
Draft paper inviting critical comment

Transcendence and Epistemology

Simone Weil

"We know by means of our intelligence that what the intelligence does not comprehend is more real than what it does comprehend.

Faith is experience that intelligence is enlightened by love."

(*Gravity and Grace*, Routledge Classics, London, 2002, p128)

George MacDonald

"Seeing is not believing, it is only seeing."

(*The Princess and the Goblin* Puffin Classics, London, 1997, p177)

Abstract:

Where epistemology and transcendence are considered compatible, two approaches to truth are pursued. A Platonistic approach sees transcendence as the grounds of all true knowledge, whilst an Aristotelian approach sees natural human knowledge as providing inferential lodging places for speculative knowledge about transcendent truth. This paper argues: firstly, that the Aristotelian approach does not work; secondly, that the Platonistic approach does work; thirdly, that the failure of the Aristotelian approach has resulted in the death of truth at the hands of modern epistemological foundationalism, and; fourthly, that the Platonistic approach is able to displace post/modern scepticism regarding knowing transcendent truth.

Paul Tyson
7,577 words

1. Introduction:

Epistemology, metaphysics and theology have been in serious trouble in Western high culture for at least the past two hundred years. This crisis has thrown up what Lyotard calls “the postmodern condition”. Lyotard’s famous report on knowledge finds that as the grand-narrative of modern, scientific truth disintegrates, the very idea of seeking to reasonably know (or speak) the truth about reality is no longer credible.¹ However, the recent “turn to religion”² has opened up a range of surprising alternative vistas to Lyotard’s diagnosis. Amongst other developments, Radical Orthodox theologians have challenged the very notion of “the secular”³ and are seeking to re-establish orthodox Christian theology as the only viable grounds for a meaningful Western philosophy and culture.

Radical Orthodoxy takes the “turn to religion” as *metanoia* – that is, as a complete shift of mind and praxis. If we go through this “post-secular”⁴ conversion, the way we understand thought and action runs on a totally different plane to how notions of truth, meaning, politics, morality etc. have developed in the West since the rise of nominalism in the 13th century. This paper, in sympathy with Radical Orthodoxy, sees philosophy as unavoidably and radically dependent on theology. Yet, as there are two types of theology, there are also two types of philosophy. You can have theology where God is a speculative object constructed by our mind – what Pascal calls “the God of the Philosophers”⁵ – or you can have theology that is grounded in genuinely religious faith and practise. Only the later type of theology, I will argue, is theology that does not lead to a hubristic naturalism where nihilism, and the breakdown of language itself, cannot be finally avoided.

In this paper I take Aristotle to be the progenitor of the distinctly naturalistic, observation and logic dependent foundationalism in Western philosophy. I hope to demonstrate that this foundationalism has led our culture in the very trajectory that produced the malaise of modern epistemology, metaphysics and theology. Interestingly, as this malaise leads us out of naturalistic dogmatism, Plato’s religious approach to epistemology and metaphysics can be taken seriously again. I contend that as the philosophical end of the Enlightenment dawns, Plato’s approach to epistemology, effectively occluded by post-Cartesian modernism, is able to be heard again. I will argue that within the context of a radical contemporary turn to religion, Platonistic epistemology, embedded in transcendence, makes theologically meaningful philosophy credible again.

In this paper I take the knowledge of God to be the foundation of all knowledge of transcendence. This is the same thing as saying that all metaphysics in the history of Western philosophy is essentially theological, and that philosophy that aspires to transcendent knowledge stands (or falls) on the strength (or weakness) of its theology (be that theology tacit or explicit). Attempts to construct non-metaphysical philosophy, independent of theological premises, are unable to make coherent negative statements about transcendent truth, and are unable to make coherent

¹ Lyotard, J-F., *The Postmodern Condition*, Manchester University Press, 1986

² De Vries, H., *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, John Hopkins University Press, 1999

³ Milbank, J., *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1990

⁴ Blond, P., (ed) *Post-Secular Philosophy*, Routledge, London, 1998

⁵ Pascal, B., *Pensées*, Penguin Classics, London, 1966, p 309.

positive statements about non-transcendent "truth" either.⁶ As such they become Sophistic systems of constructed meanings that do not even aspire to truth, and they collapse into the nihilism and irrationality of their inherent metaphysical vacuity. Philosophy that is not grounded in theology is not even philosophy; it is little other than meaningless noise, as Lyotard's vision of the "postmodern condition" indicates.

I hope to demonstrate that we can indeed still have meaningful philosophy, but only if it is grounded in meaningful theology.

2. Two epistemologies of transcendence – Platonistic and Aristotelian

In relation to epistemology of/in transcendence, there are two basic approaches. Both Plato and Aristotle believed that knowledge of the transcendently Real is both possible and critical to meaningful thought and action. Whilst there is a good deal of overlap between Plato and Aristotle, yet a pivotal difference in epistemological approach can be discerned between them. In his famous cave analogy, Plato takes the apparent flux, contingency and transience of all that we perceive to be but confused shadows of reality.⁷ Plato is well aware of how profoundly knotted sophistic argument can be too – merely pragmatic and manipulative language games that do not aim at truth and its divine origin, are no less a play of shadows than perception.⁸ Given these limitations, the search for the true is hence a search away from the play of shadows on the cave wall, and towards, ultimately, the sun itself. But whilst what truth the shadows do project in their confused and illusive manner does stimulate us to seek Truth, that Truth is itself the cause of the shadows, and this asymmetrical causal relationship can never be reversed. The realm of contingency and flux, and the sophistic knots of constructed speculative language games can never, in those terms, reveal Truth to us.

Aristotle, however, starts with science and logic and particular practical contexts and seeks to work upwards towards the ultimate good. In crude terms, Plato is a top down thinker who defines all particular truths in relation to the ultimate truths on which he believes the relative currency of particular truths depends; Aristotle is a bottom up thinker who finds science and logic true enough to build a ladder towards the ultimate truths to which they point.

Throughout this paper I will use the terms 'Platonistic' and 'Aristotelian' to refer to the above basic differentiation in epistemological approach regarding the 'objects' (or

⁶ This sounds like a very big claim. But all I am suggesting here is that non-religiously premised, non-metaphysical philosophy must abandon the notion of truth that our Western religious and metaphysical traditions have given to us. Where truth is openly abandoned, or where "truth" no longer means the state of belief where our minds are aligned with or inhere in the Mind who gives reality its intrinsic, qualitative and teleological meaning, then there is no intrinsic, qualitative or teleological reality beyond what we fictitiously construct. When this happens, nothing can ground our knowledge of the contingent, quantitative and purposeless "reality" we are left with in any fixed meaning. When all becomes constructivist and non-intrinsic, even the belief that all is constructed and non-intrinsic cannot be taken as anything other than an assertion of faith in meaninglessness. And faith in meaninglessness is a self contradiction of the first order if this faith is meant to be taken as a meaningful assertion.

⁷ Plato, *The Republic*, Book VII, 514 - 521: Cooper, J.M., (ed.) *Plato, Complete Works*, Hackett, USA, 1997, pp 1132 - 1138

⁸ Plato, *Sophist*: Cooper, J.M., (ed.) *Plato, Complete Works*, Hackett, USA, 1997, pp 235 - 293

‘Subject’) of metaphysical knowledge. I am not hereby committing Plato to being Platonistic or Aristotle to being Aristotelian in these terms, for their epistemological stances are more nuanced and in motion than such a designation will allow. However, I see it as uncontroversial to label these two approaches as deriving, in Western philosophy, from Plato and Aristotle.

