon, otherwise known as Alexander the Great, quite literally changed the world—or in any case, the Western world and the Near East—in ways that profoundly affect us even yet. He was the son of Philip II of Macedon, who during his twenty-odd year reign (360/59–336) forged in his kingdom in the northern Greek borderlands a military machine that was to dominate all potential rivals until well more than a century after Philip’s death, when the Macedonians encountered the Roman legions. The key was hard training and professionalism—and the famous Macedonian phalanx.

Traditional Greek warfare, since the 600s if not before, had involved above all the citizen-soldiers, ordinarily free-holding small farmers, who fought as the heavy infantrymen known as “hoplites” (the name comes from their shield or “hoplon”). Hoplites characteristically fought shoulder to shoulder, the shield of each hoplite held on his left arm and protecting not only himself but the man to his right. Hoplites lined up, one behind the other, in columns ordinarily eight deep, though sometimes they were thinner than that if numbers forced such an adjustment, and sometimes too, especially later on, the columns were backed up even fifty deep for tactical reasons, as under Epaminondas of Thebes at Leuctra in 371, when he astonished the Greek world by decisively defeating the Spartan “homoioi,” or peers, who had dominated the battlefield for centuries. Spartans, and later on, at least some Thebans aside, hoplite warriors were amateurs—often highly motivated and relatively well-trained (all Greeks seemed to value physical fitness), but amateurs all the same. Philip’s troops, by contrast, were professionals. And the phalanx fought with different weapons than their traditional hoplite rivals, whose primary weapon was a spear, ordinarily about eight feet long, held over the shoulder by the right hand, with some sort of short sword for close work as necessary. The phalanx fought instead with the “sarissa,” a spear more than twice as long, meant to be manipulated with both hands. The phalanx formation was not all that different from the long, deep lines favored by hoplites, but the length of the sarissa meant that five blades ordinarily preceded the front line of the phalanx, and opponents found themselves confronted by a field of spears before they could themselves engage.

Beyond that, the Macedonians had effective cavalrmen in numbers that no Greek state could match. The Greeks loved horses, as their art abundantly reveals (indeed, the name “Philip” means “horse-lover”), but Greece is not on the whole very good horse country. Only Thessaly, in the north, had much of the well-watered, flat landscape that horses favor. As a result, highly valued though they were, horses were relatively rare and expensive. Not so much, though, in Macedon. Another factor was at work as well. Greek and Macedonian cavalrmen alike fought without stirrups and with what by pretty
much any later standard were woefully inadequate saddles. Thus, it took a lot of practice for cavalrymen to become effective. The Macedonians had the horses and the time, and their cavalry gave to their armies a mobility and flexibility that Greek armies characteristically lacked (though the phalanx itself was, if anything, even less mobile than a line of hoplites).

As a result of his military prowess, Philip was able not only to consolidate his position in Macedon against what the rest of the Greek world considered his barbarian or semi-barbarian neighbors (indeed, they were not so sure about the Greekness of the Macedonians themselves), but at Chaeronea, in 338, so decisively to defeat a coalition Greek army led by Athens and Thebes, that he became de facto master of Greece. Leader of the Macedonian cavalry at Chaeronea, who dealt the decisive blow in the battle, was Philip’s eighteen-year-old son, Alexander, son not only of Philip himself, but of a remarkably strong-willed princess from what is Albania, the redoubtable Olympias.

Philip’s plan was next to invade Persia, in order, as he made out, to avenge the various outrages perpetrated by the Persians in their own invasion of Greece a century and a half or so before, not least among them the burning of the Athenian acropolis, and indeed, he had already sent the first detachments of his force across the straits into what is now Turkey. In 336, however, just as he was about to embark, Philip was assassinated at a wedding celebration (Macedonian kings were cheerfully polygamous and much given to political marriages), and, just out of his teens, Alexander found himself on the throne. It took him a while to establish his own authority—not everyone was convinced that a man so young was up to the task before him. But soon enough he crossed the straits himself, stopping first at Troy to pay homage to the tomb of Achilles, ready to fulfill his father’s ambitions.

Which he accordingly did, in astonishingly short order, in what proved at least arguably the most remarkable series of campaigns in military history. First off, in 334, he dealt with the local forces at the battle of the River Granicus, a decisive victory won in large part by a risky across-the-river and up-the-banks cavalry charge led by none other than Alexander himself. Alexander, then and always, led most emphatically from the front, and was not only a superlative general, but a superlative warrior in his own right.

The next year, at the battle of Issus, near the border between contemporary Turkey and Syria, he took on and defeated a vast host raised by the Persian king Darius III himself, capturing (and treating with great respect and deference) the king’s own family in the process. Alexander spent the next year conquering the east Mediterranean coast, devoting vast efforts in particular, to an extended siege of Tyre, and then conquered Egypt, where after a difficult visit to the desert oracle of Zeus-Ammon at Siwah, he evidently became convinced of his divine parentage.

In 331, at Guagamela in what is now Iraq, he met the forces of Darius once again, and once again thoroughly defeated them. He was now, effectively, great king of Persia in his own right, and he spent the remaining eight years of his life campaigning in the East, as far as what are now Pakistan and Afghanistan, only to die in Babylon in 323, still only thirty-two years of age. Alexander had no obvious heir, and he purportedly left his empire “to the strongest.” The ensuing battles continued for a generation or more as
Alexander's generals fought over his legacy, but when at last the dust had settled, there were three major successor kingdoms: the Antigonids in Macedonia and nearby regions, the Seleucids in a vast empire extending from what is now Turkey to what is now Iran and beyond, and the Ptolemies in Egypt and environs. These kingdoms, in their turn, endured for a century or two longer, giving way gradually and step by step to the growing power of Rome. The last of the successors, in fact, was Cleopatra herself, Ptolemaic ruler of Egypt, defeated with Mark Antony by Agrippa and the soon-to-be Augustus at the battle of Actium in 31 BCE.

