



COVER SHEET

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Transcendence and Epistemology

This paper invokes the working hypothesis that all metaphysics is grounded in theological premises. If this is conceded, then it becomes arguable that there are two underlying theological trajectories in Western metaphysics. For the want of better terms, I will call these two trajectories Platonistic and Aristotelian. The Platonistic trajectory relies on the grasp transcendence has on our mind, and sees this as the grounds of all true knowledge. On the other hand, the Aristotelian trajectory sees our natural powers of perception and logic as capable of achieving a meaningful grasp of transcendent reality.

The argument I am seeking to put forward is that Aristotelian epistemologies of transcendence underpin the dominant metaphysical grounds out of which modernism emerges. Further, modernism is over confident of our natural epistemological powers because of the Aristotelian theology underpinning modern Western metaphysics. This accounts for a certain hubris regarding the self evident and natural nature of primary truth, meaning, value, purpose and rational and empirical proof inherent in modernism. Yet, this overconfidence inevitably falls over, dispensing firstly with the belief that transcendence is knowable, and moving on from that crisis of metaphysics to the abandonment of the very idea of true knowledge. This demise has given us the postmodern attempt to do philosophy without metaphysics, truth or theology. That is, given the acceptance of the Aristotelian theological trajectory, Western meaning itself dies.

This paper seeks to advocate the resurrection of Western meaning via re-discovering the strength of the Platonistic theological trajectory regarding epistemology and transcendence.

This Platonistic trajectory has never been absent from the West, but it has, since the 13th century, often been marginal. Simone Weil is one of the great recent advocates of this type of marginality.

In *Gravity and Grace* Weil makes this comment:

We know by means of our intelligence that what the intelligence does not comprehend is more real than what it does comprehend. Faith is experience that intelligence is enlightened by love.¹

This remark well exemplifies what I am calling the Platonistic approach to epistemology and transcendence.

¹ Weil, S., *Gravity and Grace*, Routledge Classics, London, 2002, p128

There are two specific features of Weil's comment that I would like to draw attention to:

- Firstly, Weil holds that human intelligence is adequate to the task of being apprehended by that which it cannot adequately comprehend.
- Secondly, Weil believes that our intelligence can only be enlightened to know the transcendently real by faith.

Here faith is a specific type of experience opened up to the human knower when, in loving receptivity, we receive the gift of illumination from Divine love. This faith is an inherently relational and lived experience where one becomes aware that the Divine Logos is communing with us and communicating the love of God to us, at all times and in all contexts.

But this communion has some intriguing features. Weil notices that the awareness of a spiritual 'something more' *is* graspable by the human knower. She insists that phenomena's shimmering overflow *is* revealed just by giving close attention to ordinary reality in our lived experience. And yet, a meaningful grasp of what that 'something more' is can only be illuminated, via our faith, by God. And it is precisely because His ordinary revelations have no discrete phenomena that we come to recognise the radically noumenal touch of God.

Ordinarily, God does not give Himself to us without hiding Himself and without putting the onus of belief in His super-tangible touch onto us. To change back to a visual metaphor, when George MacDonald notes that "seeing is not believing, it is only seeing"² he is speaking specifically of how we cannot see the transcendent revealed in phenomena if we do not first, as children, believe in the love which seeks to be revealed to us through phenomena. This has clear resonance with Augustine's famous injunction that we must believe in order to understand. Yet Augustine is going much further than thinkers like Michael Polanyi here. There is no disputing that you cannot see at all without believing something. But MacDonald is concerned with seeing what is *divinely revealed* in what one sees. He comments here on our freedom to refuse to be grasped by transcendent truth in any given experience.

Weil, MacDonald and Augustine intimate that the illumination of revelation is only give to those who are prepared to actively have faith in transcendent and meaningful love, as the ever speaking grounds of all reality. Thus, the sheer givenness of the 'something more' in phenomena is subject to radical freedom. This 'something more' can actually be seen, without necessarily being believed in, in a manner that depends not on the revelation being given, but on the spiritual orientation of the person receiving, or failing to receive, the revelation.

Plato's very mode of philosophy - his searching, desiring interpersonal dialogues, laced with mythic parables - recognises this radical freedom in the process of mental illumination. Yet Plato's acceptance of this radical freedom in no manner qualifies his conviction of the intellectually evident nature of 'something more' beyond phenomena. Plato in effect recognises that his own experience of acute illumination,

² MacDonald, G., *The Princess and the Goblin*, Puffin Classics, London, 1997, p177

wherein the human knower is lovingly apprehended by Reality beyond flux and contingency, is essentially religious. Hence Plato held that it is only in our being grasped by transcendence, not in the powers of the human mind to comprehend per se, that we receive illumination and can know true reality.