It is also worth pointing out that in this paper I am talking about "Platonistic" and "Aristotelian" epistemologies of transcendence in an essentially theological manner. This again is not to claim that either Plato or Aristotle were, in any sense, what the Christian tradition would call theologians.⁹ Yet, when they seek or infer knowledge of transcendent truth, Plato and Aristotle do demonstrate two distinct theological methodologies. However, Plato's theology is proto-religious whereas Aristotle's theology is not, in a Christian sense, religious at all. Hence, I find Augustine to be the outstanding maturer of the Platonistic approach to knowledge of the Divine in the West. Hence, I hazard to find Spinoza, in the manner of *Prior Analytics*, and Paul Davies,¹⁰ in the manner of *Posterior Analytics*, as masters of what I am describing as the Aristotelian theological approach.¹¹

⁹ Yet, I would agree with Pickstock that the sympathy early Christian theology found with Plato is in no manner forced. See Pickstock, C., *A Short Guide to Plato*, Oxford University Press, forthcoming (as alluded to in Ward, G., (ed) *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2001, p164). Yet, it does not contradict Pickstock to also note that where Plato and Christian revelation were at odds, early Christian theologians - who were usually deeply sympathetic to Plato - saw Plato, rather than Christian revelation, as wrong. See Edwards, M.J., *Origen Against Plato*, Ashgate, England, 2002.

¹⁰ Spinoza, B., *Ethics*, Oxford University Press, 2000; Davies, P., *The Mind of God*, Simon & Schuster, USA, 1992.

¹¹ Two things need to be clarified:

Firstly, I am implying here that Plato's theological epistemology is easily reconciled with Judeo-Christian theology, and that Aristotle's is not. Where Aristotle is used by Judeo-Christian theologians - and he is extensively used - key features of Aristotle's epistemology are ignored or radically adapted. This is because the notion of revelation, of God caring to communicate to us in specifically linguistic, intimate, personal and historical terms, is key to the Judeo-Christian notion of faith. Plato's theological epistemology can be modified to align with the Judeo-Christian concept of revelation. Aristotle's first philosophy, where all our knowledge of the divine comes from our perceiving mind and where God is inherently distant from us, cannot be modified to align with Scriptural and immediate, participatory revelation.

Secondly, I am seeking to point out that in important respects Plato is not "Platonistic" and Aristotle is not "Aristotelian", within the specifically theological epistemological categories in which I am using these terms. Though Plato's epistemology is religiously inclined, it is pre-religious compared with Augustine. In this sense Augustine's Platonistic theological epistemology is the best example of what I mean by the "Platonistic" approach to the knowledge of transcendence. And as C.S. Lewis' potent case for moral education points out (*Abolition of Man*, Fount, London, 1999) Aristotle, in sharpest contrast with the modern tendency of debunking undemonstrable first principles, always *believed* in the objective validity of the qualitatively undemonstrable. It is only when one takes Aristotle's empiricistic and logical approaches to knowledge *outside* of his belief in the self evident validity of the undemonstrable foundations of first philosophy (which his empirical and logical approach to knowledge rests on, rather than supports) that one get what I am calling the "Aristotelian" epistemological trajectory that finally leads away from objective value, theology and transcendence altogether. In some manner, Spinoza and Davies still *believe* that ultimate meaning is the grounds of logic and observation, but Russell and Hume do not so believe, and ground their unbelief in how they read the Western tradition of logic and observation. It is in this sense that what I am calling an "Aristotelian" theology leads to no theology.

3. The failure of Aristotelian epistemology in regard to the knowledge of transcendent truth

Near the start of Aquinas' *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Saint Thomas notes that in *De Partibus Animalibus* Aristotle holds divine knowledge to be the highest and most desirable knowledge, even though it is a knowledge which we only grasp in very small part.¹² Aquinas does not actually misrepresent Aristotle here, but he does subtly use Aristotle to support his own Christian notion that religious faith (not speculative science) is the obvious way of grasping divine knowledge. Aquinas' stance on this matter is completely foreign to Aristotle.¹³

Having established the pre-eminence of divine knowledge with the authority of no lesser person than "The Philosopher", Aquinas goes on to delineate the theological wisdom that is "above reason", from the theological knowledge that is graspable by natural revelation (immediate perception and logic). Thus Aquinas plunges Aristotle into the Christian baptismal in the service of his apologetic task of converting the Gentiles (Arabs and Jews) to the true gospel. Yet, one cannot help but notice that Aquinas' first philosophy proceeds in a very different direction to Aristotle's, and this is because, of course, Aquinas is firstly a Christian theologian and Aristotle is firstly a pagan philosophical scientist.

Whilst Aristotle does see first philosophy or "theology" as the most intellectual, primary and highest form of human knowledge, Aristotle's theology is not at all religiously apprehended. Taylor's careful essay on Aristotle's epistemology¹⁴ – drawing solidly on the *Posterior Analytics* and Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* – makes it clear that when all is said and done, it is "Aristotle's attempt to make perception fundamental to all kinds of knowledge"¹⁵ that renders what little knowledge we can have of the divine, essentially naturalistic. Aristotle's *knowledge* of the divine has no place for that which is "above reason", in stark contrast to Aquinas' theology. (Pickstock points out that Aquinas' metaphysics is, after all, not Aristotelian.)¹⁶ The divine, through the mediation of great physical distance and abstract deduction, is here dimly known *about*. Such knowledge is speculatively cosmological, inferentially causal, metaphysically teleological and is naturally apprehended. The type of distant intellectual appreciation of the divine so revealed is typical of what Pascal understands to be the abstract irreligion called forth by "the God of the Philosophers". Pascal sees the God of the Philosophers is an idol created by, and in the image of, our own mind and experience.

¹² Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book One, Chapter 5: Pegis, A.C. (trans), University of Notre Dame Press, 1975, p70

¹³ Aristotle, *De Partibus Animalium*, Book I, 5 (644b 21 - 645a 17): Barnes, J., (ed) *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Princeton University Press, 1995, Vol 1, pp1003 - 1004. In this passage Aristotle does not simply value astronomy over all sublunar natural science, but points out that both areas of knowledge "have their special charm"; sublunar knowledge is more certain whilst divine knowledge is more noble. But needless to say, divine knowledge as Aristotle understands it, is only knowledge to the extent that it is amenable to Man's natural powers of perception and logic (which it is in only the most scanty manner) and hence speculation rather than faith are the only grounds of attempting to grasp some form of this knowledge that Aristotle can think of. This is very different to how Aquinas understands the knowledge of the Divine.

¹⁴ Taylor, C.C.W., "Aristotle's Epistemology" in Everson, S., (ed) *Companions to Ancient Thought: Epistemology*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp116–142

¹⁵ Taylor, C.C.W., *ibid*, p137

¹⁶ Milbank, J., & Pickstock, C., *Truth in Aquinas*, Routledge, London, 2001, p106

In Aristotle's defence, it may well be a great intellectual failure to observe nature closely and not be taken in worshipful wonderment. Profound natural insight may well infer the Unmoved Mover above the universe rotating the celestial spheres by the eternal attraction of pure intellectual love. Yet, the substantive content of Aristotle's basic metaphysical postulates about meaning, purpose, reason and value – the first and undemonstrable truths that underpin his whole system of philosophical science – become increasingly speculative as one seeks greater certainty within the only grounds of knowledge Aristotle provides (perception and formal logic). If you push the critical process of seeking certainty about the undemonstrable foundations of first philosophy to its logical end point, these foundations vanish altogether, leaving naturalism itself completely ungrounded in truth.

