# Looking at Philosophy: The Unbearable Heaviness of Philosophy Made Lighter, Fourth Edition

*Donald Palmer*

**McGraw-Hill**

# Looking at Philosophy

## The Unbearable Heaviness of Philosophy Made Lighter

FOURTH EDITION

Donald Palmer

*Professor Emeritus at College of Marin*


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# Preface

Wittgenstein once said that a whole philosophy book could be written consisting of nothing but jokes. *This is not that book,* nor does this book treat the history of philosophy as a joke. This book takes philosophy seriously, but not gravely. As the subtitle indicates, the goal of the book is to lighten the load a bit. How to do this without simply throwing the cargo overboard? First, by presenting an overview of Western philosophy from the sixth century B.C.E. through most of the twentieth century in a way that introduces the central philosophical ideas of the West and their evolution in a concise, readable format without trivializing them, but at the same time, without pretending to have exhausted them nor to have plumbed their depths. Second, following a time-honored medieval tradition, by illuminating the margins of the text. Some of these illuminations, namely those that attempt to schematize difficult ideas, I hope will be literally illuminating. Most of them, however, are simply attempts in a lighter vein to interrupt the natural propensity of the philosophers to succumb to the pull of gravity. (Nietzsche said that only the grave lay in that direction.) But even these philosophical jokes, I hope, have a pedagogical function. They should serve to help the reader retain the ideas that are thereby gently mocked. Thirty years of teaching the subject, which I love—and which has provoked more than a few laughs on the part of my students—convinces me that this technique should work.

I do not claim to have achieved Nietzsche's "joyful wisdom," but I agree with him that there is such a thing and that we should strive for it.

Before turning you over to Thales and his metaphysical water (the first truly heavy water), I want to say a word about the women and their absence. Why are there so few women in a book of this nature? There are a number of possible explanations, including these:

1. Women really are deficient in the capacity for sublimation and hence are incapable of participating in higher culture (as Schopenhauer and Freud suggested).
2. Women have in fact contributed greatly to the history of philosophy, but their contributions have been denied or suppressed by the chauvinistic male writers of the histories of philosophy.
3. Women have been (intentionally or unintentionally) systematically eliminated from the history of philosophy by political, social, religious, and psychological manipulations of power by a deeply entrenched, jealous, and fearful patriarchy.

I am certain that the first thesis does not merit our serious attention. I think there is some truth to the second thesis, and I may be partially guilty of suppressing that truth. For example, the names of at least seventy women philosophers in the late classical period alone have been recorded, foremost of which are Aspasia, Diotima, Aretê, and Hypatia. (Hypatia has been belatedly honored by having a journal of feminist philosophy named after her.) Jumping over centuries to our own age, we find a number of well-known women contributing to the history of philosophy in the first half of the twentieth century, including Simone de Beauvoir, Susanne Langer, and L. Susan Stebbing.

However, no matter how original, deep, and thought-provoking were the ideas of these philosophers, I believe that, for a number of reasons (those reasons given in the second and third theses are probably most pertinent here), none of them has been as historically significant as the ideas of those philosophers who are discussed in this book. Fortunately, things have begun to change in the past few

years. An adequate account of contemporary philosophy could not in good faith ignore the major contributions to the analytic tradition of philosophers Iris Murdoch, Philippa Foot, G. E. M. Anscombe, and Judith Jarvis Thompson, nor those contributions to the Continental tradition made by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Monique Wittig, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva. Furthermore, a new wave of women philosophers is already beginning to have considerable impact on the content of contemporary philosophy and not merely on its style.

So, despite the risks, I defend the third thesis. I truly believe that if women had not been systematically excluded from major participation in the history of philosophy,[1] that history would be even richer, deeper, more compassionate, and more interesting (not to mention more joyful) than it already is. It is not for nothing that the book ends with a discussion of the work of a contemporary woman philosopher and with a question posed to philosophy herself, "Quo vadis?"—Whither goest thou?

The fourth edition proceeds with the refinement of presentation begun in the second edition and with the addition of new material initiated in the third edition. I have had some help with all four editions of this book. For suggestions with the earlier editions, I am grateful to Timothy R. Allan, Trocaire College; Dasiea Cavers-Huff, Riverside Community College; Job Clement, Daytona Beach Community College; Will Griffis, Maui Community College; Julianna Scott Fein, Mayfield Publishing Company; Hans Hansen, Wayne State University; Fred E. Heifner Jr., Cumberland University; Joseph Huster, University of Utah; Ken King, Mayfield Publishing Company; Robin Mouat, Mayfield Publishing Company; Don Porter, College of San Mateo; Brian Schroeder, Siena College; Matt Schulte, Montgomery College; Yukio Shirahama, San Antonio College; Samuel Thorpe, Oral Roberts University; William Tinsley, Foothill College; James Tuttle, John Carroll University; Kerry Walk, Princeton University; Stevens F. Wandmacher, University of Michigan, Flint; Andrew Ward, San Jose State University; and Robert White, Montgomery College. I would also like to thank my colleague David Auerbach at North Carolina State University for having read

and commented on parts of the manuscript. Jim Bull, my editor at Mayfield Publishing Company for the first two editions, had faith in this project from its inception. For excellent suggestions concerning this fourth edition I thank Robert Caputi, Trocaire College; Janine Jones, University of North Carolina, Greensboro; Amber L. Katherine, Santa Monica College; James Lemke, Coker College; and Kirby Olson, SUNY Delhi. For the new edition, my editor at McGraw-Hill has been Jon-David Hague. My editorial coordinator, Allison Rona, has been exceptionally helpful. Also at McGraw-Hill I am indebted to Leslie LaDow, the production editor, and copyeditor Karen Dorman. My wife, Leila May, has been my most acute critic and my greatest source of inspiration. She kept me laughing during the dreariest stages of the production of the manuscript, often finding on its pages jokes that weren't meant to be there. I hope she managed to catch most of them. There probably are still a few pages that are funnier than I intended them to be.

## Notes

1. *See* Mary Warnock, *ed. Women Philosophers* (London: J. M. Dent, 1996).

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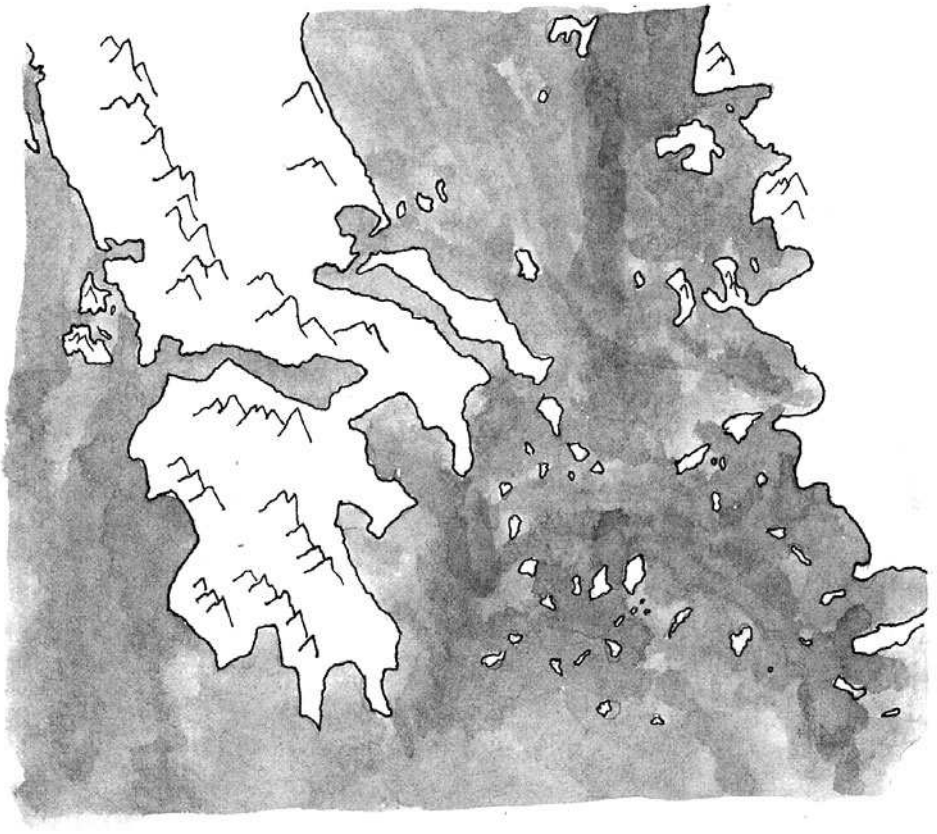
# Introduction

The story of Western philosophy begins in Greece.

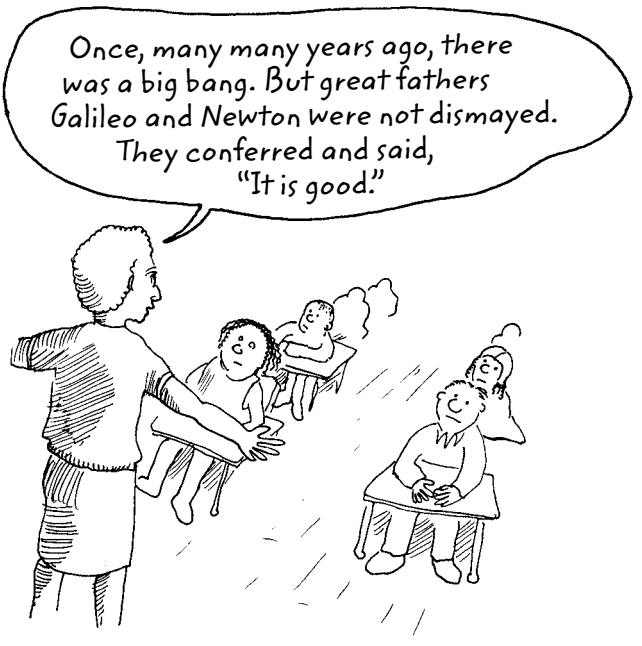


The Greek word "Logos" is the source of the English word "logic" as well as all the "logies" in terms like "biology," "sociology," and "psychology," where "logos" means the theory, or study, or rationalization of something. "Logos" also means "word" in Greek, so it involves the act of speaking, or setting forth an idea in a clear manner. "Logos," therefore, designates a certain kind of thinking about the world, a kind of logical analysis that places things in the context of reason and explains them with the pure force of thought. Such an intellectual exercise was supposed to lead to wisdom (Sophia), and those who dedicated themselves to Logos were thought of as lovers of wisdom (love = philo), hence as philosophers.

What was there before philosophy, before Logos? There was Mythos—a certain way of thinking that placed the world in the context of its supernatural origins. Mythos explained worldly things by tracing them to exceptional, sometimes sacred, events that caused the world to be as it is now. In the case of the Greeks, Mythos meant tracing worldly things to the dramatic acts of the gods of Mount Olympus. The narratives describing these origins—myths—are not only explanatory but also morally exemplary and ritualistically instructive; that is, they provide the rules that, if followed by all, would create the foundation of a genuine community of togetherness—a "we" and an "us" instead of a mere conglomeration of individuals who could only say


**Explaining Ancient Greek Customs**

"I" and "me." Hence, myths are often conservative in nature. They seek to maintain the status quo by replicating origins: "So behaved the sacred ancestors, so must we behave." Myths had the advantage of creating a whole social world in which all acts had meaning. They had the disadvantage of creating static societies, of resisting innovation, and, many would say, of being false. Then, suddenly, philosophy happened—Logos broke upon the scene, at least according to the traditional account. (There *are* other accounts, however, accounts that suggest that Western Logos—philosophy and science—is just *our* version of myth.) But let us suppose that something different *did* take place in Greece about 700 B.C.E.[1] Let's suppose that the "first" philosopher's explanation of the flooding of the Nile River during the summer (most rivers tend to dry up in the summer) as being caused by desert winds (*desert winds*, not battles or love affairs among gods) really does constitute novelty. Natural phenomena are explained by other natural phenomena, not by supernatural events in "dream time"—the time of the ancient gods. In that case, Greece truly is the cradle of Western philosophy.




**A Modern Myth?**

Why Greece, and not, for example, Egypt or Judea? Well, let's be honest here. Nobody knows. Still, a number of historical facts are relevant to the explanation we seek. For one, there was a very productive contact between ancient Greece and the cultures of the eastern Mediterranean region—Persia,

Mesopotamia, Phoenicia, Cyprus, southern Italy, and Egypt, among others. The Greeks were a well-traveled group and were extremely adept at borrowing ideas, conventions, and artistic forms from the cultures they encountered and applying these elements creatively to their own needs. There is also a controversial theory that Greek culture derives greatly from African sources.[2] It is at least certain, as one historian of Greek ideas has recently said, that "the cultural achievements of archaic and classical Greece are unthinkable without Near Eastern resources to draw upon,"[3] and eastern North Africa fits into this map.

Also, unlike the case in some of the surrounding societies, there was no priestly class of censors in Greece. This observation does not mean that Greek thinkers had no restrictions on what they could say—we will see that several charges of impiety were brought against

some of them in the period under study—but that they were able nevertheless to get away with quite a bit that went against prevailing religious opinion.

Another historical fact is that the Greek imagination had always been fertile in its concern with intimate detail. For example, Homer's description of Achilles' shield takes up four pages of the *Iliad*. In addition, the many generations of Greek children who grew up on the poems of Homer and Hesiod[4]—two of the main vehicles that transmitted Greek religion—recognized in them their argumentative, intellectually combative, and questioning nature. The polemical nature of Greek drama and poetry would find a new home in Greek philosophy.

A final component of the world into which philosophy was born is the socioeconomic structure that produced a whole leisured class of

people—mostly *male* people—with time on their hands that they could spend meditating on philosophical issues. It is always jolting to remember that during much of Greece's history, a major part of the economic foundation of its society was slave labor and booty from military conquests. This fact takes some of the luster from "the Glory that was Greece."

Still, for whatever reasons, the poetry and drama of the Greeks demonstrate an intense awareness of change, of the war of the opposites—summer to winter, hot to cold, light to dark, and that most dramatic change of all, life to death.

Indeed, this sensitivity to the transitory nature of all things sometimes led the Greeks to pessimism. The poets Homer, Mimnermus, and Simonides all expressed the idea "Generations of men fall like the leaves of the forest."[5]

But this sensitivity also led the Greeks to demand an explanation—one that would be obtained and justified not by the authority of religious tradition but by the sheer power of human reason. Here we find an optimism behind the pessimism—the human mind operating on its own devices is able to discover ultimate truths about reality.

But let us not overemphasize the radicalness of the break made by the Greek philosophers with the earlier, mythical ways of thinking. It's not as if suddenly a bold new **atheism** emerged, rejecting all religious explanations or constraints. In fact, atheism as we understand it today was virtually unknown in the ancient world.[6] Rather, these early Greek philosophers reframed the perennial puzzles about reality in such a way as to emphasize the workings of nature rather than the work of the gods. For instance, they tended to demote ***cosmogony*** (theories about the *origins* of the world) and promote ***cosmology*** (theories about the *nature* of the world).

This new direction represents the beginnings of a way of thinking that the Greeks would soon call "philosophy"—the love of wisdom. We

can discern in these early efforts what we now take to be the main fields of the discipline that we too call philosophy: **ontology** (theory of being); **epistemology** (theory of knowledge); **axiology** (theory of value), which includes **ethics,** or **moral philosophy** (theory of right behavior), and **aesthetics** (theory of beauty, or theory of art); and **logic** (theory of correct inference).

In fact, the theories put forth in ancient Greece could be called the origins of Western science with as much justification as they can be called the origins of Western philosophy, even though at that early period no such distinctions could be made. Roughly, I would say that *science* deals with problems that can be addressed experimentally by subsuming the observable events that puzzle us under the dominion of natural laws and by showing how these laws are related causally to those events. *Philosophy*, on the other hand, deals with problems that require a speculative rather than an experimental approach. Such problems often require **conceptual analysis** (the logical scrutiny of general ideas) rather than observation or data gathering. Consider these questions, paying special attention to the italicized words:

> Can we *know* why on rare occasions the sun darkens at midday?
> Is it *true* that the moon's passing between the earth and the sun *causes* such events?
> Can there be *successful* experiments that *explain* this phenomenon?

These questions are scientific questions. Now compare these questions to the following ones, paying attention again to the words in italics:

> What is *knowledge?*
> What is *truth?*
> What is *causality?*
> What is *value?*
> What is *explanation?*

These questions invite conceptual analysis, which is part of philosophy.

But we are moving too fast and looking too far ahead. As I said, such distinctions had not yet been clearly drawn in the ancient world.

The thinkers there were satisfied to have asked the kinds of questions that were foundational both to philosophy and to science.

## Topics for Consideration

1. Pick some observable phenomenon, such as what we now call the eclipse of the sun, and explain it from the perspective of science, and then again from some system of myth. (You may have to visit the library for this exercise.) Then use these two "stories" to demonstrate the difference between Logos and Mythos.
2. Think about your own patterns of belief. Are there any of them that you would acknowledge as Mythos rather than Logos? Here are two examples: (A) If you have religious beliefs, how would you characterize them in terms of this distinction? (B) What would it mean to assert that science itself is simply an instance of Western Mythos?

## Notes

1. I have chosen to use the new dating coordinates B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) and C.E. (Common Era) rather than the older B.C. (Before Christ) and A.D. (Anno Domini, or The Year of Our Lord) because the attempt to gauge the whole of human history from the perspective of a particular religious tradition no longer seems tenable. But let's face it: This new system is a bit artificial. Probably there is something arbitrary about *all* attempts to date historical events. At least I am not following the lead of the nineteenth-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who proclaimed, "History begins with my birth." (We'll study Nietzsche later.)
2. Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, vol. 1, *The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785–1985* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987).
3. Robin Osborne, "The Polis and Its Culture," in *Routledge History of Philosophy*, vol. 1, *From the Beginning to Plato*, ed. C. C. W. Taylor (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 14.
4. Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Michael Reck (New York: IconEditions, 1994); Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998); Hesiod, *Theogony: Works and Days*, trans. Dorothea Wender (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1976).
5. This sentiment can be found in the poems published in *Greek Lyric: An Anthology in Translation*, ed. and trans. Andrew M. Miller (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1996), 27, 117, 118.
6. See Catherine Osborne, "Heraclitus," in *From the Beginning to Plato*, 90.

# 1

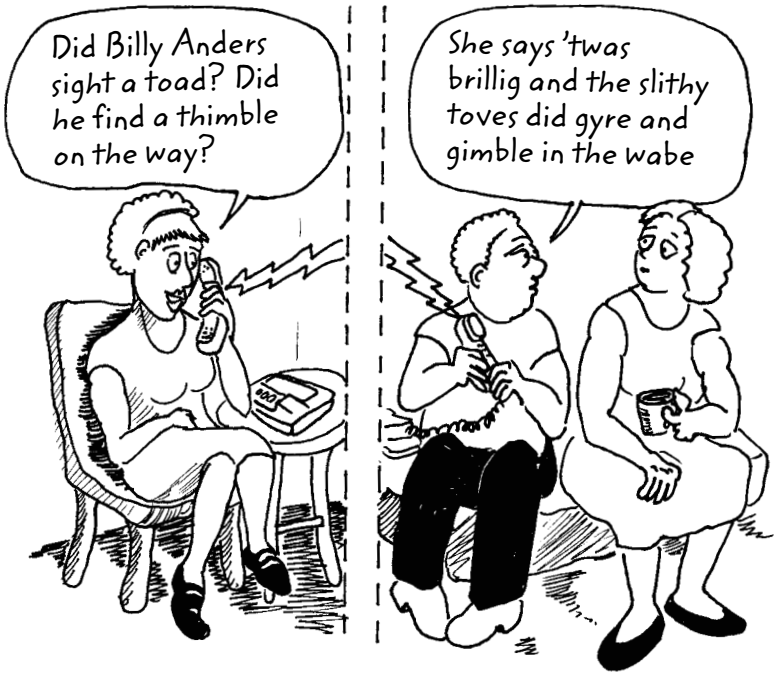
# The Pre-Socratic Philosophers

## Sixth and Fifth Centuries B.C.E.

The thinkers who were active in Greece between the end of the seventh century B.C.E. and the middle of the fourth century B.C.E. are known today as the pre-Socratic philosophers, even though the last of the group so designated were actually contemporaries of Socrates.

(Socrates was born in 469 and died in 399 B.C.E. We look at his thought in the next chapter.) What all the pre-Socratic philosophers have in common is their attempt to create general theories of the cosmos (*kosmos* is the Greek term for "world") not simply by repeating the tales of how the gods had created everything, but by using observation and reason to construct general theories that would explain to the unprejudiced and curious mind the secrets behind the appearances in the world. Another commonality was that all the pre-Socratic philosophers stemmed from the outlying borders of the Greek world: islands in the Ionian Sea or Greek colonies in Italy or along the coast of Persia (in today's Turkey). Knowledge of these thinkers is tremendously important not only for understanding the Greek world of their time, but—as I have argued in the Introduction—for grasping the origins of Western philosophy and science.

The problem is that in fact very little is known about the pre-Socratic philosophers. Most of the books that they wrote had already disappeared by the time that the philosopher Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) tried to catalog and criticize their views. Today's understanding of the pre-Socratics is based mostly on summaries of their ideas by Aristotle and by later Greek writers who had heard of their views only by word of mouth. Many of these accounts are surely inaccurate because of distortions caused by repetition over several generations by numerous individuals. (Have you ever played the game called Telephone, in which a complicated message is whispered to a player, who then whispers it to the next player, and so on, until the message—or what's left of it—is announced to the whole group by the last player in the circle?) Also, these summaries often contained anachronistic ideas, that is, ideas from the later time projected back into the earlier views. Only fragments of the original works remain in most cases today, and even those few existing passages do not always agree with one another. Remember, these "books" were all written by hand on papyrus (a fragile early paper made from the crushed and dried pulp of an Egyptian water plant), and all editions of these books were copied manually by




**Telephone**

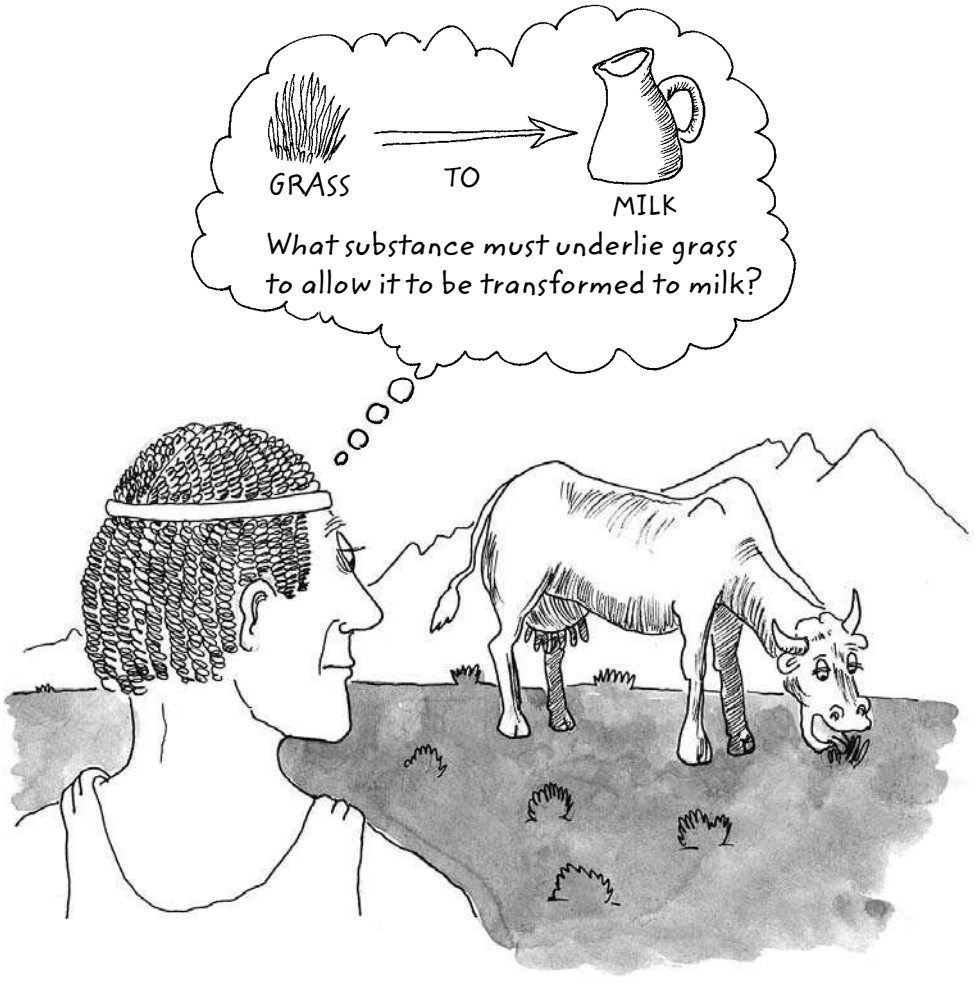
professional scribes. Furthermore, the meaning of many of the fragments is debatable, both because of the "fragmentary" nature of the scraps—key words are missing or illegible—and because of the obscure language in which many of these works were written. Nevertheless, a tradition concerning the meaning of the pre-Socratics had already developed by Aristotle's time, and it is that version of their story that influenced later philosophers and scientists. Aristotle is not the only source of our information about the pre-Socratics, but unfortunately most of the additional information comes from post-Aristotelian commentators giving interpretations of Aristotle's remarks. We do not know to what extent the material provided by these other sources is informed by extraneous sources. So Aristotle appears to be our real source, and we have no clear idea of his accuracy because he paraphrases the various pre-Socratics.[1] Therefore, the tradition that I report here is flawed and distorted in many ways.

# Thales

Philosophy makes its first self-presentation in three consecutive generations of thinkers from the little colony of Miletus on the coast of Asia Minor—today's Turkey—in the sixth century B.C.E. The first recorded philosopher is Thales of Miletus (*ca.* 580 B.C.E.). Apparently, he did not write a book, or if he did, it is long lost.

If we can trust Aristotle and his commentators, Thales' argument was something like this:

If there is change, there must be some *thing* that changes, yet does not change. There must be a unity behind the apparent plurality



of things, a Oneness disguised by the superficial plurality of the world. Otherwise the world would not be a *world;* rather, it would be a disjointed grouping of unrelated fragments.

So what is the nature of this unifying, ultimately unchanging substance that is disguised from us by the *appearance* of constant change?

Like the myth makers before him, Thales was familiar with the four elements: air, fire, water, and earth. He assumed that all things must ultimately be reducible to one of these four—*but which one?*

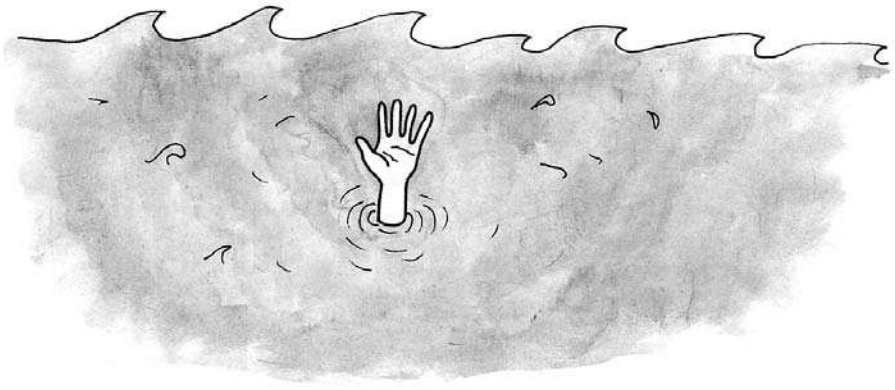
Of all the elements, water is the most obvious in its transformations: Rivers turn into deltas, water turns into ice and then back

into water, which in turn can be changed into steam, which becomes air, and air, in the form of wind, fans fire.

Then water it is!
All things are composed of water.

Thales' actual words were: "The first principle and basic nature of all things is water."[2]

This obviously false conclusion is valued today not for its content but for its form (it is not a great leap between the claim "All things are composed of water" and the claim "All things are composed of atoms") and for the presupposition behind it (that there is an ultimate stuff behind appearances that explains change while remaining itself unchanged). Viewed this way, Thales can be seen as the first philosopher to introduce the project of **reductionism.** Reductionism is a method of explanation that takes an object that confronts us on the surface as being one kind of thing and shows that the object can be reduced to a more basic kind of thing at a deeper but less obvious level of analysis. This project is usually seen as a major function of modern science.



I regret to say that I must add three other ideas that Aristotle also attributes to Thales. My regret is due to the capacity of these ideas to undercut what has seemed so far to be a pretty neat foundation for future science. Aristotle says that, according to Thales,

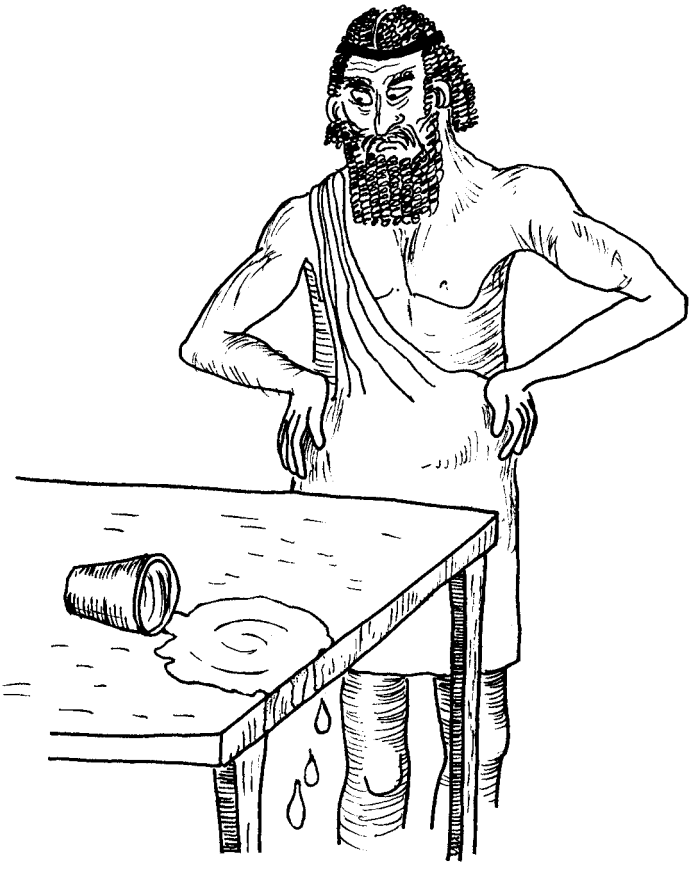
(A) The earth floats on water the way a log floats on a pond.
(B) All things are full of gods.
(C) A magnet (loadstone) must have a soul, because it is able to produce motion.

The first of these ideas, (A), is puzzling because it seems gratuitous. If everything is water, then it is odd to say that some water floats on water. (B) shows us that the cut between Mythos and Logos is not as neat in Thales' case as I have appeared to indicate. (C) seems somehow related to (B), but in conflicting ways. If according to (B) all things are full of gods, then why are the magnets mentioned in (C) any different from everything else in nature? No surprise that over the years scholars have spilled a lot of ink—and, because the debate still goes on, punched a lot of computer keys—trying to make sense of these ideas that Aristotle attributes to Thales.

## Anaximander

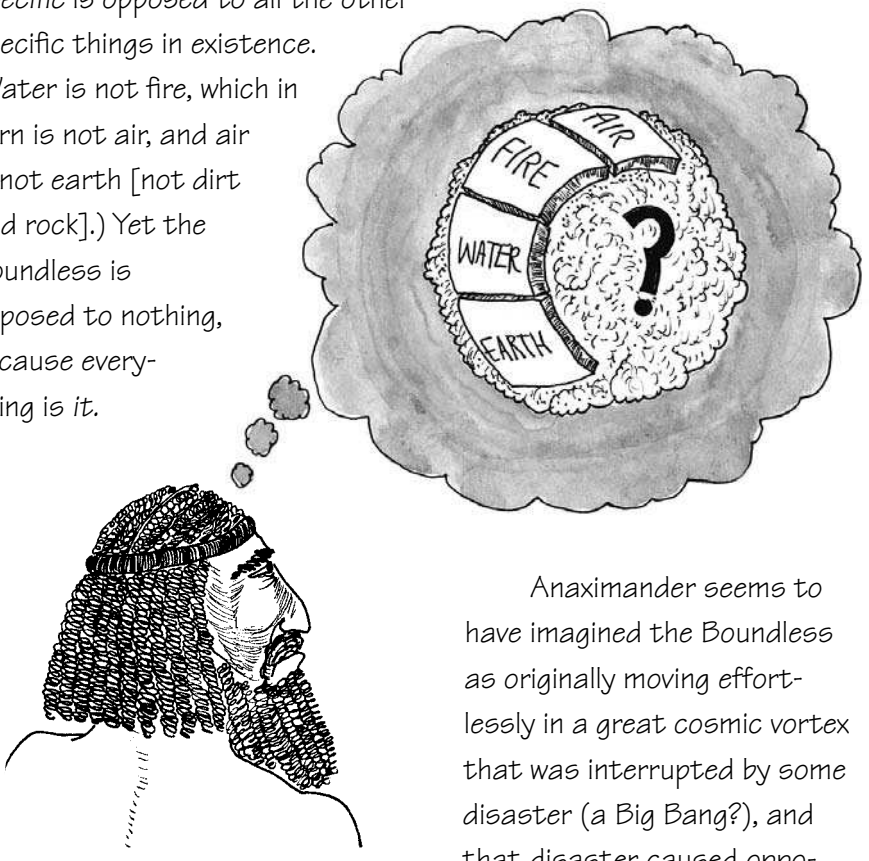
Several generations of Thales' followers agreed with his key insight—that the plurality of kinds of things in the world must be reducible to one category—but none of them seems to have accepted his formula

that everything is water. His student Anaximander (ca. 610–ca. 546 B.C.E.), also from the city of Miletus, said that if all things were water, then long ago everything would have returned to water. Anaximander asked how water could become its deadly enemy, fire—how a quality could give rise to its opposite. That is, if observable objects were really just water in various states of agitation—as are ice and steam—then eventually all things would have settled back into their primordial liquid state. Aristotle paraphrases him this way: If ultimate reality "were something specific like water, the other elements would be annihilated by it. For the different elements have contrariety with one another. . . . If one of them were unlimited the others would have ceased to exist by now."[3] (Notice that if this view can be accurately attributed to Anaximander, then he subscribed to an early view of the principle of **entropy,** according to which all things have a tendency to seek a state of equilibrium.)



For Anaximander, the ultimate stuff behind the four elements could not itself be one of the elements. It would have to be an unobservable, unspecific, indeterminate something-or-other, which he called the Boundless, or the Unlimited (*apeiron* in Greek). It would

*have to be boundless, unlimited, and unspecific because anything specific is opposed to all the other specific things in existence. (Water is not fire, which in turn is not air, and air is not earth [not dirt and rock].) Yet the Boundless is opposed to nothing, because everything is it.*




Anaximander seems to have imagined the Boundless as originally moving effortlessly in a great cosmic vortex that was interrupted by some disaster (a Big Bang?), and that disaster caused opposites—dry and wet, cold and hot—to separate off from the vortex and to appear to us not only as qualities but as the four basic elements: earth, water, air, and fire.

Anaximander wrote a book in prose, one of the first such books ever written. But papyrus does not last forever, and only one passage remains that we can be fairly certain comes from his book. However, that passage is a zinger.

> And from what source things arise, to that they return of necessity when they are destroyed, for they suffer punishment and make reparation to one another for their injustice according to the order of time.[4]

There are many possible interpretations of this amazing statement. According to the most dramatic interpretation, the whole


world as you and I know it is the result of a cosmic error. Creation is an act of injustice. But justice will be done; the world will eventually be destroyed, and "things" will return to their boundless source and revolve eternally in a vortex. *This* interpretation, which contains at least as much Mythos as Logos, exhibits a bizarre kind of optimism about the triumph of justice.

A less radical, less mythical, and more likely interpretation would be this: Once the four elements were created, they became related to one another in antagonistic ways, but their opposition to one another balances out in an ecological harmony. If one element dominates at one period (say, water in a time of flood), it will later be compensated by the domination of another element at another period (say, fire in a drought). So the original unity of the Boundless is preserved in the apparent war of the opposites.

A very important part of this passage is the claim that the events described occur "of necessity . . . according to the order of

time." This process, then, is not due to the whims of the gods, and the "punishment" and "reparation" for the "injustice" is not reprisal against individual humans by angry divinities. Natural laws are governing these processes with inevitability. If the working out of these laws is described by Anaximander in the moral and legal language of the old myths, his description simply shows, as the eminent pre-Socratic scholar Malcolm Schofield says, "that Anaximander is a revolutionary who carries some old-fashion baggage with him. That is the general way with revolutions."[5] In any case, the cause of these processes—the *apeiron*—is immortal and indestructible, qualities usually associated with gods, as Aristotle points out.[6] Again, we see that pre-Socratic philosophy has not completely divorced itself from its religious origins.

Other striking ideas have been attributed to Anaximander: (1) Because the same processes that are at work here are at work everywhere, there is a plurality of universes. (2) The earth needs no support (remember Thales' "floating like a log in water"). Because the earth is right smack in the middle of the universe (well, *our* universe), it is "equidistant from all things." (3) The four elements concentrate in certain regions—in concentric circles—of the cosmos, with earth (the heaviest) in the center, surrounded by a circle of water, then another of air, then one of fire. A wheel of fire circles our slower earth. What we see as the stars are really holes in the outer ring, or "tube-like vents," with fire showing through.

This last cosmological picture painted by Anaximander had an amazingly long life. Merrill Ring quotes the sixteenth-century British poet Edmund Spenser as writing:

> The earth the air the water and the fire
> Then gan to range themselves in huge array,
> and with contrary forces to conspire
> Each against other by all means they may.[7]

And in the early seventeenth century, Miguel de Cervantes relates a heroic adventure of Don Quixote and Sancho in which a group of bored aristocrats trick the knight and his squire into blindfolding them-

selves and mounting a wooden horse, Clavileño, which they are told is magic and will fly them to the outer reaches of the world. The underlings of the Duke and Duchess blow winds upon our heroes with great billows as they reach the "realm of the air." Turning the wooden peg in the horse's head that he believes controls the horse's speed, Don Quixote says, "If we go on climbing at this rate we shall soon strike the region of fire, and I do not know how to manage this peg so as not to mount so high that we shall scorch."[8] Their tormentors then brush their faces with torches to convince them that they have indeed reached the realm of fire at the edge of the cosmos.

Don Quixote and Sancho Pass through the Realm of Fire

This magical episode "takes place" some two thousand years after the death of Anaximander and sixty years after the death of Copernicus, so people might have come to realize by then that Anaximander was wrong.

## Anaximenes

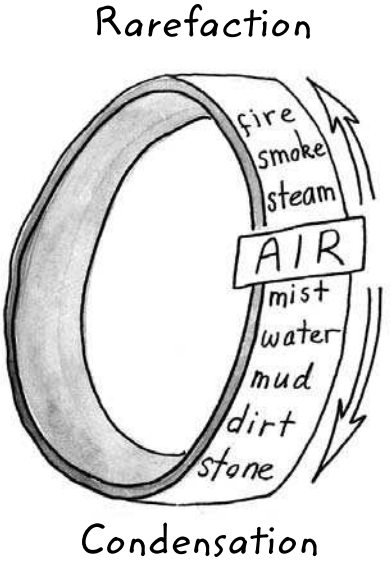
Some of Anaximander's followers asked, "How much better is an 'unspecific, indeterminate something-or-other' than nothing at all?" They decided that it was no better, that in fact it was the same as nothing at all, and knowing that *ex nihilo nihil* (from nothing comes nothing), they went on searching for the mysterious ultimate stuff.

The next philosopher,
Anaximenes (ca. 545 B.C.E.), thought it was *air*.

The air that we experience ("commonsense air") is a halfway house between all the other forms into which "primordial air" can be transformed through condensation and rarefaction. The commentator, Theophrastus, says:

> Anaximenes . . . like Anaximander, declares that the underlying nature is one and boundless, but not indeterminate as Anaximander held, but definite, saying that it is air. It differs in rarity and density according to the substances [it becomes]. Becoming finer it comes to be fire; being condensed it comes to be wind, then cloud, and when still further condensed it becomes water, then earth, then stones, and the rest come to be out of these.[9]

With the idea of condensation and rarefaction, Anaximenes continued the project of reductionism. He introduced the important claim that all differences in quality are really differences in quantity (just more or less stuff packed into a specific space), an idea with which many scientists would agree today.




These first three philosophers, Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes, are known as the Milesians because they all came from the Greek colony of Miletus on the Persian coast and because they constitute the first *school* of philosophy. Despite the differences among them, they shared a number of characteristics, some of which would eventually become part of the Western scientific tradition: a desire for simple explanations, a reliance on observation to support their theories, a commitment to **naturalism** (the view that natural phenomena should be explained in terms of other natural phenomena), and **monism** (the view that ultimately there is only one kind of "stuff").

The School of Miletus ended when the tenuous peace between the Greek outpost and Persia collapsed and the Persians overran the city, leaving behind much destruction and death. According to the historian Herodotus, the Athenians were so distressed at the fall of Miletus that they burst into tears in the theater when the playwright Phrynichus produced his drama "The Capture of Miletus." The government banned his play and fined the author one thousand drachmas for damage to public morals.

## Pythagoras

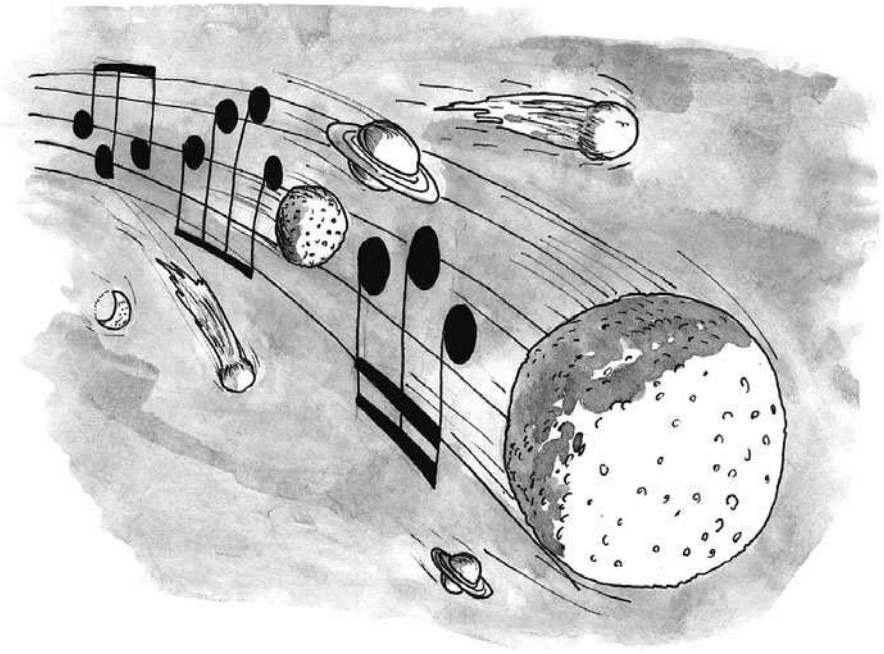
The Milesians' successor, Pythagoras (ca. 572–ca. 500 B.C.E.), from the island of Samos, near Miletus, did not seek ultimacy in some material element, as his predecessors had done. Rather, he held the curious view that all things are numbers. Literally understood, this view seems absurd, but Pythagoras meant, among other things, that a correct description of reality must be expressed in terms of mathematical formulas. From our science classes we are familiar with a great number of laws of nature, all of which can be written out in mathematical formulas (for example, the law of gravitation, the three laws of motion, the three laws of thermodynamics, the law of reflection, Bernoulli's law, Mendel's three laws). Pythagoras is the great-great-grandfather of the view that the totality of reality can be expressed in terms of mathematical laws.

Very little is known about Pythagoras himself. Nothing he wrote has survived. It is almost impossible to sort out Pythagoras's own views from those of his followers, who created various Pythagorean monastic colonies throughout the Greek world during the next several hundred years. He seems to have been not primarily a mathematician but a **numerologist;** that is, he was interested in the mystical significance of numbers. For instance, because the Pythagoreans thought that the number 10 was divine, they concluded that what we

would today call the solar system had ten members. This theory turns out to be roughly correct—the sun and nine planets—but not for Pythagoras's reasons.

Nevertheless, he anticipated the bulk of Euclid's writings on geometry and discovered the ratios of concord between musical sound and number. From this discovery he deduced a mathematical harmony throughout the universe, a view that led to the doctrine of "the music of the spheres." The ten celestial bodies move, and all motion produces sound. Therefore, the motion of the ten celestial bodies—being divine—produces divine sounds. Their music is the eternal background sound against which all sound in the world is contrasted. Normally, we hear only the "sound in the world" and are

unable to hear the background harmony. But a certain mystical stance allows us to ignore the sound of the world and to hear only the divine music of the spheres.



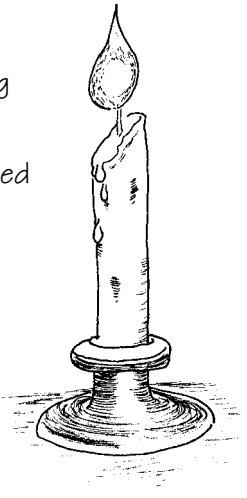
The influence of Pythagoras was so great that the School of Pythagoreans lasted almost 400 years. The spell he cast on Plato alone would be enough to guarantee Pythagoras a permanent place in the history of philosophy. (We shall see that Plato turns out to be the most important philosopher of the Greek period and that he was a fine mathematician as well.) With hindsight, we can now look at Pythagoras's work and see those features of it that mark him and his followers as true philosophers. Nevertheless, it is only artificially that we distinguish that portion of Pythagorean thought that we declare to be philosophical. We should not ignore the less scientific aspect of Pythagoras's teachings, which to him were all part of a seamless whole. He was the leader of a religious cult whose members had to obey a strict number of esoteric rules based on asceticism, numerology, and vegetarianism.

Despite their vegetarianism, Pythagoreans had to forswear eating beans because eating beans is a form of cannibalism. A close look at the inside of a bean reveals that each one contains a small, embryonic human being (or human bean, as the case may be).

## Heraclitus

The next philosopher to demand our attention is Heraclitus (ca. 470 B.C.E.) of Ephesus, only a few miles from Miletus. Almost 100 trustworthy passages from Heraclitus's book remain for our perusal. We know more about what Heraclitus actually said than we know about any other pre-Socratic philosopher. Unfortunately, we don't necessarily know more about what he *meant*. Like Anaximander, Heraclitus wrote in prose, but he chose to express himself in aphorisms—short, pithy outbursts with puzzling messages that seem to dare the

reader to make sense of them. Rather than review the great varieties of scholarly effort in recent years trying to convey the many possible meanings of Heraclitus's fragments, here I concentrate on the meaning attributed to Heraclitus's views by the generations that followed him in the Greek and Roman world in the years after his death. The picture that emerges from the commentators of that early period is fairly uniform, if perhaps misguided, but after all, that picture has guaranteed Heraclitus's fame for centuries and has been influential in the history of ideas.



One of Heraclitus's most famous aphorisms concerns fire. He wrote: "There is an exchange of all things for fire and of fire for all things."[10] Many commentators understood Heraclitus to be naming fire as the basic stuff of reality and therefore to be in the line of Mile-

Milesian cosmologists who tried to reduce all things to one element. Others realized that Heraclitus was using the image of fire in a more subtle, figurative sense. There is something about the nature of fire that gives insight into both the appearance of stability (the flame's form is stable) and the fact of change (in the flame, everything changes).

Heraclitus drew some striking conclusions from this vision:

Reality is composed not of a number of things but of a process of continual creation and destruction.

"War is father and king of all."
"Conflict is justice."[11]

But these passages too should be understood symbolically and not literally.

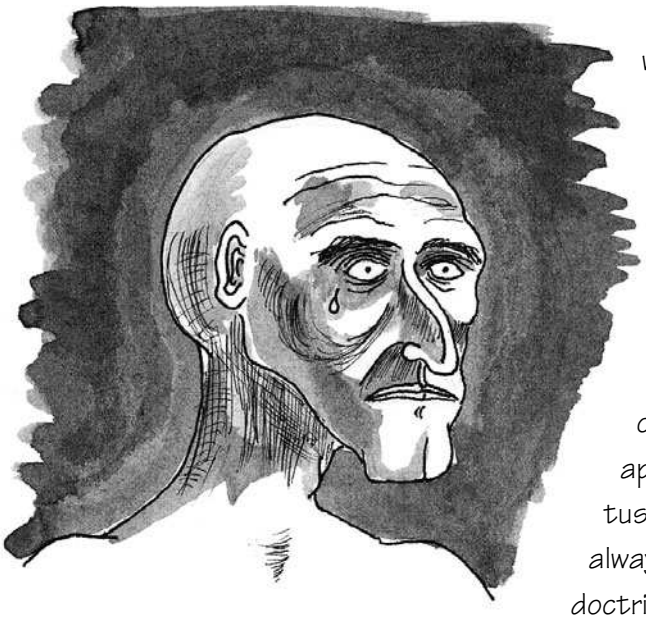
Another one of Heraclitus's aphorisms evokes the image of flowing water:

"You cannot step into the same river twice."[12]

Heraclitus explained this idea by saying "Everything flows and nothing abides; everything gives way and nothing stays fixed."[13] Commentators interpreted Heraclitus to be saying that the only thing that does not change is change itself.

Heraclitus was called the Dark One and the Obscure One because of the difficulty of his aphorisms. Justifiably or not, his ideas were interpreted pessimistically by later Greeks, and this understanding was handed down to posterity. According to this interpretation, his ideas create more than merely a philosophy—they constitute a mood, almost a worldview of nostalgia and loss:

> You can't go home again. Your childhood is lost.
> The friends of your youth are gone.
> Your present is slipping away from you.
> Nothing is ever the same.



Nevertheless, there was something positive in the Heraclitean philosophy. An unobservable Logos—a logic-governed change that made change a rational phenomenon rather than the chaotic, arbitrary one it appeared to be. Heraclitus wrote: "Logos is always so."[14] This Logos doctrine deeply impressed Plato and eventually became the basis of the notion of the laws of nature. It is also directly related to a doctrine claimed by Christianity. Both God and Christ are equated with Logos in the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word [Logos], and the Word [Logos] was with God and the Word [Logos] was God" (John 1:1); "And the Word [Logos] was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14).

## Parmenides

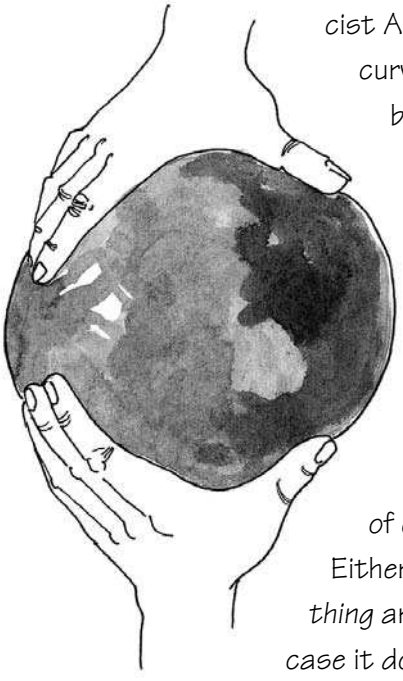
Heraclitus's successor Parmenides (ca. 515–ca. 440 B.C.E.) went a step further than his predecessor.

> In effect, he said that you can't step in the same river *once*.

Parmenides begins with what he takes to be a self-evident truth: "It is." This claim is not empirical—not one derived from observation; rather, it is a truth of Reason. It cannot even be denied without self-contradiction. If you say, "It is not" (i.e., nothing exists), then you've proved that "It is," for if nothing *exists*, it's not nothing; rather it is something.

Parmenides believed that Being is rational, that only what can be thought can exist. Since "nothing" cannot be thought (without thinking of it as *something*), there is no nothing, there is only Being. From the mere idea of Being it follows that Being is uncreated, indestructible, eternal, and indivisible. Furthermore, Being is spherical, because only a sphere is equally real in all directions. (Maybe this notion is related to the idea of the twentieth-century physicist Albert Einstein, who claimed that space is curved?) Being has no holes (no vacuum) because, if Being *is*, there can't be any place where Being is *not*.

**You Cannot Step in the Same River *Once***

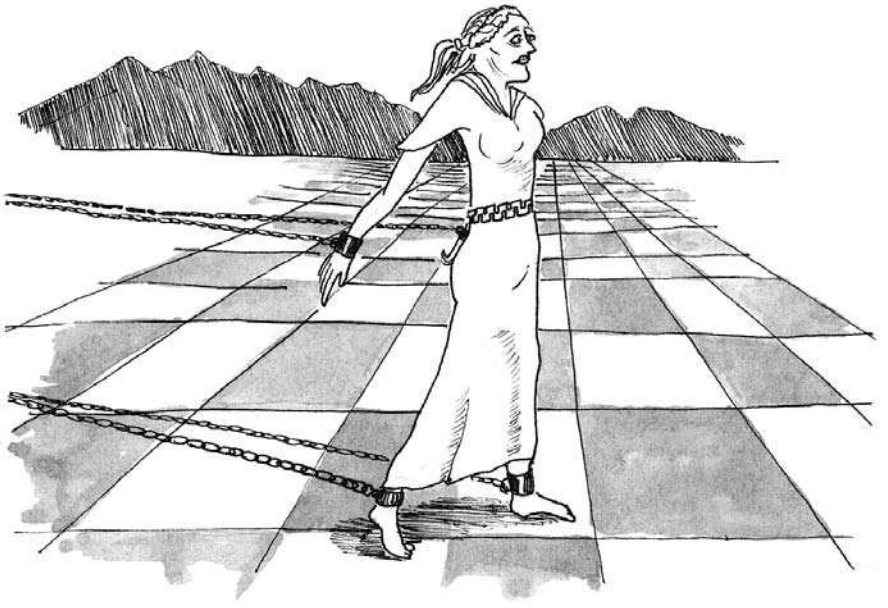


From this argument it follows that motion is impossible because motion would involve Being going from where Being is to where Being isn't (but there can't *be* any such place as the place where Being isn't).

In fact, for Parmenides the very idea of empty space was an impossible idea. Either space is a thing, in which case it is *something* and not nothing, or it is *nothing*, in which case it does not exist. Because all thought must

have an object and because nothing is not an object, the idea of nothing is a self-contradictory idea.

It must be obvious to you that Parmenides has strayed a long way from common sense and from the facts that are revealed to us by the senses of sight, touch, hearing, smell, and taste—and primary among those facts is that motion exists and that things change. But if people laughed at Parmenides, they didn't laugh for long, because he soon had a powerful ally.



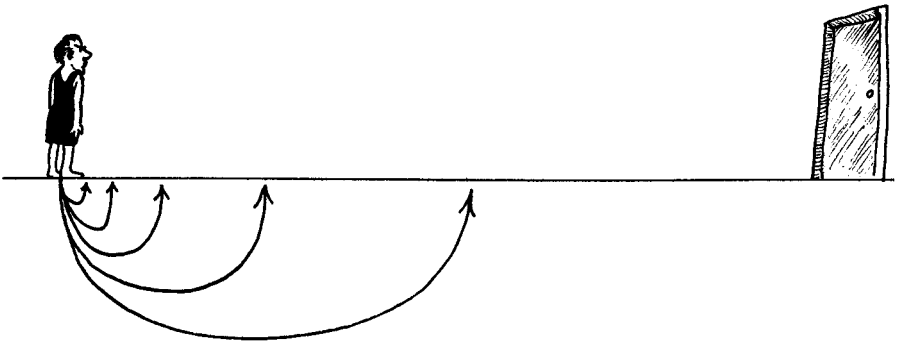
## Zeno

The sly old fox Zeno of Elea (ca. 490 B.C.E.–?) wrote a now-famous series of paradoxes in which he defended Parmenides' outrageous views by "proving" the impossibility of motion using a method known as reductio ad absurdum.

