

History of Faith and Reason

"The greatest good of man is to discourse daily about virtue." -Plato, *Apology*, 38A.

Whosoever is not of faith is sin." -St. Paul, *Romans*, 14:23

Introduction

The two most significant events in the intellectual history of the west are the emergence of philosophy in Greece and the rise to dominance of monotheism in Israel. These two traditions both begin between the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. and combine around the year zero in the person of Jesus Christ. Throughout history, each tradition has informed how we are meant to employ the talents and abilities that make us human beings, faith and reason. These two traditions have likewise (along with their adherents) taken turns invading one another, both figuratively and literally. It is impossible to imagine Judaism as we know it without the influence of Greek philosophy, and it is impossible to understand philosophy as we know it without the Hebrew Bible. It is the daunting task of this course to introduce the curious mind not so much to answers, but rather to the immortality of the questions that have been with humanity since we learned how to write and speak. We will swiftly see, that there is much greater commonality than contrast among these traditions, despite the importance of their differences.

The Jewish Tradition

The Jewish tradition is, of course, the foundation for all three of the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) as well as two of the three great proselytizing religions (Christianity, Islam and the unrelated Buddhism). Pre-scientific by nature, and at times anti-scientific in spirit (though not to the extent that modern cynics would lead us to believe), the Jews believed in a world created by a divine *Logos*, the word of the creator, whose language is synonymous with a natural law that is embedded in all things (an idea that would later form the basis of a new nation, in the form of the *Declaration of Independence*). This tradition therefore deals much less (indeed not at all) with experiments and measurements but seeks to explain the world with allegories reflective of the divine will. The parable of the Good Samaritan for example, does not in any way require any mundane *facts* about the Samaritan (he doesn't even have a name) in order to communicate the *truth* of how our creator would have us behave.

The modern reader may find such notions antiquated and even anachronistic, but it should be pointed out that although modern people may make money by means of technology (τέχνη), and make use of it via economics (οἰκονομία) and seek comfort in pharmaceuticals (φάρμακον), all of which are squarely within the legacy of Greek thought, it is often enough on allegories that it is spent. Whether immersion into the universe of film, music and comic books, belief in the symbolic power of luxury possessions or a vicarious experience of heroism through sports (or political) fanaticism, there is nothing about our time that suggests that we have outgrown our need for the allegorical. I dare not speak for Moses or Abraham, but I can certainly imagine them judging the emptiness of contemporary allegory rather sternly. Though by no means anti-intellectual, the Jewish tradition and its allegorical nature provide history with some of the greatest cautionary tales regarding the limits of human reason.

*"There is one [disease] which is widespread, and from which men rarely escape. This disease varies in degree in different men ... I refer to this: that every person thinks his mind ... cleverer and more learned than it is ... I have found that this disease has attacked many an intelligent person ... They ... express themselves [not only] upon the science with which they are familiar, but upon other sciences about which they know nothing ... If met with applause ... so does the disease itself become aggravated."*¹ Moses Maimonides, *Aphorisms*. Quoted in *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, Vol. 3 (1935), p. 555

The Torah

The Torah, or Jewish Written Law, consists of the five books of the Hebrew Bible - known more commonly to non-Jews as the "Old Testament" - that were given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai and include within them all of the biblical laws of Judaism. Whereas Islam is a religion based entirely upon a book, Buddhism on a method, and Christianity on a living God, Judaism is unequivocally a religion of laws. The Torah is also known as the Chumash, Pentateuch or Five Books of Moses.

Though doubtlessly significant both as influences and of themselves, it is important to differentiate between what constitutes philosophy, and what constitutes exegesis (the interpretation of scripture). Where the Greek tradition sought to rely on human reason, senses and understanding to explain the world around us, the Jewish tradition is cautiously aware of the limitations and corruptibility of those very processes. The result is that the Greek tradition would eventually lay the foundation for science, and the Jewish tradition would provide the (often too quiet) conscience to guide that very science in the name of civility. This interplay was artfully rendered by Albert Einstein (who himself was a son of both traditions) in 1954: *"science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind."*

"The word "Torah" has multiple meanings including: A scroll made from kosher animal parchment, with the entire text of the Five Books of Moses written on it; the text of the Five Books of Moses, written in any format; and, the term "Torah" can mean the entire corpus of Jewish law. This includes the Written and the Oral Law.

