

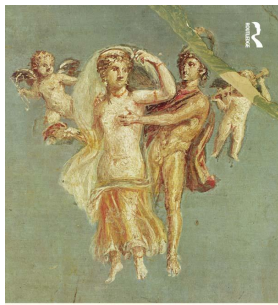
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Publisher: *Routledge*

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**ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION**  
EDITED BY GRAHAM OPPY AND N. N. TRAKAKIS  
THE HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

## **Ancient Philosophy of Religion**

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### **Ancient Philosophy of Religion: an Introduction**

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315729633.ch1>

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**Published online on: 31 Jul 2013**

**How to cite :-** George Boys-Stones. 31 Jul 2013, *Ancient Philosophy of Religion: an Introduction* from: Ancient Philosophy of Religion Routledge

Accessed on: 05 Dec 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315729633.ch1>

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## ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION: AN INTRODUCTION

George Boys-Stones

The ‘philosophy of religion’ is unusual as a branch of philosophy in foregrounding the question of whether it has a legitimate object of study to start with.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, this question makes it programmatic for philosophy as a whole. Either philosophy will be, in the end, *opposed* to religion, and defined in some measure by that opposition (as a rational or scientific outlook is opposed to, and defined by its opposition to, fideism, perhaps), or else it will turn out that religion is what frames and gives meaning to the human pursuit of knowledge.

Both of these outlooks have their adherents; and (what is evidence for the programmatic force of the question) on each is built a foundation myth for philosophy as a whole. The most potent and influential is surely the version based in the essential antagonism of religion and philosophy. According to this view, ‘philosophy’ finds its origins in a historical movement premised precisely on the rejection of ‘religious’ ways of thinking, a rejection traced to sixth-century Ionia and the revolutionary figure of Thales.

There is no denying the powerful appeal this narrative makes to the imagination. But it is by no means obviously right. An equally strong body of opinion holds that one can see far greater continuity between ‘religious’ thought and the origins of ‘philosophical’ thought: that the philosophical tradition never set out to construct itself in opposition to religion at all. Indeed, in some versions of this view, the very idea that it might have done so is unintelligible; ‘religion’ was not then, even if it is now, the kind of thing to which philosophy could have objected. If this second kind of view is right (as I shall go on to argue), then instead of asking from the beginning about the tools developed by philosophy to handle religious claims, the first question a study of the philosophy of religion in antiquity has to address is how philosophy ever came to have a critical interest in religion at

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1. My thanks to Barbara Graziosi for invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this chapter, which was also improved in the light of comments from two anonymous readers.

all. *This*, I shall argue, is the question that provides the context for discussing the development of the particular themes, arguments and strategies that have come to characterize the subject.

#### PHILOSOPHY VERSUS RELIGION?

One of the main reasons for doubting that philosophy was born in the rejection of religious belief is the well-established fact that pre-Christian religion was not defined in terms of belief to begin with. Religion was constituted for its participants not by dogma, but by involvement in rituals and customs (and these were prescribed more by time and place than by personal or tribal affiliation): by a life lived within certain systems of imagery and iconography. Ancient religion has been aptly described, then, rather as a language of sorts than as a creed (e.g. Gould 1985; cf. Burkert 1985: 54): a way of referring to the world (or some aspect of the world, or the world under some particular description), not of specifying in terms that could be translated into secular language what one has to think about it. This is not to deny that particular views about how the world operated could be associated, more or less commonly, with particular aspects of religious behaviour (although Most [2003: 303] does deny it; cf. by way of contrast Harrison [2008]). But it is to deny that the panoply of ancient religion included any mechanism to determine such associations. The ancient world knew no scriptural revelation, no line of prophets, no Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Priests, whose function was largely confined to the performance of ritual, claimed no authority as intermediaries for the divine; while Oracles, which did, were careful to avoid any comment on 'theological' questions such as what 'gods' were, or how they were to be conceived (cf. evidence in Fontenrose [1978]). Homer and Hesiod achieved wide currency in Greece as reference points for the subsequent mythological tradition, and were even credited with establishing the standard Greek pantheon, along with the genealogy and iconography of its members (Herodotus, *Histories* 2.53; cf. Burkert 1985: 120–22). But if they were important sources of imagery, they were not taken to be 'biblical' authorities for its use. In any case, the continued existence and tolerance of variant accounts ensured that people were quite capable of making the distinction between what one *had* to think about the gods and what Homer or Hesiod said about them.

None of this is, as it happens, especially controversial for historians of religion. Its consequences, however, are uncomfortable for many historians of philosophy. For if Greek religion does not determine the beliefs of its participants, then it is hardly meaningful to talk (as, recently, did e.g. Hussey [2006]; cf. Roochnik 2004: 12–17) about religious 'patterns of thought' or 'patterns of belief' put to bed by the philosophical revolution conventionally associated with Thales in the sixth century BCE. Thales and his successors might have developed new models of analysis, and attempted to explore more critically the basis for received assumptions; they might

have used these approaches and models to suggest new explanations for phenomena previously thought inexplicable. One might – one *should* – consider their work foundational for philosophical methodology. (This is, as I mean it, a trivial truth: for it is only to rehearse the fact that it is in this work that the self-consciously philosophical tradition of later centuries identified its intellectual roots.) But to see them as rejecting a specifically ‘religious’ outlook is to project back onto them a debate that no one had any thought – or motive – to formulate.

It might be objected at this point that my original characterization of the difference between ancient and modern religious belief suggests too sharp a division: that, just as the average modern Christian is less bound by conciliar edict, so the average ancient Greek was more heavily influenced by Homer than I have suggested. Even if I am right to say that we should not talk of ancient religious belief as something sanctioned and defined, according to such an objection, it is enough to allow that particular views were more or less commonly associated with particular religious expression (as I have done) to make it legitimate to talk about a religious ‘way of thinking.’ It is this that people have in mind when they talk about a worldview that is inherently ‘chaotic’ (in the manner apparently envisaged by Hussey [2006: 12]) or unstable (cf. discussion in Rowe [1983]), or which surrenders the world to irrational forces (e.g. Vlastos 1975: ch. 1). It is this that is challenged by the work of Thales and his successors.

As a matter of anthropology, the nuance is welcome. But the objection misses its mark if the ‘religious way of thinking’ identified by it fails to attain normative status in the culture. As long as it remains merely *a* way of thinking with the language of religion, there will be (and it will be understood that there is) clear distance between what one says of the *thought* and what one says of *religion*, considered as the language that happens to be used for the expression of that thought. And we know that the supposedly ‘chaotic’ form of religious thinking failed to attain normative standing: we know this because the thinkers supposed (under this very theory) to be *on the attack* employ the same language without hesitation or question themselves (cf. Burkert 1985: 306). Until the atomists, all of the early cosmologists used such language to characterize the principles of a world that remained for them, as it famously was for Thales, “full of gods” (11 A 22 DK [= Diels & Kranz 1951–2]).<sup>2</sup> Nor is there anything to suggest that their use of this language is ironic or polemical, for its use is untempered by anything that could seriously be taken as criticism of the religious context from which it is drawn. Occasionally, it is true, reservations are expressed about *particular religious practices*; but even these presuppose the perspective of the religious insider. Far from attacking religion, they question activities and attitudes that risk bringing it into disrepute.