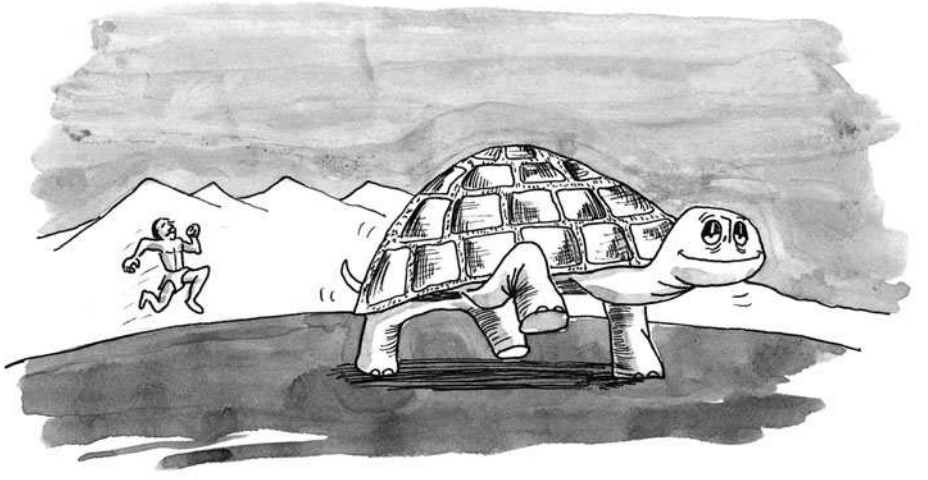
In this form of argument, you begin by accepting your opponent's conclusions, and you demonstrate that they lead logically to an absurdity or a contradiction.

Zeno argued that, even granting motion, you could never arrive anywhere, not even to such a simple goal as a door. Before you can

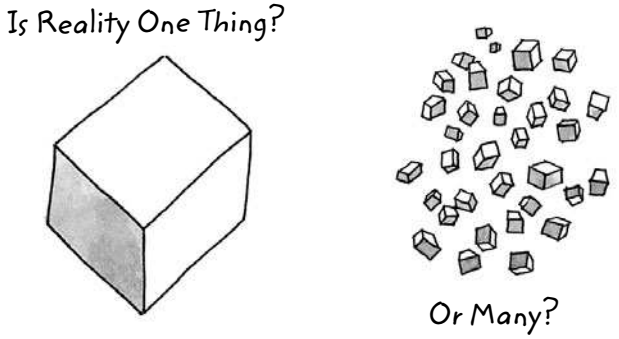
get to the door, you must go halfway, but before you can go halfway, you must go halfway of the remaining halfway, but before you can do that, you must go halfway of halfway, but before you can go halfway, you must go halfway. When does this argument end? Never! It goes on to infinity. Therefore, motion would be impossible even if it were possible.



In yet another of his paradoxes, Zeno demonstrated that in a race between Achilles and a tortoise, if Achilles gave the tortoise a head start (as would only be fair), the swift runner could never overtake the lumbering reptile. Before Achilles could pass the tortoise, he must arrive at the point at which the tortoise used to be; but given the hypothesis of motion, the tortoise will never still be there. He will have moved on. This paradox will forever be the case. When Achilles arrives at a point at which the tortoise was, the tortoise will have progressed. Achilles can never catch him.



The conclusions of these paradoxical arguments of Zeno defending the views of his master, Parmenides, may seem absurd to you, but they are actually derived from the mathematical notion of the infinite divisibility of all numbers and, indeed, of all matter. Zeno's arguments are still studied in postgraduate courses on the foundations of mathematics. Zeno is forcing us to choose between mathematics and sensory information. It is well known that the senses often deceive us, so we should choose the certainty of mathematics. With that suggestion Parmenides and Zeno caused a crisis in Greek philosophy. They radicalized the distinction between information based on the five senses and that based on pure reason (a distinction that would later develop into two schools of philosophy: **empiricism** and **rationalism**). Furthermore, they forced a reevaluation of the monistic




presupposition accepted by all Greeks heretofore (namely, the view that reality is composed of one thing), because thinkers came to realize that such a view led directly to Parmenides' conclusions. It appeared that philosophers either would have to accept Parmenides' shocking arguments or they would have to give up monism. In fact, they gave up monism.

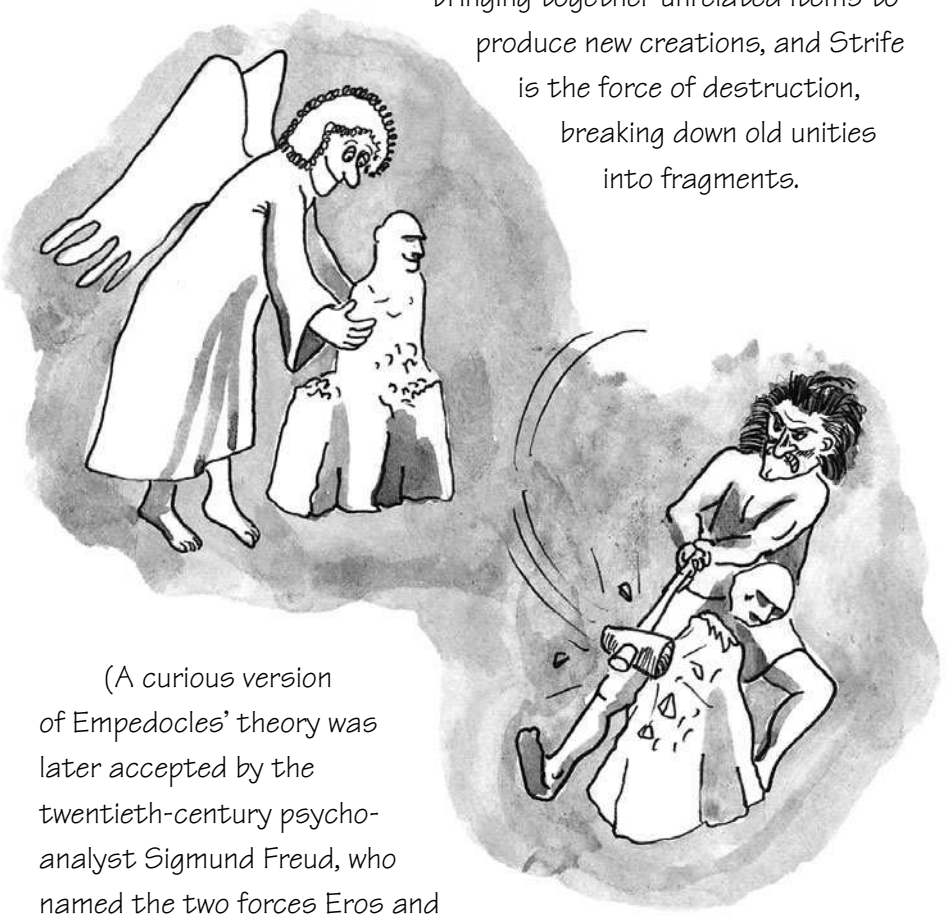
## Empedocles

The next group of philosophers are known as **pluralists,** precisely because they were unable to accept the monolithic stillness of Parmenides' Being. Therefore, they were forced to believe that ultimate reality is composed of a plurality of things rather than of only one kind of thing.

The first of this group was Empedocles (?–ca. 440 B.C.E.), a citizen of the Greek colony of Acragas on the

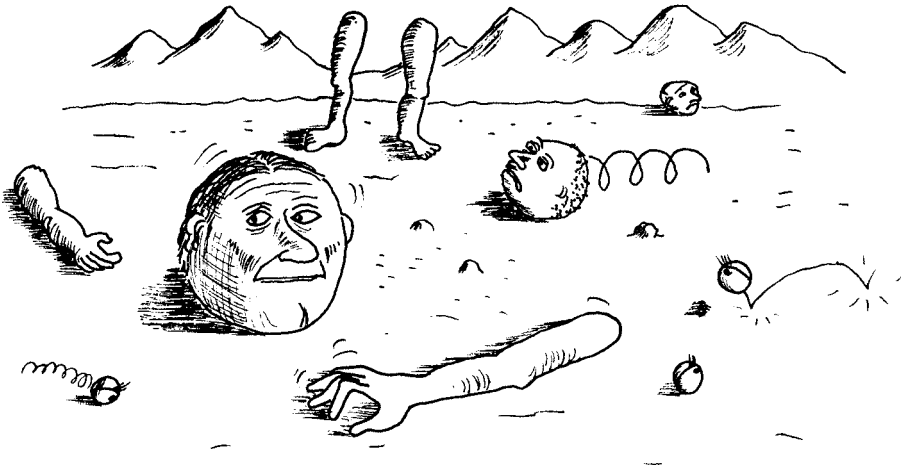
island of Sicily, who believed that everything was composed of the simplest parts of the four elements: fire, air, earth, and water. He called these elements the "four roots."

But in the face of Zeno's critique of motion, Empedocles believed he needed to posit two forces to explain change and movement. These forces he called Love and Strife. Love is the force of unity, bringing together unrelated items to produce new creations, and Strife is the force of destruction, breaking down old unities into fragments.



(A curious version of Empedocles' theory was later accepted by the twentieth-century psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, who named the two forces Eros and Thanatos [the life instinct and the death instinct]. Freud agreed with Empedocles that these forces formed the bases of all organic matter.)

The first theory of ***evolution*** developed out of Empedocles' system. Love brings together certain kinds of monsters. "Many heads grew up without necks, and arms were wandering about naked, bereft of shoulders, and eyes roamed about alone with no foreheads. Many



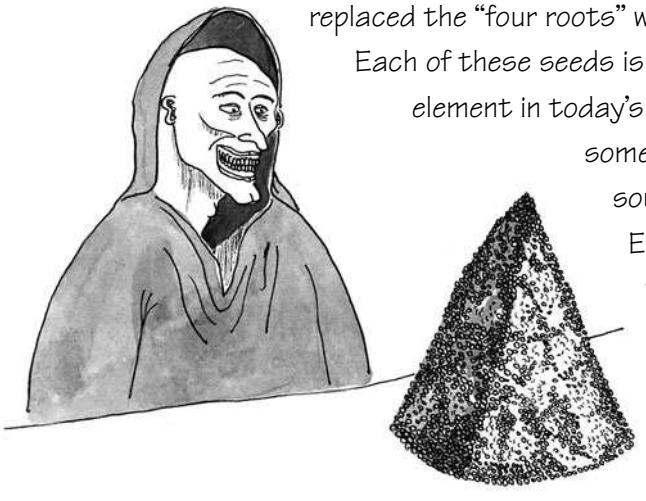
creatures arose with double faces and double breasts, offspring of oxen with human faces, and again there sprang up children of men with oxen's heads."[15]

And those that could survive, did survive.

(Aristotle later criticized this view as "leaving too much to chance.")

## Anaxagoras

The next pluralist, Anaxagoras (ca. 500–ca. 428 B.C.E.) of Clazomenae, near Miletus, found Empedocles' theory too simplistic. He replaced the "four roots" with "infinite seeds." Each of these seeds is something like an element in today's chemistry; so in some ways, this theory sounds very modern. Every object in the world contains seeds of all elements, and in each object, the seeds of one element predominate.



"In all things, there is a portion of everything. . . . For how could hair come from what is not hair? Or flesh from what is not flesh?"[16]

Anaxagoras agreed with Empedocles that some force explaining motion and change was required, but he replaced Empedocles' all too mythical figures of Love and Strife with one force, a mental one, which he called Nous, or Mind. This assumption means that the universe is organized according to an intelligent, rational order. Anaxagoras's Nous is almost like a god who creates objects out of the seeds, or elements.

Furthermore, there is a distinction between the animate and the inanimate world in that the organic world contains Nous within it as

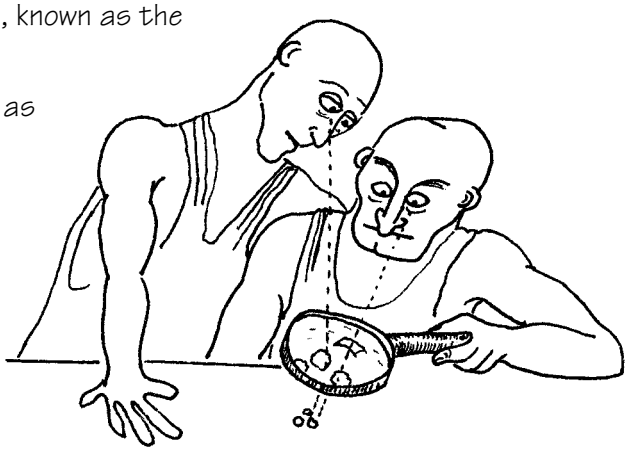
a self-ordering principle, whereas the inorganic world is ordered externally by Nous. Nous itself is qualitatively identical everywhere, but its abilities are determined by the nature of the body that contains it. Humans aren't any smarter than carrots, but they can *do* more than carrots because they have tongues, opposable thumbs, and legs. (You wouldn't act very smart either if you were shaped like a pointy root.)


Notice that Anaxagoras's theory is the first time that a philosopher distinguished clearly between living substance and "dead" matter. The anthropomorphic concept Nous looked promising to two of the most important later Greek philosophers, Socrates and Aristotle, but eventually it disappointed them. Socrates said that at first he found it an exciting idea, but it ended up meaning nothing at all, and Aristotle said that Anaxagoras stood out "like a sober man in the midst of loose talkers."[17] Later Aristotle was disillusioned by Anaxagoras, who used "reason as a ***deus ex machina*** for the making

of the world, and when he is at a loss to tell from what cause something necessarily is, then he drags reason in, but in all other cases ascribes events to anything rather than reason."[18]

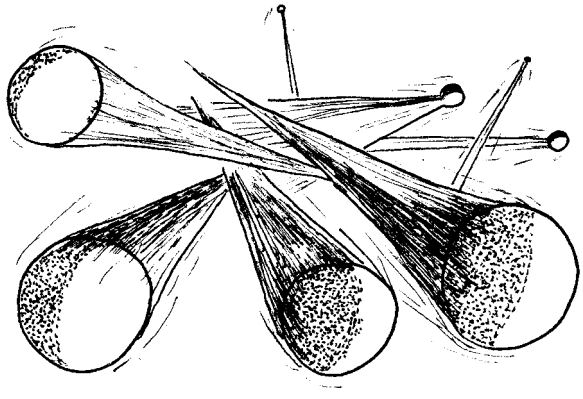
## Leucippus and Democritus

Precisely because Anaxagoras's view was anthropomorphic, it was still too mythical for Anaxagoras's successors, a group of philosophers, led by Leucippus (ca. 460 B.C.E.–?) and Democritus (ca. 460–ca. 370 B.C.E.), known as the **atomists.**



They saw the world as composed of material bodies, which themselves are composed of groups of "atoms." The Greek word ατομον (atomon) means "indivisible," that which cannot be split.

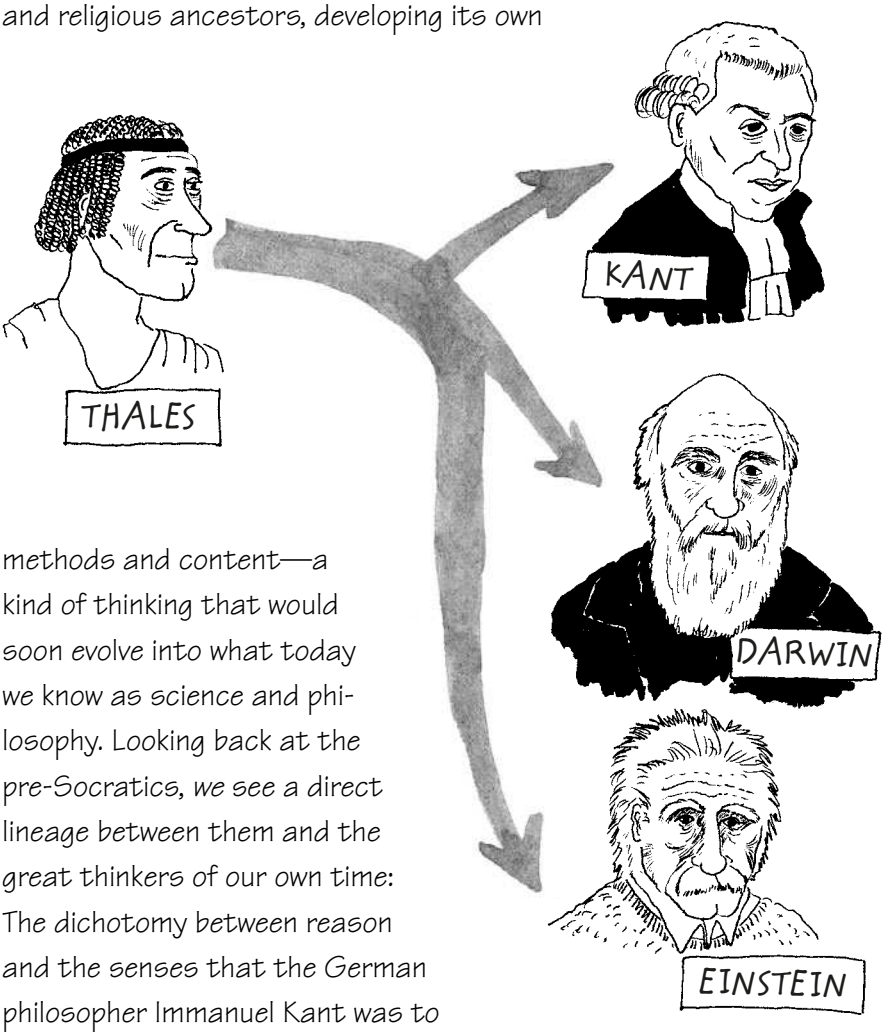
Democritus made each atom a little piece of Parmenidean Being (uncreated, indestructible, eternal, indivisible, containing no "holes") and set them moving through empty space traversing absolutely necessary paths that are determined by rigid natural laws.



So, contrary to Parmenides' view, both empty space and motion are real. Moreover, like atoms themselves, motion and space

are natural and basic, admitting of no further analysis. It is the appearance of *inertia* and not that of motion that needs explaining, and Democritus's explanation, like that of Heraclitus, is that inertia is an illusion. That is to say, it is explained away. Thus, by the year 370 B.C.E., Greek philosophy had been led to a thoroughgoing **materialism** and a rigorous **determinism.** There was nothing in the world but material bodies in motion and there was no freedom, only necessity.

What had the pre-Socratic philosophers achieved? Through them, a special kind of thinking had broken free from its mythical and religious ancestors, developing its own methods and content—a kind of thinking that would soon evolve into what today we know as science and philosophy. Looking back at the pre-Socratics, we see a direct lineage between them and the great thinkers of our own time: The dichotomy between reason and the senses that the German philosopher Immanuel Kant was to



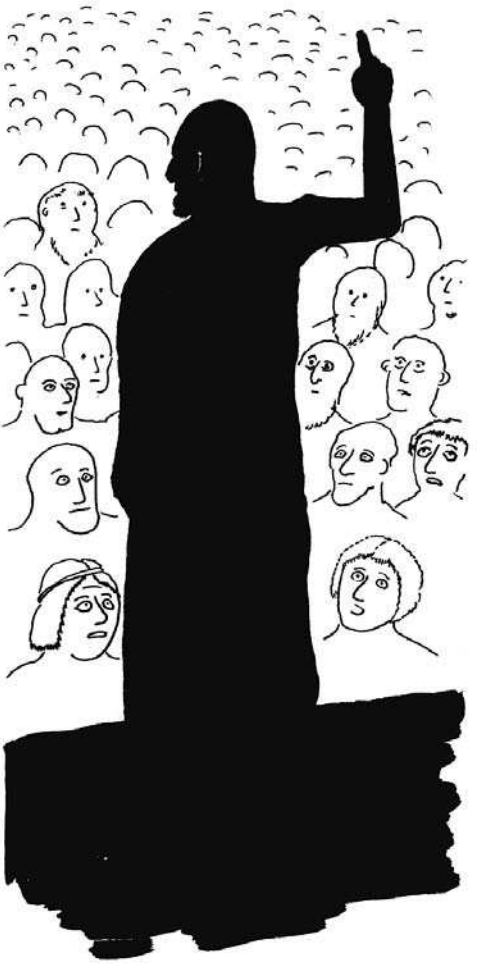

resolve in the eighteenth century was first made clear by the pre-Socratics; the first attempt to formulate a theory of evolution was made by them; and the first effort to solve the riddle of how mathematical numbers hold sway over the flux of reality—all this we see as a more or less unbroken genealogy from their time to ours.

But to the Greeks of the fifth century, the pre-Socratic philosophers had left a legacy of confusion.

The only thing the philosophers had succeeded in doing was to undermine the traditional religious and moral values, leaving nothing substantial in their place. (As the Greek dramatist Aristophanes

said, "When Zeus is toppled, chaos succeeds him, and whirlwind rules.")

Besides, "the times they were a' changin'," socially and politically as well as intellectually. The old aristocracy, dedicated to the noble values of the Homeric legends, was losing ground to a new mercantile class, which was no longer interested in the virtues of Honor, Courage, and Fidelity but in Power and Success. How was the new class to achieve these virtues in an incipient democracy? Through politics. And the access to political power was then, as it is today, through the study of rhetoric (read "law")—the art of swaying the masses with eloquent, though not necessarily truthful, argumentation.



## Topics for Consideration

1. What is the problem of "the One and the Many" that presented itself to the early Greek philosophers? Pick three pre-Socratics with very different solutions to this problem and contrast their views.
2. Apply the distinction you learned in the Introduction between Mythos and Logos to the Milesian philosophers Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes. Which camp are they in?
3. If you lived in the Greek world during the sixth century B.C.E. and knew only what could be known at that period, which of the basic substances or entities would you choose as the foundation of reality, based on your own observations? Why? (Before you start, read the next topic.)

a. Water (Thales)

b. Air (Anaximenes)

c. Fire (roughly, Heraclitus)

d. Earth (*very* roughly, Democritus)

e. An indeterminate "stuff" (Anaximander)

f. Numbers (roughly, Pythagoras)

4. Same question as the previous topic, with this qualification: Based on what you *now* know at the beginning of the twenty-first century, but still limited to the categories a through f, which letter or combination of letters would you choose?
5. Contrast as dramatically as you can the theses of Heraclitus and Parmenides. What do you think would be the practical consequences, if any, of seriously accepting the philosophical claim of Heraclitus? of Parmenides?
6. Explain why Zeno's paradoxes provoked such a deep crisis in the intellectual environment of ancient Greece. Show how philosophical progress after Zeno required some compromise between the views of the Parmenidean camp and those of the pre-Parmenidean camp.

## Notes

1. These post-Aristotelian sources are primarily Theophrastus (ca. 371–ca. 286 B.C.E.), a pupil of Aristotle; Simplicius, a sixth-century B.C.E. commentator on Aristotle; Eudemus of Rhodes, who wrote around 300 B.C.E.; Hippolytus, Bishop of Rome in the third century C.E.; and Diogenes Laertius, whose books were written about 300 C.E. A readable account of recent scholarship on this topic can be found in *Routledge History of Philosophy*, vol. 1, *From the Beginning to Plato* (ed. C. C. W. Taylor [London and New York: Routledge, 1997]), Chapter 2, "The Ionians," by Malcolm Schofield; Chapter 3, "Heraclitus," by Catherine Osborne; Chapter 4, "Pythagoreans and Eleatics," by Edward Hussey; Chapter 5, "Empedocles," by M. R. Wright; and Chapter 6, "Anaxagoras and the Atomists," by C. C. W. Taylor. These investigations support large parts of the traditional views of the pre-Socratics as they are reported here, but also give good reasons for skepticism concerning the accuracy of other aspects of those views.
2. Philip Wheelwright, ed., *The Presocratics* (New York: Odyssey Press, 1966), 44. This sentence is one of the four sentences that are attributed to Thales by Aristotle.
3. Ibid., 55.
4. Milton C. Nahm, ed., *Selections from Early Greek Philosophy* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1962), 62.
5. Schofield, 47–87, 55.

6. "The unlimited is equivalent to the Divine, since it is deathless and indestructible" (Wheelwright, 55).
7. Merrill Ring, *Beginning with the Pre-Socratics*, 2d ed. (Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing, 2000), 24.
8. Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *The Adventures of Don Quixote*, trans. J. M. Cohen (Harmondsworth, England, and New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 731.
9. Simplicius quoting Theophrastus in *A Presocratics Reader*, ed. Patricia Curd, trans. Richard D. McKirahan Jr. (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1996), 14.
10. Wheelwright, 71.
11. Ring, 70.
12. Ibid., 66.
13. Wheelwright, 70.
14. Ring, 62.
15. Nahm, 136.
16. Ibid., 150, 152.
17. Wheelwright, 168.
18. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 697.

# 2

# The Athenian Period

## Fifth and Fourth Centuries B.C.E.

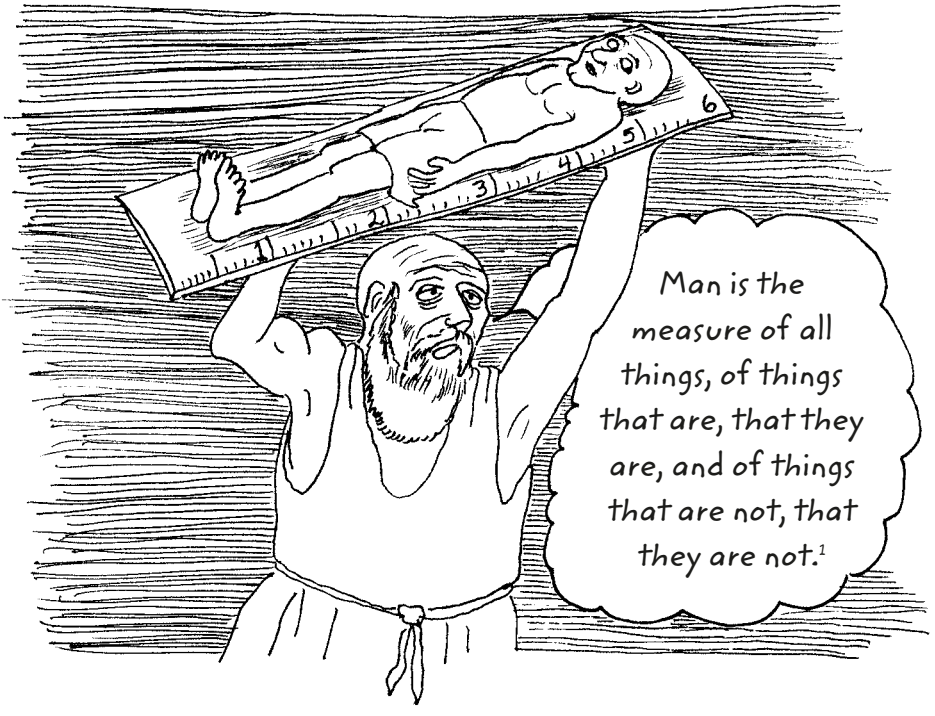

### The Sophists

Because of the social shift toward political power and the study of rhetoric, it was no surprise, then, that the next group of philosophers were not really philosophers as such but rhetoricians who became known as Sophists ("wise guys"). They traveled from city to city, charging admission to their lectures—lectures not on the nature of

reality or truth but on the nature of power and persuasion. Plato and Aristotle wrote a lot about the Sophists, and according to the picture that they handed down to us, not just skepticism but cynicism became the rule of the day.

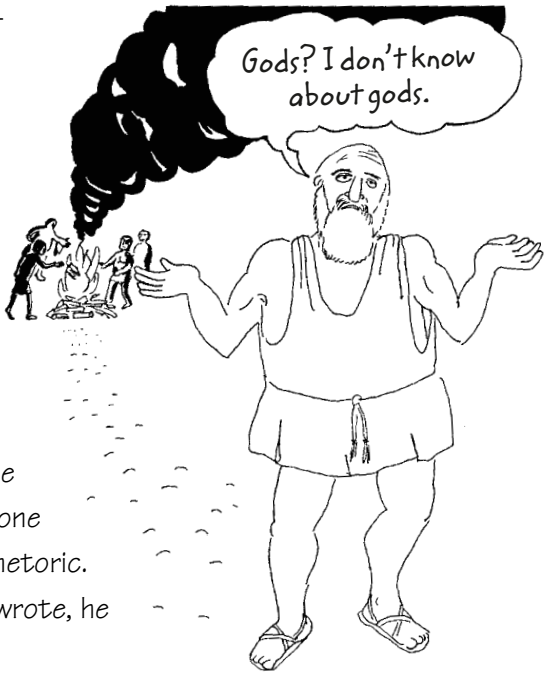
## *Protagoras*

Perhaps the most famous (and least cynical) of the Sophists was Protagoras (ca. 490–ca. 422 B.C.E.). He taught that the way to achieve success is through a careful and prudent acceptance of traditional customs—not because they are *true,* but because an understanding and manipulation of them is expedient. For Protagoras all customs were relative, not absolute. In fact, *everything* is relative to human subjectivity. Protagoras's famous claim is *homo mensura*—man is the measure.




Protagoras's emphasis on subjectivity, **relativism,** and expediency is the backbone of all **sophism.** According to some stories, Protagoras was indicted for blasphemy, and his book on the gods

was burned publicly in Athens—yet one of the few remaining fragments of his writings concerning religion states, "As for the gods, I have no way of knowing either that they exist or that they do not exist."[2]




### *Gorgias*

Another famous Sophist was Gorgias (ca. 483–375 B.C.E.). He seems to have wanted to dethrone philosophy and replace it with rhetoric. In his lectures and in a book he wrote, he "proved" the following theses:

1. There is nothing.
2. If there were anything, no one could know it.
3. If anyone did know it, no one could communicate it.

The point, of course, is that if you can "prove" these absurdities, you can "prove" anything. Gorgias is not teaching us some astounding truth about reality; he is teaching us how to win arguments, no matter how ridiculous our thesis may be.

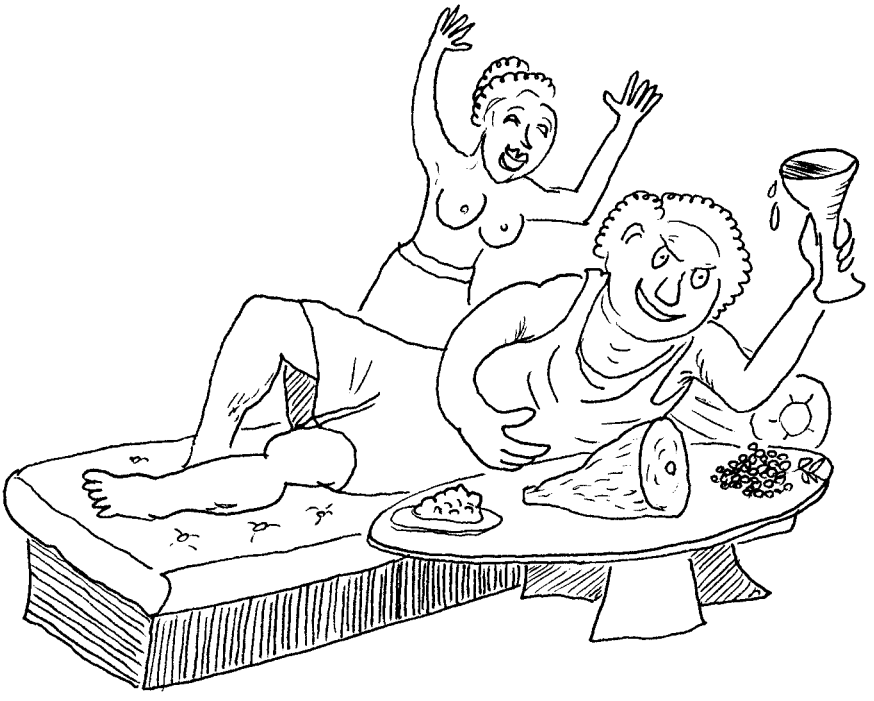
### *Thrasymachus*

Yet another Sophist was Thrasymachus, who is known for the claim "Justice is in the interest of the stronger." That is to say, *might makes right.* According to him, all disputation about morality is empty, except insofar as it is reducible to a struggle for power.

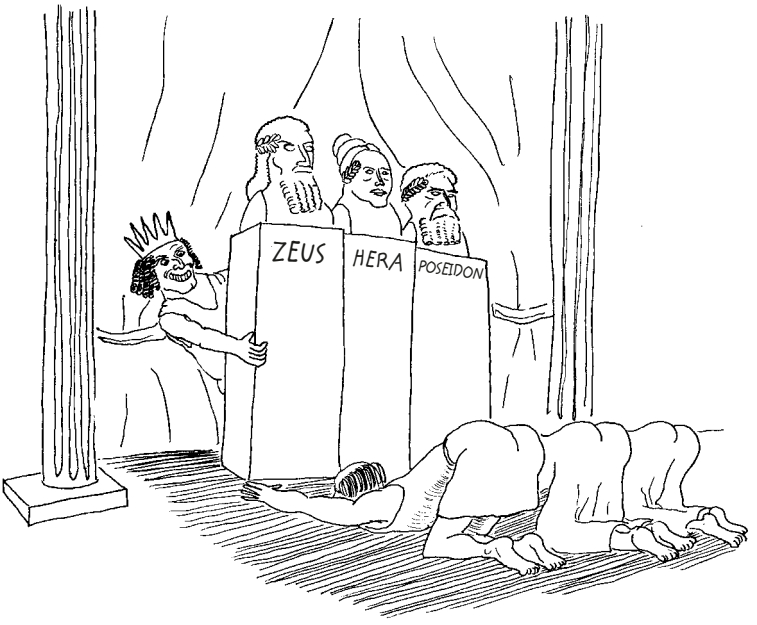
### *Callicles and Critias*

According to the accounts handed down to us, two of the most cynical Sophists were Callicles and Critias.

Callicles claimed that traditional morality is just a clever way for the weak masses to shackle the strong individual. He taught that the strong should throw off these shackles and that doing so would be somehow "naturally right." What matters is *power*, not justice. But why is power good? Because it is conducive to survival. And why is survival good? Because it allows us to seek *pleasure*—pleasure in food, drink, and sex. Pleasure is what the enlightened person aims for, qualitatively and quantitatively. The traditional Greek virtue of *moderation* is for the simple and the feeble.

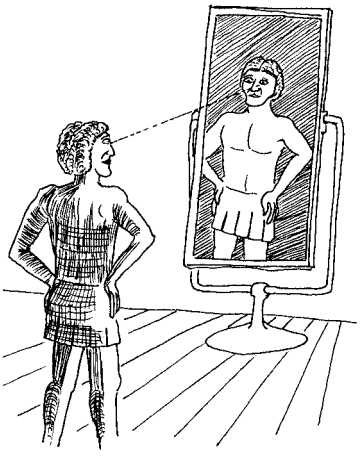


Critias (who was to become the cruelest of the Thirty Tyrants, the men who overturned the democracy and temporarily established an oligarchical dictatorship) taught that the clever ruler controls subjects by encouraging their fear of nonexistent gods.



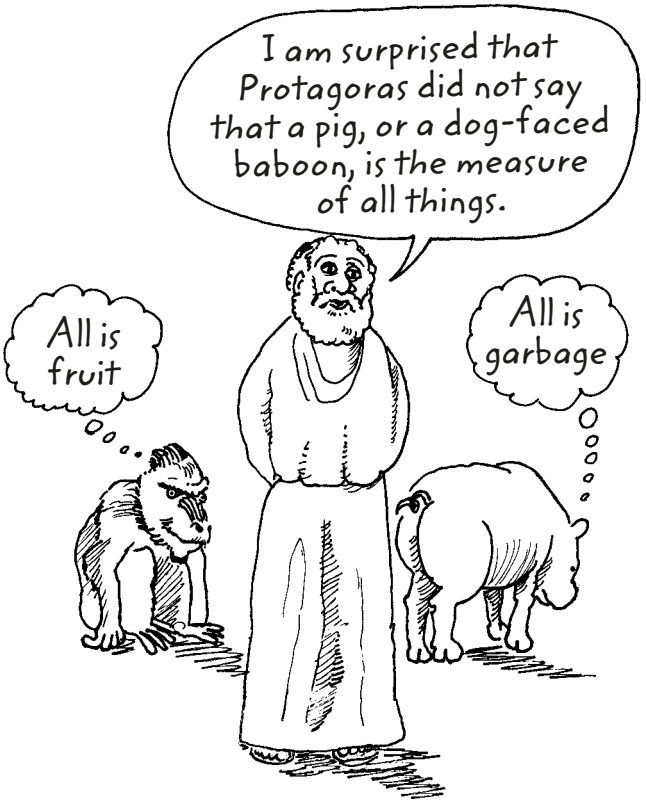

So we see that the essence of sophism comprises **subjectivism, skepticism,** and **nihilism.** Everything the pre-Socratics stood for is devalued. There is no objective reality, and if there were, the human mind could not fathom it. What matters is not truth but manipulation and expediency. No wonder Socrates was so offended by sophism.

Yet we must say a few kind words about sophism despite its negativism. First, many of the Sophists were skilled politicians who actually contributed to the history of democracy. Second, history's animosity toward them is based mostly on reports we have of them from Socrates and Plato, who were enemies of the Sophists. Third, and most important, sophism had the positive effect of making human beings aware not of the cosmos but of themselves as objects of interest. In pre-Socratic philosophy, there was no special consideration of the human. Suddenly, with Protagoras's "man is the measure," humans became interested in themselves.



## Socrates

The Sophists, who were professional teachers, met their match in a man who was possibly the greatest teacher of all time, Socrates (469–399 B.C.E.). Despite his overall disagreement with them, Socrates followed the Sophists' lead in turning away from the study of the cosmos and concentrating on the case of the human. But unlike the way the Sophists discoursed about the human being, Socrates wanted to base all argumentation on objectively valid definitions. To say "man is the measure" is saying very little if one does not know what "man" is. In the *Theatetus*, Socrates says:




Socrates' discourse moved in two directions—outward, to objective definitions, and inward, to discover the inner person, the soul, which, for Socrates, was the source of all truth. Such a search is not to be conducted at a weekend lecture but is the quest of a lifetime.


Socrates was hardly ever able to answer the questions he asked. Nevertheless, the query had to continue, for, as we know from his famous dictum,

The unexamined life is not worth living.[3]

Socrates spent much of his time in the streets and marketplace of Athens, querying every man he met about whether that man knew anything. Socrates said that, if there was an afterlife, he would pose the same question to the shades in Hades.

Ironically, Socrates himself professed to know nothing. The oracle at Delphi said that *therefore* Socrates was the wisest of all men. Socrates at least *knew* that he knew nothing, whereas the others falsely believed themselves to know something.

Socrates himself wrote no books, but his conversations were remembered by his disciple Plato and later published by him as dialogues. Very often these Socratic dialogues will emphasize a specific philosophical question, such as "What is piety?" (in the dialogue titled *Euthyphro*), "What is justice?" (in *Republic*), "What is virtue?" (in *Meno*), "What is meaning?"(in *Sophist*), "What is love?" (in *Symposium*). The typical Socratic dialogue has three divisions:

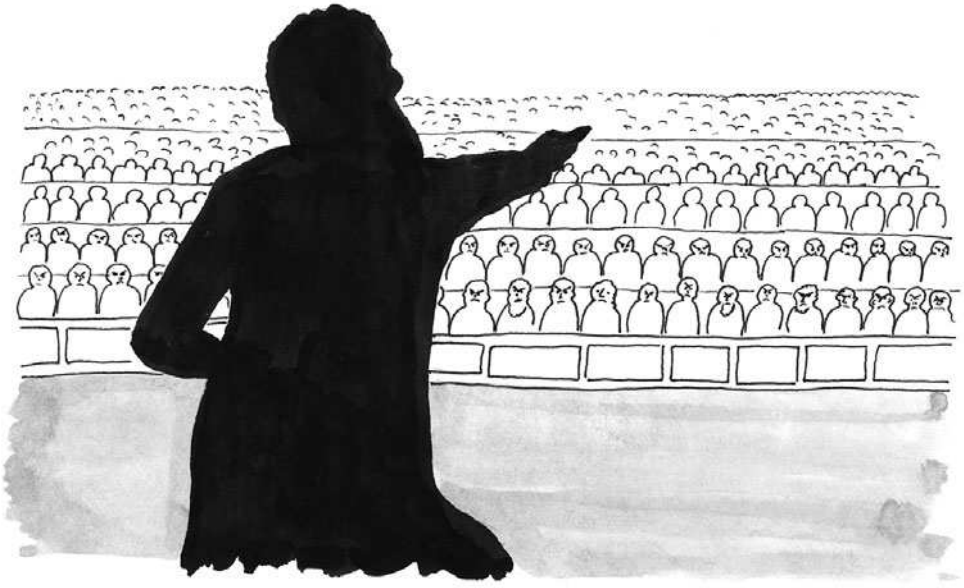
1. A question is posed (e.g., the question of what virtue is, or justice, or truth, or beauty); Socrates becomes excited and enthusiastic to find someone who claims to know something.



2. Socrates finds "minor flaws" in his companion's definition and slowly begins to unravel it, forcing his partner to admit ignorance. (In one dialogue, Socrates' target actually ends up in tears.)

3. An agreement is reached by the two admittedly ignorant companions to pursue the truth seriously. Almost all the dialogues end inconclusively. Of course, they must do so. Socrates cannot give his disciples the truth. Each of us must find it out for ourselves.


In his quest for truth, Socrates managed to offend many of the powerful and pompous figures of Athens. (In fairness to his accusers, it should be mentioned that some citizens suspected Socrates of preferring the values of Sparta to those of his native Athens. Sparta was Athens's enemy in

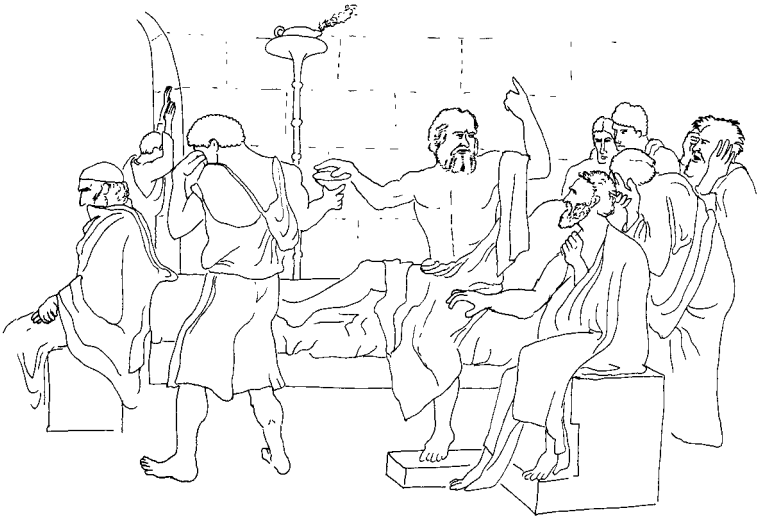


the Peloponnesian War.) Socrates' enemies conspired against him, getting him indicted for teaching false doctrines, for impiety, and for corrupting the youth. They brought him to trial hoping to humiliate him by forcing him to grovel and beg for mercy.

Far from groveling, at his trial Socrates maligned his prosecutors and angered the unruly jury of 500 by lecturing to them about their ignorance. Furthermore, when asked to suggest his own punishment, Socrates recommended that the Athenians give him free board and lodging in the town hall. The enraged jury condemned him to death by a vote of 280 to 220.

Ashamed of their act and embarrassed that they were about to put to death their most eminent citizen, the Athenians were prepared to look the other way when Socrates' prison guard was bribed to allow Socrates to escape.

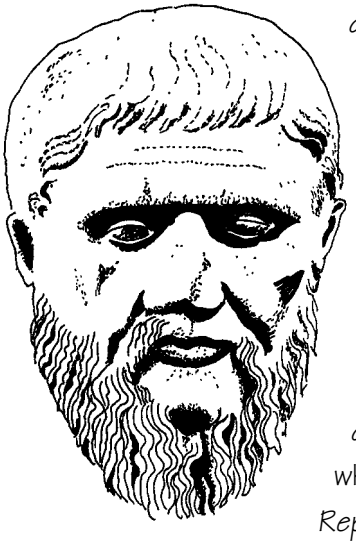
Despite the pleas of his friends, Socrates refused to do so, saying that if he broke the law by escaping, he would be declaring himself an enemy of all laws. So he drank the hemlock and philosophized with his friends to the last moment. In death, he became the universal symbol of martyrdom for the Truth.



**The Death of Socrates**
**(Vaguely after Jacques-Louis David, 1787)**

## Plato

The most important of Socrates' young disciples was Plato (427–347 B.C.E.), who was one of the most powerful thinkers in history. He is also the founder of the first university, the Academy, where students read as exercises the Socratic dialogues that Plato had written.



**Plato**

Because of his authorship, it is often difficult to distinguish between the thought of Socrates and that of Plato. In general, we can say that Plato's philosophy was more metaphysical, more systematic, and more other-worldly than Socrates' philosophy was.

The essence of Plato's philosophy is depicted allegorically in the Myth of the Cave, which appears in his most important work, the *Republic*. In this myth Plato has Socrates conceive the following vision: Imagine prisoners

chained in such a way that they face the back wall of a cave. There they have been for life and can see nothing of themselves or of each other. They see only shadows on the wall of the cave.

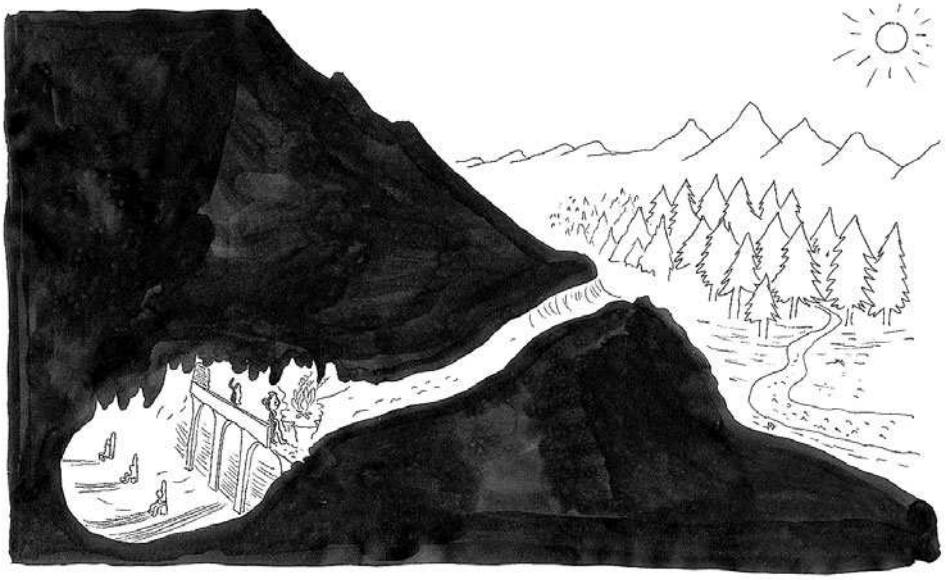
These shadows are cast by a fire that burns on a ledge above and behind them. Between the fire and the prisoners is a wall-lined path along which people walk carrying vases, statues, and other artifacts on their heads. The prisoners hear the echoes of voices and see the shadows of the artifacts, and they mistake

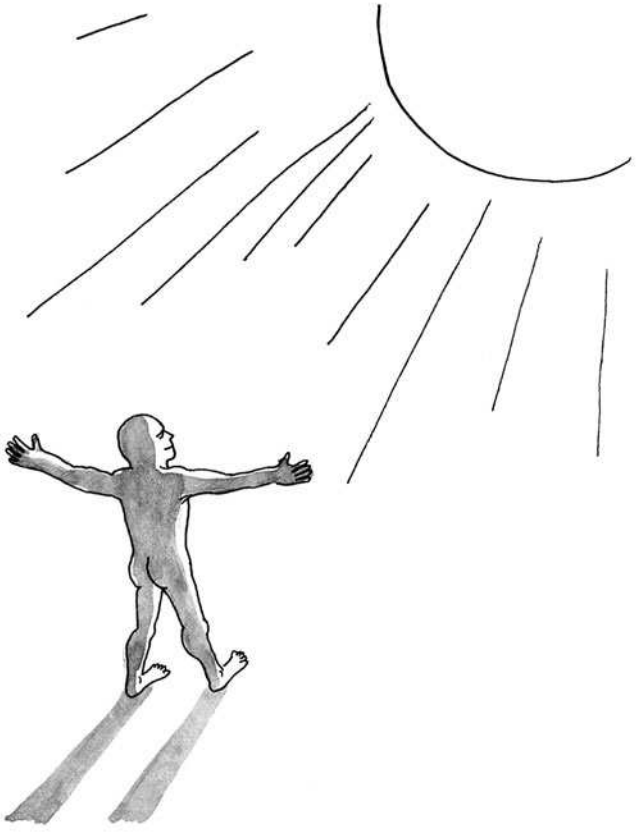
these echoes and shadows for reality.

Plato has Socrates imagine that one prisoner is unchained, turned around, and forced to look at the true source of the shadows. But the fire pains his eyes. He prefers the pleasant deception of the shadows.

Behind and above the fire is the mouth of the cave, and outside in the bright sunlight (only a little of which trickles into the cave) are trees, rivers, mountains, and sky.

Now the former prisoner is forced up the "steep and rugged ascent"[4] (Plato's allegory of education) and brought to the sunlit exterior world. But the light blinds him. He must first look at the shadows of the trees (he is used to shadows), then at the trees and





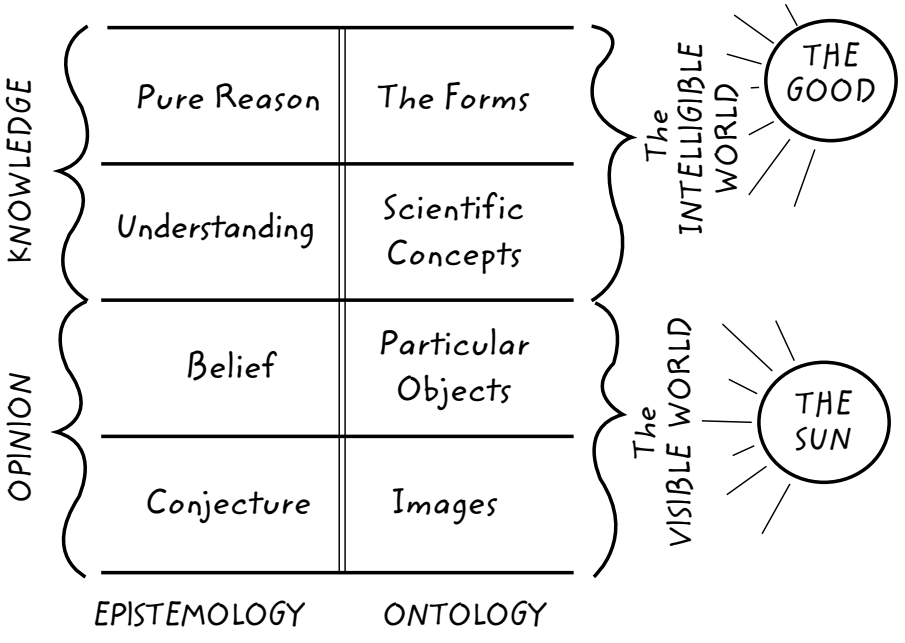
mountains. Finally he is able to see the sun itself (the allegory of enlightenment).

Plato suggests that if this enlightened man were to return to the cave, he would appear ridiculous because he would see sunspots everywhere and not be able to penetrate the darkness.

And if he tried to liberate his fellow prisoners, they would be so angry at him for disturbing their illusions that they would set upon him and kill him—a clear allusion to the death of Socrates.

The allegory of the liberation of the slave from darkness, deceit, and untruth and the slave's hard journey into the light and warmth of the Truth has inspired many philosophers and social leaders. But Plato meant it as more than just a poetic vision. He also gave it a precise technical application, seen in his Simile of the Line, also found in the *Republic*.[5] On the left side of the Line we have an *epistemology* (theory of knowledge); on the right side, an *ontology* (theory of being). In addition, we have an implicit *ethics* (moral theory) and *aesthetics* (theory of beauty). The totality constitutes Plato's **metaphysics** (general worldview).

The Line reveals the hierarchical nature of the objects of all these disciplines. Reality is a hierarchy of being, of knowledge, and of value, with objects that are most real, most certain, and most valuable at the top. A descending ontological, epistemological, moral, and aesthetic scale cascades down from the highest level in the guise of a mathematically organized series of originals and copies. The whole of the visible world is a copy of the whole of the intelligible

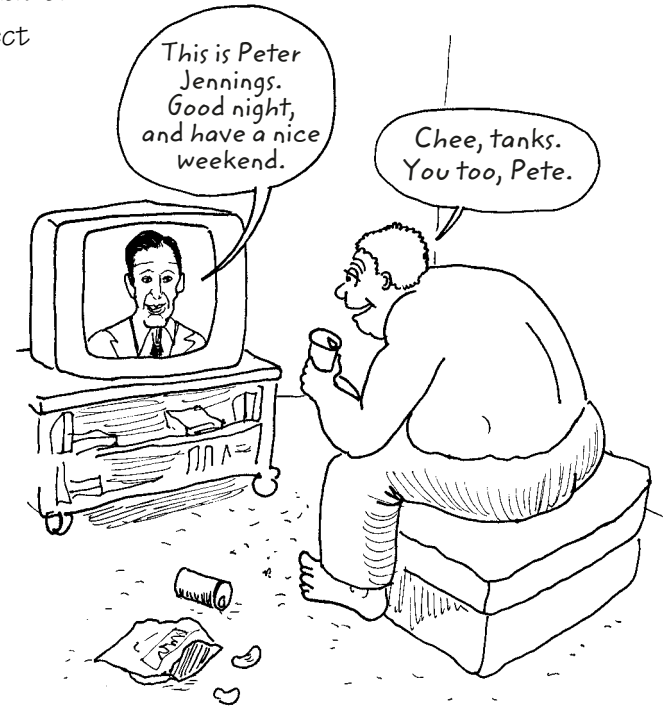


world, yet each of these worlds is also divided into originals and copies.

