

Why do we think the way we think?

The history of Western thought

By Dr. Jim Denison

I remember the day as though it were last Saturday. I was in elementary school, growing up in Houston, Texas. It was late one summer afternoon, the sun was setting and the stars were just becoming visible. A cool breeze was blowing its hint of fall to come. I got off my bike, lay back in the cool St. Augustine grass of a neighbor's lawn, folded my hands behind my head, and looked up into the sky.

And the question occurred to me for the very first time: Where did this universe come from? Soon other questions grew from that one: is this all there is? Is there a world outside this world? How can the world go on forever? Did God make all this? Who or what made God? Who or what made whoever or whatever made God? And on and on, as the twilight became night and my parents wondered where I was. On that neighbor's lawn I did my first philosophy.

In just this way the first philosophers did their first philosophy, too. Six centuries before the time of Christ, men living on the western coast of what is Turkey today began asking the same questions I asked in Houston, Texas. And coming up with radical answers, ideas never before recorded in human culture. These ideas made them the first philosophers. But not the last. Our entire cultural history is different because they thought differently. You and I are the direct heirs of their ways of looking at the world. Everything about our faith, our ministries, and our lives has been affected by the day the first philosopher folded his hands behind his head and began to think.

Let's see how that event happened, and why it matters so much.

Anthropo-what?

Greek philosophy began as a reaction to the anthropomorphic ("to make human") religion of the day. Remember Zeus and his cohorts, cavorting around on the top of Mt. Olympus and throwing thunderbolts at anyone who displeased them? Remember the gods of Homer's tragic stories, puppet masters who pulled the strings of Greek soldiers and armies for their own amusement? So did the first philosophers, who thought them as absurd as we do. But why did they ask why? Let's investigate.

It's Greek to me

Why did the first philosophers live in the territory of Greece? Why not Egypt, or Israel, or Hawaii? For several reasons.

One was their natural environment. Greece is one of the most mountainous regions in the inhabited world. Any race who would choose to call this peninsula and its islands home must have the physical stamina of a mountain goat and a similar disposition. These were hardy folk.

You see, Greece is a nation of harbors. Beachfront property is no rare commodity. And so the Greeks found it very easy to emigrate to neighboring countries in search of wealth and fame. Their neighbors found access to Greek wealth and culture just as enticing. The result was perhaps the most cosmopolitan culture and worldview in the ancient world. At a time when most of the world's nations were isolated from each other and bent on self-preservation, the Greeks were sailing (and influencing) the world.

Their politics became just as cosmopolitan, and confusing. Each island had its own governance. Each city was its own state. These various city-states tried and failed to rule their neighbors. Finally they settled on a crazy idea—why not let the people rule themselves? This "democracy" (literally, "people power") was a novel experiment not attempted again on a serious level until some colonists wearing powdered wigs wrote this revolutionary (literally) sentence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." Somewhere Greeks were applauding.

A cosmopolitan worldview plus the democratic idea that every person possesses the right to think for himself (but not yet herself, unfortunately) equals some radical ideas. And the Greeks were just getting started.

And you thought Baptists were confusing

So some of the first philosophers were free thinkers whose minds were unencumbered by tradition. Others, however, began their work for precisely the opposite reason—not to reject the religions and customs of their day, but to understand them. Let's look at these religious beliefs a little more closely. If the ancient Greeks had denominations, they'd look like these.

First would be the "Church of Olympians," with Homer as its pastor. His "sermons" were all about the various gods of Mt. Olympus and their dealings with each other and the humans with whom they amused themselves. These gods were themselves subject to "the fates," but not to laws or morals. Like a modern soap opera, you need a scorecard to keep up with who's relating (ahem) to whom.

Next would be the "Church of the Cosmogony," led by Hesiod. This 8th century farmer wrote epic poems (called the *Theogony*) which accounted for the world in terms of divine beings and their activities. He was the first person ever to create a "cosmogony," an account of how the world came to be. Unlike Homer, Hesiod wanted the world to be ordered by reason and morality. But the world didn't cooperate very much.

Third would be the "Church of Mystery," led by, well, mysterious people. The so-called "mystery cults" involved the worship of local gods representing elemental forces which were important to people engaged in a struggle for survival with the soil. These cults worshipped deities like Dionysus, the barbaric god of wine, and Demeter, the goddess of the native countryside. The mystery cults used rituals by which the initiated achieved unity with their chosen god. We call them "mystery" cults for the enlightening reason

that we have little idea how they did their worship. Their rituals were so secret that most of them perished when their cults died out.

And last among the religions of ancient Greeks would be the "Church of Orpheus," led of course by Orpheus. He was a legendary singer and composer, and was especially famous for his ego. He claimed that he would live forever. The Orphics used purification rituals to achieve union with the divine.

Of these four "denominations," the Orphics were the least popular in their time. And the most influential for the generations to follow, and for us as well. In fact, we in the Western world breathe Orphic air every day. Let's see why.

How "secular" became a cuss word

Orpheus had one principal idea: your soul is an immortal god imprisoned in your body, doomed to reincarnation. He thought that your soul existed in some preincarnate state up in "heaven." But it "sinned" there, and was punished by being put into this material world, which was created for just this purgatorial purpose. The world you can see, the flesh you can touch, anything physical at all in fact, is inferior. It is part of this "prison of the soul" and must be escaped.

How? By rituals, ascetic life, and knowledge of the correct magical formula after death. Through the use of contemplative, rational philosophy your soul can be purified and released from its abysmal physical jail. Or so Orpheus said.

Now this Orphic philosophy was just one thought among many, and not even popular in Orpheus's lifetime. However, to greatly simplify things, the Orphic cult came to influence Pythagoras; Pythagoras exerted enormous influence with Plato; Plato's thinking was formative for Augustine; Augustine's theology was normative for Luther and the Protestants; and you and I are Protestants.

From Luther through Augustine through Plato through Pythagoras to Orpheus we get the idea that the "secular" is bad and the "sacred" is good. We drive a wedge between what is "spiritual" and what is not. We think that the more spiritual we are, the more time we'll spend in church and the less in the "world." The world is evil, but spiritual things are good. And Orpheus cheers.

This is not at all how the ancient Hebrew people saw things. They knew the biblical truth that God made all that is, and pronounced it good. While the world is of course fallen (cf. Genesis 3.17-19, Romans 8.18-22), physical things are not inherently evil. Jesus did not call us to leave the world, but to evangelize it (Matthew 28.18-20). Salt is no good in the saltshaker, light no good under a basket (Matthew 5.13-16). God wants us to change the world, not forsake it.

And so from the ancient Orphics we learn one tragic reason why so many Christians have so little influence on their culture. In a sense, Orpheus was immortal after all.

Those crazy Ionians

Now we bring things together. On this side of the philosophical classroom we find men who think for the sake of thinking. They have absolutely no interest in the religious movements of their day, and want to liberate their minds from such nonsense. On the other side of the class we have thinkers who want to purify their souls, to escape from this mortal life to return to divine glory. The irreligious philosophers lived mainly in Ionia, on the western coast of modern-day Turkey. The religious philosophers lived mainly in southern Italy. They would collide in time, and the reverberations haven't ended yet.

Who says philosophy doesn't pay?

Let's look first at the first of the Ionians. Ionia was probably the richest community in all of Greece. And one of the most irreligious (no coincidence, that). Its leading city was named Miletus. And the leading man of Miletus was a fellow named Thales. He was one of the "Seven Wise Men" of Greece, and is commonly crowned the first philosopher. Here's why.

Thales was the first person (in recorded history, anyway) to create a cosmogony—a naturalistic account of how the world came into being. He risked the wrath of the gods by suggesting that they had nothing to do with the creation of the universe. He even went so far as to suggest the element from which the universe came into existence: water. Thales was sure that water was that "which existed before all existing things came to be, out of which all things came and into which all things return." This made him a monist—someone who believes that the world came from a single thing. And it made him pretty close to right.

When you cut any living thing what comes out? For crops and food to survive, what element do you need? If you're living on the coast of Turkey or an island, what surrounds you? If we had to pick only one element to live by, water would get my vote.

The point is not whether Thales was right or wrong by current scientific standards, but that he attempted the effort at all. He was absolutely the first person we know of to explain things in natural terms, without relying on religious myths or spiritual explanations. This fact makes him the first philosopher, and one of the most important of all time.

And it made him rich. Thales learned to predict eclipses and the weather (not hard to do, once you stop attributing them to angry gods). And so he forecasted a bumper olive crop for a certain year, bought up all the olive presses in Miletus, and made a fortune. And you thought philosophy doesn't pay (most philosophy teachers would agree).

Drawing unbounded maps

Thales had a student names Anaximander, who continued the string of philosophical firsts. He invented the first sundial, since he now knew that the sun would behave according to physical principles and not the whims of the gods. And he created the first-

ever map, in the belief that the gods wouldn't move the continents around whenever they liked.

Anaximander wasn't satisfied with his teacher's explanation for the origin of the world, however. He was absolutely, positively convinced that the world comes from "the uncertain" (what a leap of faith!). The *apeiron* means "unbounded, uncertain, undefined" in Greek. Anaximander was sure that the universe is the result of opposites created by it.

For instance, humidity and rain result from the opposition of hot and cold. Humidity in turn creates earth, air, and fire, Anaximander theorized. And earth, air, and fire create the sun, the moon, the stars, and so on. Everything came from water, so to speak, but water was the creation of the undefined, unbounded reality which holds everything together. Not too far from Paul's teaching six centuries later: "Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created" (Colossians 1.15-16). And certainly closer to molecular physics and current scientific theories. No simpleton, Anaximander.

This pupil of Thales had a pupil himself, a fellow named Anaximenes. He further refined the cosmogonies of his predecessors with the assertion that the substance from which the universe was created is air: "Just as the air which is our soul surrounds us, so do the wind and air encompass the world." Anaximenes said that the universe resembles a human, with air the breath of life. Everything is governed by the law of balance, with no omnipotence or Creator in a biblical sense.

Of course, Anaximenes was closest to molecular science of all. Some estimates suggest that your body is roughly 99% air. Nothing is truly solid. Anaximenes knew more than he knew.

But the true significance of these three Ionians was not their explanations for the universe, it was the fact that they attempted such explanations at all. Homer thought the world was governed by the gods who were themselves governed by the fates; Hesiod had argued for a moral order to the universe. But the Ionian philosophers were the first to explain the world on the basis of nature alone. And that world would never be the same.

Ionia was conquered in 546 B.C. by the Persians, who destroyed Miletus in 494 B.C. And so intellectual life moved to the religious culture of southern Italy and Sicily, colonies of mainland Greece at the time. And philosophy "gets religion."

Square numbers and liberated souls

If you took high school geometry, perhaps you remember Pythagoras. One of the most famous principles in math is named for him: the length of the hypotenuse of a right triangle equals the sum of the squares of the lengths of the other two sides. Is that clear? Aren't you glad this isn't a math course?

Pythagoras also invented square numbers and studied musical harmonics. But he did all this in the service of his philosophy, and his philosophy in the service of his religion. Here's why, and why it matters.

Pythagoras emigrated from the island of Samos off the coast of modern-day Turkey to southern Italy. Around 530 B.C. he founded the Pythagorean Brotherhood at Croton in South Italy. He and his followers were possessed of a very strong religious faith rooted in the Orphic cult. They were convinced that their souls had existed in a preincarnate state and must be liberated from the prison house of their bodies through rigorous philosophical thought and right actions. They thought that thought makes the soul divine, and that the true universe is a world of order, proportion, harmony, form. Hence their fascination with mathematics, the only "pure" realm we can know in this "fallen" life.

The Pythagoreans taught that form (the male principle) is good, but matter (the female principle) is evil, and that all things evolve from their interchange. Note the continuing deprecation of the "secular" (and the female as well). While Western thinkers would seldom accept Pythagoras' mathematical explanation of the world, they would assume his prejudice against the material universe. In other words, Pythagoras still haunts us, and not just in geometry class.

Who likes change (besides a wet baby)?

If Pythagoras was right, the only world which matters is the unchanging realm of numbers and harmonies. But you can't eat numbers (unless you're a professional mathematician). More practically oriented Greeks wanted to know how to make sense of the world we can see (and digest). Two schools of thought emerge, each radically opposed to the other, each centered on the issue of change and permanence in the world we experience each day.

Stepping into the same river twice

First, Heraclitus steps to the stage.

Called "Skoteinos" (the "Dark One") by his contemporaries because of his convoluted writing style, Heraclitus had utter contempt for all but his own ideas. For instance, he suggested that Homer deserved to be whipped (earning the gratitude of all junior high literature students). He lived and worked in Ephesus, the largest city on Asia Minor (the western coast of Turkey today). And he argued for two ideas which are still hugely important today.

One: change is the law of the universe. According to Heraclitus, everything that exists is in perpetual conflict and motion. Even those things which appear to be at rest, aren't. A bent bow, for instance, is still only because the string and the bow pull equally against each other. Thus Heraclitus' most famous sentence: "You cannot step into the same river twice." Everything is changing.

Then why doesn't the universe come apart at the seams? Because of Heraclitus' second idea: the "logos" holds everything together. He coined this word, so far as we know. It is the Greek word for "word," but it means far more—logic, reason, order, intelligence. This is Heraclitus' god, the living intelligence which holds together everything that is.

We each have the choice of living according to this principle of reason, or of living in perpetual ignorance. The more reasoned our lives, the more harmonious and whole our souls in this changing world.

Heraclitus' famous example for an unchanging/changing world was fire. While it is constantly changing, it is always fire. It maintains its identity and order in the midst of perpetual chaos. So it is with the rest of the universe as well.

It is more than a coincidence that John would open his gospel six centuries later with these statements: "In the beginning was the Word [the Greek word here is *logos*], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made" (John 1.1-3). While John has more in mind than Heraclitus' philosophy, I believe that he is using it to explain the Incarnation to the Greeks (who would otherwise reject any notion of God in physical flesh, for Orphic reasons). More on this later.

Heraclitus had other, far less important, ideas. He believed the sun to be the size of a plate (because it looks that way, I suppose). He thought that it was extinguished and relit daily. And he was sure that the heavens rotate around the earth. We can't all be right.

Do you get the point?