So much for the military and political record, far-reaching and important though that may be. More important still, and far more enduring, were the cultural effects of Alexander’s conquests. For Alexander was decidedly a Hellenophile. His tutor was none other than Aristotle, himself a native of nearby Stagira in northern Greece, and he traveled, so we are told, with a copy of the *Iliad* that he kept under his pillow at night (a copy, it should be added, purportedly annotated in Aristotle’s own hand). But he was a Hellenophile of an unusually far-sighted and broad-minded kind. Most Greeks thought of barbarians as, well, barbarians. Alexander, by contrast, found much to admire in the culture of Persia in particular, and greatly offended his Macedonian veterans, as his campaigns continued, by a whole series of gestures that suggested that he wished his new empire to be in some strong sense multicultural, drawing upon the legacies of both Greece and Persia.

The multicultural efforts, perhaps predictably, died with Alexander, but the Hellenic leadership, and with it at least an enduring veneer of Hellenic culture, which he imposed upon the Middle East and Egypt, did not. These had enduring effects, among them the famous Greek, Septuagint Bible—the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible composed in Ptolemaic Alexandria—a city that even under Roman control remained for centuries the Greek-speaking (or in fact polyglot) cultural capital of the ancient world. Another cultural legacy of Alexander, and one of immense impact, is the fact that though Jesus customarily spoke Aramaic, the Semitic language, closely related to Hebrew, which had been the *lingua franca* of the Persian Empire, the Christian Bible is written in *koine* Greek, the Greek of the so-called “Hellenistic” world, which is to say, the Greek-speaking, or largely Greek-speaking world of Alexander’s conquests.

And there is more. As beginning in the early second century BCE, the Romans made their way into the Greek-speaking world, they were, as we have seen, profoundly impressed by Hellenic culture, and adopted and adapted it wholesale. Educated Romans, during imperial times, and indeed in late republican times as well, were often, even ordinarily bilingual, conversant to some degree at least with Greek and Latin alike. The empire itself was a broad sense linguistically divided. In the West, those who did not speak some local language, and increasingly often those who did, spoke Latin, the ancestor of the various Romance languages. In the East, though, they generally spoke Greek, and so far as can be told fell far less need to learn Latin than their Western counterparts felt to learn Greek (why bother, after all, when Greek culture was manifestly so much richer).
The result of these cross-currents was what we know as “Graeco-Roman” culture, that is, in effect, the culture of the ancient world from the late Roman Republic onwards, a culture deeply fertilized by the ancient Near East and Egypt, and drawing in ways that are finally very difficult to disentangle from Greek and Roman culture alike—the culture that, in so many ways, is the direct ancestor of our own.
Questions

1. How did Alexander come to the throne?
2. What was Alexander’s cultural legacy?

Suggested Reading


Other Books of Interest

In a sense, Virgil’s *Aeneid* is the classic—the one work that more than any other exemplifies what the term “the Classics” means and has meant. It is not that the *Aeneid* is necessarily the most highly regarded of all works coming to us from antiquity. That honor would go—and would always have gone—to Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Indeed, as we shall see, Virgil’s *Aeneid* itself is a systematic, all but point-by-point response to both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The difference is that while from the end of the Western Roman Empire late in the fifth century CE or AD to the Florentine Renaissance nearly a thousand years later, virtually no one in Western Europe could read Greek—and no Latin translation of Homer was available. But essentially anyone who could read at all could (and did) read Latin, and had very likely learned to do so in part at least by reading Virgil. People knew Homer by reputation, and his reputation was high. But they knew Virgil firsthand, and knew him in every generation from his own time, 70 to 19 BCE, to the present. And they knew him well. Dante, for instance, knew him virtually by heart. And for a variety of reasons, they found him very congenial.

Virgil himself was born at Mantua in what was at the time Cisalpine Gaul and is now northern Italy, during the years when the Roman Republic was in its extended and painful death throes. From shortly before 100 BCE during the time of Marius and Sulla, through the days of Crassus, Pompey, and Caesar, through the civil wars following Caesar’s assassination, between Cassius, Brutus, and Cato on the one hand and Mark Antony and the young Octavian on the other, and then between Octavian—soon to be “Augustus”—and Mark Antony and Cleopatra, the Roman world had been in turmoil. The ancient world knew no military machine that was a consistent match for the Roman legions. Over the preceding two centuries those legions had overcome the Carthaginians in North Africa, Spain, and Sicily, the Gauls first in northern Italy and southern France, and then under Caesar throughout France and beyond, the Macedonians, heirs of Alexander the Great, in Greece, Macedonia, and the Near East. Only the mounted archers of Parthia had been able consistently to stand against them and even they only in the favorable terrain of their Mesopotamian homeland. When legion fought legion, though, the battle was exponentially harder and more costly, and that, of course, is precisely what happened during the civil wars. Not only that, casualties aside, the victors ordinarily proscribed and executed prominent survivors on the losing side—and confiscated their assets. For victorious soldiers had to be paid and at this period were generally paid off at the end of their service in land. The result, for the better part of a century, was chronic unrest and dislocation. And after his final triumph at the battle of Actium, won
in very large part through the agency of his accomplished assistant, Agrippa, the “young Caesar,” Julius Caesar’s grand-nephew and adoptive heir, the soon-to-be “Augustus” put an end to it, ushering in four decades of relative peace, prosperity, and calm, and in the process founding a governmental system—in effect, the Roman Empire, which would endure for more than four centuries, and indeed, in the Greek East, in one guise or another, for a thousand years beyond that.

That is the achievement that Virgil’s *Aeneid* celebrates. The triumph of Augustus, however—as Virgil well knew, effectively a rebirth or refounding of Rome—is not Virgil’s putative theme. Instead he writes about the mythical first founding of the city—the legendary millennial past as prototype and implied counterpart to the present. “Pius Aeneas,” “respectful,” “dutiful,” in short “pious Aeneas” is the number-two warrior at Troy, and unlike his “number-one” cousin, Hector, he survives the destruction of his city, and carefully and capably leads a band of refugees to fulfill their destiny by founding a new and greater Troy in the far West, in the land of Italy—ultimately, of course, Rome herself. Indeed, Aeneas’s son Ascanius, or “Iulus,” comes to be the founder of the Julian clan, and hence the direct ancestor of both Julius Caesar and Caesar Augustus. And since, so Homer tells us, and Virgil happily concurs, Aeneas’s mother is Venus herself, that means that both Caesar and Augustus are in their ancestry divine. That is Virgil’s theme, and he makes the most of it.