Origin & Preexistence

Jewish tradition holds that "Moses received the Torah from Sinai," yet there is also an ancient tradition that the Torah existed in heaven not only before God revealed it to Moses, but even before the world was created.

In rabbinic literature, it was taught that the Torah was one of the six or seven things created prior to the creation of the world. According to Eliezer ben Yose the Galilean, for 974 generations before the creation of the world the Torah lay in God's bosom and joined the ministering angels in song. Simeon ben Lakish taught that the Torah preceded the world by 2,000 years and was written in black fire upon white fire. Akiva called the Torah "the precious instrument by which the world was created". Rav said that God created the world by looking into the Torah as an architect builds a palace by looking into blueprints. It was also taught that God took council with the Torah before He created the world.

Other Jewish sages, however, disregard the literal belief that the Torah existed before all else. Saadiah Gaon rejected this belief on the grounds that it contradicts the principle of creation ex nihilo. Judah Barzillai of Barcelona raised the problem of place. Where could God have kept a preexistent Torah? While allowing that God could conceivably have provided an ante-mundane place for a corporeal Torah, he preferred the interpretation that the Torah preexisted only as a thought in the divine mind. Similarly, the Ibn Ezra raised the problem of time. He wrote that it is impossible for the Torah to have preceded the world by 2,000 years or even by one moment, since time is an accident of motion, and there was no motion before God created the celestial spheres; rather, he concluded, the teaching about the Torah's preexistence must be a metaphoric riddle."² -The Jewish Virtual Library

No matter what one believes surrounding the authorship or origin of the Torah, it is widely believed to have been first written down in its entirety by humans between 600-500 B.C. (where it had previously survived as an oral tradition), with a final version appearing around 450 B.C. It is at this time that the Torah was universally accepted (among Jews) as scripture, and the tradition became one of interpretation (exegesis) rather than exploration.

The Greek Tradition

Around the same time period in a region of Ancient Greece known as Milesia (present day Turkey) there began a tradition contrary to that of exegesis: philosophy. Prior to the rise of the Milesian school, Greece was

dominated by the poets (most notably Homer) whose recitations of the myths were meant to explain all phenomena, including the origin of the world and humanity. Owing to the myths lacking the continuity and force of the Bible, the fragmented nature of Polytheism and finally in part to the lack of an interpretive tradition, the myths were challenged and found lacking in comparison with human reason. The pre-Socratics are distinguished above all else by this appeal to human reason. *"They delighted in the light of sane thought but always retained a profound sense of outer darkness, the unexpected, the uncanny."*³W. Kaufmann, *Thales to Ockham*, Englewood Cliffs NJ, Prentice-Hall, 1961, p.2

The early philosophers are categorized as Pre-Socratics, similarly to the usage of B.C. to denote the important of the birth of Christ, it is Socrates whose life has been chosen (somewhat arbitrarily, especially in comparison to Christ) to define the eras of the Greek tradition. The pre-Socratic thinkers, despite their works existing only as secondary fragments, provide two of the most important lessons for anyone embarking on the great philosophical journey. Firstly, they guide the reader towards realizing the extent of their own ignorance (this lesson culminates forcefully in the death of Socrates) and secondly, they bear witness to the cyclical, rather than linear, nature of philosophical enquiry. Following 2.5 millennia of dormancy and irrelevancy, their re-discovery by Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries respectively, has proven the immortality and never-waning power of ideas.

*"They might conveniently be arranged in four groups of three: The Milesians (Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes); then three men who came from different places and stood each by himself (Pythagoras, Xenophanes and Heraclitus); then the so-called Eleatics..."*⁴Kaufmann, *ibid.*, p.5 Of the Eleatics, we will concentrate on Parmenides.

