

PURITY OF THOUGHT: DUALISM AND DIVINIZATION IN GREEK PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

God is pure thought; the human is a hybrid of divine thought and mortal nature; the goal of philosophy is to purify this thought of its mortal entanglements, and thus to divinize the philosopher.

This nexus of ideas—a philosophical program of purification and divinization—first emerged in Greece among the Pythagoreans, but Plato soon synthesized it with diverse Preocratic contributions, fashioning a version that many subsequent philosophers would find irresistible. So argues this dissertation, which traces the development and refinement of these ideas in order ultimately to expose Aristotle’s own deep commitment to them. For despite recent efforts to read his ethics as anthropocentric (Nussbaum 2001), his psychology as naturalistic (Wilkes 1992), and his theology as irrelevant (Irwin 1990), this program is at the very heart of his philosophy. According to Aristotle, after all, God is a kind of thought—the kind that actively thinks itself (*Metaphysics* 12.9); the human is a compound not only of body and soul, but even of inferior psychological capacities and pure thought (*nous*), which is separable (*De Anima* 3.5); at the summit of his ethics, finally, Aristotle enjoins us to live according to pure thought, adding that such a life is divine in comparison with a merely human one (*Nicomachean Ethics* 10.6–8).

Before it comes to Aristotle, however, this dissertation explains the diverse contributions of the Presocratics to his peculiarly Greek program of purification and

divinization. With them, specifically, it elicits five contributions: the correspondence between cosmos and soul introduced by the Milesians; the divinity of thought proposed by Xenophanes and Heraclitus; the self-intellection of the divine articulated by Parmenides; the purity of thought exalted by Anaxagoras; and the Pythagorean dualism that sought purification and even divinization by the contemplation of harmonies, celestial lights, and their numerical order. After showing both the ways in which Plato synthesizes these contributions and the ways in which Aristotle refines Plato's synthesis, special attention is paid to the following three remarkable agreements between their philosophies: first, the epistemic role of images and metaphors—especially the images of light and vision; second, the supreme importance of contemplation to ethics; and third, the psychological picture according to which *we* are distinct from our *humanity*. The argument behind this influential picture, an argument shared equally by Plato and Aristotle (Gerson 2003, 2005), goes roughly as follows.

The presence of appetites and passions that resist the commands of reason—the phenomenon called *akrasia* by the Greeks—argues a division of the *human being*, but not a division in our *selves*. For we possess infallible self-intellection, they assume, but when we think of our appetites and passions, the identity of our intellect with the objects of its thought is compromised by the necessary interposition of images. When we think of our reason, by contrast, we reveal our identity with it—or very nearly so—since images are almost wholly absent. Only thought of our reason, then, is infallible; only thought of reason, it turns out, is *self-intellection*. Among this argument's most controversial assumptions are a non-representational epistemology and the belief that we possess self-intellection.

By exposing these assumptions and showing their evolution through the Presocratic tradition, this dissertation explains why both Plato and Aristotle philosophized as if the body were a prison. It thereby also explains why they assumed that our pure thought should be separated from the appetites, passions, and imagination produced by embodiment. Only so, they believed, may we become who we really are. Unlike modern philosophers who glorified pure reason after them, however, in compensation for the pain of this separation Plato and Aristotle promise us the consolation of divinity.

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To My Parents

ἀλλ' ἐπὶ πόσον κάθαρσις λεκτέον· οὕτω γὰρ καὶ ἡ ὁμοίωσις τίνι φανερὰ καὶ ἡ ταυτότης τίνι θεῶ.

Plotinus

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