My claim can be mostly clearly illustrated by considering two figures who might seem to be the most obvious counter-examples to it: Xenophanes and Heraclitus.

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2. All translations are my own.

These thinkers are often characterized in the literature as *critics*, at least of traditional Greek piety, and perhaps of religion in general. But a closer look will show that such a stance can only be found in them by systematic application of the prejudicial assumption that ‘religion’ (or anyway Greek religion) is incompatible with rational thought about the world. That this *is* a prejudicial assumption in the case of Heraclitus at least is clear from the fact that the evidence is amenable to a precisely contrary interpretation. Adoménas (1999), for example, has argued that, so far from setting himself up as a critic of traditional religion, Heraclitus actually sees it offering support to his own metaphysics. What is certainly true is that we should not confuse Heraclitus’ negative attitude towards the views held by the ignorant in their approach to religion with his attitude towards religion itself. For it is precisely personal attitude, not religious practice, that Heraclitus most often has in his sights: “They pray to these statues: one might as well converse with houses, as long as one knows nothing about the gods and heroes” (22 B 5 DK [part]; cf. 27, 86, 128). What is under attack here is not prayer to statues, but ignorance. The thought is exactly paralleled by B 107, where Heraclitus speaks of eyes and ears as things that are similarly said to be *no good* without intelligence, which is, of course, not an invitation to think that Heraclitus disapproved of eyes and ears in general.

Heraclitus does occasionally – but very occasionally – address particular religious practices: “If it was not for Dionysus that they held their procession and sang in praise of the genitals, it would be a most shameless thing” (22 B 15 DK; cf. 5, 127; perhaps 14). But the qualification here is all-important: *if it was not done for Dionysus*. Sardonic remarks about how bizarre we would consider such practices in any other than their proper context cannot be taken as a criticism of them when performed in the appropriate time and place. If they could, then, again, by parity of reasoning we should have to conclude from B 58 that Heraclitus disapproved of the medical art *tout court* as well: for it is perverse, as he says there, to pay physicians for cautery and surgery when we would normally do anything to avoid getting burned or cut.

Finally, it needs to be acknowledged that Heraclitus is capable of expressing himself in terms of conventional piety, with which he obviously feels completely at home (e.g. B 24, 79, 83, 92, 93). Indeed, what might really strike us about even the so-called ‘critical’ pronouncements is the religious justification he gives for the criticism (esp. e.g. B 14, 27, 86).

The same can be said for Xenophanes. His negative remarks are far fewer than one would believe from the attention they have attracted, and far more carefully circumscribed. Like most of the supposedly ‘critical’ fragments of Heraclitus, they attack individuals, not their religion (21 B 1, 11, 12 DK, with Graziosi 2002: 60); like all of them, they are themselves concerned with upholding standards of piety. Xenophanes’ famous remarks on the cultural relativity of religious iconography, which are frequently adduced as damning indictments of traditional religion, are in fact perfectly neutral in tone: “If oxen or horses or lions had hands, if they could draw and make things with their hands as men do, horses would make images of

gods like horses, oxen like oxen. They would fashion for them the bodies that they themselves had” (B 15 DK; cf. 14, 16). Such fragments do no more than point out that other peoples do, and other species might, depict their gods in other ways. They no more imply a criticism of traditional religion than if they had observed that the Greeks talk about the gods in Greek while Thracians and Ethiopians (who figure in B 16) use different languages for the purpose, namely their own. (If horses and oxen had the power of speech they would, of course, talk of them in Horse and Ox.) Commentators can turn these fragments into criticism only on the back of an assumption that the Greeks allowed no gap between the nature of divinity and the possibilities for its artistic representation. This would in any case be a bold assumption. The fluidity of the gods’ representation within the Greek tradition makes it wholly untenable.

In general, then, there is no evidence at all that philosophy began with a movement opposed to ‘religious’ ways of thinking: none that it was, at least through the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, even an option. The continuity of language, on the other hand – and, one might add, of topic (the Milesians thematized the ‘origin,’ *archē*, of things and their *generation* just as much as Hesiod or the Orphic cosmogonies; cf. West 1983: chs 3–4; Clay 2003: 2–3) – suggests that there might be a way of understanding the new cosmology as a *development* of religious expression.

But this, now, might seem an odd claim to make, even on my own account. For I have been careful to divorce religious forms, conceived as a kind of language, from opinions that might or might not have been associated with them in the minds of religious practitioners. The language of cosmology, on the other hand, more clearly does express particular views about the cosmos. What sense does it make, then, to connect the latter with the former? To answer this question, I take my cue from Plato and Aristotle, to whom we owe the self-conscious construction of philosophy as a distinct intellectual tradition. For they ask a pertinent question when they ask why it is that human beings engaged in (what they are defining as) ‘philosophy’ to begin with. It was not because there was any compelling *need* for it: “That it is not a productive art is clear right from the first philosophers. For then as now men began to do philosophy from a sense of *wonder*...” (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* A.2, 982b11–12; cf. Plato, *Theaetetus* 155d, with Snell 1953: 38). Both Plato and Aristotle do, as a matter of fact, believe in the practical benefits of philosophy, which both make essential to happiness. But neither traces his intellectual roots to the early students of human well-being (Solon, for example, or Theognis). Both rather trace them to the ‘physicists,’ the students of nature; both explain the characteristically philosophical impulse as a response to the *wonder* of the universe.<sup>3</sup> And what is really striking about the word that both

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3. Natural philosophy might be turned to use as well, of course. The story is told, for example, of Thales predicting a bumper harvest and establishing a profitable monopoly on the olive presses. But it is told precisely to dissociate philosophy from the utilitarian considerations

use in this context – *thauma* – is its conventional association precisely with religious experience.<sup>4</sup>

It seems to me entirely credible, and much more consistent with the evidence than any alternative, that archaic Greek religion had a role to play as a ‘language’, not least because, whatever else it expressed for the individuals who engaged with it, it expressed a sense of ‘wonder’ at the world, a sense (of ‘awe’?) not captured for its users in the quotidian language of opinion and practicality. Similarly it seems that Plato and Aristotle are fundamentally right to think that philosophy (i.e. what they themselves define as such) is an extension of this response: a version of it that becomes doctrinal in seeking to pin down *what* the ‘wonder’ consists in, how the cosmos conceived as ‘wonderful’ operates. This is why philosophy retained at its core the language particular to that sense of wonder: the language, that is, of ‘divinity’. It is also why the very idea of an attack on ‘traditional religion’ – or, indeed, a defence of it – could only arise *within* a relatively well-developed philosophical system. For such an attack must be premised, not on the idea that traditional religion is a stumbling block to rational understanding, but on the reflective conclusion that it is *superfluous*: that the ‘wonder’ of the cosmos is not ‘out there’ to express at all.