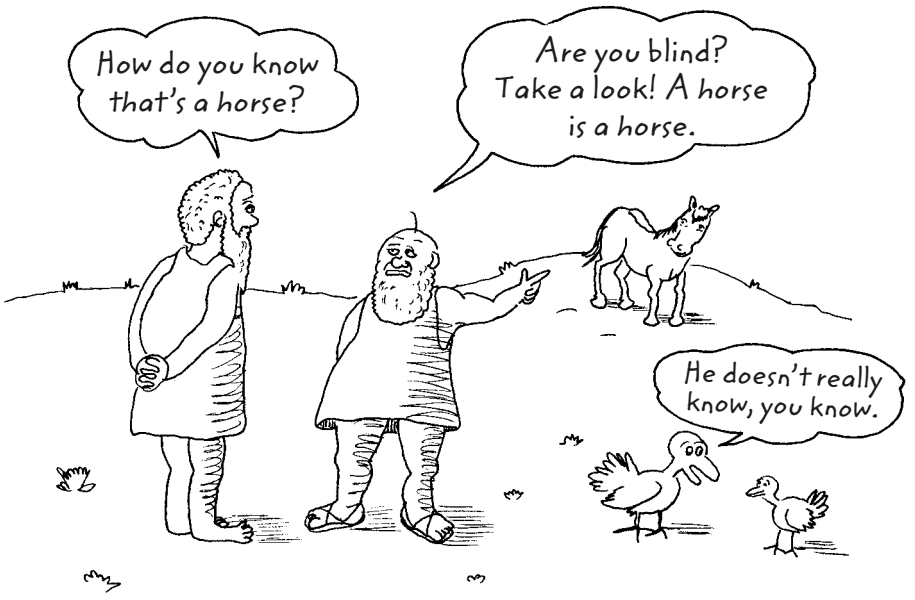
For each state of being (right side of the Line), there is a corresponding state of awareness (left side). The lowest state of awareness is that of Conjecture, which has as its object Images, such as shadows and reflections (or images on the TV screen and video games).

The person in a state of conjecture mistakes an image for reality. This level on the Line corresponds to the situation of the cave-bound prisoners watching the shadows.

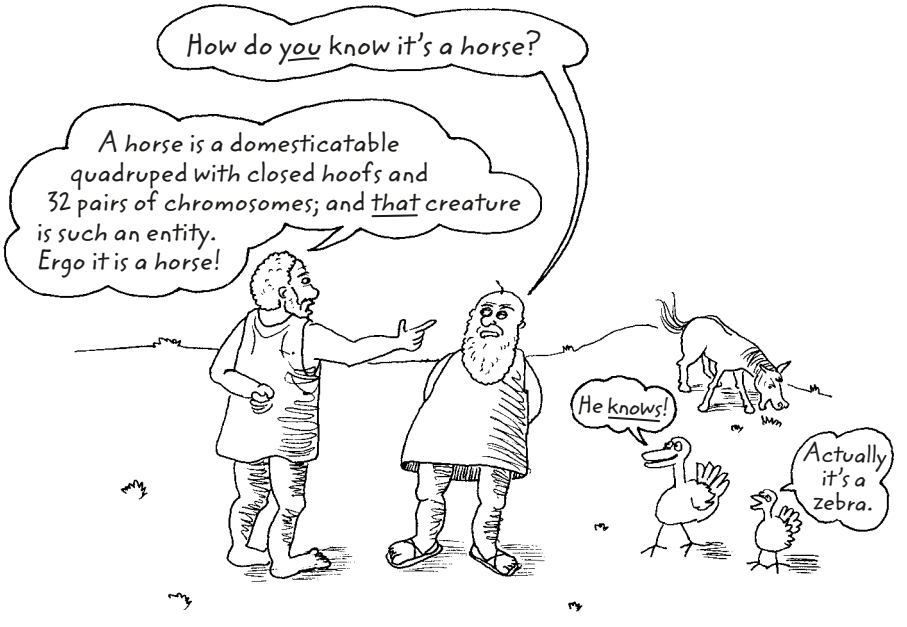
The next level, that of Belief, has as its object a particular thing—say, a particular horse or a particular act of justice. Like Conjecture, Belief still does not comprise knowledge but remains in the sphere of Opinion, still grounded in the uncertainties of sense perception. It is not yet "conceptual." It is not yet directed by theory (*hypothemenoi*) or by a definition in terms of **necessary** and **sufficient conditions.** (The person in a state of belief is like a prisoner who sees the artifact held above the wall inside the cave.)




Opinion and the objects of which it is aware are all sustained by the sun. Without the sun, there could be no horse and no image of a horse, nor could we be aware of them in the absence of light.

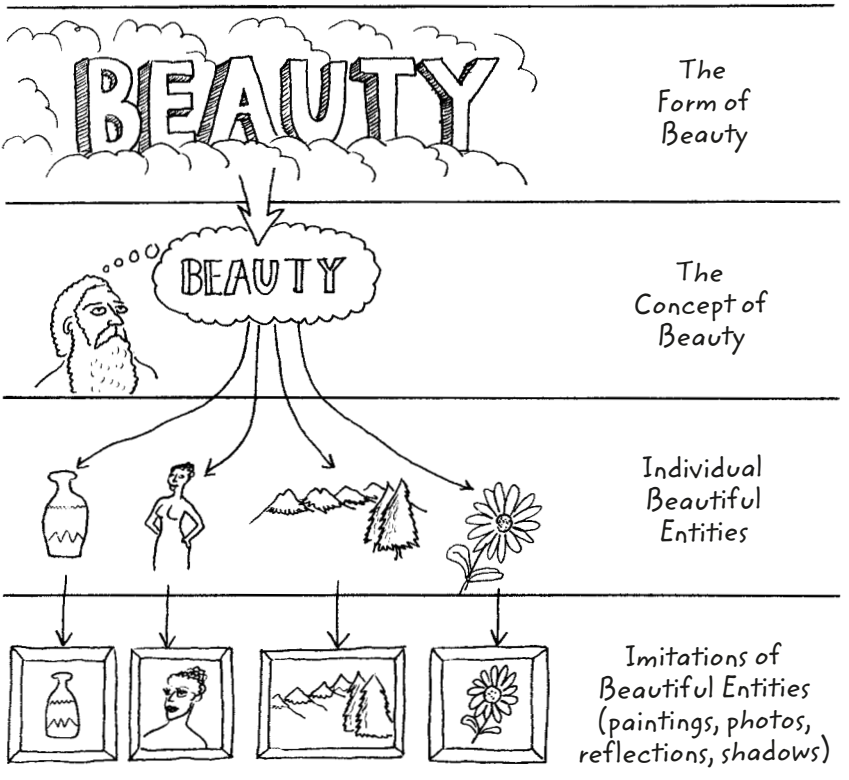



For Opinion to become Knowledge, the particular object must be raised to the level of *theory*. (This stage, Understanding, corresponds to the status of the released prisoner looking at the shadows of the trees in the world above the cave.)



But according to Plato, theories and definitions are not empirical generalizations dependent on particular cases and abstracted from them. To the contrary, rather than coming from below on the Line, theories are themselves images of something higher—what Plato calls the **Forms.** (In the same way that shadows and reflections are merely images of particular things, so theories or concepts are the shadows of the Forms.) When one beholds the Forms, one exercises Pure Reason, and one is like the liberated prisoner who gazed upon the trees and mountains in the sunlit upper world.

Plato's conception of the Forms is very complicated, but I can simplify it by saying that Forms are the eternal truths that are the source of all Reality. Consider, for example, the concept of beauty. Things in the sensible world are beautiful to the extent that they imitate or participate in Beauty. However, these beautiful things will break, grow old, or die. But Beauty itself (the Form) is eternal. It will



always be. The same can be said of Truth and Justice. (Also, more embarrassingly, of Horseness or of Toothpickness.)

Furthermore, just as the sensible world and awareness of it are dependent on the sun, so are the Forms and knowledge of them dependent on the Good, which is a Superform, or the Form of all Forms. The state of beholding the Good is represented in the Myth of the Cave by the released prisoner beholding the sun itself. Plato's theory is such that the whole of Reality is founded upon the Good, which is Reality's source of being. And all Knowledge is ultimately knowledge of the Good.

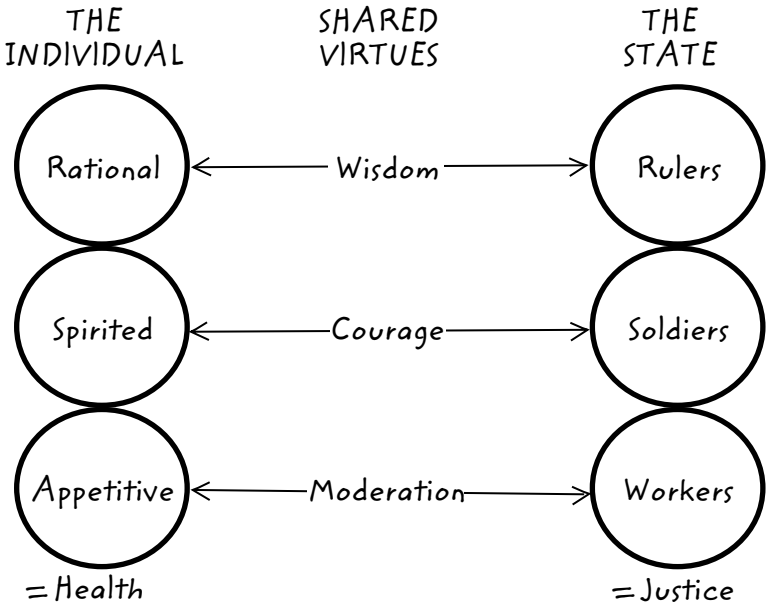

If you are puzzled by Plato's conception of the Good, you are in "good" company. Philosophers have debated its meaning for centuries. Clearly it plays a role very much like that of God in certain theological systems. For example, referring to the Simile of the Line, Plato calls the sun a "god" and claims that it is "the offspring of the Good."[6] The Good is the source of being, knowledge, and truth but is something even "more beautiful"[7] than these. It is not surprising that

many religiously oriented philosophers in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance—two periods in which Plato's influence was powerful—treated the Good as a **mystical** category. Something that is beyond being and knowledge is something that might be grasped only by a state of mind that transcends rationality. More orthodox religious thinkers treated the Good as identical to God. It was along these lines that Plato deeply influenced the development of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. It would be a bad pun (and an anachronistic one, since the English language did not yet exist in Plato's time), but an illuminating one, to say that early Christianity dropped one "o" from "Good" and changed the "u" to an "o" in "sun" to create an icon of the relation between God and Christ.

Whatever Plato means by "the Good," he optimistically holds that if one ever comes to know the Good, one becomes good. Ignorance is the only error. No one would willingly do wrong.

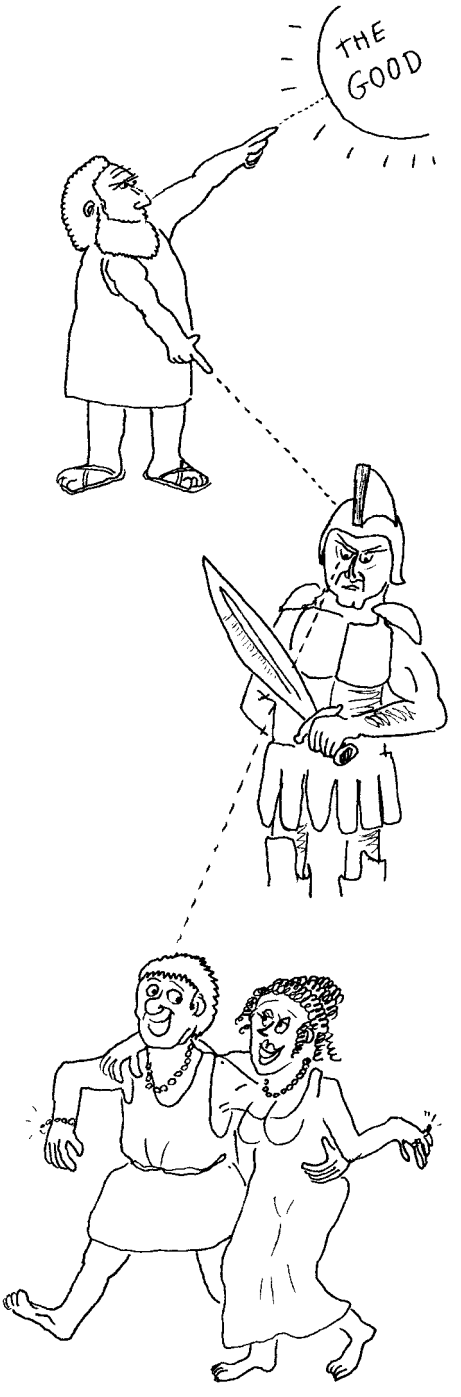
How can we learn the Truth? Where can we find the Forms, and especially the Form of the Good? Who can teach us? Plato had curious answers to these questions. In the dialogue called *Meno,* Plato had an unschooled slave boy solve a difficult mathematical problem by answering affirmatively or negatively a series of simple questions posed by Socrates. Plato concluded from this episode that the slave boy always knew the answer but didn't know that he knew. All Truth comes from within—from the soul. One's immortal soul is born with the Truth, having beheld the Forms in their purity before

its embodiment. Birth, or the embodiment of the soul, is so traumatic that one forgets what one knows and must spend the rest of life plumbing the depths of the soul to recover what one already knows—hence, Plato's strange doctrine that all Knowledge is recollection. Now we see Socrates' role as that of helping his student to remember, just as the psychoanalyst does with his or her patient today. (A modern version of Plato's doctrine of recollection is Freud's theory of unconscious memories.)




The *Republic* is well known not only for its epistemology but also for its social philosophy. The latter for Plato is a combination of psychology and political science. He said that the City (the "Republic") is the individual writ large. Just as the individual's psyche has three aspects—the appetitive, animal side; the spirited source of action; and the rational aspect—so does the ideal City have three classes—the workers and the artisans; the soldiers; and the rulers. In the psyche, the rational part must convince the spirited part to help it control the appetitive. Otherwise, there will be an unbalanced soul, and neurosis will ensue.

Similarly, in the City, the rulers must be philosophers who have beheld the Forms and therefore know what is good. They must train the military caste to help control the naturally unruly peasants. The latter will be allowed to use money, own property, and wear decorations in moderation, but the members of the top two classes, who understand the corrupting effect of greed, will live in an austere, absolute communism, sleeping and eating together, owning no property, receiving no salary, and having sexual relations on a prearranged schedule with partners shared by all. These rules will guarantee that the City will not be frenzied and anarchic—a strange beginning for the discipline of political science (one from which it has still not recovered)!




The members of the ideal City will be allowed to play simple lyres and pipes and sing patriotic, uplifting songs, but most artists will be drummed out of the Republic. This maltreatment has four reasons: (1) ontological—Because art deals with images (the lowest rung in the Simile of the Line), art is an imitation of an imitation. (Art is "three removes from the throne.");[8] (2) epistemological—The artist, at the conjectural stage,

knows nothing but *claims* to know something; (3) aesthetical—Art expresses itself in sensual images; hence, it distracts us from Beauty itself, which is purely intellectual; (4) moral—Art is created by and appeals to the appetite side of the soul (Freud's id). Art is either erotic or violent or both; hence, it is an incitement to anarchy. Even Homer must be censored, for he too is guilty of the artist's crimes: fraudulence, ignorance, and immorality.

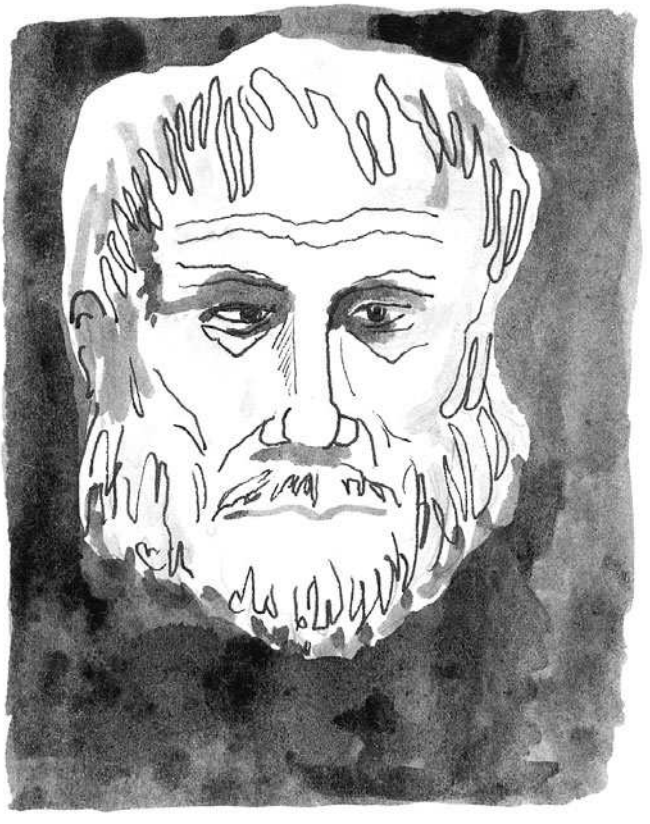
(The whole enterprise of the *Republic* can be viewed as a plea that philosophy take over the role that art had hitherto played in Greek culture.)

Plato did not live to see the inauguration of his ideal state nor to see the installation of a Philosopher King who would know the Good, but the legacy that Plato left is still very much with us, for better or for worse. The eminent British-American philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once said that the history of philosophy is merely a series of footnotes to the *Republic*.

Plato's Simile of the Line would, to a great extent, lay out the framework of Western metaphysical thought from his time to ours. Many of the philosophers mentioned in this book were influenced deeply by Plato (Aristotle, the Stoics, the Neoplatonists, Saint Augustine, Saint Anselm, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Marx, Russell, and Whitehead, among others). Even those philosophers who hated Plato's philosophy, such as Nietzsche, often admired his intellectual power—a power that even Nietzsche could not escape.

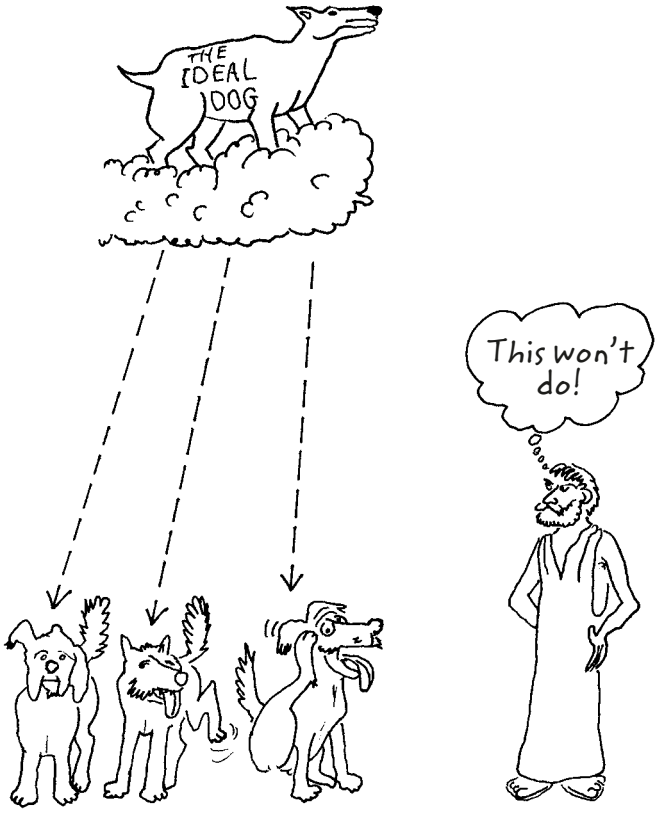
## Aristotle

Plato's influence is clearly seen in the thought of one of his best students, Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.). Aristotle, born in Stagira, spent twenty years at Plato's academy. Soon after the death of the master, Aristotle left the school because of disagreements with its new chiefs, and he founded an academy of his own, the Lyceum. In Aristotle's school, Platonic philosophy was taught, but it was also criticized.



Aristotle

The main thrust of Aristotle's dispute with his mentor concerned the latter's other-worldliness. For Plato, there were two worlds: the unspeakably lofty world of Forms, and the world of mere




Mere Dog Copies

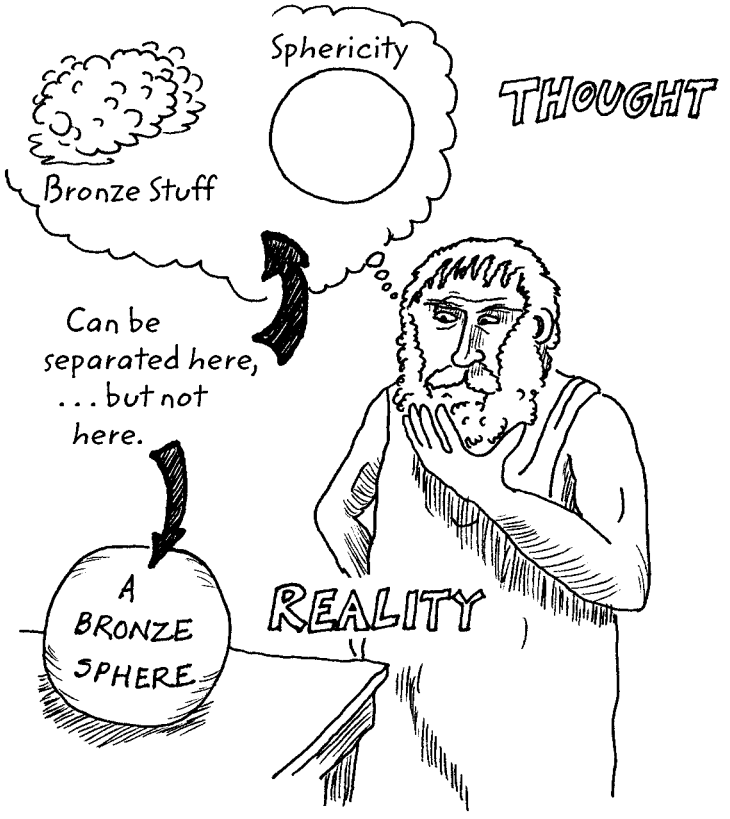
"things," which is but a poor imitation of the former. Aristotle contradicted this view, asserting that there is only *one* world and that we are right smack in the middle of it. In criticizing Plato, Aristotle asked: If Forms are essences of things, how can they exist separated from things? If they are the *cause* of things, how can they exist in a different world? And a most telling criticism has to do with the problem of *change* and *motion*, which the early Greeks had tried to solve.

They thought either that stability was an illusion (the view of Heraclitus, for example) or that motion was an illusion (the view of Parmenides). Plato had tried to resolve the dilemma by acknowledging the insights of both Heraclitus and Parmenides. The former's world is the unstable and transient realm of the visible. The latter's world


is the immutable realm of the intelligible composed of the eternally unchanging Forms, which themselves are poorly reflected in the transitory world of the visible. But did Plato's compromise really solve the problem of motion and change? Is it really comprehensible to explain "changing things" by saying that they are bad imitations of unchanging things?

Aristotle thought not.

In offering his own solution to the problem, Aristotle employed some of the same terminology as Plato. He said that a distinction must be drawn between *form* and *matter*, but that these two features of reality can be distinguished only in thought, not in fact. Forms are not separate entities. They are embedded in particular things. They are *in* the world. To think otherwise is an intellectual confusion. A particular object, to count as an object at all, must have both form and matter. Form, as Plato had said, is universal, in the sense that many particulars can have the same form. Aristotle called an object's form its "whatness." That is, when you say *what something is* (it's a tree, it's a book), you are naming its form. The

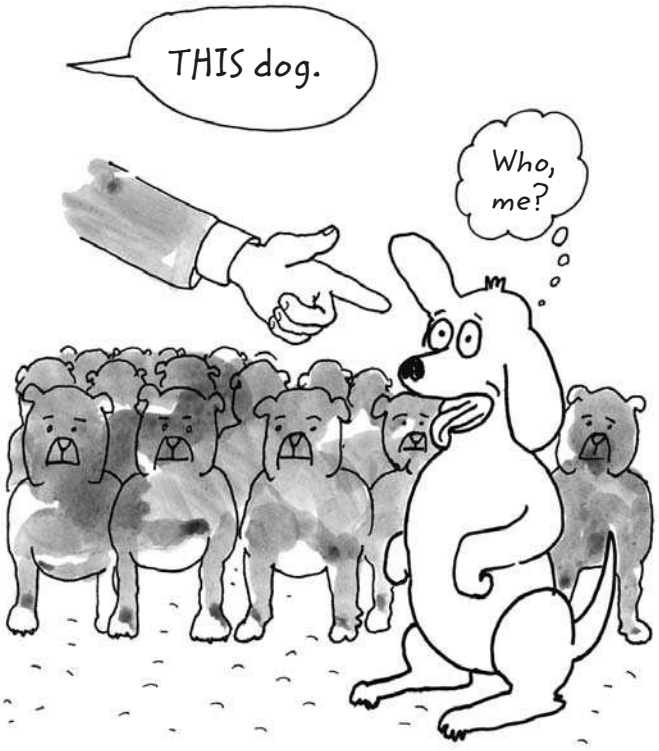



form is a thing's essence, or nature. It is related to the thing's function (a wheel, a knife, a brick, etc.).

An object's matter is what is unique to that object. Aristotle called it the object's "thisness." All wheels or trees have the same form (or function), but no two have the same matter. Matter is "the principle of individuation." An object with both form and matter is what Aristotle called a **substance.**

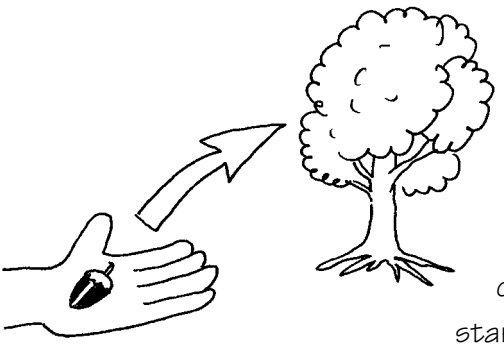
Each substance contains an essence, which is roughly equivalent to its form, as in Plato's writings; but unlike in Plato's account, in Aristotle's theory the essence cannot be separated from the substance in question. However, it is possible to perform the purely intellectual act of *abstracting* the essence from the substance. Indeed, part of the philosopher's job is to discover and catalog the different substances in terms of their **essences** and their **accidents,** that is,

in terms of those features of the substance that are essential to it, and those that are not essential. (To be human, one must be rational, so rationality is part of the human essence; but although every human either has hair or is bald, neither hairiness nor baldness is essential to human nature.)



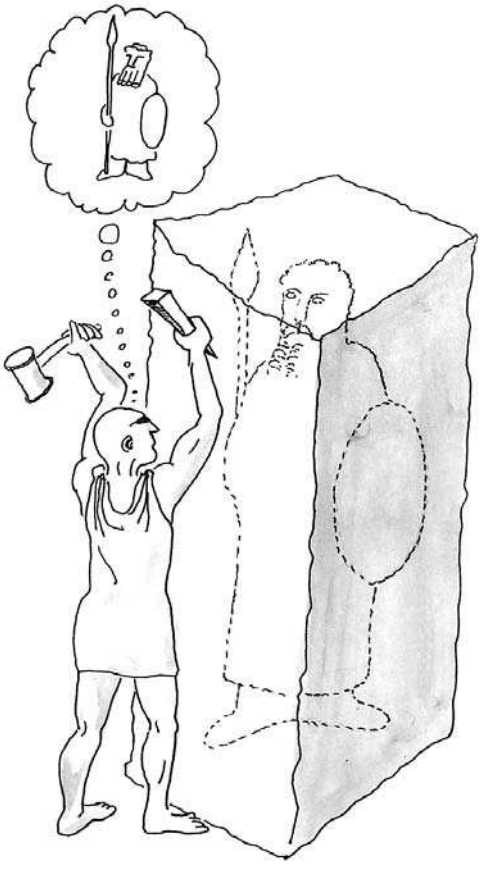

With this kind of analysis Aristotle initiated a philosophical method that would be pursued well into the modern period.

Aristotle's anti-Platonic metaphysics holds that reality is composed of a plurality of substances. It is not composed of an upper tier of eternal Forms and a lower tier of matter that unsuccessfully attempts to imitate those Forms. This theory represents Aristotle's pluralism as opposed to Plato's **dualism** (a dualism that verges on **idealism** because, for Plato, the most "real" tier of reality is the nonmaterial). How does Aristotle's pluralism solve the problem of motion and change, a problem that was unsuccessfully addressed by his predecessors? It does so by reinterpreting matter and form as *potentiality* and *actuality* and by turning these concepts into a theory of change. Any object in the world can be analyzed in terms of these categories. Aristotle's famous example is that of an acorn. The acorn's matter contains the potentiality of becoming an oak tree,



which is the acorn's actuality. The acorn *is* the potentiality of there being an oak tree. The oak tree is the actuality of the acorn. So, for Aristotle, form is an operating cause. Each individual substance is a self-contained **teleological** (i.e., goal-oriented) system. Notice that a substance's essence does not change, but its accidents do.

In fact, Aristotle analyzed all substances in terms of four causes. The *material cause* is the stuff out of which something is made (e.g., a chunk of marble that is to become a statue). The *formal cause* is the form, or essence, of the statue, that which it strives to be. (This form exists both in the mind of the artist and potentially in the marble itself.) The *efficient cause* is the actual force that brings about the change (the sculptor's chipping the block of stone). The *final cause* is the ultimate purpose of the object (e.g., to beautify the Parthenon).



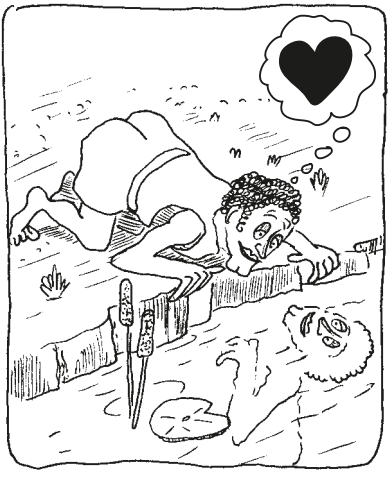
Nature, then, is a teleological system in which each substance is striving for self-actualization and for whatever perfection is possible within


the limitations allowed it by its particular essence. In Aristotle's theory, as in Plato's theory, everything is striving unconsciously toward the Good. Aristotle believed that for such a system to work, some concrete perfection must actually exist as the *telos* (or goal) toward which all things are striving.

This entity Aristotle called the Prime Mover. It serves as a kind of god in Aristotle's metaphysics, but unlike the traditional gods of Greece and unlike the God of Western religion, the Prime Mover is almost completely nonanthropomorphic. It is the cause of the universe, not in the Judeo-Christian sense of creating it out of nothing, but in the sense of a Final Cause; everything moves toward it in the way a runner moves toward a goal. The Prime Mover is the only thing in the universe with no potentiality

because, being perfect, it cannot change. It is pure actuality, which is to say, pure activity. What activity?

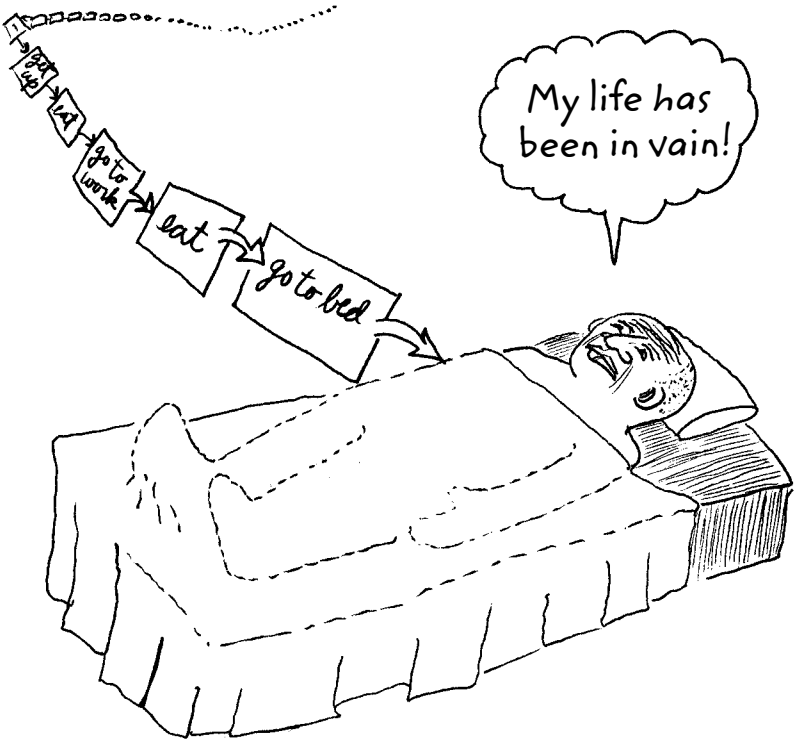
The activity of pure thought. And what does it think about? Perfection! That is to say, about itself. The Prime Mover's knowledge is immediate, complete self-consciousness.



What we seem to have here is an absolutely divine case of narcissism. (In Greek mythology, Narcissus was an extraordinarily handsome youth who became transfixed by the reflection of his own beauty and remained staring at it until he died.)

Aristotle's moral philosophy, as it appears in his manuscript now called *The Nicomachean Ethics*, reflects his teleological metaphysics. The notion of *goal*, or *purpose*, is the overriding one in his moral theory. Aristotle noted that every act is performed for some *purpose*, which he defined as the "*good*" of that act. (We perform an act because we find its purpose to be worthwhile.) *Either* the totality of our acts is an infinitely circular series (we get up in order to eat breakfast, we eat breakfast in order to go to work, we go to work in order to get money, we get money so we can buy food in order to be able to eat breakfast, etc., etc., etc.)—in which case life would be a pretty meaningless endeavor—*or* there is some ultimate good toward which the purposes of all acts are directed. If there is such a good, we should try to come to know it so that we can adjust all our acts toward it in order to avoid that saddest of all tragedies—the wasted life.

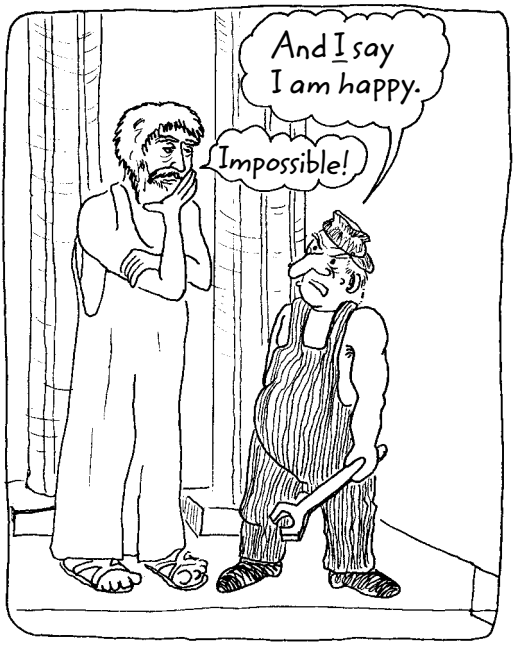
According to Aristotle, there is general verbal agreement that the end toward which all human acts are directed is *happiness*;[9] therefore, happiness is the human good because we seek happiness for its own sake, not for the sake of something else. But unless we philosophize about happiness and get to know exactly what it is and



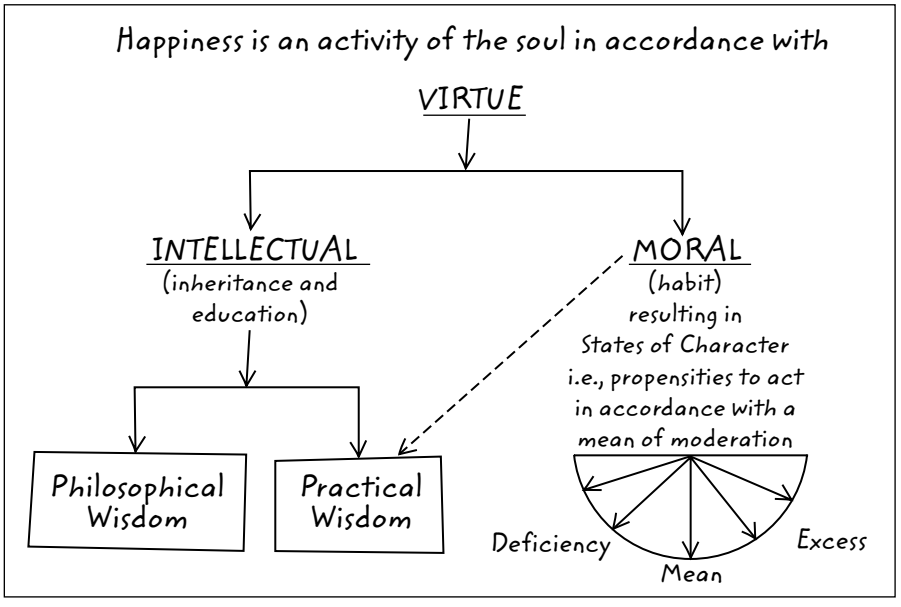

how to achieve it, it will be platitudinous simply to say that happiness is the ultimate good. To determine the nature of happiness, Aristotle turned to his metaphysical schema and asked, "What is the function of the human?" (in the same way he would ask about the function of a knife or an acorn). He came to the conclusion that a human's function is to engage in "an activity of the soul which is in accordance with virtue" and which "is in conformity with reason."[10] Before grasping this complicated definition, we must determine what "virtue" is and what kinds of virtues there are. But first, as an aside, I must mention that Aristotle believed that certain material conditions must hold before happiness can be achieved.

This list of material conditions reveals Aristotle's elitism: We need good friends, riches, and political power. We need a good birth, good children, and good looks. ("A man is not likely to be happy if he is very ugly.")[11] We must not be very short. Furthermore, we must be free from the need of performing manual labor. ("No man can practice

virtue who is living the life of a mechanic or laborer.")[12] I should note that Aristotle's moral theory would be left substantially intact if his elitist bias were deleted.




Let us now inspect Aristotle's idea of virtue. The Greek word is *areté*. It could equally well be translated as "excellence." *Areté* is that quality of any act, endeavor, or object that makes them successful acts, endeavors, or objects. It is, therefore, a *functional* excellence. For Aristotle, there are two kinds of virtue: intellectual and moral. Intellectual virtues are acquired through a combination of inheritance



and education, and moral virtues through imitation, practice, and habit. The habits that we develop result in states of character, that is, in dispositions to act certain ways, and these states of character are virtuous for Aristotle if they result in acts that are in accordance with a golden mean of moderation. For example, when it comes to facing danger, one can act with excess, that is, show too much fear (cowardice). Or one can act deficiently by showing too little fear

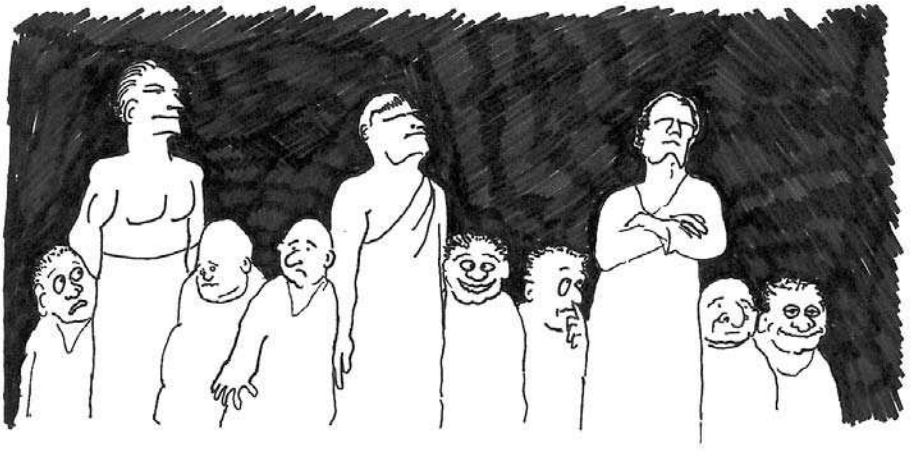

(foolhardiness). Or one can act with moderation, and hence virtuously, by showing the right amount of fear (courage). Aristotle realized that the choices we must make if we are to learn moral virtue cannot be made mathematically; rather, they are always context-bound and must be approached through trial and error.

Returning to the intellectual virtues of practical and philosophical wisdom, the former is the wisdom necessary to make judgments consistent with one's understanding of the good life. It is therefore related to moral virtue (as in the diagram). Philosophical wisdom is scientific, disinterested, and contemplative. It is associated with pure reason, and for Aristotle, the capacity for reason is that which is most human; therefore, philosophical wisdom is the highest virtue. So, when Aristotle defined happiness as "an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue," the activity referred to is philosophical activity. The human being can be happy only by leading a contemplative life, but not a monastic one. We are not only philosophical animals but also social ones. We are engaged in a world where decisions concerning practical matters are forced upon us constantly. Happiness (hence the good life) requires excellence in both spheres.

Aristotle's political views follow from his moral views. Just as happiness (*eudaimonia*) is the function or goal of the human individual, so is it the function of the state. Aristotle agrees with Plato that humans are endowed with social instincts. The state (*polis*) is a natural human organization whose goal is to maximize happiness for its citizens. In fact, the state is more natural than the family because only in the social climate produced by community can human nature be fully self-actualized. We see that in political theory, as everywhere in Aristotle's philosophy, teleology reigns supreme.

According to Aristotle, the distinction between nature and convention so touted by the Sophists is somewhat artificial. Law is natural to humans. Just as humans are naturally social, so is their desire to participate in the political body an innate disposition. But

Aristotle recognizes that different constitutional bases produce different kinds of states. As long as the constitution is designed for the common well-being (*eudaimonia*) of all its citizens, it is a just state. There are three possible legitimate forms of the state: governance by one person (a monarchy), governance by an elite group (aristocracy), and governance by the body of citizens itself (a polity—a limited form of democracy). In certain circumstances, Aristotle preferred a monarchy—where a strong individual with excellent political skills steps forward to impose conditions that will be conducive to the well-being of all citizens. But in practice, Aristotle favored a polity, even if many of the citizens are not excellent individuals. "For the many, of whom each individual is but an ordinary person, when they meet together may very likely be better than the few good, if regarded not individually but collectively."[13]



**A Few *Good* Men**

For each of the three sound forms of government, there is a possible perversion. A perverse government is one that has at heart not the interest of the whole of the citizenry, but only the interest of the rulers at the expense of the citizens. The perversion of monarchy is tyranny; the perversion of aristocracy is oligarchy; and the perversion of polity is democracy. Aristotle understood democracy as a government by the majority in a *polis* in which the bulk of its citizens

are poor, and the poor look out exclusively for their own interests by taking the wealth of the rich for their own advantage. "If the poor, for example, because they are more in number, divide among themselves the prosperity of the rich—is this not unjust? . . . If this is not unjust, pray, what is?"[14] For Aristotle, this form of mob rule is as unjust as its opposite, the rich robbing and plundering the poor.

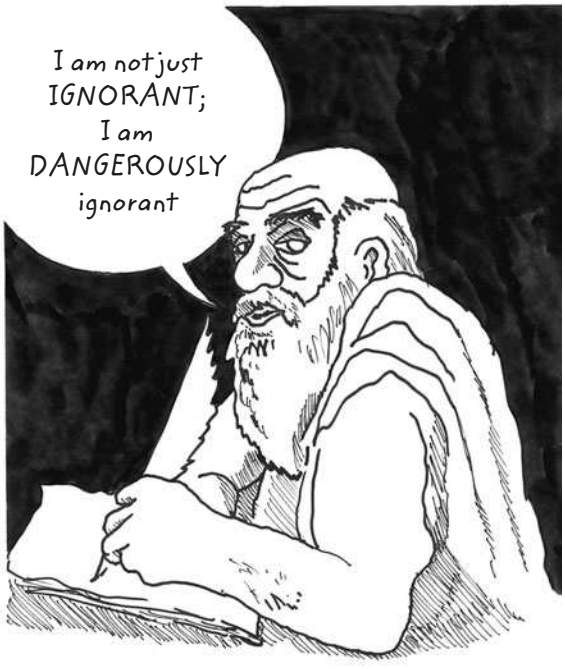
Despite Aristotle's predilection for what we would today call a modified democracy, his division of labor within the state was as harsh as Plato's. A great number of the inhabitants of the state—perhaps the majority—would be slaves. Aristotle provided a tortured argument trying to prove that some individuals are natural slaves and hence to be treated as mere property and as animate tools. Even those individuals who are citizens but are artisans or laborers are debarred from full participation in the advantages of citizenship. Furthermore, freedom is severely restricted for all members of the *polis*. At least this restriction is not as oppressive as Plato's was; Aristotle admonished Plato for outlawing private property and marriage in the ruling class. Aristotle believed that the desire to accumulate wealth is based on a natural instinct and should be allowed expression, though the state should control the excesses produced by giving free rein to that instinct.

Aristotle's support for a modified form of democracy makes his political views more attractive to the modern mentality than is Plato's propensity toward totalitarianism, but this advantage is diminished by Aristotle's assumption that the wealth of the state will be based on slave labor, by his disfranchisement of female citizens, by his debasing the class of blue-collar (blue-toga?) workers in his republic.

Just as Aristotle's political philosophy was written in response to Plato's, so was his philosophy of art. Let us recall Plato's objections to most art:

1. Ontological objection: Art is in the realm of images; hence, it has the lowest ontological status in the Simile of the Line. Artistic images are copies of copies of copies.

2. Epistemological objection: The artist is ignorant, but he purports to know Truth and to instruct it; therefore the artist is a *dangerous* ignoramus.
3. Aesthetic objection: Beauty (the Form) transcends the physical world, but art always reduces beauty to images, hence, to its lowest common denominator.
4. Moral objection: Art appeals not to the intellect—as does philosophy—but to the passions, which it stirs up, justifies, and loosens on an already chaotic (i.e., unphilosophical) public. Here too the artist is dangerous.




**Homer**

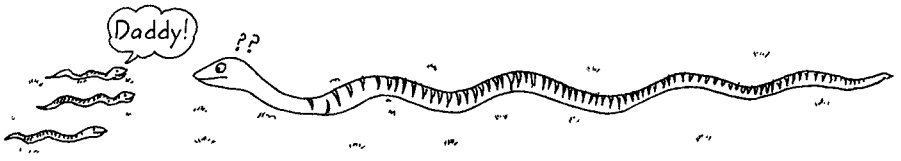
Aristotle agreed with Plato that the function of art is *mimesis*, "imitation" (or, as we would probably say today, "representation"). But he disagreed with Plato concerning the status of the *objects* represented in art. Rather than imitating mere things or individuals, art represents higher truths; hence, art, when successful, is a form of philosophy. Aristotle wrote:

> the poet's function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, i.e., what is possible as being probable or necessary. . . . Hence poetry is something more philosophical and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars.[15]

This philosophy, if correct, eliminates the first three of Plato's objections to representative art. As for the fourth objection, Aristotle argued that, far from provoking the passions, great art can *purge* from the viewers the passions that have built up in them. Aristotle says of the art of tragedy (and remember, it is generally agreed that some of the greatest tragedy ever written was from the Golden Age of Greece) that it achieves its effect "in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its **catharsis** of such emotions."[16]

Not only did Aristotle make major contributions to metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, and politics, but in addition, he singlehandedly founded the science of logic, that is, the science of valid inference. Symbolic logic has developed a long way since Aristotle's time, but it is indebted to him as its founder, and it has made more additions than corrections to his work.

Some of Aristotle's empirical claims about the world leave something to be desired (for instance, his claim that falling rocks accelerate because they are happy to be getting home, or his claim that snakes have no testicles because they have no legs). Nevertheless, Aristotle's metaphysics, his ethics, his logic, and his aesthetics remain permanent monuments to the greatness of human thought.




## Topics for Consideration

1. It is claimed in this chapter that subjectivism, skepticism, relativism, and nihilism are at the heart of the project of sophism. Contrast these ideas with those seen in the philosophies of the pre-Socratics, and again with those in the philosophy of Plato.

2. Based on the few pages about Socrates that you have read here, write an essay speculating on what Socrates might have meant when he said, "The unexamined life is not worth living."
3. Make an alignment between Plato's Simile of the Line and his Myth of the Cave. Show that for each category or entity in the Simile, there is a corresponding category or entity in the myth.
4. In the Simile of the Line, the sun—the ultimate source of light—is designated by Plato as "the lord of the visible world." That is, everything in the physical world is dependent on the sun, and all visual awareness of the physical world is because of the presence of light. The sun, in turn, is a copy of the Good, which is the "lord of the intelligible world." What does this analogy between the sun and the Good tell us about the objects and the relationships in the intelligible world and about our knowledge of this world?
5. William Wordsworth's poem "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" and John Keats's poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn" are sometimes called Platonic poems. Go to the library and locate them, and write an essay on one or both of them, interpreting them in the light of Plato's metaphysics. Also comment on the irony involved in the very idea of "Platonic poetry."
6. In Plato's *Republic* the healthy city is explained in terms of the same model as that of the healthy individual. Explain this congruity.
7. In the debate between Plato and Aristotle over the status of art, with which philosopher do you tend to agree? Defend your position.
8. Explain what it means to say that in the disagreement between Heraclitus and Parmenides, Plato credits both positions, but ultimately he sides with Parmenides.
9. Demonstrate the role played by teleology in the different aspects of Aristotle's philosophy.
10. In the text, the examples of an acorn and of a statue are used to illustrate Aristotle's theory of the four causes. Choose two other examples—one from nature and one from human manufacturing—and see if you can work each example through Aristotle's four causal categories.
11. First explain what Aristotle meant by describing moral action in terms of the golden mean, then show why engaging in moral action is a *necessary condition* but not a *sufficient condition* to achieve happiness, or the "good life."

12. Write an essay discussing the question of whether, in your opinion, the American constitutional system has addressed the objections that Aristotle directs toward the idea of democracy.

## Notes

1. Philip Wheelwright, ed., *The Presocratics* (New York: Odyssey Press, 1966), 239.
2. Ibid., 240.
3. Plato, *Apology*, in *Plato on the Trial and Death of Socrates*, trans. Lane Cooper (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1941), 73.
4. Plato, *Republic*, in *The Dialogues of Plato*, vol. 1, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Random House, 1937), 775.
5. There has been much scholarly debate concerning the best English translation of the Greek terms Plato uses in the Simile of the Line. Here is a transcription of the Greek words in question:

| | |
|---|---|
| *noesis* | *eide* |
| *dianoia* | *hypothemenoi* and *ta mathematica* |
| *pistis* | *ta horomeva* |
| eikasia | *eikones* |

In designating *noesis* as "reason" and *dianoia* as "understanding," I am following the translations of both W. H. D. Rouse and Leo Rauch. But it should be mentioned that *noesis* has also been rendered as "understanding" (by G. M. A. Grube), as "knowledge" (by G. L. Abernathy and T. L. Langford), and as "intellection" (by Allan Bloom). *Dianoia* has been translated as "reasoning" (by Grube), as "thinking" (by Abernathy and Langford), and as "thought" (by Bloom). I have opted for Rouse's and Rauch's translation of *noesis* as "reason" because doing so best reveals the continuity between Plato and the later Western metaphysical tradition through Hegel and Kant. (We study Kant in Chapter 5 and Hegel in Chapter 6.) I have chosen to call the fourth square "scientific concepts." Plato gives us two Greek terms for that slot, *hypothemenoi* and *ta mathematica*. Many interpreters choose the second phrase, "mathematical objects," as the key phrase here—and it is true that Socrates used examples from arithmetic and geometry to explain this concept. I have selected "scientific concepts" because this category includes mathematical ideas but in fact encompasses more. I believe Plato did not mean to restrict *hypothemenoi* (literally "assumptions" or "postulates") to mathematical ideas. M. E. Taylor warns us against being misled by Plato's mathematical language here. He says that Plato "had before him no other examples of systematic and organized knowledge" than "the various branches of mathematics as recognized in the fifth century" (M. E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and His Work* [New York: Meridian Books, 1960], 289). Plato is referring to organized conceptual knowledge, that is, roughly what today we would call scientific concepts. According to Plato, scientific concepts are inferior to Forms both because they are copies (imitations, shadows, reflections) of the Forms and because the individual thinkers still depend on visual imagery when they operate at this level. In this sense the Forms, not the concepts, are mathematical, because they are image-free.
6. Plato, *Republic*, in *Great Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Eric H. Warmington and Philip G. Rouse, trans. W. H. D. Rouse (New York: New American Library, 1956), 305, 307.

7. Ibid., 308.
8. Ibid., 399.
9. The Greek word is *eudaimonia*. Some translators have preferred "well-being" over "happiness."
10. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *A Guided Tour of Selections from Aristotle's "Nicomachean Ethics,"* ed. Christopher Biffle, trans. F. H. Peter (Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing, 1991), 26.
11. Ibid., 30.
12. Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 1183.
13. Ibid., 1190.
14. Ibid., 1189.
15. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, 1463–64.
16. Ibid., 1460.

# 3

# The Hellenistic and Roman Periods

## Fourth Century B.C.E. through Fourth Century C.E.

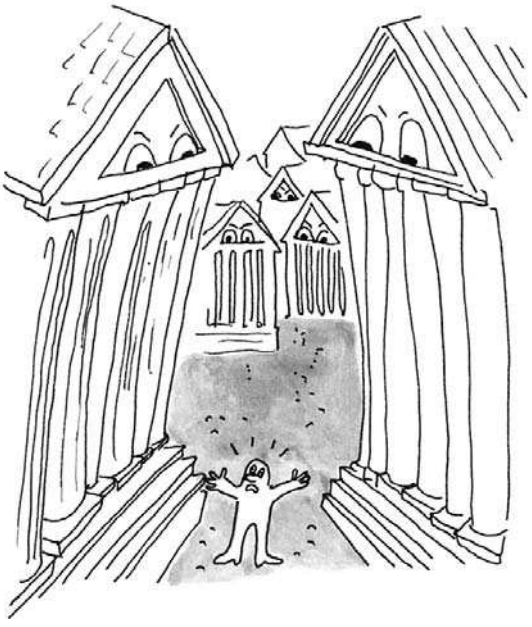
After the death of Aristotle, Greek civilization entered what historians call the Hellenistic era, a period of cultural decline. The Greek city-states, unable to solve the problem of political disunity, were decimated by the Peloponnesian War and ravaged by the plague. First they fell under Macedonian rule; then, after the death of Alexander the Great, they eventually were absorbed into the newly emerging Roman Empire. Many of the philosophies of this "decadent" period began in Greece but received their greatest exposure in Rome, including the two major philosophies of the period, Epicureanism and stoicism.

### Epicureanism

The philosophy of Epicurus (341–270 B.C.E.) is known (not surprisingly) as Epicureanism. If today the term hints of gluttony, debauchery, and bacchanalian orgies, that is not Epicurus's fault but the fault of some of his Roman interpreters. Epicurus himself led a life of sobriety and simplicity: eating bread, cheese, and olives; drinking a bit of wine; napping in his hammock; and enjoying conversation with his friends while

strolling through his garden. He died with dignity and courage after a protracted battle with a painful disease.

Epicureanism was grounded in the atomic theory of Democritus, but, in fact, Epicurus, like all post-Alexandrian philosophers, does not seem to have been really interested in science but in finding out about the good life. However, since Aristotle's time, the notion of the "good life" had suffered a setback. It no longer made sense to advocate being active, influential, political, and responsible as a way of self-improvement. Reality seemed to be unmoved by personal initiative, and the individual developed a feeling of powerlessness as he or she was about to be absorbed into the massive, impersonal bureaucracy of the Roman Empire. Like Aristotle, Epicurus believed that the goal of life was happiness, but happiness he equated simply with *pleasure.* No act should be undertaken except for the pleasure in which it results, and no act should be rejected except for the pain that it produces. This belief provoked Epicurus to analyze the different kinds of pleasure. There are two kinds of desires, hence, two kinds of pleasure as a result of gratifying those desires: natural desire (which has two subclasses) and vain desire:



**The Individual in the Roman Empire**

I. Natural desire
   A. Necessary (*e.g.*, desire for food and sleep)
   B. Unnecessary (*e.g.*, desire for sex)
II. Vain desire (*e.g.*, desire for decorative clothing or exotic food)


**The Pursuit of Vain Pleasure**

Natural necessary desires must be satisfied and are usually easy to satisfy. They result in a good deal of pleasure and in very few painful consequences. Vain desires do not need to be satisfied and are not easy to satisfy. Because there are no natural limits to them, they tend to become obsessive and lead to very painful consequences.