The Milesians

Thales is widely considered to be the first Western Philosopher. He famously predicted an eclipse of the sun in 585 B.C. and lived roughly at the same time as the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah. The prediction of the eclipse is the first documented use of scientific reasoning in history. He was most likely Phoenician in descent, as Miletia in his day was a melting pot of cultures. Another famous anecdote, which serves as a warning to philosophers to this day, is that he was so busy star gazing that he tripped and fell into a well. Little is known about his philosophy aside from the following:

- He believed that the world was held up by water, like a ship at sea
- He believed that all things in their most fundamental form were water
- The soul was a kinetic thing to him, and stones had them by virtue of being subject to gravity and magnetism
- He believed that all things were full of Gods

Anaximander, the second of the Milesians, was a student of Thales and the first Greek to ever compose a book of prose. Though just as little is known about him, some of his ideas are terrifyingly modern and undeniably relevant, while others seem laughable. His greatest contribution to philosophy was the idea of the *apeiron*, or the infinite, boundless void. He considered this to be the origin of all things (thus replacing the water of Thales).

- He held that there was a constant heating and cooling off which gave shape to the world, predicting Geology by thousands of years
- He held that the Earth was cylindrical, like a drum with two flat surfaces on either side
- All life was originally born from "creatures of a different kind."

It never ceases to amaze that despite living in a world without Geometry, written numerals or any means of quantification, Anaximander managed to stumble upon the notion of biological evolution by the simple

observation that people require “*prolonged nursing*” and thus a human baby would never have been able to survive in the wild. It is unknown as to whether he ever crossed the equator, but it is highly unlikely. Despite only ever seeing the N. Hemisphere, his “cylinder” represents a great leap forward over flat-Earth theory.

Anaximenes, likewise, carried the fundamental theories of his predecessors forward by means of observation and synthesis. To him the world had to be more than nothing, but also less dense than water, and thus held air to be the fundamental substance. In addition, he contributed the following ideas:

- The stars do not move under the Earth, but around it
- The sun itself is Earth, but brought to an intense state of heat due to excessive motion

It is the final point that is most significant, because when added to atomic theory that would come later, it provides an accurate fundamental understanding of energy and thermodynamics.

Pythagoras

A name that lives on in the Geometry classrooms of the world, Pythagoras lived on a Greek colony in southern Italy where he went on to found a semi-religious order (the Pythagoreans) that sought to explain God and the universe in numbers. Thousands of years before the Mandelbrot set was named “the fingerprint of God”, and hundreds before Euclid’s Phi ratio, it was Pythagoras who first suspected that a hidden language of numbers lie beneath the surface of experience, just waiting to be discovered.

- The famed Pythagorean theorem $a^2+b^2=c^2$
- Belief that the study of mathematics was a spiritual pursuit, a means of contemplating the abstract above the worldly
- The dual nature of body and soul
- The belief in immortality of the soul, and transmigration of souls
- The notion that society can be designed as a means of salvation for its citizens

Outside of mathematics, where his influence is direct and permanent, it was Pythagoras’s influence on Plato that best defines his legacy. After the death of Socrates, Plato would absorb the ideas of Pythagoras and it was this later, Pythagorean Plato, who would exert a profound influence on Christian thought. His doctrine of eternal recurrence, or the idea that in infinite time all cycles of life repeat themselves, would capture the imagination of a young Nietzsche in the mid-19th Century.

Heraclitus

By far the most controversial and influential of the pre-Socratic philosophers is Heraclitus. Also known as “the dark philosopher” it is his biting critiques of his contemporaries that best describe his legacy. He is either loved or hated by those who read him to this day. His significance rivals that of Socrates himself, although we only know him in fragmentary quotes. It is believed that his calling attention to the constant state of flux in the world is what caused those who came after him to run fleeing into another world, the world of *Metaphysics* in which the pure concepts of the mind can truly exist, unlike here where all we have are imperfect attempts.