Paul Davies, a theoretical physicist particularly interested in cosmology, has an entirely different approach to epistemology and transcendence. In his fascinating book, *The Mind of God*,³ Davies makes special note of how delicately balanced and profoundly brilliant the fundamental structure of physical reality is, and how remarkable it is that we can grasp this intellectually. This, Davies believes, points to a Cosmic Mind of some description in or above the physical cosmos. This is not the God of religion however, for Davies speculates about the Cosmic Mind in essentially impersonal terms. Given the methodologies of science and mathematics, Davies has no reason to believe that the Cosmic Mind has any interest in us at all. To use Pascal's phrase, Davies believes in "the God of the Philosophers". It is Davies' confidence that the human mind is an adequate tool to probe the edges of the most profound mysteries of physical reality that leads him to his theological conclusions. Davies' cosmological speculations have much in common with Aristotle's approach to divine knowledge.

Near the start of Aquinas' *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Saint Thomas notes that in *De Partibus Animalibus* Aristotle holds divine knowledge to be the highest and most desirable knowledge, even though it is a knowledge which we only grasp in very small part.⁴ Aquinas does not actually misrepresent Aristotle here, but he does subtly use Aristotle to support his own Christian notion that religious faith (not speculative science) is the obvious way of grasping divine knowledge. Aquinas' stance on this matter is completely foreign to Aristotle.⁵ Yet, having established the pre-eminence of divine knowledge with the authority of no lesser person than "The Philosopher", Aquinas goes on to delineate the theological wisdom that is "above reason", from the theological knowledge that is graspable by natural revelation. Thus Aquinas plunges Aristotle into the Christian baptismal in the service of his apologetic task. Yet, one cannot help but notice that Aquinas' theology proceeds in a very different direction to Aristotle's first philosophy; but this is because, of course, Aquinas is a Christian theologian and Aristotle is a pagan philosophical scientist.

Whilst Aristotle does see first philosophy or "theology" as the most intellectual, primary and highest form of human knowledge, Aristotle's theology is not at all religiously apprehended. C.C.W. Taylor's careful essay on Aristotle's epistemology makes it clear that when all is said and done, it is "Aristotle's attempt to make perception fundamental to all kinds of knowledge" that renders his knowledge of the

³ Davies, P., *The Mind of God*, Simon & Schuster, USA, 1992

⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book One, Chapter 5: Pegis, A.C. (trans), University of Notre Dame Press, 1975, p70

⁵ Aristotle, *De Partibus Animalium*, Book I, 5 (644b 21 - 645a 17): Barnes, J., (ed) *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Princeton University Press, 1995, Vol 1, pp1003 - 1004. In this passage Aristotle does not simply value astronomy over all sublunar natural science, but points out that both areas of knowledge "have their special charm"; sublunar knowledge is more certain whilst divine knowledge is more noble. But needless to say, divine knowledge as Aristotle understands it, is only knowledge to the extent that it is amenable to Man's natural powers of perception and logic (which it is in only the most scanty manner) and hence speculation rather than faith are the only grounds of attempting to grasp some form of this knowledge that Aristotle can think of. This is very different to how Aquinas understands the knowledge of the Divine.

divine essentially naturalistic.⁶ Aristotle's knowledge of the divine, as comfortable as it is with awed speculation, has no place for that which is "above reason", in stark contrast to Aquinas' theology.

Aristotle's natural theology, like all of his work, has an enduring profundity to it. However, it is clearly "theology" without faith – that is, without a relational inherence of the devotee in the Divine – and it seeks no religious contact with the Divine, but is happy to postulate *about* the divine instead.

In Aristotle's theology, Man as an individual being is autonomous from God. Further, Man's existential context is always bounded by the sub-lunar (the natural as opposed to the divine), even though the faculty of mind in Man is divine and hence attune in harmonic resonance to the intellectual music of the Heavens.

Taylor points out that Aristotle's epistemology is grounded in his very naturalistic understanding of the human soul. From this grounding his empiricist epistemological foundationalism works well, within its limits, provided one does not push the question of how one knows the truth of the undemonstrable premises of knowledge. This truth, and all teleological meaning, is somehow infallibly inferred without demonstration from perception in Aristotle. So any practical knowledge of primary truth Aristotle may seek – notably, knowledge of the *summa bonum* – is all derived naïvely from perception, from tight logic and from wise opinion, even though the higher up and further away from sensory immediacy such knowledge moves, the more speculative and less testable it gets, and the more we must take on faith that such speculations are undemonstrably true. This 'faith' is faith in our own mind. We must have faith in the perception and logic that is the dependable, even divine, natural grounds of the wise opinions of higher metaphysical speculation.