The desire for sex is natural but usually can be overcome; and when it can be, it should be, because satisfaction of the sexual drive gives intense pleasure, and all intense emotional states are dangerous. Also, the desire for sex puts people in relationships that are usually ultimately more painful than pleasant and that are often extremely painful.

One of the natural and necessary desires to which Epicurus pays a great deal of attention is the desire for *repose*. This term is to be understood both physically and psychically. The truly good person (i.e., the one who experiences the most pleasure) is the one who, having overcome all unnecessary desires, gratifies necessary desires in the most moderate

**Love is a Many-Splendored Thing (For a Day or Two)**

way possible, leaves plenty of time for physical and mental repose, and is free from worry.

Notice that Epicurus's definition of pleasure is *negative;* that is, pleasure is the absence of pain. It is this negative definition that prevents Epicurus from falling into a crass sensualism. The trouble with this definition is that, taken to its logical extremity, the *absence* of life is better than any life at all (a conclusion Freud also came to in his text *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* where he claimed that behind the "pleasure principle" is Thanatos, the death instinct).

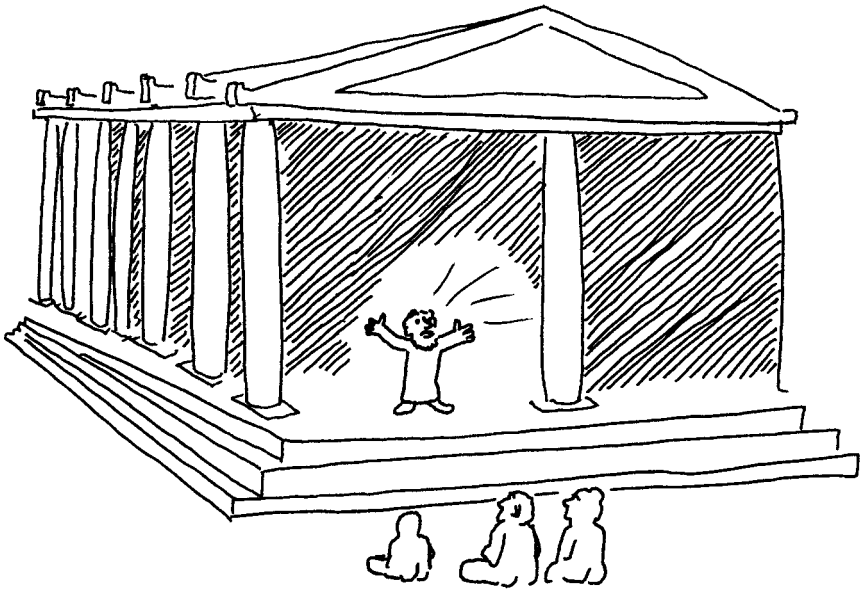

Beyond the Pleasure Principle

This deduction is a bit ironic because Epicurus himself claimed that his philosophy dispelled the fear of death. Democritus's atomism led Epicurus to believe that death was merely the absence of sensation and consciousness;therefore, there could be no sensation or consciousness of death to fear. "So long as we exist, death is not with us;but when death comes, then we do not exist."[1]

Some of Epicurus's Roman followers interpreted "pleasure" quite differently, defining it as a positive titillation. It is because of these extremists that today Epicureanism is often associated with sensualistic **hedonism.** Sickly Epicurus, swinging in his hammock, would have disapproved. (Though not too harshly. Polemics cause agitation, which is painful.) Epicurus's theory never constituted a major philosophical movement, but he had disciples in both Greece and Rome for a number of centuries. His most famous follower was the Roman Lucretius, who, in the first century B.C.E., wrote a long poem, *On the Nature of Things,* expounding the philosophy of his master. It is through Lucretius's poem that many readers have been introduced to the thoughts of Epicurus.

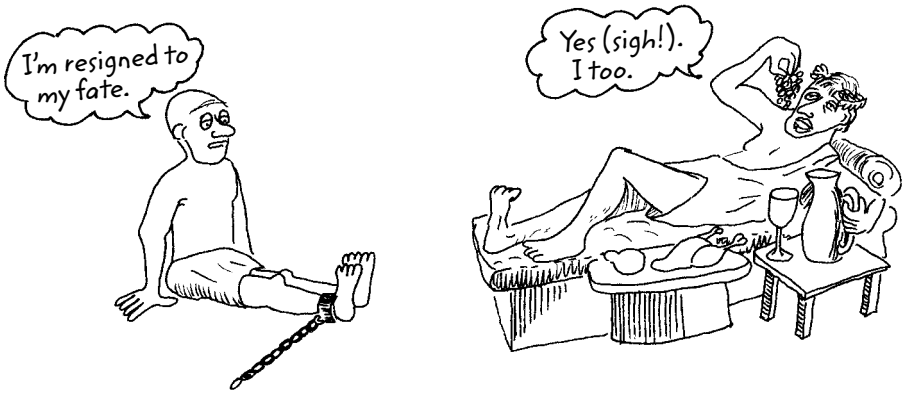
## Stoicism

Stoicism was another important Hellenistic philosophy that was transported to Rome. Stoicism was founded in Greece by Zeno of Cyprus (334–262 B.C.E.), who used to preach to his students from a portico, or stoa (hence the term "stoicism," literally, "porchism"). Like



*Zeno at the Stoa*

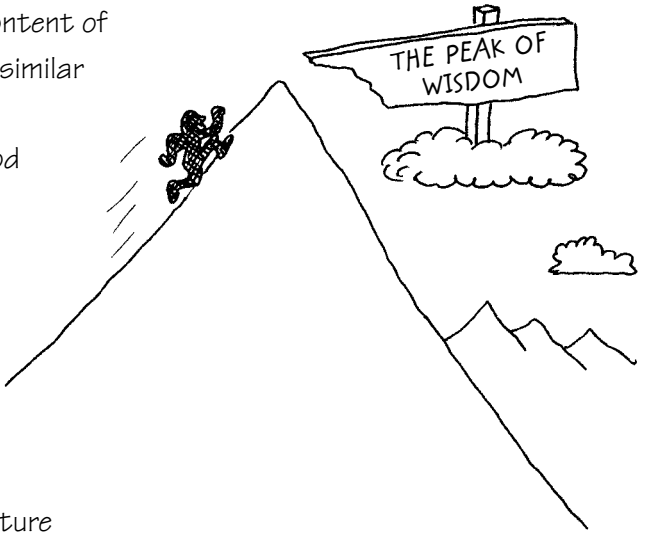
Epicureanism, stoicism had its roots in pre-Socratic materialism, but stoicism too, especially in its Roman form, became less interested in physics and more particularly concerned with the problem of human conduct. The three most interesting of the Roman stoics were Seneca (4–65 C.E.), a dramatist and high-ranking statesman; Epictetus (late first century C.E.), a slave who earned his freedom; and Marcus Aurelius (121–180 C.E.), a Roman emperor. (It's quite striking that a slave and an emperor could share the same philosophy of resignation, though probably this philosophy was easier for the




emperor than for the slave!) The stoics accepted the Socratic equation that virtue equals knowledge. There exists a cognitive state that, once achieved, expresses itself as a disposition to behave in a certain dispassionate manner, and in turn it guarantees complete well-being. One should strive throughout one's life to acquire this wisdom. Human excellence is attained instantaneously once one has gained the enlightenment.

The duration of such a life of perfection is indifferent (which fact leads to the stoic advocacy of suicide under certain circumstances). To achieve this state of blessedness, one must free oneself from all worldly demands, particularly those of the emotions and of pleasure seeking. The stoic wise person is an ***ascete*** who has transcended the passions that create a disorderly condition in the soul. The stoic has no interest in all those objects that in normal human beings excite the passions of grief, joy, hope, or fear.

What is the content of stoic wisdom? It is similar to the Aristotelian notion that the good consists of acting in accordance with one's nature. The stoic addition to this idea is that to so act requires acting in accordance with nature itself, that is, with the totality of reality (which the stoics take to be divine). Considered as a whole, reality is perfect. Humans will also become perfect if they learn to live in accordance with the divine plan of reality. This accomplishment requires that one make one's desires identical with the overall providential plan for the universe. In fact, a person can do nothing but conform to the grand design, and stoic wisdom consists in recognizing this truth. Fools are those who try to impose their own selfish desires on reality. This attempt results in unhappiness and unfreedom. If **freedom** is the unity of will and ability (i.e., being able to do what one wants), then the only way to be free is to want what the universe wants. We shouldn't wish that we could get what we desire;rather, we should desire what we get. If we could learn to equate what we want with what's the case, then we would always





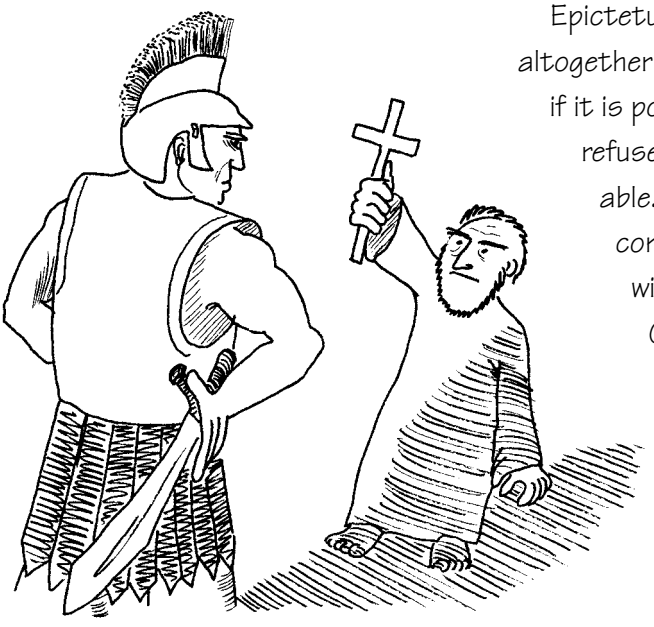
**Don't Try to Get What You Want—Rather, Want What You Get**


be free and happy, because we'd always get just what we want. This is stoic wisdom.

The stoics realized that if one ever achieved this lofty state, the apparent harshness of reality might jeopardize one's inner equilibrium, and one might backslide into pain and anxiety. For this reason, and because the stoics believed that the amount of time one spent in the enlightened state was indifferent, the stoics advocated suicide in certain circumstances. If extreme conditions forced themselves upon one and if one realized that these conditions would destabilize the equilibrium of one's stoic soul and plunge one into unacceptable emotional agitation, one had every right to escape those conditions through suicide. Epictetus said of suicide, "If the smoke is moderate I will stay: if excessive, I go out. . . . The door is always open."[2] Marcus Aurelius used identical imagery: "The house is smoky, and I quit it."[3] Seneca said, "If [the wise man] encounters many vexations which disturb his tranquillity, he will release himself. . . . To die well is to escape the danger of living ill."[4] In fact, on the advice of the emperor Nero, Seneca did step into the bath and open his veins.

During the period when stoicism was exercising its greatest influence, a new social and religious form of thought was coming to the fore: Christianity. Although Christians were still a minority in the Empire, their religion had found an ever-growing number of adherents because its promises resonated with the needs of people at all levels of society. It bestowed meaning on even the most wearisome features of life;it offered a direct and personal connection to divinity through

the person of Jesus, the son of a carpenter;its communal basis offered an identity that was much more concrete than that obtained by mere residence in the Roman Empire;and it offered salvation and eternal life. Although the Christians had not learned to defend their new religion with a systematic philosophy as they would in the Middle Ages, their doctrine was in competition with the philosophies of the day for the hearts and minds of men and women. All such thought systems were responding to the same problems, so it is no surprise that there are some similarities between Christianity and a philosophy like stoicism;for example, both philosophies share the doctrine of resignation, the disdain for attachment to earthly things, and the concern with conforming to the will of divine Providence. The differences cannot be overlooked, however, such as the discrepancy between stoic and Christian teachings on suicide. Whereas the stoic believed that suicide was justified to prevent oneself from going against the divine plan of the world, Christians believed that the act of suicide was prohibited by that same divine plan. Also, stoicism was inclined to be quietistic and acquiescent to political authority, whereas in its inception Christianity tended to be activistic and resistant to political domination.

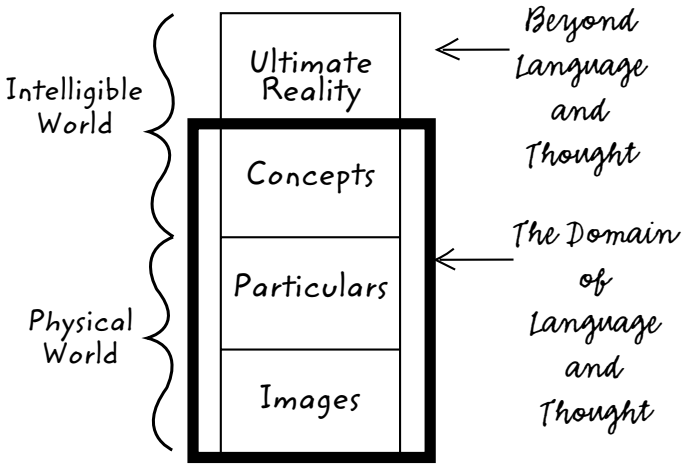


Epictetus said, "Refuse altogether to take an oath, if it is possible;if it is not, refuse as far as you are able."[5] This attitude contrasts greatly with that of many Christians who refused to swear an oath on the divinity of the emperor and were martyred for that refusal.

## Neoplatonism

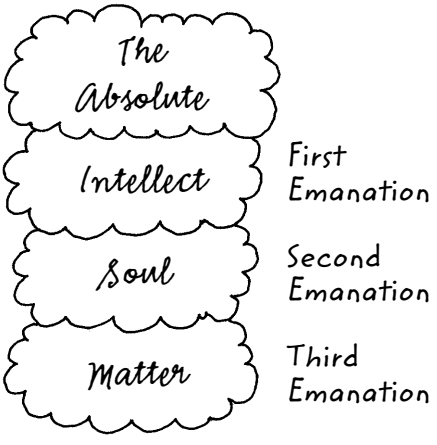
After the death of the stoic Marcus Aurelius ("the last good emperor"), a long period of upheaval and disorder ensued. The helplessness that people felt in the face of the decadence of the crumbling empire was responded to by a religious revival. The most prominent philosophical religious competitor with Christianity during the third century C.E. was a mystical form of **Platonism** known today as Neoplatonism, espoused by Plotinus (204–270). We have already seen a deep-seated propensity toward other-worldliness in Plato, which Aristotle had criticized. Plato's claim of superiority for the other world fit in well with the world-weariness of the third century.


For Plotinus, as for Plato before him, absolute truth and certainty cannot be found in this world. Plato had taught a purely rational method for transcending the flux of the world and achieving truth and certainty, but Plotinus preached that such a vision can only be achieved extra-rationally, through a kind of ecstatic union with the One. The One was for Plotinus the Absolute, or God. Nothing can be truly known about the One in any rational sense, nor can any characterization of the One be strictly correct. If we review Plato's Simile of the Line from a Plotinian perspective, we see that language, and therefore thought, functions by drawing *distinctions* (we say "this is a pen,"




meaning it is *not* the desk). But in the One, no distinctions exist; hence, nothing can be thought or said about it. A person can know the One only by uniting with it. That union can be achieved in this life in moments of mystical rapture, but in the long run the goal can only be achieved in death.

One can prepare for the ultimate union through an ascetic program of virtuous living. Plotinus's own version of the Line is based on his idea that God, or the Absolute, does not perform acts of creation (that would sully God's unchangeableness); rather, God "emanates." That is, God is reflected onto lower planes, and these reflections represent kinds of imitations of God's perfection in descending degrees of fragmentation. (What we have here is a kind of "gooey" Simile of the Line.) This metaphysics borders on **pantheism**—the view that reality and God are the same.




Because the philosophy of Plotinus and his followers was the last philosophy of the classical period, his version of Platonism was the one that was

handed down to the medieval world. Because of this fact, we will see that the problem of pantheism cropped up again in the Middle Ages, this time to haunt not the death scene of classicism but the birth scene of Christian philosophy. When the early Christian thinkers faced the task of unifying and systematizing the Christian worldview, they turned to the prevailing Platonic metaphysical scheme as a framework, and the Platonism they found was already heavily influenced by Plotinus's thought.

## Topics for Consideration

1. Show why Epicurus's decision to define pleasure negatively (in terms of a lack of agitation) produces a very different philosophy from the Roman version of Epicureanism based on a positive definition of pleasure (in terms of the experience of titillation).
2. It is often believed that desires for food and sex are based on natural (i.e., biological) needs. Epicurus too calls them "natural" but claims that the fulfillment of the desire for food is "necessary," while the fulfillment of the desire for sex is "unnecessary." Explain what he means; explain what effect acting on his philosophy would have on one's life.
3. Write a short essay defending or attacking the view that *repose* is a key element of the "good life."
4. Are you convinced that both an emperor and a slave could follow the principles of stoicism? Explain your position.
5. Stoic philosophers claimed that we are happy only if we are free. What did they mean by "happiness" and "freedom"? Why, if freedom is such an important virtue, did they not agonize over choices that faced them?
6. Compare and contrast stoicism with Epicureanism as practiced by Epicurus, and then again with the later followers of Epicurus in Rome.
7. Compare and contrast Plato's version of the Simile of the Line (in Chapter 2) with Plotinus's version of it.

## Notes

1. Epicurus, "Letter to Menoeceus," trans. C. Bailey, in *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers: Epicurus, Epictetus, Lucretius, Marcus Aurelius*, ed. Whitney J. Oats (New York: Modern Library, 1940), 31.

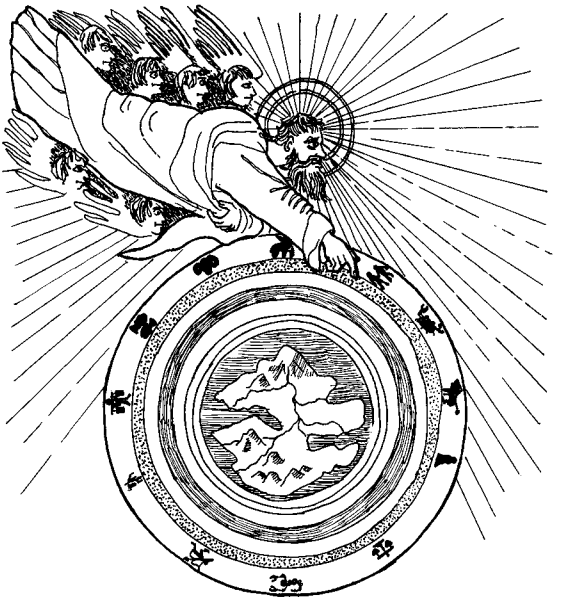
2. Epictetus, "Discourses of Epictetus," trans. P. E. Matheson, in *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers*, 267.
3. Marcus Aurelius, "Meditations," trans. G. Long, in *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers*, 523.
4. Seneca, *The Stoic Philosophy of Seneca*, ed. and trans. Moses Hadas (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1958), 202–3.
5. Epictetus, "The Encheiridion," in *The Discourses of Epictetus*, ed. and trans. George Land (Mount Vernon, Va.: Peter Pauper Press, n.d.), 22.

# 4

# Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy

## Fifth through Fifteenth Centuries

All three of the main Western religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—had their birth in the land that was home to the ancient Mediterranean desert cultures, in today's Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. By the beginning of the period now known as the Middle Ages, Islam had not yet appeared on the scene (I will speak more of Islam shortly), and Christianity was barely 400 years old. But the main books of the Hebrew Bible on which Judaism was based already dated back 1,200 years. Judaism itself developed out of earlier, tribal **polytheistic** religions from which Judaism distinguished itself when it proclaimed that there was but one God, Jehovah, who had chosen the natives of ancient Judea—the Jews—with whom to establish a



**The Creation of the World**
**(After an Anonymous Medieval Painting)**

special covenant. This covenant was the basis of a law that not only lays moral strictures (the Ten Commandments), but also provides rituals governing dietary habits, marriage and funerary rites, prayers, sacrifices, and alms giving. The Jewish Bible, or Torah (later called the Old Testament by Christians), describes God's creation of the world, assigns humans a place in it, contains God's commandments, expresses his will, and relates a history of the Jews. It explains both the triumphs and the many sufferings of the Jews, whose homeland unfortunately lay on one of the major military crossroads of the world; therefore, Judea suffered numerous invasions and brutal conquests. These holy writings also contain the fiery words of great prophets who are said to have recorded divinely inspired visions of God's will and of the future. Among other prophecies, one foretells the coming of a messiah (or "anointed one") who will liberate the Jews from their oppressors and establish a kingdom of Glory.

Christianity derived from precisely this Jewish prophetic tradition, when an initially small band of Jews—then later increasing numbers of non-Jews—claimed to recognize an individual named Jesus of Nazareth (ca. 4 B.C.E.–ca. 29 C.E.) as the "Christ," a Greek translation of the Hebrew word "messiah." The story of Jesus is told in four gospels (proclamations of good news): Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These books tell of the annunciation by angels to Jesus's virgin mother, Mary; of her pregnancy; of Jesus's humble birth in a stable; of his family's flight to Egypt to escape the wrath of the jealous King Herod; and of the miracles and cures Jesus performed. The gospels also tell of his teachings, which involve a reinterpretation of the Jewish law that de-emphasizes those features governing ritualistic practices and dietary habits and instead underscores an interiorization of the law. This reinterpretation produces a doctrine of compassion and aid for one's fellow human being, particularly for the downtrodden, despairing, and disadvantaged. Jesus's teachings also contain a strong element of **eschatological** prophecy that urges people to prepare for the Kingdom of God, which is at hand. Furthermore, these gospels tell the story of Jesus's betrayal by one of his

**The Annunciation**
**(After Fra Angelico)**

disciples, of his arrest by the Roman authorities—who forcibly included a rebellious Judea in their empire—of Jesus's trial and condemnation by the Jewish court, of his crucifixion by the Roman soldiers, of his burial and miraculous resurrection, and of the ascension to heaven of the living Christ. All these events were viewed by Jesus's followers, and by the Christian Scriptures themselves, as fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament and therefore as proof that, indeed, Jesus was the Christ, the messiah foretold by the ancient prophets.

The Christian communities in Palestine immediately after Jesus's execution were composed mostly of Jews who saw Jesus's message as directed primarily toward Jews, but at the same time the doctrine was spreading to the broader Greek-speaking and Latin-speaking world. Indeed, after the first four gospels, the bulk of the rest of the New Testament is dominated by the letters of Christian leaders to communities of believers in the Greek-speaking parts of the Mediterranean world. Foremost among these writings are the letters of Saint Paul, Christianity's greatest missionary and organizer.

In these letters he developed and clarified the doctrines of love and servitude and the spritualization and interiorization of the Hebrew law; he emphasized Jesus's suffering and death as an atonement for the sins of the whole human race and as a guarantee that this atonement meant an eternal life for those who believe in Jesus as the Christ and who live according to his teachings.

The New Testament concludes with an apocalyptic vision of the end of the world based on the writings of a Christian prophet called Saint John the Divine, not to be confused with Saint John, the author of the Fourth Gospel. John the Divine was indeed confused with Saint John during the first part of the Middle Ages, and this misunderstanding bestowed great authority on John the Divine's writing, known as the Book of Revelation. In his vision John sees a great battle between the forces of God and those of the devil, Satan, that results in the return of Christ, the Final Judgment of the living and the dead, the admission of the blessed into the New Jerusalem (heaven), and the consignment of the damned to hell.

During the 300 years after Jesus's death, Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire, but tumultuously so, because of the sometimes bloody repression of it by the Roman authorities and because of internal debates among its leaders concerning the correct form that Christian **dogma** should take. Its **canon** did not take form until the fourth century after the birth of Jesus.

**The Damned Dragged Down to Hell by Demons (After Luca Signorelli)**

## Saint Augustine

In the year 313 C.E. an important event occurred. The Roman emperor Constantine was converted to Christianity, and even though only one in ten citizens of the Empire was a Christian, Christianity became the official religion of the realm. During the next couple of centuries, the early Church fathers turned to the prevailing Neoplatonic philosophical tradition in their search for intellectual foundations for their still relatively new religion. The first truly important philosopher in this Christian Platonic tradition was Augustine of Hippo (354–430). He had one foot squarely planted in the classical world and one in the medieval world, and he straddled the abyss that separated these two worlds.

As a young student of rhetoric in Rome, acutely aware of his own sensual nature, Augustine was concerned with the problem of good and evil. He became attracted to **Manicheanism** (founded by Mani of Persia in the third century), which was a philosophy that combined certain Christian and Persian elements and that understood reality in terms of an eternal struggle between the principle of light (Good) and the principle of darkness (Evil). The strife between these two principles manifested itself as the world. The soul represented the good and the body represented evil. As a Manichee, Augustine could attribute his many sins to a principle somehow outside himself.

But Augustine soon became dissatisfied with this "solution" to the problem of evil, and he became attracted to Neoplatonism and

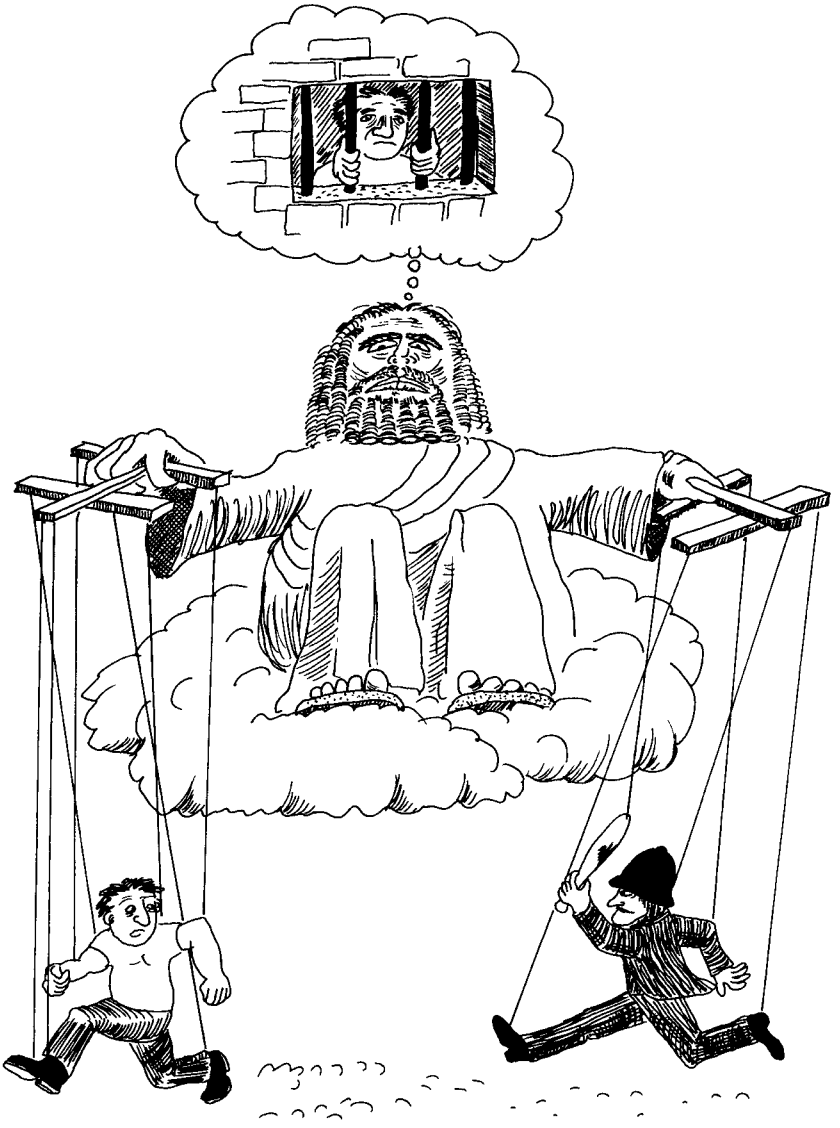

its conception of an *immaterial reality*. It was from Neoplatonism that Augustine got his idea of evil not as a real feature of reality, but as a lack, an incompleteness, a privation. (Recall the Simile of the Line: the more goodness a thing has, the more real it is. Conversely, the less reality it has, the worse it is. Just as a dental cavity is a *lack* of calcium [a hole is not a *thing*, it is an absence of being], so is a sin not a thing, but an absence of goodness.) In 388, after a minor mystical experience,


**Evil as the Absence of Being**

Augustine converted to Christianity and never again vacillated in his intellectual commitment. Though Augustine returned to the religion of his mother (she was eventually designated by the Catholic Church as a saint, Saint Monica), his understanding of Christianity remained influenced by Neoplatonic ideas. But he would now admit that sin was not simply a privation of goodness, but the result of excessive self-love on the part of the sinner *and* the lack of sufficient love for God. In 391 Augustine was ordained a priest and in 396 became the Bishop of Hippo, on the North African coast. During this period, Christianity was still seeking to achieve focus on its own identity, and Augustine spent an enormous amount of energy combating a series of heresies: **Donatism, Priscillianism, Arianism,** and of course, his former persuasion, Manicheanism. But at the same time, he had to combat a new and especially difficult heresy, that of **Pelagianism.** Pelagius's heresy was that of overaccentuating the role of free will in salvation and minimizing the role of God's grace. Much to Augustine's embarrassment, Pelagius had been using Augustine's book on free will to defend his own view.

So Augustine found himself walking a tightrope. He had to attack the Manichees for minimizing free will and attack the Pelagians for overemphasizing it. This problem occupied him in some very subtle philosophical reasoning.

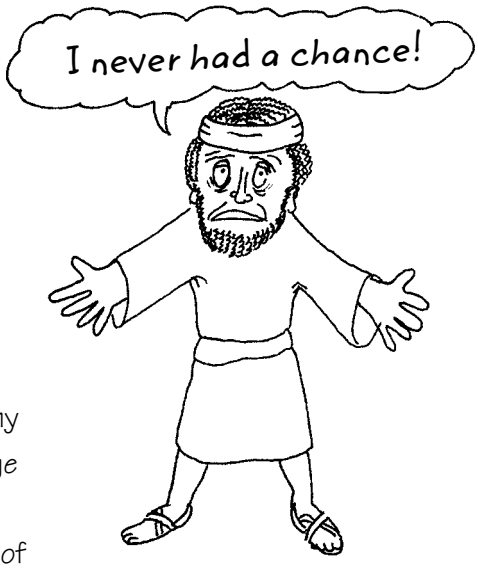
The problem: If God is all-wise (omniscient), then he knows the future. If he knows the future, then the future must unfold exactly in accordance with his knowledge (otherwise, he *does not* know the future). If the events in the future *must* occur according to God's foreknowledge of them, then they are *necessary*, and there is no freedom. If there is no freedom, then humans are not responsible for their acts, in which case it would be immoral to punish people for their sins. (If God knew millions of years before Judas was born that he would betray Jesus, how could God send Judas to hell for his betrayal?) So the conclusion seems to be: Either God is omniscient but immoral, or he is benevolent but ignorant. How can Augustine avoid this unpalatable dilemma? He does so with a number of sophisticated arguments.



**Does God's Foreknowledge Determine Our Actions?**

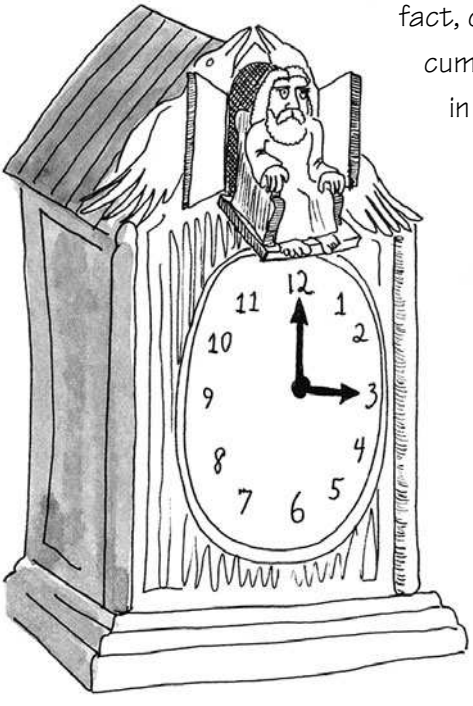
One is that, for God, there is no past or future, only an eternal present. For him, everything exists in an eternal moment. To say "God knew millions of years before Judas's birth that he would betray Jesus" is to make the *human* error of believing that God is *in* time. In fact, God is outside of time. (That's what it means to say that God is eternal.) Another tack of Augustine's is to admit that God's knowledge of the world entails **necessity,** but to deny that necessity

is incompatible with freedom. Like the stoics, Augustine believed that freedom is the capacity to do what one wants, and one can do what one wants even if God (or anyone else) already knows what that person wants. Augustine pointed out that God's foreknowledge of a decision doesn't *cause* the decision, any more than my own acts are caused by my knowledge of what I'm going to do.




**Judas**

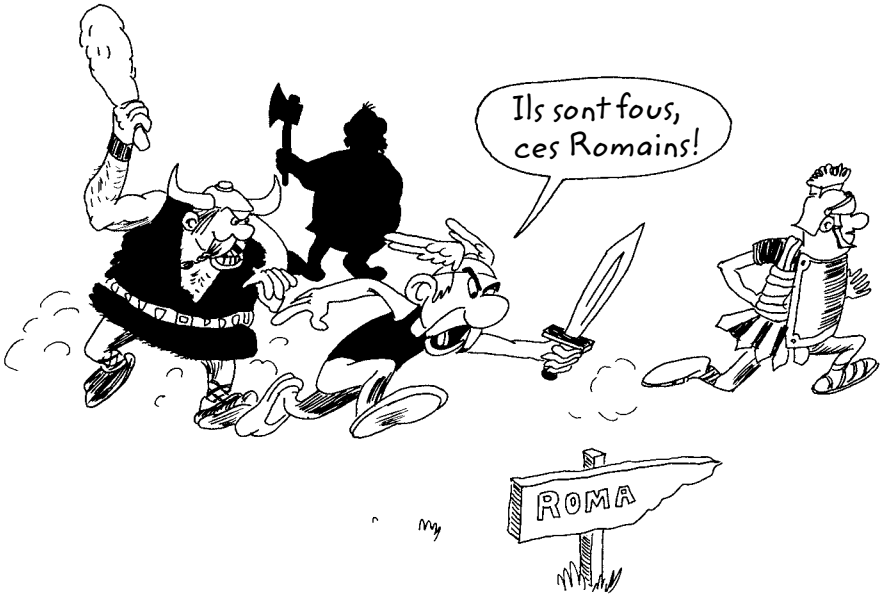
I have just presented a sample of Augustinian thought. His philosophy is a profound meditation on the relation between God and the human being. It was addressed to a troubled and expiring world. The old order was crumbling. In fact, on the same day Augustine succumbed to the infirmities of old age in the cathedral at Hippo, the barbaric Vandals were burning the city. Even though they left the cathedral standing out of respect for him, the fires that consumed Hippo were the same ones that consumed the Roman Empire. The classical period was over, and that long night, which some call the Dark Ages, had commenced.




**God Is Not in Time**

At the death of Augustine, Western philosophy fell into a state of deterioration that was to last for 400

years. This period, the advent of the medieval world, truly was the dark night of the Western soul. The Roman legions could no longer control the frontiers of the Empire, and the Teutonic tribes from the eastern forest swarmed over the old Empire.




Rome was sacked twice within a thirty-five-year period. The new "barbarian" emperors no longer bore Latin names but Germanic ones. They were not interested in culture as it had been known in classical times. Philosophy as the Greeks and Romans had understood it was in danger of perishing.

## The Encyclopediasts

During this long dark night, philosophy flickered only as individual candle flames at distant corners of the old, dead empire. Certain isolated monasteries in Italy, Spain, and Britain and on the rocky crags of islands in the Irish Sea produced what are known as the encyclopediasts, who systematically compiled and conserved whatever remnants of classical wisdom they could lay their hands on. The three salient figures in this tradition are Boethius (480–525) in Italy,

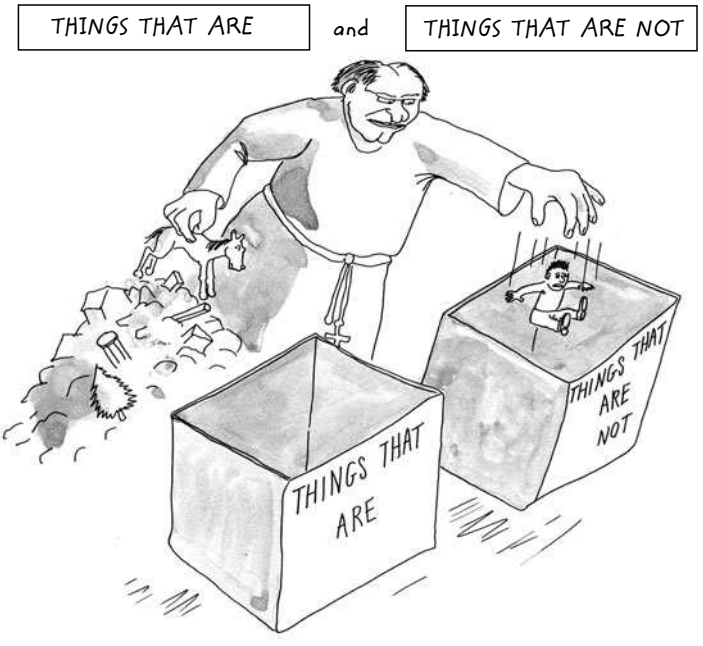
Isidore (570–636) in Spain, and The Venerable Bede (674–735) in England. (St. Isidore's encyclopedia is particularly revealing. Under the letter "A" can be found both an entry on the atomic theory and an entry on the Antipodes, a people who were supposed to inhabit the rocky plains of southern Africa and who, Isidore believed, had their big toes on the outside of the feet, thereby allowing them more maneuverability among the rocky fields where they dwelt!) Isidore's hodgepodge is emblematic of the state of philosophy during the Dark Ages.

**An Antipode Showing Off in Rocky Terrain**

## John Scotus Eriugena

Suddenly, after four centuries of relative silence, philosophy blossomed forth in the work of the first great metaphysical system builder of the Middle Ages, the redundantly named John Scotus Eriugena ("John the Irishman, the Irishman" [*ca.* 810–*ca.* 877]). John had been called from Ireland to the Palatine School of King Charles the Bald to translate the Greek document known today as the Pseudo-Dionysius (a work falsely believed to have been written by St. Paul's Christian convert St. Dionysius but believed today to have been written by a Neoplatonic philosopher sympathetic to Christianity). John's own book, *On the Divisions of Nature*, was greatly influenced by his reading of the Pseudo-Dionysius and is a confusing combination of Christian dogma and Neoplatonic pantheism. Through his book and his influential translation, Platonism gained an even greater foothold in Christianity.

John's goal was the categorization and understanding of the totality of reality (what he calls "Nature"). The first categorical distinction he drew was between




**John Scotus Divides Up Nature**

This distinction involves the Platonic supposition that there is a hierarchy of being, that some things are more real than other things. "Things that are not" are those entities that on a Neoplatonic scale contain a lesser degree of reality. For example, a particular tree or horse contains less being than the form "tree" or the form "horse"; hence, particulars are subsumed under this negative category. So are all "lacks" or "deprivations," such as sinful acts or acts of forgetting. The most surprising thing we find in this category is what John called "super-reality"—that which cannot be grasped by the human intellect, that which on the Neoplatonic scale is "beyond being." Apparently, John was talking about God.

What is left? What can be called the "things that are"? Only those entities that can be comprehended by pure human intellect, namely, the Platonic Forms! All else is beyond being.

So we find this Christian scholar in the apparently awkward position of claiming that God is among those things classified as nonexistent—in the same class where we would expect to find centaurs, griffins, round squares, and mountains made of gold. Why doesn't John's writing end all discussion of God once and for all? Because John's method of the "*vias affirmativa* and *negativa*" (borrowed from the Pseudo-Dionysius) allowed him to make sense of the nothingness of a being beyond being.

| VIA AFFIRMATIVA | VIA NEGATIVA |
|---|---|
| We affirm:<br>"God is wise."<br>↑<br>This affirmation is true only as metaphor. Wisdom " is a word that gets its meaning from human discourse. We can apply it to God only analogically to give us a hint of his nature. | We deny the affirmation:<br>"God is not wise."<br>↑<br>This negation is literal. Because "wisdom" gets its meaning from human discourse, it cannot literally apply to God. |

This affirmation and its negation do not lead to a self-contradiction; rather, they serve as thesis and antithesis and are ***dialectically*** reconciled in a (Hegelian-like) synthesis that will lead us to realize that God is somehow superwise. The same method will show us why John said that God does not exist but that he [super] exists.

There is yet another way in which John Scotus Eriugena divided Nature:

1. Nature that creates and is uncreated (i.e., God)
2. Nature that creates and is created (i.e., the Platonic Forms)
3. Nature that is created and does not create (i.e., the physical world)
4. Nature that is not created and does not create (i.e., God)

(Remember, in this Neoplatonic schema, to say that something "X" *creates* is to say that there is something below X in the hierarchy of reality that is dependent upon X. Conversely, to say that something "Y" *is created* is to say that Y is dependent on something above it for its existence.)

In this system, God is both Alpha and Omega, Beginning and End, Creator and Goal of Creation. God issues out into the world and comes back to himself. John's philosophy looks suspiciously like Plotinus's pantheistic system of emanations, and though many attempts were made to defend *On the Divisions of Nature* against the charge of heresy, eventually it was condemned as heterodoxical, in 1225 by Pope Honorius III.

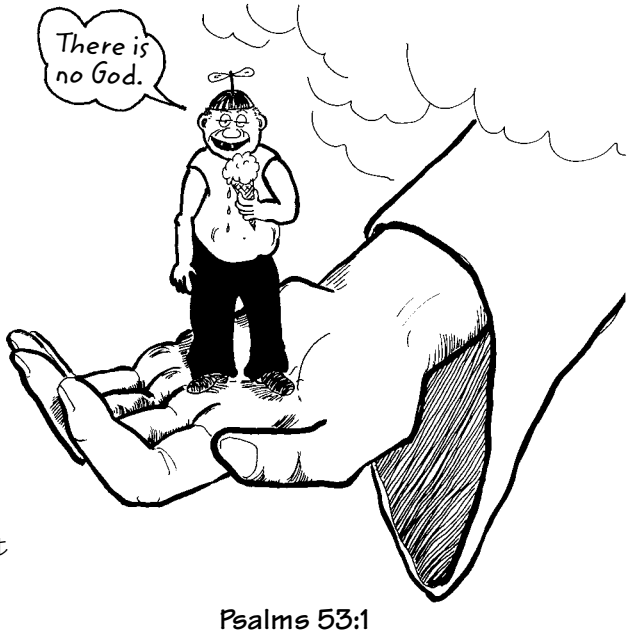

**Alpha and Omega**

## Saint Anselm

After John Scotus Eriugena, there were no great system makers for the next 350 years. From the ninth to the thirteenth centuries, philosophy would be done in a more piecemeal manner than it had been done by Augustine or John Scotus, or than it would be done in the thirteenth century by Thomas Aquinas. It was confined to a kind of philosophical grammar of theological terms. A piecemeal approach, however, does not mean that philosophy was always unimpressive. One of the most striking pieces of philosophical logic produced in the medieval period is the demonstration of God's existence created by Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), later Saint Anselm. Today this demonstration is known as the **ontological argument** because it is derived not from observation but from the very idea of being ("ontology" equals "theory of being").

Anselm's argument began with a reference to the fool (of Psalms 53:1) who "says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" But, said Anselm, even the fool

> is convinced that something exists in the understanding at least, than which nothing greater can be conceived. For when he hears of this he understands it. . . . And assuredly that than which nothing greater can be conceived, cannot exist in the understanding alone. For




**Psalms 53:1**

> suppose it exists in the understanding alone: then it can be conceived to exist in reality, which is greater. . . . Hence, there is no doubt that there exists a being than which nothing greater can be conceived, and it exists both in the understanding and in reality . . . and this being thou art, O Lord, our God.[1]

Try out Anselm's argument. Conceive in your mind the most perfect being you can think of. (Anselm believed it will look very much like the conception of the traditional Christian God—a being who is all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful, eternal, and unchangeable.) Now ask yourself, does the entity you conceived exist *only* in your mind? If it is even possible that it exists only there, then it is *not* the most perfect entity conceivable because such an entity who existed both in your mind and extramentally would be even more perfect. Therefore, if it's possible even to conceive of a most perfect being, such a being necessarily exists.

This argument is a slippery one, and it immediately found detractors. A contemporary of Anselm's, Gaunilon, a monk by profession, made the following objections on behalf of the fool.

1. It is, in fact, impossible to conceive of "a being than which nothing greater can be conceived." The very project boggles the mind.
2. If Anselm's argument were valid, then it would follow that the mere ability to conceive of a perfect tropical island would logically entail the existence of such an island.

**Gaunilon's Objections**

Anselm's response was as simple as Gaunilon's rebuttal:

1. If you understand the phrase "most perfect being," then you already have conceived of such a being.
2. There is nothing in the *definition* of a tropical island that entails perfection, but the very definition of God entails that he be all-perfect, so it is impossible to conceive of God as lacking a perfection; and since it is obviously more perfect to be than not to be, the bare conception of God entails his existence.

This argument is both more difficult and more ingenious than it may appear to you. It is, in fact, a very good argument (which is not to say that it is flawless). Its genius is its demonstration that the sentence "God does not exist" is a self-contradictory sentence. That is why only a fool could utter it.

Take note of how very Platonic Anselm's argument is. First, it is purely **a priori**—that is, it makes no appeal whatsoever to sensorial observation; it appeals exclusively to pure reason. Second, it makes explicit the Platonic view that the "most perfect" equals "the most real." (Recall the Simile of the Line.)

The ontological proof has had a long and checkered history. We shall see it again more than once before this narration ends. Many philosophers think that Immanuel Kant finally put it to rest in the eighteenth century (by showing that the flaw in the argument was not one of logic but of *grammar*); but even today, 900 years after it was written, the argument has astute defenders.

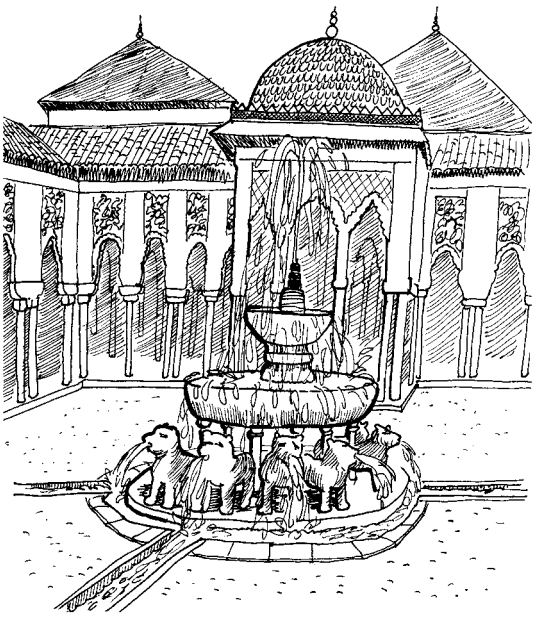
## Muslim and Jewish Philosophies

During the eleventh and twelfth centuries the growing influx into Europe of Latin translations from Arabic and Hebrew manuscripts had a dramatic effect on the directions that philosophy would take. Many of these works entered the Christian monastic world by way of Spain. From the ninth through the twelfth centuries the courts of the Muslim caliphs of Spain were the most cultured in Europe. The "Moors" (Arab, Berber, and other Muslim groups) had invaded Christian Spain in the year 711 C.E. as part of the militant expansion of Islam. Islam is the third of the three dominant Western religions, all of which derive from roughly the same area of the Middle East. The key figure in Islam is Muhammad, who was born at Mecca in today's Saudi Arabia in 570 and died in Medina in 632 C.E. According to the tradition, when he was forty years old he received a direct revelation from the angel Gabriel while meditating in a cave on a desert mountain. Over the next twenty years Muhammad continued to receive revelations that designated him as the latest in a long line of prophets of God that were to be accepted by the new religion, including all the great prophets from the Jewish Bible, but also Jesus of Nazareth. Muhammad copied the words that were revealed to him, and they

became the Qur'an (or Koran), the holy book of the Islamic religion. The main idea in this religion is monotheism, just as it is in Judaism and Christianity (though Jews and Muslims often see the Christian **doctrine of the Trinity** as a backsliding into polytheism). Even more than Judaism or Christianity, Islam preaches the power of God (Allah) over the world and in everyday life. The words "Islam" and "Muslim" both derive from the Arabic word for "submission" or "surrender." Like the other two religions—but unlike the tribal religions of Muhammad's native Arabia—Islam forbids the use of idols. Like Judaism and Christianity it sees its patriarch in the biblical figure of Abraham. Islam preaches the brotherhood of all believers, and it requires charity to the poor. In addition, it stresses prayer (five times daily), purification, and fasting during holy days (Ramadan), and it enjoins the faithful to make a holy pilgrimage to Mecca at least once during one's lifetime.

Islam had tremendous appeal because of its theological simplicity, its ability to address the spiritual and material needs of great numbers of people who lived in chaotic times, its capacity to transcend tribal rivalries, and its offer of community and personal salvation. Its survival against great odds and bloody oppression in its first years gave it a militant cast. Its leaders believed in the idea of holy war (*jihad*), and through conquests and conversion Islam spread rapidly in all directions. In the West, by the year 732—a little more than 100 years after Muhammad's first revelations—Muslim armies had penetrated deeply into France, where they were finally defeated at the Battle of Tours by Charles the Sledgehammer, Charlemagne's grandfather. The Arab-dominated Muslim army retreated behind the Pyrenees, where the Moors developed a splendid Islamic culture in Spain that contained beautiful cities, magnificent gardens with flowing water everywhere, great architectural monuments, and spacious centers of learning. There Muslim, Christian, and Jewish scholars worked side by side studying the manuscripts of the Greek philosophers, whose surviving copies were slowly being discovered and gathered in the great libraries of Seville,

Granada, Cordoba, and Toledo. These libraries had no match in the Christian world. The products of the Muslim schools of translators slowly worked their way into Catholic-dominated Europe and caused a great stir, especially the translations of Aristotle and many commentaries on his works, most of which had been lost to the Christian world.



**The Court of the Lions**
**The Alhambra—Granada**

## *Averroës*

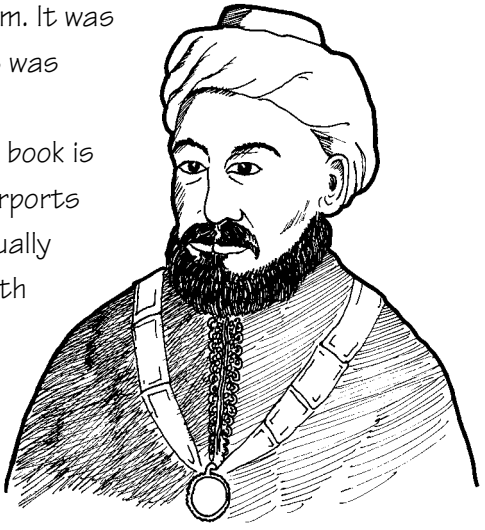
One of the most influential of the Muslim philosophers in both the Islamic and Catholic worlds was Abul Walid Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Rushd, better known in the West as Averroës (1126–1198), who was born in Cordoba, Spain. His most impressive writings were his careful explications and analyses of Aristotle's philosophy. Aristotle's rediscovery had sent shock waves through the Muslim intellectual community. Averroës's commentaries were written in the context of a debate among Arab-speaking theologians as to whether the claims of Aristotle's philosophy were compatible with Muslim dogma. The Arab theologian al-Ghazali (1058–1111) had written against Aristotle, and the Persian Avicenna (980–1037) had defended the Greek philosopher. Averroës rejected the arguments of both al-Ghazali and Avicenna, claiming that they had both misread Aristotle. There still exists today a scholarly debate as to how Averroës himself should be read. According to one group of interpreters, Averroës wrote two types of commentary: one for more general

consumption in which he asserted that all of Aristotle is compatible with Islam and that Aristotle's ideas can be used to explore and clarify Muslim belief, and another for a more sophisticated audience in which he defended Aristotle *against* Islam. According to a second group of scholars, Averroës's message is consistent throughout and is somewhere between the two extremes demarcated by the other two groups.[2] Averroës's commentaries came into the Christian world appearing to claim that there were two kinds of opposing truths, philosophical truth (i.e., Aristotelian) and religious truth, yet also claiming that the contexts of philosophical and theological discourse were so distinct that both truths could be accepted at the same time. Averroës's writings had a dizzying effect on the philosophers of the monasteries and newly established universities of the Catholic world. On the one hand, Averroës's work was indispensable for the understanding of Aristotle, but on the other, it was felt that his theory of the discrepancy between religion and philosophy would have to be refuted in the name of Christian dogma. Thomas Aquinas (whom we will study shortly) wrote a book called *On the Unity of the Intellect against the Averroists*, yet he so respected Averroës's explanations of Aristotle that he simply called him "the Commentator." Some Western theologians, led by Siger of Brabant (ca. 1240–ca. 1284), went against the grain (and got in trouble for it), defending what they took to be Averroës's **doctrine of double truth.** They were called the Latin Averroists.

## *Maimonides*

What Averroës was to Muslim philosophy and Thomas Aquinas was to Catholic philosophy, Moses Maimonides (1135–1204) was to Jewish philosophy. Like his contemporary Averroës, Maimonides was born in Cordoba and also was most influential in the Catholic world for his insights into the philosophy of Aristotle. Thomas Aquinas revered Maimonides, and Thomas's demonstrations of God's existence were clearly influenced by those of Maimonides. In fact, Maimonides' first book, *A Treatise on Logic,* is a compendium of the categories of Aris-

totle's logic and an analysis of them. It was written in Arabic when Maimonides was sixteen years old.



