

Gods and the Good

Richard Norman introduces the Greek philosophers working in a culture that had created the colourful Olympian pantheon.

Consider this contrast. In John's Gospel, Jesus says: 'A new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you.' In the Christian tradition, Jesus is the moral exemplar, the model for how we should live, and he is seen as the incarnation of divinity because he exemplifies God's care and loving-kindness towards his creatures. Now look at what Xenophanes said about the ancient Greek gods and goddesses: 'Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods everything that is a matter for shame and blame among humans, stealing and adultery and deceiving one another.'

As Margaret Connolly says, Xenophanes in the 6th Century BCE criticised the traditional conceptions of the gods on the grounds that they were merely human creations. But he also criticised the portrayal of them as amoral beings, falling woefully short of the qualities we should admire in a god. The ancient Greeks may have envied their gods for what they could get away with, but they could not see them as models of how to live a morally acceptable life.

Where then did they look for models of moral goodness? As Connolly says, in place of the plurality of amoral divinities Xenophanes advocated some kind of philosophical monism:

There is one god, greatest among gods and humans, not like mortals either in body or in mind. He sees as a whole, he thinks as a whole, he hears as a whole. He always remains in the same place, not moving, nor is it fitting for him to move to different places at different times, but without toil he moves everything by the thought of his mind.

This suggests the idea of an all-powerful divine being as the source of order and regularity in the universe. Probably about a generation earlier, the philosopher Anaximander seems to have explained the regular alternation of opposites in our world – hot and cold, wet and dry, day and night, summer and winter – as governed by some kind of cosmic justice: 'They render justice and

restitution to each other for their injustice, according to the assessment of time'. A single all-powerful divinity like Xenophanes' 'one god' may have been regarded by some Greek thinkers as the custodian both of justice in the universe as a whole, and of the justice which should govern human social life. We can find this idea in some of the tragic dramas – those of Aeschylus, for example, in which the head of the gods, Zeus, is portrayed as the upholder of *dike*, justice, maintaining the balance both between warring opposites in the natural world and contending parties in human moral conflict.

However, the dominant tendency in early Greek thought about the origins and causes of natural processes was in a different direction. The 'Pre-Socratic' philosophers – so called because they lived and wrote before Socrates – were increasingly drawn to purely mechanistic explanations of the natural world. They were the first to formulate theories of fundamental elements which combine and recombine to make up the things of our world, and theories of atoms which are the basic constituents of physical things. These theories have less and less room for the idea of a divine order which governs everything.

Anaxagoras, for instance, writing around the middle of the 5th century BCE, traced the origin of the universe to an original mixture in which 'all things were together'. He postulates an initial rotation which begins to separate out the fundamental underlying substances, which can then combine in all sorts of ways to make up the world we know. Anaximander does assign a role in all this to a divine mind, but all it does is to start the rotation. After that, purely mechanical processes take over.

This is the Anaxagoras who, as Connolly says, was exiled from Athens for rejecting the traditional gods. There is a fascinating response to Anaximander from Plato, writing in the early 4th century BCE. As so often, Plato puts his



The School of Athens (1511) by Raphael, in the Vatican.
The two central figures arguing are Plato on the left and Aristotle on the right.
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thoughts into the mouth of his teacher Socrates, in an imaginary conversation. He depicts Socrates as describing how, as a young man, he had eagerly followed the philosophical theories about the origins of the physical world, but was also puzzled by them. The passage is worth quoting at length:

“Then I heard someone reading, as he said, from a book of Anaxagoras, that mind organises everything and is the cause of everything. I was delighted with this kind of cause, and it seemed to me somehow right that mind should be the cause of everything. I thought that if this is so, then mind in ordering everything must order each thing in the way that is best. If anyone desired to find out the cause of the creation or destruction or existence of anything, he must find out what state of being or doing or suffering was best for that thing, and therefore a person had only to consider the best for himself and others, and then he would also know

the worst, since the same knowledge applies to both. And I rejoiced to think that I had found in Anaxagoras a teacher of the causes of existence such as I desired, and I imagined that he would tell me first whether the Earth is flat or round; and whichever was true, he would proceed to explain the cause and the necessity of this being so, and then he would teach me the nature of the best and show that this was best. If he said that the Earth was in the centre, he would further explain that this position was the best, and I should be satisfied with the explanation given, and not want any other sort of cause...

This splendid hope, my friend, was quickly disappointed. As I read on, I saw that the man made no use of mind or any other such cause to explain the order in the world, but gave as explanations air and ether and water and many other absurdities. I might compare him to a person who began by maintaining generally that mind is the cause of the actions of

Socrates, but who, when he endeavoured to explain the causes of my several actions in detail, went on to show that I sit here because my body is made up of bones and muscles.’

Plato, *Phaedo* 97b-98c

What Plato is saying, through his fictional Socrates, is that a full explanation of everything must refer not just to mechanical *causes* but also to *purposes*. To understand properly why things are as they are, we have to know *what they are for*, what overall *purpose* they serve, why it is *good* that they should be as they are.

This is the starting point for Plato’s own philosophy. For Plato the fundamental explanation for everything is to be found in certain *ideal values*. Our human values of justice, moderation, courage and the like are imperfect approximations to perfect timeless ideals which are the ultimate reality, more real than our changing physical world. Similarly the structure of the natural world, with its divisions into species and kinds, is an imperfect manifestation of a timeless ideal formal structure. This is Plato’s famous ‘theory of forms’ or ‘theory of ideas’. And at the pinnacle of this formal structure, as the ultimate explanation of everything, is the idea of the Good – the governing ideal of the natural world, and the ideal to which we should aspire.