Every extreme begets an extreme. Heraclitus' absolute insistence on change as the principle of the universe was opposed by Parmenides, an Italian thinker who was completely convinced that Heraclitus was completely wrong. How he came to that notion, and how his students defended it, is one of the more entertaining chapters in the history of Greek philosophy.

Parmenides' teacher was a wandering religious teacher named Xenophanes of Colophon. Read his description of the religious beliefs current in his time, and see if he's not onto something:

If oxen, horses or lions were able to draw pictures as men do, oxen would draw gods that were oxlike, horses gods that were horselike, and lions lionlike gods....

The Ethiopians say the gods are black and flat-nosed, while the Thracians declare they are blue-eyed and red-headed.

Every time I see the Italian-looking Jesus painted by Leonardo da Vinci in *The Last Supper*, I think Xenophanes was right.

Xenophanes believed that the world is one. Not just the product of one substance or one process—the world is one. Parmenides agreed: "That which is *is*, and it is impossible for it not to be." $A = A$, and cannot be anything else. Rationally, something that is cannot become something else. The keyboard on which I am typing these words cannot be anything but a keyboard. And so change is impossible.

Parmenides was the first philosopher to use such purely rational arguments in defense of his ideas. And so he is known as the first Rationalist—someone who believes that truth is the result of logical reasoning, not empirical observation. If I were to point out to Parmenides that my keyboard could be melted into a plastic lump and remolded into a miniature Statue of Liberty, he wouldn't care. Rationally speaking, it is a keyboard right now, so it must be a keyboard always.

This sounds rather ridiculous, doesn't it? But actually it's not. Consider these defenses of Parmenides' reasoning by his student, Zeno of Elea. "Zeno's paradoxes" were his attempts to prove rationally that change is impossible.

Here's one. Imagine that you're holding a bow and arrow, prepared to shoot at the wall on the other side of the room from where you're reading these words. Before the arrow can get to the wall, would you agree that it has to get halfway there? Before it can get to that spot, does it have to get halfway to it? Before it can get halfway to the place which is halfway to halfway, does it have to get halfway to it? And so on, and so on, and so on—ultimately, the arrow never moves. Do you get the point? (pun intended).

And so we have a stalemate. Heraclitus is right: according to our senses, everything changes constantly. And Parmenides is right: according to logic, nothing can change. What's a philosopher to do?

Physics before there were physicists

If you can't win the game, change the rules. So far everyone is playing by the rule that there is one basic substance or principle which explains everything. What if there isn't? The Pluralists (aptly named) are sure there isn't. And they're mainly right.

Meet Empedocles of Agrigentum, one of the great egotists of all time. He said of himself, "I wander among you as an immortal god, not as a mortal. I am honored by all as a god—as is fit!—and they weave wreaths for my head. But why do I speak about it as if it were something unusual? I am much more than you, O mortals steeped in many evils!" The title of his autobiography should have been *Humility And How I Perfected It*.

His sandals were discovered near Mount Aetna, which was said to have rejected them when Empedocles threw himself into its crater to learn the secrets of Vulcan. Three cheers for the volcano.

Here's why such an egomaniac matters to us: he was right about something important. He was the first significant thinker to break the monist mold, arguing that the world is

made of many parts, not a single whole. Earth, air, fire, and water are the four roots of existence. Finally the world can change and not change at the same time.

Anaxagoras of Clazomenea continues the progress, claiming that matter is composed of indestructible and invisible bodies (which he calls "seeds"). And Leucippus of Miletus assents, dividing all of nature into innumerable little particles.

Finally a fellow named Democritus identifies the "atomoi" ("that which cannot be cut") as the elementary bodies of the universe. These "atomoi" act and interact with each other to produce the changing phenomena we observe each day. And yet they are themselves indestructible, thus the substance which ensures the permanence of reality.

At last we have a reasonable explanation for the world and its vagaries, and that twenty-three centuries before atomic physicists can claim the credit for themselves.

Summarizing this summary

By the time these three centuries of thinking have ended, the Western world has made amazing progress toward the culture we have today. We have left in the rearview mirror the gods of Homer and Hesiod for the natural world we see outside the windshield. After arguing for a few generations about what the world is made of, we have finally decided that it is made of many things, some of which we can see but most of which we cannot. These things behave according to reasonable, natural principles. And so the world is ordered and rational. Given the mythological worldview they inherited, these thinkers were both radical and revolutionary. And the Western world has never been the same.

From these pre-Socratics (because they worked in the centuries before Socrates, of course) the Western world learned certain assumptions. One: the world that matters today is the material, not the spiritual. Two: we can best understand that world through logic and reason, not myth and religious tradition. Three: for truly spiritual people, the spiritual is good while the "secular" is bad.

No need for God in such a world, is there? Spirituality is personal, individual, subjective. It is not about the practical world we can see, but only the soul we cannot. If you choose to pursue spirituality in order to purify your own spirit, that's fine. But don't impose your spirituality on reasonable materialists like the rest of us. We know what really matters is matter.

Doesn't sound like *ancient* philosophy at all, does it?

When the light at the end of the tunnel is an oncoming train

The shortest war in history was fought between England and Zanzibar in 1896. Zanzibar surrendered after 38 minutes. If only the Athenians had been so intelligent.

For 50 years, Athens had been the greatest power in Greece. Then came the Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.), their 27-year-long conflict with Sparta, the great city-state to the south. Athens knew they would lose this war for ten years, but they kept fighting. The end was a bitter, humiliating defeat by their mortal enemies. And you thought you had a bad year.

The Athenians could see the light at the end of the tunnel, until it ran over them. So could the philosophers, who tried to make the best of a very bad situation. As Athens crept closer and closer to disaster, many of her people began to abandon their traditional gods, and to turn to the philosophers for truth and guidance. The Sophists were ready.

The original wise guys

Sophists were the originators of that great tradition now carried forward by late-night infomercials, the first pop psychologists, the original success gurus. They were the "learned ones" who could teach you how to succeed in hard times. They wrote how-to handbooks on nearly every subject, and traveled around the country conducting seminars and collecting large fees.

In time the most popular of the Sophists became international figures, in demand all over the Mediterranean world. They would advise famous marriages, educate wealthy children, and guide kings and princes. Their services were available to the highest bidder. We have Personal Digital Assistants, tiny computerized calendars in our hands; they were Personal Philosophical Assistants, the best the world had to offer before Bill Gates.

I thought I was wrong, but it turns out I was wrong

Over a single generation these Sophists became the great celebrities of their culture. They were the first to argue for subjective ethics, the idea that no absolutes exist (itself an absolute statement, when you think about it—or even if you don't). According to their philosophy of life, the only wrong idea is the idea that an idea can be wrong. I'm not sure what that means, but neither were they.

In time the Sophists settled on the practice of rhetoric—the art of persuasion by eloquent speech. If no absolute values can be relied upon, the best we can do in life is convince others that our own subjective ideas are right. The Sophist teachers became brilliant debaters, learning to persuade gigantic crowds of the truth of their chosen ideas. The rest of the intellectual world hated them, for they could never win an argument with them. No matter how wrong their positions seemed to be, they could persuade the crowds that they were right. They were the first Teflon philosophers.

Talk show ethics got their start with the Sophists of ancient Greece. What you believed wasn't nearly as important as convincing others that you were right, or at least entertaining. To their credit, the Sophist argument for natural rights (everyone is right, because no one can be wrong) made them oppose the slavery which was common in the day. Other than that contribution, the best thing we can say for the Sophists is that they made better philosophers better still. No Sophists, probably no Socrates.

We might add that the Sophists never really went away. Postmodern relativism, the idea that there's no such thing as objective truth (itself an objective truth claim) can be traced all the way back to the Sophists. I'm not grateful.

From stonecutter to soul shaper

Philosophers come in all shapes, sizes, and motivations. In the case of Socrates (470-399 B.C.), his was the oddest of all three. He was a squat, little man, quite ugly, described as having "strangely staring eyes." He was the son of the stonecutter Sophroniscus and his midwife Phainarete. By trade he was a stonecutter himself, but he did not follow his profession. This single fact led to much verbal abuse (and sometimes worse) from his wife Xanthippe. No wonder he wanted to get out of the house and down to the philosopher's hall every chance he got.

Plato, Socrates' most famous student, spoke often of the man's amazing physical toughness. Plato claims proudly that his teacher could drink any man under the table "when necessary." (He doesn't say when that is.) Socrates possessed great moral courage, refusing to compromise his beliefs even in the face of impending death.

He was a man of enormous intellectual concentration. For instance, while serving in the Athenian army stationed at the town of Potidaea, Socrates is said to have stood still for a day and a night, thinking out an intellectual dilemma. Indifferent to his surroundings or bodily needs, he stood and thought while the armies fought all around him. Apparently the other side didn't consider him much of a military threat. Nor did he.

Xenophon, one of his greatest admirers, shows why:

“Socrates was so pious that he undertook nothing without the will of the gods; so just that he did not one injustice--more than that, he was kind to everyone who came in contact with him. He was so much the master of himself that he never preferred what was merely pleasurable to what was good; and so virtuous that he never made a mistake in the choice between the good, the better and the worse--in a word, he was the best and happiest of all mankind.”

How did such a strange person become so influential? Through two words.

Do you know yourself?

The oracle at Delphi was the greatest tourist attraction in ancient Greece. Conventional wisdom said that the gods spoke to mortals here. The "oracle" was actually a female, sitting on a chair suspended over a shaft which led down into the earth. A worshipper would approach and ask his question of the gods. Mists would rise from this shaft, and the woman would speak the word of the gods to the person. Answers were usually cryptic and ambiguous at best—like the horoscope in this morning's newspaper.

Socrates made his pilgrimage to this oracle, as did thousands of others in his day. The oracle told him that he was the wisest of all men, for while no one knows anything, he knew that he knew nothing. Then the oracle gave him this motto for living: "know yourself." These two words became his passion and his singular contribution to Western culture.

Do you know what you don't know?

How do we know ourselves? Through the "Socratic" method of questioning our assumptions and truth claims. His method began by professing ignorance of the truth, and seeking it through dialogue. He would seek a definition of the truth in question, test it by common experience, and deduce consequences.

For instance, consider this abbreviated record of a conversation between Socrates and a man named Meno:

Soc. By the gods, Meno, be generous and tell me what you say that virtue is. . . .

Men. There will be no difficulty, Socrates, in answering your question. Let us take first the virtue of a man--he should know how to administer the state, and in the administration of it to benefit his friends and harm his enemies; and he must also be careful not to suffer harm himself. A woman's virtue, if you wish to know about that, may also be easily described: her duty is to order her house and keep what is indoors, and obey her husband. Every age, every condition of life, young or old, male or female, bond or free, has a different virtue: there are virtues numberless, and no lack of definitions of them; for virtue is relative to the actions and ages of each of us in all that we do. And the same may be said of vice, Socrates.

Soc. How fortunate I am, Meno! When I ask you for one virtue, you present me with a swarm of them, which are in your keeping. Suppose that I carry on the figure of the swarm, and ask of you, What is the nature of the bee? And you answer that there are many kinds of bees, and I reply: But do bees differ as bees because there are many and different kinds of them; or are they not rather to be distinguished by some other quality, as, for example, beauty, size, or shape? How would you answer me?

Men. I should answer that bees do not differ from one another, as bees.

Soc. And if I went on to say: That is what I desire to know, Meno; tell me what is the quality in which they do not differ, but are all alike--would you be able to answer?

Men. I should.

Soc. And so of the virtues, however many and different they may be, they have all a common nature which makes them virtues; and on this he who would

answer the question, "What is virtue?" would do well to have his eye fixed; do you understand?

Men. I am beginning to understand; but I do not as yet take hold of the question as I could wish.

[Socrates continues through ten pages of questions regarding the various nature of various virtues, none of which Meno is able to answer.]

Soc. Then begin again, and answer me. What, according to you and your friend Gorgias, is the definition of virtue?

Men. O Socrates, I used to be told, before I knew you, that you were always doubting yourself and making others doubt; and now you are casting your spells over me, and I am simply getting bewitched and enchanted, and am at my wits' end. And if I may venture to make a jest upon you, you seem to me both in your appearance and in your power over others to be very like the flat torpedo fish, who torpifies those who come near him and touch him, as you have now torpified me, I think. For my soul and my tongue are really torpid, and I do not know how to answer you; and though I have been delivered of an infinite variety of speeches about virtue before now, and to many persons--and very good ones they were, as I thought--at this moment I cannot even say what virtue is.¹

The point is not what virtue is, but that we cannot know what virtue is unless we know ourselves first. Objective, empirical, coldly logical speculation does not achieve truth. But logic is a useful tool in defining the truth we must experience personally.

The Socratic method has been used for twenty-three centuries to arrive at clear definitions, to expose fallacious assumptions, and to discover truth. But this is just the beginning of Socrates' contribution to our culture.

How's your soul today?

Socrates' most important belief about you and me is that we are a soul, an eternally-significant person who must care for our spiritual lives as our highest priority in life. Before Socrates, the spiritual nature of human life was a means to an ends—the more we pleased the gods, the happier and richer we might expect to become. While there were isolated philosophical movements who sought to cleanse the soul from its prison house (cf. the Orphics and Pythagoras), they never captured the popular imagination. Socrates did.

He was a "gadfly" on the Athenian culture of his day, consistently insisting that we know and practice only the good. Socrates (naively) believed that the soul will always do good when it knows the good. And he believed that our quest for the good mirrors the

¹ Plato, *Meno*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1949) 24-6, 35-6.

ontological existence of the Good, an objective right and wrong which exists independent of our subjective experiences.

And so Socrates wants you and me to seek always to do the good. How? By investigating rationally all claims to the good, to see if they are built upon a truthful and objective definition and reality. And then by applying this reality to our lives, whatever its cost.

For example, when Socrates was condemned to death unjustly by the Athenian courts as a corrupter of their youth (actually he exposed the corruption of their parents), he was faced with a moral dilemma. He could easily have escaped his prison cell with his life. But his rational investigation of this option led him to a certain conclusion: if every person condemned by the courts were to flee his sentence, a just and ordered society would be impossible. If it is wrong for others to flee justice, he could not flee justice. And so he must die.

Socrates drank the hemlock which ended his life because he believed this to be the objectively right thing to do. He sought and lived for the good, always. And his example would forever change the way Western thinkers sought to do the same.