**Moses Maimonides**

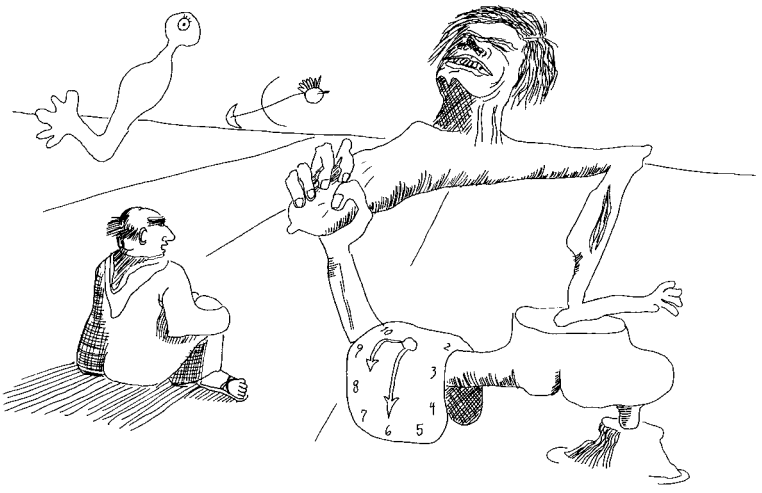
Maimonides' most celebrated book is called *Guide of the Perplexed.* It purports to conduct educated but intellectually confused Jews through the labyrinth of philosophy and Judaic theology in their quest to resolve the conflicts between science and religion. The problem is, the *Guide* itself needs a guide, for it is a very difficult work, and it raises questions about its author's intentions similar to those raised about Averroës's. The most common way of understanding the book is to treat it as an attempt to reconcile Aristotelian philosophy with Jewish theology, showing that the Greek's theories provide tools for exploring and expanding on Judaism. Maimonides calls Aristotle "the chief of the philosophers" and calls Moses "the master of those who know."[3] But there have been very respectable scholars who see the book as subversive of religious values. Despite appearing to support religious values, the book in fact undermines them in a subtle and sophisticated way. For instance, Maimonides insists on what he claims to be the primary commandment of Judaism, to know God. Yet his theology is a *negative* theology, apparently showing that God cannot know us (an idea of Aristotle's, as you may recall) and that we can only know what God is not (a Neoplatonic idea that we have already seen in the work of John Scotus Eriugena). One Maimonidean scholar states the problem like this: Maimonides "records the duty to know God as the very first commandment. . . . Yet when we examine it in the total context and full development of his own analysis, we seemingly must conclude that this ideal is not only impossible, but empty of content and meaning."[4]

But if some scholars have seen Maimonides as a heretic destroying Jewish doctrine with Aristotelian logic, others have seen him as an anti-Aristotelian rabbi whose intention was to demonstrate the incoherence of so-called philosophical wisdom. Still others have seen him as holding a version of the doctrine of double truth attributed to Averroës, whose work he knew and admired. Whatever Maimonides' true intentions were, his astute clarification of Aristotelian categories and the use of Aristotelian arguments in his books left the impression in the world of Latin-speaking scholars that he was indeed a guide for those readers perplexed by Aristotle.

Despite the small minority of vociferous critics calling Maimonides a heretic, Jewish culture has for the greatest part been very proud of him from his day to ours. When Christian troops under Ferdinand and Isabella conquered the Moors in 1492 and expelled the Jews from Spain, there emerged this adage in Ladino, the Spanish spoken by the exiled Jews: "De Moisés a Moisés no ha habido nadie como Moisés" (From Moses to Moses there has been nobody like Moses).

## The Problem of Faith and Reason

The problem being dealt with by Maimonides and Averroës, the problem of faith versus reason, was one that plagued the whole of medieval philosophy. In the Christian world it received its best medieval solution at the hands of Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, as we shall soon see. The problem concerned the question of whether to emphasize the claims of divine revelation or the claims of philosophy in one's conception of reality, and among Christians there were extremists in both camps. We've seen that philosophers like John Scotus Eriugena had purely conceptual schemes in which there seemed to be no room for mere religious belief. Even St. Anselm's God seemed primarily philosophical and a far cry from the Stern Father and Vengeful Judge of the Old Testament. At the other end of the spectrum was the antiphilosopher Tertullian (169–220), whose



Credo Quia Absurdum

famous cry was "*Credo quia absurdum*" ("I believe that which is absurd"), with the implication that he believed it *because* it was absurd.

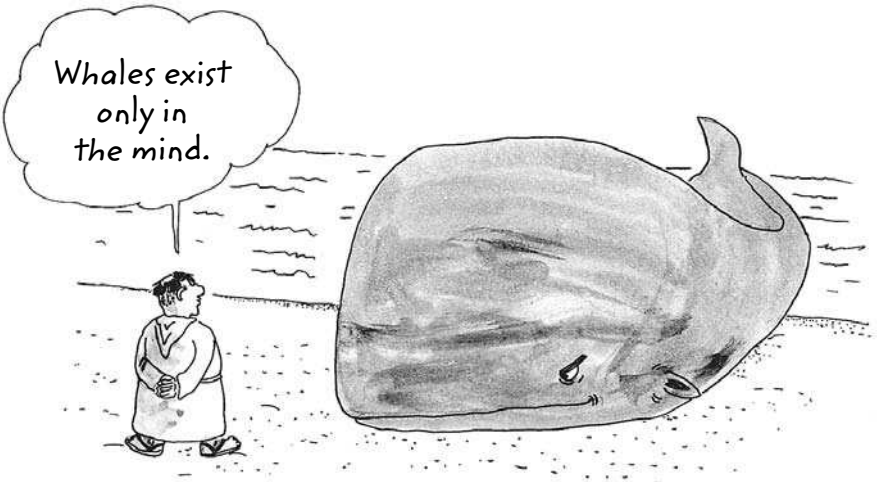
The debate between these two groups reached a high pitch and produced a number of startling claims, such as the view that we have seen attributed to the Latin Averroists, who produced the doctrine of double truth. Recall that according to this doctrine there are two mutually contradictory truths, one produced by faith and one by reason, but both valid from their respective points of view. So, for example, from the anatomical perspective, the human being is a compilation of organs that, when they cease to function, bring about the termination of the person; but from the theological perspective, the human being is a soul that is, through God's grace, immortal.

This theory, though logically unsatisfactory, did for a short time play the historically positive role of allowing science to develop without having to conceive of itself in theological terms.

## The Problem of the Universals

The other vexing problem of the day, the problem of the **universals,** was the question concerning the referents of words. Augustine had inaugurated a concern about language that dominated philosophical

thought throughout the Middle Ages. Remember that according to Augustine, God sees his creation as an eternal present—that is, past, present, and future all rolled up into one. If language represents reality, and if humans experience reality so differently from God, then the true "word of God" can be nothing like the language of humans, who perceive the world in terms of a temporal sequence in finite space. Human language, then, must be a kind of degradation of Godly language. (Notice that this situation is probably another one in which medieval thought is haunted by Plato's Simile of the Line, in which each level of the hierarchy of being is a poor copy of the one above it.) Yet human language can aspire to the truth, being God-given, so theological concerns necessarily overlapped linguistic ones. The specific version of the problem that would obsess Christian, Jewish, and Muslim philosophers for several centuries had been introduced by Boethius, who had been deeply influenced by Augustine and who had translated from the Greek an essay about Aristotle by the Neoplatonic author Porphyry (232–304). The latter had queried the ontological status of genera and species. We know that there exist individual things that we call "whales"; but does the genus *Balaenoptera*, or the species *Balaenoptera physalis* (fin whale), or the species *Balaenoptera musculus* (blue whale) exist in nature, or are these only artificial categories existing merely in the mind? (The same problem appears in sentences like "This dog is brown." Do the words "dog" and



"brown" only name the individual, or do they name the classes of canines and brown things, and are those classes real or artificial?)

The debate that ensued was, of course, similar to the debate between Plato and Aristotle over the status of the Forms, but the original works of the Greeks were lost to the philosophers of the early Middle Ages, and it took them 900 years to arrive at the point that Aristotle had gained in one generation. The issue reached such a state of confusion that John of Salisbury (ca. 1115–ca. 1180) claimed that in his day there were as many ideas on the subject as there were heads. The extremes in this debate were represented, on one side, by the strict **Platonic realists** (today called "exaggerated realists"). They held that classes were not only real but *more* real than individuals. Anselm himself was a representative of this view. The other extreme, represented by Roscelin (ca. 1050–1120) and William of Ockham (ca. 1280–ca. 1349), was the doctrine known as **nominalism,** from the Latin word for "name" (*nom*). According to this view, which was eventually found unacceptable by the Church, only particulars are real, and words denoting classes are merely names. According to the nominalists, the system of names creates differences and similarities that exist only in the mind of the speaker or in the system of language itself.

You and I may smile when we are told by anthropologists that an Amazonian tribe includes in the same class toads, palm leaves, and armpits (namely, the class of entities that are warm and dry on top and damp and dark underneath), but the nominalist asks us if this classification is any more arbitrary than our claim that whales and moles are members of the same class (namely, the class of entities with mammary glands).

## Saint Thomas Aquinas

As I mentioned earlier, it is Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) who is generally credited with working out the best medieval solution both to the problem of faith versus reason and to the problem of the universals.

Thomas was an Italian nobleman who ran away from his family's castle to join the Dominican order (where, by the way, he was so well fed that a niche eventually had to be carved out of the dinner table

to accommodate his ample girth). Before I talk about his philosophy, let's look at the world he inhabited, thirteenth-century Europe.

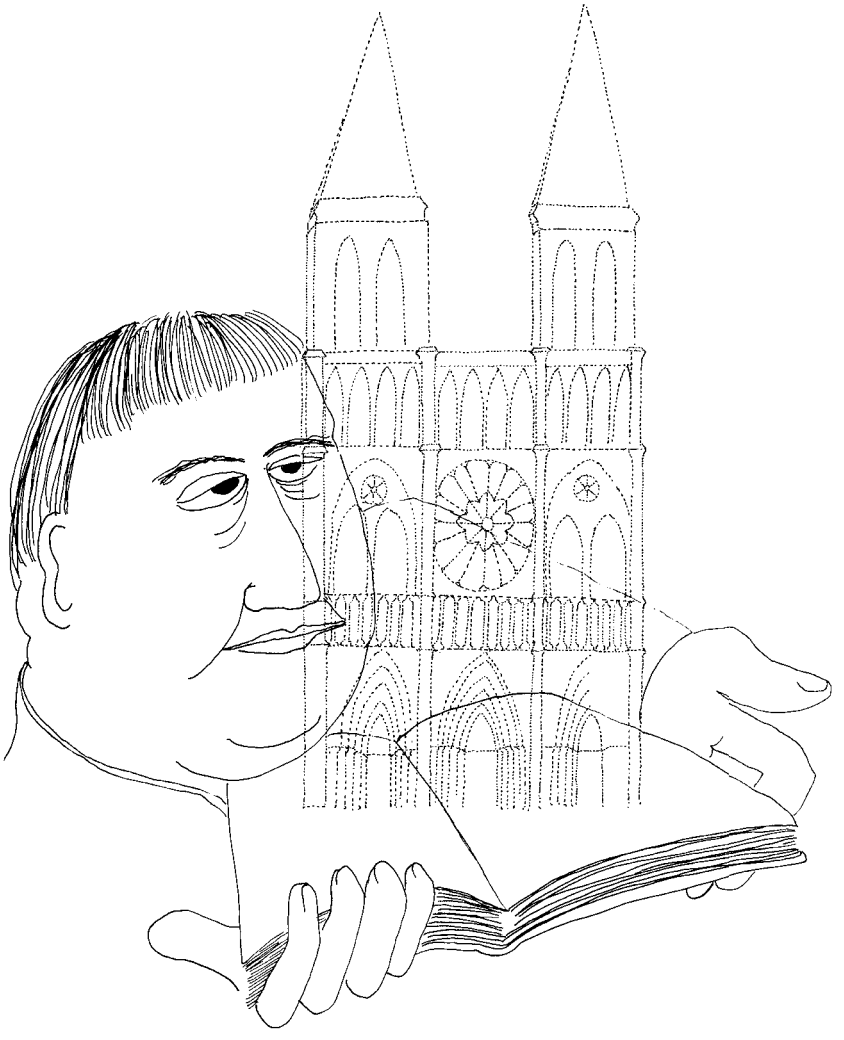
More than 100 years had elapsed between Anselm's death and Thomas's birth. In that century, as we have seen, European scholars were becoming more and more acquainted with the "lost" works of the classical age, particularly the writings of Aristotle. Though the theories of Aristotle were found to be shocking by some, his philosophy was actually more compatible with the new this-worldly attitude of the thirteenth century than was the now somewhat stale other-worldliness of Platonic thought. The human race had survived the millennium. The year 1000 had passed without the world ending, as many people had expected.


The old apocalyptic prophecies faded further into the future, and as Europe emerged from the darkest moments of the Dark Ages, interest in the world of here and now was revived. Aristotle surfaced as the champion of these new interests. It fell to Thomas Aquinas to "Christianize" him—no easy task considering that Aristotle held such un-Christian views as

A. The earth is eternal. (There never was a creation.)
B. God, the Prime Mover, knowing only his own perfection, is indifferent to human affairs. (He doesn't even know we exist.)
C. The soul is not immortal.
D. The goal of life is happiness.
E. Pride is a virtue and humility a vice.

No surprise that Aristotle's works were banned by the University of Paris in 1210. (Indeed, Thomas's works themselves were condemned at Paris and at Oxford just after his death.)

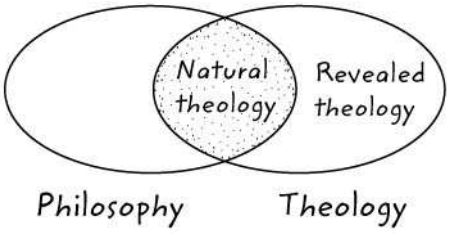
Thomas Aquinas wrote more than forty volumes. His leading works are two encyclopedic projects, the *Summa theologica* and the *Summa contra gentiles*. These tremendously systematic works comprise a whole structure that has often been compared to the Gothic cathedrals, which were the new architectural style of his day. Like them, Thomas's work is not only a mirror held up to late medieval society but also a beacon unto it.



Thomas's main job was that of *reconciliation*, not only the reconciliation of Aristotle with Christendom but also that of reason with faith and of the warring sides in the debate over the status of universals. Concerning the latter, Thomas was able to take advantage of the Aristotelian solution: Universals are neither autonomous forms nor mere mental states. They are "embedded" in particular objects as their "whatness." The human mind has the power of *abstraction* based on its ability to recognize real similarities that exist in nature. These abstractions become *concepts*. This solution came to be known as **moderate realism.** It had been anticipated 120 years earlier by Peter Abelard (1079–1142), whose view is called **conceptualism.** The only difference between the two views seems to be one of emphasis. Both are grounded in Aristotle's insistence that essences do not exist apart from individual substances, even though as an intellectual act one can abstract the essence from the substances that exhibit essential similarities. For example, I can mentally and linguistically isolate the "dogness" that all dogs have in common, even though in fact that dogness exists only *in* real dogs. Abelard appears to concentrate more than Thomas does on the *conventionality* of the concepts in the human mind and therefore holds that there is a slight discrepancy between the concept in the mind and the essence (i.e., the real similarity existing among all dogs) that that concept is meant to represent. This view pushes Abelard a bit closer to nominalism than Thomas would be willing to go. The distinctions I am discussing here are subtle; nonetheless, precisely these kinds of fine points caused passionate intellectual battles in the Middle Ages.

Concerning the problem of reason versus faith, Thomas began by distinguishing between *philosophy* and ***theology.*** The philosopher uses *human reason* alone. The theologian accepts *revelation* as authority.

Then Thomas distinguished between *revealed theology* (accepted purely on faith) and *natural theology* (susceptible of the proof of reason). That is, he showed where philosophy and theology overlap.




Thomas admitted that sometimes reason cannot establish the claims of faith, and he left those claims to the theologians (*e.g.*, the claim that the universe has a beginning in time).

Most of Thomas's system is concerned with natural theology. Nevertheless, in order to establish that form of theology, he first developed a whole metaphysical system based on Aristotelian philosophy. Thomas agreed with Aristotle that there is nothing in the human mind that does not begin with observation and experience. Even though there are no innate ideas that explain how knowledge is possible (as in Plato's philosophy), according to Thomas, the soul does have the capacity for abstraction, contemplation, and reasoning. This ability allows humans to arrive at principles and causes that can explain the observable world even if those principles and causes are themselves unobservable. To arrive at these principles—which will also be the principles of his natural theology—Thomas first employed the Aristotelian conception of the world as a plurality of substances, which, you will recall, can be analyzed in terms of form and matter, or actuality and potentiality. Thomas stressed even more than did Aristotle the idea of actuality, which he called "act" (*actus* in Latin), and associated it strongly with the idea of "being" (*esse* in Latin). *Esse* is the *actus* whereby an essence or a form (*what* a thing is) has its being. "There is no essence without existence and no existence without essence."[5] In other words, chimeras and griffins do not have essences because they do not have being. They do not exist and never

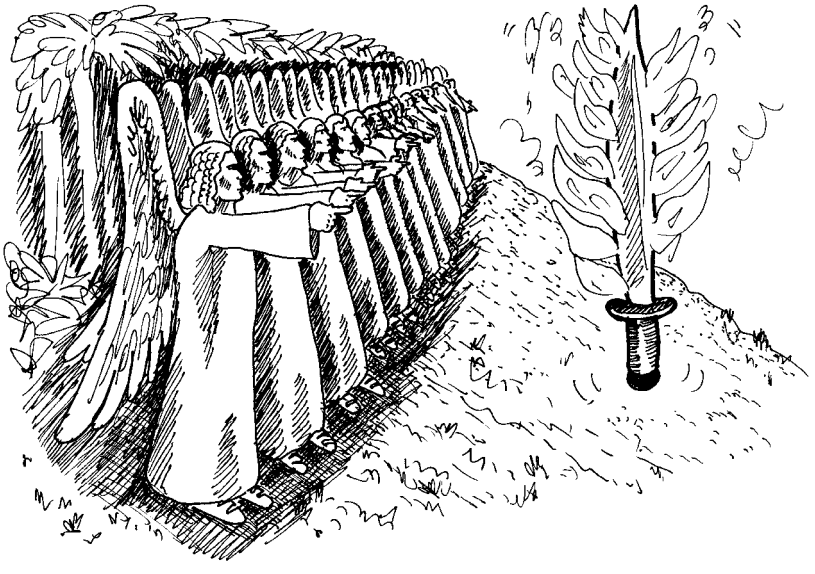
have existed. They are just fanciful constructions based on imaginative abstraction.

Aquinas placed this idea of "acts of being" in a context that is clearly more Platonic than Aristotelian, the context of a hierarchy of being. Reality is a system of "acts of being" in a hierarchical framework with God at the top and the lowliest "acts of being" taking place at the bottom. The word "being" (*esse*) here does not mean the same thing at each level of the hierarchy. The word has an **analogical** meaning rather than a single meaning. That is, *esse* at the bottom of the scale is *something* like *esse* at the top, but not identical to it. For example, according to Thomas, God is a *pure* act of being. He is, like Aristotle's Prime Mover, pure actuality with no potentiality to be anything other than what he is, whereas things further down the ladder have less actuality (they are lesser "acts of being") and have more potentiality to be something other than what they are at the moment. A tree can become lumber for a house, or it can rot, dry up, and turn into powder. It follows from this line of thinking that some substances have no physical matter, because matter has the most potentiality for change, according to Aristotle and Thomas. This lack of physical matter is true for God *and* humans, according to Aquinas. Here is where Thomas and Aristotle part company, because Aristotle called the human soul "the form of the body," implying thereby that the soul, along with the body, is mortal. But Thomas said that the soul is the form of the *subject*, the human individual, and therefore the soul is possibly immortal.


**(After Sir John Tenniel)**

(Thomas could not logically *prove* that the soul is immortal, but as a theologian he accepted Christian revelation as establishing the truth of immortality.)

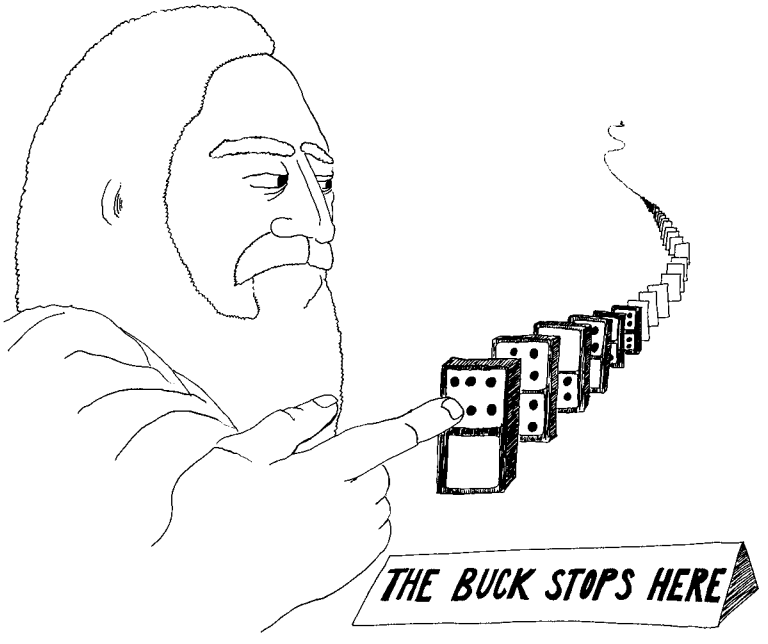
Thomas also believed that from this metaphysical scheme of reality as a hierarchy of substances one could deduce a priori that angels *must* exist to fill the gap between human souls—which are embodied—and God, who is pure, unembodied *esse*. Indeed, there have to be different levels of angels in the hierarchy, some more spiritual than others. The seraphim, for example, are higher than the cherubim. This deduction, for which Saint Thomas's followers gave him the title of the Angelic Doctor, shows not only how far the mind's capacity for abstraction can carry us beyond the confines of direct observation, but also provides a good example of a theological idea whose truth can be known both philosophically (natural theology) and by revelation (see Genesis 3:24 and Isaiah 6:2), according to Aquinas. Another, even more important, example of a truth that can be known both philosophically and through revelation is that of God's existence. In the *Summa theologica* Aquinas provided five philosophical arguments



**The Cherubim and the Flaming Sword Block the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:24)**

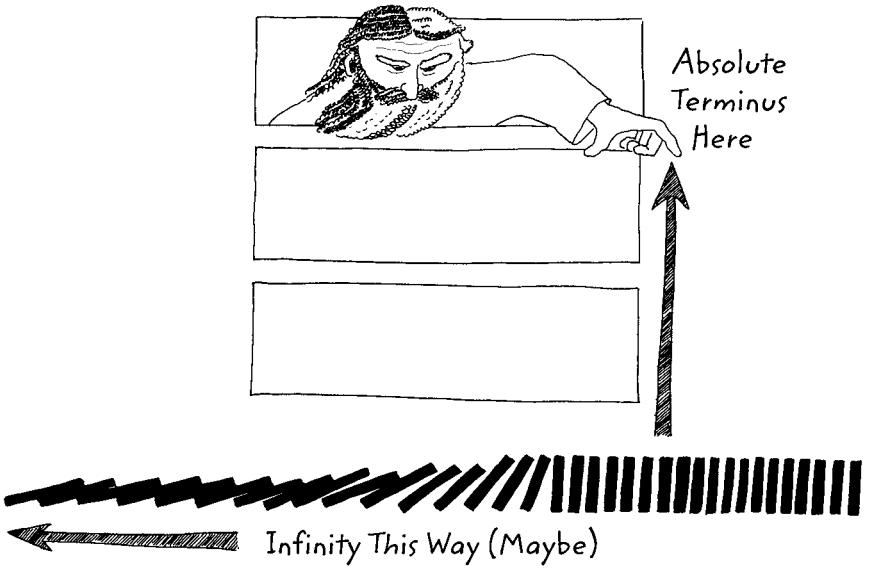
for God's existence. They are called **cosmological arguments,** as opposed to Anselm's ontological argument, because they all begin with observations derived from the natural world. (Remember, *kosmos* is the Greek word meaning "world.") Three of Thomas's "five ways" are very similar. I present here the second of the five as representative of Thomas's natural theology:

> In the world of sensible things we find there is an order of efficient causes. There is no case known (neither is it, indeed, possible) in which a thing is found to be the efficient cause of itself; for so it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. Now in efficient causes it is not possible to go on to infinity. . . . Now to take away the cause is to take away the effect. Therefore if there be no first cause among efficient causes, there will be no ultimate, nor any intermediate cause. . . . Therefore it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God.[6]




In the simplest reading of his demonstration, Thomas seems to be giving us a domino theory and merely saying that, if there is a series of causes and effects, such a series must be caused by a being who is itself uncaused; otherwise we will have an infinite regress,

which Thomas found intellectually repugnant. This version of the argument was submitted to careful scrutiny (e.g., by David Hume in the eighteenth century). Thomas's alleged knowledge of an order of causes was challenged, as was his claim that an infinite series of causes is impossible. However, Thomistic scholars have demonstrated that Thomas's second way is more complicated than it appears to be, because it involves a horizontal system of causes (in which an infinite series cannot be disproved) and a hierarchical system of dependencies (which, according to Thomas, cannot admit of an infinite regress).



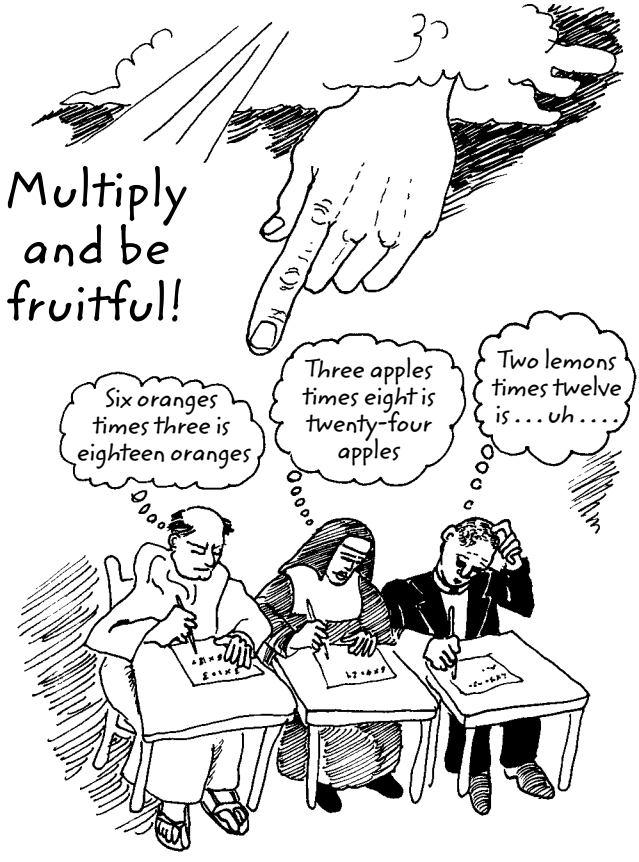

Whatever their validity, the five Thomistic proofs have some historically notable features. Unlike the ontological proof of Anselm, they all begin with an **a posteriori** claim, that is, with an appeal to observation. This is one of the Aristotelian characteristics of the argument, and in its commitment to the reality of the observable world, it contrasts greatly with the Platonism of Anselm's a priori proof. Still, there are vestiges of Platonism in the five ways, including their appeal to a hierarchy of causes.

Like Aristotle's philosophy, all of Thomas's thought is teleological, especially his ethics. Human activity is viewed as a means-end

structure. We choose desired goals and then choose among acts that lead to those goals. The acts are relative to the ends, but the ends (health, beauty, duty) are themselves relative to some absolute ends that give meaning to the relative ends; otherwise, every series of actions would lead to an infinite regress.

If we want to make correct choices, we must know what the ultimate goal is. Aristotle said it was happiness. Thomas agreed but thought he now knew what the Greeks did not—that happiness itself must be eternal to be an absolute. To be an absolute goal is to be a goal in and of itself and not be merely a goal relative to some other goal (the way that taking aspirin is a goal relative to the goal of getting rid of a headache, which is a goal relative to the higher goal of maintaining health). The argument for God's existence looks backward to a first, aboriginal *efficient cause* (in the language of Aristotle, which Thomas expressly employs), and the argument for meaning looks forward to a *final cause.* The argument claims that if there is no final cause (that is, no ultimate goal) that bestows meaning on each of the actions leading to that goal, then no action has any real meaning and human life itself is meaningless—"a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing," in the words of Shakespeare's Macbeth (act V, scene v). Our happiness, hence our correct choices and acts, depends on knowledge of God—not just on philosophical knowledge of God but on the expectation of that full and final knowledge, the **Beatific Vision.** This possibility, when achieved, fulfills the Eternal Law of God, which is the law that sustains the universe—a divine ordering that governs nature. Just as this divine law that directs natural substances is obviously consistent with the essences of those substances and is reflected in their behavior, so is it reflected in human nature. "Natural law" is the term chosen by Thomas to designate the eternal law as it applies to humans. God also gave human beings freedom; therefore they are free to obey the natural law or not. (Notice that Aquinas's use of the phrase "natural law" is not related to modern science's application of it. In the scientific sense, humans are *not* free to disobey natural

law.) Obedience to natural law is "a rational participation in the eternal law of God."[7] Thomas argued that individuals have a sufficient knowledge of their own human nature to understand generally what is morally correct and to be able to regulate their own actions in the light of that understanding. They know, for instance, that they should seek to preserve themselves and that suicide is therefore wrong. They know that they should, as a species, reproduce. (I say "as a species" because individuals, such as nuns, monks, and priests, may choose to guard their virginity without going against the natural law.) Humans also know that they should care for their fellow humans. But just in case self-knowledge is not strong enough in a weak-minded person to lead to these moral insights, revelation has also provided humans with the Ten Commandments. Thomas's moral philosophy, then, is yet another example of "natural theology," in which both philosophy and biblical revelation lead to the same conclusion.




Thomas himself seems to have experienced some kind of ecstatic realization two years before his death (a prefiguring of the Beatific Vision?), which caused him to cease writing. He said that in the face of that experience, all his words were like mere straw.

The work of Saint Thomas Aquinas represents the apogee of scholastic philosophy. But at the very moment when **scholasticism** was being articulated by Thomas Aquinas and by other thirteenth-century philosophers such as John Duns Scotus (1265–1308) as the most excellent statement of the high medieval mind, currents were already developing that would begin to undermine the scholastic synthesis, foreshadowing as they did the birth of a new, more secularly oriented world. These currents were the voices of men who, intentionally or unintentionally, separated the theological from the philosophical in ways that prepared the path for the "new science" of the Renaissance. Such was the thought of Roger Bacon (ca. 1212–ca. 1292), whose disdain for speculative metaphysics and whose curiosity about the natural world influenced other philosophers to move

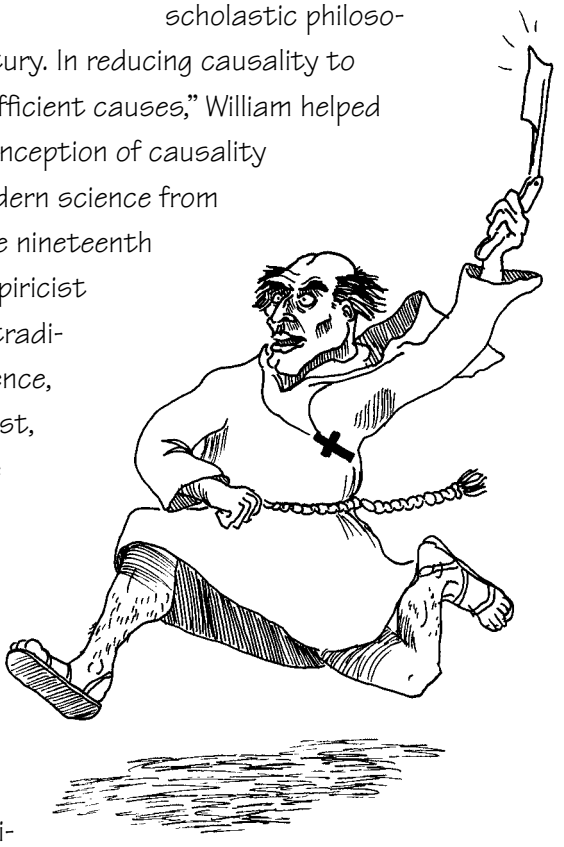
along the new path—philosophers such as John Buridan (ca. 1300–ca. 1358), Nicholas of Oresme (1320–1382), and Nicholas of Autrecourt (ca. 1300–?).

## William of Ockham

The most influential of these antischolastic late medieval philosophers was William of Ockham (ca. 1280–ca. 1349), who has already been mentioned here for his nominalistic stance in the debate concerning the status of universals. William's name comes from his birthplace, the town of Ockham in Surrey, in the south of England. After entering the Franciscan order he studied theology at Oxford, where he proved himself to be a superb logician. His philosophy—if not his theology—is unabashedly empiricist. According to William, all knowledge other than revealed knowledge must be derived *directly* from sensorial observation of particular objects and events. Therefore, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as metaphysical knowledge (knowledge that goes beyond the physical). From the narrow epistemological foundation constructed by Ockham, Thomas Aquinas's metaphysical inferences are unwarranted. The search for knowledge must be governed by a methodological principle of simplicity according to which "plurality is not to be assumed without necessity." This principle, now known as Ockham's razor (or Occam's razor, after the Latinate spelling of William's name), would in later years come to be accepted as a guiding rule by all empiricists, and indeed, it seems to have become a component of the scientific method itself. Its modern form has usually been worded as "Do not multiply entities beyond necessity," meaning that whenever a phenomenon can be equally well explained by a theory containing fewer elements rather than many, the simpler theory is to be chosen over the more complicated one. (Contrast these two theories: Your watch is powered by an electronic battery; or, your watch is powered by a workforce of invisible fairies.) William's principle of simplicity raised some ecclesiastical hackles. There were suspicions that his "razor" could be used to reduce the Holy Trinity to one, or even to


shave God out of the picture. But William's goal was almost certainly not to attack religion. He was interested in ejecting universals and essences from metaphysical theories and, indeed, in shaving metaphysics itself from the realm of possible knowledge.

Ockham's razor also eliminates Aristotle's formal and final causes, concepts used extensively by the scholastic philosophers of the thirteenth century. In reducing causality to what Aristotle had called "efficient causes," William helped usher in the **mechanistic** conception of causality that would characterize modern science from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. William's tight empiricist program also disallows the traditional proofs of God's existence, whether Anselmian or Thomist, depending as they do on the idea of a hierarchy of degrees of perfection or on the impossibility of an infinite series of efficient causes. According to Ockham, these ideas are illegitimate metaphysical notions that cannot be justified by empirical observation.

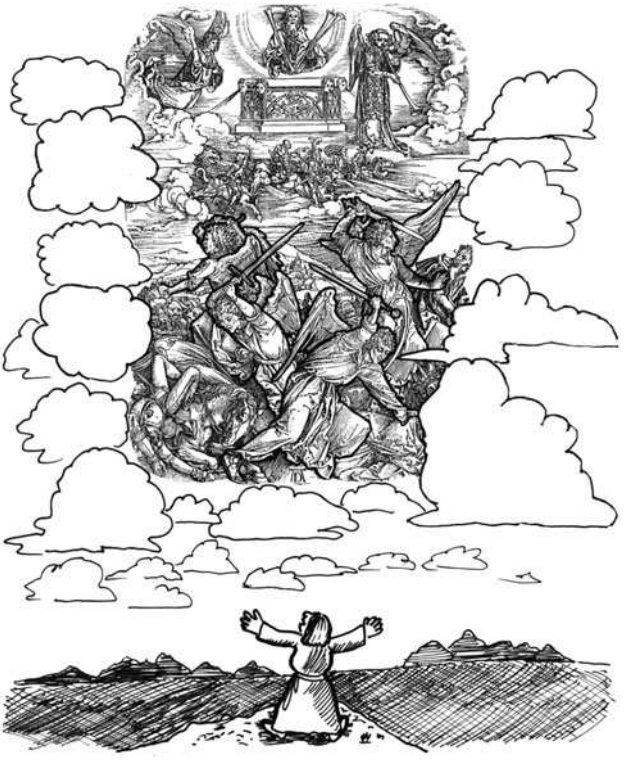


**Ockham Wielding Razor**

William's nominalism is such that only individuals are real, and universality is a feature of language, not of the world. That is, we can talk about "vegetables," for example, as a universal concept, but the universality inheres pragmatically in the linguistic category we use rather than in some universality actually existing in the various organic entities we call vegetables. William assumed that it is possible to create universal categories in language because of actual similarities between real individual objects in the world—individual carrots are not only similar to one another, but also to beets and to spinach—so his nominalism is not as radical as some later philosophers would carry it when they argued that even the concept of "similarity" is arbitrary, a conventional invention imposed on objects that are basically different from one another.

The genuine similarities and dissimilarities that exist among real objects and events permit a science of natural things, according to Ockham, including the cataloging of causal laws, but causality cannot be an absolute. There can be no *necessary connections* found among objects and events in the world. The reason for our failure to find necessity in the world is not the fault of our sensory apparata (as it will be in the radical empiricism of David Hume in the eighteenth century), but because of theological considerations. If God is omnipotent but inscrutable, as William thought Christians must believe, then all events in the natural world must be radically **contingent,** because divine omnipotence has the capacity to interrupt any series of events whatsoever, even those that we humans think are the most necessary. Indeed, there is historical and revelatory proof that such interruptions do happen, according to William, namely, the miracles recounted in the Bible.

In dealing with William of Ockham, we must constantly remind ourselves that in his own mind his radical philosophy did not undermine theology; rather, it strengthened it by preventing metaphysical ideas from claiming to impose constraints on God's ability. God's infinite freedom, inscrutable grace, and perfect omniscience are not limited by any human principles except the law of noncontradiction,



St. John the Divine Sees the End of the World

according to William. Indeed, these divine powers can even overturn the principles of empiricist philosophy, for God has the capacity to produce at will in the minds of his subjects appearances that are uncaused by any actual events in the world and yet that seem to be caused by such events. The proof of this claim is found in the visions that God allowed some of the biblical prophets to have of the future as if that future were contemporary with them. Also, revealed theology presents some paradoxes that cannot be resolved logically or philosophically, such as the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom. William rejected as sophistic the solutions to this problem of predestination that were offered by Saint Augustine, but he was unable to suggest a solution of his own.

Not surprisingly, a number of religious figures of his day found William's views to be heretical. His degree of Master of Theology from Oxford was held up by the chancellor of the university, who sent to

the pope a complaint concerning the danger of allowing William's ideas to be circulated. Ockham was called to the papal palace in Avignon to be investigated. (This period in Catholic history—between 1309 and 1377—was later called by some theologians the "Babylonian captivity" of the papacy,[8] because the French cardinals had managed to outmaneuver the Italians and forced the papacy from the Vatican in Rome to Avignon in southern France.) William stayed in Avignon for four years without any judicial decision being reached.

At Avignon William got caught up in a controversy about the role of poverty among the clergy, because he supported the Franciscan doctrine of poverty against the stance of the pope. When he realized that the pope was about to issue a condemnation of his defense of apostolic poverty, William escaped to Bavaria and sought the protection of Emperor Ludwig, the antipapal regent there. Pope John XXII excommunicated William in absentia. William probably died in Bavaria in 1349 of the Black Plague, which was ravaging Europe at that time. The epidemic deprived Europe of many of its most creative minds and contributed to a deterioration of culture that lasted well into the next century.

## Renaissance Philosophers

The historical period that marks the transition between the Middle Ages and the modern world took place approximately between 1450 and 1600. It is called the Renaissance, meaning the "rebirth," which refers not only to the recovery of classical Greek and Roman art, ideas, styles, and forms but also to a renewed enthusiasm for the more sensual aspects of life as the ancient Greeks and Romans were imagined to have lived it. The exploration and exploitation of the "New World" by navigators and conquistadores such as Christopher Columbus, Ferdinand Magellan, and Hernan Cortés, along with the opening of trade routes to Asia, produced new economics, new classes of wealth, and demands for education outside the Church-dominated cathedral universities and cloisters. The culture that

emerged put down its first and deepest roots in Italy, where the arts and literature were liberated from what the late-fifteenth-century citizens felt were the artificial strictures of the medieval world. Innovative and highly talented artists flourished, including painters (for example, Fra Angelico, Raphael, Michelangelo, and Leonardo da Vinci), sculptors (Donatello and Verrocchio), and architects (Giotto and Brunelleschi). In politics, the erosion of papal power opened channels for ambitious monarchs (for example, Charles I of Spain, Francis I of France, and Henry IV of England) and for influential religious reformers (such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, and Jonathan Wycliffe). The works of the artists and writers of the period, as well as translations of the Bible into local languages, were made available for mass consumption for the first time because of the invention of the printing press and of engraving procedures.

Closer to the specific interests of this book, attention should be directed toward the end of the Renaissance, when some of the fields that we now recognize as the modern sciences began to establish independence from their philosophical and theological moorings, and a generation of scientific heroes emerged—men such as Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543), the Polish astronomer who articulated the modern version of the heliocentric (i.e., sun-centered) theory of the planets; Tycho Brahe (1546–1601) of Denmark, who gathered the astronomical data that would later be formulated into the laws of planetary motion by Johannes Kepler (1571–1630) in Germany; Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), the Italian physicist, mathematician, and astronomer who laid the foundations of contemporary science; and the English physician William Harvey (1578–1657), who discovered the circulation of blood.

Renaissance philosophers are in general not remembered today as well as the artists, scientists, politicians, and explorers who were their contemporaries. But there are in the Renaissance two related philosophical developments that should be reported: the emergence of humanism, and the battle between a newly articulated Neoplatonism and a revised Aristotelianism.

The word "humanist" was used in the Renaissance to designate those scholars whose interests were the *studia humanitatis*, the humanities. These philosophers were keenly interested in human affairs: politics, institutions, art, and mores as well as human freedom and dignity. In general, they were more concerned with moral philosophy than with metaphysics. They removed philosophy from the hands of ecclesiastical professionals and turned it into a fitting study for laypersons. To this end, they promoted translations of the Graeco-Roman masterpieces into modern European languages and experimented in writing their own works in those same vernacular languages—the language of the people. Although several important humanists were clergymen, they too participated in freeing philosophy from the institutional control of Christian authority. Their eventual power was such that even a number of popes were designated as humanists, most notably, Nicholas V (pope from 1447 to 1455).

The poet Petrarch (Francesco Petrarca, 1304–1374) is usually regarded as the founder of Italian humanism. Inspired as he was by the rhetorical skills and aesthetic qualities of the Roman poets and orators such as Cicero and Seneca, he objected not only to the content but also to the style of the works of the scholastic philosophers, which he found "barbaric, tediously pedantic, arid and incomprehensible." He had "nothing but contempt for what he regarded as their empty loquacity and their addiction to disputation for its own sake."[9] He attacked the scholastic addiction to Aristotle and touted Plato over Aristotle as the superior philosopher. These attacks did not mean that Petrarch had no respect for Aristotle. Despite not being able to read Greek well, he blamed the scholastic philosophers for mistranslating Aristotle, and despite never having read Averroës, he also blamed them for following the Arab philosopher's commentary on Aristotle. No Arab philosopher for Petrarch, only Latin and Greek!—and only those Latin and Greek philosophers whose works were compatible with Christianity. In all things, Petrarch's motivation came back to his religious beliefs. He summed up his project with this motto: Platonic wisdom, Christian dogma, Ciceronean eloquence.

Other important Renaissance humanists were Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536) of Holland, whose *In Praise of Folly* cleverly satirized the overintellectualizing of the scholastics and called for a return to a simpler and happier Christianity; Thomas More (1478–1535) of England, whose *Utopia* combines Platonic, Epicurean, and Christian theories in a depiction of an ideal human life; the Italian Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494), whose *Oration on the Dignity of Man* lauds human freedom and the human power of self-creation; and Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) of France, whose influential *Essays* set forth in a witty manner his philosophy of skepticism. Even Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) has been called a humanist, despite the fact that his book *The Prince* seems to be less "in praise of folly" than in praise of the manipulation of political power.

Despite the many differences between the medieval and the Renaissance philosophers, they had in common that their intellectual worlds were book centered and that their arguments were based on the appeal to the authority of ancient philosophers rather than to the arguments of reason or the data of experience, as would be the case with the modern philosophers who followed them. Not until the end of the Renaissance did thinkers begin to challenge all authorities—including the classics—and with that challenge the modern world began. The big philosophical debate in the early Renaissance was over the question of which ancient *auctor* (author), Plato or Aristotle, was the truer *auctoritates* (authority). To the Renaissance philosophers, was it Plato or Aristotle who had more genuinely anticipated the truths of Christianity? Which of the two had offered a better framework for a philosophical defense of Christian dogma?

So we see that despite the Renaissance reaction against medieval scholasticism, there was nevertheless a strong Aristotelian tradition throughout the period, but it was Aristotle in a new style as humanists tried to claim him for their own. If the scholastics had produced a perversion of the true Aristotle, then he must now be reclaimed for the new age. The Italian universities taught philosophy as a preparation for medicine, and in these teachings Aristotle's

natural philosophy played a very different role from the role it had played at Oxford and Paris. Still, numerous empirically oriented philosophers continued to argue that Aristotle's philosophy—especially in its new, humanized guise—was better than Platonism for defending Christian dogma. However, as one Renaissance scholar noted, "even the most advanced Aristotelians did not progress from empiricism to experimentalism. They remained content to observe nature passively in order to confirm established doctrines rather than trying to devise methods of active intervention or validation."[10]


The Platonic philosophy that, during the Renaissance, tried to usurp the role that Aristotelian philosophy had played during the High Middle Ages was in fact an updated version of the Neoplatonism of the Low Middle Ages. Its tradition goes back to Plotinus, Proclus,[11] Saint Augustine, the Pseudo-Dionysius, and John Scotus Eriugena. Renaissance Neoplatonism, especially that of the Florentine Academy, founded by Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), was nevertheless not identical to its earlier incarnation. It was more humanized, yet it was also more entirely Christianized. The early Church fathers had speculated that Plato had learned of the Hebrew Bible during a visit to Egypt. This connection explained what the Platonized Christians took to be striking similarities between Plato's philosophy and Christianity, which to them was the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Ficino translated all thirty-six

of Plato's dialogues, plus the *Enneads* of Plotinus, into Latin. Furthermore, he translated a manuscript attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, an Egyptian priest, that purported to show how Mosaic wisdom had been transmitted to Plato. This document was later discovered to be a forgery from the early Christian period, but in the Renaissance it added considerable stature to Plato's religious credentials.

The Neoplatonic Christians of the early medieval period had found it advantageous to interpret passages of the Bible not only literally but also allegorically and esoterically (finding layers of hidden meaning). The Platonism espoused in the Renaissance by Ficino and his teacher, Cardinal Bessarion (ca. 1403–1472), and by Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) in Germany applied the same technique to the writings of Plato himself. This interpretation allowed them not only to find in Plato's writings cryptic allusions to biblical truth but also to explain away certain awkward features of Plato's philosophy, such as his apparent approval of homosexuality, his communism, and his doctrine of **metempsychosis** (according to which the soul exists in a heaven of souls before the body is born and enters the body at birth). Despite the mystical tendencies in Neoplatonism, in its Renaissance version it avoided Plato's apparent other-worldliness by seeing each individual object in the visible world as a microcosmic replica of the whole of reality. So, rather than viewing the physical world as disgusting, ugly, and sinful, humans could appreciate and even spiritualize the beauties of the material realm. The influence of humanism on Neoplatonism even permitted the glorification of pleasure and sensuality. This feature of Neoplatonism is perhaps best manifested in Renaissance art and allows that art to be paradoxically Platonic,

despite Plato's own suspicions about art and particularly about art's sensuous aspects.

Toward the end of the Renaissance, a revived interest in ancient Greek skepticism was employed to undermine *all* philosophical knowledge. Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469–1533), nephew of the more famous Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, hoped to sweep away all philosophical learning and leave only the firm foundation of divine authority. He failed to foresee that that same skepticism would soon be used to chisel away at the bedrock of Christian dogma.

Giordano Bruno (b. 1548)—whom we could call the last man of the Renaissance—was burned at the stake by the Inquisition on February 17, 1600, for refusing to treat philosophical issues from the perspective that the religious authorities had deemed orthodox. At his trial he said that he pursued his ideas "according to the light of nature, without regard to any principles prescribed by faith."[12] Among his crimes was his espousal of the Copernican heliocentric theory of planetary motion.

## Topics for Consideration

1. According to the information in this chapter, what is the relationship among the three major religions in the West: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam?
2. Write a short essay setting forth your own views about what is called in this chapter the problem of God's foreknowledge. If you agree with Augustine's solution, defend it. If you disagree with Augustine, criticize his solution.
3. Explain how the Christian philosopher John Scotus Eriugena could assert that God belongs in the category of "things that do not exist."
4. Explain why the opposite of a self-contradictory statement (i.e., the negation of such a statement) is necessarily true. Then explain why Saint Anselm asserted that the statement "God does not exist" is self-contradictory.
5. Describe the similarities that you find among the philosophies of Averroës, Maimonides, and Thomas Aquinas.

6. Explain what the problem of the universals is. Detail your explanation by analyzing the concept "dog" from the perspective of (a) the exaggerated realists, (b) the moderate realists, and (c) the nominalists. (Begin by looking up the words "dog" and "canine" in the dictionary.)
7. Compare and contrast Saint Anselm's ontological argument with Saint Thomas's cosmological argument.
8. Explain the ways in which the philosophy of William of Ockham, if true, would undermine the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas.
9. In your library find a book with reproductions of paintings from Renaissance Italy. Select a few and analyze each of them first from the point of view of Plato himself (see Chapter 2), then from the perspective of the Neoplatonic Renaissance philosophers.

## Notes

1. Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogium,* in *The Age of Belief, ed.* Anne Fremantle (New York: New American Library, 1954), 88–89.
2. This debate is discussed by Oliver Leaman, *Averroës and His Philosophy* (Richmond, England: Curzon Press, 1998). Leaman espouses the second of the two views.
3. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed,* trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 29, 123.
4. Marvin Fox, *Interpreting Maimonides: Studies in Methodology, Metaphysics, and Moral Philosophy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 21.
5. Frederick Copleston paraphrasing St. Thomas, in *A History of Philosophy,* vol. 2, *Medieval Philosophy,* part 2 (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books/Doubleday and Co., 1962), 53.
6. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica,* in *The Age of Belief,* 153.
7. Vernon J. Bourke paraphrasing Saint Thomas, in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* vol. 8, *ed.* Paul Edwards (New York and London: Macmillan, 1972), 112.
8. The term "Babylonian captivity" refers by analogy to the enslavement of the Jews by the Babylonians between 579 and 338 B.C.E. Parts of the story of the complications of the Avignon papacy are nicely dramatized in Umberto Eco's best-selling novel *The Name of the Rose,* whose main character, William of Baskerville, is an amalgamation of William of Ockham and Sherlock Holmes.
9. Jill Fraye, "The Philosophy of the Italian Renaissance," in *The Routledge History of Philosophy,* vol. 4, *The Renaissance and Seventeenth-Century Rationalism, ed.* G. H. R. Parkinson (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 17.
10. Ibid., 42.
11. Proclus (ca. 401–485) was the last administrator of the Athenian school of Platonism, which by then had become a form of Neoplatonism.
12. Quoted by Fraye, 49.

# 5

# Continental Rationalism and British Empiricism

## The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

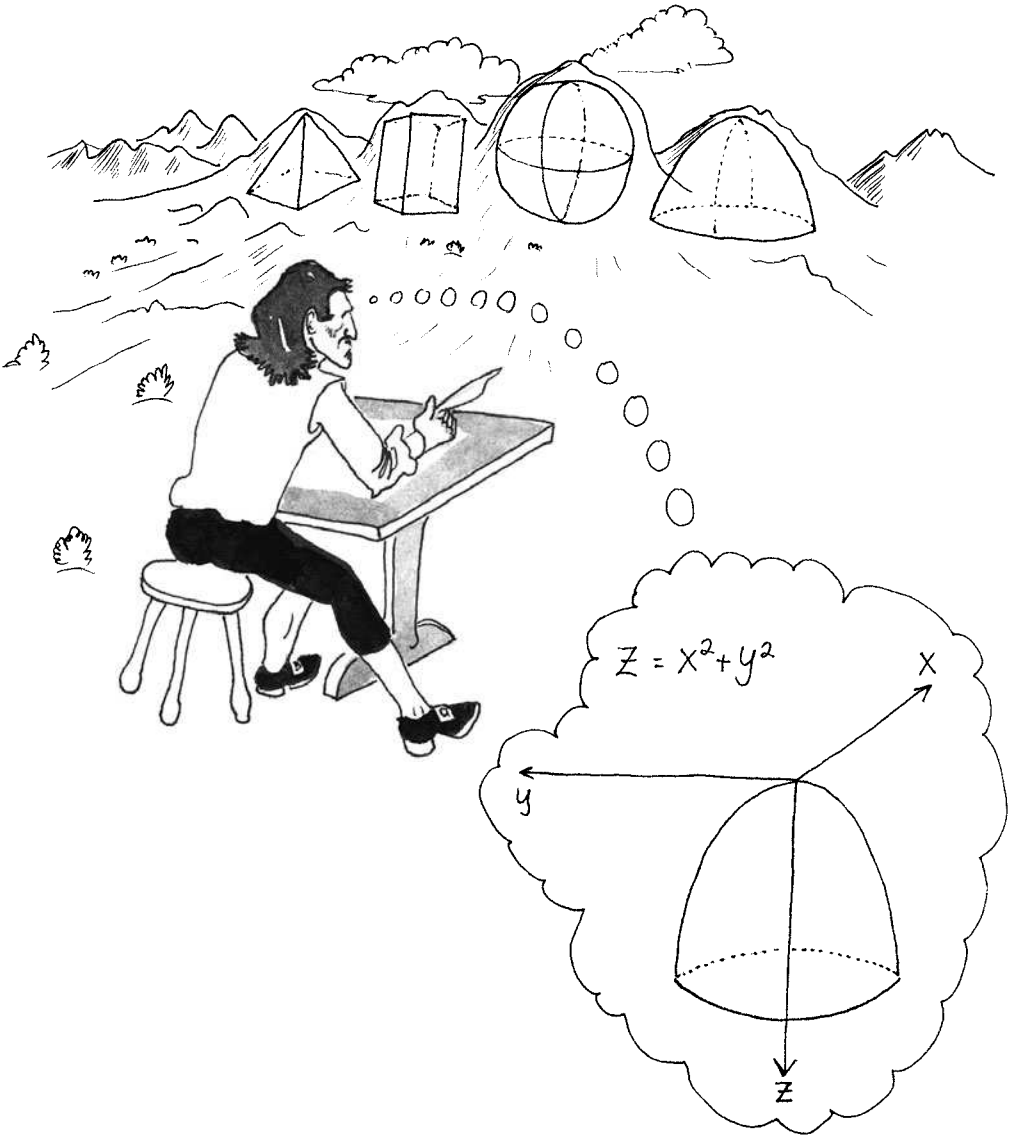
### Descartes

René Descartes

Though there were a number of lesser philosophers during the Renaissance, the first truly magnificent philosophical system of the modern period was that of the Frenchman René Descartes (1596–1650). Descartes may not have been very good looking, but he was smart!

Descartes first carved a niche for himself in the pantheon of intellectual giants by discovering analytical geometry, thereby fulfilling the old Pythagorean dream of demonstrating the relation between plane geometry and pure algebra.

