

Greek Philosophy as a Religious Quest for the Divine¹

James Bernard Murphy

ABSTRACT Philosophy has always been parasitic on other bodies of knowledge, especially religious thought. Greek philosophy in Italy emerged as a purification of Orphic religious traditions. Orphic votaries adopted various disciplines in the attempt to become divine, which led Pythagoras and Empedocles to define philosophy as a path to divinity. According to Plato and Aristotle, the goal of philosophy is to become “as much like a god as is humanly possible.” Classical Greek philosophy is not the study of the divine but the project of becoming divine, a project which it shares with Christianity. Greek philosophy and Christianity have different paths to the divine, but they share a common aspiration.

KEYWORDS deification; origins of Greek philosophy; philosophy as theology; metaphilosophy

1. In this essay, I draw freely from my forthcoming book, *Deification in Classical Greek Philosophy and the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

✉ James Bernard Murphy, Department of Government, Dartmouth College, NH, USA
✉ James.B.Murphy@Dartmouth.edu 📞 0000-0002-5568-3545

© ⓘ FORUM PHILOSOPHICUM 28 (2023) no. 1, 85–97
ISSN 1426-1898 E-ISSN 2353-7043

SUBM. 20 December 2022 Acc. 31 January 2023
DOI:10.35765/forphil.2023.2801.05

Even eminent philosophers have claimed that philosophy has always been parasitic on other disciplines. As Nelson Goodman memorably put it: “Scientists run the business, but philosophers keep the books.” The “business” is the generation of ideas, hypotheses, empirical findings, concepts, and theories by mathematicians, physicists, and biologists, but also literary theorists, historians, and theologians. Only afterwards do philosophers arrive to “keep the books” by certifying whether the claims of the other disciplines actually constitute knowledge. Philosophers, like accountants, do not generate revenue; they only attempt to determine whether the business is profitable.

All of this is rather obvious in the realm of what might be called “applied philosophy,” such as the philosophy of physics, the philosophy of religion, the philosophy of history, and so on. But what about the core fields of “pure philosophy,” such as logic, epistemology, and metaphysics. Surely these fields of inquiry are autonomous? Yet some leading historians of philosophy, including R.G. Collingwood, have argued, I think persuasively, that even the core of philosophy is indirectly parasitic on the other disciplines: they claim that developments in logic track developments in mathematics, developments in epistemology track developments in sciences ranging from physics to history, and developments in metaphysics track developments in many sciences, especially theology. Without the raw material provided by inquiry in the other disciplines, philosophy deteriorates into sterile logomachy.

There are almost as many definitions of philosophy as there are philosophers, and a whole branch of the discipline is devoted to this question: “metaphilosophy.”² Perhaps the least controversial definition was offered by the Catholic apologist, G.K. Chesterton: “Philosophy is thought that has been thought through.” In every other field of inquiry, ideas are presupposed but not examined. What R.G. Collingwood calls “absolute presuppositions” are assumptions so basic that they cannot be themselves proven because they make possible all scientific inquiry. They are the lenses by which scholars and scientists see the world. In Collingwood’s example, if you ask a pathologist “Why do you assume that every disease has a cause?,” the pathologist “will probably blow up right in your face, because you have put your finger on one of his absolute presuppositions, and people are apt

2. Philosophers have always debated the nature and justification of their activities, but the word “metaphilosophy” seems to be very recent. A follower of the later Wittgenstein, Morris Lazerowitz (1970), defines it thus: “The investigation of the nature of philosophy, with the central aim of arriving at a satisfactory explanation of the absence of uncontested philosophical claims and arguments.” On Plato and the origins of metaphilosophy, see (Griswold 1988, 144).

to be ticklish in their absolute presuppositions” (Collingwood 1998, 31). Biology, like every other science, makes progress by taking some ideas for granted. Scientific thought, in Chesterton’s expression, is not fully thought through. Only philosophers ask whether all things have causes and, by the way, what is a cause, anyway?