In the process, he achieves a variety of other ends as well. During the second century BCE, as over the course of a very complex series of campaigns and machinations the Romans took over in Greece and Macedonia, the Romans came into ever more intimate contact with Hellenic culture, with the cultural legacy of ancient Greece. They were, to put it mildly, impressed. The Romans took a back seat to no one in determination and toughness—less than a tenth the size of the United States in terms of population, they on one occasion lost more troops in a single day than America lost in every war since Korea combined—and kept on fighting for fourteen more years until they won. But Roman culture could boast nothing remotely like Greek literary culture, philosophy, or art. So while they had only contempt for what they took to be Greek dilatoriness, fratricidal political ineptitude, and low cunning, they adopted Greek high culture wholesale. The Romans, with some justification, saw themselves as unmatched masters of the practical side of life—not just military matters and government, but law and practical technology as well, contracts and concrete, if you will. In the realm of art and intellectual endeavor, though, they knew their betters when they encountered them, and those betters tended to speak and write in Greek.

This is the situation that Virgil very self-consciously seeks to rectify. The Greeks had their Homer, which in some sense, despite the critiques of Plato and others, seemed to typify, almost to crystallize what it meant to be a Hellene. The Romans needed their own epic, their own Roman *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, exemplifying “Romanness” and Roman values just as Homer exemplified Greek ones. And that is precisely what in the *Aeneid* Virgil worked with such diligence to provide.
As we have seen in a previous lecture, Homer himself worked from oral tradition, and indeed, it is not entirely clear how the Iliad and the Odyssey found their way into written form. The case is very different with the Aeneid. Virgil wrote and polished it line by line with Homer metaphorically, if not literally before him as he wrote. And he gives us in the Aeneid both an Odyssey and an Iliad. The first six books of the Aeneid are in effect Virgil’s Odyssey, as Aeneas travels from his home in Troy to his new home in Latium, encountering his own array of challenges and temptations along the way. The last six books are Virgil’s Iliad, where Aeneas fights not to destroy a city, but rather to found one.

The differences here are every bit as instructive as the parallels. The labors of Aeneas are constructive, not destructive, and he represents a new and very Roman sort of hero. Bright Achilles, let us recall, is concerned above all with arête and kleos, with his own matchless powers as a warrior, as “far the best of the Achaians,” and with the glorious reputation that is his by right. And many-faceted Odysseus is concerned above all to get home and to reestablish himself in Ithaca. The goals of dutiful Aeneas are quite different. He is a man on a mission, a mission appointed by the gods, and his first responsibility is not to himself, still less to his glory, but rather to his people and to Rome-to-be. It makes of him rather duller company than either Achilles or Odysseus. But when Achilles is slighted, he has no trouble begging the gods that his own side might lose, at least for a time, so that one and all may come to recognize what sort of man they have insulted. And when Odysseus returns to Ithaca, he returns alone. All of his shipmates, the whole Ithacan host, such as it was, has meanwhile perished—through their own heedlessness, in many cases at least, no doubt. But still the odds are not encouraging. Aeneas, by contrast, not only successfully shepherds the bulk of his refugee band to Latium, but once there finds allies, wins a war, and founds a city that will rule the world. And there lies the difference. Glorious as it is, there is something fundamentally undisciplined and self-serving in Greek culture, a fatal flaw as it were—and it is just there that the Romans differ and that Aeneas differs. Things are “all about us,” not “all about me.” Or so Virgil seems to imply.

And indeed, he gives to the Romans something not unlike an explicit “mission statement,” to make use, perhaps not inappropriately, of the language of “leadership seminars” and “teamwork workshops.” In book six of the Aeneid, Aeneas descends to the underworld (as does Odysseus in the Odyssey) where he meets with his much-loved father Anchises, who speaks prophetically to him of the glorious future of Rome. The culmination of his peroration is as follows in the translation of Robert Fagles.

LECTURE NINE
Others, I have no doubt,  
will forge the bronze to breathe with suppler lines,  
draw from the block of marble features quick with life,  
plead their cases better, chart with their rods the stars  
that climb the sky and foretell the times they rise.  
But you, Roman, remember, rule with all your power  
the peoples of the earth—these will be your arts:  
to put your stamp on the works and ways of peace,  
to spare the defeated, break the proud in war.

It is true that Virgil in a variety of ways qualifies and complicates this vision. The task of Aeneas—and of Rome—is difficult and costly and only partly capable of fulfillment. The human world is a world at best of half measures and partial success. But even so, or so in the end Virgil implies, the effort is worth it. Yes, but no. Or to put the matter differently, no, but yes.
Questions

1. What was Virgil attempting to provide when he wrote the *Aeneid*?
2. What are the similarities and differences between Homer’s Achilles and Odysseus and Virgil’s Aeneas?

Suggested Reading


Other Books of Interest

Publius Ovidius Naso, or Ovid, is in a sense, and more or less by design, the “anti-Virgil.” Born in 43 BCE, Ovid died in 17 CE in unhappy exile at Tomis on the shores of the Black Sea. He spent most of his life, however, in Rome, where he was nothing if not an urban sophisticate. He was a born poet—and bon vivant—and though in his youth, to please his father, he took at least the first steps toward a political and legal career, his heart was never in such pursuits, and already in his late teens he had won a reputation for his verse. And deservedly so. His verse is delightful, fresh, light, and fluent, and two thousand years have not dimmed its luster. Like Virgil at least in this, Ovid’s works have been cherished and studied without interruption since he wrote them to our own time. He would have been pleased, but not surprised. Indeed, at the conclusion of his greatest work, the Metamorphoses, he cheerfully prophesies as much. As A.D. Melville translates in Oxford World’s Classics edition:

Let, when it will, that day, that has no claim  
But to my mortal body, end the span  
Of my uncertain years. Yet I’ll be borne,  
The finer part of me, above the stars,  
Immortal, and my name shall never die.  
Wherever through the lands beneath her sway  
The might of Rome extends, my words shall be  
Upon the lips of men. If truth at all  
Is established by poetic prophecy,  
My fame shall live to all eternity.