Having made his contribution to math, in 1633 Descartes was about to publish his manuscript on physics, but when it dawned on



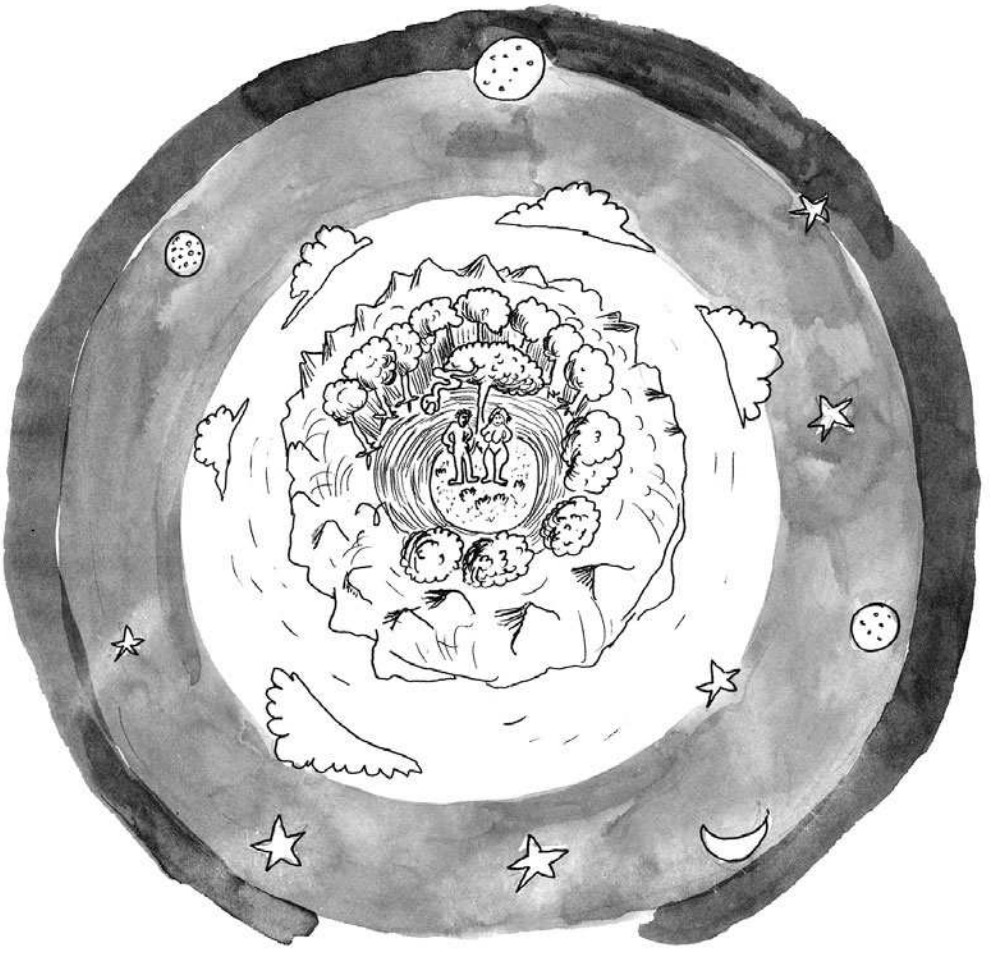

him that seventeen years earlier Galileo Galilei had been arrested by the Inquisition for teaching views about the physical world that were very close to Descartes' own views, Descartes ran, did not walk, to his publisher to withdraw his manuscript.

Galileo's crime had been to peer through his newly invented telescope and discover that the planet Jupiter had four moons.


Ce ne sono quattro!

Why should anybody care? Least of all, why should the Brothers of the Inquisition care?

Because the Renaissance mind had inherited from the medieval world the view that the Garden of Eden was the belly button of the universe and that God had created the rest of the cosmos in concentric layers around the stage of the human drama.



Of course, there had been rumors floating around that the sun and not the earth was the center of the planetary system, but the scientific evidence against that view was the undisputed fact that the moon orbits the earth. If the sun is the center of everything, then why doesn't the moon orbit the sun instead of the earth?

So, if Galileo proved that Jupiter has four moons that orbit it, then he had pulled the last strut out from under the geocentric theory of the universe. As Freud was to say later, this discovery was the first of the three major blows against humans' conception of their own self-importance. (The other two were Darwin's revelation that we are only animals and Freud's discovery that we are sick animals.)


It was too much for the Brothers of the Inquisition, so off went Galileo to jail.

Descartes was a practicing Catholic, but he believed that religion as it was conceived and followed by some of his fellow Catholics—including some powerful ones—was riddled with contradiction and superstition. He disapproved of what he saw as the Church's reactionary stance in its confrontation with the newly


emerging sciences, including Galileo's astronomical writings, and he thought that a correct picture of humans would include both spiritual values and the capacity for rigorous scientific investigation. He correctly saw that if religion tried to stem the tide of science, religion would be swept away. But Descartes did not want to have to go to jail to prove it.

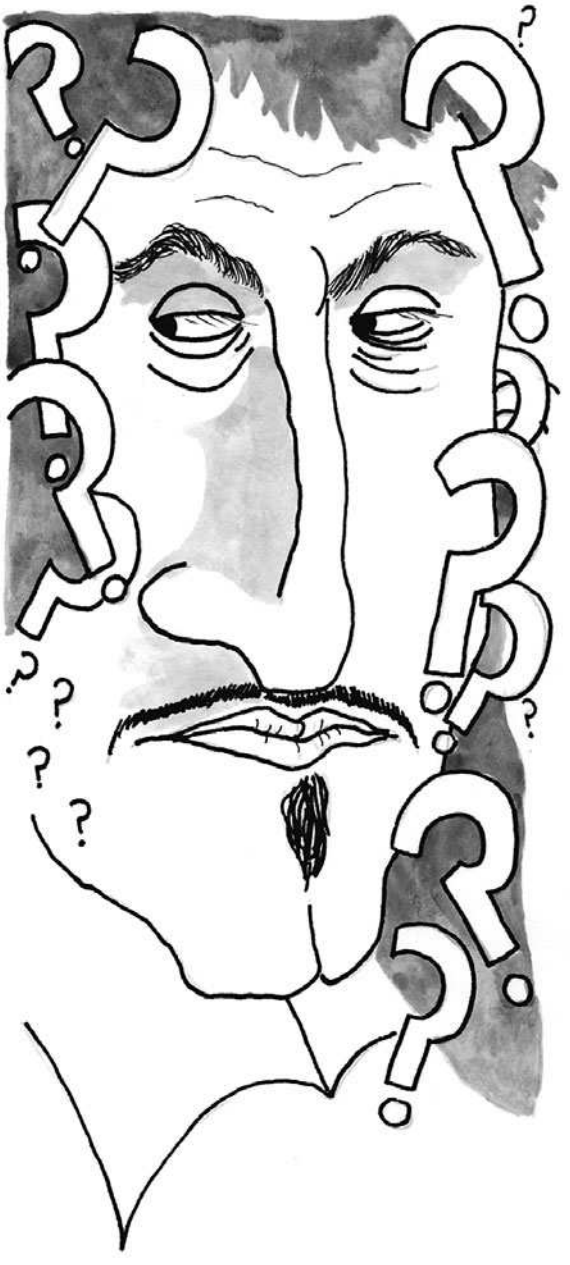
**Stemming the Tide**

So he decided to ease his ideas about physics onto an unsuspecting religious establishment by smuggling them into a book of philosophy called *Meditations*, which, in a groveling and self-effacing manner, he dedicated to "the Most Wise and Illustrious Doctors of the Sacred Faculty of Theology in Paris."

Meanwhile, to his friend he wrote, "the six Meditations contain all the fundamental ideas of my physics. But please keep this quiet."[1] Descartes hoped that the theologians would be convinced by his arguments before they realized that their own views had been refuted.

To discover a firm foundation of absolute certainty upon which to build his new objective system of knowledge, Descartes chooses a

method of "radical doubt," whose motto is *De omnibus dubitandum*—everything is to be doubted. Descartes will doubt away anything that can possibly be doubted, no matter how weak the grounds are for doubting, until he can discover a proposition that is logically



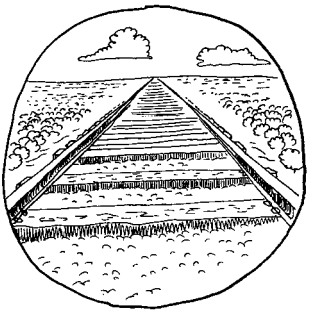
indubitable. This proposition, if it exists, will be the absolutely certain foundation of all knowledge.

He writes:

> I must once for all seriously undertake to rid myself of all the opinions which I had formerly accepted, and commence to build anew from the foundation if I wanted to establish any firm and permanent structure in the sciences.[2]

This radical project requires him to tear down the old "house of knowledge," riddled as it was with rotten beams and unsupportable planks, and rebuild it from the ground up. Descartes realizes that such a project could take forever if, one by one, he challenges each of what seems like an infinite number of beliefs in the attempt to "rid himself of all his former opinions," so, like a termite inspector operating on the assumption that if a main bottom support beam is rotten, the whole building is in danger, Descartes immediately scrutinizes a structure that supports most of what passes for knowledge, namely, information about the outside world supplied by the five senses. He writes: "All that up to the present time I have accepted as most true and certain I have learned either from the senses or through the senses" (166). Amazingly, his method of radical doubt eliminates the primary source of information in one fell swoop. He announces that the senses are known deceivers, and it is not prudent ever to trust a known liar.

Descartes' point is clear. We all know about optical illusions (the "bent oar" in the pond, the "water" on the road, the tracks that



"meet at the horizon") as well as illusions associated with the other senses. So, suddenly, radical doubt has deprived Descartes of all sensory information.

But Descartes immediately feels he has gone too far. He writes:


If you can cut through the wonderfully Baroque language here, you'll see that Descartes is saying that anyone who can stare at his hands and *wonder* if they are his hands is not a philosopher, but a lunatic. Radical doubt, in telling us that we should never trust the senses, has suddenly become a form of insanity.

Perhaps the only way to keep Descartes from leading us away from the "house of knowledge" and into a madhouse is to acknowledge that simple commonsense judgments such as "This is my hand" are the legitimate foundations of knowledge. But remember, the philosophical game Descartes is playing ("radical" or "methodological" doubt) requires that the *slightest* ground for doubt be accepted as canceling out any claim of certainty. Therefore, Descartes proceeds to scrutinize his thoughts about his hand as he stares at it, trying to see if he can detect a weakness in these thoughts; he discovers a major debility that has since come to be called "the problem of dreams." Descartes writes:

> I am in the habit of sleeping, and in my dreams representing to myself the same things or sometimes even less probable things, than do those who are insane in their waking moments. How often has it happened to me that in the night I dreamt that I found myself in this particular place, that I was dressed and seated near the fire, whilst in reality I was lying undressed in bed! (166–67)

He comes to what he calls an "astonishing" realization: that there is no test to prove with absolute certainty that at any given moment one is not dreaming. (Any test you can *think*, you can *dream*, so it's no test at all.)

Therefore, consistent with radical doubt, Descartes assumes that it is always possible that he *is* dreaming. This assumption totally undermines the possibility that the senses can provide us with certain knowledge. (Imagine someone saying, "This is a table" but then having to qualify her assertion by adding, "However, I may be dreaming, so maybe it's not a table.")

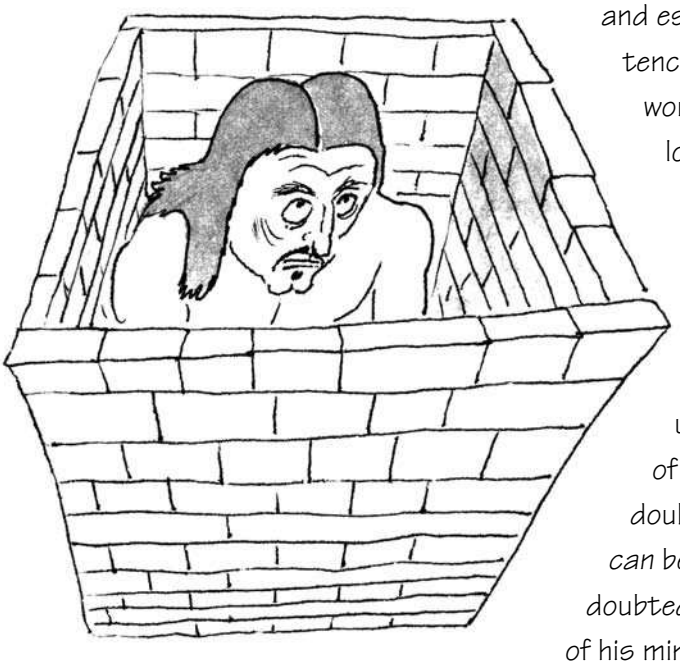
What about mathematics? Perhaps it can be a candidate for absolute certainty. Descartes says, "For whether I am awake or asleep, two and three together always form five, and the square can never have more than four sides, and it does not seem possible that truths so clear and apparent can be suspected of any falsity or

uncertainty" (168). But radical doubt requires Descartes to suspect even the simplest propositions of arithmetic if there is *any* reason for doing so. Well, what if the Creator of the universe was not the benevolent God of Catholicism about whom Descartes had learned in his childhood, but an Evil Genius, a malevolent demon whose sole purpose was that of deception, so that even the simplest mathematical judgment would always be false? (Again, imagine a math teacher saying to her class, "two plus three equals five . . . unless there is an Evil Genius, in which case maybe two plus three is not five.") Could Descartes know for sure that such a demon did not exist?

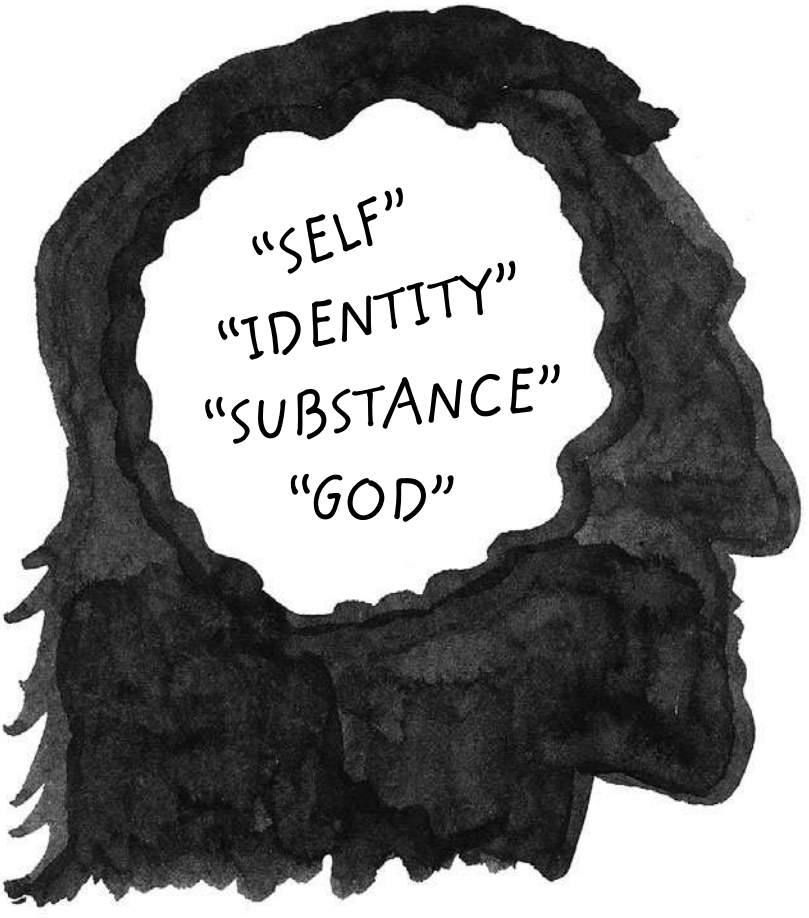
No, he could not! It is logically possible that Descartes' mind is being controlled externally by a malevolent force. So, following the rules of radical doubt, Descartes assumes that all the world is nothing but the diabolical fiction of the Evil Genius.

Well, then, is there any thought that would be certain to Descartes even if his senses are deceiving him, even if he is dreaming, even if an all-powerful demon is exercising its full might to deceive him? Is there any truth that is correct and certain, even to a lunatic? Yes, there is one, and only one, such truth: "I think, therefore I am."[3] Even if his senses deceive him, even if he is dreaming, even if he is mad, even if an evil genie is set on deluding him, this proposition is true for as long as he asserts it or holds it in consciousness. It and it alone cannot be doubted under any circumstances.

Having discovered certainty in selfhood and having established that his self is identical to his consciousness (for it is possible to doubt that you have a body, but it is impossible to doubt that you have a mind; therefore, your self and your mind must be the same), Descartes now has a foundation upon which to build his new "house of knowledge": the certainty of selfhood, or of consciousness, or as he calls it in his more religious moments, of the soul. But what can he build upon that foundation? Descartes now must find a way of escaping **solipsism,** that is, of escaping the confines of his own subjectivity



and establishing the existence of an external world. To do so, he looks inward and carefully examines the contents of his own mind—because, at this point, working under the strictures of the rules of radical doubt ("anything that can be doubted must be doubted"), the contents of his mind are all that Descartes has to work with. In addition to the absolutely certain knowledge of selfhood, Descartes also finds what philosophers today call **sense data,** the immediate sensations of perception: colors, sounds, odors, tastes, and tactile textures (hard, soft, cold, hot, etc.). These sense data too are certain as long as we merely describe them and do not make causal inferences to the external world. "I am experiencing red, white, and blue now" is certain, but "There is a French (or American, or British, or Dutch) flag out there" is not certain. (I may be dreaming; an Evil Genius may be deceiving me.) At least the existence of mental sense data and the possibility that they are caused by a physical world outside my consciousness gives Descartes hope of making progress. But Descartes' survey of the contents of consciousness provides him with a much firmer bridge to external reality, even if that bridge's connection to the outside physical world is rather indirect. Descartes discovers that besides sense data, the mind also contains four **innate ideas** (shades of Plato) that are not derived from sense data. In fact, the very idea of selfhood is such an idea, according to Descartes. The other innate ideas




are the idea of *identity*, that is, the idea of "sameness"; the idea of *substance*, that is, the idea of "thingness"; and the idea of an all-perfect being (that is, *God*). Now, the ideas of substance and of God, if they could be proved to be veridical, would establish that there was something in the universe besides Descartes' consciousness. But of course an Evil Genius of the proportions conceived by Descartes could easily place a false idea of substance in his mind. What about the idea of God? How does Descartes know that his apparently innate idea of God was not placed in his mind by the Evil Genius? Descartes has to *prove* God's existence and has to do so using only those data that he can deduce logically from the one certainty afforded him—the immediate states of his own consciousness.

(Critics point out that Descartes overlooks the fact that the process of logical deduction is exactly the kind of reasoning that the Demon could distort. If it can distort math, it can distort logic. They are roughly the same thing.) Nevertheless, Descartes does prove—to his own satisfaction, at least—God's existence. He offers two arguments to achieve this result. Here's the first:

> [E]xistence can no more be separated from the essence of God than can having its three angles equal to two right angles be separated from the essence of a [rectilinear] triangle, or the idea of a mountain from the idea of a valley; and so there is not any less repugnance to our conceiving a God (that is, a Being supremely perfect) to whom existence is lacking (that is to say, to whom a certain perfection is lacking), than to conceive of a mountain which has no valley. (204)

This argument is clearly a version of the ontological argument of Saint Anselm, whom Descartes fails to acknowledge as the author of this demonstration. (To be fair to Descartes, we could say that it is precisely Descartes' appeal to reason rather than to authority that makes him a modern thinker.)

Here's a paraphrase of the second argument in four steps. (Such a condensation of his proof may be unfair to Descartes. The argument may be more convincing in all its detail. But Descartes takes four pages to develop it! Philosophy is long; life is short.)

(A) The fact that I doubt proves that I am an imperfect being. (A perfect being would know everything, hence would have no doubts.)
(B) I can only know that I am imperfect if I already understand the idea of perfection.
(C) My idea of perfection could only be caused in me by something perfect. (Nothing can be more perfect than its cause, and nothing in my actual experience is perfect enough to cause the idea of perfection in my mind.)
(D) Therefore, a perfect being (God) exists.

Notice that *doubting* is a form of *thinking*—indeed, it has so far been Descartes' main form of thinking, given his method. Therefore

the two main **Cartesian** philosophical arguments so far could be stated as

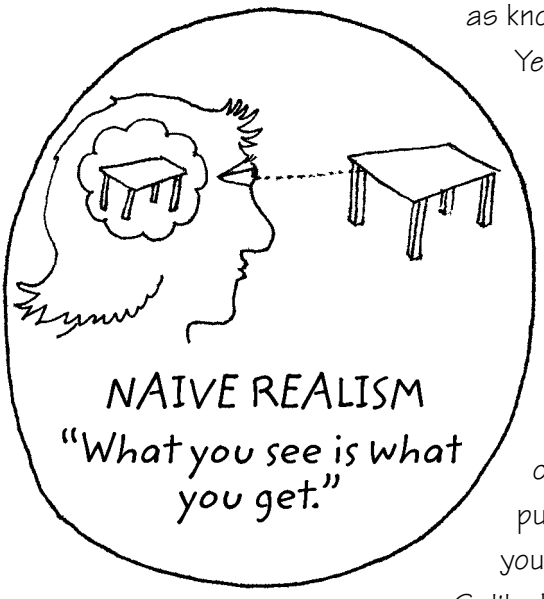
1. I doubt, therefore I exist.
   and
2. I doubt, therefore God exists.

Also notice that both proofs presuppose the Platonic hierarchy of being, in which "most real" equals "most perfect," and vice versa.

If valid, Descartes' proof of God's existence disposes of the Evil Genius. (If a secret universal deceiver exists and causes me to err, and if God has given me no way to know if its existence, then my error must be blamed on God. But a perfect Being is by definition faultless. Therefore, if God exists, the Evil Demon does not exist.)

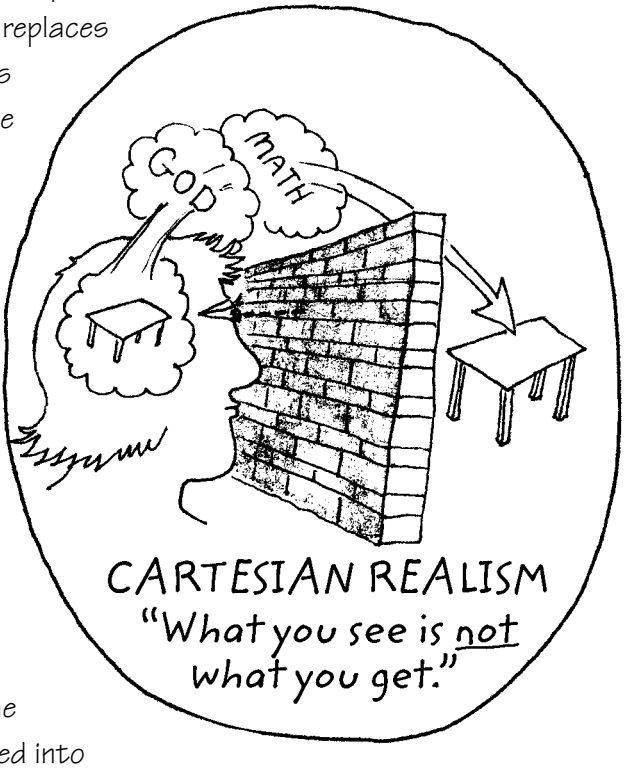
The End of the Evil Demon
(Or Is It?)

Descartes' discovery of the logical impossibility of an Evil Genius restores mathematics to his system (the only objection to math had been the Evil Genius hypothesis). Descartes applied math not to the world as known by the senses (the senses are never fully rehabilitated in Descartes' system) but to his innate concept of corporeal substance, introducing him to a world not of colors, sounds, tastes, smells, and heat and cold—for Descartes, these qualities exist only in the mind, *caused* by material substance—but of objects of size, shape, location, and three-dimensionality moving through space at different velocities. *These* ideas can be treated mathematically, and mathematical laws describing their nature and behavior can be discovered, in fact—*quelle surprise!*—are exactly the kind of mathematical laws developed by Galileo and soon to be developed by Johannes Kepler, Isaac Newton, and a host of others. The *real* world is not the world as known by the senses but the world

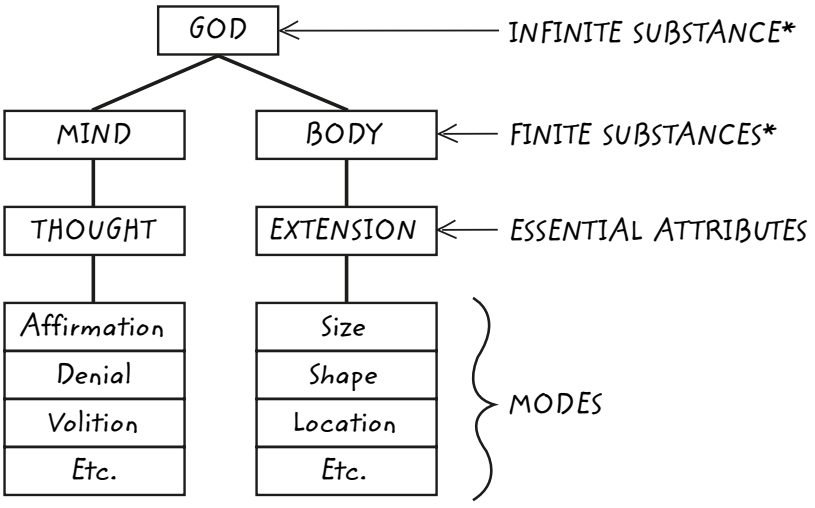



as known by mathematical physics. Yet, in Descartes' system, none of these conclusions would be possible if Descartes did not base science on the certainty of self (self equals soul) and God's existence. Without God there is only confusion and solipsism; with God, science can happen. Descartes has pulled it off. He has shown that you can have both God and Galileo!

However, Descartes does leave himself with a few problems. First, he has replaced the commonsense view of the relation between self and world (what philosophers call **"naive realism"**), but he replaces it with a most circuitous route, indeed. Second, he assigns all perceivable qualities ("red," "blue," "sweet," "warm," "melodious") to the mind and leaves only mathematically measurable quantities in the external world—a cold, colorless, odorless, soundless, tasteless world of matter in motion.

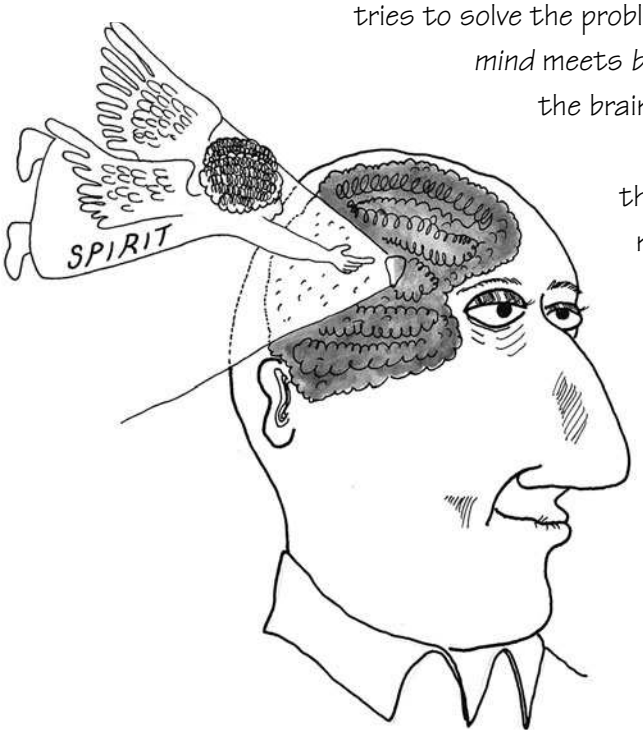



Furthermore, Descartes' picture of the world is hopelessly divided into




* Substance is defined as "that which can exist by itself, without the aid of any other substance."[4]

substances that are defined in ways that mutually exclude each other. How could the mental world (a nonspatial, purely spiritual sphere) have any effect on the physical world of crass matter, and vice versa, in this radically dualistic scheme of things? Descartes tries to solve the problem by claiming that *mind* meets *body* at the center of the brain, in the pineal gland.




It should be obvious that this solution does not work. No matter *where* mind meets body, at that place it *becomes* body, because it then has *location*, which is a mode of physical substance. At this point, Descartes conveniently dies of the common

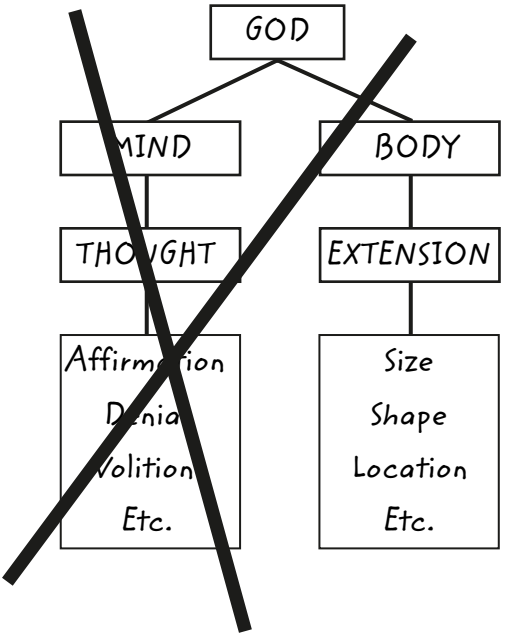
cold while visiting his benefactress, Queen Christina of Sweden, in order to explain to her the function of the pineal gland. So, he left to his followers the legacy of his radical dualism.

## Hobbes

Meanwhile, across the Channel, Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) was dealing with problems similar to those addressed by his contemporary René Descartes. Hobbes was a contentious old codger who dabbled in everything. (His experiments in math led him to claim that he had squared the circle and cubed the sphere.) At one point or

**Thomas Hobbes Squares the Circle**

another he managed to antagonize every political party in Britain and had to flee to France.




Hobbes solved Descartes's dualistic dilemma simply by dismantling dualism. He loudly proclaimed a form of mechanistic materialism reminiscent of Democritus's atomism, thereby rejecting one side of Descartes' diagram; and Hobbes's thinly disguised atheism rejected Descartes' "infinite substance" as well. For Hobbes, the only things that existed in reality were bodies in motion. Despite his claim that "there exist everywhere only bodies," Hobbes did not actually deny the existence of thoughts. He simply held them to be "phantasms," shadows of brain activity, mere epiphenomena that had no practical effect on the physical system. Similarly, though he was a determinist, he was, like the stoics and St. Augustine, a "soft determinist." (A soft determinist believes that freedom and determinism are compatible.) It was okay to talk about freedom as long as all one meant by it was "unimpeded movement." (Water flows down a channel both necessarily and freely.)

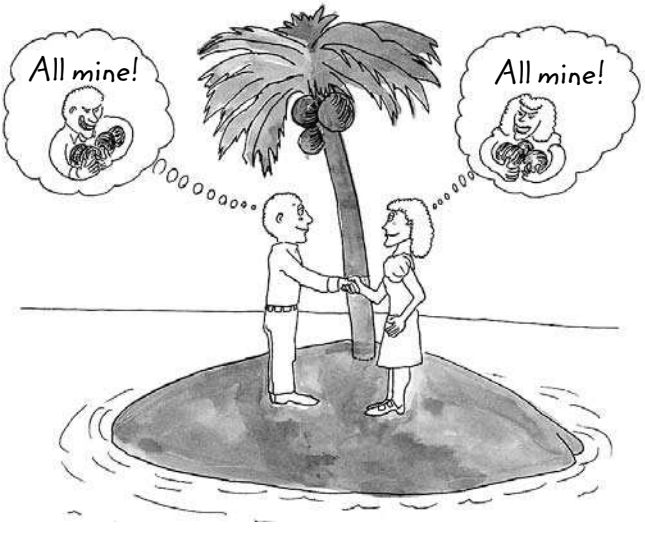
Hobbes's psychology is very pessimistic. Every living organism obeys laws of individual survival; therefore, all human acts are motivated by self-interest and the quest for power. Altruism is not just a bad idea; it is impossible. Far from being immoral, *egoism* is the only show in town: "Of the voluntary acts of every man, the object is some good to himself."[5]

What makes Hobbes's **psychological egoism** pessimistic, in my opinion, is that if it is true, then it is impossible for individuals to act except in ways that they take to be in their own interest. Anyone who

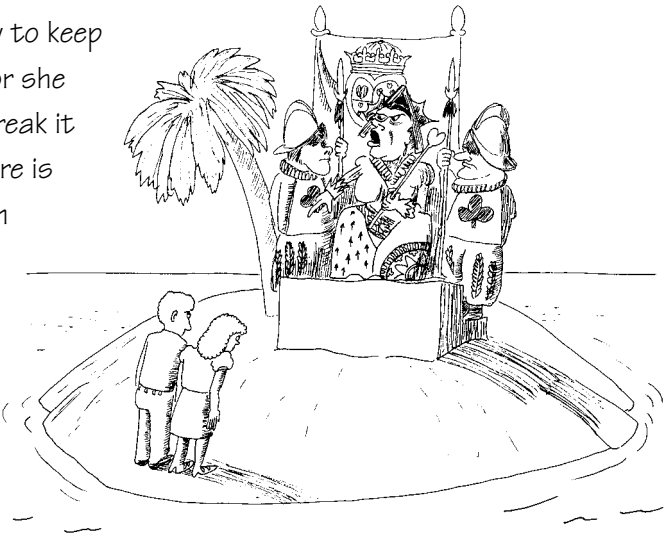

makes a claim to the contrary is lying or is in a state of self-delusion, ignorance, or stupidity.

Hobbes is best known for his political philosophy, which is influenced by his egoistic theory of motivation. He recognized the state as an artificial monster (the "Leviathan") that restricts what little freedom there is in nature and flaunts its power over the individual, but Hobbes justified the existence of the political state by contrasting it to the notorious "state of nature," dominated by scarcity and fear,


where "every man is enemy to every man" and where life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short."[6] In the state of nature, there is no law, no morality, no property, and only one "natural right"—the right to protect oneself using any means at one's disposal, including violence and slaughter. If two people are on a desert island and there isn't an abundance of coconuts to eat, then neither dares turn a back nor sleep lest the other bash him or her with a rock in order to get all the coconuts. However, if both are rational, they will realize that the most likely way of surviving is to agree with each other to forswear violence and share the coconuts. The trouble is, given the selfish nature that Hobbes attributes to all of us, there is no reason



at all for either party to keep the agreement if he or she can figure a way to break it with impunity. So there is every reason for them to distrust each other. Despite their "agreement," neither dares yet to sleep a wink. The solution requires that a third party be found. The first two parties give to the third party all the rocks (and perhaps an army), and they give up their right to violence. In exchange, the third party promises to use her absolute power to guarantee that the first two parties honor their agreement with each other. ("She" may be either a monarch or a parliament—in either case she is the source of all authority.)



The Sovereign

This is Hobbes's famous "social contract." He realized that there is nothing to prevent the new sovereign from abusing her power (indeed, given her egoistic nature and innate lust for power, it is almost inevitable that she would do so), but he believed that the state, even with its necessary abuse of power, was better than the alternative—the horrors of anarchy in "the state of nature."

(It should be mentioned that, typically, Hobbes's political theory managed to please no one in Britain. The parliamentarians didn't like it because of its absolutist implications, and the king didn't like it because of its denial of the divine right of monarchs.)

## Spinoza

Back on the Continent, the Dutch-born Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1634–1677) was trying to resolve the dilemmas of Descartes' legacy while remaining within the rationalistic tradition that

Descartes exemplified. (Rationalists believe that the true source of knowledge is reason, not the senses, and that the correct philosophical model must be an a priori one, not one based on empirical generalizations.) Spinoza was, according to Bertrand Russell, "the noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers,"[7] because Spinoza, more than any other philosopher, *lived* his philosophy, even though he realized that doing so would result in his alienation from both the Jewish and the Christian communities. Spinoza accepted his excommunication from synagogue, church, and society without rancor, and he never sought fame or riches, or even a professorship, living out his life philosophizing and grinding lenses to earn a meager living. He accepted as his reward the state of tranquility afforded to him by his philosophy, and his motto could well have been his own epigram, "All excellent things are as difficult as they are rare."[8]

**Baruch Spinoza**

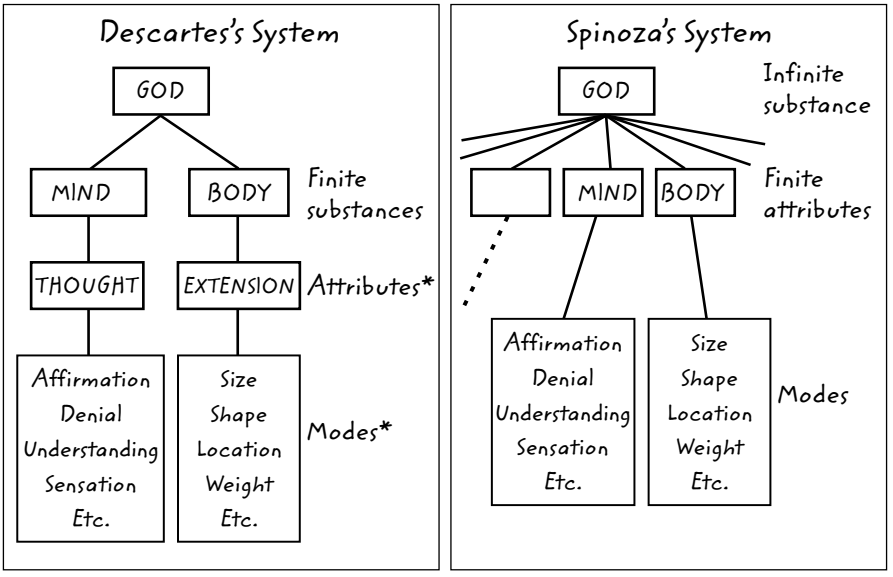
Spinoza tried to submit Cartesian metaphysics to a geometric method even more rigorous than that used by Descartes himself. Like Descartes', Spinoza's philosophy is centered on a definition of *substance,* but Spinoza had detected a contradiction in Descartes' account. Descartes had said, "By substance, we can understand nothing else than a thing which so exists that it needs no other thing in order to exist." Then Descartes had gone on to say, "And in fact only one single substance can be understood which clearly needs nothing else, namely, God,"[9] which he called "infinite substance." Despite this admission that by definition there could exist only one kind of being that was absolutely independent, Descartes (in a con-

tradictory manner, according to Spinoza) proceeded to distinguish between "infinite substance" and "finite substances"—the latter were called corporeal substance (body) and mental substance (mind). This radical dualism led Descartes to his notorious mind-body problem and his universally scorned pineal gland solution.

Spinoza avoided this embarrassment by accepting Descartes' definition of substance (as that which is absolutely independent) and taking deadly seriously the inference that there could be only *one* such substance. (If there were two, they would limit each other's independence.)


Furthermore, because finiteness would constitute a limitation on God's absolute independence, Spinoza defined God as having infinite attributes. So once again, the conclusion is that there can be but one substance because any substance other than God would have to possess attributes that have already been defined as belonging to God.

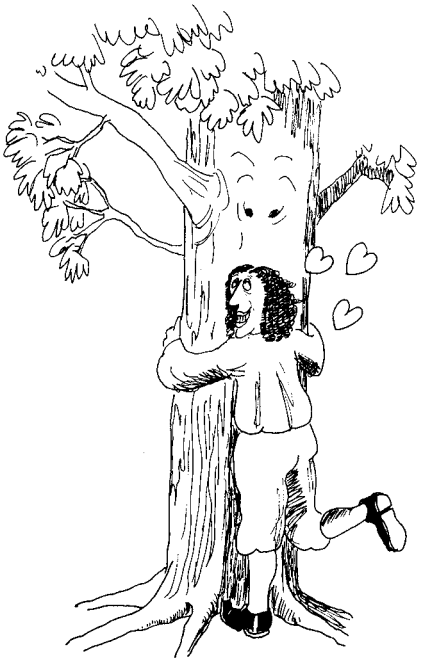
Let's look at a schematized comparison of the systems of Descartes and Spinoza:




***An attribute, for Descartes, is a characteristic that is the essence of a substance (i.e., that which is essential to it). For Spinoza, an attribute is a characteristic that to the human intellect seems to be an essence. A mode is a specific modification of an attribute (i.e., a characteristic of a characteristic).**

Like Descartes, Spinoza equated "infinite substance" with God, but he also equated it with nature. The equation "Nature equals God" makes him a pantheist. (It is also this equation that got him into trouble with both the Jewish and Christian theologians.) There are two human perspectives on reality (i.e., on God): one viewed through the attribute of mind (resulting in idealism, the claim that only mind exists) and one viewed through the attribute of body (resulting in materialism, the view that only matter exists). In theory, there are an indefinite number of other perspectives on reality, but only these two are open to the human intellect. A completely consistent idealistic or materialistic account of reality can be given, but no consistent dualism is possible. Dualism involves a confusion of perspectives. (So much for Descartes' pineal gland.)


The true philosopher attempts to transcend the purely human perspective and view reality *sub specie aeternitatis*, that is, from the perspective of reality itself. From this perspective, one comes to realize that the human has no privileged position in the cosmos, that the human has no more and no less dignity than anything else in nature. One must come to love everything, which is to say, to love God (because one must either love everything or nothing at all). The *love of God* is tantamount to the *knowledge of God*, which is to say, a philosophical knowledge of reality. This difficult intellectual love of God is a form of rationalism that, like Platonism, is tainted with mysticism. It also contains a stoic component, insofar as knowledge of reality leads one to realize that everything that happens, happens of necessity. There is no **randomness** and no freedom of the will. But the realization that there is no such thing as free will, neither for God nor for humans, can itself be a liberating realization because one is

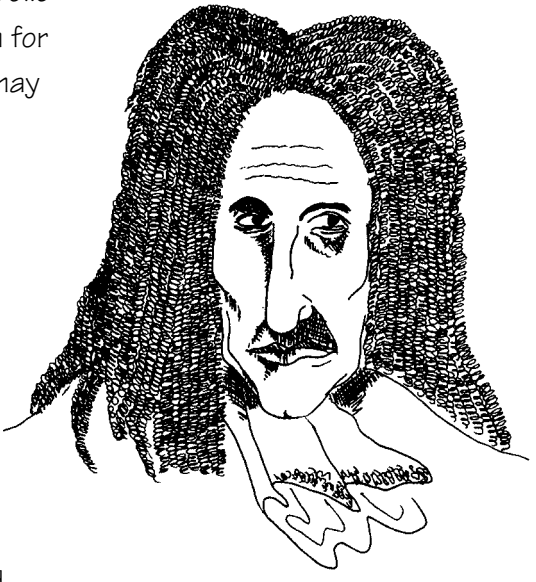


**The Unrequited Love of Nature**

thereby freed from the demands of desire and passion, both of which were seen by Spinoza as murky emotions that manage to control us only because of our failure to grasp the rational structure of reality. With knowledge, these emotions can be transformed into clear and distinct ideas leading to a kind of blessedness and joy. Spinoza wrote, "There cannot be too much joy: it is always good: but melancholy is always bad."[10]

## Leibniz

The third of the great Continental rationalists was the German Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716). He was a universal genius who made significant advances in symbolic logic and who created a plan for the invasion of Egypt that may have been used by Napoleon 120 years later. Leibniz also invented a calculating machine that could add, subtract, and do square roots. Furthermore, he discovered infinitesimal calculus simultaneously with Sir Isaac Newton (and got into a squabble with him concerning who had stolen the idea from whom).



**Gottfried Leibniz**

**"Leibniz was one of the supreme intellects of all time, but as a human being he was not admirable."**[11]

**Bertrand Russell**

Like Spinoza, Leibniz wished to correct the errors of Cartesian metaphysics without rejecting its main structure, but Leibniz was not satisfied with Spinoza's pantheistic monism nor with his naturalism (i.e., his view that all is nature and that the human being has no spe-

cial status in reality). Leibniz wanted a return to a Cartesian system with real individuals and a transcendent God. Leibniz's system, as set forth in his *Monadology* and *Essays in Theodicy*, can be summarized in terms of three principles: the **principle of identity,** the **principle of sufficient reason,** and the **principle of internal harmony.**

In his *principle of identity,* Leibniz divided all **propositions** into two types, which later philosophers would call **analytic propositions** and **synthetic propositions.**[12] Take a look at the following table:

| ANALYTIC | SYNTHETIC |
|---|---|
| A. True by definition (They are true merely by virtue of the meanings of the words in the sentences.) | A. Not true by definition (Their truth or falsity depends not on meanings but on facts in the world.) |
| B. Necessary (Their opposites are self-contradictions. They cannot be false.) | B. Not necessary; rather, contingent (They could be false if facts were different.) |
| C. A priori (Their truth is known independently of observation.) | C. A posteriori (Their truth or falsity is known by observation.) |

Following are some examples of *analytic sentences:*

A. All bachelors are men.
B. 2 + 3 = 5
C. Either A or not–A

This category includes definitions and parts of definitions (example A) and arithmetic and the principles of logic (examples B and C). Analytic propositions were said by Leibniz to be based on the principle of identity in the sense that this principle is the positive counterpart of the **principle of noncontradiction** (which says that it cannot be the case that A and not–A at the same time) in that the negation of every analytic sentence is a self-contradiction (*e.g.*, "Not all bachelors are men" implies the contradictory assertion "Some

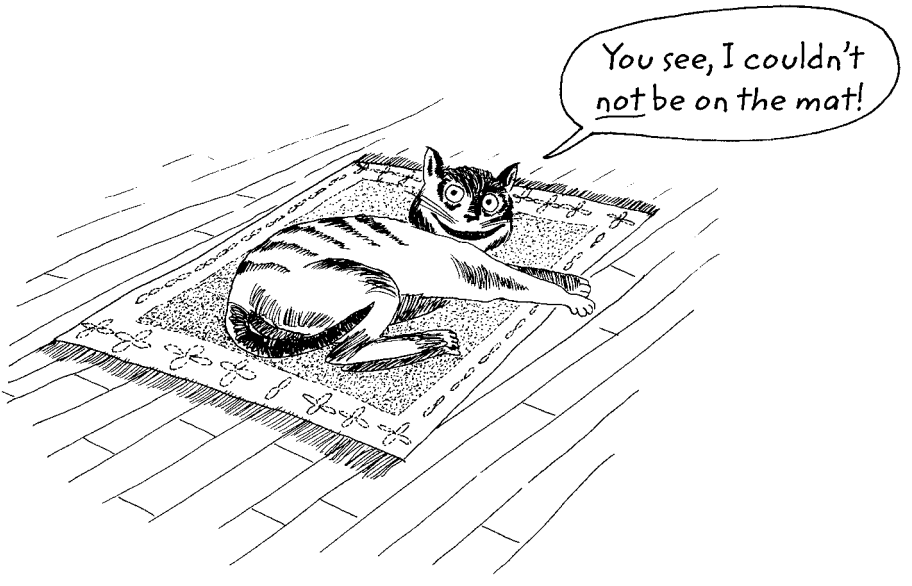
men are not men" because the definition of "bachelor" is "unmarried man").

Following are some examples of synthetic sentences:

A. The cat is on the mat.
B. Caesar crossed the Rubicon in 49 B.C.E.

Now, having drawn what many philosophers believe to be a very important distinction, Leibniz made the surprising move of claiming that all synthetic sentences are really analytic. *Sub specie aeternitatis;* that is to say, from God's point of view, it is the case that all true sentences are *necessarily* true, even though it doesn't seem to be the case to us humans. For Leibniz, Tuffy the cat's characteristic of "being on the mat at time T" is a characteristic necessary to that specific cat in the same way that "being a feline" is necessary to it.

This line of reasoning brings us to the *principle of sufficient reason.* According to Leibniz, for anything that exists, there is some reason *why* it exists and why it exists exactly as it does exist. Leibniz claimed that this second principle is the main principle of rationality and that anyone who rejects this principle is irrational. If the cat is on the mat, then there must be some reason why the cat exists at all, and why it is on the mat and not, for example, in the dishwasher.



Both these reasons should be open to human scientific inquiry, though perhaps only God can know why the cat exists *necessarily* and is necessarily on the mat.

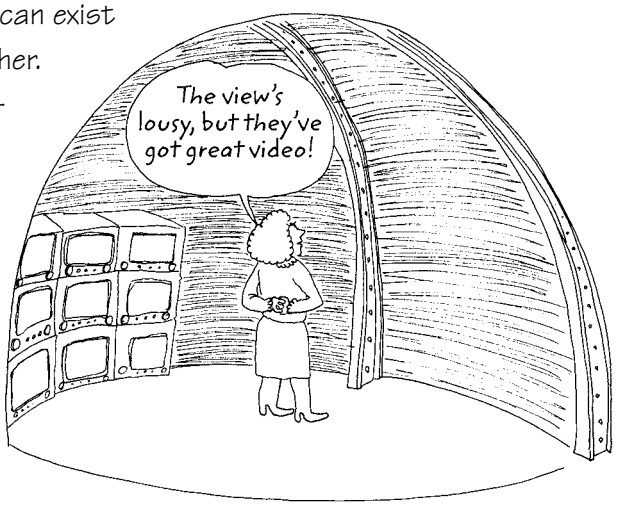
What is true of the cat is true of the whole cosmos, said Leibniz. There must be a reason why the universe exists at all, and this reason ought to be open to rational human inquiry. The deepest question, according to Leibniz, is "why there exists something rather than nothing."[13] Like Saint Thomas, he concluded that the only possible answer would be in terms of an uncaused cause, an all-perfect God whose being was itself necessary. So if Leibniz was right, we can derive the proof of the existence of God from the bare notion of rationality plus the self-evident proposition that something rather than nothing exists.

This conclusion leads us to the *principle of internal harmony*. If there is a God, God must be both rational and good. Such a divinity, Leibniz told us, must desire and be capable of creating the maximum amount of existence possible ("metaphysical perfection") and the maximum amount of activity possible ("moral perfection"). Therefore, at the moment of creation, God entertained all possibilities. He actualized only those possibilities that would guarantee the maximum amount of metaphysical and moral perfection. For example, God did not just consider the individual "Caesar" in all of Caesar's ramifications (would write *The Gallic Wars*, would cross the Rubicon in 49 B.C.E., would die on the Ides of March) before actualizing him. Perhaps God considered actualizing (i.e., creating) in Caesar's place "Gaesar" and "Creasar," who, as potential actualizations, were identical to Caesar in all respects except that Gaesar would cross *not* the Rubicon but the Delaware River in 49 B.C.E., and Creasar would cross the Love Canal. God saw that *only* Caesar was compatible with the rest of the possibilities that he would activate, and therefore he actualized him and not the others. A similar thought experiment could be performed with God's creation of Brutus (as opposed, perhaps, to "Brautus" and "Brutos"). So the relation between Caesar and Brutus is not a causal one but one of *internal harmony*. And the same holds

true of the relations among all substances. God activates only substances that will necessarily harmonize with each other to the greatest extent possible. This principle now explains why all true sentences are analytic. If Tuffy is on the mat at 8 P.M., that is because *this* cat *must be* on the mat at 8 P.M. (otherwise it is not Tuffy, but another cat). It also explains Leibniz's notorious claim that *this is the best of all possible worlds.* His actual words are "Hence the world is not only the most admirable machine, but in so far as it consists of minds, it is also the best Republic, that in which the minds are granted the greatest possible happiness and joy."[14] The world may appear very imperfect to *you,* but if you knew what the alternative was, you would be very grateful indeed to God. (It is this feature of Leibniz's philosophy that was to be lampooned by Voltaire in *Candide.*)


**Candide Inspects the Ruins of Lisbon after the Earthquake of 1755**

Every philosopher in the 250-year period after the publication of Descartes' *Meditations* conceived of reality in terms of substances. Leibniz called these substances *monads*, which he defined as units of psychic force. They are "substances" in that they are the simplest and realest "things" that can exist independently of one another. They are not *material* substances, however, as were both the "atoms" of Democritus and the "corporeal existence" of Descartes, because materiality is not an irreducible substratum but a quality that is a product of the relation between certain monads—the way that liquidity is a product of relationships between certain molecules of hydrogen and oxygen, even though neither hydrogen nor oxygen is itself liquid. Monads are simple (i.e., they have no parts), and each is "pregnant"[15] with all its future states. Each monad is a mirror of the entire universe (God actualized only those monads that *would* mirror the rest of the universe), but they perceive the rest of reality only as features of their own inner states. "The monads have no windows."[16] All monads have a psychic life, but some have a higher




**The Monads Have No Windows**

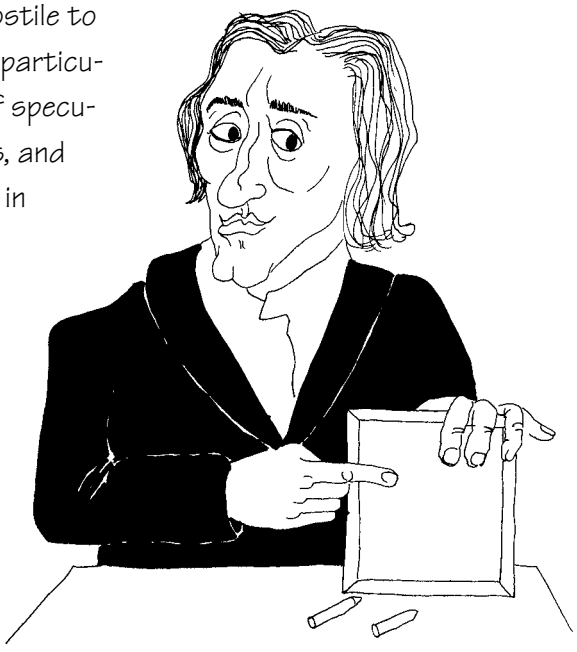
**After a Philosophy Lecture, Three Students Actually Find a Monad behind a Pile of Old Socks**

degree of psychic life than others. These monads (or communities of monads clustered around a "dominant monad") are conscious. Some conscious clusters of monads are also free, and these are human beings. (Of course, in Leibniz's theory, as in the theory of Saint Augustine, God already knows how these human beings will spend their freedom.)

Perhaps it can be said that Leibniz's philosophy solves the problems of Descartes' dualism, but it does so at the expense of common sense and seems to be fraught with as many problems as Descartes' theory. It should come as no surprise that a philosopher would soon rise to the defense of common sense and of observation, reacting against the speculative flights of fancy of a Spinoza or a Leibniz. Such a philosopher was John Locke.

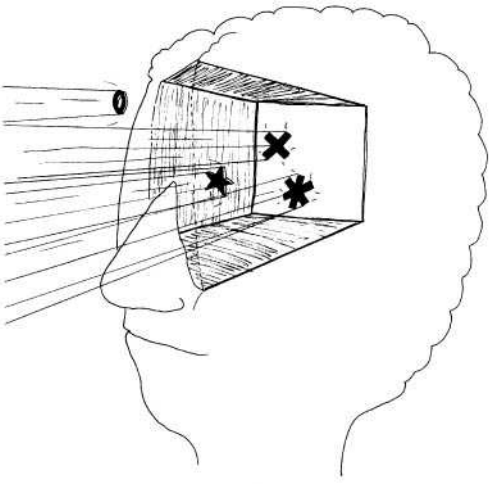
## Locke

John Locke (1632–1704) was the first of the classical British empiricists. (Empiricists believed that all knowledge derives from experience. These philosophers were hostile to rationalistic metaphysics, particularly to its unbridled use of speculation, its grandiose claims, and its epistemology grounded in innate ideas.) In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke began his attack on Descartes' "innate ideas" by threatening them with Ockham's razor. (Recall that Ockham's razor is a principle of simplification derived from William of Ockham. It cautions,



**John Locke**

"Do not multiply entities beyond necessity." Given two theories, each of which adequately accounts for all the observable data, the simpler theory is the correct theory.) If Locke could account for all human knowledge without making reference to innate ideas, then his theory would be simpler, hence better, than that of Descartes. He wrote, "Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas: How comes it to be furnished? . . . To this I answer, in one word, from *experience*."[17] So the mind at birth is a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, and is informed only by "experience," that is, by sense experience and acts of reflection. Locke built from this theory an epistemology beginning with a pair of distinctions: one between simple and complex ideas and another between primary and secondary qualities.