Whether or not one finds these sweeping claims about philosophy in general to be plausible, there is no doubt that philosophy has always had a special relationship to religious thought. Whether in ancient Greece, China, or India, philosophy always grows out of religious speculation. We see this evolution in the famous theories of the stages of history: philosophy always succeeds religion. Hegel’s theory of the development of absolute mind proceeds from art to religion to philosophy; in his view, philosophy transcends in form but also includes the content of art and religion. Auguste Comte describes an evolutionary progress from the theological to the metaphysical to the positive sciences; that is, from religion to philosophy to natural sciences and mathematics. These epic theories of history are certainly correct that philosophy arose from earlier religious modes of thought. Comte was wrong to suppose that philosophy would ever replace religion or that the sciences would ever replace philosophy. Even today, philosophical speculation about possible worlds or about free will reveals the continuing influence of religious ideas.

Philosophical inquiries about the infinite, about possible worlds, and about freedom of the will are all developments of religious ideas. Philosophy can help us clarify and sharpen our religious speculation on these ultimate matters. Immanuel Kant concludes his *Critique of Pure Reason* by posing the fundamental questions his whole philosophy aims to answer: “What can I know? What should I do? What may I hope?” (A805/B833). I think it self-evident that these are the basic presuppositions of religious life and thought.³ The liminal philosophical question is: why is there something rather than nothing? Here philosophy becomes a disciplined kind of religious speculation.

Philosophy and religion could both be said to be oriented to matters of ultimate human concern, matters about the meaning of life and death, time and eternity, origins and destiny. That is why bookstores usually lump together philosophy and religion, or even philosophy, religion, and the occult! To those philosophers with scientific aspirations, this association of philosophy with religion is an embarrassment, which is why the early

3. I do not claim, of course, that Kant would agree that philosophy is parasitic on religious thought.

logical positivists, such as Rudolf Carnap, rejected the name “philosophy” for their logical and linguistic inquiries. One leading contemporary philosopher, Colin McGinn, wants to rename philosophy “ontics”—that is, the science of being, just as “physics” is the science of nature. No one would confuse “ontics” with religion, which is the point of the new name.

In the wake of modern ideas of progress, scholars often tell the story of Greek thought as an evolution from myth to reason, from *mythos* to *logos*.⁴ On this view, Greek philosophy replaced the bizarre tales of the gods in Homer and Hesiod with a rational and secular science of nature.⁵ But this view of the development of philosophy cannot be squared with actual history. If we take myth to mean stories expressing beliefs about ultimate questions, then myth is a permanent part of human thought and culture. We shall always rely upon myths to make sense of these liminal matters. But, like all modes of thought, including modern physics, mythic ideas need to be thought through before we can assess their validity. As Werner Jaeger rightly observes, without philosophy, myth is blind, but without myth, philosophy is empty.⁶ The greatest works of speculative philosophy—think especially of Hegel—elaborate a powerful mythical narrative in the language of abstract conceptual argument. Plato alerts us to his uses of myth, whereas modern scientific and philosophical discourse disguises its myths under a highly technical terminology. The danger of ignoring the mythic elements of modern thought is that we are at risk of swallowing myths whole, as is so often the case with readers of Marx, Freud, and Heidegger.⁷

4. See, for example, John Burnet’s *Early Greek Philosophy*, which warns us not to “fall into the error of deriving science from mythology” (1892, 14); similarly, Jonathan Barnes’s *Early Greek Philosophy* (2001, xviii–xxv) contrasts the “rationality” of the philosophers to the “arbitrary caprice” and “fantasy” of mythology; see: Wilhelm Nestle’s *Vom Mythos zum Logos: “Mythisches Vorstellen und logisches Denken sind Gegensätze”* (1975, 1); “There is no real continuity between myth and philosophy” (Vernant 1982, 107). On the tendency of historians of philosophy to equate the religious with the irrational and the secular with the rational, see (Tor 2017, 10–9).

5. Thus, according to Walter Burkert, with the rise of the philosophers “Myth is left behind. The word *mythos*, obsolete in Attic, is now redefined and devalued as the sort of story that the old poets used to tell and that old women still tell to children” (Burkert 1985, 312).

6. “Mythical thought without the formative *logos* is blind, and logical theorizing without living mythical thought is empty” (Jaeger 1939, 150).

7. “The danger begins when men believe they have left all that behind [namely, myth] and are relying on a scientific method based solely on a combination of observation and logical inference . . . Today it [myth] is even more heavily overlaid than in ancient Greece with the terminology of rational disciplines. This makes it more difficult to detect and therefore more dangerous” (Guthrie 1962, 1:2).