Aristotle's natural theology, like all of his work, has an enduring profundity and simplicity to it. However, it is clearly "theology" without faith – that is, without a relational inherence of the devotee in the Divine – and it seeks no religious contact with the Divine, but is content to postulate *about* the divine instead.

That is, having Aristotelian "knowledge *about* God" is to speculatively construct the idea of "God" to the best of our epistemological, theoretical and imaginative powers. "*Knowing* God", however, in the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, is a very different affair. To know God in the manner in which "a man speaks with his friend",¹⁷ in the direct and intimate terms of "our Father",¹⁸ is *not* dependent on our mental constructions of 'what' God is. For, to Judeo-Christian belief, God is a 'Who' rather than a 'what', and as *The* personal subject, He can only be actually known by us in the categories of interpersonal relation. Further, God's 'what' – if He does indeed transcend the universe itself – remains infinitely uncontainable by our finite minds.¹⁹ To "know God" in this specifically religious and relational manner, is to receive His self revelation in the inter-personal terms of love in which He reveals Himself, rather than the terms of cognitive capture which are always only of analogical importance (and this is of real importance) but can simply not actually capture God as an object enclosed within our intellect. And, if the *imago Dei* is to be believed, this distinction between 'who' and 'what' does not just apply to God. All personal subjects transcend intellectual capture. I may know a great deal *about* Karl Marx, but if I have not met him and experienced at least a degree of the spiritual mystery of interpersonal penetration with him, I do not *know* – in the reciprocal interpersonal existential terms of love – Karl Marx.²⁰ Without an actual interpersonal relationship with Karl, no matter how much knowledge about him I have and how much I admire his thought and personal character, I do not know him.²¹ (And if

¹⁷ Exodus 33:11

¹⁸ Matthew 6:9

¹⁹ An interesting tying together of revelation and apophaticism can be seen here. The 'Who' of God is knowable and even effable in the relational mystery of the self giving Logos of God who is love. God, as Person, is no formal noumenal entity about which we can only have apriori and empty knowledge. However, the 'What' of God, outside of specifically personal and revealed term, remains forever beyond our propositional knowledge. Yet, within the 'Who' revelation of divine love, God does reveal to us analogical 'whats' about 'who' He is.

²⁰ See Buber, M., *I and Thou*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1958 for a good description of the spiritual perspective of interpersonal encounter embedded in the divine found in the Judeo-Christian perspective.

²¹ I can, of course, love what Marx loved in reading his work – and experience something akin to friendship with Marx thereby – but this is to know what Marx knew rather than to know Marx.

Origen is right, true knowledge *is* love, and mere disinterested knowledge about anything or anyone – ie information – is not knowledge at all.)²²

In Aristotle's theology, Man as an individual being is, as with nominalism, autonomous from God. Further, Man's existential context is always bounded by the sub-lunar (the natural as opposed to the divine), even though the faculty of mind in Man is divine and hence attune in harmonic resonance to the intellectual music of the Heavens.

Taylor points out that Aristotle's epistemology is grounded in his very naturalistic understanding of the human soul. From this grounding his empiricist epistemological foundationalism works well, within its limits, provided one does not push the question of how one knows the truth of the undemonstrable premises of knowledge. This truth, and all teleological meaning, is somehow infallibly inferred without demonstration from perception in Aristotle.

Aristotle's disinterest in sceptical epistemological concerns about perception, and his disdain for Platonic notions of the spiritual essence of the soul, means he sees no reason to get tangled in the kind of problems of uncertainty that Plato grappled with. Aristotle straightforwardly assumes a valid equation between what perceptually and logically *is* with what morally *ought* to be and with what is inherently *meaningful*, and finds a more or less naïve empiricism the only sensible stance to take on truth.²³

So any practical knowledge of primary truth Aristotle may seek – notably, knowledge of the *summa bonum* – is all derived naïvely from perception, from tight logic and from wise opinion, even though the higher up and further away from sensory immediacy such knowledge moves, the more speculative and less testable it gets, and

²² Crouzel, H., *Origen*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1989, p99. If Origen is right, then truth and meaning is given only by love.

²³ It is interesting to note that Hume's critique of equating "is" with "ought" (*A Treatise of Human Nature, Book III*) and G.E. Moore's conception of the "naturalistic fallacy" (*Principia Ethica*) presents the kind of meaningful naturalism Aristotle puts forward with some fundamental challenges. (Which is not to say that Hume and Moore do not have their own fundamental problems.) Iff perception and logic alone account for knowledge, and iff undemonstrable first principles are considered purely speculative, then Aristotelian moral philosophy and metaphysics cannot stand against Hume. Hence Catholic natural moral philosophy, if reason is considered autonomous from (though aligned with) faith, is vulnerable to some very heavy hits from the work of Hume and Moore. Only where one holds that knowledge is grounded in the type of revelation that must be committedly *believed*, (ie where faith is the grounds of reason) rather than ratio-empirically proven, can the notion of intrinsic natural moral qualities be unconcerned about Hume. Faith grounded reason critiques the very dubious notion of objective ratio-empirical proof, as well as Humean solipsism, thus dispensing with the notion of "is" as Hume uses it. Natural theology where the natural is believed to be embedded in God and reason is grounded in faith is, however, not naturalistic in the secular sense of that word, and makes no apologetic bridges to secular naturalism. Contrary to what appears to be implied in *Fides et Ratio*, faith as the only grounds of reason - a position that Aristotle's commitment to undemonstrable primary truths tacitly accepts - is *not* a mutually agreeing partnership between supernatural faith and natural reason, where both of these 'wings' of belief have a degree of autonomous validity in their own terms. Natural revelation, as revelation, and as the revelation of meaning and purpose, is not self evident, but requires faith to be received. Further, as nature and the human knower are, in Christian theology, fallen, supernatural discernment given by the Spirit is needed in order to grasp the true meaning of natural revelation, just as much as He is needed to discern the true meaning of the Christian Scriptures. Hence, natural reason, as the gift of God to fallen humanity, will always err without faith, redemption and discernment, and these super additions are *not* natural (ie fallen) even though we never escape attempting to grip them from the spiritual weakness and humility of our pre-eschaton position.

the more we must take on faith that such speculations are undemonstrably true. This 'faith' is faith in our own mind. We must have faith in the perception and logic – the divine faculties of the human and embodied mind – that is the dependable natural grounds of the wise opinions of higher metaphysical speculation.

Pascal and Kierkegaard are withering in their dismissal of such faith.²⁴ Pascal notes that as the many incommensurable philosophical notions of the *summa bonum* indicate, there is no natural, objectively empirical or unequivocally rational way of distinguishing between mere speculation and primary truth. Confidence in the natural powers of the human mind to truly grasp (let alone demonstrate) primary truth, let alone transcendent truth, is badly misplaced. But it is so seductive! We think our intellectual powers to be divine, and so we attribute to our own nature (and the natural limits of human knowledge) a hubristic natural divinity.²⁵ Unjustified confidence in the autonomous powers of the natural mind to grasp and contain the divine is the grounds of the Aristotelian approach to metaphysics. As beautiful and noble minded as Aristotle's philosophy is, nevertheless, from the Judeo-Christian perspective, it is an attempt to build the Tower of Babel: the attempt to climb to and seize Heaven, by sheer natural ingenuity.²⁶ The Biblical narrative sees such an endeavour as doomed to end in the fragmentation of meaning itself and the disintegration of civilisation's unifying creative powers.