**The Tabula Rasa Being Marked by Experience**

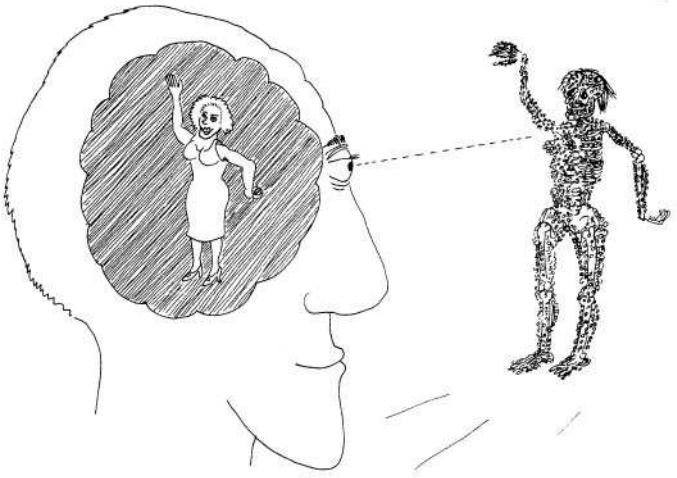
Simple ideas originate in any one sense (though some of them, like "motion," can derive from either the sense of sight or the sense of touch). These ideas are simple in the sense that they cannot be further broken down into yet simpler entities. (If a person does not understand the idea of "yellow," you can't explain it. All you can do is point to a sample and say, "yellow.") These simple ideas are Locke's primary data, his psychological atoms. All knowledge is in one way or another built up out of them.

Complex ideas are, for example, combinations of simple ideas. These result in our knowledge of particular things (*e.g.*, "apple"—derived from the simple ideas "red," "spherical," "sweet"), comparisons ("darker than"), relations ("north of"), and abstractions ("gratitude"). Even abstractions, or general ideas, are nevertheless *particular* ideas

that stand for collections. (This doctrine places Locke close to the theory known in the medieval world as "nominalism." All the empiricists share with the nominalists the anti-Platonic thesis that *only particulars exist.*)

Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities is one that he borrowed from Descartes and Galileo, who had in turn borrowed it from Democritus. Primary qualities are characteristics of external objects. These qualities really *do* inhere in those objects. (Extension, size, shape, and location are examples of primary qualities.) Secondary qualities are characteristics that we often attribute to external objects but that in fact exist only in the mind, yet are *caused* by real features of external objects. (Examples of secondary qualities are colors, sounds, and tastes.) This view of the mind has come to be known as *representative realism.* According to it, the mind *represents* the external world, but it does not duplicate it. (Naive realism, the view that the mind literally duplicates external


**The Problem: To Construct Knowledge from Simple Ideas**



What Appears to Be Out There What Is Out There

reality, was discussed earlier in this chapter.) The mind is something like a photograph in that there are features of a photo that very accurately represent the world (e.g., a good picture of three people correctly depicts the fact that there *are* three people and that each of them has two eyes, one nose, and one mouth), and there are features of the photograph that belong exclusively to the photo (its glossiness, its two-dimensionality, the white border around its content). So in Locke's system, as in Descartes' system, there is a real world out there and it has certain real qualities—the primary qualities. Now, these qualities—what are they qualities *of*? In answering this question, Locke never abandoned the basic Cartesian metaphysics of substance.

A real quality must be a quality of a real *thing*, and real things are *substances*. (Once again, everything in the world is either a substance or a characteristic of a substance.) Well then, what is the status of this pivotal idea of "substance" in Locke's theory? Recall that Descartes had claimed that one cannot derive the idea of substance from observation precisely because perception can only generate qualities. For this very reason, it was necessary to posit the idea of substance as an *innate idea*. But Locke was committed to the rejection of innate ideas and to the claim that all knowledge

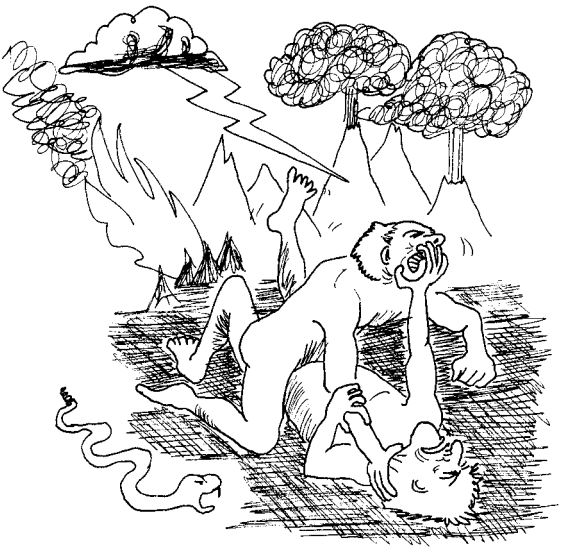
comes in through the senses. So what did he say about the idea of substance? Rather amazingly, he said the following:

> So that if anyone will examine himself concerning his notion of pure substance in general, he will find he has no other idea of it at all, but only a supposition of he knows not what *support* of such qualities which are capable of producing simple ideas in us.[18]

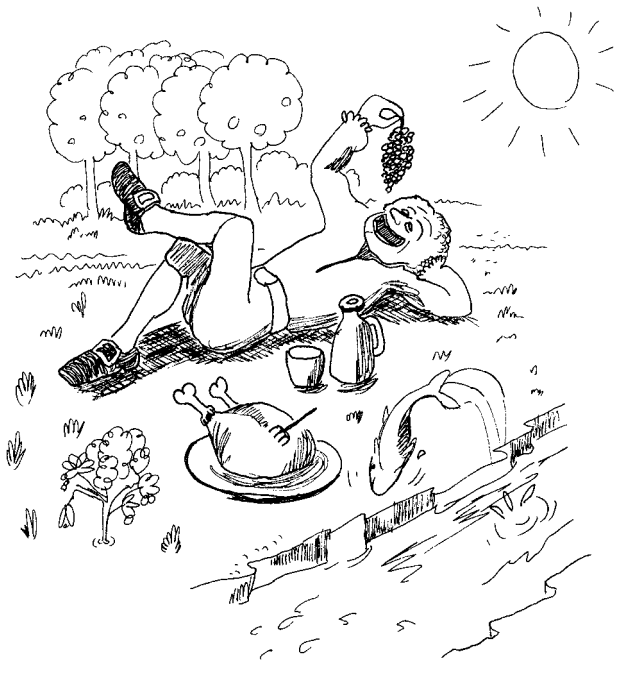
So, having claimed that he could account for all knowledge purely in terms of experience and having arrived at the concept that had dominated philosophy for the last several generations, Locke proclaimed it a mystery and even joked about it. (He compared the philosopher trying to explain substance to the Indian who explained that the world was supported by a great elephant, which in turn was supported by a tortoise, which in turn was supported by—"*something, he knew not what.*") Locke's conclusion is a bit embarrassing, and it is either a rather inauspicious beginning for empiricism or the beginning of the end of the metaphysics of substance. (We will soon see that it is the latter.)

John Locke concerned himself not only with epistemology but with politics as well. In his theory, developed in *Two Treatises on Government*, Locke, like Hobbes, drew a distinction between the "state of nature" and the "political state." However, what he meant by "state

of nature" was very different indeed from what Hobbes meant by it. Far from being a condition in which there is no justice nor injustice, no right nor wrong, "no mine and thine distinct,"[19] Locke's "state of nature" is a *moral* state—the state into which we are all born as humans, where we are all bestowed with certain *God-given* natural rights, the right to "life, health, liberty and possessions."[20] Recall that for Hobbes, there was only one natural right, the right to try to preserve one's life. Hobbes seems to have believed that a kind of instinct for survival authorized that right. Locke's theory contains several natural rights, all of which are moral rather than instinctual, and they derive their authority from God. Hobbes purposely left God



**The State of Nature according to Hobbes**



**The State of Nature according to Locke**

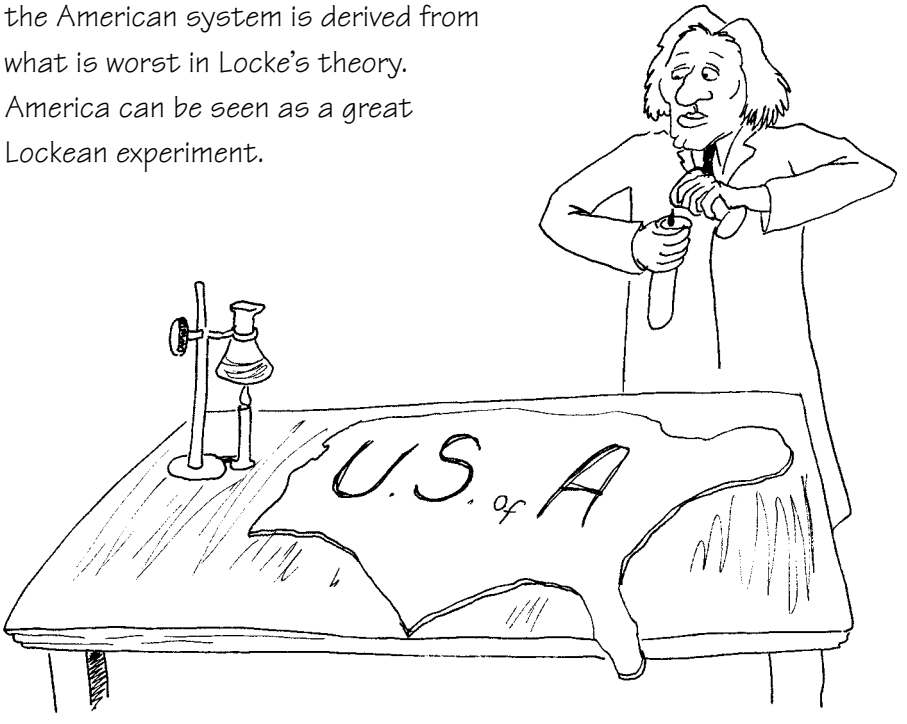
out of his theory because he was trying to escape medievalism, where all philosophy presupposed God's existence. Hobbes was particularly insistent that there was no such thing as a "natural right to property," because in nature there is no property, only possession ("only that to be every man's, that he can get; and for so long as he can keep it").[21] Locke, on the contrary, claimed we have a natural right to whatever part of nature we have "mixed our labor with."[22] So if I till the soil, or cut down a tree and make a house from it, then this garden and that house are *mine* (and will be my children's when they inherit them from me). Locke did put qualifications on this natural right to property. One can accumulate as much "natural property" as one can use, as long as:

A. It does not spoil in its accumulation.
B. Enough has been left for others.
C. Its accumulation is not harmful to others.


Locke's wealthy friends were probably glad to hear that "gold and silver may be hoarded up without injury to anyone."[23]

(It is noteworthy that Locke's theory presupposes a state of abundance in nature, whereas Hobbes's presupposes a state of scarcity. It may be true that human nature would express itself very differently in these vastly dissimilar "states of nature.")

According to Locke, individual political states are to be evaluated in terms of how well they protect the natural rights of the individuals living in those states. A good state is one that guarantees and maximizes those rights; a bad state is one that does not guarantee them; and an evil state is one that itself assaults the natural rights. Locke's version of the "social contract" is that all citizens consent to be ruled by a government elected by a majority for just as long as that government protects the natural rights. But a tyrannical government is illegitimate and *ought* to be revolted against. Note that, unlike Hobbes, Locke is able to distinguish between a legitimate and an illegitimate government and provides a theory of justifiable revolution. It is clear that the Founding Fathers used Locke's theory to justify the American Revolution, and they incorporated his ideas into our Declaration of Independence and Constitution. Perhaps what is best in the American system derives from what is best in Locke's theory, and some social critics claim that what is worst in the American system is derived from what is worst in Locke's theory. America can be seen as a great Lockean experiment.



## Berkeley

The second of the British empiricists was the Irishman George Berkeley (1685–1753), a teacher at Trinity College in Dublin who eventually became the Anglican Bishop of Cloyne. As a philosopher, he was very impressed by Locke's work and wanted to correct what he took to be its errors and inconsistencies while remaining true to the basic platform of empiricism ("blank slate" theory, **psychological atomism,** nominalism, commitment to Ockham's razor). In fact, he applied Ockham's razor to the idea of material substance so scrupulously that he shaved it clean away and was left with a type of subjective idealism—the view that only minds and ideas exist.

Early in his *Principles of Human Knowledge,* Berkeley attacked Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Recall that the former were said to inhere in material substance that existed independently of the mind, whereas the latter existed only in


*George Berkeley*

the mind (or, as Berkeley put it, their *esse* is *percipi*—their "being" is "to be perceived"). Berkeley pointed out that our only access to so-called primary qualities is through secondary qualities. The only way we can know the size, shape, location, or dimensionality of an object is by feeling it or seeing it (i.e., through the secondary qualities of tactile or visual sensation). Berkeley's conclusion was that descriptions of primary qualities are really only interpretations of secondary qualities—different ways of talking about colors, sounds, tastes, odors, and tactile sensations. Therefore, primary qualities too exist only in the mind. Their *esse* is also *percipi*.

To explain how this translation of secondary qualities into primary qualities is possible, Berkeley drew a distinction between direct perception and indirect perception. Direct (or immediate) perception is the passive reception of basic sense data (Locke's secondary qualities and simple ideas). Indirect (or mediate) perception is the interpretation of those sense data. Consider the process of learning to read. The small child confronts a written page and sees only black "squigglies" on a white background. (This is direct perception.)

Through a process of acculturation, the child eventually learns to see these markings as words loaded with meanings. (This is indirect perception.) It is an interesting fact that once we've learned to read, it is very difficult to recover the child's "innocent eye" and see the words again as mere squigglies. This distinction explained to Berkeley why we adults perceive the world as groupings of things rather than as sense data. Nevertheless, claimed Berkeley, the things we see in the so-called external world are really only collections of ideas, philosophically analyzable into their component sense data. Said Berkeley,

> As several of these [sense data] are observed to accompany each other, they come to be marked by one name, and so to be reputed as one thing. Thus, for example, a certain color, taste, smell, figure and consistence having been observed to go together, are accounted one distinct thing, signified by the name "apple"; other collections of ideas constitute a stone, a tree, a book, and the like sensible things.[24]

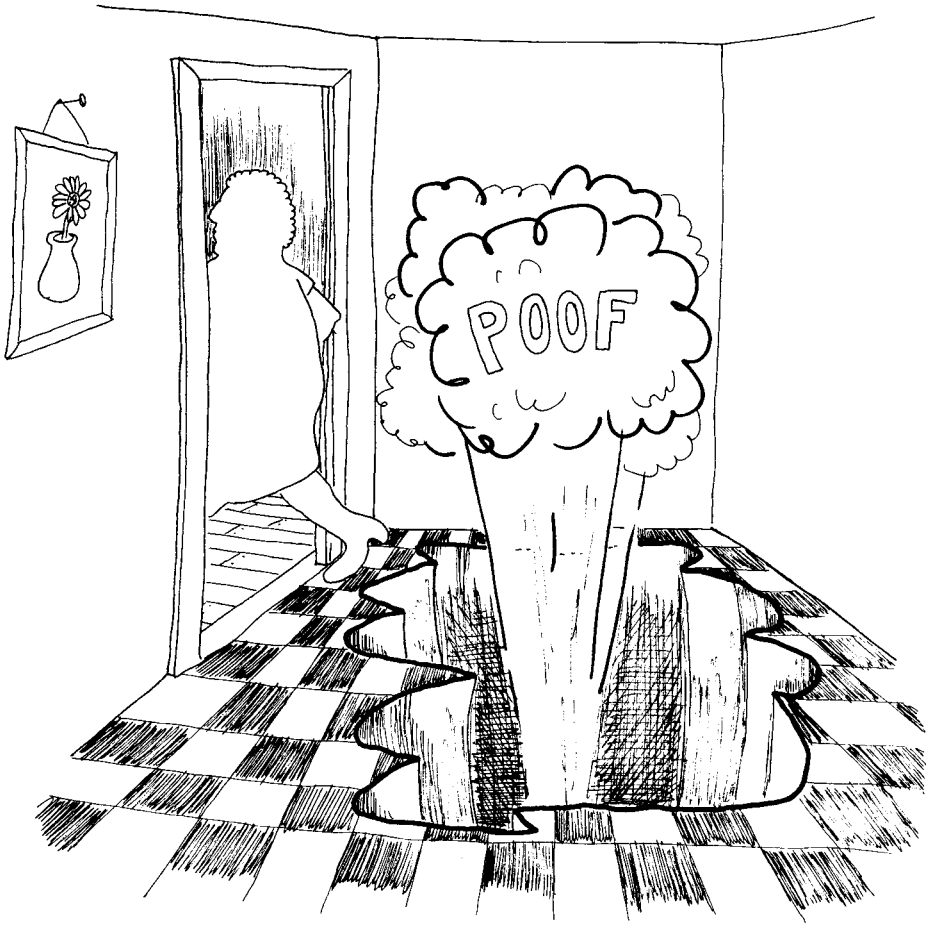
What's true of the component parts of a stone is true of the whole stone. Its *esse* is also *percipi*.

Notice that the notion of material substance (Locke's "something, I know not what") has simply disappeared in Berkeley's system. And the role played by the rationalists' innate idea of substance in explaining how we come to know the world as a concatenation of individual physical objects has been taken over by language. We teach our children words, which organize the ideas in their minds into "things." Berkeley's subjective idealism holds that each of us lives in his or her own subjective world composed of the sense data of the five senses. This is the same world we entered into as infants. But we were taught a language, which is to say, taught to "read" our sense data. Language is also the cement of intersubjectivity. I am able to bridge the gap between my private world and yours through the shared use of conventional symbols. Without language I would be stuck solipsistically in the echo chamber of my own mind.

Berkeley believed that with these two categories (sense data and language) he could account for all possible human knowledge—

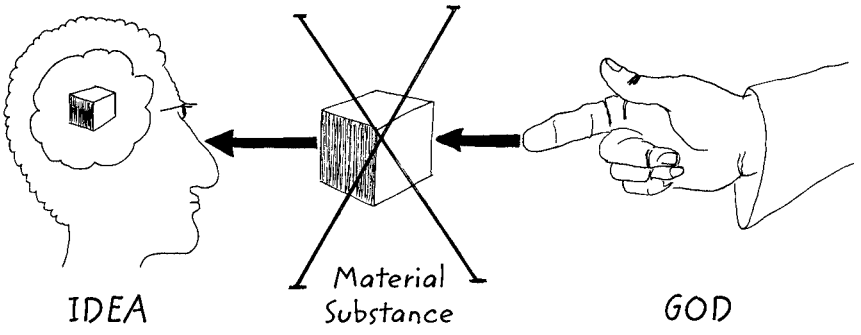
all except the knowledge of God. (Berkeley was a bishop, after all, so don't be surprised to find God playing a key role in Berkeley's philosophy, even if it was a bit embarrassing to him that God's *esse* is not *percipi*.) God's existence can be deduced from the regularity and predictability of sense data. If the so-called physical world's "being" is to


"be perceived" and hence is dependent on the mind, then why is it that when I return to an empty room that I had vacated earlier, everything is just as I left it? Why didn't the room disappear when I stopped perceiving it? Because God was perceiving it while I was out.




**Why Doesn't the Room Disappear When We Leave It?**

God is the guarantor of the laws of nature. When the Bible says that God created the world, it means that he created sense data and minds (spirits, selves) to perceive them. God did not cause there to be some unperceivable, mysterious stuff—"material substance"—which in turn causes ideas. Believing in the existence of such a "stuff" was the error of Locke's representative realism. Locke failed to see that the representation is the reality. Berkeley has merely eliminated the "middleman." His theory explains everything that Locke's does but is more economical; hence, according to Ockham's razor, it is *better* than Locke's. So Berkeley believed.




**Berkeley Eliminates the Middleman**

## Hume

The third of the "Holy Trinity" of British empiricism is the Scot, David Hume (1711–1776). He published his first book, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, when he was twenty-seven, and he hoped to achieve fame and fortune from it, but by his own reckoning, it "fell dead-born from the press." Ten years later he rewrote it and published it as *An Inquiry Concerning the Human Understanding*. This book was considerably more successful than its predecessor, possibly because it was a bit more moderate. Today Hume is recognized as the most acute, if the most perplexing, of the British empiricists.

Hume's philosophy began with a revival of Leibniz's analytic-synthetic distinction, or in Hume's words, a distinction between "relations of ideas" and "matters of fact." It will be recalled that analytic propositions are expressed by sentences

A. whose negation leads to a self-contradiction,
B. that are a priori,
C. that are true by definition, and therefore,
D. are necessarily true.

Synthetic propositions are expressed by sentences that are the opposite of sentences expressing analytic propositions; that is, they are sentences

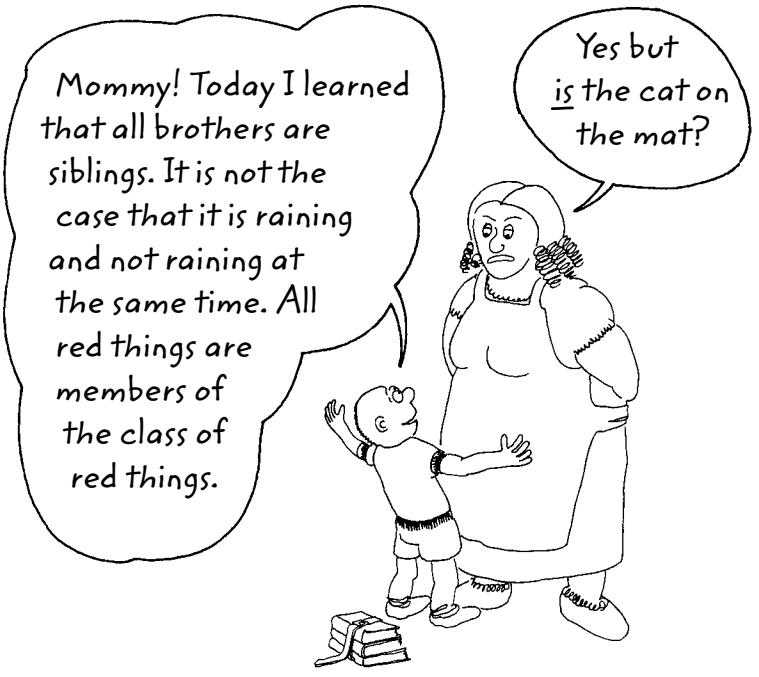
A. whose negation does not lead to a self-contradiction,
B. that are a posteriori,


**David Hume**

C. that are *not* true by definition, and
D. when they are true, they are not *necessarily* true (they *can* be false).

Now, in accepting this distinction, Hume was admitting that there are such things as *a priori necessary truths.* It would seem that any empiricist who accepted such truths was jeopardizing the program of empiricism by recognizing the legitimacy of the rational-

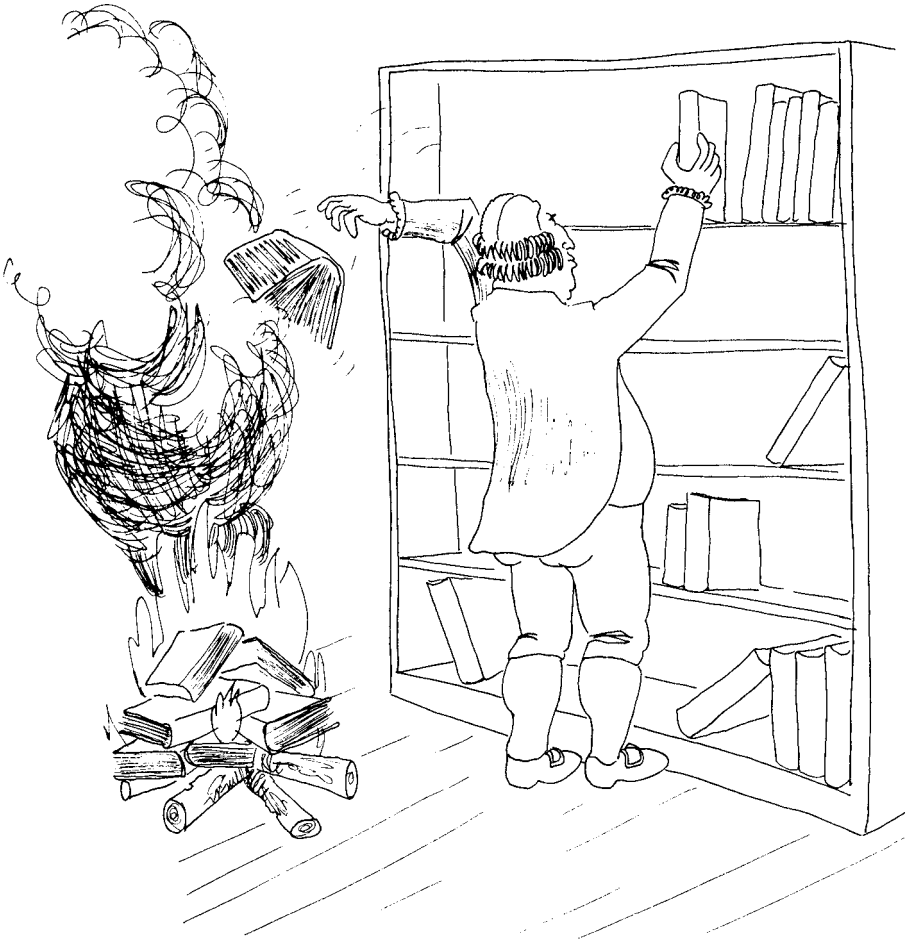
ists' dream, but Hume defused this situation by adding one more characteristic to the list of features of "relations of ideas." He said that they are all *tautological;* that is, they are all redundant, repetitive, merely verbal truths that provide no new information about the world, only information about the meaning of words. Thus, given the conventions of the English language, it is certainly true that "all sisters are siblings," but this statement tells us nothing about any particular sister that wasn't already known by calling her a sister in the first place. Similarly, anybody who really understands the concept "five" and the concepts "three," "two," and "plus" already knows that three plus two equals five. So the rationalistic dream of a complete description of reality that is a priori and necessarily true is a will-o'-the-wisp because a priori truths aren't descriptions of *anything,* according to Hume. Only synthetic claims—"matters of fact"—can correctly describe reality, and these claims are necessarily a posteriori. Therefore, all true knowledge about the world must be based on observation. This is, of course, the central thesis of all empiricism.



What Hume was claiming was that there are basically only three categories of analysis. Any proposition whatsoever is either analytic, synthetic, or nonsense. Hume said:

> When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume—of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance—let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number* [i.e., analytical truths]? No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence* [i.e., synthetic truths]? No. Commit it then to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.[25]

(No wonder Hume lost his job as a librarian.)



**David Hume—Librarian**

There is, then, very clearly a "Humean method" of philosophizing. One takes any claim that one would like to test and asks a series of questions about that claim:

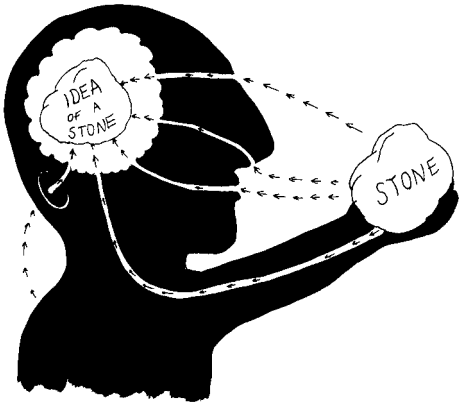
1. *Is it analytic?*
   (This is determined by negating the sentence in which the claim is expressed. If the resultant negative sentence is a self-contradiction, then the original sentence is analytic.)

   ☐ YES (If the answer is YES, the claim is *true* but philosophically trivial.)

   ☐ NO (If the answer is NO, go to the next question.)

2. *Is it synthetic?*
   This question is posed by Hume in the following way: "When we entertain . . . any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but inquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived?* And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion."[26]

In other words, question 2 can be answered affirmatively only if it is possible to trace its ideas back to sense data ("impressions"). For example, all the ideas in the sentence "This stone is heavy" can be traced back to sense data; hence, it passes the empirical criterion of meaning.




☑ YES

But what if, in a particular case, the answer to question 2 is negative?

☑ NO

That is, what if a particular idea cannot be traced to a sense impression? In that case, according to Hume, we must be dealing with vacuous ideas, that is to say, with *nonsense.*

Now, with Hume's method in hand, if we turn to some of the traditional philosophical topics, such as God, world, and self, we arrive at some pretty startling conclusions. Let's start with the sentence "God exists."

1. Is this proposition analytic?

That is to ask, is its negation ("God does not exist") a self-contradiction? Most people would answer no. Of course, some would answer yes—namely, all those defenders of the "ontological proof of God's existence" (*e.g.*, Anselm, Descartes, Spinoza), but Hume would respond to them by saying that if the sentence "God exists" is analytic, then it is tautological and tells us nothing about reality. The true sentence "A being whose existence is necessary would be one that necessarily exists" still doesn't tell us whether there is a necessary being.

☑ NO

So if we assume that "God exists" is not analytic, the next question is,

2. Is this proposition synthetic?

Hume believed that it was impossible to trace the idea of God back to sense data. He said, "Our ideas reach no farther than our experience: We have no experience of divine attributes and operations; I need not conclude my syllogism. You can draw the inference yourself."[27] So although Hume didn't actually say so, his method seems to imply that the idea of God is vacuous and that statements about God are literally nonsense.

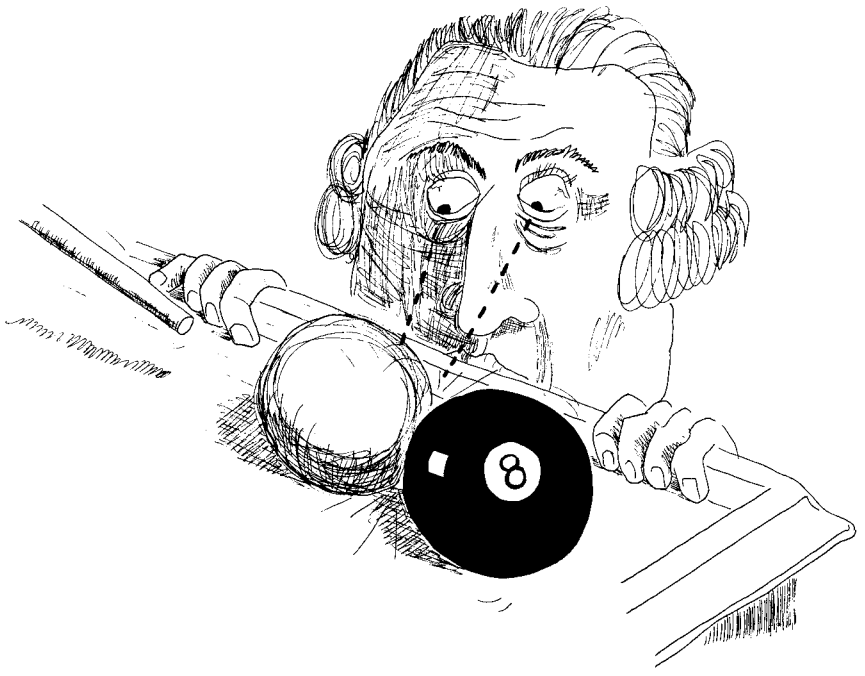
So much for God in Hume's system. What about the world? Berkeley, using Ockham's razor, had already eliminated "material substance" from empiricism. Material substance was *one* of the key concepts philosophers had used to explain the world. Hume now turned to another, one that was employed not only by philosophers but also by scientists and by ordinary people of common sense—that of **causality.**


Let's take the sentence "X causes Y," where X and Y are both events. (We'll use Hume's example: X is the event of billiard ball A striking billiard ball B, and Y is the event of ball B moving after being struck.)

1. Is the sentence "X causes Y" analytic?
   (That is to say, is the sentence "X does not cause Y" a self-contradiction? Obviously not, because it is perfectly possible to conceive of A striking B and B *not* moving.)
   ☑ NO

2. Is the sentence "X causes Y" synthetic?

Now, it seems that the answer will be affirmative because there should be no difficulty in tracing back the idea of "cause" to sense data. But Hume *found* a difficulty. When he analyzed the concept, he broke it down into three components: (a) priority, (b) contiguity, and (c) necessary connection. Priority (the fact that X precedes Y) can be traced to sense data. So can contiguity (the fact that X touches Y). But no matter how many times Hume *observed* ball A strike ball B, he could not find any *necessary connection* (the fact that if X happens, Y *must* happen), yet this was exactly what needed to be found if the concept of causality was to be sensible.

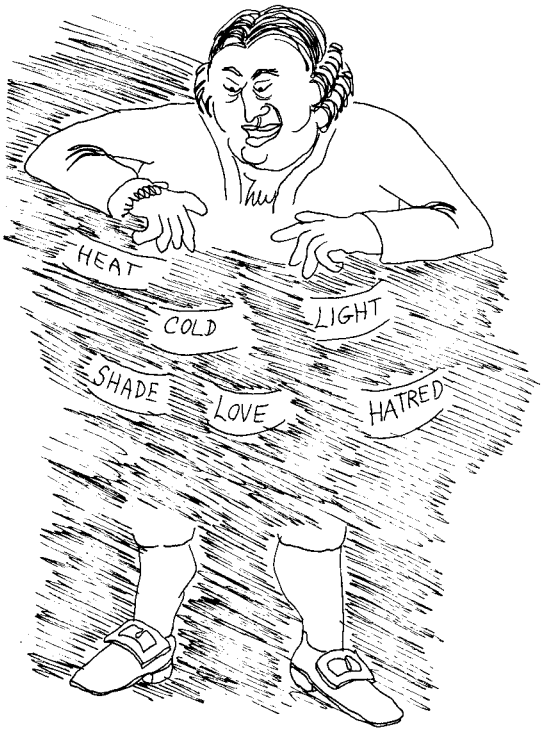


**Hume Observing Causality**

So the concept of "causality" proved to have the same status as "material substance" and "God." This embarrassment has far-reaching consequences. It means that whenever we say that event A causes event B, we are really only reporting our own *expectation* that A will be followed by B in the future. This statement expresses a psychological fact about us and not a fact about the world. But if we try to show the rational grounding of our expectation, we cannot do so. Even if A was followed by B innumerable times in the past, that does not justify our claim to know that it will *do so again* in the future. Hume did not, however, conclude that no causality exists in the world. He never doubted that objects and events stand in causal relations to each other, but he did doubt that an adequate philosophical account of causality was available.

Hume's discovery has come to be known as the problem of **induction.** What makes us so certain that the future will behave like the past? If we answer "because it has always done so in the past," we are **begging the question,** because the real question is, *Must* it do

so in the future just because it has always done so in the past? Nor can we appeal to the "laws of nature," because then the question is, What guarantees that the laws of nature will hold tomorrow? There is no analytic or synthetic guarantee of the laws of nature. The concept of causality is one of the key ideas that are needed to understand the world. Hume concluded that neither reason nor experience could justify the idea of "necessary connections," which is the main component of the notion of causality.




**Hume Discovers the Self—Such As It Is**

"Hume's fork" (the analytic-synthetic distinction) has equally disastrous results for the concept of self. There is no sense datum to which the concept can be traced. Far from finding the self to be the simple, indubitable, absolutely certain, eternal soul that Descartes had claimed it to be, Hume found, according to his method, that "there is no such idea" as "self." The so-called self proves to be "a bundle or collection of different perceptions [. . . heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure . . .] which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement."[28]

David Hume had consistently and vigorously followed the program of empiricism to its logical conclusion. The results were disastrous for the philosophical enterprise. The sphere of rationality was found to be very small indeed, reduced as it was to verbal truths and

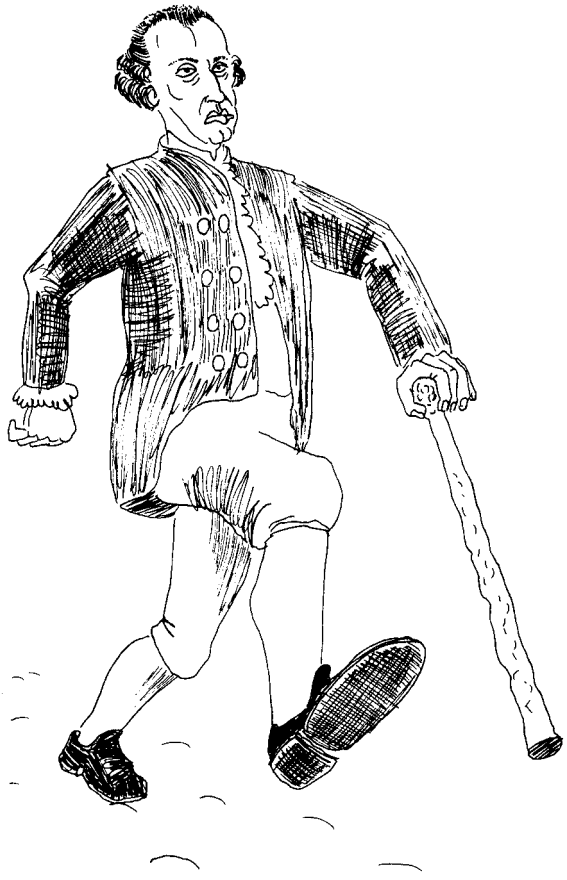
descriptions of sense data; yet nearly everything that interested people as philosophers or nonphilosophers fell beyond those limits. Hume believed he had shown that human life was incompatible with rationality and that human endeavors always extend beyond philosophical justification. (Rationally, I can never know that the loaf of bread that nourished me yesterday will nourish me today; hence, I can never be *rationally* motivated to eat.) But Hume knew perfectly well that the human being could not be sustained by the meager fruits of philosophy. Even while writing his philosophical manuscript Hume knew that, once he put down his pen, he too would revert to the normal, unfounded beliefs of humanity—namely, beliefs in self, world, and causality (if not in God). He even suggested, maybe with tongue in cheek, that perhaps we should abandon philosophy and take to tending sheep instead.

**David Hume—Shepherd**

## Kant

It would be fair to say that the history of philosophy would have ended with Hume if his views had prevailed. To survive Hume's attack, philosophy needed a powerful, subtle, and original mind to come to its defense. It found such a protector in the German Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Kant spent the whole of his life in the old Hanseatic

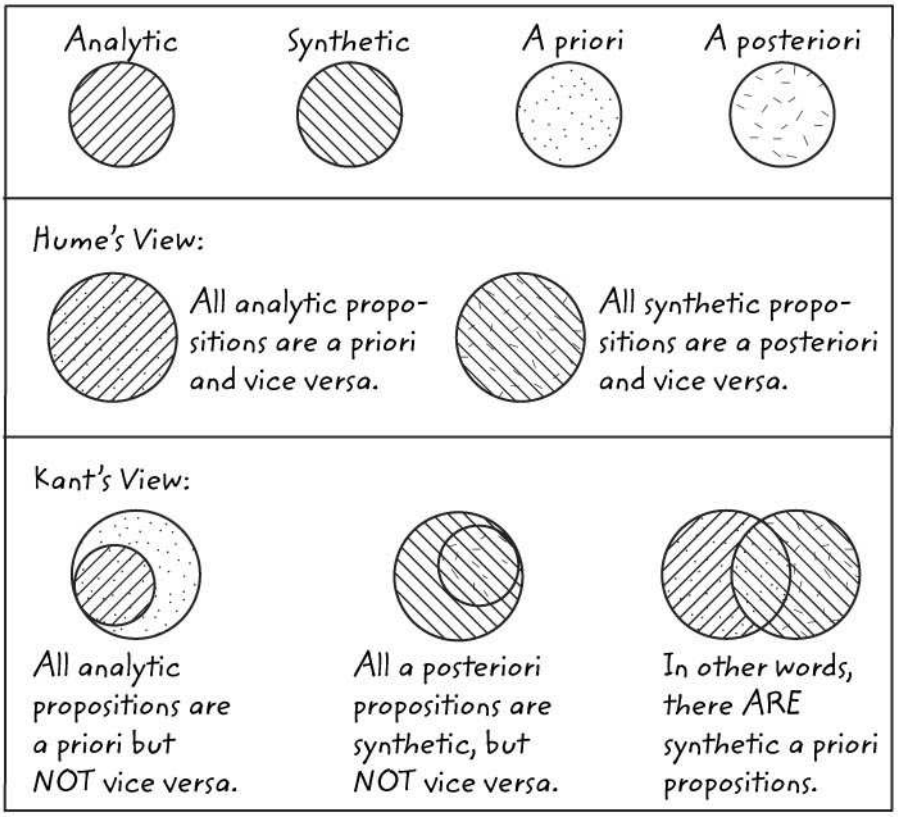
city of Königsberg in the northeastern corner of Prussia (today, Kaliningrad, Russia), where, at least until his fiftieth year, he passed his days complacently in the bourgeois life of a respected professor of the university. This old bachelor, whose personal life was so methodical that his neighbors used to set their clocks by his afternoon walks, had been trained in the rationalistic metaphysics of Christian von Wolff, an undistinguished disciple of Leibniz, and Kant had found no reason to doubt any of its tenets—that is, not until one fine day in his late middle age when a copy of Hume's *Inquiry* crossed his desk. Kant's reading of it "awakened him from his dogmatic slumber," as he later reported. He realized that Hume's powerful argument undermined everything Kant had believed and that no honest progress in philosophy could be made until Hume's skeptical arguments had been refuted.



**Herr Professor Immanuel Kant on His Daily Walk**

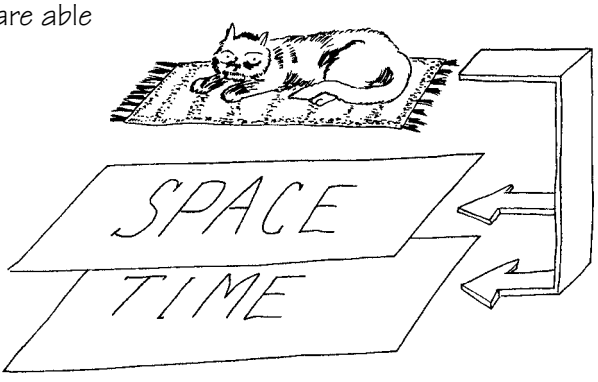
Kant's response to Hume, and his attempt to synthesize what he took to be the best of Hume's philosophy with the best of what was left of rationalism after Hume's full-scale frontal assault on it, is found in *The Critique of Pure Reason*. There Kant accepted Hume's analytic-synthetic distinction as the key philosophical tool of analysis. Kant agreed with Hume that all analytic propositions are a priori

and that all a posteriori propositions are synthetic, but he disagreed with Hume's claim that all synthetic propositions are a posteriori and that all a priori propositions are analytic (hence tautological). That is to say, according to Kant, there is such a thing as a *synthetic a priori truth*, a meaningful statement about reality whose truth is known independently of observation.

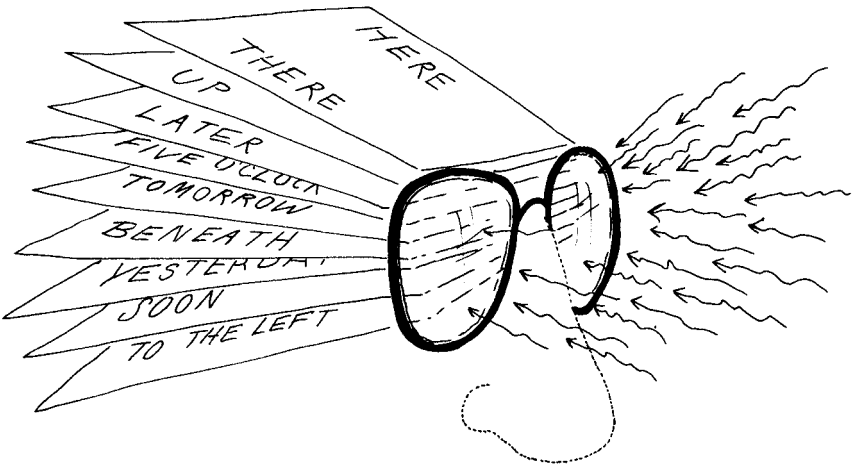



Kant believed that only by demonstrating the existence of such truths could Hume be refuted and philosophy, science, and common sense (and perhaps religion) be made respectable again. This demonstration would be done by showing that the knowledge that Hume denied was, in fact, grounded in synthetic a priori truth, as were the very arguments that Hume had mustered against such claims of knowledge. Kant began by dividing the mind into three "faculties"—intuition (i.e., perception), understanding, and reason—and then performing what he called a "transcendental" analysis of each faculty.

Kant first dealt with the faculty of intuition. Here the primary question that concerned Kant was not "What is perception?" nor "Is perception possible?" Rather, it was "*How* is perception possible?" That is, he began with the commonsense view that we *do* perceive the world and asked what conditions must hold for that to be possible. For example, he wanted to know how it was possible that we are able to utter true sentences about the height of the Matterhorn if the empiricists were right to say we never perceive space, only sense data. And he wanted to know how it was possible that we are able to utter true sentences about the amount of time it takes to get to Berlin if the empiricists were correct to say we never perceive time, only sense data. Kant's solution was to demonstrate that space and time are the synthetic a priori foundations of the faculty of perception. An a posteriori sentence like "The cat is on the mat" *presupposes* the truth of the sentence "Objects exist in space and time." According to Kant, we sometimes know the first sentence to be true, yet it cannot be true unless the second is also true. The latter is not analytic, and it is not a posteriori (there is no sense datum of space or time—Hume was right about that), so it must be a synthetic a priori truth.




Kant called this method of analysis a "transcendental **deduction**" because it transcends direct observation or, better, gets behind and underneath it to discover its necessary conditions. This analysis led Kant to conclude that space and time were not features of external reality. Rather, they were features of the *structure of the mind.* The human mind analyzes the data it receives in terms of space and time. Space and time are the "irremovable goggles" through which we perceive the world. They are not like pieces on a chess board (things in




**The Irremovable Goggles**

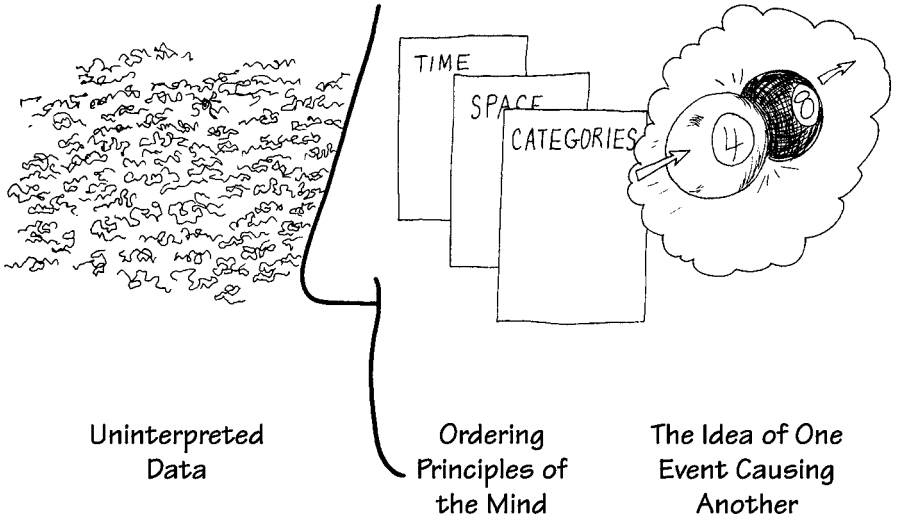
the world); rather, they are like the rules according to which we play chess and in whose absence chess would not exist.

Having discovered the synthetic a priori foundations of the faculty of intuition, Kant then turned to the faculty of understanding. This faculty enables us to understand facts about the world (that Mt. Whitney is higher than Death Valley, that the cat is on the mat). Once again, Kant began not by asking "Can there be knowledge of the world?" Instead, he began with the commonsense assumption that we *do* have such knowledge and asked how such knowledge was possible. He found that it was grounded in the synthetic a priori foundations of the faculty of the understanding, which he called "the categories of the understanding." These categories included those of unity/plurality/totality, causality, and substantiality. These concepts are not deduced by the mind from reality; on the contrary, the mind brings them to reality. This is why Hume had been unable to find them "out there" when he looked for them. A sentence such as "Every event is caused" (which to Hume was neither empirical nor true by definition) is, according to Kant, a synthetic a priori truth.

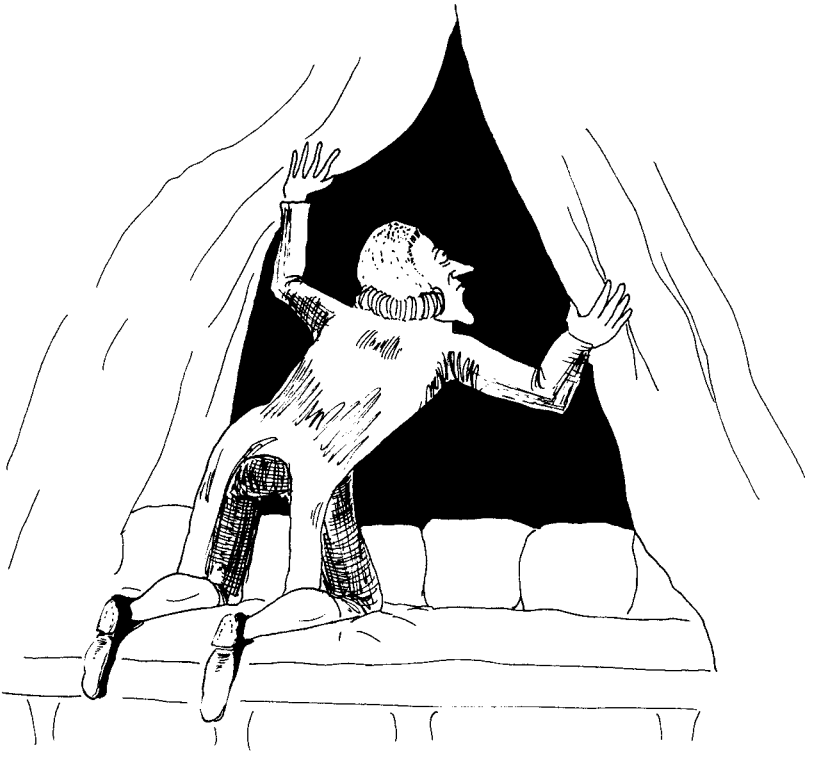
Kant also claimed that mathematics belonged in the category of the synthetic a priori. First, math has an a priori status because our knowledge of it is independent of observation. (Your first grade

teacher, Miss Green [you remember her!] was wrong when she pointed to two piles of chalk and said, "Two pieces of chalk plus three pieces of chalk is five pieces of chalk. *Therefore,* two plus three equals five." No, two plus three would equal five even if chalk had never been created.) But math also has a synthetic status. It tells us something about the world. A mathematical proposition is not merely an empty tautology in the way that definitions are.

Obviously, Kant's theory of the synthetic a priori is reminiscent of the Platonic-Cartesian doctrine of innate ideas, but there is a major difference. Kant did not claim that we are born with a group of *ideas* but that the mind is structured in such a way that it analyzes its data in terms of a particular set of synthetic *a priori rules,* which are like a permanent program in a computer and which produce ideas when fed information by the senses. If you are a human being, then you make sense of the world in terms of such concepts as time/space/substantiality/causality. The mind *must* order the world in terms of "thingness," though there is nothing "out there" corresponding to our idea of substance. The mind *must* understand the world in terms of causal series even though there is nothing out there that could correspond to our idea of the cause of any event.



Kant's position was meant to represent a compromise between the warring rationalists and empiricists. His famous assertion "thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind"[29] was meant to grant to the rationalists that sense data alone could not provide knowledge and to grant to the empiricists that there could be no knowledge in the absence of sensorial contribution. To many philosophers, Kant's solution seemed to be successful; however, it had the consequence of putting him in the disconcerting position of admitting that there does exist some kind of ultimate reality (what he called the **noumenal world,** or the "thing-in-itself" [*das Ding-an-sich*]) but that the human mind is incapable of knowing it. The noumenal world (from a Greek word meaning "the *thing* that appears," as contrasted with "phenomenon," from a Greek word meaning "the *appearance* of a thing") is the reality behind appearances,

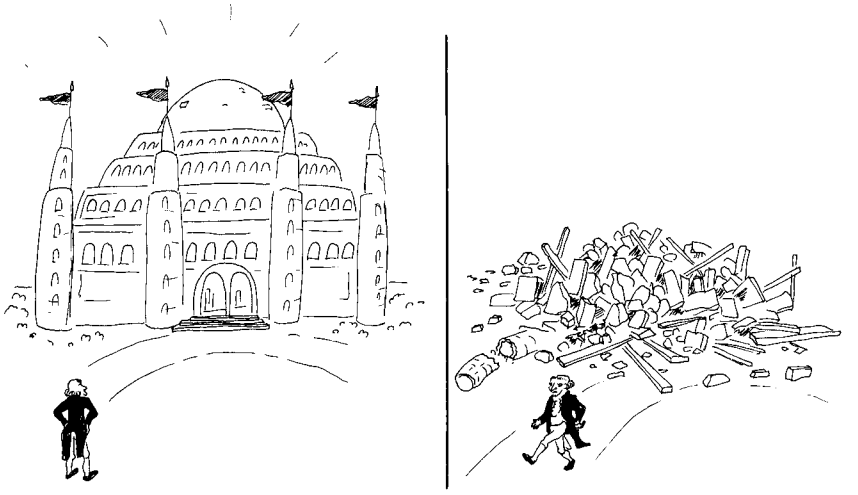


**Kant Peers beyond the Curtain of the Phenomenal World and Sees Nothing**

and we can know that such a reality does exist because appearances must be appearances of something. But we humans of necessity have no access to this noumenal world; rather, we are limited to knowledge of what Kant called the "phenomenal world"—the world as perceived, conceived, imagined, interpreted, analyzed, and theorized about by the human mind. That is, we can only know a world that has passed through the human mind, through the gridwork of space and time and the categories of the understanding. Contrary to Hume's conclusion, Kant's conclusion was that common sense and science are valid but only insofar as their claims are about the phenomenal world. But nothing positive can be said about ultimate reality, other than that it exists. The concept of a noumenal world is what Kant calls a *limiting concept*. We can say *that* a noumenal reality exists, but not *what* that existence comprises. This limiting concept meant that traditional metaphysics of the type attempted by philosophers from Plato through Leibniz was impossible. Kant deduced this conclusion from his transcendental analysis of the faculty of reason.

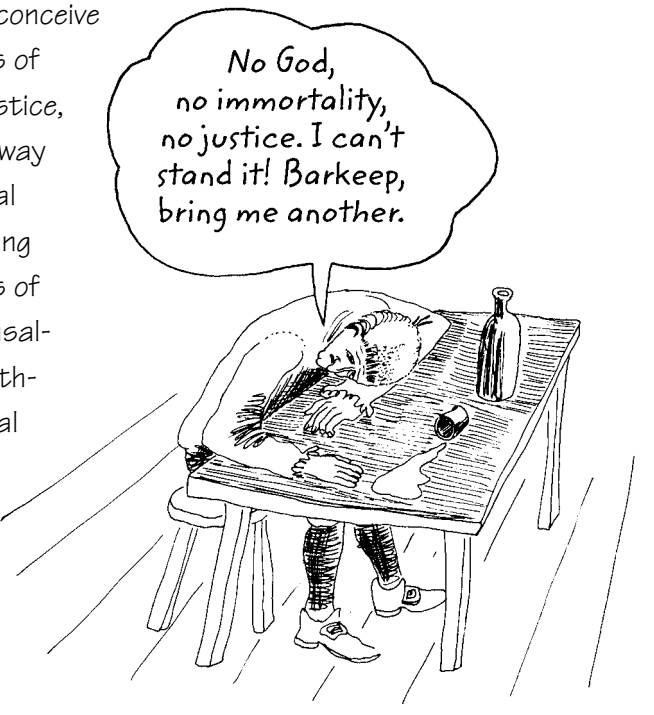
The faculty of reason was supposed by Kant to be the faculty that produced the "pure" concepts (i.e., concepts uncontaminated by the senses) such as "God" and "soul." Were there any synthetic a priori foundations for this faculty? (Which is another way of asking, can we hope to know any "higher truths" about ultimate reality?) Kant's notorious answer—which was so scandalous to the metaphysicians and theologians—was *no!* Traditional metaphysics was impossible because it was always the result of illegitimately applying notions of space, time, and causality to the noumenal world when in fact these concepts can be applied only to the observable world. Therefore, all proofs of God's existence must fail, along with all attempts to describe ultimate reality in terms of that mysterious category "substance." We humans must therefore despair of ever knowing of God, justice, immortality, or freedom, because all these ideas overreach the human capability for knowledge.