If philosophy is the logically rigorous exploration of the presuppositions of religious thought, then what are those basic presuppositions? To answer this, I would have to define religion, about which there is no agreement. I will attempt to be modest and uncontroversial. The etymology of the word “religion,” in its Latin root, is disputed but certainly makes no reference to anything supernatural.⁸ When we say that someone practices yoga “religiously” we mean they practice yoga assiduously, conscientiously, and rigorously. Within Christianity, a “religious” vocation traditionally meant joining an order of monks, friars, or nuns, so that one’s whole life would be unified around Christian ideals. A religious life is at least a disciplined life.

According to some philosophers, this task of unifying all the major pursuits in a life around an ideal of the good is sufficient to make a doctrine religious, no matter how otherwise secular.⁹ A religious life may or may not be oriented to a god, but it cannot be a mere hobby or temporary fancy. In this sense, the great philosophical systems are religious in the sense that they aspire to unify the pursuit of knowledge, virtue, and aesthetic experience—in short, the true, the good, and the beautiful. In our age of hyper-specialization, it seems ludicrous to attempt to treat so many areas of inquiry. Why do the great philosophers attempt to theorize logic, nature, beauty, ethics, politics, and god?¹⁰ Are they merely attempting to cover all topics, to be encyclopedic? No, philosophy aspires to be comprehensive for practical, not merely theoretical, reasons. Since a complete human life includes thinking logically, understanding nature, appreciating beauty, acting ethically, being a good citizen, and knowing God, philosophy cannot lead us to live our lives well unless it shows us how to integrate all the major goods into a coherent whole.

The French historian of Hellenistic philosophy, Pierre Hadot, argues that all the great ancient thinkers saw philosophy as a distinctive and unified way of life rather than a mere body of knowledge.¹¹ The first person to be called a “philosopher” was Pythagoras, and he is said to have founded

8. Ever since Cicero, scholars have debated whether the Latin noun *religio* stems from the verb *religare* “to bind or obligate” or the verb *relegere* “to go over again” (in thought, word, or deed).

9. For the argument that religion essentially unifies a human life by giving it a focus but need not involve anything supernatural, see (Dewey 2013; Dworkin 2013).

10. I capitalize “God” only when referring to the biblical divinity—not to honor the biblical God but because “God” is a proper name only of the biblical God (*Yahweh*).

11. For the argument that the ancient schools of philosophy were each devoted to a distinctive way of life, see (Hadot 2002). About ancient philosophy, he says: “The real problem is therefore not the problem of knowing this or that, but of *being* in this or that way” (2002, 29). Plato describes philosophy as a way of living at *Theaetetus* 174a.

a religious cult, with its own diet, rituals, and god.¹² Socrates is a better-known exemplar of philosophy as a coherent, integrated way of life. The latter's aim was never to teach a doctrine, but always to turn around someone's life. Philosophy, for him, was a divine mission literally to save souls.¹³ Because the heroic virtues of Socrates were consistent with differing philosophical interpretations, he became the ideal sage not only for Platonism but also for Stoicism, Skepticism, and Cynicism. According to Hadot and other scholars, the various schools of ancient philosophy resembled different religious orders, each with its own characteristic customs, disciplines, and styles of living.¹⁴

Hadot is certainly right about the practical orientation of the great philosophers, ancient, medieval, and modern, who aspired not merely to change minds but to change lives. It is no accident that Spinoza calls his great metaphysical study of God and nature the *Ethics*. Philosophical inquiry into physics, cosmology, and logic was always in the service of the acquisition of the virtues, both moral and intellectual. The goal of philosophy was less the perfection of knowledge than the perfection of the knower. Plato says we cannot be certain that philosophy will save us—but believing in philosophy is well worth the risk.¹⁵

Religion means more than a life integrated around the pursuit of some ideal; a religious life is integrated around some transcendent or divine ideal. Hadot is unduly reticent about the ultimate goal of what he calls “philosophy as a way of life.”¹⁶ The reason why Plato and Aristotle aim at the perfection of the moral and intellectual virtues is so that human beings might become like a god—or at least as much like a god as is humanly possible.¹⁷

12. For the argument and evidence that Pythagoras (or, at least, a Pythagorean) was the first person to be called *philosophos*, see (Moore 2020, chaps. 2–4). David S. du Toit concurs: “*Dadurch wird Pythagoras zum ersten richtigen Philosophen gemacht*” (1997, 237).