Yet before entirely natural theology leads to the curse of Babel, it leads to the abandonment of the knowability of transcendence itself. The comment famously attributed to Laplace, that he had no need of the hypothesis of God, is the natural outcome of finding perception to be the sole grounds of knowledge and of finding human logic to be self-sufficiently true. The transcendent becomes, at best, an extraneous hypothesis that those who so wish to can believe in. But, in reality, the idea of God has no relevance to knowledge and practise as autonomous modern Man actually thinks and lives. Tillich points out that our generally assumed naturalistic cosmological philosophy of religion makes "atheism not only possible, but almost unavoidable."²⁷ Further, as atheistic naturalism matures in our intellectual culture, the collapse of belief grounded in the immediate and existentially committed knowledge of God ends up fatally wounding meaningful metaphysics, epistemology and theology. From that place of self-corrosive nihilism, naturalism itself, and the very idea of true belief, must fall.

In the final analysis, the Aristotelian naturalistic approach to the knowledge of transcendence fails. And this failure takes down with it any confidence in a true knowledge of reality. This collapse is the end not only of metaphysics, epistemology and theology, but of philosophy and meaning itself.

²⁴ Pascal, B., *Pensées*, Penguin Classics, London, 1966; Kierkegaard, S., *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Hong & Hong, Princeton University Press, 1992

²⁵ Genesis 3:5

²⁶ "The Inklings" were very interested in this Tower of Babel pattern in the history of civilisation. Their penetrating imaginative treatments of this theme rewards contemplation. See Lewis, C.S., *That Hideous Strength*, Macmillan, New York, 1965; Williams, C., *The Greater Trumps*, Regent College Publishing, UK, 2003; Tolkien, J.R.R., *The Lord of the Rings*, HarperCollins, London, 1991.

²⁷ Tillich, P., *Theology of Culture*, Oxford University Press, 1964, p18

4. The success of Platonistic epistemology in regard to the knowledge of transcendent truth

In *Theaetetus* Plato puts forward the notion that our knowledge of timeless, universal truths - such as mathematics - cannot be derived from perception, but must be directly apprehended by some capacity of the mind herself.²⁸ In *Meno* Plato famously puts forward the notion that because we do have an innate 'pre-recognition' of universal and timeless truths, it stands to reason that our minds have a transcendent origin.²⁹ We can only recognise necessary truths if our minds already have truth, and are, in some profound sense, akin to transcendent truth. To Plato, that we do grasp universal truths beyond the contingency and flux of the perceptual manifold, indicates that our mind is not spawned from contingent, fluctuating, temporal nature. In this way Plato grounds the ordinary processes of thought in transcendence and makes perception a derivative knowledge grounded in thought and the mysteries of transcendent reality, rather than seeing perception as the source of knowledge and hence the grounds of our knowledge of transcendence, as in Aristotle.

Yet, none of these notions are given irrefutable justifications by Plato, and indeed, it seems very likely that all of them are meant to be seen as inspired and searching spiritual analogies, rather than definitive rational or scientific descriptions that replicate a simple correspondence with objective reality. And yet, the rigour of contemplative thought in Plato is in no contradiction to the poetic imagery in which he seeks to express the mystical and spiritually erotic insights that ground his whole conception of the love of wisdom. Plato's onto-epistemological belief framework is subtle and profound.

An examination of how Plato depicts Socratic wisdom, as found in *Apology*, brings out a twofold purpose in Plato's approach to the human situation in relation to the divine, and reveals Plato as a deeply theological thinker. Negatively, Plato critiques "human wisdom" grounded in immediate sensory knowledge, custom, status and power, and mere argument. Such "wisdom" cannot be adequately justified. But Plato's critique is not critique for its own sake. Positively, once merely human wisdom is found wanting, Plato seeks to bring divine wisdom into view - wisdom which cannot be grasped by merely human capacities, but must hence be received, in humility, from the god.

"The god" is pivotal to Socratic wisdom. In *Apology* 22e-23b the true wisdom of "Socratic ignorance" is clearly identified with Socrates' refusal to trust reputed "human wisdom", precisely *because* he serves the god of true and divine wisdom. At issue here is not simply a theory about wisdom and knowledge, but an approach to life that must be lived out in either good faith or bad faith to the god that human certainty cannot grasp. Socrates discovers that such an approach to ignorance and wisdom is politically problematic. For as human wisdom cannot grasp divine wisdom in the terms of human "certainty" and "control", true wisdom, grounded in the divine, will always appear uncertain and subversive to those committed to merely conventional authority and "wisdom". The condemnation and execution of Socrates underlines the political problematic of life lived in devotion to the god of true wisdom.

²⁸ Plato, *Theaetetus*, 185d,e : Cooper, J.M., (ed.) *Plato, Complete Works*, Hackett, USA, 1997, p205

²⁹ Plato, *Meno*, 85d,e : Cooper, J.M., (ed.) *Plato, Complete Works*, Hackett, USA, 1997, p886

This same problematic is also very personal as well as being unavoidably political. Kierkegaard makes much of Socrates' reckless preparedness, in the face of his own pending death, to actively trust the god regarding that which cannot be proven.

[Socrates] poses the question ...: if there is an immortality... He stakes his whole life on this "if"; he dares to die, and with the passion of the infinite he has so ordered his life that it might be acceptable - *if* there is an immortality.³⁰

Socrates' unjustified trust in the god manifested in his courageous gamble on the soul's survival of the body, is lived out in his steadfast determination to live by the goodness of true wisdom even in the face of the death penalty. A Kierkegaardian reading of *Apology*, *Crito* and *Phaedo* seems well justified, as there are no indubitable proofs for the soul's survival of death in Plato, and yet clearly Plato advocates a reckless, gambled concern for the true and eternal happiness of the soul and is not simply concerned with what we might now call deontological ethics.

This rejection of "human wisdom" and yet the tacit acceptance of divine wisdom that cannot be justified in merely human terms, can be seen more broadly throughout Plato's opus. In the so called "early dialogues" no attempt to articulate a definitive justification of any belief is found to demonstrate an unassailable force of reason.³¹ And this problematic comes up through all of Plato's works.³² However, this does not relegate Plato to some exitless maze of fundamental ignorance.³³ Plato has a humble trust (faith) in the god of divine wisdom whom he, like Socrates, seeks to serve. To believe in transcendent truths without justification does not make these truths arbitrary however, for the truths Plato believes in are necessary if Reason is real.

Plato has faith in Divine Reason and hence, the Divine Mind. This faith is a committed and specifically interested belief in transcendent meaning, and this belief makes the highest praxiological demands on the believer. Plato's philosophy is thus essentially religious. Whilst, historically, Plato's faith in Reason is in no sense

³⁰ Kierkegaard, S., *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Princeton University Press, 1992, p201

³¹ See J.M. Cooper's introduction to *Plato, Complete Works* (Hackett, USA, 1997) pp xii – xviii regarding the conjectural basis of a distinct periodised chronology attributable to Plato's works. I share Cooper's opinion that this conjecture is an unhelpful and potentially misleading interpretive map to Plato's thought.