In order to live a good life, according to Plato, we have to engage in the arduous philosophical task of achieving an intellectual grasp of these ideal forms. In a famous passage in Plato’s greatest work, *The Republic*, he likens human beings to prisoners in an underground cave, condemned to spend their lives watching the flickering shadows on the wall of the cave. Only a few of the prisoners manage to make their way out of the cave into the world above. At first they are dazzled, but as their eyes become accustomed to the real world, they come to see everything in the light of the sun, and to understand that the sun is the source of all life. And this is Plato’s image for the intellectual and moral insight whereby we can come to understand everything in the light of the Good.

What role are religion and the gods supposed to play in all this? In another famous passage, the so-called ‘Euthyphro dilemma’, Plato provided what has subsequently been seen as the definitive

refutation of the idea that we should derive our moral principles from beliefs about the will of a god or gods. In the context of Greek polytheism, Plato (through the mouth of Socrates) points out an obvious objection to this idea. The gods are at odds with one another about what is right and what is wrong. The conflicts between them mean that we cannot simply identify what is right with what the gods will.

But there is also a deeper problem, and it is this deeper problem that is still seen today as the fundamental philosophical objection to any attempt to ground the idea of moral rightness in the commands of a deity. The ‘Euthyphro dilemma’ in this formulation is equally applicable in the context of Christian monotheism. The dilemma is: are things right because they are willed by God, or are they willed by God because they are right? If the former, then absolutely anything could be right. If God wanted to be appeased by child sacrifice, that would make it morally right to kill innocent children. But we know that it would be wrong. We are therefore driven to the second arm of the dilemma. If God wills what is right, he must do so *because it is right*. But in that case its being right must be independent of God’s will. Things are right because they are right, not because God wills them.

Talk of a ‘god’ or ‘gods’ does have a role in Plato’s view of the world. His *Timaeus* is an account of the origins of the physical world. Here he talks about a divine craftsman, a ‘demiourgos’, fashioning pre-existing matter, taking as his model the eternal ideal forms, in order to create an ordered universe structured and organised in the best way possible. Note that this is not the Christian idea of creation *ex nihilo*. Matter exists independently of the divine craftsman, and the ideal model is not created by God, it is what the god copies. Note also that the account of the work of the divine craftsman is said by Plato to be a ‘likely story’ – a *mythos*, not *logos*. Plato was one of the earliest thinkers to make the distinction between *mythos* and *logos*. The language in which we talk of divine beings is a language of images and metaphors. And the purpose served by the creation myth in Plato’s *Timaeus* was to make good the deficiency he found in Anaxagoras and the other early cosmologists – to show that the universe is as it is because that is

how it is best for it to be. The ultimate explanatory principle, for Plato, is not God but the Good. And it is knowledge of the Good that we need in order to live as we should.

But here's a problem. How is this knowledge supposed to help us live a good life? Disconcertingly, Plato seems to imply that only philosophers need apply – that only when you have been through the educational programme set out by Plato, of mathematics and abstract logical thinking, culminating in this highest philosophical knowledge, can you know how to live.

But there's an even worse problem. Even for those who have completed the intellectual education, how is it supposed to help? This is the criticism which Plato's most famous pupil, Aristotle, directed against his teacher. Ethics, moral thinking, is supposed to be a *practical* activity. It is supposed to tell us *what to do*, how to *act* – analogous to other practical abilities. Saying that we need knowledge of the Good is like saying that what a doctor needs above all is a theoretical understanding of the idea of Health. Does a weaver, Aristotle scathingly asks, need knowledge of the Good in order to make a good coat, or a carpenter to make a good table?

So where does Aristotle turn for an alternative approach? He draws on a different strand in Plato's ethical thinking – his account of 'the virtues'. The term 'virtues' is the standard English translation for the Greek word *aretai* – the qualities which make people good people, and actions good actions. Plato and Aristotle both accept what would have been a conventional list of virtues, familiar to their contemporaries – wisdom, courage, moderation, justice, generosity,

good temper, honesty, friendship. They don't question the recognition of these as good qualities. What they offer is an explanation of *why* they are good. And for both of them, this is rooted in human psychology – an account of the human psyche, the 'soul'. Human beings live well when the different components of the psyche – reasons, desires and emotions – are properly related to one another, working in harmony and performing their appropriate functions. All of the virtues can be analysed and understood in that way. And that is why, as rational beings and as social beings, we need to be just, self-restrained, courageous, exercising all the virtues in order to live fulfilling and flourishing human lives.

This is the enduring strand in the ethical philosophy of Plato and Aristotle – the attempt to show that the qualities which go to make a good human life are good because they enable us to flourish as human beings, to fulfil our distinctive human potentialities. This way of thinking has been very influential in the Christian tradition and the Islamic tradition – in the thought of Aquinas, for instance, and in that of Ibn Rushd (Averroes). It remains equally influential in modern secular philosophy. I would go further. Not only has it been influential, it is also the *right* way to think about the good life. And for that we owe a great debt to the thinkers of ancient Greece.

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Two Epigrams

1

'Oh Zeus, why don't I last?' Beauty complained.
The god replied: 'I made only what doesn't last beautiful.'

2

Let no one be like anyone else but everyone like the best.
How can that be? Each fulfil yourself.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
Translated by Dinah Livingstone