13. Hadot describes Socratic philosophy as “a way of life, intended to ensure a good life and thereby the salvation of the soul” (2002, 65).

14. “Ancient philosophy was also a way of life, an exercise in self-discipline, a process of self-transformation which expressed itself not only in the theories one propounded but also in the clothes one wore, the food one ate, and the way one behaved with regard to gods, animals, and other men” (Most 2003, 305).

15. “No sensible man would insist that these things [heaven and hell] are as I have described them, but I think it is fitting for a man to risk the belief—for the risk is a noble one—that this, or something like this, is true about our souls and their dwelling places” (*Phaedo*, 114d).

16. Hadot focuses on the disciplines of the philosophical way of life rather than on the goal, on the means rather than on the end; but he does mention the Platonic goal of “becoming like god” (2002, 262).

17. “The goal of the philosopher is to become as much like this god as a human possibly can: by devoting himself to the study of all that is divine” (Most 2003, 311).

Ancient Greek philosophy clearly reveals its origins in religious thought and practice. Ever since Aristotle, historians have distinguished an Ionian from an Italian tradition of Greek thought.¹⁸ During the sixth century, Ionian cosmologists from Asia minor—Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes—developed their thought in relation to the speculations about the origins of the cosmos in Homer and Hesiod.¹⁹ Aristotle sometimes calls these early Ionian thinkers “philosophers”—but they did not call themselves philosophers. The first Greek thinkers to call themselves “philosophers” seem to have been Pythagoras and Empedocles, who lived in southern Italy.²⁰ If the Ionian physicists take Apollonian religion in Homer and Hesiod as their starting point, then Pythagoras and Empedocles were inspired by Bacchic and Orphic mystery cults active in southern Italy. If the Ionian physicists respected the gulf between gods and humans, the Italian philosophers, by contrast, claimed to have transformed themselves into gods. The Ionian physicists aspired to understand the divine causes of the cosmos; the Italian philosophers aspired to themselves become gods.

By calling themselves “philosophers,” Pythagoras and Empedocles created the image of a philosopher as a sage with wisdom about the meaning of life and death. Pythagoras, a follower of Orpheus, is often credited with the Orphic belief in the transmigration of souls through plant, animal, and human bodies.²¹ In the case of Pythagoras and Empedocles, the souls that migrate from life to life retain their personal memories: indeed, Pythagoras was famous for remembering his prior incarnations.²² In reaction to the

18. According to Diogenes, the Ionian tradition extends from Thales to Theophrastus while the Italian tradition extends from Pythagoras to Epicurus. See Diogenes, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, I (Introduction), X.

19. On the Homeric and Hesiodic texts relevant to Ionian natural philosophy, see (Kirk et al. 1983, chapter 1). On the reliance of the Ionian thinkers on Homer and Hesiod, see (Kahn 1960, 119–65).

20. Philosophy arrived in southern Italy when Xenophanes and Pythagoras emigrated from Ionia; they flourished at the end of the sixth century. On Pythagoras as the first person to call himself a philosopher, see Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives of the Philosophers*, 1.12 and 1.13. And see Iamblichus, *On the Pythagorean Way of Life*, 12.58. “There are good grounds for thinking that Pythagoras introduced and made familiar a new meaning of the words *philosophos* and *philosophia*” (Guthrie 1962, 1:204). According to Leonid Zhmud, many modern scholars do credit the Pythagoreans with coining the word “philosophy” (see Zhmud 2012, 18). For a book-length argument that *philosophos* emerged as an accusation against the Pythagoreans, only to be adopted by them, see (Moore 2020). On whether Heraclitus (fragment 35) claimed that Pythagoras called himself a “philosopher,” see (Kirk, Raven, and Schofield 1983, 218).

21. Xenophanes reports that Pythagoras stopped someone from beating a puppy on the grounds that he recognized a friend’s voice in the dog’s yelp; see Pythagoras, fragment 260.

22. “Pythagoras commands a unique ability to recall facts about his earlier incarnations (as probably reflected in Empedocles DK 31 B129)” (Tor 2017, 275).

complacent story of Greek philosophy as the triumph of secular reason over religious myth, some contemporary scholars have described Pythagoras and Empedocles as magicians, healers, and shamans.²³ Greek philosophy in Italy is not mysticism but something much weirder: a blend of mysticism and science, like alchemy.²⁴ What are we to make of a figure like Empedocles, who is the pioneer of physical chemistry but also a magician and healer?²⁵ In the same poem, Empedocles sets forth his theory of the elements and then proceeds to claim that he will provide his students with the powers to control the winds and resurrect the dead.²⁶ No wonder that he also claimed to be immortal himself.²⁷ The first philosophers in Italy resemble medieval alchemists more than modern scientists.