³² The manner in which Plato de-constructively interrogates his own belief in ideal forms in *Parmenides* does not at all negate Plato's commitment to the truth of some type of ideal metaphysical reality on which all particularity depends. The profundity of his commitment to such a belief is actually demonstrated by his happy preparedness to concede that his particular go at trying to bring that reality into the grasp of the mortal mind has its inherent difficulties.

³³ If one reads the "early dialogues" through the eyes of Kierkegaard - whose methodological debt to Plato is very large - then what Kierkegaard calls "indirect communication" can be reasonably argued for in Plato. This method of communicating throws responsibility for the decision of belief onto the reader, but it is done with specific craft in order not only to force a commitment, but to provide an indirect opportunity for the reader to judge truly in her commitment of belief. Though it may appear so, the concealment of the authors beliefs is not a function of aimlessness or ignorance at all. Kierkegaard is very different to Plato in his understanding of what the truth he sought to indirectly present was, but someone who intricately argues any cause for a price, under the conviction that truth cannot be known (a Sophist as Plato defines them) is very different to someone who believes truth can be known, but that the searcher must not rely on any human teacher to gain a false dogmatic certainty. In this manner, Plato and Kierkegaard seem very close. See Kierkegaard, S., *The Point of View*, (ed & trans) Hong & Hong, Princeton University Press, 1998.

Christian, it has a natural sympathy with Saint John's faith in *Logos*.³⁴ To early Christian theologians this sympathy was obvious, despite the equally obvious fact that Plato was ignorant about who the *Logos* is and about some specific moral details of what devotion to a life that pleases God are.

Plato's beliefs are carefully reasoned out, and yet, they are held to with an interest, courage and passion that goes beyond what the best powers of human reasoning can finally tie down. Plato implies that no belief stance can be held to without great existential courage. For this reason Plato despises manipulative sophistic illusions, rejects sceptical attempts at belief suspension, and boldly seeks to articulate transcendent myths. These myths reflect Plato's central, though unstated, belief in the validity, knowability and necessity of transcendent truth. Transcendent truth is knowable - though such knowledge is always a very personal gamble - yet, as it is the only grounds of what we can truly know, transcendent truth is not demonstrable via perception or any other 'natural' means.

If one does not start from this position of faith in reason, one cannot reason meaningfully at all. Without faith in reason, all perception and all language must seem to be meaningless self generated chimeras. From here, however, the belief that language, perception and reason are chimeras cannot be held to as being true. For if one does not assume a knowable Meaning above the flux and contingency of temporal natural existence in which human thought and language is situated, there is no true and no false, there is only sophistic manipulation. "Reason" is then intrinsically purposeless instrumentality, solipsistic illusion and a mere front for meaningless power contests, if there is no meaning in which reality itself is grounded.

In fact, Aristotle can only have the approach to truth that he has because he accepts Plato's stance and then ignores it.³⁵ Reason and the knowledge of truth is unproblematically obvious to Aristotle because Plato has so powerfully destroyed the grounds of Sophistry, and this enables Aristotle to move forward in science and logic with a confidence that perception leads to truth provided one is committed to the foundational metaphysical reality of Reason. Plato's faith in Reason is shot through with existential courage and anxiety, whereas Aristotle has no faith in that sense, but is rather a dogmatist who believes in Reason, and on that ground dismisses what he cannot see (ie Plato's ideal forms) as non-existent. Faith is humble and existentially

³⁴ Of course, Philo's Platonistic Hebraic synthesis is influential on Saint John, but a Christian interpretive framework sees John as shedding revealed light on the truths that Plato saw equally from revelation, though in a religio-historically hampered and prophetic manner. That is, the Christian view is that Plato sees the truth "through a glass dimly". (Interestingly, Jowett's use of this phrase in *Phaedrus* 250b alludes to a common ground between Plato's view of our limited (but real) capacity to grasp metaphysical reality and Saint Paul's in 1 Corinthians 13:12. Whilst Jowett's translation may be guilty of anachronistic liberty, nevertheless, there is a strong empathy here between Paul and Plato that Jowett is right to allude to.)

³⁵ Because the conceptual universe Plato sets up for Aristotle has, as Marx puts it, the "spiritual aroma" of metaphysical reality about it, all that is open to the vigorous mind in that environment is dependable, it is bivalent, it is qualitatively discernable. In this environment observation and logic can be firmly grounded in meaning, and can subtly become the grounds of reason itself. Hence, armed only with keen observation and vigorous logic, (and also a tacit faith in the rational dependability and inherent purposiveness of reality) Aristotle can set about mapping all knowledge, moving from the most apparent, particular and immanent forms of knowledge to the most subtle, universal and transcendent forms of knowledge, by steady steps upwards.

and relationally dependent on the Unseen Truth; dogmatism is unquestioningly sure of its certainties and neatly self contained within its own universe of discourse.³⁶

The Classical period, in general, was not given to dogmatism (or its inverse, pragmatism), but was open to faith (and its inverse, scepticism). Augustine, as the last great Classical thinker, undergoes an amazing interpretive transformation as the pillar of Medieval Western Christendom.³⁷ The power of his faith in finding truth becomes the dogmatic foundation of the Middle Ages. It is only in an age of authority, where primary truths are unproblematically religiously accepted, that Aristotle can return to the West. And so the return of Aristotle mirrored Aristotle's relationship to Plato, as the Augustinian foundation of authority in faith is ignored, and the simply authoritative dogmatically accepted. On this front Aquinas stands at a fascinating juncture. Aquinas embraces the Augustinian humility of faith, and yet he is a deeply Medieval Christian, fully committed to dogmatic authority. His attempt to adapt Aristotle to the demands of both the humility of faith *and* the certainty of dogmatic authority makes him easily misunderstood by those with a particular sensitivity to faith, by those with an unswerving loyalty to dogmatic and ecclesial authority, and by those who are attune to the nominalist methodology and cosmology of naturalistic science.

It is the very success of Plato's advocacy of a faith foundation for reason and knowledge that ironically created the environment of certainty where naïve empiricist dogmatism and ecclesial dogmatism ultimately came to flourish. But even so, Plato cannot be held accountable for the naturalism and dogmatic religious rationalism that was to flourish in the West after him.

Consider these three beliefs:

1. If reason and meaning are true, one must have faith in them to reason meaningfully at all. (Hence, no philosopher is serious who uses reason and meaning to argue against reason, meaning and truth.)
2. For reason and meaning to be true, they must transcend the flux and contingency that is characteristic of what is apparent to a merely natural perspective (ie, naturalism is a perspective that cannot sustain faith in reason).

³⁶ Aristotle is a model of scientific revisability; he is not dogmatic in that sense. But he can be read as being dogmatic in his untroubled naturalistic confidence in observation and logic as grounded in their self evident undemonstrable premises. More generally, dogmatic scientism is what I have in mind here. The unwavering adherence to a strict ratio-empirical methodology of pursuing valid knowledge, when accompanied by an awareness of the limitations of ratio-empirical certainty, is a type of dogmatism that implies the refusal to make judgements of final truth. Naturalistic science is a dogmatic method, not a dogmatic answer. It dogmatically suspends judgement on finding truth in the cause of endlessly pursuing truth. In this way it is opposed vigorously to faith and locates the centre of knowledge in the human knower, not in any transcendent ontological truth in which the human knower is embedded.

