

Why We Think the Way We Think about Morality and Ethics Greeks and Geeks: The Pre-Socratics, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics

A Scene from the Film “The Name of the Rose” (1980, Dir. Jean-Jacques Annaud)

How people have thought about ethics through the ages is complicated. The film “**The Name of the Rose**” is based on the book by the Italian philosopher of semiotics, Umberto Eco (Il nome della rosa). It is really a murder mystery set within a Benedictine monastic community in northern Italy, in the year 1327, during the Inquisition. Central to the plot, is the conflict between the inquiring liberal-minded Franciscan scholar, William of Baskerville (Sean Connery) and the traditionalist, the Benedictine Jorge of Burgos, the Venerable Jorge, the oldest member of the community. But, there is something else going on. At its heart, is the debate over the significance of change: changing reality and within it, changing human knowledge, in an Inquisitorial context where change is dangerous. In the clip, we see Jorge holding forth about this. He proclaims that “There is no progress in the history of knowledge. There is only continuous and sublime recapitulation”, meaning repetition. For Jorge, changing reality has no meaning and the changing, unstable search for truth within it, is reckless vanity. For Jorge, all is given already in the sacred text of Scripture, with the reiteration of fixed divine ideas. For Jorge, Scripture, having parachuted down from heaven, provides sure, unchanging access to sure unchanging truth. For Jorge, nothing can be learned from the fickle flux of history. On the other hand, for the radical and disturbingly modern Franciscan, William of Baskerville, things are more nuanced. While he regards Scripture as a primary means to truth and ethics, through what it reveals to us (we refer to this as “*from above*”), he also sees that truth and ethics are to be discovered, through our critical observation and experience of reality (we refer to this as “*from below*”). Ironically, it is this very conviction that leads him to sift the evidence and uncover Jorge’s violent crimes.

This insight that truth, including ethical truth, is multi-faceted and is bound up with both faith insights from sacred texts (from above) and critical observation of reality (from below), revelation and concrete life experience, is important to understanding the Greeks and their influence upon Christian ethics. With this thorny idea in mind, let’s move forward!

From Divine Myth to Critical Thinking ‘of Sorts’: The Pre-Socratics

While it is obvious that Christian thinking stems from the Hebrew world, Christian thought’s connection to the Greek world is less clear. What is most distinctive about the Greek contribution to Christian thought, is that around 600BC (the time of the prophet Jeremiah), the dominant minds of the Aegean cut loose from the religious mythological traditions (like the Iliad and the Odyssey), and attempted to explain the world in conceptual terms. Truth expressed through *sacred texts* no longer satisfied. The first steps in this process began with the philosophers of nature. Thales, proposed that the underlying substance of everything was water. Later, Heraclitus proposed that the fundamental principle of everything was motion or change. For Parmenides, it was the opposite: permanence. All these guys, different as they were, argued similarly: that rationally explicable principles, principles from reality, could bring coherence to human ideas and human life.

The Big Three: Socrates, Plato and Aristotle

Socrates: Thinking Critically and Radically

With the rise of the Athenian philosopher Socrates, this idea of developing ethical thought from observation and experience was important. What Socrates contributed beyond Thales, Heraclitus and Parmenides, was exhausting rigour, especially applied to the moral. Socrates, subjected everything to relentless scrutiny, confident that moral truth could be gained through critical reflection – remember our first discussion when we referred to his idea that the “unexamined life is not worth living”. That said, conscience was paramount in moral knowledge. We are *morally bound* by what we believe to be right, but at the same time conscience can never be lazy, for we are *duty bound* to subject our conscientiously held views to rigorous analysis. Moral philosophy had to do with two functions: the critical one, that deconstructs the myths, stories, and values that we have inherited as right; and the constructive one that thinks through to new ideas and new conclusions. An example of this, is Socrates’ discussion about what is justice (The Republic, Plato, Book 1, Five Great Dialogues, pp. 221-253). Thrasymachos proposes that justice is nothing more than the interest of the stronger: a widely held view of the Athenian elites. Socrates exposes the flaws in this idea that ‘might is right’, forcing Thrasymachos to admit that the powerful can be, and often are mistaken about their own true interests. He argues that the true interest of the ruler is the well-being of his subjects. He insists that power does not validate itself; that there is a higher conception of *the good*.