Pascal and Kierkegaard are withering in their dismissal of such faith.⁷ Pascal notes that as the many incommensurable philosophical notions of the *summa bonum* indicate, there is no natural, objectively empirical or unequivocally rational way of distinguishing between mere speculation and primary truth. Confidence in the natural powers of the human mind to truly grasp (let alone demonstrate) primary truth, is badly misplaced. But it is so seductive! We think our intellectual powers to be divine, and so we attribute to our own nature (and the natural limits of human knowledge) a hubristic natural divinity. Unjustified confidence in the autonomous powers of the natural mind to grasp and contain the divine is the grounds of the Aristotelian approach to metaphysics. As beautiful and noble minded as Aristotle's philosophy is, nevertheless, from the Judeo-Christian perspective, it is an attempt to build the Tower of Babel: the attempt to climb to and seize Heaven, by sheer natural ingenuity. The Biblical narrative sees such an endeavour as doomed to end in the fragmentation of meaning itself and the disintegration of civilisation's unifying creative powers.

Yet before entirely natural theology leads to the curse of Babel, it leads to the abandonment of the knowability of transcendence itself. The comment famously attributed to Laplace, that he had no need of the hypothesis of God, is the natural

⁶ Taylor, C.C.W., "Aristotle's Epistemology" in Everson, S., (ed) *Companions to Ancient Thought: Epistemology*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp116–142; quote from p137.

⁷ Pascal, B., *Pensées*, Penguin Classics, London, 1966; Kierkegaard, S., *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Hong & Hong, Princeton University Press, 1992

outcome of finding perception to be the sole grounds of knowledge and of finding human logic to be self sufficiently true. The transcendent becomes, at best, an extraneous hypothesis that those who so wish to can believe in. It is because we now see religion in cosmological and nominalist terms, rather than ontological and participatory terms, that Tillich claims that Western culture's assumed philosophy of religion makes "atheism not only possible, but almost unavoidable."⁸ Further, as atheistic naturalism matures in our intellectual culture, the collapse of belief grounded in the immediate and existentially committed knowledge of God ends up fatally wounding meaningful metaphysics, epistemology and theology. From that place of self corrosive nihilism, naturalism itself, and the very idea of true belief, must fall.

In the final analysis, the Aristotelian naturalistic approach to the knowledge of transcendence fails. And this failure takes down with it any confidence in a true knowledge of reality. This collapse is the end not only of metaphysics, epistemology and theology, but of philosophy and meaning itself.

The fascinating history of the risings and fallings of Aristotelian thought in Western culture bears the above statement out.

During the 3rd century BC Aristotle's scientific philosophy waned in the face of epistemological concerns carried forward by the Sceptics, was displaced by the Stoic and Epicurean responses to scepticism, and was rendered somewhat obsolete by the increasing separation of science from philosophy. This period of philosophical divergence was more or less resolved back into Platonistic directions by the second century AD. Yet, whilst important features of Aristotle's thought were absorbed into Neoplatonism, Aristotle didn't regain a strong following in his own right until the 8th century in Byzantium. Via that revival, Aristotle found his way to the Islamic world from whence, in the 12th century he conquered the West with great moment.

From the 12th century Barnes notes that "for some four centuries Aristotle's philosophy and Aristotle's science ruled the West with virtually unchallenged sway."⁹ It is not without significance that this period – the formative pre-modern period – sees the rise of nominalism, the decline of Augustinian and Platonist influence, and the creation of the idea of the secular in Western culture. From here arise the full gamete of cultural inventions that made the modern world possible.

Tillich sees the 13th century as the axis of a profound swing in Western culture away from an ontological and Augustinian philosophy of religion, towards a cosmological and, in my terms Aristotelian philosophy of religion.¹⁰ From this deep shift in the most primary underlying cultural texture of belief assumptions, the seeds of the modern world were germinated. Aristotle's influence is steady in science, philosophy and theology, all the way from the start to the finish of this profound shift. It is only after this shift is complete that Aristotle moves out of favour amongst the new scientists. Whilst Bacon and Locke both strained against Aristotelian orthodoxies, Barnes pertinently notes that our modern notion of scientific method is thoroughly Aristotelian.