Pythagoras, Empedocles, and Parmenides were not only the first thinkers to describe themselves as philosophers, but Pythagoras and Empedocles actually claimed to be gods, while Parmenides claimed to have become god-like.²⁸ Here we see the influence of the mystery cults and the Dionysian aspiration for union with a god.²⁹ Empedocles was an early follower of Pythagoras, and he insisted that Pythagoras was a divine being.³⁰ Aristotle tells us that Pythagoras claimed to be either a god or, at least, a being between gods and men.³¹ Empedocles also claimed to be

23. See the work of Peter Kingsley: *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic* (1995); *In the Dark Places of Wisdom* (1999).

24. Shaul Tor shows how scholars continue to assume that Greek philosophy must rest either on reason or on revelation but not both (2017, 10–8).

25. According to Aristotle, Empedocles developed the immensely influential theory that all matter could be analyzed into the four basic elements of earth, air, fire, and water; see Empedocles's fragments 346 and 347. Compare these elements to the modern theory of the four possible states of matter: solids, gases, plasma, and liquids. According to Charles Kahn, Empedocles's elements are more abstract and general than the familiar cosmic masses; his elements are the "roots" of earth, air, fire, and water (see 1960, 124–5).

26. See Empedocles, fragment 345.

27. "Empedocles—who was plainly a magician, who considered his immortalization a fundamental prerequisite for his effectiveness as a magician, and who in his description of his own immortality comes closer than any other person or text to the references to ritual immortalization preserved on the gold plates [i.e. tablets]" (Kingsley 1995, 314).

28. On Parmenides's "association of the acquisition of divine knowledge with the divinization of the knower (*homoïōsis theōi*)," see (Tor 2017, 267, 341).

29. "One aspect of the earliest Greek philosophy may be described as a revolt against the privileges of the gods" (Eriksen 1976, 120).

30. According to Empedocles, Pythagoras "easily saw everything of all the things that are, in ten, nay twenty lifetimes of men" (fragment 259; Empedocles fragment 129).

31. Aristotle is said to have written a treatise, "On the Pythagorean Philosophy," of which we only have fragments; see fragments 191 and 192 (Rose). Iamblichus agrees that Pythagoras was seen as an incarnation of Apollo in his *On the Pythagorean Way of Life*, 27.133 and 28.135.

a god.³² Yes, the first Greeks to call themselves philosophers claimed to be divine beings.

Pythagoras himself brought Ionian natural science to Italy during the late sixth century; the new Italian philosophers continued the cosmological inquiries of the Ionians but subordinated knowledge to the practical goal of becoming like a god. The Ionians, one could say, were pure scientists, while the Italians were also charismatic sages. Yet the contrast between the Ionians and the Italians is not a contrast between secular science and religious alchemy. Far from being materialists, these Ionian physicists identified their first principles with a god.³³ Aristotle noted the continuity from myth to reason in Ionian natural science: just as Homer had identified Oceanus as the origin of the gods and all terrestrial waters, so Thales identified water as the origin of all things.³⁴ According to Aristotle, these early physicists were right to identify their first principles with the divine.³⁵ Ionians and Italians differed not about the essential causal role of divinity but about our relation to the divine.

I emphasize the contrast between the Ionians and the Italians because only the Italians called themselves “philosophers,” and only the Italians aspired to become divine. Yes, the Ionians pioneered rational inquiry into the origins of the cosmos; but the Italians pioneered what they called

“Pythagoras himself quickly achieved the status of a *daimon*, intermediate between man and god, or even an incarnation of the Hyperborean Apollo” (Guthrie 1962, 1:231).

32. “Friends . . . I give you greetings. An immortal god, mortal no more, I go about honoured by all . . . by men and women, I am revered,” Empedocles, (fragment 399). “In Empedocles, being immortal means not existing forever, but detachment from the cycles of deaths and births and living, for a long but finite time, as a god” (Long 2019, 31).