So far, so good. But despite its manifest excellence, and despite Ovid’s provocative employment of epic meter, the Metamorphoses is a work very different not only from Virgil’s Aeneid, but from the Iliad and the Odyssey as well. To be sure, Ovid is working quite consciously from a different, quasi-secondary “epic” tradition, harking back not to Homer but to the Theogony of Homer’s near-contemporary Hesiod, a tradition not so much heroic as didactic, designed at least putatively to teach, in the case of Hesiod’s Theogony to teach about the nature and doings of the gods. And indeed, a tradition which had found particular favor, at first glance rather surprisingly, among the highly sophisticated poets and critics of Hellenistic Alexandria. But even so, in the context in which he wrote, Ovid’s Metamorphoses is a surprising work. Composed around the turn of the millennium, at the height of the imperium of

Lecture 10:  
Ovid’s Metamorphoses  
(Professor Timothy B. Shutt)

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Ovid’s Metamorphoses (trans. Frank Justus Miller).
Augustus, it sets out in some sense to rivals, or even, in fact, to answer Virgil’s *Aeneid*. But Ovid adopts a very different tone.

The *Aeneid*, despite its thematic cross-currents and complexity, recounts what is in the end a tale of progress, even of triumph. Aeneas is, after all, in his pursuit of his divine mission, laying the foundations for Rome and for the noble Roman mission of bringing peace and justice to the world. So too Augustus—or so Augustus hoped—and by celebrating the one, Virgil celebrates the other. Ovid’s vision in the *Metamorphoses*, by contrast, focuses not so much on progress as simply on change—on metamorphosis—and on change motivated, by and large, not by pursuit of a grand, over-arching goal, of a sort of moral and political regeneration, but rather by pursuit of erotic satisfaction. “You want to know what *really* motivates people,” Ovid seems to imply, “well let me tell you—it doesn’t look to me like the pursuit of justice.” Erotics, indeed, formed the focus of Ovid’s poetry from the very outset of his career. The early work that cemented his reputation as the greatest poet of his generation was the *Art of Love*, in which, in surpassingly deft, light, and witty verse, he explains how one may best proceed as a seducer. This was not a subject calculated to please Augustus, who was at the time seeking to encourage in the population at large a commitment to faithful marriage, the dutiful rearing of abundant children, and, more broadly, a return to sober and earnest old Roman virtue. Ovid was having none of that, and in the *Art of Love*, to make the point clear, he cheerfully sends up one of the most solemn lines in the *Aeneid*. In book six, in company with the Cumaean sibyl, Aeneas prays to be admitted to the underworld. The sibyl answers, it's not hard to get there, not at all—“night and day the door of gloomy Dis stands open.” No, the trick is getting out again, “hoc opus, hic labor est” (6.127, 129). That is the hard part. Ovid quotes the very same phrase (1.453), but the task he has in mind is different—not overcoming the clutches of death and evil, but winning the favors of a woman without wasting any money on gifts. And though the tone of the *Metamorphoses* is varied—Ovid is sometimes serious and often gruesome—the key signature of that work too highlights this irreverent, erotic note.

The work focuses on change in a cosmic context, beginning, in fact, with the creation, going through the Golden Age and a universal flood, toward the end even briefly addressing the tale of Troy and the mission of Aeneas, and concluding with the divinization of Caesar and, implication, of Augustus—and of course, as we have noted, the immortalizing of Ovid himself in his poetry. But Ovid’s focus is on mythology, in which he took a deep and enduring antiquarian interest. I doubt very much that he had any serious belief in the myths that he recounts, but he clearly loved the stories themselves, and no one has ever told them better. That was, indeed, the primary reason for his enduring popularity. For generation after generation people read the stories of the gods and goddesses and heroes, of their loves and quarrels, of their transformations, often enough as they were learning Latin—Ovid rivaled Virgil himself as a school text, and not least in monastic schools. And for generation after generation painters and poets took up Ovidian themes—among them Chaucer and Shakespeare and Renaissance painters beyond counting. Ovid, in fact, addresses virtually all the familiar tales, and they are familiar, in very large part, precisely because he addressed them. Apollo and Daphne, Actaeon and Diana, Pyramus and Thisbe, Echo and Narcissus, the tale of Theseus, the
tale of Perseus, the tale of Orpheus, tales of Hercules and of Jason—the list goes on and on. Even on Broadway—My Fair Lady, Eliza Doolittle, goes back to Ovid via George Bernard Shaw.

Despite his success, however—and Ovid was very successful indeed not only in his posterity but at the time—Ovid’s later years were by no means as happy as he would have wished. He finally fell afoul of Augustus once and for all. No one knows for sure precisely what happened—it may or may not have had to do with the unhappy, if exuberant, erotic career of Augustus’s daughter Julia—but in 8 CE, Ovid found himself exiled to Tomis on the shores of the Black Sea for “a song and an error.” The “song” was pretty clearly the subversive Art of Love. The error is anyone’s guess. In any case, Ovid never came home, but it was not for lack of trying. As far as he was concerned, the Black Sea shore was the end of the world—and despite his Epistulae ex Ponto, “Letters from the Black Sea,” and Tristia or “Woes,” in Tomis he remained. Consoled, however, let us hope, by his entirely justified intimations of enduring poetic fame.
Questions

1. How does Ovid’s tone in the *Metamorphoses* differ from Virgil’s in the *Aeneid*?

2. What is the primary reason for Ovid’s enduring popularity?

Suggested Reading


Other Books of Interest


The Etruscans

Around 700 BCE, the Etruscans occupied the territory now known as Tuscany. It is arguably the Etruscans who played the most crucial role in the formation of the later Roman culture.

As early as the eighth century, Greek colonists in search of markets and natural resources occupied the southern portion of the Italian peninsula, so a Roman culture was bordered on the North by the Etruscans and on the South by the Greeks.

There are accounts that the Etruscans, in the late seventh century, took over the village occupied by the Romans and transformed that village into an Etruscan marvel.

The Republican Period

According to tradition, Rome was founded in 753 BCE by descendants of Trojan hero Aeneas, who fled Troy when it was being destroyed by Greek forces around 1200 BCE. These descendants, twin boys Romulus and Remus, had a remarkable father: Mars, the god of war. Through Aeneas, the Romans could also trace their heritage to Venus. This tradition of creating a genealogy back to the gods would become of great importance to the Romans.