Socrates taught our Western civilization that there is an objective truth, and that we can know it. Jesus agreed, though for very different reasons and in a very different way: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). To the degree that we admit and recognize the truth about God, others, and ourselves, we can live in the light of our Father's word and will. If there is an area of your life which contradicts or ignores the truth of God's revelation and purpose for your life, today is a wonderful day to resubmit yourself to "the Truth" himself.

Next we will study the influence of Socrates upon Plato and Aristotle, and through them, on our lives today. For now, know that an emphasis on objective truth, determined rationally and then experienced personally, has been the single most important intellectual foundation for the Western world. And that foundation was first built by a little son of a stonecutter.

He has not finished carving our world, yet.

A broad thinker and the world he left us

A newspaper article described change this way: "Try as you will, you get behind in the race, in spite of yourself. It's an incessant strain, to keep pace...and still, you lose ground. Science empties its discoveries on you so fast that you stagger beneath them in hopeless bewilderment. The political world is news seen so rapidly, you're out of breath trying to keep pace with who's in and who's out. Everything is high pressure. Human nature can't endure much more!"

Sounds like yesterday's news, doesn't it? It is--from the *Atlantic Journal*, June 16, 1833.

Despite all that has changed about our culture, our most basic questions remain unanswered today. What happens when we die? How can we live meaningful lives? What are the best ways to raise our children? How do we govern ourselves as individuals and as a nation?

The most influential answers ever proposed for these perennial, ultimate questions came from a man nicknamed "the Broad," and his most unruly pupil. And everything else in Western philosophy is largely a footnote.

Aristocles was born in 427 B.C., and later given the nickname Plato (meaning "the broad," apparently owing both to the size of his intellect and his girth). To call him the son of aristocracy is to understate the case. His family traced themselves to Poseidon, god of the sea, and Solon the lawgiver. When your ancestors rule most of the surface of the planet and the laws of all mankind, you're under pressure to make something of yourself. And Plato did.

As the story goes, he was twenty years old, dark and handsome, when he met Socrates. Immediately he changed his life's ambition to philosophy. So much for family expectations. But no one knew the historic significance of this decision, least of all Plato.

Sparta defeated Athens in 404 B.C. Plato left his conquered hometown, disillusioned and bitter. For several years he wandered across Greece, Italy, Sicily, and Egypt, meditating constantly on the thought of Socrates. He finally returned home to take up the work of his former teacher, founding the first great philosophical school in Western history. This school was named the Academy (for the grove of trees under which it met; does this make them shadetree philosophers?)—hence "academics" today. Plato spent the rest of his life at his school, active in teaching and writing to his death in 348 B.C.

His writings have all been preserved, but little of his oral teaching was recorded. His writing reads like dialogue, however, as it is in the form of conversations between Socrates and others. His literary skills were considerable, but not systematic.

One of the great struggles in understanding Plato is the existence of apparent philosophical contradictions recorded in these dialogues. The other is in knowing when Plato is preserving the ideas of Socrates and when he is putting his own thoughts in Socrates' literary mouth. While questions remain about some of his ideas, no doubt remains about his influence.

We're only a shadow of ourselves

Plato thought that you and I inhabit a world which is but a shadow of the real world. Here's why.

We're in bad hands

Plato was convinced by Socrates that the objective Good exists. But he couldn't find it anywhere in this corrupted, decadent world. And so he concluded that it must exist someplace outside the material universe. But where? Borrowing from the Pythagoreans their Orphic belief that the soul is a fallen, preincarnate god, he found his answer.

According to Plato, a world of eternal, unchanging, perfect realities exists, but in the realm of ideas, not physicality. This "place" he called the world of Forms or Ideas. It must by definition be separate from the sensible world, and is known only to the intellect. These Forms are unchanging realities, and the only objects worth knowing.

What of our changing, non-ideal (literally) world of experience? It is only a shadow of the Forms, a physical and thus imperfect reflection of the Ideas it represents. The way to escape the shadows and experience the Forms is through philosophy (naturally), specifically by seeking the true, universal definition of a thing or experience. When we understand an entity in its perfect, unchanging essence, we have glimpsed the Form which it reflects.

We need an example, preferably as mundane as possible. So, consider the fingers with which you type on your computer. What is unique or at least unusual about your hands? (fingerprints, shape, etc.). What is the unchanging essence of the "perfect" hands? You are this moment contemplating the Form of hands, of which your physical appendages are but a poor representative. Just as a shadow is not the real thing, so your hands are not real in themselves. Alas, they only copy the ideal hands you have discovered by philosophical reflection. And they are not the way you wish they were (ask any arthritic).

How did we get in this sorry state of affairs? Remember Orpheus' strange idea that our souls "sinned" in their pre-mortal existence and are punished by being put in such fallen hands (and eyes, and ears). Pythagoras believed Orpheus, and Plato believed Pythagoras. You may not believe Plato, but millions of people for eight centuries did.

Here is Plato's most popular illustration of our world of shadows. Imagine that you are exploring some caves in a park. You walk into one very strange cavern, finding inside a group of people who are chained to the back wall. Their captors have arranged things so that these unfortunate people cannot turn their heads to see behind themselves. Thus they do not see you, or even know that a "you" might exist. The only world they can see is the back wall they face. Behind them roars a giant fire, casting their shadows on this wall. Because they have lived their entire lives seeing only these shadows, they assume them to be all the world there is. But you know better. You want to unchain them and show them the larger world they cannot see. So did Plato.

How do we rattle such chains?

Remembering what you know

Plato is sure that your soul not only lived once in the world of Forms, but can remember it (with a little help). When you contemplate the beautiful, or reflect on the ideal, your soul is reminded of that perfect Idea it once knew. This is the theory of "anamnesis"

("remembering"), and it constitutes the first epistemology (theory of knowledge) in Western history.

To help your soul remember its roots, you need a little discipline. Plato offers these helpful hints. He thinks that your intellect is the rightful ruler of your soul, aided with the higher emotions (such as love, nobility, sacrifice, and the like). However, the lower emotions of lust and pride want to hijack the whole enterprise. So you must discipline your soul through the use of reason and logic, temperance and virtue.

Plato likens your soul to a charioteer (your mind) and two horses (the higher emotions, which help steer, and the lower emotions, which want to take the whole thing into the ditch). So long as your thoughts and feelings take the high road, so to speak, all is well.

Let's try this theory out. Think for a moment about the table at which you are sitting, or last sat. Who thought of such an odd idea as a piece of wood held up by four others? How did he or she come to design the first such thing? What design did the builder attempt to execute? Probably a more perfect table than you are seeing or remembering right now. That "ideal" table was composed of a perfect rectangle, supported by perfectly designed and created legs. But such perfection is impossible in this world of imperfect wood, nails, and hands.

So where did such a perfect design come from? Not visual, physical experience, for no such entity exists. If Plato is right, the first architect of the first perfect table contemplated the idea of "tableness," if you will. Such contemplation caused his or her soul to remember the "idea" of the perfect table. The result was a design only imperfectly executed in wood.

The only hope for us in this flawed world is that our souls can also remember the unchanging moral standards which regulate life in the world of Forms. An absolute morality, learned from Socrates, permeates Plato's world view. But that morality has no reference in God or our personal relationship with him, for reasons we'll soon examine.

Why does any of this matter to you and me today? For this simple and important reason: if Plato is right, the way Christians see God, themselves, and their world is wrong. Tragically, for nearly five hundred years the church saw God through Plato's eyes, not Plato through God's. And we're still paying for that mistake today.

Let's see why, and how.

Working with rusty nails

Plato's way of seeing the world works itself out in theology and everyday life with disastrous consequences. First, think about where all of this puts God.

God is only an idea

If physical reality is a flawed shadow, then a perfect God cannot be definition have any part of it. If he made it with all its imperfections, he clearly is imperfect as well.

And so Platonic thought relegates God to the realm of ideas only. He can have nothing to do with this shadowy place. The very idea that he would intervene in the natural world you and I must inhabit is absurd by definition. The miraculous is rendered impossible, and any hope you and I have to know God while in this shadowy cave is dashed. Think about him, but don't try to experience him personally. Doesn't much of our culture today agree?

If Plato is right, God is a figment of your imagination, literally. Your idea of God may be very different from mine. Who's to say who's right? And what difference does it all make anyway? Can you see why Greek philosophers had such little interest in personal religion? And why our Western culture has a built-in suspicion of it as well?

Growing up, I thought that religion was a crutch for cripples. So did Plato. What neither of us realized is that we're all crippled. And Plato's God is no help at all.

How things got this way

So, how did this cave of shadows come to exist? It seems that God created a divine craftsman, a figure who made both souls and bodies from pre-existing materials. This craftsman did the best he could, but he had rusty nails and warped two-by-fours to work with. This material world is the source of evil in our lives--it is irrational, chaos in perpetual movement. And there's nothing either God or his carpenter can do about it.

The divine craftsman modeled his work on the Forms which exist in the world of Ideas, but he could make only imperfect copies of them. This is why when you contemplate a table you can imagine the "tableness" he was attempting to reproduce. Your soul remembers the Ideal table and is drawn from this chaotic cave of shadows to the real world of Forms.

Here's what Plato's theory of creation means for Christians: this world is a bad place, and you want to spend as little time here as possible. You want to break the philosophical chains which tie you to the shadows you see, by thinking about the world you cannot. You cannot change the world, so don't try. Just don't let it change you.

This is the most popular definition of spirituality I know today. Retreat from this fallen, sinful world. Spend as little time in it as possible. Live at the church, raise your kids there, go to school there, socialize there. Shop from the Christian Yellow Pages; listen only to Christian music; read only Christian books; have only Christian friends. And somewhere Plato is cheering.

Didn't Jesus warn us that salt is no good in the saltshaker?

A philosopher needs his island

How would Plato rule a country, given his ideas about ideas? Rather sternly, it turns out. Just as the soul is governed by reason, so society should be governed by the reasoners. The philosophers make up the "guardian" class and order the government and its citizens. They are aided by the "warrior" class (akin to the higher emotions we saw in Plato's epistemology), who work in close cooperation with the guardians to keep the masses in line.

The "working" class (like the lower emotions) must be governed closely. They do the farming, manufacturing, trading, and other mundane work which makes the city-state possible. And so they feed the guardians and warriors who rule them.

How are we to produce these classes? Guardians are deprived of all natural marriage, private property, or family life. They are mated to other guardians. Their offspring never know their parents, but grow up in a general nursery and so are protected from all concerns but the rational.

To make all this happen, the city-state should be located on an island, with all foreign contact strongly discouraged. And you thought democracy was flawed.

The best thing about Plato's theory of politics is that it was never enacted. Makes our politics look better, doesn't it?

Ignore the shadow of the shadow

What of aesthetics, a theory of art? Plato saw all visual art as a distraction. After all, if an apple you can see is but a shadow of "appleness," then a painting of that apple is a shadow of a shadow. A royal waste of time.

But Plato knew that art, for all its flaws, has great influence on our souls, especially the lower emotions. So he wanted it tightly censored. And music most of all, since it bypasses the eyes and goes straight to the soul. If he thought so poorly of the ordered, mathematically-oriented music of his day, what do you suppose he'd think of rap?

Plato was more helpful when he did science. He was convinced that the earth is not stationary, but revolves around an axis. It would take the Western world nearly two millennia to agree. He urged the standardizing of weights and measures, and was sure that 365 days make a year. If only he'd stuck to science and left politics alone.

The central tradition of Western thought owes its very existence to Plato. He was the true philosopher of beginnings, since he started the serious discussion of almost every great philosophical question. He wanted us to focus on our souls, and to live out the unchanging standard of morality he first learned from Socrates.

But his God bears no practical relationship to our lives. His world of Forms has no connection with this physical universe, except through his epistemological speculations. The world wanted a more concrete explanation. Enter Aristotle.

The biological philosopher

We are truly in the Information Age. But we're not the first people to center our lives and culture around the accumulation and transmission of such. The second great thinker in Western history would have loved the Internet. Except that he already knew more than it does, or wanted to. As we continue to consider the reasons we think as we do, let's meet Aristotle.

The greatest of Plato's pupils was the most unlikely. Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) was the son of a doctor and the heir of a long family tradition in medicine. Not exactly the career pursuit a teacher would suggest who believed the physical is but a shadow. He grew up in Stagira, a city in Chalcidice on the north coast of the Aegean Sea. When he was eighteen he entered Plato's Academy, and stayed there for twenty years (until Plato's death in 348 B.C.).

Sometimes Aristotle maintained an excellent relationship with his teacher. On other days he would linger after lectures and challenge Plato's ideas and reasoning. Plato referred to him as the "mind" of the Academy.

When Aristotle once conducted a sharp polemic against the master, Plato compared him to a filly that kicks the dam whose milk it drank. And when Plato's favorite pupils were absent one day, Aristotle argued so ruthlessly with the 80-year-old master that Plato was obliged to remain away from his own Academy for three months. Tough stuff, philosophy.

At Plato's death, Aristotle was incensed that he was not put in charge of the Academy (one wonders why he was surprised). Plato's nephew got the job instead, proving that academic politics haven't changed. And so Aristotle stormed off, moved to the principality of an old student of his named Hermias, married his niece, and wrote a noble poem when Hermias was later betrayed and crucified. From there he moved to the coast of Asia Minor to study marine biology. And by the way, for three years (from 343-340 B.C.) he tutored the heir to the throne of Macedonia, a young man named Alexander.

In 335 Aristotle returned to Athens to found his own philosophical school, the Lyceum. Here he built the first important library in Greece, with a large collection of maps and a natural history museum. Given his family background, it is no surprise that his curriculum was broader than Plato's Academy, including natural sciences, biology, literature, psychology, and the new science of logic.

Unlike Plato's artistic dialogues, Aristotle's works were composed of his straightforward, tightly reasoned lectures. He gave these lectures while walking about the spacious gardens of the Lyceum with his students while they discussed various subjects together. Hence the "peripatetic" method of teaching (from the Greek words for "to walk about"). Many preachers are peripatetics and don't even know it.

In 323 B.C., when Alexander the Great died and an anti-Macedonian sentiment swept the country, Aristotle was forced to abandon his Lyceum. He fled the country, and died the next year.

God, the universe, and all related subjects

Aristotle's major work was nothing much—just gathering all the learning of the past and present, in the fields of science, philosophy, rhetoric, law, and literature, and organizing this knowledge into meaningful patterns which would be available to posterity. And we thought Plato was broad.