#### CONSENSUS AND ‘EXPERIENCE’: CLASSICAL ORIGINS

The centrality of ‘religious’ language to cosmology remained quite unquestioned until the fifth century BCE, and the emergence of a raft of thinkers of whom we can take Protagoras and perhaps Democritus to be representative.<sup>5</sup> Democritus, as it happens, recognized the existence of “gods”, or anyway of entities that explain why people think there are gods (68 A 74–9 DK). To this extent, he accepts the validity of religious language. But Democritus goes against the consensus of preceding

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that *might have been*, but *were not*, its inspiration. See Aristotle, *Politics* 1.11, 1259a5–18 (= 11 A 10 DK).

4. Cf. *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* 240–41; *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* 84–90, 205; Pythagoras 58 C 6.30–31 DK (“Disbelieve nothing wonderful [*thaumaston*] about the gods, or doctrines concerning the gods”). Likewise of nature conceived as divinely ordered: e.g. Empedocles 31 B 35.17 DK; Galen, *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body* iv, 358 Kühn (= Arnim 1903–5 [hereafter SVF] 2.1151); Philo, *On Rewards and Punishments* 33 (SVF 2.1171). Likewise too in arguments from design: Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Professors* 9.99, 115. The association between *wonder* and religion is recognized even by atheists: see Euhemerus, quoted at Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Professors* 9.17.
5. Gerson (1990: 27) suggests that there is no theology in Parmenides, since he identifies reality with thought. But Parmenides certainly uses the language of religion (28 A 20, 30–31, 33, 37 DK; B 1, 12–13) and Kingsley (1999) is right to remind us that Parmenides was himself a priest. (Kingsley is able, in fact, to read his poem as precisely a record of religious experience.)

generations in refusing to use this language to describe the originative material that forms the bedrock of his cosmology. Democritean atoms are, in fact, perhaps the first example of a material principle not so described. The ‘gods’ of which he speaks exist at a level of the universe whose reality is secondary and derivative (cf. B 9, 125), which in Democritus’ terms means not really *real* at all. So, while there is room to think that the language of deity has some residual role to play in describing the human experience of the cosmos, it is for the first time possible to conduct scientific cosmology without it. This is a significant development. To present a cosmology without religious language is not to say plainly what others had said metaphorically. It is to deny something that others asserted or assumed about the cosmos.

One can see more explicitly a similar development in the work of Democritus’ older contemporary Protagoras, who began his provocative book *On the Gods* with these words: “About the gods I have no way of knowing that they exist or do not exist, or what they look like. There are many things that prevent me from knowing: the obscurity of the subject, and the brevity of human life” (80 B 4 DK). This is not, of course, atheism, although some in antiquity took it to be so (Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Professors* 9.55–6). Protagoras does not *deny* the existence of the gods. But it would be ingenuous to see this programmatic statement as merely cautious agnosticism. The philosopher who began another of his books with the famous claim that “Man is the measure of all things” here too suggests that the existence of the gods makes no difference to one’s experience of the world. So there is a denial here: a denial that religious language *adds* anything at all, that it *has* meaningful content of its own. The universe will end up looking the same whether one calls its originative matter or structuring forces ‘divine’ or not.

It is against this background that we need to understand the first arguments adduced in favour of the existence of god. For these arguments, I suppose, are not intended *only* as vindications of belief, but, just as importantly, are meant to establish to an audience who could conceive of a world without it that ‘god-talk’ has purpose and content that are not covered by other areas of the language. One of our earliest pieces of evidence for the form taken by these arguments comes from a dialogue by Plato, and looks back, perhaps, precisely to the time of Democritus and Protagoras a generation before him. In the course of a discussion of the importance of religious belief, one of the participants in the dialogue, Clinias, offers what must have been the stock theistic response to the threat of atheism:

CLINIAS: Well, my friend, it seems fairly easy to show that people who say that there are gods are telling the truth, doesn’t it?

ATHENIAN: How?

CLINIAS: First there is the earth and sun and stars and everything, and the seasons that are so well arranged and divided into years and months. Then there is the fact that everyone, both Greeks and non-Greeks, reckon that there are gods. (*Laws* 885e–886a)



Clinias' two arguments resonate through much of the subsequent history of the philosophy of religion. The first of these is a simple form of the so-called 'argument from experience'. Clinias' claim seems to be that there is *obviously* something about the heavenly bodies that justifies the use of religious language about them. The second, an argument from consensus, is presumably meant to undermine the idea (which is in fact identified as the central plank of the atheistic thesis at 889e) that since religious *language* is merely conventional, the very gods it describes must be human fictions as well. (Such an argument is attested for Critias [88 B 25 DK].) It does this by showing that religious language cuts across all cultural boundaries by which the merely conventional is normally identified.

The reply of the Athenian (who is unnamed, but often assumed to represent Plato himself) is instructive for us in the weaknesses it identifies in these arguments. He denies first of all that universal consensus (in Clinias' form of it) bears much weight. This is partly because the consensus would have to take account of the immorality associated with divinity by some of the most influential voices of his own tradition (*Laws* 886b–d; at the front of his mind are Homer and Hesiod, of course). But it is also because the Athenian himself explicitly recognizes that the *use of religious language* is not in itself any guide to the beliefs underlying it. The fact that people use the language of religion is not proof that they need it, that they have in mind something for which they could not have used other words. In fact the Athenian's response at this point converges with his objection to the argument from experience. For all that argument does is identify items in the cosmos that the atheists already know about. Applying religious language to them cannot elevate their status:

You and I, when we talk about proof that there are gods, adduce these very things, the sun, moon, the stars, the earth, as themselves gods and divine entities. But anyone who listens to these wise men [i.e. the atheists] will say that they are just earth and stones, incapable of any interest in human affairs, however we dress them up with persuasive language. (886d–e)

In Plato's assessment, it seems, these first forays into the definition of deity through argument are not really equal to the threat of the determined materialist. Nevertheless, it is possible for us to glean something important from what Clinias has tried, and some confirmation of the idea that the philosophical reception of religious language answers to a sense of *wonder* in the face of the world. Clinias' argument from experience asserts his sense that there is just something about the world that elicits more in response from us than mere earth and stones would. 'God' is not displacing nature here, but apparently naming some aspect of it. Indeed, this is Clinias' problem: challenged by the atheist, he has nothing new to show. A useful analogy is with the 'other minds' problem. Confronted with other human beings, one feels that one can *know* (experience, sense) the presence

of minds and selves that are qualitatively comparable with one's own. Yet if one were asked to *demonstrate* that there is a mind there, that things would look and feel very different if the person were an insentient machine, that would be very difficult. Wherever one points, it seems to be the machine one finds.