The Etruscans transformed a relatively primitive Latin village into a major city complete with city walls, temples, administrative buildings, writing, rituals, and religious beliefs. But the Etruscans were eventually ousted from the city around 500 BCE, so this might be the best date to begin the discussion of Roman art.

This is also the beginning of the Republican Period, when Rome was governed by a kind of representative government. The Republican Period lasted almost five hundred years, and it is the latter half of this period when Rome was expanding her borders to other parts of the Italian peninsula. Near the latter half of the Republican period, the Romans invaded the lands of Etruscans and were victorious. They later invaded their southern neighbors, the Greeks, and brought back great wealth and prestige that they displayed in grand processions.

Roman Portraits

Portraits in the tradition of those of Alexander the Great were extremely important to the Romans, particularly to the Roman generals, who began to portray themselves on coins and in marble and bronze. Although some may have attempted to represent themselves as pseudo Alexanders, many of
these portraits were distinctively different from Hellenistic ones. They are generally referred to as “veristic” (true to life) portraits, for they reveal faces that are not idealized.

Though veristic portraits became less popular once the East was opened to the Roman world, the Roman devotion to personalized images is one of its greatest artistic accomplishments.

**Roman Architecture**

The Romans single handedly transformed the architectural landscape, and this architectural revolution was founded on a new building material: concrete.

After 100 BCE, walls were being made of concrete, and the surfaces of the concrete walls were encased in a veneer of regularly shaped pieces of stone. Much later, fired bricks created a facing to the concrete core. In antiquity, these brick-faced concrete walls were covered with stucco or even marble.

**Propaganda Vehicles**

The turn of the century from BCE to CE was extremely significant, for Rome was shedding its old republican ways and was being ruled by virtual dictators eventually known as “emperors.” Art and architecture could function as a vehicle of significant propaganda value. It could solidify and establish an individual’s or family’s power.

The first emperor, Augustus, great nephew of the famous dictator and general Julius Caesar, solidified his power after his victory over Antony and Cleopatra. Augustus established Rome artistically and architecturally as the true capital city of a vast empire.

Augustus wrote a treatise, the *Res Gestae*. In this, he reported that when he returned in 13 BCE from campaigns in Spain and Gaul, the Roman senate decreed that an altar in honor of his safe return (the Altar of Augustan Peace) be erected in the field of Mars, a flat plain outside the city.

The reconstructed building that houses the altar is made of white marble. The walls depict processions of contemporary men and women, including Augustus himself and other identifiable members of his family. This is an example of a historical relief, a type of contemporary narrative that if not invented by the Romans was certainly exploited by them.

Flanking the doors are large panels depicting Rome’s founding. The subject matter is a masterful blending of contemporary and mythological events. Augustus is portrayed not as a military victor but as a pious priest at an altar and the head of a distinguished household. This represents a kind of genealogy that he is trying to create for his family. Furthermore, Augustus sacrificing at an altar is echoed by Aeneas, also portrayed sacrificing at an altar, and this must be a deliberate attempt to portray Augustus as the new Aeneas.

The structure was part of an ensemble of structures that proclaimed the power of Augustus. Part of this was a tall obelisk, taken from Egypt. There was also a giant round tomb created for Augustus, and the obelisk acts as a kind of hub of two spokes, one of which leads to the tomb of Augustus and the other to the Ara Pacis.
Nero's Excesses

Augustus established the use of art as a political tool in Rome that virtually all future emperors followed and built upon. One of these emperors, Nero, became emperor in 54 and fourteen years later was assassinated, bringing to an end this great Augustan family of emperors.

Nero had extraordinary wealth, and nothing is more representative of his excesses than a villa estate he built in the middle of Rome. This large estate was approximately one-third the size of Central Park in New York City, and it included an enormous vestibule and a pool of water the size of a large lake. A multistory palace contained hundreds of rooms, all elaborately decorated with wall paintings, inlaid marble, mother of pearl, even gold and gems. It overlooked formal gardens in which animals would roam and be hunted. Little remains of that vast complex, known as the Domus Aria, or Golden House, because soon after Nero’s assassination, the buildings were systematically stripped and built over. The so-called lake was drained and the private gardens were eventually converted back to public spaces.

Hadrian

Hadrian created an equally luxurious estate, but unlike Nero’s, Hadrian’s was miles from the city. Beginning around 120 CE, this emperor set out on multi-year journeys throughout the lands as a kind of cultural ambassador. Hadrian’s villa estate evoked his journeys (for example, to Athens and Egypt). Not only were these foreign places brought to mind through the landscaping and architecture, but also through the decoration and sculptures. In Rome itself, Hadrian built perhaps the single most important building of the ancient world.

The Pantheon

The Pantheon was a temple in effect, to all of the gods. The building is round, domed, and has an enormous rectangular porch with forty-foot tall columns. The dome, believed to be the largest in antiquity, rises to an enormous circular opening called the “Oculus,” or the “Eye.”

This is architecture in the service of religion and of the manipulation of the human senses. One feels diminished by the size of the interior, but also encased in warm light and color. Its architecture had an effect on architecture throughout antiquity and into the modern world.

Bath Houses

The third century could be proclaimed as the age of public baths. These are gigantic buildings that encompassed city blocks and included not only a bathing complex but landscaped gardens, meeting halls, and dining areas. The bathing complex was a massive grouping of rooms systematically laid out around a vast, vaulted hall.

The Roman baths were magnificently complex engineering marvels. Below these public spaces there were large furnaces that heated massive quantities of water. Rooms were set aside for different forms of bathing, from hot, steaming water to cooling swimming pools. There were also large windowed
rooms that captured the rays of the sun and columned courtyards for cool air circulation.

The decoration of such buildings with marble-covered concrete walls and intricate mosaics lent these interiors a scintillating effect of water and color. These enormous spaces required equally large sculptural displays that, as in earlier times, consisted of copies of Greek originals that unmistakably revealed Rome’s continued affection for the Greek classical world, as well as its dominance over that world.