³⁷ Peter King in his introduction to Augustine's *Against the Academicians and The Teacher* (Hackett, USA, 1995) describes the epistemological approach Augustine carves out as laying "the foundations for a new intellectual type of late antiquity: the committed non-dogmatic philosopher" (p xix). King notes that with Augustine's passing and the disintegration of the classical world "later generations [explored and developed] Augustine's account of knowledge, [yet] by then a new conception of dogmatic philosophy had arisen." (p xx) Here King points to one of the chief marks of distinction between Classical and Medieval approaches to truth.

3. For us to know reason and meaning the essence of our mind must be embedded in transcendent reason in a manner that transcends the merely natural.

These three beliefs underlie Plato's theological and ontological epistemology. This is an approach to knowing transcendent truth that, though not demonstrable, is the only way to have reason at all. As such it does not finally disintegrate into non-meaning as the Aristotelian approach does.

5. The Failure of the Aristotelian approach to knowledge of transcendence and the post/modern death of truth

The fascinating history of the various risings and fallings of Aristotelian thought in Western culture is very instructive for the purposes of this paper.

During the 3rd century BC Aristotle's scientific philosophy waned in the face of epistemological concerns carried forward by the Sceptics, was displaced by the Stoic and Epicurean responses to scepticism, and was rendered somewhat obsolete by the increasing separation of science from philosophy. This period of philosophical divergence was more or less resolved back into Platonistic directions by the second century AD. Yet, whilst important features of Aristotle's thought were absorbed into Neoplatonism, Aristotle didn't regain a strong following in his own right until the 8th century in Byzantium. Via that revival, Aristotle found his way to the Islamic world from whence, in the 12th century he conquered the West with great moment.

From the 12th century Barnes notes that "for some four centuries Aristotle's philosophy and Aristotle's science ruled the West with virtually unchallenged sway."³⁸ It is not without significance that this period – the formative pre-modern period – sees the rise of nominalism, the decline of Augustinian and Platonist influence, the creation of the secular in Western culture, and the political, economic, artistic, intellectual, technological, social and theological developments that were to give rise to modern world as we have come to know it. As previously alluded to, Tillich also notes that in the 13th century a profound swing in the underlying religious philosophy of Western culture was underway. This was a swing away from an Augustinian, Platonistic ontological and integrative outlook and towards a Thomistic, Aristotelian, cosmological, nominalist and secularisable outlook.³⁹ Within this deep shift in the most primary underlying cultural texture of belief assumptions, the modern world inexorably replaced the medieval world. Aristotle's influence is steady in science, philosophy and theology, all the way from the start to the finish of this profound shift. It is only after this shift is complete that Aristotle moves out of favour amongst the new scientists. Whilst Bacon and Locke both strained against Aristotelian orthodoxies at the end of Aristotle's period of pre-modern scientific influence, Barnes pertinently notes that our modern notion of scientific method is thoroughly Aristotelian.

³⁸ Barnes, J., *Aristotle*, Oxford University Press, 1986, p86

³⁹ Tillich, P., *Theology of Culture*, Oxford University Press, 1964; "The Two Types of Philosophy of Religion" pp 10-30

Scientific empiricism – the idea that abstract argument must be subordinate to factual evidence ... is largely [derived from] Aristotle. The point needs emphasising, if only because Aristotle's most celebrated English critics, Francis Bacon and John Locke, were both staunch empiricists who thought they were thereby breaking with Aristotelian tradition.⁴⁰

Descartes was as influenced by the waves of scepticism to fall out of the ancient past as he was fascinated with the dogmatic ideal of indubitable proof. He was enthralled by the power of mathematics and cautiously enticed by the modern tradition breaking attitude of the emerging scientific enterprise. In some ways he is akin to Aristotle, in other ways not.

Cartesian certainty involves a curious form of dogmatism about one's own disembodied mental essence, and this in itself is totally foreign to Aristotle. Yet, the Aristotelian autonomy of the powers of Man's perception embodied reason is curiously anthropocentric (though not egocentric in the Cartesian sense) when it comes to knowledge, in very similar fashion to the classically Modern outlook Descartes so influentially shaped. Descartes also has a distinctly religious guarantor of the truth apprehended by the thinking therefore existing ego, and this too is nothing like Aristotle. Yet the point of commonality between Descartes and Aristotle that I am seeking to pin down concerns a scientifically philosophical and cosmologically "theological" rationalism that would lead inexorably to Laplace's disinterest in the hypothesis of God. The scientific method of Descartes – mathematical, observation dependent, autonomous from the claims of tradition and religion – has Aristotelian roots. The Continental Humanist Rationalism that finds the human mind in itself adequate to the apprehension of truth, has its roots in Aristotle. And the Empirical tradition notably carried forward by the English, bequeaths to us Modernity cast in a decidedly Aristotelian mould. A pervasive secularistic naturalism in intellectual circles was the outcome of such a cultural trajectory. Darwin, and his dramatic take up, is the product of this long naturalistic progression in Western thought, and by no means some blinding novelty that just appears out of objective science. After the geo-centric cosmological revolt of Galileo, and the *imago Dei* cosmological revolt of Spencer's naturalism, Western culture is radically unseated from the "Christian" cosmological philosophy of religion which began shaping the Modern age way back in the 13th century.

Well prior to the 1860s however, the failure of perception and reason to uncover transcendent truth had already produced the "disenchantment of reason",⁴¹ in Germanic philosophy and theology in particular. By 1841 Feuerbach in philosophy and Strauss in theology, had put the final nails in the coffin of the Christianised Aristotelian naturalism that took root in Western culture in the 13th century.⁴² As the end of that type of reason, these developments signalled the beginning of postmodernity. Understanding thought and meaning, without Enlightenment framed cosmological secularised Christian reason, became the big challenge of the nineteenth century. The social sciences bequeathed to us by Marx were most promising, as they continued the Enlightenment ethos of Progress – praxeologically and scientifically

⁴⁰ Barns, J., *op cit*, p 86.

⁴¹ Harrison, P., *The Disenchantment of Reason*, State University of New York, 1994

⁴² Feuerbach, L., *The Essence of Christianity*, Harper Torchbooks, London, 1957: Strauss, R., *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, SCM Press, London, 1975

conceived – within a materialist metaphysical framework. A meaningless cosmos was now, so Progressives secular intellectuals believed, entirely compatible with truth. Naturalism took a deeply materialist turn and moral constructivism became very powerful. But other approaches, such as the loose trajectory from Hamann through Kierkegaard and on to Tillich, sought to recover a non-secularised theological approach to truth. And then the Nietzschean revival of anti-Christian pagan virtues, grounded in the relentless repetition of a genuinely pagan meaningfulness, sought to undermine metaphysics itself and the entire Western tradition of truth and meaning. This last pathway leads most straightforwardly to Lyotard’s postmodern condition, once all goals, words and meanings – including Nietzsche’s paganism – are stripped of their tacit faith in any metaphysical reality.

Our need to discard metaphysics itself arises from our need to distance ourselves from the failed first philosophy of our post-Christian secularised culture. This culture is grounded in Aristotelian naturalistic epistemological presumptions that finally fail to deliver transcendent truth. And so we have the postmodern need to root up and destroy all metaphysical truth (ie we have the meta-narrative of no-meta-narrative).