The analogy that exists between the 'other minds' problem and Clinias' sense of god did not elude Plato, for it is in effect the basis for his own improved demonstration of the existence of god. To cut short what is in the exposition a rather long argument, and one that purports to show rather more than this by the end, Plato argues (891e–899e) that corporeal entities in general, although capable of transmitting motion, are not capable of initiating it, unless they are endowed with that *self-moving* principle we call 'soul'. In the case of the cosmos too, then, its motion must be due to the presence of incorporeal, self-moving soul. (In fact this is especially true of the cosmos as a whole, since there is no other, corporeal entity to which it could conceivably owe its motion.) The cosmos, in other words, manifests the attribute of *life* – and, Plato adds, for its orderly nature, rational life at that (cf. 898c).

This argument builds on Clinias' sense that there is something (something 'wonderful?') about the world that is not explained by a list of its material parts, and it does so by identifying a plausible candidate for the *something else* that is needed to explain it. That 'something' is, he suggests, qualitatively identical to the principle of 'life' that we identify in living creatures within the cosmos (895c). No wonder, then, that most people recognize the existence of 'gods'. (It turns out at 887c–888a that the Athenian is not altogether above an appeal to consensus after all.) The activity of the divine is *evident*, at least to perception informed by reason.

This debate marks an important moment for philosophy, as well as for the philosophy of religion. For an argument over whether the language of deity is a proper part of philosophy ultimately opens the way for philosophy to develop as a tradition *distinct from* religious discourse in a way that might bring the two into conflict. So it was, no doubt, part of Plato's own intention, in defining philosophy as a skill with its proximate roots in the work of the early Ionians, to steal a march on the atheistic tendencies to which that work had latterly given rise by insisting on its inherently *religious* character. Plato's Socrates, poster-boy of subsequent philosophical enquiry, traces his beginning in philosophy to an encounter with the divine (*Apology* 21b), and sees his philosophy as divine service (cf. *Phaedo* 60e–61b; *Euthyphro* 13d) and himself as divine intermediary (*Symposium* 203a; cf. 219c; Hunter 2004: 84; Bussanich 2006). The end of his work is variously conceived in terms of 'purification' (e.g. *Phaedo* 66b–67c), afterlife (*Apology* 40e–41c) or assimilation to god (*Theaetetus* 176a–b). This language is no accident: Plato quite deliberately shapes his philosophy as a religious pursuit, a way of celebrating the gods (cf. esp. Nightingale [2004] on Plato's appropriation of the word 'theory', *theoria*, from the context of participation in religious festivals). I have discussed above already how he, and after him Aristotle, orient it towards the *wonder* of the universe. Philosophy might be distinguishable now from religion, but in Plato's terms it is its heir, not its other.

## CONSENSUS AND EXPERIENCE IN HELLENISTIC PHILOSOPHY

Plato's approach to divinity plays down the consensus argument in favour of a strengthened version of the argument from experience, which asks us to see the incorporeal conditions of order within the perceptible world. This, of course, is all of a piece with his wider belief in an incorporeal realm by which the world of the senses is structured. But one did not have to believe in such a realm to believe in the reality of the divine, as we can see from Plato's empiricist successors in the Hellenistic era: the schools of Epicurus and the Stoics. Both of these schools, though, found it necessary to strike a different balance between the descendents of Clinias' two arguments (the argument from experience and the consensus argument). Both were committed to the view that any real entity is corporeal and so, in principle at least, perceptible; both, then, steered away from the road on which Plato started towards private *inference* as a way of shoring up the experience of the divine, and towards a greater emphasis on the argument from universal consensus.

The more extreme of the two schools in this sense is the Epicurean, which privileges the consensus argument absolutely over any consideration drawn from private speculation about the cosmos:

Epicurus alone saw, first, that there must be gods because nature itself impresses an idea of them in the minds of all. There is no people, no race of men, that lacks some untutored "preconception" of the gods – what Epicurus calls a *prolēpsis* ... If everyone's nature agrees on something, it is necessarily true; so we must admit that there are gods. And since there is almost unanimous agreement on this, among the uneducated as well as philosophers, we say that it is also agreed that this preconception ... is such that we think the gods blessed and immortal. (Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 1.43–5)

It will be observed that this version of the consensus argument differs from that of Clinias in one significant respect. While Clinias argues that Greek and non-Greek alike believe in the existence of gods, that is, *that there are gods*, Epicurus' claim is that there is universal consensus *both* that gods exist *and* that they are blessed and immortal. Epicurus, in other words, does not invoke a second strand of argument to explore *what the gods are like*: the kind of consideration that Clinias' argument from experience was supposed to provide. It is possible to doubt that this is the safest way of developing the argument from consensus: the more one claims consensus about, the more likely it is that the consensus does not really exist (cf. Plutarch, *On the Contradictions of the Stoics* 38). In fact, it has even been suggested, with some plausibility, that Epicurus himself did not think that consensus *actually existed*: only that it *would* do in an ideal world (Obbink 1992). But if this is the claim, why make anything hang on it at all?

Epicurus' position is an unusual one, for it will turn out that, whatever he thinks the gods are, he is sure that they have no role to play in a cosmology. (In fact he thinks that the slapdash organization of the cosmos amounts to something like an argument *against* the cosmological involvement of any intelligent being; Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* 2.167–82, 5.195–234.) Yet unlike Protagoras, for example, he takes seriously the phenomenology of religious 'experience'. He has a good reason to do so: as an empiricist, he will find the fact that people have a *sense* of deity all the more striking precisely because there is reason to believe that the gods are not active in the world.

Epicurus, then, has to provide an account of god that gives empirical content to religious experience without deriving that content from humanity's immediate cosmic environment. This, surely, is why he insists that a full characterization of god can be given by the consensus argument without further appeal to our experience of the natural world. It may also be why he insists on the idea that the experience of deity is of something tranquil and immortal: after all, nothing in our experience of the natural world is immortal; and nothing tranquil would want any part in it (*Letter to Herodotus* 76–7).