33. Thales, whom Aristotle described as the first philosopher, said: “all things are full of gods” (*panta plērē theōn*, fragment 91), a claim repeated and endorsed by Plato, *Laws* 899b; see: Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (hereinafter abbreviated as *Met.*), 983b 20.

34. On Oceanus as the origin of all the gods, see Homer, *Iliad* 14.201 and 14.246; as the origin of all terrestrial waters, see *Iliad* 21.195–197; Thales, fragment 85; *Met.*, 983b 20. In other places, however, Aristotle sees less continuity between Homer and the philosophers: Homer and Empedocles, he says, have nothing in common apart from their meter (*Poetics* 1447b 18–19).

35. Aristotle explains why first principles in physics are reasonably described as divine: “as it is a principle, it is both uncreatable and indestructible . . . they [natural philosophers] identify it with the Divine, for it is deathless and imperishable,” (Aristotle, *Physics*, 203b 7–8, 14–15). “Now all causes must be eternal,” (*Met.*, 1026a 17). “For the Greek philosophers, a god frequently functions as a hypothetical entity, analogous to the hypothetical entities of modern science such as black holes, neutrinos, or the unconscious” (Gerson 1990, 2). A first cause must have a wholly different nature from what it causes, otherwise it must itself have a cause. In Aristotle’s terms, the first cause must be uncaused, the first mover must be unmoved—otherwise we have an infinite regress of causes and movers. If the cosmos rests on a turtle, what does the turtle rest on? Aristotle wants to avoid the answer that it is turtles all the way down.

“philosophy” as a path to salvation through knowledge of the cosmos. Socratic philosophy, as we shall see, blends Ionian cosmology with Italian aspiration to divinity. According to Aristotle, Plato was primarily a disciple of the Italian philosophers, especially the Pythagoreans.³⁶ That would explain why Plato was so centrally concerned with “becoming like a god.”³⁷

Plato and Aristotle promoted this religious conception of philosophy when they both asserted that the goal of human life is “to become as much like a god as is possible.” The idea that becoming like a god (*homoiōsis theōi*) is the goal of the philosophical life for Plato and Aristotle was a commonplace among the Platonists of antiquity, but much less often asserted by modern scholars.³⁸ Because of the recent revival of interest in ancient commentators on Plato and Aristotle, several scholars have noted the striking neglect of this theme, especially in English-language scholarship.³⁹ So unfamiliar today is this idea of becoming like a god, that some scholars even deny that it is Platonic.⁴⁰ This neglect has seriously distorted our modern understanding of the Socratic Greek philosophers. That the Socratic philosophers see happiness as a goal is well known; what is not well known is that happiness was understood by them as becoming godlike.⁴¹

36. See *Met.*, 987a 29–31.

37. According to the Neoplatonist Arius Didymus, Pythagoras was the first thinker to propose *homoiōsis theōi* as the *telos* of all human striving; Plato’s contribution was to restrict this ambition *kata to dynaton*. See (Merki 1952, 1; Roloff 1970, 1).

38. On the theme of becoming like God in Middle Platonism (and beyond), see (Torri 2017a, 2017b). For Plotinus, see (Zovko 2018). For the most up-to-date bibliography of scholarship on this theme in ancient philosophy, see the dissertation of Paoli Torri (2017a, 232–48).

39. Speaking of the Platonic doctrine of “becoming as much like a god as possible,” Julia Annas observes: “Given its fame in the ancient world, the almost total absence of this idea from modern interpretations and discussions of Plato is noteworthy” (Annas 1999, 53). David Sedley agrees: “*Homoiōsis theōi*, universally accepted in antiquity as the official Platonic goal, does not even appear in the index to any modern study of Plato known to me . . . [yet] its influence on Plato’s successors, above all Aristotle, is so far-reaching that we risk seriously misunderstanding them if we do not make due allowance for it” (2000, 309). Finally, John M. Armstrong builds on both Annas and Sedley in his “After the Ascent: Plato on Becoming Like God” (2004). A pioneer of English-language attention to this theme is Culbert Rutenber (1946).

40. Sandra Peterson claims that when Socrates says in the *Theaetetus* (176b-c) that we should “become as much like a god as humanly possible,” he is not speaking for Plato, in part because “the recommendation to aim at becoming like God strikes me as the worst idea I have ever heard in philosophy” (2011, 74–85)—which is saying a lot! Even setting the *Theaetetus* aside, the idea of becoming like a god appears in several Platonic dialogues and in different contexts.