The result was philosophy developed on the largest possible scale. Aristotle's career established the great divisions of philosophy which are still accepted today, and he made enduring contributions in each of them. Let's look at these contributions, each in turn.

Let's be logical

If we are going to organize all learning into one system, we will need a strategy. And so Aristotle's first contribution to philosophy and Western thought was to state the laws of logic as we know them today. He studied the structure of rational thought, seeking to define those essential principles which sustain all reasoned inquiry. And he succeeded.

We all employ three basic axioms whenever we think in ordered ways. First, we use what Aristotle called the law of *identity*: A is A, and it must remain so. In other words, we begin by identifying the reality we are seeking to understand. We name it, quantify it, qualify it. We first want to know what it is, and how it relates to the rest of reality.

Then we move to the second axiom of reason: the law of *contradiction*: A is B, or it is not B, but it cannot be both. Whenever we identify something, we also identify what it is not. And it cannot be both, or reason breaks down. The page on which you are reading these words is either visible or it is not. If we think it is both, we cannot think about it at all.

Now we're ready for the last axiom of logic: the law of the *excluded middle*: A is B or it is not B, but it cannot be both *at the same time*. A statement must be either true or false within a given logical context. We must choose.

These laws of logic have sustained rational inquiry from Aristotle to today. This effect has been both very good and very bad, for reasons we'll soon investigate.

"The form be with you"

The logical approach Aristotle brought to the work of philosophy was a distinct departure from Plato's dialogues on scattered subjects. But his greatest break with his master came not in strategy but in substance, literally.

Remember that Plato was convinced by Pythagoras that there is a world of Forms or Ideas, distinct from this physical world, and that this world is but an imperfect shadow of

that which is real. This ontology was the foundation for Plato's approach to the soul, the physical universe, aesthetics, and the future.

Aristotle rejects this essential premise. Completely. He is certain that the Form, such as it is, is to be found in the material world itself. Rather than being a shadow of the real, the physical universe *is* the real. Why did Aristotle come to this monumental shift of worldviews? And why does it matter?

Aristotle begins in his usual logical way. Rational beings must know objective truths, or they are not rational. However, the Forms cannot be known objectively--they are the product of a speculative philosophical system, not empirical experience. And so the primary realities of life must be the individual things we perceive. As a result, the Forms (such as they are) must be contained in the objects themselves.

In this view, individual concrete entities are real and scientifically knowable. Aristotle calls these entities the "substance," the thing which actually exists. He takes Plato's Forms to describe the unchanging essence which gives the thing its definition and purpose. As a result, things can change in quantity, quality, and position, but they cannot change in themselves because of their form.

And so Aristotle's ontology incorporates Plato's insistence on objective truth and values, as it was learned from Socrates. He explains how the world can change (cf. Heraclitus) while affirming unchanging values and timeless truths (cf. Parmenides). And he makes it possible for philosophy to be relevant to the observable world of real life experience.

One example of this relevance is Aristotle's fascination with biology. He was the first to construct a system for naming, categorizing, and relating all living forms. Another example is his view of the universe. He saw the observable universe as eternal and all-embracing, with nothing (such as a world of Forms) outside it, and theorized that it is hierarchically ordered and subject to causation in every respect. His understanding of physics was formative until well after the time of Copernicus--for centuries, the heavenly bodies revolved around the earth in perfectly elliptical, rational orbits. Or so the world thought. Such theories and many others were motivated by Aristotle's shift from the unseen Forms to the observable Substance of life.

How does this new perspective change things? In every way. If Aristotle is right, there is no "spiritual" realm to be separated from the "secular." God is not distant from this material universe. Spirituality is best developed by studying the empirical things which surround us. Ministry happens by reaching the world we can see, not by escaping to the world we cannot. We'll watch this philosophical shift as it works itself out in monumental ways across Western culture.

A moving god

Some of the most intellectual facts have the most mundane explanations. For instance, most Christians do not know that the letters of Paul are arranged as they are for this deeply spiritual reason: they go from longest to shortest. Many people do not know that

"Bible" comes from Byblos, the town where ancient paper was harvested and processed, so that the Holy Bible is simply the Holy Book.

And many theologians and other Christians use the word "metaphysics" without ever knowing its deeply intellectual etymology--it is so named simply because Aristotle's writings on this subject were placed after ("meta") his writings on physics in his collected works. Philosophical trivia is such fun, isn't it?

When we reach Aristotelian metaphysics, we come to the most significant single subject in his thought relative to Christian faith. Remember that Aristotle believed the physical universe acts according to predictable laws of cause and effect. All substances are in constant motion. So, he asked himself, where did all this motion begin?

It seemed reasonable to Aristotle to suggest that motion requires a mover. All observable experience suggests that this is so. And so an Unmoved Mover must be the first cause of all other motion. This Mover would be purely immaterial in nature, on the order of Mind, since all material things require something else to begin their motion. Unlike Plato's Forms, it can cause physical reaction by direct involvement with the material universe, since the Form is in the Substance.

And so Aristotle believed that a Mind exists, self-sufficient and containing all knowledge and motion within itself. This Unmoved Mover would be impersonal, with no capacity for individual relationship with us. We can accept the existence of this God, but we cannot know him (or it).

When we apply Aristotle's laws of logic to his theology, we soon see how incompatible his metaphysics are with Christian faith. God cannot be three and one, for this is a contradiction; Jesus cannot be fully God and man, for the same reason. If laws of logic prevail, the Bible cannot be fully inspired and yet the product of human personality; God cannot be sovereign over the future while allowing us free will. But these denials of Christian belief are no problem for Aristotle, for he holds none of these beliefs.

When a theologian uses non-contradiction as the test for all truth, know that Aristotle is pleased. But God may not be.

Life is hot air

From theology, Aristotle soon moved to ethics. His work comprised the first comprehensive study of morality in Western history. He was primarily concerned with finding the underlying purpose for human existence. And he (and millions after him) thought he succeeded admirably.

Aristotle observed that all people aim at *eudaemonia*--well-being or exalted happiness. (Note the influence of this idea on Thomas Jefferson and the *Declaration of Independence*.) Aristotle believed that the life of reason leads to this happiness, manifested as a holistic, complete life. For him, virtue is a settled disposition of character

and right behavior. The life of reason flourishes when we follow a balanced course, the "golden mean."

And so Aristotle wanted us to feel anger, but not too much--righteous indignation, but not irrational action. He wanted us to feel sexual attraction, but not to the point of obsession. He wanted us to seek wealth, but not so much that we become overly materialistic. And so on.

Above all, he wanted us to contemplate life. Here we find perfection in the direct knowledge of the realities revealed to us by metaphysics, mathematics, and his philosophy of nature. The more we seek to understand perfection, as revealed in the imperfect world around us, the more our souls are elevated to *eudaemonia*. This idea would influence spirituality for more than a thousand years.

For Aristotle, the soul is the highest principle of life and being. It possessed no previous, disembodied immortality (vs. Orpheus and Plato). And the only part of you which lives beyond your death is the "separate reason," the highest part of your soul. Your soul operates in your body through the *pneuma*--a life-giving heat (literally "hot air"). By this active material principle, your soul influences your body.

And so with Aristotle we arrive at the "tripart" view of humanity which is still highly influential today--body, soul, and spirit. This is not at all the biblical view of mankind (which sees us as a whole being, variously described as body, soul, and spirit, but one creation). But it is the most popular today.

The drama made me do it

Like Plato, Aristotle thought art to be highly influential. Unlike Plato, he believed it to be valuable for our souls. Since the Form is in the Substance (the sensory world), artistic reflection on the world which surrounds us is good for our souls.

And so Aristotle wanted art to imitate life. He especially liked art which appeals to the emotions as well as the intellect. And he most especially liked art which helps to purge our spirits. This *cathartic* function of artistic expression is the highest purpose an artist can achieve, in Aristotle's view. Tragic drama is therefore the best art, for it operates psychologically to relieve us of the oppressive emotions of pity and fear.

This philosophy of art has become is one of the most influential aesthetic theories all time. It has been used to justify all sorts of artistic expression, and has itself been subject to significant critique. In short, it is by no means certain that an artistic cathartic experience relieves us of our emotions or the need to act them out. Much evidence indicates that such artistic experience actually creates in us an even greater desire to act out what we have seen the artist do.

Aristotle would say, "The drama kept me from doing it." Many psychologists today would say the opposite.

The fount of all knowledge

Aristotle wrote more than a thousand manuscripts. Unfortunately, only a few of his writings have survived, in the form of notes used in lectures. These were assembled by his pupil, Theophrastus, and sent to Asia Minor for safe keeping. Here they remained for 150 years, until they were translated into Latin, Syrian, and Arabic. They were lost again, and not rediscovered until the fifth century A.D., when they were translated from the Arabic versions.

From the fifth to the fifteenth centuries, Aristotle was regarded as the fountainhead of all knowledge. Thomas Aquinas called him "the Philosopher"; Dante called him "the Master of those who know." Education and culture were based on his thought, and his works were studied and memorized as dogma.

Reaction against Aristotle came with the Renaissance and Francis Bacon's critical philosophy. The flaws in his method, conclusions, and theories were pointed out. Some scientists believe that blind acceptance of the errors of Aristotle stunted the growth of science for hundreds of years.

The progress of Greek philosophy after Plato and Aristotle changed dramatically after their deaths. No great original systems would appear; thinkers for the most part were satisfied to repeat their opinions. From his time to ours, no other man has made such a serious addition to so many branches of knowledge as Aristotle. From theology to psychology, his philosophical construction shaped the Western world for more than a millennium. And its impact on our worldview continues today.

If a great man plants trees he'll never sit under, Aristotle was truly great. At least for philosophy. His impact on Christian faith is another matter, as we'll soon see.

With the demise of Alexander the Great, everything Greek came into question and turmoil. His expansionist administration had created global interaction between Greeks and other worldviews. The old systems came increasingly into question, as new ideas became popular. And his death led to a long period of decline for the Greeks and their way of life, creating unrest and even rejection of many principles held dear for centuries.

The result was a move away from speculation to practice. Theories which could explain the origins of life were not nearly as needed as those which could explain its purpose today. How we should live became much more interesting than why. And so Greek philosophy moved into what we now call the "ethical period."

Cynics have us over a barrel

The first practical reaction to speculative philosophy came with Antisthenes, a companion of Socrates. His followers began to advocate a way of life more than a philosophy. Their chief doctrine was virtue, which they defined as life according to nature. Because they

were willing to go to any extreme to make their point in public, they became known as the "Cynics" (meaning "dog" in Greek). Not a popular group, these.

And for more reasons than just their name. The Cynics want you to cut all necessities to bare minimums. Many lived their lives as wandering beggars, going barefoot and wearing a single rough garment. The staff and beggar's wallet became their symbol. Their food was lentils, and their beverage cold water. One of their leaders chose to live inside a barrel, which he carried around himself as his clothing. Their goal was to achieve utter tranquility against all changes of fortune.

They attacked all forms of convention and the lax moral standards of their day, and were sure they were on a divine mission to reform their culture. And so they have given their name to anyone who criticizes the establishment. Whether they live in a barrel or not.

A dog's life is your fate

A second ethical response to speculative philosophy was the movement known as Stoicism. Founded by Zeno, this is first and foremost a rule of life. Stoicism is named for the columns ("stoa") where its followers met, but it has given its name to an attitude of resignation to the fates. And appropriately so.

The Stoics believed that Divine Reason or Fate rules the universe, and that we are all forced to obey its dictates. You can choose to go along, like a dog running beside the cart to which he is tied; or you can be dragged along by the cart; but you're going with the cart.

Our duty consists in joyful assent to the decrees of Fate. And so apathy--freedom from all passion and emotion--is the highest emotional goal. Utter indifference to external things is the key to a life lived well, if you're a Stoic. Epictetus (A.D. 50) had it down: "If you caress your wife or child, say to yourself that it is not different than if you were caressing any person. Then, if he dies, you will be unaffected." A lovely way of life, isn't it?

The Stoics believed that the universe is perfectly rational. The active principle is fire. God, or Divine Providence, is a universal, cosmic principle who forms, orders, and rules the universe. His highest manifestation is Reason, the ruling principle in mankind. The Stoics saw the universe as eternally cycling from destruction to rebirth (cf. 2 Peter 3:7, a passage often cited erroneously as having Stoic influence). All is ordered in the Stoic world.

And so logic becomes especially important for the Stoics. It is not just a tool, as with Aristotle, but a significant part of philosophy itself. Grammar and learning occur only through the bodily senses; they are tested by reason, and if stable and ordered, they are valuable.

The Stoics strongly influenced later politics and thought, especially the doctrine of natural law as expressing the universal decrees of Divine Reason. Universal and classical Roman Law was based more on Stoicism than any other single source.

Be happy, but not too much

A third ethical response to the speculations of Plato and Aristotle was led by Epicurus (341-270 B.C.). No ancient philosophy has been as generally and completely misunderstood as his Epicureanism. The common view is that Epicureans want a comfortable, sensual hedonism, combined with a crude atheism. This reputation arose largely because so many prostitutes came to join the Epicurean movement.

The actual situation was quite different: a small, exclusive group of refined quietists, of the highest moral character, with an extraordinary devotion to their founder, a most attractive theory and practice, and strong and loyal friendship. Epicurus himself was an amicable and cheerful man of extreme modesty ("Send me a cheese," he once wrote to a friend, "that I may fare sumptuously"). But his movement was extremely unpopular in the ancient world, since its teachings countered the Stoics, Platonists, and Aristotelians. It's tough to swim upstream, especially when the big fish are moving the other way.

The Epicurean aim of life was simple: happiness as the absence of pain and the presence of tranquility. They denied the Stoic approach to fatalism, since it was disturbing to the mind and prevented tranquility. They rejected Cynicism for its similar denials of tranquil pleasures. And they had little interest in the speculations of Plato and Aristotle, since they could bring few pleasures to life.

Epicurus developed an epistemology, theology, and psychology. His theory of learning was quite creative: the physical world is made of atoms (agreeing with the Atomists); the atoms on the outer layer of things are given off as the "images" of their material subjects.

These "images" float through the air until they contact a perceiving subject. Then they make an actual physical impression on the sense-organ, penetrating through the pore directly to the mind and producing mind-pictures. Since images are sometimes mixed (as with a centaur, combining the images of a man and a horse), concepts come from the images as they are creatively assimilated and understood. Not a bad guess, and closer to modern theory than any other in ancient Greek speculation.