Plato: Thinking Critically ‘from Above’

Plato was a student of Socrates. Story has it that he was so traumatized by his teacher’s execution for the alleged crime of “corrupting the youth of Athens” that he withdrew from the public arena and dedicated his life to teaching privately through his academy. For Plato, truth is something that comes *from above*, truth is universal and eternal. He is a bit like Jorge of Burgos, in that in his very Greek way, he sees the changing character of nature and human reality

as a sign of its corruption, its flawed-ness, and he looks to eternity for permanence and stability. Because of this, he speaks of “The Forms”; eternal ideals, which exist in a real world elsewhere – a bit like heaven. For Plato, this world, our world, is in contrast, a world of shadows, and our job is to identify the Forms or Ideals, and to copy them, approximate them, as best we can. With regard to the Form of justice, Plato sees it as “not the disproportional happiness of any one class, but the greatest happiness of the whole”. That said, while justice pertains to the greatest happiness of the whole, it is also a product of rigid class division and specialization of function. There are three classes in Plato’s thinking, each reflecting three aspects of the human psyche: *the appetitive*, *the spirited* and *the rational*. The class that represents appetite are the farmers and artisans who produce for consumption. The class that represents the spirited aspect of human existence, is that of the warriors and guardians, who defend the state. But it is to the philosophers, the rational element of the human, that falls the task of governing: the philosopher kings, who have both the natural giftedness and education to do so. These are the people who put into effect the Forms, the Ideals. They are like a sort of “super-cabinet” who operate outside the framework of the law because they know best. While there is an idealistic radicalism to Plato, these heavenly blue-prints of the Forms, to which only the elite have access, generates an authoritarianism, from which Plato never escapes. It is worthwhile remembering that Plato’s approach “*from above*”, the idea of building ethics, as a copy of eternity, what we call heaven, is a way of thinking that comes down to us through Augustine and his City of God and onto Martin Luther and the Protestant tradition.

Aristotle: Thinking Critically ‘from Below’

There is a famous portrait of Plato and Aristotle, and the rest of the Academy of Athens, by Raphael (see the attachment). At the centre are the two figures walking together, Plato with his finger pointing upward to the heavens and Aristotle with his right hand levelled out. This difference is often explained as a summary of the different approaches they took. Plato is pointing upward to the Forms, mentioned above, while Aristotle reflects an empiricist view of things, an emphasis on what are called concrete particulars. Plato points to a sense of the eternal and timelessness, while Aristotle looks into the physicality of life and the present realm. What stands out in Aristotle’s work is his appeal to an evolutionary view of scientific investigation, an observation of practical reality, of what *is*. In his study of the Athenian state, for instance, he insisted that one must be aware of historical processes. In this sense, he gave great weight to tradition and custom, because, he reasoned that practices long favoured by people, are favoured *because* they work.

Two points that characterize Aristotle’s grounded way of approaching ethics are these: first in his work *Politics*, human beings are essentially social or political (of the city). Social and political institutions, as an expression of the collective, should then serve *all*, not just the interests of isolated individuals. Second, in his best-known work *Nicomachean Ethics*, which focuses on character and virtue (*ethikē aretē*) he concludes that virtue is reached through moderation, through “the golden mean” between excess and deficiency. True courage for example, lies between foolhardiness and cowardice. It is this practical approach, “*thinking from below*” that flows onto Thomas Aquinas and shapes much of the Catholic tradition.

The Stoics: Rationality and Human Equality

Just prior to the emergence of Christianity several philosophical movements arose, some of which, especially Stoicism, influenced Christian ethical thought. Today people speak of “being stoic”, in other words being resilient, showing a “stiff upper lip”. Certainly, Stoicism taught its followers the art of self-discipline in the face of adversity. It did however impart much more. At the heart of Stoicism, was the idea of a cosmos grounded in a rational God. Human beings were thought to reflect this same rationality, although, when corrupted by the flesh (sin) they could deviate from their rational essence. To be true to one’s humanity, was to centre oneself in reason and in doing so, to transcend the accidental circumstances of birth, station and life experience. For Stoicism, all people were equal and of equal value: this was the basic moral reality. Accordingly, among the Stoics, Epictetus the slave, Marcus Aurelius the Roman emperor, the writer Seneca and the orator, Cicero, could all be numbered.

Questions for Consideration

The idea of people as equal, seems very Stoic. What do you think a Stoic may have made of Paul’s insistence that in Christ there is no Jew nor Gentile, no slave nor free, male nor female (Galatians 3:28)?

Socrates is sometimes thought to be the Greek Christ for his questioning radicalism and execution. What do you think?

Jesus proclaims the kingdom of God (in Matthew’s Gospel it is called the kingdom of heaven) when he frees people from oppression and points to how we are to live (see Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5,6&7) and Luke’s Sermon on the Plain (Lk 6:17-49). Plato speaks of the Forms or Ideals. Do you think there is a similarity?

Aristotle seems very grounded in his approach, but also rather moderate. Jesus seems practical as well, as he draws parables from concrete lived reality, but his conclusions seem more radical. Any thoughts?

For contemporary Christians: do you think our ethical thinking must draw from both Scripture (the sacred text) and from modern ethical insights? What should be the rough balance? Give an example!