6. The viability of the Platonistic approach to an epistemology of transcendent truth now

Plato’s stance on the need to have faith in reason, that is, on the essentially religious nature of philosophy, may be due for another revival. For now that ratio-empiricistic foundationalism has more or less destroyed Western philosophy and theology, meaningful truth may yet again prove to be something we cannot do without.⁴³ Plato’s rebuttals of both sophistry and dogmatism, grounded in the inherent contradiction of arguing against the transcendent reality of meaning and in an incisive critique of all forms of complacent belief naivety, are as powerful and as needed today as they were when he first made them. Plato points us again towards the grounding of philosophy in theology, an outlook the so called ‘turn to religion’ has considerable interest in. But the type of theology Plato points towards – a distinctly religious theology – is very different to first philosophy about “the God of the Philosophers” that Aristotle finds of interest in his foundational and cosmological speculations.

Living in a mythopoetic culture that was largely post-religious in its learned class, and being fully unconvinced by the polytheism and degenerate religious anthropomorphism of his own religious heritage, Plato shows us a religious attitude that is yet bereft of a religion worthy of his devotion. That God is one, that God is entirely Good, that our souls (mind and distinct personhood) are derived from God, that God reveals Himself to us in our every true perception, thought, relation and act - these Plato believes and these ground his reasoning and questing to know and live truth. It is the Judeo-Christian religious heritage that knows God to be as Plato finds Him, (and Plato even seems to know of Christ as Christianity finds Him).⁴⁴ Plato’s faith – unlike Aristotle’s – is implicitly faith in God. And God, or at least the Forms of the Mind of God, is known to Plato via his immediate participation in the Mind

⁴³ See Kierkegaard, S., *The Sickness Unto Death*, Princeton University Press, 1980; Wells, D., *God in the Wasteland*, Eerdmans, USA, 1994

⁴⁴ Consider the perfectly just man who is crucified in Plato's *Republic*, Book II, 361b - 362c : Cooper, J.M., (ed.) *Plato, Complete Works*, Hackett, USA, 1997, pp1001-2

beyond his own mind when he thinks truly. Yet Plato is a pre-religious devotee of God. For these reasons, Augustine, by providing a specifically religious fulfilment of Plato's vision of philosophy, develops the essence of Plato's outlook far beyond Plato. Augustine incorporates Plato's intellectual vision of the transcendent God into a specific historical revelation where God redemptively acts in "our" space and time. And so the barrier of heaven is sundered from above. The Divine is revealed in historical and human manifestations, and the Divine actively transforms us in Augustine. The grace of Theo-centric redemption and the notions of communion and communication with the Divine (comprehensible for all who believe, not just those very smart people with the liberty of contemplative leisure) are radical religious developments beyond Plato. But Plato's philosophy, as religious in form and aspiration, points to these specifically religious developments.

If the genealogy of modernity is as Radical Orthodoxy describes it (and I think it is) then the breakdown of truth and meaning our culture is enmeshed in can be traced very closely to our secular and naturalistic epistemological foundationalism. At the logical end point of that philosophical tradition, truth can no longer be believably grounded in anything more substantive than the inherent uncertainties of appearance, and meaning can no longer be grounded in anything more significant than the solipsistic constructions of speculative imagination. Truth and meaning now break in our hands every time we seek to use them in any serious manner that is more than merely conventional. From here, we can only have meaningful truth and true meaning if truth and meaning are understood in an entirely different way to the nominalist naturalistic trajectory of modern Western culture. There is now no viable belief possible in any equation of a true knowledge of the real with our secular epistemological modern heritage. In this climate, and particularly in the current context of the turn of philosophy to religion, Augustine, as a fresh and promising alternative, can stand. Hence, Augustine's understanding of truth and our ontological grounding in truth, and the theological nature of truth, should be seriously heard.

I would like to finish this paper by having a quick look at Augustine's epistemology of transcendence, and by suggesting that this is a profitable pathway out of the meaninglessness of post/modernity and towards truth, reason and meaning.

7. Sapientia – the knowledge category for transcendence

Put simply, Augustine held that there were four categories of knowledge; *sensus*, *cognitio*, *scientia* and *sapientia*.⁴⁵ *Sensus* and *cognitio* are forms of knowledge Augustine holds to be below intellection. *Sensus* is a merely receptive knowledge derived from immediate sensory stimulation and *cognitio* is the knowledge gained from the combination of *sensus* with memory. *Scientia*, however, is a form of knowledge that straddles intellection and that which is below the intellect. *Scientia* combines *cognitio* with an intellectual grasp of universal categories, categories not, according to Augustine (and Hume), embedded in perception and observation. *Scientia*, according to Augustine, is an instrumental knowledge, of great practical importance and interest, but not a knowledge capable of revealing essential truths.

⁴⁵ Nash, R.H., *The Light of the Mind: Saint Augustine's theory of knowledge*, The University Press of Kentucky, 1969

Sapientia is a fully intellectual knowledge (ie not derived from sensus, cognition or scientia, but apprehended directly by the mind) which is an inspired grasp of true ends. Sapientia is the knowledge of meaning, value, purpose, essential being and transcendent truth. Sapientia is the participatory knowledge of love, a knowledge that grounds the finite, particular, contingent and transitory human knower in the love and reality of the infinite, universal, intrinsic and eternal – yet essentially personal and communicating – Being of God.

The minute one thinks about Augustine’s understanding of sapientia it becomes apparent that this is a category of knowledge that Western intellectual culture in general no longer believes in. From the nominalists in the 13th century onwards, epistemology has been focused more and more sharply on scientia to the eventual occlusion of sapientia. Certainly what we recognise as the modern genealogy of epistemological foundationalism – traced from Descartes through Hume through Kant to its implosion with the Logical Positivists – is concerned almost exclusively with epistemology in the terms of scientia. This genealogy does not even consider direct participatory knowledge of/in the Divine, and where knowledge other than sensus and cognition is concerned, the categories of universal knowledge and moral obligation it derives are entirely formal and cannot be substantive.

Without sapientia there is no knowledge of transcendence – for how more demonstrated could it be that modern scientia cannot comment on truth, being, meaning, love, beauty, value, final purpose? And yet scientia, or the pragmatic instrumentalism it spawns, is our functional meta-narrative of "truth" that pushes all humanities and religious concepts of value and meaning into the waste paper basket of mere solipsistic sentiment. Yet, without meaningful metaphysics, of what value is scientia, and to what end *should* the powers of scientia be directed? Without meaningful metaphysics we lose truth in all its categories: aesthetic, moral, practical, scientific, spiritual, etc. and are left with brute power and the construction of both “facts” and “values” as these are ever subservient to the dominant power interests that meaninglessly determine everything about our lives. Yet the irony of carefully thought out theories of the non-existence of meaningful thought (and the non-existence of the personal thinking subject who constructs these arguments), and articulate affirmations of the inarticulable negation of meaning this instrumental purposeless power context gives us, gives the lie to the “realism” of such meaningless materialism and points us back to Plato.

Wisdom, as Augustine well understood, is only found beyond reason as far as our natural powers of mental construction go. It is a “hidden wisdom”⁴⁶ but it is not therefore, inaccessible for it is directly and transformatively revealed to the heart/mind of faith by the Spirit of God. Grace, the gift of God Himself to us in saving self revelation, through the passion, the gospel, the Spirit and the church, this is the only grounds of truth, meaning and reason.