41. European scholarship never lost sight of this central Platonic theme: “*Es besteht also kein Zweifel, dass die homoiōsis theōi als ein wichtiges Stück platonischen Lehre galt.*” (Merki 1952, 2). Dietrich Roloff concurs in his chapter “*Ausblick auf die platonische Angleichung an Gott!*” (1970, 198–206). Salvatore Lavecchia concurs that “*La homoiōsis theōi constitutisce il*

Ever since Plato and Aristotle entered the medieval universities, their overarching visions of human life were obscured when their writings were divided into separate bodies of knowledge, such as logic, metaphysics, ethics, politics, and theology. Twentieth-century analytic philosophers have remade Plato and Aristotle in their own image and likeness by dissolving their thought into a miscellaneous array of conceptual puzzles. When it comes to the philosophy of the Socratics, truly we murder to dissertate. For, as we shall see, in the thought of these philosophers—what we call metaphysics, ethics, politics, and theology—are all merely aspects or phrases of one aim: to become like a god.⁴²

The quest to become divine helps to explain the curiously ascetic character of most philosophical ethics. Socrates insisted that we should care for our souls more than for our bodies. Plato's philosophical rulers possess no private property and renounce family life: they live like soldiers in common barracks. Aristotle argues that the supreme pleasure in life is contemplation. The Stoics were famously stoic and advised us to escape the grip of the passions. Even the Epicureans, in theory devoted to pleasure, advocated an abstemious regime designed to avoid all pain: the pleasure of wine, they insisted, is not worth the hangover. There is something downright inhuman about much philosophical ethics, which may explain why so many of the great philosophers were unmarried and childless. The whole philosophical tradition, as Nietzsche observed, seems bent on the denial of the body and the suppression of mere life. All of this makes sense only if the goal is to cultivate what is most divine in ourselves: namely, our intellects.

Once we see that ancient Greek philosophy was oriented toward the question of how to become as much like a god as is humanly possible, then we see the possibility for an illuminating encounter with Christianity, which, according to the Bible, promises to make the followers of Jesus into "partakers of the divine nature."⁴³ In the words of Athanasius, "God become man so that we might become like God." No doubt, the Christian

centro e la sostanza della filosofia platonica" (2006, 1). He sees Plato's thought as culminating in a mystical union with the divine: "*Il telos della filosofia platonica consiste nella piena e cosciente esperienza del divino. Il rapporto diretto con il divino pervade il pensiero et l'azione del filosofo*" (2006, 287). Lavecchia's study is the only book-length treatment of our theme in Plato; his splendid book ranges from minute semantic analysis to the speculative flights of Neoplatonism. Lavecchia focuses resolutely on the metaphysical ascent to the good, drawing on thinkers ranging from Proclus to F.W.J. Schelling.

42. "One might say that the first principle of Platonic ethics is that one must 'become like a god'" (Gerson 2005, 34).

43. 2 Peter 1:4; Ephesians 4:24.

path to divinity is quite different from that of Greek philosophy, but the shared goal reveals a striking commonality between Athens and Jerusalem.