His conclusion is that, *if the experience of god is real*, then it must be direct: *parallel to*, not *derived from*, our experience of the world. His distinctive epistemology comes in very handy at this point to explain how this might work. According to Epicurus, absolutely *any* thought, whether based in sensory perception or dreams or imagination, involves the interaction of the atoms that constitute our minds with delicate 'films' (*eidōla*) of atoms thrown off by real objects in uncountable number. The idea is that in ordinary waking life our experience is dominated by more substantial films from relatively close objects that come through the sense organs. But if we shut this 'noise' out, and especially when we are asleep, we become sensitive to the much finer films from more distant objects that do not need the grosser portals of the senses. (In principle, we become open to films from objects all over the universe: they move very quickly, and are too fine to meet effective obstruction; and this is how we can experience images of anything we care to imagine.) Clearly, Epicurus argues, if we have a concept of god it is because there are films representing gods that we perceive (in sleep or imagination), and objects producing these films. Because we perceive them directly in this way, they need not be integral parts of our cosmos, but might (as Epicurus in fact thinks) be outside it.<sup>6</sup>

Whether Epicurus' position carries any water is a moot question. Indeed, it has been a moot question since antiquity whether it was even offered in good faith: many have supposed that the argument was a sop to conventional piety

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6. We are, of course, capable of imagining fictions: this happens, according to Epicurus, when we encounter a confusion of films, as when those of a man and a horse strike us as a 'centaur'. But such confusions do not force themselves on people's minds in all parts of the world as films of tranquil and immortal beings do. Consensus heads off the objection.

from an atheist pure and simple. What is certainly true is that the Epicureans were an irritation to conventional theists. Even if their belief in god was genuine, their justification for it paradoxically (and, no doubt, infuriatingly) *removed* god from relevance to philosophical enquiry (cf. perhaps Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Professors* 9.58). The Stoics, by contrast, brought the argument from experience back to bear on the question and, by blending it in their own way with the consensus argument, hoped to provide an account of god that would vindicate his active role in the cosmos even while satisfying the demands of strict empiricism.

The way the Stoics went about this was to start their version of the consensus argument without the claim that there is consensus over the existence of god, let alone over his nature. In fact they explicitly deny that there is consensus at this point (Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Professors* 9.61; Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.12–13). They start their version of the argument, rather, with the observation that everyone has a *concept* of god. In other words, the Stoics address not a shared belief as evidence for shared experience of something real in the world, but a shared concept.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the Stoics claim that the concept they are talking of is *simple*, somewhat in the way that the concepts of ‘red’ or ‘hard’ or ‘good’ might be thought to be simple. The concept of god is not, for example, a concept of ‘god as good’. One might think of it as something like an irreducible concept of the ‘numinous’, or the *wonderful*, perhaps. In any case, this radical simplicity guarantees that the concept cannot be the product of imagination: that is, the combination or manipulation of pre-existing concepts. One could no more invent *this* concept in imagination than one could think up a new primary colour.

But how did we acquire this concept if we have never had a sensory encounter with god? The answer to this takes us back to the argument from experience, which the Stoics use to suggest that we *have* had direct sensory experience of god; in fact we are perceiving god all the time as we encounter the natural world:

Cleanthes, of our school, said that four causes explain the formation of concepts of gods in the souls of men. The first cause, he said ... arose with foreknowledge of the future; a second we derived from the wealth of benefits that can be seen in the moderation of the climate, the fertility of the earth, and in an abundance of other benefits; the third lies in things that strike terror into our souls: lightning and tempest, rain-storm, snow, hail, devastation, pestilence, the movement and groaning of the earth; showers of stones and showers as if of blood; landslides and crevices that suddenly open up in the ground; unnatural prodigies,

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7. This position is not uncontroversial, since our evidence (Cicero and Sextus as cited) also characterizes the argument as one from agreement *in the existence of god*. But my view is that it is easier to explain this as a loose characterization of the argument in what is after all, in both cases, a polemical context, than to explain by any other means the insistence apparent in both passages on the role of the *concept* in the argument.

human and animal, lights in the sky, and those stars that the Greeks call ‘comets’ ... The fourth and most important cause is the regularity of the movement and revolution of the heavens, the orderliness of the sun, moon and stars. It is enough to see it to know that it is not accidental.

(Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.13–15; cf. also *SVF* 2.1009–10; Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Professors* 9.60)

As a matter of Stoic doctrine, *the whole world* is pervaded by god in a way that means that god is directly perceptible in all of it; but at times, when faced with moments of natural beauty, or awe, or power, or orderliness, we need to use terms that go beyond the impersonal vocabulary of agriculture or spectrum analysis. Again, we see here ‘god’ being used of that aspect of the world corresponding to our sense of *wonder*. And, not to make too much of this too quickly, it is not absurd to assimilate this sense to the idea that the world possesses something like a personality. Certainly the Stoics go on to argue that ‘god’ is an intelligent and benevolent force. Indeed, they apparently claimed that god’s philanthropic benevolence is *as* nearly inseparable from our concept of him as any other quality (Plutarch, *On the Contradictions of the Stoics* 1051D–E, 1052B).

But the further away we now get from the bare concept, the more justification these claims for his character will need. Later I shall turn to one way in which the Stoics among others tried to provide it, and a form of argument that became increasingly central to theological development. First, though, with some sense of ‘god’ as a personality emerging from our cosmological work, it is worth pausing to consider the implications this had for ancient ethical thinking.

#### ETHICS AND ESCHATOLOGY

I have described the roots of ancient ‘philosophy’ as a sort of development of ancient religion, not its nemesis: an extension of the attempt to use religious language and imagery that is understood to be ‘conventional’ (that is, culturally specific) in elucidating the underlying nature of things. I infer some extra support for this way of looking at things from the fact, to which I alluded earlier, that the thinkers identified within the later tradition as pioneers of philosophy, the Ionian cosmologists, were not known for their interest in *ethics*. This is striking because one area on which it is clear that religion in the pre-philosophical world was widely understood to have some bearing was precisely the area of human conduct. The gods were everywhere invoked to exact revenge, to guarantee oaths, to reward the beneficent, to purify and forgive the venial. There is, furthermore, a wealth of evidence for reflective interest in issues of justice and morality among writers of the archaic period, Hesiod not least among them. A tradition founded on the rejection of ‘religious’ or ‘mythological’ patterns of thought would surely be forced to confront the implications for human life of such a revolution. Yet it

is not really until Empedocles that we find the development of 'ethical' themes within a clear theoretical framework as part of the cosmological tradition; and the first major cosmological thinker who also wrote systematically on the subject was Democritus, who, as we have seen, actually went further than any of his predecessors (and most of his successors) in marginalizing the relevance of religious language. If the Ionians were 'rejecting' religion, in short, they ought to have had more to say about ethics. Their silence on the matter suggests their acceptance of both ethical conventions and associated religious language. The question for us, again, becomes why the tradition ever came round to subject it to analysis at all.