**Art under Constantine**

The fourth century was the beginning of a dramatic transition from a pagan to a Christian world. It would be several more centuries before Christianity entirely suppressed pagan gods. But this early Christian church in the fourth century was exerting its presence, particularly after the conversion of the emperor Constantine in 337 CE. Art under Constantine was distinctive in the deliberate suppression of classical forms, which are naturalistically rendered figures depicted as occupying a real space. This is replaced by an almost naïve approach to representing humans as squat and ill-proportioned figures laid out in repetitive symmetrical rows. This type of artwork existed before Constantine, but was never so blatantly promoted by an emperor for imperial pretensions.

A large triumphal arch in Rome, near the Coliseum, was created in commemoration of Constantine’s victories. It has three large arched portals and a high attic on which had once been placed bronze statues. The surfaces are almost completely covered with sculptures, many of which can be identified as having been scavenged from earlier imperial monuments.

These works of art may have been collected and displayed by Constantine to show himself in the company of earlier emperors. The arch represents typical themes of war, triumph, and imperial virtue, but without regard to realistic sizing and groupings of figures. Important figures and individuals are shown disproportionately large, and the figures are arranged according to a social hierarchy. Individual features, save for the emperors’, are suppressed in favor of generic heads. Any realistic interaction is superseded by a static, simplified environment carved in flat, low relief.

**A New Style**

Classical style thus gave way to another style, which led to the types of images typical of the early Medieval and Byzantine periods. The classical world by the fourth century is drawing to a close, and the art that is being commissioned at this time seems to reflect a shift from the pagan to the Christian culture. Yet in spite of its demise, this classical world would be revived in the fifteenth century by the Italian Renaissance and would be passed down to Western culture and later to the American colonies as a dynamic part of our artistic heritage. We are, therefore, the inheritors of this Roman empire, and through it, this Greek classical world.
1. How is the Roman devotion to personalized images one of its greatest artistic accomplishments?

2. What was the sensory effect produced by the architecture of the Parthenon?

Suggested Reading


Other Books of Interest


Plotinus is perhaps the least often read of the great philosophers, and despite his very considerable merits, there are reasons for this. He is by no means alone among his peers in being relatively difficult to read—Hegel, for instance, is notoriously difficult and relatively few readers find Kant engaging at first acquaintance. Even the great scholastic, St. Thomas Aquinas, takes a bit of getting used to, if for no other reason than because of the unfamiliar format of much of his most influential work. The case with Plotinus is rather different. Fifty-four of his philosophical essays survive, arranged by his disciple Porphyry for no readily ascertainable reason into six sets of nine—hence the traditional name of the collection, the Enneads or the “nines.” The logic of Porphyry’s arrangement is obscure, more or less thematic, but certainly not chronological, and certainly not designed to facilitate a beginning-to-end systematic elucidation of Plotinus’s thought.

But in Porphyry’s defense, that is not the way that Plotinus worked. As a matter of fact, according to Porphyry, in large part because of his poor eyesight Plotinus found the act of writing difficult and the act of revision, indeed, impossible. But he may also have been what we would call “dyslexic,” with very poor handwriting and worse spelling. As Porphyry puts the matter, he characteristically “worked out his train of thought from beginning to end” and then wrote it down, once and for all, “as continuously as if he was copying from a book.” And beyond that, his writings were occasional, apparently arising from the situation at hand and meant for his immediate disciples and pupils. The result, as his translator, A.H. Armstrong puts it, is that “in his writings we find his philosophy presented, not step by step in an orderly exposition, but a perpetual handling and rehandling of the great central questions, always from slightly different points of view and with reference to different types of objections and queries.”

The result is “an extremely unsystematic presentation of a systematic philosophy.” Extremely systematic as a matter of fact. Plotinus’s vision is every bit as orderly and coherent as his writings are occasional and scattered. He accordingly represents in unusually, perhaps uniquely, striking form the truism that in reading philosophy—as opposed to, say, literature—what matters is the underlying system, the philosophical vision, and not, certainly not primarily, the often obscure and inelegant way in which the system is expressed. Some philosophers, of course, write brilliantly. Many don’t. But writing brilliantly is not, in the last analysis, what philosophy is about.

However challenging his mode of expression, the influence of Plotinus’s vision was profound, both directly and indirectly, in ways which would doubtless have pleased him, and in ways which quite possibly would not. For the

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The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Plotinus’s *The Enneads* (trans. Stephen MacKenna).
philosophical vision of Plotinus provided the framework for the Neoplatonism that became the predominant philosophy of late antiquity, both in the hands of pagan traditionalists, prominent among them Porphyry himself, and in the hands of their Christian rivals. St. Augustine, for instance, for a millennium and more far and away the most influential Christian theologian in the Latin West, freely acknowledges his immense debt to “the Platonists,” meaning, in the first instance, Plotinus as he appeared in Latin translation. Indeed, as a first approximation it would be fair to characterize Augustine’s contribution to Christian theology as a rethinking of Neoplatonism in explicitly Christian terms. The ensuing “Christian Platonism” laid the sometimes unacknowledged groundwork for the scholastic philosophers of the high Middle Ages, and indeed, continues to gain adherents of one sort or another to the present day. I know three or four of them firsthand. Dante’s immediate philosophical master is Thomas Aquinas, to whom he pays homage in the Paradiso. But the underlying structure of the Commedia reflects at least equally Plotinus, albeit at second hand and in ways in which Dante himself hardly suspected, so thoroughly had the Neoplatonic vision of the cosmos become in Dante’s day simply accepted wisdom.

What, then, is Plotinus’s system and how does that system work? At the center, in a causal and ontological, if not in a physical sense, lies his utterly undifferentiated and unitary highest god, the source, as Dante would put it, of all that “revolves in mind or space,” which Plotinus refers to as “the One,” or “the Good” or the “First,” the “arche” or origin of all things (6.9.3). Plotinus’s One is ceaselessly, timelessly engaged in joyful self-contemplation, and the result of that self-contemplation is an image of the One, which comes eternally to life in its own right.

The name of this second god is “Nous” or “Mind,” or “Intellect,” which is, in fact, what “nous” means in Greek. The Nous too is engaged in contemplation, ceaseless contemplation of the One, and in the process it too generates, or to use the technical term, “emanates” an image, and this image is the “Psyche,” or World-Soul, which has with regard to the world itself, an immanent and transcendent aspect, corresponding, more or less, to Plato’s transcendent and Aristotle’s immanent forms. The World-Soul too contemplates, and the image that it generates, furthest from the One itself and non-contemplative, is the physical world of nature.