His theology was less creative. The gods must exist, he said, or else we could not have their image in our minds. Yet they form no part of the physical universe, living in perfect tranquility and representing the ideal of human life. Epicurean religion was simply the contemplation of the divine life.

And his psychology was similar to his epistemology. The soul is composed of atoms, themselves material in nature. Soul-atoms are diffused all over the body, causing every sensation we feel. The directing, rational part of the soul is located in the breast. And the soul is mortal, dissolving into its material elements when the body dies. Death ends all

consciousness. And so we should have no fear of death and the beyond, leaving us free for present happiness.

I'm sure I'm not sure

The last of these ethical responses to Plato and Aristotle was the movement known as the Skeptics. Pyrrho of Elea, a contemporary of Zeno and Epicurus (ca. 365-275 B.C.) was the first leader of the Skeptics. He sought imperturbable tranquility, but not in the dogmatic theories of his day. Rather, he found happiness in absolute agnosticism and suspension of judgment.

Since we cannot know whether our sense perceptions agree with reality, we can never get beyond our senses. And so when our thoughts and our senses conflict, we have no criteria for distinguishing the true from the false. The result: when we suspend all judgment, tranquility will follow. We cannot grasp God or the eternal, and so we should give up our attempts to know them. And peace will come.

A second group of Skeptics descended from some of Plato's students at the Academy. Following Socrates' motto, "I know only that I do not know," they decided that we do not know even that we do not know. We know nothing, and we're sure of it.

Skepticism leads eventually to Eclecticism, a philosophy which combines truths from various sources without seeking a unified system of absolute knowledge. And nothing is more popular today than that.

There's no truth but mine

It's fascinating to see the ways these four movements have helped mold the Western worldview as it is typically practiced today. With the Cynics, some have chosen to retreat from our rampant materialism and seek truth and life in nature or asceticism. This approach is especially popular with some of so-called Generation X, young people soured on the materialism of their parents.

Others are more Stoic in their fatalistic approach to life--many in my parents' generation demonstrate enormous resignation to hard times and resilience in the midst of them. Still others are Epicurean in their pursuit of pleasure and happiness, often to extremes which Epicurus condemned--I think of some of my contemporaries and their definitions of success and purpose. And the post-modern relativism and rejection of absolutes can be traced to the ancient Skeptics. Truth is only what I say it is. And you should believe me.

As we watch the early Christians deal with these competitors for the soul, we find ways to take Christ to our culture today. For no generation since the post-Socratics is more like them than we are. We'll see how, next.

The philosopher God

As you may have noticed, this "ethical" response to Plato and Aristotle left some ethics to be desired. Specifically, any reference to a personal God. And so religious mystics attempted to build a bridge between the mind and the soul. The result--no surprise here--was a philosopher God. These thinkers wanted a theosophy--a religious world view. Let's see what that view looked like.

Bring a Stoic to church

In the last two centuries before Christ, Stoicism underwent a significant process of modification. They dropped their doctrine of "conflagration" (the end of the world by fire), and accepted the eternity of the cosmos (I'm sure the cosmos was grateful). And they began using their Divine Providence doctrine to supply order in that eternal cosmos, making Stoicism more suitable for the Romans who adopted their philosophy.

Three men would be upset if we didn't mention them here. Posidorus of Apamea (130-46 B.C.) developed important doctrines about God and mankind. He saw man as the "bridge-being" or intermediate between higher and lower life, and viewed the cosmos as a single organism ruled by a divine or "higher" power. Sounds a bit like Shirley MacLaine.

Epictetus was one of the greatest later Stoics. The son of a woman slave, he was born between 50 and 60 A.D. at Hieropolis in Phrygia. He came to Rome as a slave of one of Nero's men, became a secretary, and took courses with Musonius Rufus, the fashionable Stoic philosopher. After obtaining his freedom, he taught philosophy on street corners, and later established a school in Nicopolis. He was mainly a moral and religious teacher, and his philosophy can be summed up in two words: "bear" and "forebear." Joyful resignation to the Divine Will is the highest good for Epictetus.

The greatest of the later Stoics was Marcus Aurelius (121-180 A.D.). He succeeded Antonius Pius to the Roman throne in 161 A.D., and was a brilliant ruler and even more brilliant philosopher. He based much of his teachings on Epicurus, but also derived much from Plato. Marcus' *Meditations* is a masterpiece of Stoic thought.

Marcus' son Commodus began the decline of the Empire. With Aurelius the end of an epoch was reached--he was the last great Stoic, and the last great product of classical culture as well.

Making a good mind

The next movement of significance before Christian philosophy is known as Neo-Platonism. Philo of Parissa returned Plato's Academy to positive, dogmatic teaching, and away from the skepticism of the day. Most of all, his school taught a theological and religious way of life.

The primary object of the Neo-Platonics was knowledge of truth about the divine world, leading to the "greatest possible likeness to God." They placed a supreme Mind or God at the head of a hierarchy of being, as the first principle of reality. This Supreme Mind is too far above the material world to be accessible to us except through occasional flashes

of illumination. Intermediary beings such as lesser gods, stars, and demons rule and order the visible universe. Evil comes from matter itself, which is opposed to the intentions of the Good.

In this system, God is known primarily through the "via negative" (the "way of negation"). By stating what God is *not*, we get a better understanding of what he is. Religion is remote intellectual devotion to the remote Supreme Mind, whose vision we can only hope to attain fully in the next life. Pagan piety towards the inferior gods, the star-gods and other deities of mythology or popular religion is combined with ascetic philosophical reflection. By harmonizing Plato's Good and Aristotle's Mind, this school created a view of God which was followed by many for hundreds of years.

Making Plato a Jew

One last philosopher before Christianity must be mentioned: Philo Judaeus of Alexandrinus (30 B.C. to A.D. 50). This Alexandrian Jew of a priestly family wrote historical, philosophical, political, and ethical works. He was the leading figure of his intellectual community. And his efforts to combine Neo-Platonism and the Old Testament would influence theologians for centuries to come.

Philo's great ambition is to bring Plato and the Hebrew Bible together, as a means of encouraging philosophers to worship the Jewish God. His method is known as "allegory," a hermeneutical approach whereby the literal or intended meaning of the text is obliterated in favor of a more "spiritual" reading.

By this approach, Genesis is not a record of historical fact but a kind of Platonic myth. Adam symbolizes "spirit" or "mind," Eve sensuality, and Jacob asceticism. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob stand for the learned, natural, and exercised virtues. When the three wanderers ask about Sarah's whereabouts and Abraham answers, "She is in the hut" (Genesis 18.9), he is *really* saying that virtue is in the soul. Who needs seminary when you can interpret the Bible like this!

Philo's theology was quite interesting and influential. He saw God as the absolute, transcendent Being who is the ground of all existence. The "logos" is the instrument by which God works to make the world of visible things. The "pneuma" is the Divine Substance which God breathes into humans, and becomes our intelligence and the "image of God" in us. Salvation comes as we deliver ourselves from our bodies (our evil principle), eradicate our passions by asceticism, and seek God through mysticism.

Philo matters to us not because of his theological results, but because of his method. He was among the first to attempt to bring Platonic thought and biblical revelation together. And his allegorical method is still (unfortunately) in common use today.

Don't apologize, but be apologetic

Now we step over the bridge from the pre-Christian world to the Christian era. Remarkably, both banks of the river look very much alike, especially at first.

Alexandria (founded by its namesake Alexander the Great in 333 B.C.) had become the leading commercial and intellectual city of the world by this time. Its library of 700,000 volumes attracted scholars from all over the world. The Septuagint (the Hebrew Bible into Greek) was translated here. And "Christian Wisdom" got its start here as well.

The first Christian philosophers wanted to do three important things: (1) explain their faith to the Greek world; (2) bring pagans to Christ; and (3) encourage Christians to think well about their beliefs. They are known to us as "apologists," from the Greek word for "defense" (see 1 Peter 3:15: "Always be prepared to give an *answer* to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have"). The first apologists defended Christianity against philosophical attacks, and made their faith systematic for the sake of the Church. They did us all an enormous service.

The most important of these early apologists was Justin Martyr. Justin (his last name derives from his death for Christ) based his doctrine on divine revelation, and denied that we can know God apart from that revelation. However, he also believed that God has planted "seeds" of knowledge of himself in all people. This is the "seminal Logos," a Stoic term used by Justin in a very un-Stoic sense.

In this view the great philosophers have all lived and taught to some degree according to the Logos, and everything true in their teaching comes from God. But Christians have not merely seeds or fragmentary portions of the truth, but the Logos himself, the Lord Jesus. Therefore, the Christian revelation transcends the teaching of the philosophical schools.

This was a brilliant attempt to bring Christianity and Greek philosophy together, and has much to commend itself to us. However, Justin's own use of his method sometimes went astray. For instance, he developed a subordinationist theology regarding the Trinity (ranking the Father above the Son, who is above the Spirit), so as to make his theology more consistent with Neo-Platonism. But while we can fault some of his method, we cannot question the piety of his faith or the passion of his love for Jesus.

We will meet with those who undertake this apologetic task across the rest of our survey.

The faith of our fathers

Finally we come to the Patristic era (from the Latin for "fathers"). This is a subject worthy of an entire course of study. We'll do great violence to it by wresting from its treasures only a few people, and just a few of their insights. May they forgive us.

Tertullian (AD 160-230) radically rejected philosophy, but used philosophy to do so. He was Stoic in his view that God as "spirit" is fine and subtle matter, that souls must be physical in nature, and that the Father is the "God of the philosophers." And yet he thought he rejected philosophy with his method. His famous cry was, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" A great deal, apparently.

Clement of Alexandria (AD 150-225) combined Christian orthodoxy with a much greater respect for Greek philosophy. He insisted on the transcendent unity of God, the divinity of Christ, the unity of the Church, and the superiority of revealed doctrine. But he also believed that Greek philosophy is a valuable preparation and assistant in attaining the final truth of the Christian revelation.

Origen (A.D. 185-254) was the first great Christian Platonist. Born in Egypt, he succeeded Clement as head of the Catechetical School at Alexandria when he was eighteen years of age. He was imprisoned and tortured for his faith, and died as a result of his persecutions. His was a passionate commitment to the Christian faith.

His was a very original attempt to adapt Platonism to the requirements of Christian theology, beginning as a teacher with the data of revelation. However, he soon yields far too much ground to Plato. He is an extreme subordinationist, believing that God's power extends to all created things, the Son's only to rational beings, and the Spirit's only to a limited number of rational beings whom he sanctifies.

Origen believed that God's first creation was a community of rationally disembodied spirits, all equal and possessed of free will. These spirits sinned and fell in various degrees, according to the severity of their sin. Some became angels, others men, others demons. The material universe was created after this fall to provide penitential dwellings for these fallen spirits. Even the sun and other heavenly bodies are purgatorial vehicles in which are embodied spirits which have sinned.

Salvation for Origen comes through reincarnation, as fallen spirits move through a long series of lives, up and down the scale towards God according to their merits in the preceding stage. At last would come the *apokatastasis*, the restoration of all things. All spirits would be returned to their first purity and equality, even the devil included.

To achieve such a radical synthesis, Origen had to make full use of Philo's allegorical method. He shows us how far off track a brilliant person can go, unless the Bible guides both our method and our conclusions. If it could happen to Origen, it can happen to us.

Ideas to avoid

We'll close this section with some of the more interesting heresies of the period (as though Origen's ideas weren't heretical enough). The *Gnostics* were the first and most serious intellectual threat to early Christianity. They believed that knowledge (*gnosis*) rather than faith (*pistis*) is the means to God and salvation. We know much more about them than we once did, thanks to the 1945 discovery of the Nag-Hammadi Library in upper Egypt. This large jar contained a fifth-century Gnostic library with thirteen books, forty-eight writings, and 700 pages of material.

Gnostics saw matter as essentially evil, and the realm of the spirit as good. They were strongly anti-Semitic, though they believed in the supreme being of the Jews. They

posited a female deity named "Sophia" (from "wisdom") as the mother goddess, and believed that "eons" separate good from evil. Their system proceeds downward from Depth/Silence to Mind/Truth, thirty "eons" (of whom Christ is the last), Word/Life, Men/Church, and twelve more "eons" (Sophia is the last). Sophia had a miscarriage, resulting in the Demiurgos, and the Demiurgos made the universe. Why hasn't some science fiction writer picked up on this stuff?

The Gnostics were just getting started as the New Testament era was drawing to its close. Their separation of spirit from material and God from mankind was manifested by some in the argument that the earthly Jesus took on the divine Christ spirit at his baptism, and lost him at his crucifixion. Paul apparently is fighting Gnosticism in Colossians 1.15-23, and John in 1 John 1.1-4.

Arianism was a second opponent of early Christianity. Arius, a presbyter of the church in Alexandria, denied that the Christian shares God's nature. He taught that Christ is the logos of God, but denied that divinity was incarnate in the body of Jesus of Nazareth. This attempt to preserve biblical monotheism at the expense of biblical Christology was rejected by the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325.

Pelagianism (from Pelagius, a monk of British birth who lived in Rome, early 5th century A.D.) insisted on our total freedom of choice. This argument against total depravity was counted effectively by Augustine, as we'll see in the next chapter.

Manichaeism (from the sect of Mani) argued for a metaphysical dualism with God as good but finite, limited by the power of Satan. Satan created the material world, captured man's free spirit, and imprisoned it in the body, there to suffer for sins committed in a previous existence. We can be redeemed only by severely ascetic discipline.

Augustine was right--there is a "God-shaped emptiness" in each of us. The religious philosophers we've surveyed in this manuscript have each attempted to fill it. But any jigsaw puzzle solver knows that the wrong piece won't fit into the right hole. Next we'll find some pieces that still work for our souls today.

Evil exists only if you think it does (in which case, it does)

We continue with Patristic philosophy (named for the "fathers" of the church through Augustine) by looking at the person who most influenced the person who most influenced us. Plotinus (AD 204-269) was the greatest Platonic philosopher after Plato. Born in Lycopolis, Egypt, he studied philosophy in Alexandria for eleven years, then established his own school in Rome in 243. In 269 he died of a painful illness, probably leprosy.