The answer to this question must presumably be that the enquiry into nature (into the world conceived as *wonderful* and intriguing) at some point stumbles on ways of thinking about the world that throw light back on to the enquirer; human beings encounter *in the world* something that 'mirrors' or comments on their nature in a way that causes reflection on the adequacy of conventional social obligations. This might be by the discovery that cultural convention has no underpinning in nature whatsoever (such an extreme conventionalist position might be thought to lie behind the speculation of Democritus); but it might, conversely, be by uncovering something in one's investigation of the cosmos suggesting that nature itself supplies a normative basis for action that supplements or even contradicts local convention. One can see how this might happen as the divine forces that animate the cosmos become increasingly clearly understood (and not merely depicted) as *persons* of a sort, with 'intentions' for the way the world should be. In this case, it becomes increasingly natural to ask where we stand on their activity: how we ourselves would like the cosmos to be, and what we might be able to do about it. This may be something we can see in Empedocles. Empedocles' cosmos is constituted by four elements, themselves designated as gods (namely, Zeus, Hera, Aidoneus and Nestis; 31 B 6 DK), which are organized by the additional forces of Love and Strife. Love and Strife represent very different 'intentions' for the world: Love aims to unify the disparate elements; Strife aims to tear them apart (B 17). Oddly enough, *both* are ruinous to the cosmic order when they predominate: Love makes the cosmos a homogeneous sphere; in Strife the elements are separated beyond fruitful interaction. Nevertheless, Empedocles is clear that our preference should be for the actions of Love. His thought, perhaps, is that Love as the force that keeps elements in combination is reflected in the force (or *daimōn* as he calls it) by which we are united and maintain what integrity we have as living, organic creatures. What is clear, in any case, is that this partisan affinity with Love is at the centre of our being (in one fragment, B 128, we are told that Aphrodite is the only divinity recognized by early human beings) and has normative implications for us. We are particularly to avoid behaviour associated with the destructive work of Strife, and to adopt certain rituals and taboos that will allow the 'purification' of our *daimōn*, its release from this world, and reunion with the divine principle from which it derives (B 115, 139–41).

The belief in an immortal principle, inherited by Empedocles from the Pythagorean tradition, is taken up from the same background by Plato and made the focus, at times, of a terrifying eschatology. A soul that falters on the path to 'purification' might, for example, expect punishment (*Phaedo* 113d–155a; *Gorgias* 523a–526d; *Republic* 10, 614c–616b) or at best reincarnation (*Phaedo* 71d–e, 81d–82b; *Republic* 10, 617d–621b; *Timaeus* 42b–c, 91d–92c; *Laws* 904c–905d). Indeed Plato has been criticized since antiquity for appealing to our *fear of the gods* in this way as a motive for virtue (Chrysippus, as reported by Plutarch, *On the Contradictions of the Stoics* 1040A–B). But this stands as a criticism of Plato in particular not least because his official position seems to be based in a more positive vision of virtue as self-fulfilment through *identification* with god, a view that one way or another was to become extremely influential. This idea relates closely to two themes we have already seen, namely the argument from experience and the idea associated with it that *what* is experienced has the character of a *person* of sorts. For not only does this vindicate a sense of our *obligation* towards god – that is, as a person, and a member of the cosmic community (cf. e.g. *Gorgias* 507e–508a; also *Euthyphro* for the idea that piety is a form of justice) – but it also establishes god as a role model for us. His perfect thought, by which the cosmos is moved and governed, is an ideal for our philosophical aspirations and, since thought is not, in itself, spatially limited as we embodied creatures are, it gives us the possibility of finding our identity in a form of uncircumscribed perfection. This latter idea is found in Plato's famous definition of virtue as "becoming like god, as far as possible" (*Theaetetus* 176a–b).

It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that these two notions – that we should relate to god in a particular way, and that we should become as like him as possible – set the pattern for mainstream ethics in the subsequent tradition, from Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* X.7–8, esp. 1177b26–1178a2, 1178b21–3), through the Stoics (cf. Plutarch, *On Common Conceptions* 1076A) and Epicurus (*Vatican Sayings* 33; *Letter to Menoecus* 135), to the Platonist revival (Alcinous, *Didaskalikos* 28.3, 181.43–5 Hermann), including Jewish and Christian Platonists, where it found a ready-made niche as a gloss on the notion that we were made in God's image (Philo, *On Flight and Finding* 63; Clement, *Stromata* 2.19, 2.22, 5.14.94.4–95.2). But it would be hasty to think that all of these thinkers have the same vision of human perfection. For in the meantime, ideas of god were developing, and with it the idea of what it would be like to be like god.

#### DESIGN AND TRANSCENDENCE

I have so far been addressing the way in which religious language found a place within the philosophical tradition as part of a complete characterization of the world, indeed as a central part of it, since it aims at the heart of the *wonder* in which, I have argued, philosophy finds its roots. As such, the arguments I have



been tracing (versions of the arguments from consensus and from experience) have been about resisting the reductionist tendencies of atheism by trying to specify the nature of god *as encountered*. But such arguments necessarily have their limits. There is, as we have seen, a gap between demonstrations *that* religious language has a role, and specifications of the role it has. The Stoic proof of god from consensus, for example, is effective in inverse proportion to the amount it says about *what god is*. An opponent might say that it vindicates the category of the divine only in so far as it empties it of content.

It is at this point, then, that a second level of argumentation is introduced, to supplement experience with *inference*. If god's presence is supposed to make a difference to the cosmos, we need to establish exactly what difference he makes; and then, from the effects that god has, to infer his nature and (if he should turn out to be that sort of thing) his intentions. Absolutely central to this enterprise are two types of argument we have not yet seen, although they have a certain affinity to the argument from experience: the 'cosmological' argument, and the argument from design.

Plato's argument in *Laws* book 10 might be thought to start us on the way to an argument from design, to the extent that it relied on inferring something about god's nature (as the world's soul) from his effects. Yet the inference did not really take us away from the senses: it educated us about what we were seeing (not just movement, but *life*) rather than pointing to an unseen hand that made it possible in the first place. But then the *Laws* passage had the specific intention of addressing the divine *in so far as* it was active within the world. Things are slightly different in Plato's cosmological work, the *Timaeus*:

We must consider in the case of the cosmos what one must consider at the beginning of an investigation into anything, whether it always existed, coming to be from no origin, or whether it came to be, starting from some origin. It came to be – for it is visible and tangible and corporeal, and all such things are perceptible, and perceptible things are grasped by opinion with perception, and are in a process of coming to be and are generated. And for things that come to be we say that there must be some cause of their coming to be. It is a job to find the maker and father of this universe, and if found impossible to talk of him to everyone. (28b–c)

It was quickly to become a matter of controversy in antiquity whether Plato meant that the world had a literal, temporal origin, or whether he is here using the language of temporal creation metaphorically, to communicate a different sort of priority, the *causal* priority of the creative principle. But what is important for now is the fact that we can see here a very different sort of claim from the one made in the *Laws*. Here it is said that what is observable – which turns out as the dialogue proceeds to *include* the soul that informs and shapes the material world (34b–36d)

–relies on a divine principle, which we either *cannot* or mostly *do not* encounter at all: a creator-god who exists a step beyond our experience; not the thing that is ‘wonderful’ about the world, but its cause.