⁸ Tillich, P., *Theology of Culture*, Oxford University Press, 1964, p18

⁹ Barnes, J., *Aristotle*, Oxford University Press, 1986, p86

¹⁰ Tillich, P., *Theology of Culture*, Oxford University Press, 1964; "The Two Types of Philosophy of Religion" pp 10-30

Scientific empiricism – the idea that abstract argument must be subordinate to factual evidence ... is largely [derived from] Aristotle. The point needs emphasising, if only because Aristotle's most celebrated English critics, Francis Bacon and John Locke, were both staunch empiricists who thought they were thereby breaking with Aristotelian tradition.¹¹

Once we move to Descartes, tying down sympathies and antipathies between modernism and what I am calling the Aristotelian theological trajectory, is a complex task. However, in broad terms it is possible to claim that the distinctly modern scientific method – mathematical, observation dependent, autonomous from the claims of tradition and religion – has Aristotelian roots. Rationalism also has Aristotelian roots, where the human mind in itself is deemed adequate to the apprehension of truth. And the Empirical tradition notably carried forward by the English, bequeaths to us, as Barnes points out, a modernity cast in a decidedly Aristotelian mould. As we move through the 18th century, a growing and pervasive secularistic naturalism in intellectual circles is evident. Whilst I have no space to make the case here, I believe it is this secularistic naturalism that leads to the 19th century disenchantment with reason that then bequeaths to us the distinctly postmodern crisis of reason, meaning and truth.

So, I trace our contemporary crisis of meaning to the Aristotelian approach to the knowledge of transcendence. It seems to me that the Aristotelian theological well is now totally dry, but that the Platonistic theological well is as full as it has always been, and alone of these two theologies, is able to undergird meaningful metaphysics.

To conclude.

In this paper I have sought to argue the following line of reasoning:

Divinely given knowledge is foundational to philosophy in the Platonistic trajectory. Metaphysics grounded in this specifically religious and faith based theological trajectory keeps a radical indeterminacy open regarding meaning and non-meaning, but such an approach alone opens the human knower up to the possibility of revealed and genuinely transcendent meaning. The Aristotelian naturalistic theological trajectory, however, falsely believes that meaningful transcendent knowledge can be speculatively attained by a reliance on the certainties accessible to our natural epistemological capabilities. This misplaced confidence leads eventually to the abandonment of the knowledge of transcendence itself. Without the knowledge of transcendence, philosophy falls into meaninglessness and language, reason and science have only an arbitrary and pragmatic coherence that can reveal no true knowledge of the real. This state of profound ignorance and meaninglessness - which we now peer into - can only be withdrawn from if we are prepared to give up modern secular reason, as grounded in the Aristotelian theological trajectory, and take a Platonistic turn to religion very seriously.

Yet, contemporary philosophers and theologians are often deeply invested in both the hope and the failure of the Aristotelian theological trajectory. So, is a Platonistic turn

¹¹ Barnes, J., *op cit*, p 86.

to religion possible? Such a turn is not compatible with the very idea of theology and philosophy as discrete disciplines that we are now so comfortable with. The desire of philosophers to dabble in religion yet maintain their own speculative and non-faith intellectual autonomy from religion is very strong. The desire of theologians to dabble in philosophy, yet hold their own discrete disciplinary zone sacrosanct from the profoundly destructive winds of contemporary philosophical speculation, is equally strong. But in Kuhn's terms, both philosophy and theology do seem to need some big and fundamental paradigm shifts, so the time of impossible shifts may be upon us. As we have seen from the 13th century, big shifts do happen; the belief in certainty, the desire for individual freedom, and the hunger for knowledge simply overturned the medieval liturgical world. The result was the dismantling of the organic integration of facts and values characteristic of the medieval world, and the abandonment of that world's priorities of sapientia over scientia and community over society. Now, maybe, the enormous instrumental power of scientia bereft of teleological, moral and metaphysical bearings may yet foster a new swing towards sapientia. But the size of the shift, if a Platonistic epistemology of transcendence is to be considered, should not be underestimated. For the Platonistic trajectory after Augustine sees philosophy's relation to religion as one of all or nothing. Here, the "all" is an Augustinian style faith premised theological philosophy and the "nothing" is completely irreligious secular nihilism. If an Augustinian turn to religion is to happen, then theology must first purge itself of the tendency to be a non-faith speculative exercise after the model of secular philosophy. Likewise, philosophy needs to come to realise that without faith, there is no reason.