His final words summarize his thought: "the divine spirit within me is departing to be united with the universal divine spirit." After his death, his disciple Porphyry revised and published his works in six Enneads (series of nine writings each).

Plotinus wanted to bring the uncharted religious ideas of his age under one unified system. He saw God as the source of all being and existence, and believed that the universe emanates from him. Thought produces soul, which produces matter. The soul "fell" into its physical state when it turned from God toward the material. Somewhere Orpheus is cheering.

Only by mystically purging ourselves from all bodily sensations and contemplating the eternal can we know God. Then our souls transcend their own thought, lose themselves in the soul of God, and become one with God.

We've heard all this before. Now comes the new (and highly significant) part. Plotinus believed that evil has no independent status or identity. Evil is the result of wrong thoughts, and only comes into material reality when we think them. And so evil is nothing of itself, literally "non-being." For reasons which make no sense just yet, this is crucial. Trust me.

The greatest mind since Paul

Now we come to my hero among the Patristics: Augustine. He was the greatest constructive thinker and most influential teacher of the early Christian church, and a dominant force in theology and philosophy even today. His was a formative influence on Descartes and the whole development of modern philosophy. And the Protestant reformers, especially Luther and Calvin, were guided in their theological views to a great extent by his published works. Other than that, his life didn't accomplish much.

Augustine (AD 354-430) was born at Thagaste in North Africa, to a Christian mother named Monica and a pagan father named Patricius. He became a brilliant and successful rhetorician (think lawyer), practicing at Rome and Milan. In Milan he was converted to Christ in 386, and soon ordained. He became Bishop of Hippo in North Africa in 396 and remained there to his death.

His writings fill 16 volumes of Migne's *Patrologia Latina*, in very small print--I had to translate some of them in my doctoral work and remember the experience painfully. The main bulk were very detailed explanations of the Scriptures, either as sermons he preached at Hippo or commentaries on various books of the Bible. His homilies on John's Gospel, Explanations of the Psalms, and commentaries on Genesis are of special importance. And his two most widely read works, *Confessions* and *City of God*, are the most significant and influential Christian books of all time outside of Scripture.

Let's take a brief tour of his thought. At every turn you'll say, "But that's what everyone believes." That's the point. Let's use Augustine's Latin phrases to make it.

De Trinitate

For Augustine, God is absolute and majestic. He is eternal, transcendent, and absolutely free, holy and totally separate from evil. What he wills, he does without intermediaries of any kind (vs. Gnosticism and Plotinus).

All ideas and forms of things are grounded in God's intelligence (agreeing with Plato). He proceeded rationally in creating the world, and everything owes its existence to him (vs. Plato). He created the world *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). All that is, is good, since it was created by God.

All true theological thinking begins and ends with the Trinity. Augustine's work *De Trinitate* is the single most important writing ever produced on this crucial subject. God created mankind as Trinity, and we can approach him only as Trinity.

Non posse non peccare

Augustine believed that the only knowledge worth having is knowledge of God and ourselves. All other knowledge, such as logic, metaphysics, and ethics, has value only insofar as it contributes to our knowledge of God.

It is our duty to understand what we firmly believe, to see the rational basis of our faith. And so we have a famous credo from Augustine: "Understand in order that you may believe; believe in order that you may understand." The highest function of wisdom and reason is to know God.

Truth is objective and absolute. I know that I exist, and so I know the reality of existence (Descartes would get credit for this idea 1,200 years later). The center of all thought is God. Concentration on inner spiritual reality leads to all truth.

Against Plato and with the Hebrew anthropology, Augustine believed that the body is not inherently evil. We are body and soul, but each works with the other to bring us to life's purpose.

Now things get interesting. Before the Fall we were holy and wholly innocent. After the Fall our entire being was corrupted. We were plunged into ignorance and sin, and are now utterly incapable of knowing what we should do apart from God's revelation and redemption. We were free to sin or not to sin before the Fall, but after the Fall it is impossible for us not to sin (*non posse non peccare*, for you intellectuals).

And so Adam's sin created hereditary sin, from which only God can reform us. The ramifications of this idea for infant baptism, sexuality, and human identity are still with us today.

As a logical result of this belief in inherited sin, Augustine argued strongly for predestination regarding salvation. He believed that every person is born with a sin nature, so that God is just in condemning us all. If anyone turns to God by faith, this is only possible by God's help, since our sinful nature makes such conversion impossible. And so God must decide who is to be saved and who is to be lost. A Calvinist before Calvin, so to speak.

Omnia natura bonum est

Now we go from preaching to meddling. For Augustine, everything that is, is created by God and is therefore good (*omnia natura bonum est*--all nature is the best). How, then, did evil come to be?

By logical progression, if everything that exists is good, evil cannot "exist." Evil must be a privation or lack of the good: "nothing else than corruption, either of the measure, or the form, or the order, that belong to nature. Nature therefore which has been corrupted, is called evil" (*Nature of the Good*, 4).

God has given us freedom of will, so that we would choose the good (his worship). But we choose wrongly. And evil results from our wrong choices. It already existed in potential (evil as non-being, from Plotinus). And we make it a reality when we misuse our freedom.

The result is simple: evil is not God's fault but ours. This "free-will" theodicy (an explanation for evil in the light of God's goodness) is the most popular such approach in Christian history.

Augustine's theodicy drives his philosophy of history. There are two kinds of people ("cities" in his analogy): those who desire God and those who do not. The "City of God" is spiritual and eternal; the "City of the Devil" is material and temporal. They are in perpetual conflict throughout history (the "dialectical" philosophy of history, found in Rousseau, Hegel, Comte, Nietzsche, Marx, and Spengler). Only when Jesus returns will the City of God defeat finally and forever the City of the Devil, and heal the results of the Fall eternally.

No one except Paul has exerted as much philosophical and theological influence on the Church as St. Augustine. We still think his thoughts in so many ways. But as is true with all human minds, his was finite and fallen. We'll see how in the studies to come.

Dark Ages or Golden Ages?

Now we move briefly to the "Medieval" period of Christian philosophy and history. I detest calling this the Middle Ages (did they know they were in them?), and especially detest calling them the Dark Ages. What Protestants call "Dark," Catholic historians call "Golden." History is truly perspective.

It is fair to say that not much original thinking occurred during the thousand years between Augustine and the Reformation, but that's for a reason. The Western world rediscovers Aristotle, and enters into a massive project of assimilating his thought into Christian theology and practice.

For the most part, the intellectuals of the day confined themselves to relating the work of the ancients to their own faith. And they accomplished what they intended to. Be careful what you aim at, lest you hit it.

Three unusually creative people deserve our applause, however: Anselm, Abelard, and Thomas Aquinas. Let's start with Anselm of Canterbury, since he was born before the others.

The fastest way to a philosophical headache

Anselm (1033-1109) was Archbishop of Canterbury in England (though they forced the office on him). He was the first truly significant Medieval philosopher. for three reasons.

First, he argued for the right relationship of reason and faith: "I believe that I might understand" (*Credo ut intelligam*). I agree, so he must be right.

Second, he articulated a very influential theory of the atonement: the satisfaction view. In *Cur Deus Homo* (*Why the God Man?*) he suggested that Christ satisfied God at the cross, enabling a reconciliation between God and man. This theology came from the feudal society in which it was born, but that doesn't make it right.

Third, he constructed the most complicated defense of God's existence ever devised: the ontological argument. Take two aspirin and proceed:

Major premise: I can conceive of a perfect being ("that than which nothing greater can be conceived").

Minor premise: to be perfect, something must exist.

Conclusion: God exists.

Philosophers are still debating. And in heaven, Anselm laughs at them all.

No way to treat a philosopher

Anselm's philosophical sparring partner was Abelard (1079-1142). But the latter had far greater problems than the former.

Abelard wanted to follow the art of disputation, so he became the student of William of Champeaux in Paris (around 1100). But he argued against William and was invited to leave. Later he met Heloise, a niece of a high official at Notre Dame, and fell in love with her. They had a child, and wanted to be married. Heloise's father found out, and had Abelard beaten and emasculated. Abelard went to a monastery, and Heloise to a nunnery. Abelard was accused of heresy, and expelled from the monastery. He entered another monastery, but was expelled again for heresy. He died soon after. And you thought you had a tough week.

Abelard disagreed with Anselm's view of the atonement, putting forth his own "moral influence" theory. In his view, Christ's death was an expression of God's love designed to invoke a response of devotion, love, and obedience. In other words, the Father loves us because he loves us, not because his Son made him. I agree (though I think the

atonement was more than an example or influence for us, being a substitutionary atonement man myself).

And Abelard disagreed with Anselm's view of reason and faith. In fact, his credo was precisely the opposite: "I understand, that I might believe." Rationalists every since have agreed. A tough life, but a good thinker.

The dumb ox on which we still ride

Now we come to the highest expression of Medieval philosophy and theology: Thomas Aquinas (1225?-1274). Remarkably, the greatest thinker of the Medieval era was known as the "dumb ox" as a child, and graduated last in his class (must have been some class!). He wanted to establish the Christian faith in a world where Aristotle was influential. And so, in essence, he applied Aristotle's ideas about purpose and materialism to Christian thought. With monumental results.

Thomas used Aristotle's theories about cause and effect to promote the cosmological argument for God: if there is a creation, there must be a Creator. This is still the most popular defense of God's existence.

He made enormous advances in our understanding of language as well. He showed us that "univocal" language occurs when the words mean the same thing in every context; "equivocal" language results from words which have nothing in common in different contexts; and "analogical" language happens when words have some relationship with each other in different contexts. The theological significance here is that our language about God has some truth, by analogy, even though it describes the One who is above all description. Thomas' approach to analogical language is still the foundational understanding of theological speech today.

Thomas, following Aristotle, was also a big proponent of natural theology. He believed that God can be seen in his creation, and that faith and biblical revelation are only needed to complete what God has already revealed in nature. "Natural" revelation and "special" revelation are theological categories we get from Thomas and still use.

His view of reason and faith: "I will observe, that I might know, and when my observation reaches its limits, then I will believe." From Thomas to today, most Roman Catholic thinkers agree. And many Protestants as well.

What does it all mean for Christians seeking to serve Jesus today? Let's review:

- *Augustine* taught the church to see God as Trinity, mankind as fallen from inherited original sin, salvation as predestined, evil as the result of misused free will, and history as a war between God and Satan.
- *Anselm* gave us a reasonable approach to God's existence, to Jesus' death, and to faith itself.
- *Abelard* made reason into rationalism.
- And *Thomas* made rationalism into faith.

They were right about many things, wrong about some things, but influential about everything, as we'll see next.

I think, therefore my head hurts

In the last section we looked (very) briefly at Medieval thought through the eyes of Anselm, Abelard, and Thomas Aquinas. Now let's run across the bridge from their world to the "modern" era. Make three quick jumps with me.

First we stand on *Medieval* feet, intellectually. Philosophy is based on authority structures. Revelation comes through the Church. Our primary concern is for the God-man relationship.

Now we jump to the *Renaissance*. Reason becomes more important than before, as it is shaped through our study of nature and classical literature. Authority structures are deemphasized, the autonomy and enlightenment of mankind is elevated, and concern for the man-man relationship reigns supreme.

Then we jump to the *Reformation*. Revelation comes not through Church or intellect but Scripture. Authority is found not in Church or man but Scripture. The God-man relationship is crucial once again.

Finally we leap to *Rationalism*. Reason is the normative means of discovering truth. There is no authority structure outside our reason. Our concern is for the man-man relationship. Here's why.

Rene Descartes (1596-1650) made each of these jumps with us. His was a Jesuit education, coupled with a fascination for mathematics. In light of the Reformation, he wanted to give his beloved Catholic Church a stable and reasonable foundation. In response to the popularity of the Renaissance and its Enlightenment, he felt this foundation must be strongly rational.

So he reasoned as any mathematician would: start from an unquestionable position, then reason to an unassailable conclusion and proof. Using the mathematical premise of doubt, Descartes soon realizes that he can doubt anything he can think of. He can doubt even his own existence. But what is the one fact he cannot doubt? That he is doubting. If he is doubting, by definition he is thinking. Result: "I think, therefore I am" (*Cogito, ergo sum*, the only Latin words even non-Latin speakers know).

Now Descartes is free (in his own mind) to reason from reason. He thinks he has proven the authority of human reason. So he will apply it to the rest of reality. By rational definition, God is absolute or he is not God (shades of Anselm). He can be the only absolute Substance. Everything else, including mind and body, must be a "relative" substance. God cannot be absolute Substance if he is bound to the material--rather, his existence must be spiritual/intellectual in nature. And God has given us the ability to reason, so that we can be in his "image" and comprehend his creation.

And so God puts in our minds "innate ideas" which give structure to human nature. These structures of rational investigation are the means by which we learn what we know, as they define both truth and relevance. (Unfortunately for his followers, Descartes was never able to relate such a mind to the physical body. In time, this problem would destroy pure rationalism as a philosophy.)

Descartes was sure that his insistence upon reason as the origin and test for truth could be used to demonstrate conclusively the rationality of the Catholic Church in the face of its detractors. But he was wrong. This insistence in time actually worked against the faith he sought to serve. If reason is the test and source of all truth, then why do reasonable people need revelation? The Church? God?

From monism to monads

Exactly so, said Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677). Spinoza was born into Jewish faith, but read Descartes and renounced his Judaism. He was expelled from his synagogue, worked as a lensmaker, and was despised for centuries as an atheist.

Spinoza reasoned that there is only one (rational) substance in all reality, and apparent differences are only apparent. So, what is this substance?

Godfrey Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) had the answer: "monads." Leibniz was sure that reality is made of these tiny units. "Monads" contain life in themselves, and are all of the same shape and size. They are arranged and moved by the "Prime Monad"--God. Higher-order monads (like us) perceive more than we reflect; lower-order monads (like this paper) reflect more than they perceive.

Balderdash, said the rest of the philosophical world. And they were right. Spinoza and Leibniz show that the ultimate result of pure rationalism is not rational at all. In their insistence that reason is the only substance in the world, they are not reasonable.

And the philosophical pendulum swings in the other direction.

Seeing is seeing

Philosophers have their "parties," just like Democrats and Republicans. If the Rationalists were one, the Empiricists were the other. "Empiricism" is the belief that ideas are derived from experience through the senses, not from reason in and of itself. Let's watch them come to a bloody end, just like the Rationalists.