One might be unclear what sense it makes to apply the language of ‘god’ to a principle so abstract and removed from experience, at least, given the association of ‘personhood’ with divinity that we have seen so far. Why not think of this transcendent principle merely as the prior state of, or *condition for*, the genesis of god? (It is not adequate to say that the ‘divine’ is, perhaps by definition, whatever comes first. After all, even the earliest of Hesiod’s gods *came to be*, and Chaos, which came to be before everything else, was not a god; Hesiod, *Theogony* 116.) Plato’s view about this, then, seems to be that the principle that we infer must, if it is to do its job of explanation, still have personality of a sort. At least, it must have or embody *reason* or *intention*. Matter is given in Plato’s universe as a ‘brute fact’; what this cosmological argument does is to show that there is something *else* that organizes it; and organization requires planning. The creator’s thought might not be quite like our thought (this is another topic for discussion among his followers); but it surely *thinks* and *intends* in some relevant, non-metaphorical sense. This is how Plato comes to designate him a ‘craftsman’ (*Timaeus* 28a). At the same time, of course, it must be possible to attribute ‘life’ to him, so that when his creation has life as well (see 30b) it makes sense to think of him as a ‘father’.

One thing to note about Plato is that, although he thinks that the cosmos is designed, his argument is a ‘cosmological argument’ *rather than* an argument from design. (Similarly, at *Phaedo* 97c it is the hypothesis of teleological agency that leads us to seek out design, not design that leads us to teleology.) The reason for this may be that Plato does not think that the cosmos is *absolutely* well ordered, only *as well organized as possible*, given, that is, the constraints placed on god by the intractability of matter. The world shows traces of chaos as well as of order. For a true argument *from* design we have to look elsewhere (e.g. Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.4.2–19, with Sedley 2007: 75–86; Aristotle and the Stoics in the report of Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.87–97). But what both cosmological and design arguments share is the *distance* they open up between god and what we directly experience: between ‘god’ and our immediate sense of wonder. Even for the Stoics, whose god never *can* be very far away from us, such arguments take us to an understanding *about* god that is not part of our experience *of* him. But if the argument is supposed to take us to a designer who stands outside the world – as is the case with Plato and Aristotle – new difficulties as well as new vistas are encountered.

The new opportunities that arise with the conclusion in this case (the case where we infer the existence of a god who transcends the cosmos) include the fact that this transcendent god will function as a new and superior terminus for philosophical enquiry and fulfilment of our religious impulse. Prominent among the new difficulties is the correlative fact that we, as embodied human beings, embedded in the cosmos, are designed in the first place for thinking about *it*, not beings above it: to associate with or become like this higher god will be a difficult

matter (cf. Alcinous, *Didaskalikos* 28.3, 181.43–5 Hermann). A transcendent god, as *pure* intellect, is uncomplicated, but also then unrevealed, by the familiar attributes of spatial extension and organic articulation. Plato had already said that his creator-god was ineffable (*Timaeus* 28c, quoted above), and the claim is taken very seriously by his followers in the Platonist revival of the post-Hellenistic era. By the time Alcinous was writing (perhaps in the first or second century CE – we have no clear indication) a number of strategies had been developed by which philosophers could elevate their own thought to meet the god whose existence was demanded by reason, all of them to become stock-in-trade for the later philosophy of religion. They include versions of the *via negativa*, an approach to god through contemplation of the limited categories by which he is *not* bound, and the *via eminentiae*, by which we extrapolate from the good things of our experience to a god greater than any of them (Alcinous, *Didaskalikos* 10.4–6, with Mansfeld 1988).

The trouble is that there is something inflationary about the whole process. The argument from design removes god from our experience; these measures allow us to approach him again. But the closer we come to understanding this higher god and his creative activity, the closer we approach a reapplication of the question that provoked our original use of such arguments as the design and cosmological arguments. *What explains this god in his turn?* The Platonist Numenius, writing in the generation before Plotinus (on whom he was an important influence), imagines Plato upbraiding those of his contemporaries, Alcinous perhaps among them, who were content to end their enquiries with the creator intellect, ineffable or no: “The intellect which you humans conjecture to be the first,” he says, “is not. There is another intellect prior to it, more ancient and divine” (*Fragments* 17.6–8 Places).

This inflationary tendency is not new with Numenius. In fact we find it as early as Philo, the Jewish philosopher of first-century Alexandria and one of our earliest witnesses to the Platonist revival. Philo addresses his god as (*inter alia*) the world’s creator and architect (*On the Creation of the World* 16), its father and guardian (*That God is Unchanging* 29–32; *On the Creation of the World* 10; cf. *On Providence* fr. 2); but, for all this, places him *above* the level of creative intellect, well off the front line of duty. He is above even the principle of goodness and unity (*Contemplative Life* 2; *Questions on Exodus* 2.68); he is nameless and unknowable (*Change of Names* 11), revealed to us only indirectly in the powers that manifest themselves as his immediate effects in the universe (*Questions on Genesis* 4.8; also *Who is the Heir?* 111, *Change of Names* 15). As if in competition with the trend, early Christians vary the thought only to place God still further away from the approach of reason. The deliberate care with which they locate their own god *above* that of any Greek system is set out in dramatic terms by the apologist Justin, who imagines the approach to god as a journey through, but then finally beyond, the Hellenic schools (*Dialogue* 2, 6.6–10). Beginning with the Stoics, whose theology is rooted in the natural world, he progresses to Aristotle’s school, and then to a neo-Pythagoreanism, which raises its vision as far as the realm of mathematical

abstraction. Finally, he comes to Platonism and here, he says, one might have expected to “catch a glimpse of god: for this is the end of Platonic philosophy”. But it turns out that the journey is not yet complete. For the Christian will show you that God, the true God, is so *unlike* the human mind that he resides beyond its grasp. Justin’s God is literally *beyond the realm of rational inference*.

One of the consequences of god’s recession from view in this way is a renewed interest in the early centuries of our era in *intermediary* deities, notably in those creatures who mark the space between the realms of god and humanity, known as *daimones*. Serious philosophical interest in them was traced in antiquity to Plato’s early school. The Stoic Chrysippus was also well known for his interest in the subject, perhaps because he believed that a global teleology needed to operate through a network of local micro-systems (rather as we think of the global ecology as a balance of myriad eco-systems). In any case, the one place where they make a distinctive contribution to our evidence for Chrysippus is in his suggestion that minor lapses on the part of these *daimones* might be responsible for some of the phenomena we allege as part of the problem of evil (Plutarch, *On the Contradictions of the Stoics* 1051c). But the later Platonist interest in *daimones*, associated especially with Apuleius and Plutarch (cf. Kidd 1995; Brenk 1998) surely goes beyond this. It addresses the metaphysical question of how an increasingly distant god interacts, practically speaking, with the world. One of the principal roles fulfilled by *daimones*, then, was to bridge the ontological gaps opened up by the design argument, in a way that would ultimately lead to the baroque celestial hierarchies developed in Proclus and Pseudo-Dionysius. But it also addresses the phenomenological question of how we *encounter* deity across these ontological divides. Our immediate point of religious contact is with *daimones* (and the World Soul too): it is through them that we can be said to encounter god (cf. Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris* 360D–F; Finamore 2006).