When we compare deification in classical Greek philosophy to deification in the Bible, here are some contrasts that emerge. For the Greek philosophers, a god is an object we seek to know; for the Bible, God is a person whom we seek to encounter. For the Greek philosophers, a god is a concept of the divine; for the Bible, God is a proper name (*Yahweh*). For the Greek philosophers, we become like a god by assimilating our thoughts to the timeless rationality of divine order; for the Bible, we become like God by surrendering to loving union with God. In the Bible, we become gods by becoming God's (see Meconi 2008). For the Greek philosophers, the cosmos is the only image of a god; for the Bible, a human being is the only image of God. For the Greek philosophers, we become divine by contemplating the heavens; for the Bible, we become divine by hoping for salvation in the future.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Annas, Julia. 1999. *Platonic Ethics, Old and New*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Aristotle. 1984. *Complete Works of Aristotle*. Edited and translated by Jonathan Barnes et al. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Armstrong, John M. 2004. "After the Ascent: Plato on Becoming Like God." In *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, edited by David Sedley, 171–83. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Barnes, Jonathan. 2001. *Early Greek Philosophy*. London: Penguin.
- Burkert, Walter. 1985. *Greek Religion*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Burnet, John. 1892. *Early Greek Philosophy*. London: A. and C. Black.
- Collingwood, R. G. 1998. *An Essay on Metaphysics*. edited by Rex Martin. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Dewey, John. 2013. *A Common Faith*. 2 ed. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Dworkin, Ronald. 2013. *Religion without God*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Eriksen, Trond Berg. 1976. *Bios Theoretikos*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Gerson, Lloyd P. 1990. *God and Greek Philosophy*. London: Routledge.
- . 2005. *Aristotle and Other Platonists*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Griswold, Charles L. 1988. "Plato's Metaphilosophy: Why Plato Wrote Dialogues." In *Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings*, edited by Charles L. Griswold, 143–67. New York: Routledge.
- Guthrie, W.K.C. 1962. *A History of Greek Philosophy*. Vol. 1. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge
- Hadot, Pierre. 2002. *What is Ancient Philosophy?* Translated by Michael Chase. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Iamblichus. 1991. *On the Pythagorean Way of Life*. edited by John Dillon and Jackson Hershbell. Atlanta: Scholars Press.
- Jaeger, Werner. 1939. *Paideia*. Translated by Gilbert Highet. Vol. 1. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Kahn, Charles. 1960. *Anaximander and the Origins of Greek Cosmology*. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Kant, Immanuel. 1998. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Edited and translated by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kingsley, Peter. 1995. *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- . 1999. *In the Dark Places of Wisdom*. Inverness, CA: Golden Sufi Center.
- Kirk, G.S., Raven, J.E., and Schofield, M., eds. 1983. *The Presocratic Philosophers*. 2 ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Laertius, Diogenes. 1980. *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. Translated by Robert Drew Hicks. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Lavecchia, Salvatore. 2006. *Una via che conduce al divino: La homoiosis theo nella filosofia di Platone*. Milan: Vita e Pensiero.
- Lazerowitz, Morris. 1970. "A Note on 'Metaphilosophy'." *Metaphilosophy* 1 (1): 91–. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9973.1970.tb00792.x>.
- Long, A. G. 2019. *Death and Immortality in Ancient Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Meconi, David Vincent. 2008. "Becoming Gods by Becoming God's: Augustine's Mystagogy of Identification." *Augustinian Studies* 39 (1): 61–74. <https://doi.org/10.5840/augstudies20083917>.
- Merki, Hubert. 1952. *Homoiōsis Theōi*. Freiburg in der Schweiz: Paulusverlag.
- Moore, Christopher. 2020. *Calling Philosophers Names*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Most, Glenn. 2003. "Philosophy and Religion." In *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Philosophy*, edited by David Sedley, 300–22. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nestle, Wilhelm. 1975. *Vom Mythos zum Logos*. Stuttgart: A. Kröner.
- Peterson, Sandra. 2011. *Socrates and Philosophy in the Dialogues of Plato*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Plato. 1997. *Complete Works*. Edited and translated by John M. Cooper et al. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing.
- Roloff, Dietrich. 1970. *Gottähnlichkeit, Vergöttlichung und Erhöhung zu seligem Leben*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Rutenber, Culbert. 1946. *The Doctrine of the Imitation of God in Plato*. New York: King's Crown Press.
- Sedley, David. 2000. "The Ideal of Godlikeness." In *Plato 2: Ethics, Politics, Religion, and the Soul*, edited by Gail Fine, 309–28. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Toit, David S. du. 1997. *Theios Anthropos*. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr.
- Tor, Shaul. 2017. *Mortal and Divine in Early Greek Epistemology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Torri, Paoli. 2017a. "Homoiōsis Theōi: A Study of the Telos in Middle Platonism." PhD diss., University of Milan and KU Leuven.
- . 2017b. "Quale dio per quale vita?: Una interpretazione del τέλος platonico dell'assimilazione a dio nel Didaskalikos di Alcinoos." *Philologus* 161 (2): 232–48. <https://doi.org/10.1515/phil-2017-0012>.
- Vernant, Jean-Pierre. 1982. *The Origins of Greek Thought*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Zhmud, Leonid. 2012. *Pythagoras and the Early Pythagoreans*. Translated by Kevin Windle and Rosh Ireland. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Zovko, Marie-Élise. 2018. "Worldly and otherworldly virtue: Likeness to God as educational ideal in Plato, Plotinus, and today." *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 50 (6-7): 586-96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2017.1373340>.