If Kant had concluded *The Critique of Pure Reason* at this point, he would have satisfied the Humean critics of metaphysics and



**The House of Metaphysics before and after *The Critique of Pure Reason***

theology while pleasing the defenders of common sense and science, but he would not have satisfied those impulses in the human heart toward higher sentiments. To these stirrings, Kant addressed the rest of his *Critique*. There he claimed the following: There is no logical necessity to conceive of the world in terms of God, immortality, justice, and freedom (in the way that there *is* a logical necessity of conceiving of the world in terms of time, space, and causality); nevertheless, without such inspirational concepts, many humans would lose their enthusiasm for life. If one could not believe, for example, that



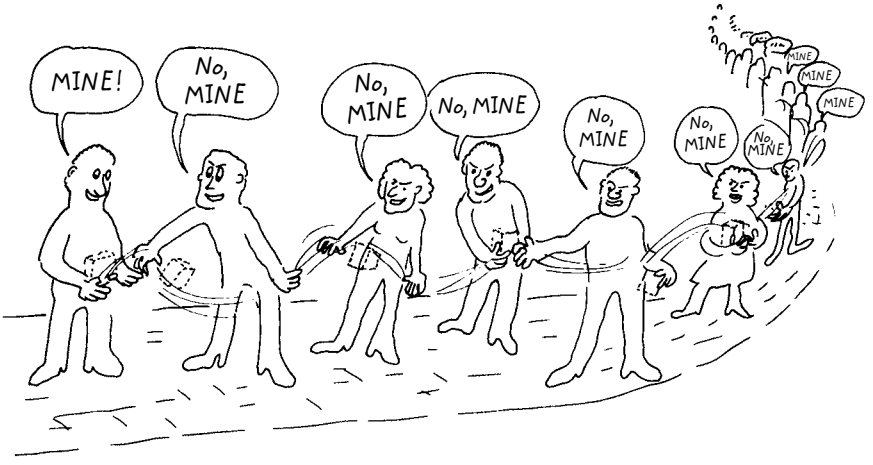
the human soul is free and that ultimately justice will triumph, then one might well lose the motivation required for the engagement in the day-to-day world. Therefore, according to Kant, one has the right to *believe* (but not to claim to know) that God, soul, immortality, justice, and freedom exist, not as *metaphysical* necessities, but as *practical* (i.e., moral) necessities. We have the right to treat these topics as if they were synthetic a priori truths if doing so will make us better, more successful human beings.

Kant's attempt to distinguish knowledge from belief, yet ground belief in moral necessity, was acceptable to many people who were tired of the extravagant claims made by metaphysicians and theologians but who were also looking for a legitimate role for *belief* in the modern world. Kant's critics, however, accused him of merely "kicking God out the front door in order to let him in through the back door."

After *The Critique of Pure Reason,* Kant wrote a number of other important philosophical works, including *The Critique of Practical Reason* and *The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals,* both of which addressed specifically the problem of ethics. In its emphasis on intention and duty, Kant's theory demonstrated Christianity's influence on him, and in its attempts to ground duty in reason, Kant's theory showed him to be a thinker of the Enlightenment. By positing freedom as if it were grounded in a synthetic a priori truth (for without freedom there can be no moral acts), one can derive an ethical code from its foundations in reason. Being a rule-guided activity, reasoning itself is based on a respect for rules and laws. From such respect, Kant deduced a moral command, which he called the *categorical imperative:* "Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."[30] All moral acts are modeled on principles that may be universalized without contradiction. Kant thought that, as creatures of reason, we are duty-bound to obey such principles, or "maxims," as he calls them, meaning subjective rules of conduct—subjective in that we must choose to submit ourselves to them. Here, I am going to oversimplify this idea a bit to see what Kant was talking about.

Let's suppose that you owe a friend five dollars, and to your annoyance, he pressures you to repay. So you say to yourself, "If I kill him, I won't have to repay the debt." But as a true Kantian, you first check to see if you could universalize the maxim governing the proposed action. You ask yourself, What if everyone accomplished his or her goals by killing someone? Could there exist a universal law that states, "Everyone ought to kill someone"? This law would be an impossible law because if everyone complied with it, there would be no one left to comply with it. Therefore, we are duty-bound not to kill as a way of solving problems. Okay, then, what if you lie to your friend, telling him that you already repaid the debt? Can the principle behind this proposal be universalized? Could there be a general law


that states, "Everyone ought always to lie"? Obviously not, because it would be impossible even to state the law without breaking it. Furthermore, if everyone always lied, then there would be no such thing as a lie, or, lies would be the truth. (For the same reason, if all money were counterfeit, then there would be no such thing as counterfeit money. Counterfeit money would be real money.) This law would be self-contradictory. Therefore, we are duty-bound not to lie. Well, what if you repay the five dollars and then steal them back? Can the principle behind this act be universalized? Imagine a general law that states, "Everyone ought always to steal."




**Where Theft Is the Law of the Land**

This too is an impossible law because the concept of stealing is parasitical upon the concept of property. But if everyone always steals, there can be no property; there can be only temporary possession, that is, stuff passing from person to person. So we are also duty-bound to refrain from stealing. (If you are a true Kantian, it's beginning to look as though you will have to pay your debt!)[31]

You may have noticed a similarity between Kant's categorical imperative and Jesus's Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Both are meant to force individuals to look at their behavior in nonegotistical ways. But there are interesting differences as well. It appears that Jesus's maxim appeals to feelings

and desire, whereas Kant—who does not trust feeling and desire—claims to appeal only to reason. Jesus's intentions (and those of countless generations of parents who have demanded of their mean little kids, "How would you like it if someone did that to *you*?") can be thwarted by sadistically oriented masochists who might be very pleased to be humiliated or slapped around a bit. The categorical imperative gives them no such leeway.

Kant formulated the categorical imperative in a number of ways, not just in terms of the principle of universalizability. One such formulation was this: "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person, or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only."[32] By saying we should treat people as ends and not merely as means, Kant was, of course, admonishing us against *using* other people as a means to our own ends. He thought that morality entailed the recognition of the *dignity* of each person as a person. If there were no *persons* in the world, only *things*, there would be no *values*. Nothing would be worth anything more or less than anything else. But there are persons in the world—that is, individual entities having not only desires (because animals, too, have desires) but also rationality and freedom. Therefore, as the source of values, humans have *dignity*, which Kant defines as something so valuable that nothing could transcend it in worth. To claim our status as humans—that is, to claim our dignity—we must value above all else that which bestows dignity and humanity, namely, rationality, freedom, and autonomy. We must value these qualities in ourselves, but also in other individuals as well. Or, in Kant's words, we must treat other individuals as *ends* and not as *means*. The principle of universalizability behind the categorical imperative makes this our duty as rational beings. This side of Kant's ethics has widespread practical implications for such issues as sexual relationships, discrimination, informed consent, and death with dignity.

If we dwelt solely on the first formulation of the categorical imperative (the one based on universalizability), Kant's ethics might seem quite bloodless; but this second formulation adds some warmth to his moral doctrine. Nevertheless, there is a *bit* of coldness

at the heart of his view. He was so intent on making morality a question of *duty* that he refused to grant any worth to *inclination.* According to him, if a person who was motivated by feelings of empathy toward humanity rendered assistance to a helpless, needy person, this act would be of less moral value than would be the same act performed by someone who actually loathed humanity but who was motivated purely by a sense of duty.

Kant's ethical conclusions, like his metaphysical conclusions, were essentially conservative in nature. His theory rationalized all the virtues that his Lutheran upbringing had extolled. (Lutherans had always known that a human's relation to God was one of belief, not of knowledge; and they had always known that they were duty-bound not to murder, lie, or steal.) Nevertheless, it is striking that Kant derived his principles from reason and not from divine commandment. Here he was more of an Enlightenment figure than a Lutheran. And many philosophers believe that Kant, in saying that certain kinds of metaphysical speculation are a waste of time, revealed something essential about the limits of human reasoning, and in saying that morality requires acts to be viewed from a perspective other than that of self-interest, he revealed something essential about ethics.

## Topics for Consideration

1. Discuss the role that God plays in Descartes' philosophy. Based on the evidence provided in this chapter, defend one of these views:
   A. Descartes was an atheist who used the idea of God to disguise the true nature of his enterprise from religious authorities who were hostile to the new mechanistic sciences.
   B. Descartes gave God so much power in his system that without God the system would collapse, which proves that Descartes was a religious philosopher as well as a supporter of science.
2. Discuss Descartes' method of radical doubt, which he used to establish an absolutely certain foundation for his philosophy. Are you convinced that Descartes' method achieved that goal? If so, say why. If not, explain what you think goes wrong.

3. Explain why Descartes' philosophy leaves us with what has been called the "mind-body problem," and briefly show how Hobbes, Spinoza, and Leibniz, respectively, dealt with that problem.
4. State the thesis of Hobbes's psychological egoism, and then either defend it or criticize it.
5. Explain how Hobbes justified the legitimacy of governments and the absolute power of sovereigns within governments.
6. Replace the word "God" as used in Spinoza's philosophy with the word "nature," and report what differences, if any, such a change makes in his philosophy.
7. Central to the theories of both Leibniz and Hume is the distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions. What differences exist intheir respective treatment of these categories that can explain why their general philosophies are so much in opposition to each other?
8. Explain the different views that Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz had of the idea of "substance," and show the consequences that these differences produced in their respective philosophies.
9. Show the further development of the idea of "substance" in the philosophies of Locke and Berkeley.
10. Contrast the idea of the "self" in the theories of Descartes and Hume.
11. It was suggested on page 194 that in conditions of abundance, Locke's optimistic view of human nature may be correct, and in conditions of scarcity, Hobbes's pessimistic view may be correct. If this suggestion is valid, what are the implications for the idea of "human nature"?
12. Critically discuss Berkeley's claim that descriptions of so-called primary qualities (size, shape, location, etc.) are really only interpretations of secondary qualities (colors, sounds, tastes, etc.).
13. Explain the idea of "necessary connection" in Hume's discussion of causality. Why do you think Hume held that necessary connections are required in true causal relations, and why did he hold that propositions attempting to describe necessary conditions are neither analytic nor synthetic?
14. Using examples from the text, explain why Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz are all called rationalists, and why Locke, Berkeley, and Hume are called empiricists.
15. What, in your opinion, does Kant's theory of knowledge have in common with rationalism? What does it have in common with empiricism?

16. Try to construct an argument showing that the following maxim is ultimately self-contradictory and that willing it as a universal law would therefore be impossible: "Everyone desiring to escape an onerous obligation should kill the person to whom he or she is obligated." (See note 31.)

## Notes

1. René Descartes, *Essential Works of Descartes,* trans. Lowell Blair (New York: Bantam Books, 1966), x.
2. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy,* in *The Essential Descartes,* ed. Margaret D. Wilson, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. T. R. Ross (New York: Mentor, The New American Library: 1969), 165. Subsequent references to this book appear in parentheses in the text.
3. Descartes's version of this idea as expressed in the *Meditations* is simply, "I am, I exist" (35). I have used "I think, therefore I am," the version from the *Discourse on Method,* because it is better known than the other. Indeed, it may be the most famous line from the history of Western philosophy. See *Discourse on Method,* in *The Essential Descartes,* 127.
4. Descartes, *Objections and Replies,* in *The Essential Descartes,* 274.
5. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: On the Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1998), 88.
6. Ibid., 84.
7. Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York and London: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 569.
8. Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics and On the Correction of the Understanding,* trans. Andrew Boyle (New York: Dutton/Everyman's Library, 1977), 224.
9. Descartes, *The Principles of Philosophy,* in *The Essential Descartes,* 323.
10. Spinoza, 171. I have tampered a bit with Boyle's translation of the Latin word *hilaritus,* which Boyle renders as "merriment" and I have changed to "joy." The word "mirth," chosen by R. H. M. Elwes, is, to my ears, even less Spinozistic than "merriment."
11. Russell, 581.
12. Leibniz called his two propositions simply "necessary" and "contingent" judgments, but Immanuel Kant in 1781 gave them the name they now have. Propositions whose predicate is embedded in the subject and can be "analyzed out" of the subject are *analytic.* (In the sentence, "A bachelor is male," the subject "bachelor" already contains the predicate "male.") Propositions whose predicate is not embedded in the subject are *synthetic,* originally meaning "brought together." (In the sentence, "The cat is on the mat," the subject "cat" does not contain the predicate "on the mat," so the sentence brings together the subject and the predicate.)
13. Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, *Monadology and Other Philosophical Essays,* trans. Paul Schrecker and Anne Martin Schrecker (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 87.

14. Ibid., 90–91.
15. Ibid., 151.
16. Ibid., 148.
17. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books, 1964), 89.
18. Ibid., 185.
19. Hobbes, 102.
20. John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Civil Government,* in *Two Treatises of Government* (New York: Hafner, 1964), 124.
21. Hobbes, 85.
22. Locke, *The Second Treatise,* 134.
23. Ibid., 144.
24. George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge,* in *Principles, Dialogues, and Philosophical Correspondence, ed.* Colin Murray Turbane (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 22.
25. David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 114.
26. Ibid., 13.
27. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion,* in *Focus on "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion," ed.* Stanley Tweyman (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 108.
28. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), 252–53.
29. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: Humanities Press, 1950), 93.
30. Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals,* trans. Lewis Beck White (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976), 39.
31. When I said in the text that I had oversimplified the presentation of Kant's theory of universalizability, what I meant is that I was going to ignore for the moment some of the problems related to interpreting this theory. For example, there is a debate concerning the generality or specificity of the maxim to be universalized. Some Kantian scholars believe that the correct rendition of the categorical imperative requires adding the phrase "similarly circumstanced," for example, to each of the laws I mentioned in my examples. For instance, when you think about killing your friend to avoid repaying your debt, rather than testing the morality of your action by suggesting a law that states, "Everyone ought to kill someone," you should propose the maxim "Everyone desiring to escape an onerous obligation should kill the person to whom he or she is obligated." (There would be similarly circumstanced maxims in the case of lying to the lender or stealing from him.) These formulations stressing circumstance would make it harder for Kant to demonstrate the self-contradictoriness of these maxims, but they would perhaps save Kant from the charge of inconsistency sometimes leveled against him for his support of capital punishment and of the killing of enemies during "just" wars.
32. Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals,* 47.

# 6

# Post-Kantian British and Continental Philosophy

## The Nineteenth Century

If Kant believed that his "critical philosophy" would spell the end of speculative metaphysics, he was sorely mistaken. Even during his lifetime, there was emerging a generation of metaphysicians, some of whom, ironically, were using Kantian principles to advance their speculations well beyond the limits that Kant lay down in his *Critique.* Kant was especially embarrassed by the use of his ideas and terminology by philosophers who were calling themselves Kantians while creating a kind of highly metaphysical idealism of the type Kant had repudiated. But it must be said that he himself was somewhat responsible for this turn of events. After all, he had defined nonhuman reality as a noumenal thing-in-itself and then announced that it was inaccessible to human thought, with the consequence that human thought had access only to itself. As that earlier idealist George Berkeley would have pointed out, an inaccessible noumenal world is hardly better than no noumenal world at all. Indeed, this new generation of German philosophers derived their idealism from their dissatisfaction with Kant's claim that there existed a nonmental world that was unknowable.

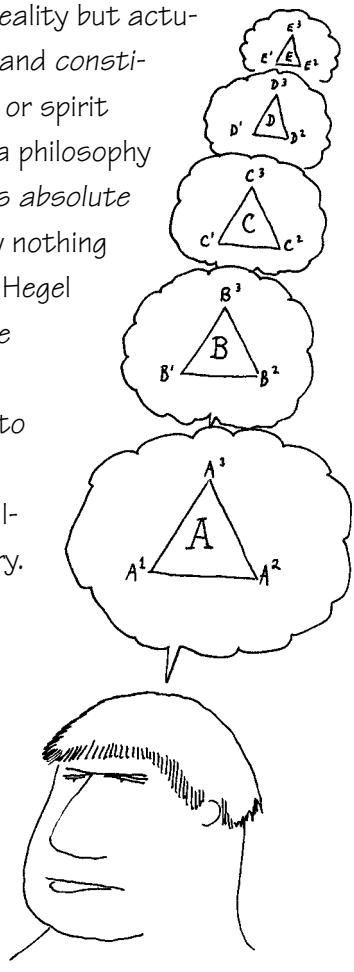
### Hegel

Primary among the ranks of the German idealists were Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775–1854), and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831).

**G. W. F. Hegel**

Of these, it was Hegel who achieved the greatest prominence, and it will be he who will represent German idealism for us.

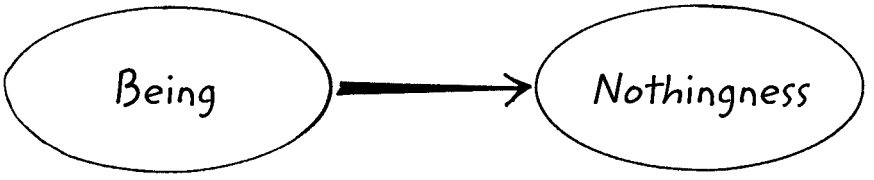
Kant had argued that the appearances of ultimate reality are processed by the human mind, which thereby creates a world for us humans to inhabit. Hegel went further and claimed that the mind did not merely *structure* and *regulate* reality but actually *generated* it and *constituted* it. That is to say, reality is simply mind or spirit (*Geist* in German). This claim left Hegel with a philosophy that he himself called "absolute idealism." It is *absolute* idealism not only in the sense that absolutely nothing but ideas exists, but also because ultimately Hegel equated "mind" with "divine mind," or "absolute mind." This meant that if mind = reality, then reality = God. This view, in some ways similar to Spinoza's, brought Hegel close to pantheism. Furthermore, besides equating *Geist* with reality and God, Hegel also equated it with history. Kant had seen the mind as structurally identical from individual to individual, culture to culture, and historical period to historical period. Hegel criticized Kant's view as static and ahistorical. According to Hegel, even though the mind does have a universal, abstract structure, its content changes evolutionarily from period to period. There exists a mode of philosophical introspection that reveals the general structure of



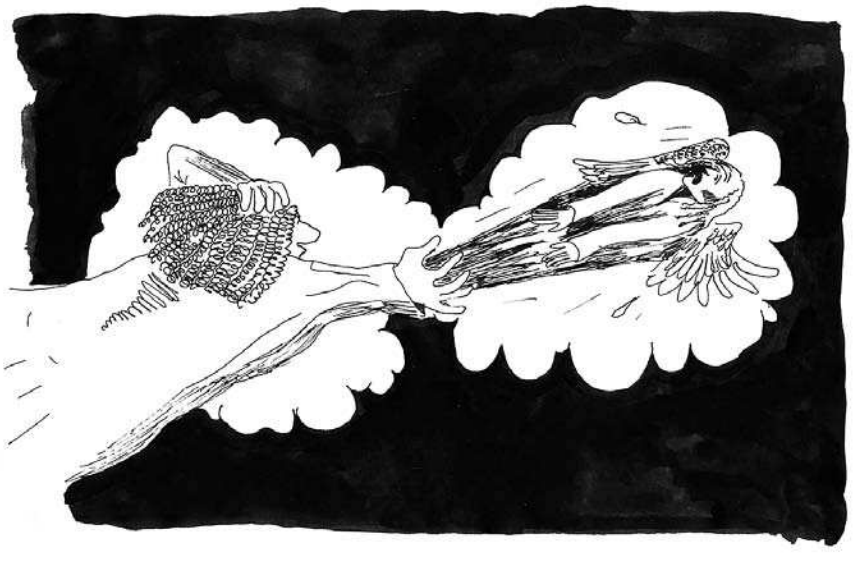

**The Evolution of the Mind**

Mind and even allows us to reconstruct history in an a priori manner. In our attempt as philosophers to investigate the nature of the mind, we can reconstruct the *logical* (not chronological) beginnings of creation. They go something like this:

In the beginning, God, pure Mind, and hence Pure Being, attempted to *think himself*. But the thought of pure Being is an impossible thought; therefore, when God attempted to think Being, he thought *nothing*. That is, he thought the opposite of Being.

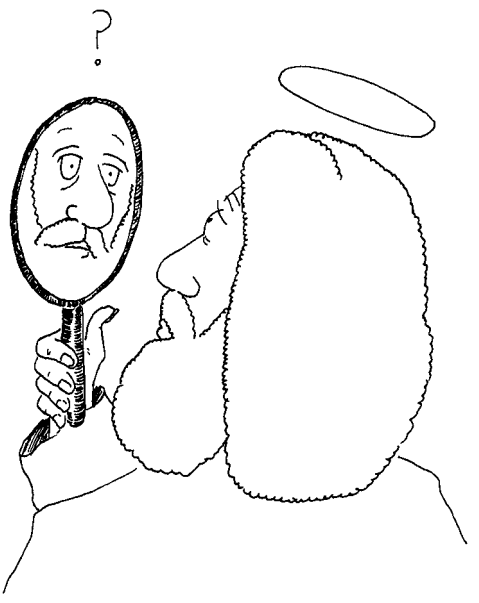



But remember, in the unusual system being suggested here, God is God's thought; therefore, in his failure to think pure Being, God has distanced himself from his own essence. This is what Hegel calls God's *self-alienation*. The "truth" of Hegel's insight can be seen in biblical symbolism in the relation between God and Satan. Satan is a fallen angel. He has "fallen away" from divinity. He is, in Hegel's way



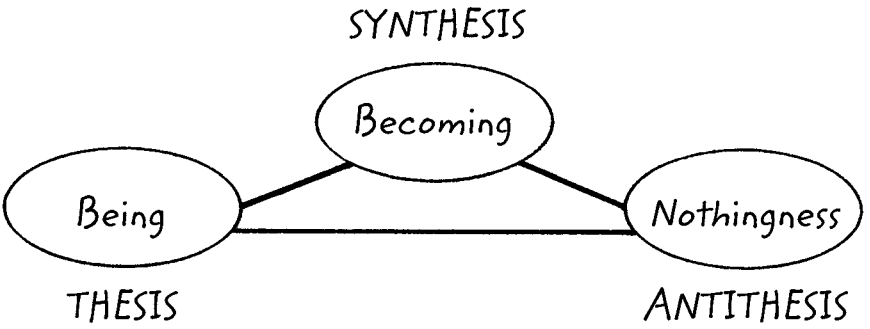
Satan Falls Away from God—Divine Self-Alienation

of thinking, divinity self-alienated. Another biblical indication of Hegel's "truth" can be seen in God's answer to Moses when God spoke to him through the burning bush. When the shrub burst into flame, Moses asked it, "Who art thou?" and God answered, "I am that which is" (or, in ungrammatical Hebrew, "I am that what am"). Here we see that God cannot say himself without dividing his essence into a subject-object relationship. ("I am . . ." [= subject] "that which is" [= object]. If the subject is the object, then it is not itself as subject.) Hegel's God, then, is in a kind of identity crisis. But if God experiences an identity crisis, so does the human because the human mind is nothing but a manifestation of the Divine Mind. The history of an individual's mind, like history itself, is the process of self-awareness and self-recovery.

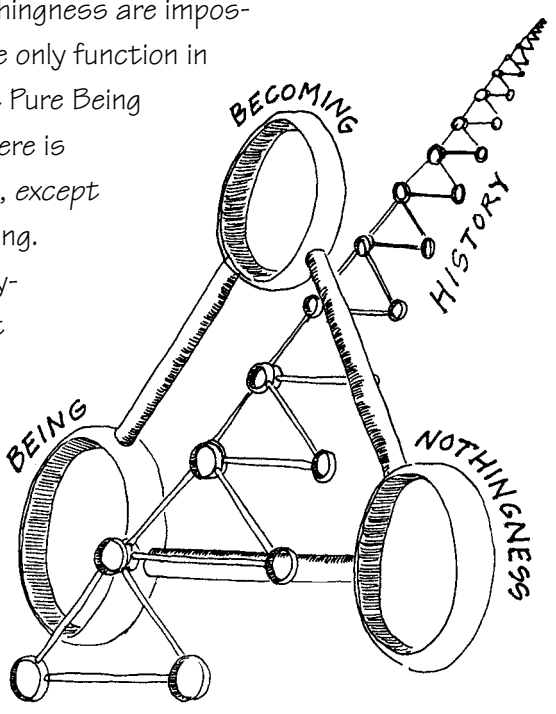


God's Identity Crisis

Returning to the dichotomy Being ↔ Nothingness—can there be any reconciliation between the two? Well, these two impossible thoughts (neither Pure Being nor Pure Nothingness can truly be thought) represent the absolute limitation of all thinking and all reality. That is, all thought and all reality must fall somewhere between these two extremes. Hegel's term for anything occurring between these polar opposites is "Becoming." So we can call Being a *thesis* (positive, +), Nothingness an *antithesis* (negative, – ), and Becoming a *synthesis* (combination of positive and negative +/ – ). Hegel calls this universal structure of all thought and reality the *dialectic*.



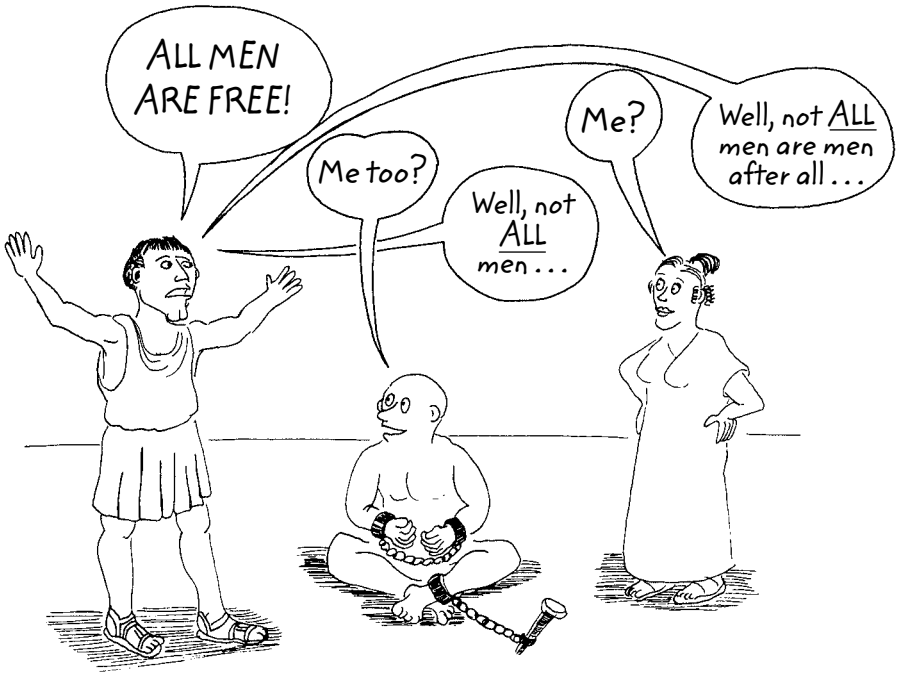

Therefore, anything in the world—a table, for instance—is in fact a *process* synthesizing a positivity and a negativity. It *is* the table by *not* being the chair or the floor. This process is the nature of thought, language, and reality, which are systems of positivities created by negativities, and vice versa. Every thought, word, and thing exists only as a part of a system of exclusions. Again, a thing is what it is by *not* being its other, yet that "otherness" is what defines it as a being. This fact now explains why the thoughts of Pure Being and Pure Nothingness are impossible. Thought and language only function in a system of contrasts, yet Pure Being encompasses all; hence, there is nothing to contrast with it, *except* Nothingness, which is nothing. (Are you following this dizzying "logic"?) Furthermore, it can be deduced from this system that every synthesis must become a new thesis, and defined as it is by its opposite, this new thesis must spawn its own antithesis. So history is an



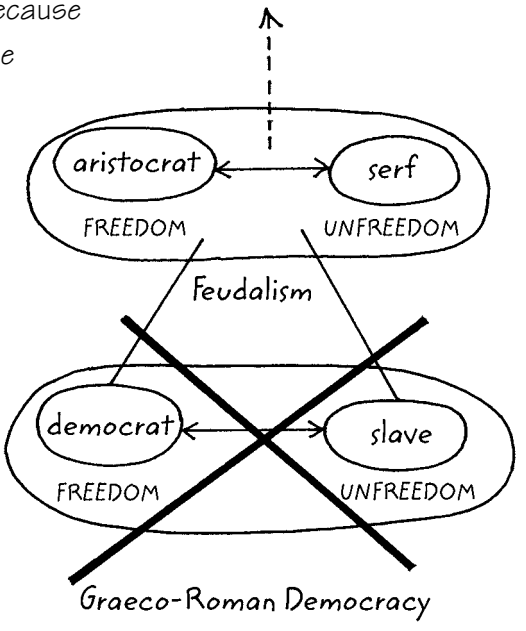
eternal process of the dialectic, with each historical moment being a concatenation of contradictions—the tension between the positive and the negative. These forces are opposed to each other, yet mutually dependent on each other. Eventually, the tension between the thesis and the antithesis destroys the historical moment, but out of its ashes a new historical moment is born, one that *brings forward the best of the old moment.* Here is Hegel's optimism: progress is built into history. And if we individuals think we see regression and backsliding at specific times in history, this is because we are blind to "the cunning of Reason," which uses *apparent* retrograde movements to make hidden progress. Such is the nature of Reason's (i.e., God's) process of self-recovery. Consider, for example, the period of Graeco-Roman democracy. On the one hand, there existed among the Greek and Roman democrats the commitment to self-determination, freedom, and human dignity (as seen, e.g., in Pericles' "funeral speech"). On the other hand, during their democratic periods, both Greece and Rome were imperialistic, slave-holding states. These two essential features of the society in question were contradictory but, ironically, were mutually dependent on each another. The slaves existed for the pleasure of the new democratic class, but without slavery and the booty from plundering, there never would have been a class of men liberated from toil who could dedicate their time, skills, and intellect to the creation of a democratic state. Yet eventually the *conceptual* contradiction between freedom and unfreedom, the two pillars of Graeco-Roman democracy, tore the society apart and prepared the way for a new kind of society, medieval feudalism.

Now, feudalism might not seem to you and me like a progression over earlier democratic societies, and in fact, it might seem like a retrogression. But from Hegel's point of view, medieval society represents an advance in freedom over Greece and Rome because in feudalism there were no slaves. Even the most humble serf had legal rights.

What happened in history also happens individually. Each of us passes through various stages in our conceptions of our self and our




freedom. There is the stage at which we believe we can be free only by escaping the domination of others and by dominating them. Then we come to realize that in dominating them we ourselves are dominated because we become dependent on those we dominate, both materially and in terms of self-identity. (Who am I? I am the lord. But only as long as I am recognized as such by the bondsman. Without his recognition, I am nobody. Hence, in effect, *he* is the lord, and I am the bondsman.) Only by acknowledging that neither we nor others around us are free can we



transcend the unfreedom of relationships of domination and discover higher forms of freedom—which is to say, discover the path of Reason and Divinity.

This sample of Hegelian thinking gives us an inkling of the psychological, sociological, historical, and theological dimensions of Hegel's thought. What we miss in this sampling is the absolute systematization of his philosophy. An outline of one of his several proposals for such a system follows:

The System

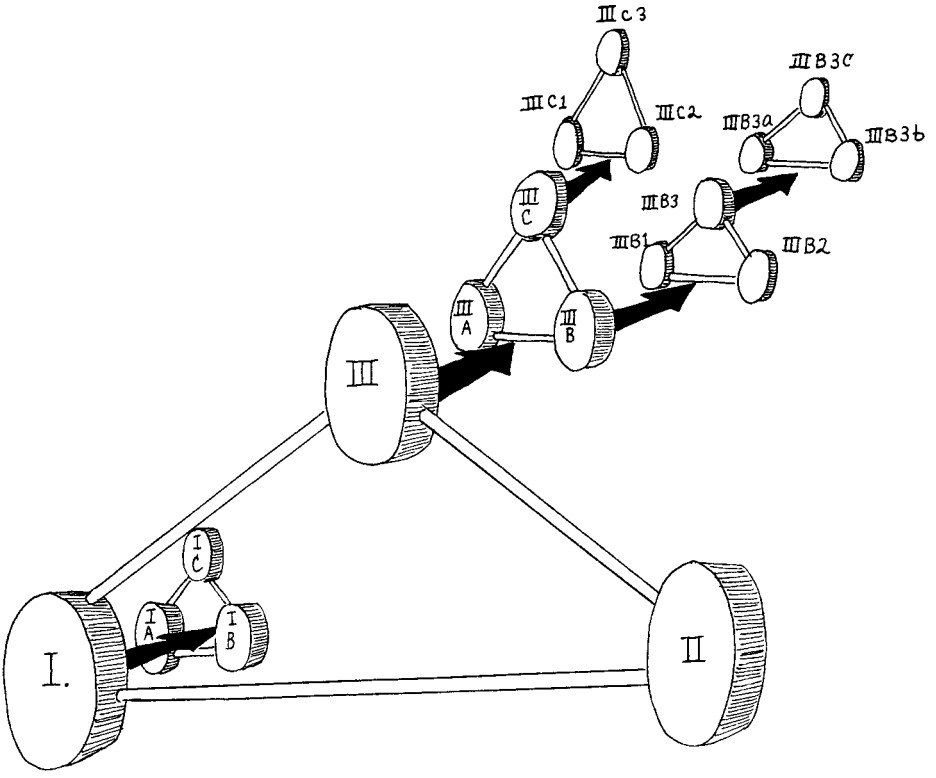
I. The idea-in-itself (= logic)
   A. Being
   B. Nothingness
   C. Becoming

   } This we've just discussed.

II. The idea-outside-itself (= nature, i.e., the material world qua *material* that is the opposite of spirit but must be *potentially* spirit. The *goal* of inanimate matter is spirit.)

III. The idea for itself (= spirit; the idea recovered from its loss into its opposite.)
   A. Subjective spirit (Mind as self-conscious and introverted.)
   B. Objective spirit (Mind projecting its own laws outward, creating a human world.)
      1. Law (Exterior—comes to the individual from without.)
      2. Morality (Interior—comes from within the individual.)
      3. Ethics (Synthesis of the law exteriorized and interiorized.)
         a. Family
         b. Society
         c. State
   C. Absolute spirit
      1. Art
      2. Religion
      3. Philosophy

Notice that this whole system is structured in terms of interrelating triads of theses-antitheses-syntheses (even though Hegel




**The System**

rarely used those terms) and that the state is the highest form of objective spirit. Many of Hegel's critics point this out when they call attention to his eventual worship of the authoritarian, repressive Prussian state. Some even claim his whole system was contrived to be in the political service of the newly restored Prussian monarch, Hegel's paymaster.[1]

A more positive interpretation of Hegel's objective spirit concentrates on his designation of Napoleon as a sign of the end of history.[2] On this account, *history* is the history of the opposition between masters and slaves, or lords and bondsmen. The labor of the bondsmen had created a world of culture that transcended nature. Before the French Revolution the fruit of their labor was enjoyed only by the lords, who had finally proven themselves to be useless. The rise of Napoleon marked the end of the reign of the lords and the advent of a new universal and homogeneous state in which lords no longer looked down

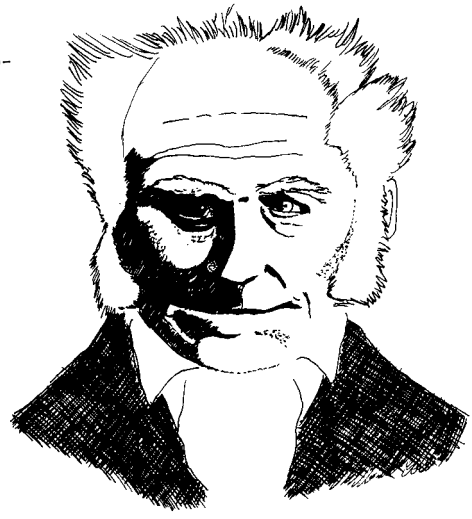
contemptuously on bondsmen; rather, this new state was one in which "one consciousness recognizes itself in another, and in which each knows that reciprocal recognition";[3] that is, each person will recognize all other people's individuality in their universality and their universality in their individuality. Napoleon's cannons at the Battle of Jena, which Hegel could hear as he hurried through the last pages of his *Phenomenology of Mind,* were finishing off the old world of masters and slaves. Napoleon himself was the harbinger of the posthistorical world. Yet to Hegel it was no surprise that people caught up in the turbulent events of the moment did not grasp their significance at the time. The end of history cannot be understood by those *in* history. This is the meaning of Hegel's aphorism "The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk."[4] But perhaps in Hegel's mind his own philosophy represented the posthistorical world even more than did Napoleon. It also must be noted that it is not objective spirit that is the apogee of Hegel's system; rather, it is absolute spirit, and the highest pinnacle of absolute spirit is not the state but *philosophy* (and, one assumes, particularly *Hegel's* philosophy).

**The Owl of Minerva**

## Schopenhauer

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) was one of Hegel's sharpest critics. He was a younger contemporary who refused to be intimidated by Hegel's immense fame. As a beginning philosophy teacher at the University of Berlin, Schopenhauer had scheduled classes at the same time as Hegel's, knowing full well that thereby he was guaranteeing for himself few, if any, students. This arrogant young philosopher's opinion of Hegel was one of undisguised contempt, as can be seen in the following unflattering portrait he drew.

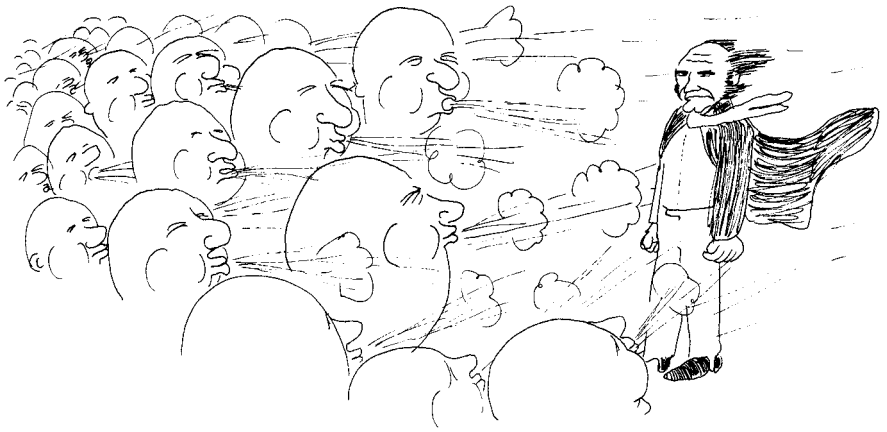
> Hegel, installed from above by the powers that be as the certified Great Philosopher, was a flat-headed, insipid, nauseating, illiterate charlatan, who reached the pinnacle of audacity in scribbling together and dishing up the craziest mystifying nonsense.[5]



**Arthur Schopenhauer**

Schopenhauer, in fact, showed deep respect for only two Western philosophers: Plato and Kant. He also admired the philosophical traditions of India. To Schopenhauer, the rest of the philosophers throughout history had been merely "windbags." Schopenhauer began his work demanding a return to Kant, and indeed, the first part of Schopenhauer's main work, *The World as Will and Idea,* was fundamentally a repetition of Kantian ideas. He agreed with Kant that the human mind is incapable of knowing ultimate reality, that the only reality we are capable of grasping intellectually is that which has passed through the grid work of space and time and through the categories of the understanding. Schopenhauer wrote:

> "The world is my idea":—this is a truth which holds good for everything that lives and knows, though man alone can bring it into reflective and abstract consciousness. If he really does this, he has



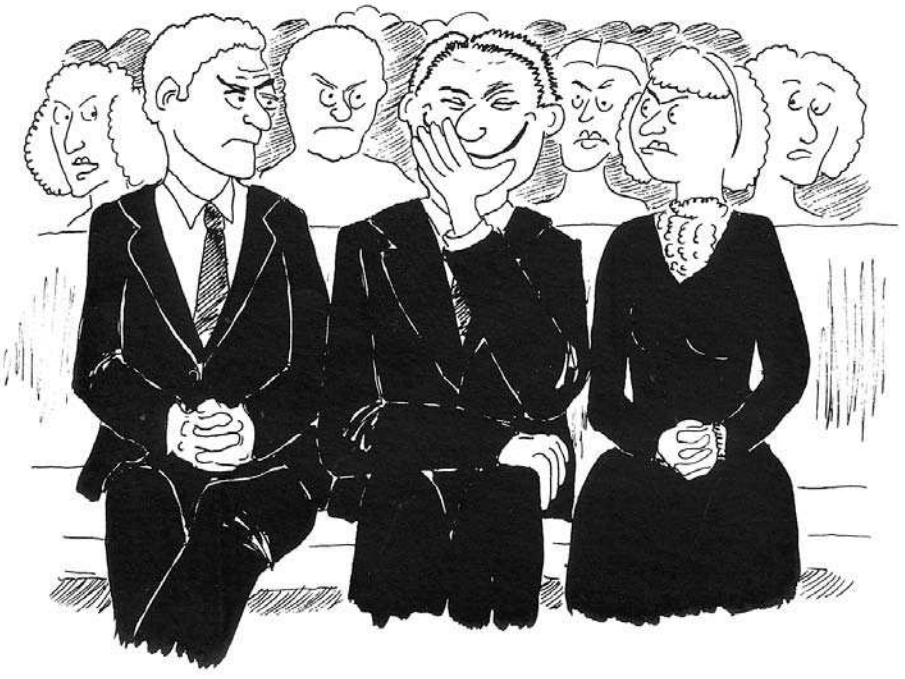
**The History of Philosophy as the History of Windbags**

> attained to philosophical wisdom. It then becomes clear and certain to him that what he knows is not a sun and an earth, but only an eye that sees a sun, a hand that feels an earth; that the world which surrounds him is there only as idea.[6]

Now, when Kant turned to the noumenal world, he claimed that we could not know it, though we had the right to hold various beliefs about it based on certain of our practical needs. Recall that for Kant, these beliefs were extremely optimistic ones: faith in God, freedom, immortality, and eternal justice. Furthermore, Kant had pointed out certain human experiences, certain positive intuitions of ours, that he hoped might be extrarational hints about the nature of that unknowable noumenal world. For example, there were those feelings of the sublime that we experience when we look deeply into the sky on a clear summer night, and equally inspiring to Kant were the feelings of moral duty that we experience in certain moments of crisis. As Kant put it, "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe . . . the starry heavens above and the moral law within."[7]

Well, Schopenhauer too believed that there were certain intuitive experiences that should be heeded because they might well give us an extrarational insight into ultimate reality. But Schopenhauer's examples of such insights were very different indeed from those of Kant.

For example, Schopenhauer wondered why it is that when someone is told of the death of an acquaintance, the first impulse that person experiences is the urge to grin—an urge that, of course, must be suppressed. And Schopenhauer wondered why it is that a respectable businessman or government official, who may have worked tirelessly for years to achieve the success and power that he has finally obtained, is willing to risk all of it for a moment's sexual



**It's Not Nice to Giggle at Funerals**

pleasure with a forbidden partner. These and similar human experiences left Schopenhauer with a much more pessimistic hunch about the nature of ultimate reality than that held by Kant. Schopenhauer's dark suspicions quickly became "truths" in his system. (The curious status of these nonepistemological truths has not escaped the eyes of Schopenhauer's critics.) Said Schopenhauer: "This truth, which must be very serious and impressive if not awful to everyone, is that a man can also say and must say, 'The world is my will.'"[8]

**Schopenhauer Peers beyond the Curtain of the Phenomenal World**

Schopenhauer's awful truth amounts to this: Behind appearances, behind the phenomenal veil, there does lie a noumenal reality; but far from being the benign sphere where Kant hoped to find God, immortality, and justice, Schopenhauer found there a wild, seething, inexorable, meaningless force that he called "will." This force creates all and destroys all in its insatiable demand for "More!" (More of *what* it does not know—it only knows that it wants more.)

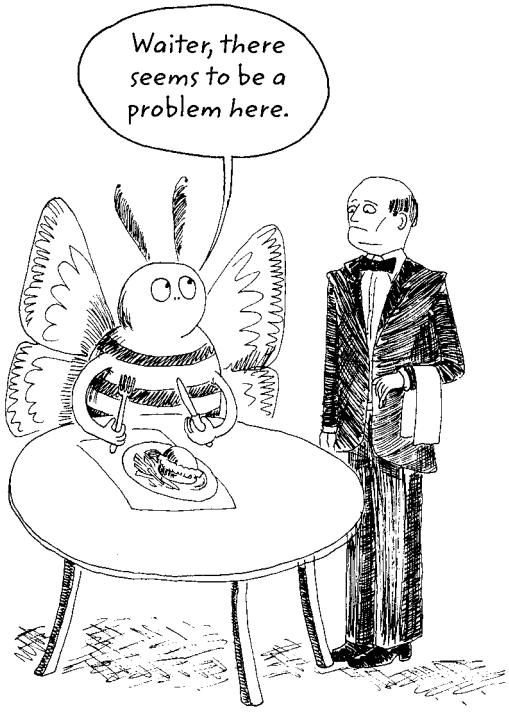
The best phenomenal images for understanding Schopenhauer's will are images of sex and violence. Not only in nature but even in the human sphere, every event is an act of procreation or destruction. Our actions, whether intentional or unintentional, motivated consciously or unconsciously, are, in fact, actions that in one way or another are in the service of procreation and destruction. (If you are

familiar with Freud's theories, you know now where he got his idea of the id. Even the name "id" [Latin for "it"] indicates the same noumenal indeterminacy as Schopenhauer's will. Freud himself said in 1920, "We have unwittingly steered our course into the harbour of Schopenhauer's philosophy.")[9]


According to Schopenhauer, everything in the phenomenal world is merely the manifestation of this perverse will, or as he called it, an "objectification of the will" (that is to say, the will passed through the categories and the grid work of space and time).

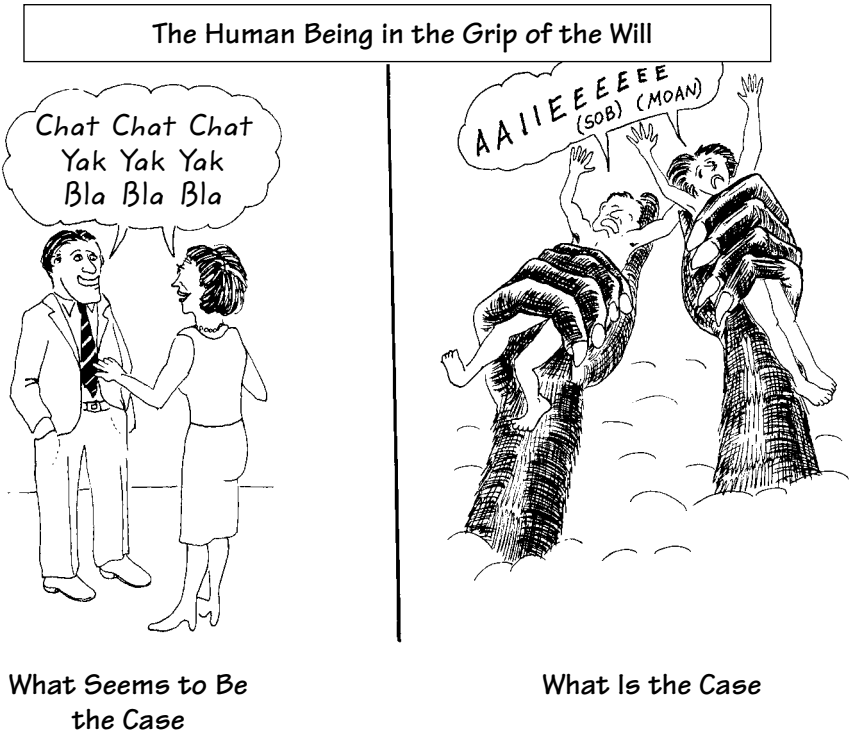
Even though Schopenhauer's images of the will are ones of dumb brutality, he also conceived of the will as immensely cunning. The will is capable of disguising its heartless purposes from any of its own "experiments" that might be capable of taking offense or even taking reprisals against the will. In other words, the human mind is constructed in such a way as to be self-deceiving, even concerning its view on the world. The will is denatured as it passes through the grid work and the categories. Nevertheless, if we could strip away our natural optimism, itself a product of the cunning of the will, we could look into nature and see that it cares not a whit for the happiness or well-being of any of its creatures beyond the bare needs of reproduction. Schopenhauer illustrated his point with descriptions of the giant turtles of the South Pacific that were known to have been smashed to death by the hundreds against the rocky coast in storms during mating season as they tried to get to shore to lay their eggs in the sand. Schopenhauer also called attention to that strange species of moth that emerges from its cocoon with full

reproductive and digestive systems; yet nature forgot to give it one little detail—a mouth! So the moth reproduces and then seeks food but quickly starves to death. Yet nature does not care; the moth has laid its little eggs. And, according to Schopenhauer, what's true of the turtle and the moth is true of the human being. If you are over eighteen years of age, your body is deteriorating. Your body, which is just the scaffolding for the reproductive system, begins to die once it has held its eggs in place and given them a chance to duplicate themselves.




This news is terrible indeed. Why do people not realize that we are all in a state of bondage to the irrational, meaningless will? Precisely because of the cunning of the will. Human culture itself is nothing but one more experiment of the will, and human optimism and hope are simply the will's gift to us to guarantee that we continue to deceive ourselves about the true state of affairs. The whole of human culture is nothing more than a grand deception. Art, religion, law, morality, science, and even philosophy are only **sublimations** of the will, sublimations that are still acting in its service. Hegel's glorification of higher culture is simply proof of the absolute triumph of the will.

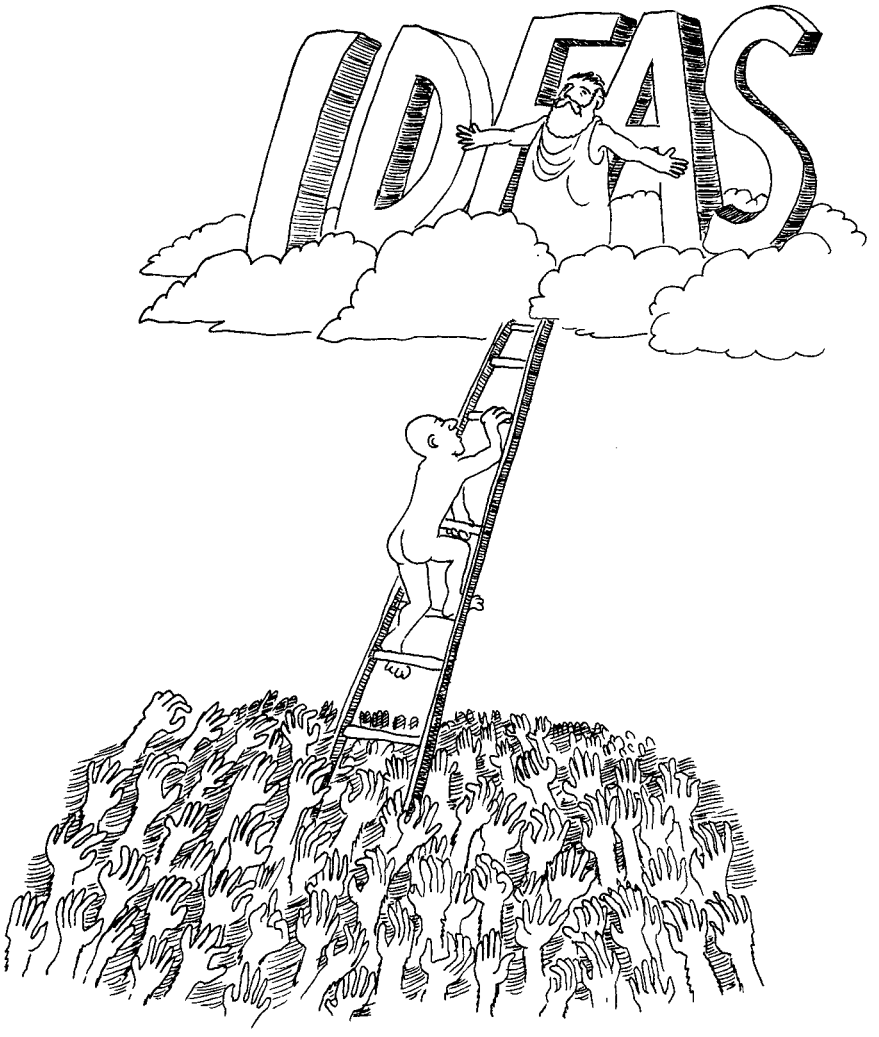
All our hopes and aspirations will be dashed. Happiness is an impossible dream. It is absurd that anyone can remain an optimist after even a glance at the newspaper on any given day. A mudslide swallows up whole villages. A mad assassin's bullet strikes down the hope of a people. A single parent, mother of three, is killed by a painful disease. The drums of war never cease beating, and an inglorious




death awaits all. Verily, only a fool can remain optimistic in the face of the truth.

Surely philosophy was never so disheartened and disheartening as in the case of Schopenhauer. But, according to him, his pessimism was a *rational* pessimism, and he sought a *rational* solution to it. There had, of course, been others who understood the truth and sought rational responses to it. Both Jesus and the Buddha had been pessimists, according to Schopenhauer, but their solutions were chimerical and still in the service of the will (besides, their doctrines were perverted by the cunning of the will manifested in the optimism of their disciples who presented their masters' pessimistic messages as "good news"). Plato too had offered a *nearly* successful solution, but his eternal Forms were still part of the world of ideas, hence of the will.

It might seem that suicide should be the only recommendation that Schopenhauer's philosophy could make. But in fact, Schopenhauer recommended against suicide on the grounds that self-murder




Plato's Solution

would be a last, desperate act of will, hence still a manifestation of the will (that is to say, no act requires as much concentration of will as does suicide; hence, suicide cannot possibly be the negation of the will).

Do not despair! There is a Schopenhauerian solution. Even though all culture is nothing but a sublimation of sex and violence, hence an experiment of the will, there is a point at which the cultural world can achieve such a degree of subtlety that it can break off from its own unconscious origins and set up an independent sphere that


**Elvis's Solution**

is, in fact, counternature and therefore antiwill. This autonomy from the will occurs in a specific corner of the art world—that of music. But not just *any* music. Certainly, popular music won't do, evoking as it does the imagery and emotions of the phenomenal world. Nor will most classical music serve. For example, in Beethoven's works, the imagery is still too strong; hence its link to the will is too obvious. (When listening to the "Pastoral," we see the cows in the meadow, the bright green grass and the wildflowers, and the puffy little white clouds in the blue sky.) No, an escape from the will can be achieved only in the contemplation of purely *formal* music, a music without words and without imagery. There is a kind of baroque music that fits