Each level of being, then, in Plotinus’s vision, is an attenuated version of the level above, the unitary One, the timeless Nous, which is the repository of Plato’s timeless forms of all things in differentiated guise, the eternal World-Soul, and the physical world (or “Physis” or “Phusis”). The physical world is thus, to the limit of its capacity to be such, an image of the highest god, mediated through the levels between, and the world itself is in some strong sense sacramental, an ongoing manifestation of divine power and the divine nature, insofar as it is capable of being so.

The essential gambit of Christian Platonists, then, Augustine prominent among them, was to identify the Nous with the Logos, the second person of the Trinity, which thereby became the repository of the forms, the timeless template of all things. This is a conception that, as we will see, finds radiantly full expression later on in Dante.
But there is more to Plotinus than that. We humans, for Plotinus, are in effect a “microcosm,” a little world unto ourselves, and we have affinities with all levels of the great chain of being, physical, psychic, noetic, and beyond. And we can—and indeed should—by means of self-discipline and focus reascend to the highest levels, indeed, by mystic ascent, to the One itself. So Plotinus provides not only an ontology, but also a sort of mystic theology, and he was, needless to say, influential in this regard as well. Indeed, some have argued that his careful detailed attunement of Greek rationalism and his own deeply religious impulses is his most enduring legacy of all.
Questions

1. How were Plotinus’s philosophies presented in his writings?
2. What is the result of the joyful self-contemplation engaged in by Plotinus’s “One”?

Suggested Reading


Other Books of Interest

This lecture and the one that follows concern the New Testament, often loosely termed the Christian Bible. Actually, the Christian Bible includes both the Hebrew Bible of the Jews, termed by Christians the Old Testament (Covenant), and the New Testament, the Christian Scriptures. Inclusion in the official collection of the New Testament Scriptures, the New Testament canon, implies that a book has authority in the Church. Originally, various local churches had their own canons. Beginning with the Muratorian Canon of ca. 170 the New Testament canon was almost fixed, including the books in our versions minus Hebrews, James, and 1–2 Peter. Within a short time, these books were also included and the New Testament collection as we know it was completed.

In this lecture, we will deal with the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. Essentially, these texts present varying accounts of Jesus’ life, teachings, and career. We need to emphasize, both in discussing the Gospels, as well as for our next lecture regarding Acts and the Epistles, that we will not be concerning ourselves here with the reconstruction of the life of the historical Jesus or the history of early Christianity. We will not discuss the historicity, that is, facticity, of the events described. Rather, we are concerned with the literary study of the various early Christian accounts.

Scholars have sought to identify the genre of the Gospels with various genres known from Greek literature. These attempts have yielded mixed results, since aspects of the Gospels’ literary form derive from Jewish tradition but others derive from various Greek forms of writing. The various Gospels present differing chronologies and often differing versions of the same or similar teachings. This is termed by scholars the synoptic problem. Scholars have endeavored to trace the development from the earliest and simplest traditions to those that evidence additions and development in order to reconstruct the literary history of these documents. Some recent scholars see the various Gospels as stemming from different groups within the early Church, such as the Matthean or Johanine churches.

The titles given to the Gospel accounts do not reflect the actual authors. Rather, they have been attributed to the known apostles. We are not even sure where these texts were composed. Yet they reflect events that took place in Judea and Galilee in the first century. The most probable dates for the Gospels are Mark, late 60s; Matthew, late 70s; Luke, late 70s or 80s; and John, late 80s or 90s. John clearly demonstrates a much more expansive approach. The basic sayings and narrative have been expanded with some new source material but generally through literary techniques. Luke is by the
same author as Acts and they may in fact be seen as one work. As such, the purpose of the combined work is to bridge the era of the Gospels and the Epistles, to assert that the Pauline Church of the Gentiles is the real continuator of the early Jewish Church of Jesus and the Apostles in the Galilee and Judea.

The Gospels were composed in Greek, even though the original sayings of Jesus and perhaps even the narratives must have been passed down orally in Aramaic. We call the first three, Mark, Matthew, and Luke, the Synoptics, since they basically provide parallel sets of sayings and a parallel narrative. Scholars have concluded that Mark was known to the authors of Matthew and Luke, who used Mark and an additional source, termed “Q,” to compose their versions. The so-called Gnostic Gospels, like Thomas and Judas, are much later texts and cannot be used as sources to reconstruct the life and teachings of Jesus. Despite some false reports to the contrary, Jesus and John the Baptist are not mentioned in the Dead Sea Scrolls and no New Testament material is preserved among the scrolls. While the scrolls help us greatly to understand the historical background of Christianity, the scrolls sect (Essenes in the view of most scholars) were not “proto-Christians.”

In addition to the Gospel accounts, we have minimal external evidence. The Roman historian Tacitus testifies to the death of Jesus at the hands of Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator. The Jewish historian Josephus, according to the unaltered version preserved in an Arabic translation, also testified to the fact that Jesus had been crucified by Pilate and indicated that his followers continued to see him as the messiah.

One of the key elements of the Gospels is their use of the Hebrew Bible and its interpretation. The Gospels make the claim throughout that the career and fate of Jesus were prophesied by the Hebrew prophets. For this reason they are constantly appealing to the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. Sometimes these interpretations are shared with various Jewish exegetical texts, demonstrating the rootedness of early Christianity in Judaism. The ethics of the New Testament are clearly derived from those of the Pharisees, the forerunners of the Talmudic rabbis. Especially in regard to the fulfillment passages, the New Testament presents claims that Judaism did not accept. At the same time, the interpretive methods of these passages have been shown to be similar to the contemporizing Pesher exegesis of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Central to the message of the Gospels is the notion of apocalyptic messianism, the Jewish teaching, prominent in the Dead Sea Scrolls, that the messiah would come immediately. He was to establish the kingdom of God. In the Gospels there are aspects of this concept, although they seem to be expressed in a quietist way, assuming no expectation of a violent conflagration leading to the End of Days. There are strong hints that Jesus was the messiah in the eyes of his followers but he is not yet understood as even quasi-divine in the Gospel texts. The Jewish-Christian polemic in the earliest texts is an argument over religious ideas. The antagonism that is displayed in the later Gospel texts reflects the ongoing friction between the early Christians and the Jewish community among whom they lived.