#### REVELATION AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

Christians accept the idea that the *scala naturae* is fuller than is immediately obvious (e.g. Clement, *Stromata* 6.17.157.4–5, 161.2; Origen, *On First Principles* 1.8.1; Pseudo-Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchy* esp. 3.2, 4.3), and are delighted to take over the notion that the gods of Greek religious experience are really mere *daimones* (Athenagoras, *Plea* 23; Justin, *II Apology* 5; Origen, *Exhortation to Martyrdom* 45; Augustine, *City of God* 18.14). But there are further intermediaries crucial to the identity of Christianity as a movement as well: the Hebrew prophets, first of all, read in the light of the belief that Jesus was the Christ they foresaw; and then, of course, Christ himself as the incarnate ‘word’ (cf. esp. Augustine, *City of God* 8.18–21). These additional entities have a very particular importance for Christianity. I noted a little earlier that Justin positions Christianity as the perfection of philosophy by locating God one step beyond the reach of inference. In

doing so, he finds a radical way of limiting the inferential sequence begun by the argument from design. But if we can neither experience God directly nor infer his nature, how can we possibly know he exists at all or have any regard for him? The answer lies in these extra intermediaries: for one of the things that they bring is direct knowledge of God's intentions: divine revelation.

It has been suggested that one of the things that makes Plotinus such an important figure for subsequent Hellenic (i.e. non-Christian) Platonism is that he found a way of bringing a conclusive end to the search for a first principle, by locating it *above being*, at a place beyond which there is nowhere for enquiry to go (Gerson 1990). Justin, I have suggested, found a different terminus for philosophy, in a first principle that exists *beyond rational inference*. One advantage to Justin's way of doing things is that it is easier for him to retain a sense that the first principle is a *person* of sorts: an entity, that is, to which religious language remains applicable. To be sure, Platonists were also keen to retain this sense (as Gerson [1990: 217] stresses); but it is only now in a very attenuated sense that one can talk of the will or creative thought or even providence of the divine. This in turn matters for philosophical, and not just for sentimental, reasons, because it relates to the problem of evil, a problem that was always going to be found lurking behind attempts to establish a philosophical account of the cosmos based on an appeal to its good order or evident design. Briefly put, it will be easier to excuse and explain apparent disruption to cosmic order if we can explain it in the light of some form of personal relationship that we, as human beings, can have with god.

My point is perhaps most clearly made by starting with the alternative recourse adopted by Platonists. For most Platonists (exceptions include those, such as Plutarch and his contemporary Atticus, who were dualists; cf. Armstrong 1992), evil was understood to be principally a metaphysical rather than a moral issue. In Plotinus, for example, the price paid for the increase and diffusion of *being* is that in order for some things to *be* at all, they must be imperfect (*Enneads* 1.8). The trouble is that it is *human beings* who bring consciousness to the level where this imperfection is most manifest. The cosmos benefits from the expansion of being, but it is human beings who suffer the consequences. Ideally, we would like to be able to appeal to an additional principle that justifies the allocation of this burden. But where the Christian can talk of God's *intentions* and *concerns* for us as human beings to provide a context and, at last, a justification for our suffering, it scarcely makes sense to attribute "concerns" and "intentions" to the Platonist One. Instead of offering a justification of human suffering, then, Platonists will suggest that philosophy offers us the means to rise *above* the evil, and approach the goodness definitively embodied in god. But we can only do this by rising above our humanity, our rootedness in the cosmos. It is, in the end, as if the problem of evil is circumnavigated by rejecting the relevance of human suffering. After all, as Celsus put it with unusual bluntness (although perfect orthodoxy; with Origen, *Against Celsus* 4.75–99, see Plato, *Laws* 903b–c), humanity is for the world, not vice versa.

Celsus' views are expressed thus bluntly in an anti-Christian work, and this is significant, for Christians in general adopt a much more anthropocentric view of the world. It is, in fact, part of the Christian recognition of the fact that the world is the work of something properly designated a 'god' that it is, in the relevant sense, *for* humanity. In his reply to Celsus, and in setting out his own cosmology, Origen, for example, develops the idea that human beings are entirely responsible for their own woes, which come to them through the misuse of free will, with which they were originally created. The natural world, he argues, is nothing less than a systematic *response* to this, a reformatory designed by God for the purpose (cf. esp. Koch 1932).

An explanation like this of the world's purpose might satisfy Christian theodicy, then, by retaining a sense of God's relationship with us as persons; but, as I noted, it is bought at the price of his elevation beyond the reach of rational inference. Justin asserts it as fact: Origen explains why it must happen. If the world is created for human beings, he says, and not only this but, more specifically, for the reform of creatures whose natures have been perverted by the exercise of their own free will, there is a very real sense in which the world *could have been different*. (It *must* have been different if just one individual had chosen a different path, as its reformatory prescription must be tailored to its inmates.) And if the world could have been different, if it is a contingent system, then it is not such a straightforward task to infer, from the way it is organized, the nature of the principles responsible for its order. This, for Origen at least, is a large part of the reason why Platonists go wrong. Platonists assume as a matter of methodology that the world is an inevitable outpouring of the first principle, and this assumption allows them to infer causes from their effects. Origen argues that it is a contingent *response* to choices unknowable in their totality to human beings. This puts a limit on what can be inferred about God as its creator.

But God has thought of this too; and in order to restore the possibility of our approach to him, he has built *revelation* into the scheme of things. The Oracles of the Greeks, as I noted, say nothing about the nature of god; the Hebrew prophets say everything. If commentary is needed, everything is clarified for the Christian by Christ, the incarnation of God's reasoning, the principle *through which* the world was made in the first place. For a Christian, then, Scripture is a very different kind of thing to the religious narratives of the Greeks. Christian Scripture has an importance at least equal in philosophical relevance to the data of the senses and the inferences of logicians. The alliance of faith and Scripture in this way offers a new perspective on the world, a perspective that really is distinct from, and to some degree in competition with, that of philosophical reason.

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In the generation before Plotinus, Numenius described the programme a philosopher ought to follow. One should, he says, first of all apply reason to the question

in hand; then confirm the results by appealing to philosophers one has a reason to trust, namely Plato and Pythagoras; and last of all, one can look at where and how this truth is expressed in the religious traditions of the world (all in *Fragments 1*). Very different is the approach set out by Plotinus' contemporary, Origen. In his metaphysical magnum opus *On First Principles*, Origen puts faith at the beginning of the process when he issues his invitation to "those who have believed and been convinced" in the opening words of the book. In the course of the work he will take them *from* their belief *into* the philosophical frameworks within which it is to be organized. This rethinking of the relationship between faith and philosophy completes the divorce of the two in a way that makes the former available as a clearly defined object of study for the latter. The 'philosophy of religion' is built from arguments that have roots as ancient as philosophy itself; it is with Christianity that it acquires its identity as a distinct discipline.