In the context of this course it is also important to note that Heraclitus, independent of Judaic tradition, came to replace the water of Thales, void of Anaximander, air of Anaximenes and numbers of Pythagoras with the concept of the divine *Logos* (reason or word). The recognition of this rational principle in the world, behind the scenes, helped prepare the way for Greek acceptance of Jewish thought (the divine word) between the translation of the Torah and the time of Christ. Additionally, his allegorical use of fire as a cleansing or purging force was likely inherited by the early Zoroastrians whose dualistic theology was active in Persia at the time.

In the modern era, Hegel and Nietzsche's work is rooted in the Heraclitan worldview, which they saw as an instrument to break the shackles of Enlightenment thought, which by their time had been as constraining as the church dogma it had sought to replace. Personally, I cannot help but share their exuberance and unflattering opinion of unconstrained human reason. Furthermore, although we are focusing on the Western tradition, Heraclitus would have been a brother to Chinese Taoists or Japanese Zen Buddhists. Some quotations can be found below:

"Those awake have but one ordered universe in common, but in sleep every man turns away to one of his own."

"Listening not to me but to the Logos it is wise to agree that all things are one."

"The path up and down are one and the same."

"It is not possible to step in the same river twice."

"What is opposition is in concert, and from what differs comes the most beautiful harmony."

"All things happen by strife and necessity."

"After death things await men which they do not expect or imagine."

"Man is called childish compared with divinity, just as a boy with a man."

"Fire will judge and seize upon all things."

"Dogs bark at those whom they do not recognize."

"It is not good for men to obtain all they wish"

"To God all things are beautiful and good and just, but men have supposed some things to be unjust, some just."

Parmenides

In many ways, Parmenides was to Socrates what John the Baptist was to Christ. Like Socrates after him, Parmenides was a philosopher who used reason itself to express the limits of human reason. It was the position of the Eleatics that reality is one substance, devoid of any plurality. It was here that *"his [Plato] dichotomy of knowledge and of belief and of an unchanging, eternal, timeless reality and ever changing, temporal appearance was derived."*⁵Kaufmann, *ibid.* p.18. It is the notion of this eternal reality that has caused Parmenides to be known as "the Father of Metaphysics." Metaphysics being the branch of philosophy that deals with the first principles of things, including abstract concepts such as being, knowing, substance, cause, identity, time, and space. This infatuation with metaphysics among the learned Greeks doubtlessly prepared them for the concept of the single Hebrew God.

Parmenides was so admired by Plato, that a dialogue was named after him. It is in this dialog alone that we see the young Socrates presented as a student, rather than as the central teacher in Plato's writings:

"We can speak and think only of what exists. And what exists is uncreated and imperishable for it is whole and unchanging and complete. It was not or nor shall be different since it is now, all at once, one and continuous...In the knowledgeable realm, the form of the good is the last thing to be seen, and it is reached only with difficulty. Once one has seen it, however, one must conclude that it is the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything, that it produces both light and its source in the visible realm, and that in the intelligible realm it controls and provides truth and understanding, so that anyone who is to act sensibly in private or public must see it..."⁶ Plato, Parmenides

Furthermore, he was the first philosopher to recognize that although truth should be sought, un-truth (deliberate or otherwise) existed everywhere in the natural world and could not be proven to have any less of a valid existence than truth. This idea would permeate Nietzsche's thinking, and through him saturate the development of 20th century thought:

*"...but if you wish to get better training, you must do something more than that; you must consider not only what happens if a particular hypothesis is true, but also what happens if it is not true."⁷ Plato, *ibid.**

As you can hopefully already see, the questions with which humans have grappled are neither new nor are they monopolized by any single culture or place. In our desperate search for answers, fueled like a nuclear fire by the instant informational gratification we call Google, humanity has come no closer to finding an answer to eternal mysteries. It is the purpose of both philosophy (with all its logic and rhetoric), as well as faith (with all its prayer and meditation), to fend off a far more catastrophic possibility, the death of our ability to wonder. For to lose one's sense of awe and wonder is for the soul and mind to die needlessly before the body.