Ultimately, as one can already see from the Gospels, the Jews did not accept the messiahship of Jesus and the beliefs of Christianity. In their view,
the messiah had not come and the world had not been redeemed. As the notion of Jesus’ divine status began to spread in the Church, Jews found this a violation of their concept of monotheism, and Christianity’s eventual rejection of the authoritative nature of Jewish law and practice was not acceptable to the Jews. As a result, we will see in our next lecture about the Acts and Epistles how a religion spawned among Jews in the Land of Israel soon became a religion of Gentiles in the Greco-Roman world.
Questions

1. What is the purpose of Luke and Acts when taken as a combined work?
2. What are the characteristics of the Synoptic Gospels?

Suggested Reading


Other Books of Interest


This lecture will cover the book of Acts and the Pauline Epistles. We will not be able to discuss the deutero-Pauline Epistles, those attributed to Paul but actually composed by his close followers, nor the Catholic Epistles (James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, and Jude) or Revelation. The latter represents the flowering of the apocalyptic messianic trend of ancient Judaism in the early Church.

We first turn to Acts, composed by the same author as Luke. Acts intends to tie the Gospel accounts to the Epistles, thus arguing for Paul and Gentile Christianity as the continuation of the career and teachings of Jesus. The text tells us the story of the early Jewish Jerusalem Church, led by James the brother of Jesus, as well as how Paul began his mission to the Gentiles, how this mission was approved by the elders of the Jerusalem Church, and how it then succeeded throughout the Greco-Roman world. This account emphasizes the continuity of Pauline Christianity with the Gospel traditions. Acts is an important source of historical information about the Jewish communities of the Land of Israel, Syria, Asia Minor, and Greece. Despite some differences, it helps to establish the chronology of the Pauline mission and the resulting Epistles.

Scholars have compared the Epistles to the literary form of letters in ancient Aramaic and in the Greco-Roman world. Important similarities have been found, but, like the Gospels, the Epistles constitute a special Christian genre. In some cases, the Epistle as preserved may represent what was originally one text, but some of the canonical Epistles are composites of what were originally separate letters or fragments of letters.

The Epistles are considered by scholars to be Pauline and their probable dates and places of composition are as follows (in order of date): Galatians, Antioch? 49; 1 Thessalonians, Corinth 50–51; 1 and 2 Corinthians, Ephesus 54; Romans, Corinth 55; Philemon, Rome? 60; Philippians, Rome 61. Considered to be by later Pauline followers are the deutero-Pauline Epistles: Colossians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, and Titus.

The Epistles display virtually no knowledge of the Gospels or of other traditions about the life of Jesus. Paul himself had never met him. This and other considerations have led scholars to date the Epistles to an earlier date than the Gospels. While this is correct, the raw material of the Gospels—the sayings and the short narratives—is so closely bound up with the Judaism of Judea and the Galilee that we must see it as the earliest Christian material, followed by the raw material of the Epistles, the finished Epistles, and then the finished Gospels.
A few words must be said about Paul. He started out an opponent of Christianity and then, following a vision of Jesus, turned into its strongest advocate. He came from Tarsus in Asia Minor and may have been educated in the Land of Israel. In any case, after a journey to Arabia of which we know little, he undertook trips to Syria and Asia Minor, where he confronted the issue of Gentile Christianity. Eventually, he secured the agreement of a council of the Jerusalem Church to convert Gentiles without their accepting Jewish law and, as a result, transformed Christianity from a sect of messianic Jews into a religion aimed at the Greco-Roman pagans. Eventually, he was arrested in Jerusalem and tried in Caesarea. As a result of his appeal, he was taken to Rome where later sources indicate that he was most probably executed.

Paul’s theology shaped Christianity as a world religion. He was responsible for the transformation of Jesus, the man some Jews thought was the messiah, into the Christ, a divine savior who brought salvation to those who had faith in him—who were “in Christ.” It was Paul who saw the Father and Son as one, thus clinching Jesus’ divine status. He spoke of “justification,” becoming blameless, by faith in the sinless one who had taken all of humanity’s sins upon himself. He emphasized the deep division of body and soul, an approach harking back both to some Dead Sea Scrolls texts and also to fundamental ideas of Hellenistic Judaism. These concepts lay behind his preference of celibacy to marriage. In his view, Christians were bound only by the moral laws of the Hebrew Bible, not by the ceremonial regulations. The old law was no longer to be observed after the coming of Jesus. He believed that Jesus would return at the second coming to usher in the true messianic redemption. All these were key beliefs in the Christianity that would spread throughout the Greco-Roman world.

Yet Paul also had to deal with the Judaism from which both he and Christianity had come. In his view the original Israel, the Jewish people, had now been expanded to include the Gentile Christian believers who entered the community by their faith and by baptism. Interpreters and scholars still debate his attitude to Judaism. To some, he demanded supercessionism, the belief that Christianity had replaced Judaism and that the Jews were now despised by God. To others, Paul argued for the continuation of God’s unique relationship with the Jews even as the new covenant of the Christians had expanded the notion of Israel. The latter point of view, called the dual-covenant theology, is now normative in the Catholic Church and some other denominations.

Those who read Paul as opposing the Jews and Judaism set the stage for the terrible relations between Jews and Christians that were fueled by supercessionist beliefs and manifold forms of anti-Judaism. Recent years, starting with the Second Vatican Council in 1965 have seen the complete repudiation of anti-Semitism by the Catholic Church and a variety of other Christian denominations. Much of this is the result of the realization that the Holocaust was in certain ways greatly encouraged by the heritage of Christian anti-Judaism. Let us hope that these changes have ushered in a new era of inter-religious respect and cooperation.
Questions

1. How did Paul’s theology shape Christianity as a world religion?
2. What are the different ways to read Paul?

Suggested Reading


Other Books of Interest


Suggested Readings:


Other Books of Interest:


Other Books of Interest (continued):


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