Their story begins with John Locke (1632-1702). A student of philosophy, natural science, and medicine at Oxford, he was an important politician in England. His primary philosophical concern was with epistemology (the theory of knowledge). And his ideas have shaped the way Americans see ideas ever since.

Locke reasoned that we are born with our minds a "tabula rasa" ("blank slate"). All we know comes from experience, writing on these "slates." Our sensations (coming directly from experience) and reflections (upon sensations) produce knowledge. We must be satisfied with probability, since our senses can deceive us (agreeing with the ancient Skeptics).

Locke applied this epistemology to politics in defense of democracy. We learn moral law only from experience, and desire to pursue pleasure and avoid pain. This desire should be protected by the government, so that our "inalienable right" to the pursuit of happiness is preserved. No Locke, no Thomas Jefferson.

Keep going: empiricism in theology leads to Deism. The only fact you can state about God is that he is the creator of the world (we had to come from somewhere or Someone). Everything else is the result of individual, subjective experiences. So we posit a God who made the world but does not participate in it today, and we have Deism (with Locke its father). Again, no Locke, no Jefferson.

From Locke we move to George Berkeley (1685-1753). This Irishman, Bishop of Cloyne and missionary to Rhode Island wrote his *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* in 1710. He took Locke a step further: if all we know comes from experience, then the world as we know it can only be the world we perceive. This is "solipsism": "to be is to be perceived." Berkeley reasoned that God perceives all that is, which is why the world holds together when we're not looking. But he couldn't prove that it was so by objective experience.

So David Hume (1711-1776) took the stage, and empiricism to its logical conclusions. His *Treatise on Human Nature* (published when he was 26 years of age) and *Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* argued this basic thesis: where there is no impression there can be no knowledge. Hume denied even causality as non-empirical.

He thus denied the cosmological (from Creator to cosmos) and teleological (from Designer to design) arguments for God. His radical empiricism led ultimately to the death of empiricism. For ultimately, if Hume is right, we can know nothing. As a result, Hume is called the "Father of Skepticism." From Descartes' "doubting is thinking," we have come to Hume's "doubting is doubting." Another dead end.

From hardware to software to the disk to the printer

Enter the "savior of Western thought," Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). This quiet, unassuming professor in Konigsberg, Germany would have been nominated by none of his childhood friends to be known for anything. They would each have been wrong.

To simplify the notoriously complex Kant: we must rescue philosophy from the twin dead ends of pure rationalism and pure empiricism. How? The senses provide the "data" which the mind "interprets." The result is "knowledge."

Of course, we say. Everyone thinks that's true. Precisely the point.

Let's start with Kant's epistemology (as described in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, one of the most influential philosophical treatises of all time). Kant believed that your mind brings rational structures to reality. Rather than being impressed by reality through sense impressions only (as the empiricists said), your mind *interprets* these sense impressions. It uses innate (with Descartes) "categories" (not ideas, vs. Descartes). According to Kant, "although all our knowledge begins with experience it does not follow that it arises out of experience."

What are these categories, you ask? Kant provides the answer:

Quantity (amount):

1. Unity
2. Plurality
3. Totality

Quality (kind of material)

4. Reality
5. Negation
6. Limitation

Relation (of substance to other substance)

7. Inherence and subsistence
8. Causality and dependence
9. Community

Modality (of patterns within substances)

10. Possibility / impossibility
11. Existence / non-existence
12. Necessity / contingency

Let's (over)simplify things. Kant believed that he identified the key questions your mind inherently asks of every sense experience given to it: how much? what kind? how does it relate to other things? what patterns can we identify and predict? We cannot help asking these questions--this is the basic way our minds innately work.

To use an analogy totally foreign to Kant's world, think of your mind as the software resident in your computer. Your senses are the keyboard, being typed on by the external world. Your software interprets the keystrokes, resulting in "knowledge" which is imprinted on the disk drive and printed on paper.

Isn't this how everyone thinks that thinking works? Not before Kant.

Kant "saved" philosophy from itself. He showed that we can bring rationalism and empiricism together in a third model which uses the best of both and makes reasonable living possible. Western thinkers owe him an enormous debt of gratitude.

But we are indebted to Kant for more than the good results of his legacy. He has also contributed mightily to the relativism, pluralism, and materialism of our age. Here's how.

Kant called that which is knowable by our senses the "phenomena." That which we cannot know empirically is the "noumena." His conclusion: we cannot know the "thing in itself." Our minds interpret the sense data given to them, resulting in knowledge as *we* know it. But we cannot have objective knowledge of objective reality. This is simply impossible for us. By this measure, how are we to see miracles? Divine revelation through Scripture? Christian ethics? It's all "your truth," but only yours.

So how should we live? Kant's "moral imperative" was simple: do your duty, for the sake of your duty (from his *Critique of Practical Reason*). If everyone did what you're thinking of doing, would it be right? Is this your duty? (It is tragically possible to explain Hitlerism in the light of Kant's theory of duty.)

What is beautiful? In his *Critique of Judgment* Kant argued for objective aesthetic theory: things are beautiful (or not) as they possess characteristics which the mind's categories affirm (or not).

The upshot of Kant's influence: Western philosophy is both empirical and rational. *But the truths that matter--God and his relationship with us--are neither.* Clearly, Christians must respond to the Kantian challenge if we are to defend the objective truth of Scripture and faith. Or we are doomed to live in his relativistic world.

Where to begin? With his premises. Kant argued that we cannot know objective truth. His statement is itself a claim to objective truth, is it not? He claimed that we cannot know the "thing in itself." This is itself a claim about the "thing in itself," is it not? While I would certainly not argue that my sense impressions of reality, as interpreted by my mind, constitute all of objective reality that exists, the limitation is with me, not with reality. There is objective reality. And we should strive to know it as best we can. Our limitations are not to be embraced but overcome.

Kant's thought is the air most Western minds breathe, until they suffocate. Next let's open the windows.

It's common sense

The first reaction to Kant's synthesis of reason and experience came from Thomas Reid (1710-1796), a Scottish philosopher. Remember that Kant maintained that you cannot know the "thing-in-itself," only your experience of it. Reid argued the opposite side: you can know the world directly, without the mediation of ideas. You are able to make self-evident moral judgments, based on principles which take precedence over experience.

Because you have rational freedom, you are the cause of your experience, not just a reactor to it.

The school Reid founded, "Scottish 'Common-Sense' Realism," soon became the official philosophy of Princeton Seminary and of conservative Christianity in America. Through B. B. Warfield and others, it achieved great influence in this country and culture. The primary reason you've not heard of or wrestled with Kant's ideas is that your culture has not. Common sense dictates that you know reality, and that's good enough for most of us.

As a result, the Kantian denial of absolutes has met no real intellectual resistance in our culture. Relativism is appealing to a people who want independence from absolute ethics or truths. And because we've not interacted seriously with the Kantian sources of relativism and pluralism, we have no intellectual answer for this threat.

Common-sense realism defines the way most Americans think about how they think. That's both good and bad.

A father and his sons

From reaction to Kant we turn to endorsement of his ideas. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) is considered both the father of modern philosophy and the father of liberalism. Let's see how both births took place.

Schleiermacher's *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (1799) and *The Christian Faith* (editions from 1821 to 1831) made him a universal reputation among the theologians and intellectuals of his day. He was the first theologian to approach systematically the Christian faith from the standpoint of personal experience. If Kant is right, we cannot know God "in himself," but only our impressions of him. And so theology is the analysis of our "God-consciousness."

What is this consciousness? We experience God in our sinfulness, our finiteness, our dependence on him. And so religion is a "feeling of absolute dependence."

Schleiermacher brought Kant into the philosophical mainstream, thus founding "modern" philosophy. And he applied his thought to theology, with the result that there is no absolute or objective truth in Christian faith. For this he is credited with "liberalism" as well.

We're still fighting these two sons today.

Synthesize!

Another response to Kant's worldview has been as influential as Schleiermacher's, on a more political level. Georg Wilhelm Hegel (1770-1831) was born the son of a minor official in Stuttgart, in southern Germany. His family was poor, but he managed to obtain

a university education. He became a private tutor, later a newspaper editor and school principle, finally a university professor.

Hegel was a prolific writer. His *Phenomonology of Spirit* contained over 750 pages, though its author considered it but a preface to his larger system. *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences* is the outline of his entire system. His collected works in German comprise some twenty volumes. And they are exceedingly difficult to follow, given the intricate difficulty of his theories and his obfuscating writing style.

Nonetheless, his basic ideas are clear, and profoundly important. Hegel believed (against Kant) that the universe is rational. The mind creates form and shapes in the experiential world, and participates in them.

Here's how: *thesis* reacts with *antithesis*, resulting in *synthesis*. Hegel says this is how your mind processes its experiences, and shapes and forms them. Just as hydrogen and water make oxygen, so every experience you have suggests to your mind its opposite; your mind combines the best from both into a synthesis.

Hegel believed that this "dialectic" is the pattern for all of reality, in this progression (**from bottom to top**):

Spirit (God) / Idea-Nature

Notion / Being-Essence

Measure / Quantity-Quality

Being for Self / Being-Determinate Being

Becoming / Being-Nothing

This "triadic pattern" constitutes the way all experience and reality works, in Hegel's view. In just a moment, you'll see why such a complex worldview matters today.

The inevitable philosopher

Hegel's rather esoteric philosophical system has directly influenced millions upon millions of lives, believe it or not. The reason is named Karl Marx (1818-1883).

Marx's ideas developed through three distinct stages. In the German chapter of his life, he read and agreed with Hegel, adopting his "dialectical idealism." Marx was also influenced by Ludwig Feuerbach's argument that any projection of spirit is a result of our

wishful thinking and dissatisfaction with life. (Sigmund Freud borrowed from Feuerbach as well his belief that "God" is a projection of our need for a father figure.)

And so Marx concluded (against Hegel) that the world is material only--all "spiritual" ideas are wish-fulfillment. But this material world operates according to the dialectical process. Marx published the *Rhineland Journal*, challenging some of Hegel's assertions, and soon found himself exiled from Germany.

Now in France, he studied with Saint-Simon the ideas of economic socialism. Here he published the *Communist Manifesto* with Engels. For it he was exiled again.

Finally he came to England, where he read Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (the basis for capitalism). In reaction he published *Capital*, his most significant economic work.

Marx's worldview stands on two primary assertions. First, *ultimate reality is material in nature*, moving through various stages of dialectical history and finally to a Communist stage. The Asiatic and Primitive classes clashed, resulting in the Feudal; the Feudal and its antithesis led to Capitalism; the Capitalists and those they oppress (according to Marx) will clash, leading finally to the class-less world of Communism. Lenin's 1917 Bolshevik Revolution is the direct outworking of this philosophy.

Second, *mankind is alienated from work and ourselves*. We have a deep sense of dissatisfaction, leading to social revolutions. The solution to this alienation is to abolish capitalism, by armed revolution if necessary.

The major question asked for years of Marx's worldview is simple: why hasn't the inevitable revolution to Communism already occurred? With events of recent years we can now say that the class-less society did not result from Communism, and that revolutions are moving toward democracy and capitalism, not away from them.

Nonetheless, Marx's applications of Hegel's philosophy show the pervasive influence and significance of ideas. Millions have been enslaved to his.

A leap into the light

The strongest reaction to both Kant and Hegel in the nineteenth century was made by the Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). Kierkegaard lived a tragic life--all his brothers and sisters died; he learned of an illegitimate relation between his parents and subsequently left the ministry; he felt that God had lodged a "veto" against his engagement to Regina Olson, and regretted her loss the rest of his life. His major controversy was his attack on the Lutheran Church of Denmark. Finding it cold, dead orthodoxy, he wrote viciously against it and was castigated by Danish society as a result. His was a life of deep alienation.

His central tenet was simple: *truth is subjectivity*. Theological speculations move us not one step closer to faith. Faith is not intellectual assent, but the total commitment of our

lives to something. Such commitment is subjective, for its results are not known before they are experienced. Truth is chosen and acted upon.

Kierkegaard believed that we move through three stages in life. First, the *aesthetic*, an empty seeking after pleasure and beauty; second, the *ethical*, seeking to do our duty but experiencing the despair of failure; and third, the *religious*, when we choose to trust completely in God.

This passion for the individual's choice and life made Kierkegaard the "father of existentialism." The philosophy attributed to him stresses personal identity and choice as the basis for life. Tragically, there is no place for the community of faith in Kierkegaard's thought, or in the school he "founded." Existentialism will be dominant in Western thinking from Kierkegaard to the present.

Superman to the rescue

Yet another reaction to Kant's synthesis was the bold philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). While his father and grandfather were both pastors in Prussian Saxony, Nietzsche became a committed opponent of the Christian faith. His principal contributions have been two: the "will to power" and "postmodernist relativism."

First the "will to power." Nietzsche believed that every drive we experience is but a variant of the one basic drive--the will to gain power. All goods, all values, all virtues are expressions of the power positions of various individuals and groups.

The best way to live is to embrace this will to power, according to Nietzsche. The "superman" is the person who takes for himself power from the world. The Christian, on the other hand, with his stress on humility, is weak and must be rejected. Happiness comes from power, and the more, the better.

Second, his contributions to what has become "postmodern relativism." In brief, Nietzsche argued that our language does not reflect reality as such, but only our experience of it (in agreement with Kant). There is no such thing as "leaves," only individual leafs which we experience and synthesize into the universal. Language is purely individual and subjective, absolutely the product of our own experiences. And so language *cannot* reflect a larger, objective reality or truth. This linguistic assertion will be crucial for the development of postmodernism we'll track in the last chapter.

Nietzsche is right: the "will to power" is the dominant drive in fallen human nature (cf. Genesis 3). But he is wrong: we must not embrace it but surrender it to God. Only then can his power (far greater than any we can claim) be ours, and his purpose fulfilled by our lives.

Be positive

Are you tired of reading about responses to Kant? Come with me just a little further before we turn the corner. Yet another reaction to the German professor came from Auguste Comte (1798-1857), a teacher of mathematics and profound thinker. His contribution is called "positivism." Until this generation, it was the most dominant worldview in the intellectual community of Western culture.

Comte wanted to reform society and the sciences, according to the following model. He believes that all knowledge begins with the *theological* stage of childhood, when we regard things as the expression of supernatural beings. Next we evolve to the *metaphysical* stage of youth, where abstract powers are substituted for personal beings. Finally we arrive at the *positive* stage of adulthood, where we abandon all concern for ultimate knowledge and center only on the phenomena (with Kant) we can experience, as it is understood scientifically.