The gospel is just this that in Christ God has given us grace in its fullness. And the reception of grace is premised on the humility of faith, and hindered, as Kierkegaard points out so powerfully, by the opposite of faith – the hubristic self sufficiency of sin. To philosophy consciously grounded in faith, the most basic epistemological

⁴⁶ 1 Corinthians 1:18 – 2:16

categories are hence the most existential categories of theology. Faith and sin are both relational acts of commitment; commitment to God, or commitment to “Self” as God.

In *The Teacher* and in *Against The Academicians*, Augustine gives a fully religious philosophical account of how we must already have the truth before we can learn the truth – as in *Meno* – and he attacks both sceptical sophistry and naïve dogmatism. In *The City of God*, the inherent meaninglessness of naturalistic paganism, its agonistic, fatalistic and elitist “virtue” and its intrinsic nihilistic violence is spelt out with incisive insight,⁴⁷ at the same time as the ontology of harmony that is the meaningful truth embodied in the City of God is presented. What Plato seeks to do theoretically in *The Republic* and more historically in *The Laws*, Augustine here does in a distinctly theological history with a forward moving eschatology grounded in actuality rather than in abstract utopianism. Augustine’s Platonistic theological philosophy gives meaning and truth its grounding in an actual living historical reality – the Body of Christ – and as the church came to displace paganism throughout both the Eastern and Western reaches of the old Roman Empire, the substantive content of reason of the church came to ground both the Latin and the Greek Middle Ages in Reason that was inherently meaningful, ontological and integrative of facts and values. Civilizational collapse and the failures of faith that corresponded to the rise of dogmatic authority did indeed kill off science in the West for most of the Middle Ages. But if there had been no climate of truth underpinning the Middle Ages, Aristotle’s science and logic could not have had the profound impact they did have in the 12th century.

Naïve empiricism, nominalistic disintegration, the occlusion of sapientia by scientia, the replacing of ontological participation with cosmological individualism, and dogmatism itself, grew and flowered in the West from the 13th century and gave us modernism. Now the vast and uncontrollable flower of scientific power (and its handmaidens of mass production, advertisement and consumption, and politico-economic-military power) unleashed from wisdom stands over us like the dynamic horror of a boiling mushroom cloud. Will we be able to get the genie back in its bottle? Will we be able to harness instrumental power to wise ends? We can only be saved from ourselves by repentance and faith, by gambling on God and by rediscovering sapientia as God’s gift to us.

Augustine shows us how knowledge of transcendence can be had, and how that having is of an essentially religious nature, and how true philosophy is nothing other than Christian theology and the practise of Christian life. If the ‘turn to religion’ can grasp this, there may yet be hope for truth in Western culture. Without such a grasping, there is no truth, no reason, no wisdom and ultimately only inarticulate noise and meaningless struggle in the pointless spiritual void of inherently banal and amoral existence. And then we die.

⁴⁷ Simone Weil’s empathy with Augustine’s account of pagan virtue can be read in her penetrating piece *The Iliad or Poem of Force* (Peter Lang, NY, 2003).

8. Conclusion

In this paper I have sought to argue the following line of reasoning:

Divinely given knowledge of transcendence is foundational to philosophy in the Platonistic trajectory. The Aristotelian naturalistic trajectory falsely believes that transcendent knowledge can be attained by epistemologically anthropocentric natural means. This misplaced confidence in the Aristotelian approach leads eventually to the abandonment of the knowledge of transcendence itself. Without the knowledge of transcendence, philosophy falls into meaninglessness and language, reason and science have only an arbitrary and pragmatic coherence that can reveal no true knowledge of the real. This state of profound ignorance and meaninglessness - which we now peer into - can only be withdrawn from if we are prepared to ditch the very notion of modern nominalist secularity, and take the turn to religion very seriously.

But this raises a question: how serious are contemporary philosophers and theologians⁴⁸ about turning to religion? Can philosophy dabble in religion and maintain its own speculative and non-faith intellectual autonomy from religion, or is philosophy's relation to religion one of all or nothing? (The 'all' being an Augustinian style faith premised theological philosophy and the 'nothing' being secular nihilism.) This paper has sought to demonstrate that there is no mid point between philosophy and theology, but that the relation between them *is* one of all or nothing. Hence, if the line of reasoning I have sought to articulate has any significance, then theology should stop being a non-faith speculative exercise after the model of secular philosophy, and philosophy should realise that without faith there is no reason.

⁴⁸ Isaiah 7:9b “If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.”

Bibliography

- Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Pegis, A.C. (trans), University of Notre Dame Press, 1975
- Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Barnes, J., (ed), Princeton University Press, 1995
- Augustine, *City of God*, Penguin Classics, Ringwood, 1984
Against the Academicians and *The Teacher*, King, P., (trans & ed) Hackett, USA, 1995
- Barnes, J., *Aristotle*, Oxford University Press, 1986
- Blond, P., (ed) *Post-Secular Philosophy*, Routledge, London, 1998
- Buber, M., *I and Thou*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1958
- Crouzel, H., *Origen*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1989
- Davies, P., *The Mind of God*, Simon & Schuster, USA, 1992
- De Vries, H., *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, John Hopkins University Press, 1999
- Edwards, M.J., *Origen Against Plato*, Ashgate, England, 2002
- Feuerbach, L., *The Essence of Christianity*, Harper Torchbooks, London, 1957
- Harrison, P., *The Disenchantment of Reason*, State University of New York, 1994
- Hume, D., *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Penguin Classics, UK, 1986
- Ionnes Paulus PP II *Fides et Ratio*, Vatican, 1998
- Kierkegaard, S., *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Hong & Hong, Princeton University Press, 1992
The Point of View, trans. Hong & Hong, Princeton University Press, 1998
The Sickness Unto Death, trans. Hong & Hong, Princeton University Press, 1980
- Lewis, C.S., *That Hideous Strength*, Macmillan, New York, 1965
The Abolition of Man, Fount, London, 1999
- Liotard, J-F., *The Postmodern Condition*, Manchester University Press, 1986

- MacDonald, G., *The Princess and The Goblin*, Penguin, London, 1995
- Milbank, J., *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1990
- Milbank, J., & Pickstock, C., *Truth in Aquinas*, Routledge, London, 2001
- Moore, G.E., *Principia Ethica*, Prometheus Books, USA, 1988
- Nash, R.H., *The Light of the Mind: Saint Augustine's theory of knowledge*, The University Press of Kentucky, 1969
- Pascal, B., *Pensées*, Penguin Classics, London, 1966
- Pickstock, C., "Justice and Prudence: Principles of Order in the Platonic City" in Ward, G., (ed) *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2001, pp162 - 176.
- Plato, *Plato, Complete Works*, Cooper, J.M., (ed) Hackett, USA, 1997
- Spinoza, B., *Ethics*, Oxford University Press, 2000
- Strauss, R., *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, SCM Press, London, 1975
- Taylor, C.C.W., "Aristotle's Epistemology" in Everson, S., (ed) *Companions to Ancient Thought: Epistemology*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp116–142
- Tillich, P., *Theology of Culture*, Oxford University Press, 1964
- Tolkien, J.R.R., *The Lord of the Rings*, HarperCollins, London, 1991
- Weil, S., *Gravity and Grace*, Routledge Classics, London, 2002
- The Iliad or Poem of Force*, Peter Lang, New York, 2003
- Wells, D., *God in the Wasteland*, Eerdmans, USA, 1994
- Williams, C., *The Greater Trumps*, Regent College Publishing, UK, 2003