If Comte is right (and many in the West believed him for a century), the only "truth" worth knowing is that which you can verify scientifically or logically. We'll see more of this worldview shortly.

America's contribution to the philosophical world

Finally we come to America's unique contribution to this history. It took a while, but here it is: American pragmatism. Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) believed that differences in meaning are only significant if they lead to differences of practice. Truth is "opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate."

William James (1842-1910) took Peirce's ideas a step further. Building on the empiricism of John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), he argued that truth is that which works in experience. What we experience *is* reality (opposed to Kant). Applied to religion, faith is valid only if it works for the individual in experience. James coined "pragmatism" for this philosophy during an 1898 lecture at Harvard.

John Dewey (1859-1921) took things still farther: morality is that which works so that people function well together. The result: American pragmatism, the belief that truth is whatever works. Whether that truth is intellectual, linguistic, religious, or moral in nature, the test of practical experience is the only one we need. And Americans are still cheering today.

The Darwinian god

Now we step into the 20th century, and the major worldviews continue to pile up on the page. Process Theology was the application of Darwin's evolutionary thought to theories about God. Influenced by Alfred North Whitehead, process theologians thought (and still think today) that reality flows in a continuum of development (as frames of a motion picture). Every bit of reality is totally dependent on every other bit of reality. God is in evolution with his world. He is all the God there is today, but he will be even more God tomorrow.

In some of the mainline Protestant traditions, these contributions from Charles Hartshorne, John Cobb, Norman Pittinger and others have been extremely influential. In you're seeking a union between Darwinian scientific thought and faith, here's the wedding to attend.

Why does our culture believe that "truth" is personal and subjective? Why is faith to be kept private, Sunday separated from Monday and the "religious" from the "real world"? Why does our society believe that sincerity in our beliefs + tolerance of others = acceptable spirituality?

Our entire survey of Western thought has been a means to this end, a preparation for this conversation. Let's learn in brief why our neighbors believe our beliefs are just ours, irrelevant to them. And how to help them follow Jesus in a "postmodern" world which isn't changing any time soon.

The first "postmoderns"

First we must remember Friedrich Nietzsche, the "patron saint of postmodern philosophy." According to this critic of the Christian faith, the world is composed of fragments, each one individual. We construct concepts which rob reality of its diversity and individuality (such as forming the concept "leaf" for leaves, an idea which can never do justice to the diversity of leaves). These concepts or laws are actually illusions or convenient fictions.

"Truth" is solely a function of the language we employ and exists only within specific linguistic contexts. It is a function of the internal workings of language itself. The authority structure of the Church, whether centered on the Bible or the Church's teachings, is therefore unfounded and irrelevant.

Nietzsche's hermeneutical insights parallel Friedrich Schleiermacher's earlier theological assertions. According to this "father of theological liberalism," biblical texts are not systematic theological treatises but reflections of the minds and contexts of their authors. The interpreter must move behind the text to its author's mind. The work of theology is therefore to "abstract entirely from the specific content of the particular Christian experiences."

And so an entirely different epistemological foundation began to be laid by Nietzsche and Schleiermacher, one which rejected the objective building blocks of the modern world for a knowledge base centered in subjectivity. In their view, truth is not absolute and objective but relative and individual. Recent philosophers of language would soon finish this foundation and build a new house on it.

Finishing the new foundation

According to Wilhelm Dilthey, hermeneutics functions in a circle. We comprehend language by understanding its words, yet these words derive their meaning only within their holistic context. Objectivity in interpretation cannot be achieved, and should not be desired.

Hans-Georg Gadamer agreed that the interpreter must "fuse the horizons." Meaning emerges only as the text and interpreter engage in dialogue, a "hermeneutical conversation." Because each reader will conduct his or her own conversation with the text, objective meaning is obviously impossible.

Ludwig Wittgenstein rejected his earlier language philosophy (built on a scientific, mathematical, positivistic hermeneutic) for a view of language as "game." Social rules determine the use of words and their meaning. Language is a social phenomenon which derives its meaning from social interaction. Since each "player" works from personal and subjective rules, there can be no objective authority within any speech act.

The "structuralists" further developed the social nature of language. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, language is like a work of music in which we focus on the whole work, not the individual performers of the musicians. As social constructs, texts are developed to provide structures of meaning in a meaningless existence. These structures form the foundation for hermeneutical theory and practice.

The movement known as "deconstructionism" moved even further toward subjectivity: meaning cannot be inherent in a text or speech act, but emerges *only* as the interpreter enters into dialogue with the author. One significant role of the contemporary interpreter is to deconstruct the modern epistemological structures with their mythical claims to objective authority.

In the last century, language philosophers have largely discarded the hermeneutical foundations which undergirded speech and faith since the time of Christ. Claims to objective truth and absolute authority have been dismissed, whether their source is the Church, the Scriptures, or interpreted experience. In their place we have seen the construction of a foundation and building called "postmodern." The implications of this project for Scriptural authority are historic and monumental.

The "postmodern" movement which has resulted from such foundational shifts is still evolving and ill-defined. However, three names stand above the rest in stature and significance: Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Richard Rorty.

Michel Foucault: unmasking motives

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) was the most significant bridge figure from Nietzsche to the postmodern world. His ideas relative to hermeneutics can be grouped in three categories.

First, his *epistemology* rejected the Enlightenment claim to objective knowledge. With Nietzsche, we must focus on the individual and the specific. Therefore, language cannot express universal truth but only the personal experience of its user and/or interpreter.

Second, his *anthropology*: humans use language to express and to gain power. With Nietzsche, the basic human drive is the 'will to power.' To name something is to exercise power over it. We seek knowledge for the power it gives us. The goal of hermeneutics should therefore be to unmask those power drives which created the text before us.

Third, his *historiography*: we create history to make or preserve those mythical worldviews which enhance our power and status. There is no objective "world" behind our historical recording of its events; we choose which events to report and the interpretation we give them based on our ambition for power. "Truth" is the fictional fabrication of those who claim it. The result for language should therefore be to introduce discontinuity into the reader's life, jarring him or her into admitting that life is chaotic and subjective.

Jacques Derrida: deconstructing "reality"

Jacques Derrida critiques the Enlightenment ontology with the approach known as "deconstructionism." While Foucault's epistemology leads to his view of language, Derrida's ontology serves as the foundation for both his epistemology and his hermeneutics.

According to Derrida, there is no fixed or universal reality. Not only can we make no objective claims to knowledge, given the subjective nature of the interpretive process; there *is* no independent reality to describe. No "world" exists, only your world and my world. "Onto-theology," the attempt to articulate ontological descriptions of reality, must be abandoned.

We "create" our own world by speaking of it. Language possesses no fixed meaning and is not connected to a fixed reality. Our words do not *carry* meaning ("logocentrism"); rather, they *create* it.

For instance, the device on which I am typing these words is either a word-processor, a fancy typewriter, or a strange box which makes annoying clicks, depending entirely on whether I, my grandfather, or my preschool friend is describing it. We cannot get beyond the words to the "reality," for the words create that reality for us.

As a result, the work of interpretation has as its goal the deconstruction of logocentrism. We must admit the absence of transcendent reality and focus only upon the text itself as it speaks to us personally. We must deconstruct our view of language which posits an objective world beyond our words. As we live with the anxiety produced by the absence of transcendent truth we come to terms with life as it truly is. And as we deal with the text separate from its author's intention or any claims to represent objective truth, we reconstruct our own world.

Language is therefore the door to whatever meaning is possible for us.

Richard Rorty: building pragmatic community

Richard Rorty, one of America's most popular philosophers, completes the postmodern foundation by demonstrating its pragmatic usefulness for our daily lives. While Foucault and Derrida develop their language theory on the basis of their epistemologies, Rorty bases both his epistemology and his pragmatic program on his view of language.

Rorty agrees with Foucault and Derrida that language is a matter of human convention, not the mirror of an objective reality. All language is derived from and dependent upon its context, and is thus subjective and relative. Rorty's contribution to postmodernism is his extension of this foundational conviction to its larger pragmatic consequences.

Because no foundational truths or "first principles" exist apart from our linguistic creation of them, we must develop our personal ways of coping with reality as we see it. "Truth" for us is what works for us. Language is therefore to be judged by its pragmatic value, not its supposed representation of objective reality. Language is a tool for interpreting and coping with life.

Four results for language follow. First, language is equally valuable and useful regardless of its field of use. Science is no more objective than ethics, for instance. No one genre of speech act possesses meaning of greater value than another.

Second, language and the life it creates and interprets is best viewed in narrative context. No speech act stands alone. Every context is temporal and contingent.

Third, language functions best as the creator of community. As we tolerate and affirm other speech acts and the realities they create, we foster a larger sense of acceptance. As we share common linguistic experience, we forge a common life. Given that no objective reality stands outside our linguistic interpretation of our own experience, such community is our best hope for belonging and meaning.

Fourth, this pragmatic language theory possesses the capacity to lead us to a kind of postmodern utopia. Once we have banished our power-driven, manipulative attempts to require and enforce one particular view of reality and truth, we will be free to live in a society built on tolerance and mutuality. Such a postmodern hope offers an enticing, accessible, and nonjudgmental alternative to the Christian eschatology built upon our acceptance or rejection of a single Way, Truth, and Life.

To sum up, the postmodern worldview is built upon three foundation stones. First, the ontological and epistemological belief that no reality exists independent of the linguistic interpretation of our personal experiences. Second, the linguistic belief that we literally create our own worlds by the speech we employ to describe and interpret these experiences. And third, the pragmatic belief that such language acts, when affirmed as

mutually acceptable and equally valuable, forge a community of tolerance and shared, created purpose.

An apologetic for biblical authority

How shall evangelicals respond to this alternative worldview and its threat to objective biblical authority? Is it possible to defend today Paul's absolute claim that "all Scripture is inspired by God"? What follows is a brief sketch of such an apologetic, approaching an engagement with postmodernism along both philosophical and pragmatic lines.

First, a philosophical response. Unfortunately, one approach to postmodernism among evangelicals is to accept its foundational beliefs and attempt to build a Christian structure upon them. This results in an intensely subjective faith which possesses no intrinsic or objective merit for others. Fortunately, there are other ways.

I suggest that the postmodern rejection of objective truth contains within itself the fissures which may lead to its collapse. In brief, if no objective truth exists, how can I accept this assertion as objectively true? According to postmoderns, no statement possesses independent and objective truth. And yet the preceding statement is held to be independently and objectively true. This seems a bit like the ancient skeptics (ca. 500 BC) who claimed, "There is no such thing as certainty and we're sure of it."

A second philosophical critique of postmodernism centers in its rejection of objective ethics. Since all ethics are purely pragmatic and contextual, no ethical position can be judged or rejected by those outside its culture. If this be so, then how are we to view events such as the Holocaust? Within the interpretive culture of the Third Reich, Auschwitz and Dachau were pragmatically necessary and purposeful. And yet they stand as the quintessential rejection of the tolerance and inclusion so valued by postmoderns. The postmodern must choose between his insistence on inclusion and his rejection of intolerance. Logically, he cannot have both.

The postmodern rejection of objective biblical authority thus rests upon illogical and mutually contradictory foundational principles. This "apagogic" apologetic (defending one's position by exposing the weaknesses of its opponents) may prove effective with the postmodern who values logical consistency.

If, however, our postmodern friend simply shrugs her shoulders and says, "So what"? we can turn to a pragmatic response. Here the postmodern rejection of modernity is in our favor. The chief obstacle to faith posed by modernity was its insistence on empirical proof and scientific verification. The postmodern rejects such a materialist worldview, insisting that all truth claims are equally (though relatively) valid. The result is a renewed interest in spirituality unprecedented in our century. While this contemporary spirituality is unfortunately embracing of all alternatives, at least Christianity can function as one of these options.

How can we make an appeal for biblical authority in such a marketplace of spiritual competitors? By reversing the "modern" strategy. In modernity we told our culture, "Christianity is true; it is therefore relevant and attractive." We invited nonbelievers to accept the faith on the basis of its biblical, objective merits. "The Bible says" was all the authority our truth claims required.

In the postmodern culture we must use exactly the opposite strategy: our faith must be attractive; then it may be relevant; then it might be true (at least for its followers). If we can show the postmodern seeker for spiritual meaning that Christianity is attractive, interesting, and appealing, he will likely be willing to explore its relevance for his life. When he sees its relevance for us, he may decide to try it for himself. And when it "works," he will decide that it is true for him. He will then affirm the authority of the Scriptures, not in order to come to faith but because he has.

Conclusion: remembering our future

Can such an approach be effective? If we jettison our "truth first" approach to biblical authority and begin by appealing to our culture on the basis of attractive relevance, will we abandon our Scriptural heritage? No--we will return to it.

We live in a postmodern, post-denominational, post-Christian culture. The first Christians lived in a pre-modern, pre-denominational, pre-Christian world. They had no hope of taking the gospel to the "ends of the earth" by beginning their appeal to the Gentiles with biblical authority. The larger Greek world shared the postmodern skepticism of any absolute truth claim, let alone those made on the basis of Hebrew scriptures or a Jewish carpenter's teachings. And so the apostolic Christians build their evangelistic efforts on personal relevance and practical ministry. The result was the beginning of the most powerful, popular, and far-reaching religious movement in history.

I am convinced that we are now living in a culture more like that of the apostolic Christians than any we have seen since their day. They had no buildings or institutions to which they could invite a skeptical world, and so they went *to* that world with the gospel. They had no objective authority base from which to work, so they demonstrated the authority of the Scriptures by their attractive, personal relevance. We now live in a day when nonbelievers will not come to our buildings to listen to our appeals on the basis of Scriptural authority. But when we show them the pragmatic value of biblical truth in our lives, ministries, and community, we will gain a hearing.

Postmodernity offers us a compelling opportunity to "remember our future." To remember the biblical strategies upon which the Christian movement was founded, and to rebuild our ministries on their foundation. To move into our postmodern future on the basis of our premodern heritage.

Every postmodern person I have met wants the same thing: a faith which is practical, loving, and hopeful. The tragedy is that our churches do not always offer them this biblical truth in a way which is attractive and relevant. The good news is that we can.

