WESTERN PHILOSOPHY AND THE LIFE-GROUND

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Summary

For Western philosophy, “life support systems” (LSS) may be assumed to mean merely emergency medical devices, because there is no category for life’s ecological and social infrastructures in its canon. Western philosophy’s second-order realm of concepts, principles and arguments are in this way essentially decoupled from the encompassing social and environmental systems that lie presupposed beneath its reflective inquiries. While every moment of human existence silently depends on and expresses these very LSS—the life-ground standpoint adopted in this chapter—philosophy’s discourses make them disappear before our eyes as, to employ an often-used term, the mere “furniture of the world.” Accordingly, a “life-value turn” to connect the regulating agency of human thought to its systemic effects, or alternatives, of world construction is an emergent turn for Western philosophy, which we may derive from its very abdication of it, a mind-world dualism underpins most of its 2500-year development after the Pre-Socratics. From Plato on, there is a realm of pure concepts and reasoned visions dwelling above the world of corporeal interests, prejudices and certain death, which seeks to transcend its confused self-desires, illusions and fleeting changes, but does so in peerlessly diverse ways that illuminate our earthly lot—as explained ahead.

The standpoint advanced here is that philosophy must take account of humanity’s natural and social LSS to comprehend how they may be understood to enable broader and deeper ranges of life in a sustainable manner. Yet, this home truth requires a
profound meta-shift in philosophy’s received perspective. The task of the following account of Western philosophy over 2600 years is, thus, to move beyond the established categories of interpretation to new lenses of philosophical accountability and disclosure. To provide the foundational category of judgment required for this philosophical journey, the onto-axiological conceptions of “the life-ground” and the “life-value turn” by contemporary Canadian philosopher John McMurtry (b.1939) are utilized, from which Western Philosophy is mapped in the light of the EOLSS mission.

1. The Life-Ground in Western Philosophy Via Negativa

One of the earliest recorded thinkers from the Mediterranean area, Thales of Miletus (624—547 B.C.E.), stresses the importance of water as the ultimate “brick” with which the universe’s edifice is built, as well as the indispensable “paste” that holds the edifice together, and the skilful “hand” that varies the shape of the edifice in time. Thales’ search for the primary principle represents possibly the first recorded attempt to individuate a unifying notion behind the apparent plurality of natural phenomena. All following philosophical, theological, and scientific explanations share Thales’ intent, though they generally disagree on his conclusion. Thales says water is the primary principle [arché], i.e. the fundamental constituent of reality, from which all things originate, to which all things return, and through which all change occurs. The hydrologic cycle is, for him, the entire cycle of being, which he also characterizes as living being. Thus, the primary principle—water—is the principle of life.

As Thales’ philosophy is reported in the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle (384—322 B.C.E.), repeated empirical observations led Thales to reach the conclusion that ‘the nurture of all creatures is moist, and that warmth itself is generated from moisture and lives by it; and that from which all things come to be is their first principle… Besides this, another reason for the supposition would be that the semina of all things have a moist nature.’ Thales noticed that all living beings are generated in environments characterized by humidity (e.g. gills, eggs and uteri). Throughout their existence, all living beings need water in order to survive, so that all activities of theirs are, in relevant measure, determined by such a need, the meeting of which draws the ultimate line between their being and their being not.

Water has an analogous role to play in that world, which we would regard today as “inanimate,” namely the world of geological, physical, and astronomical phenomena. Aëtius attributes to Thales the notion that ‘even the very fire of the sun and the stars, and indeed the cosmos itself is nourished by evaporation of the waters.’ Thales conceived of all natural phenomena as forms of life. The primary principle is said to pervade entirely, and manifest itself throughout, the universe, cutting across—and perhaps blurring—physical, geological, and biological distinctions, which we now take for granted. As Aristotle reports in his *De Anima*: ‘Some think that the soul pervades the whole universe, whence perhaps came Thales’ view that everything is full of gods.’ Thales reveres the omnipresent living being that is made possible by water as divine.

1.1. Rarefying the Life-Ground: the Ideal Turn of Ancient Philosophy

1.1.1. The Ionians and Empedocles
Thales’ search for the primary principle, its life-centeredness and its manifestations in a revered, soul-permeated, divine universe of living matter (i.e. Thales’ pantheistical hylozoism), travels diverging paths with his Ionian disciples. Anaximander (610—546 B.C.E.) claims the primary principle to be ‘the qualitatively indefinite’, or ‘the spatio-temporal boundless’, or ‘the unperceived’, depending on the translation of the Greek word apeiron. Anaximenes (d. 528 B.C.E.), one of Anaximander’s pupils, maintains the primary principle to be air \( \text{pneuma} \), which determines all natural phenomena by rarefaction and condensation. Diogenes of Apollonia (sixth century B.C.E.), probably a pupil of Anaximenes’, speaks of an intelligent primary principle, which shapes throughout, orders, and vivifies the universe. Anaxagoras (500—428 B.C.E.) argues that a rational primary principle—the ‘Mind’ \([\text{Nous}]\)—flows throughout the universe regulating its existence in an orderly fashion.

One feature uniting all these thinkers and Thales is their privileged position in society. Although very little is known about their biographies, it appears that all these pre-Socratic thinkers were active in politics, which implies that they belonged to the landed or mercantile class ruling the Greek-speaking city-states spread around the Aegean and the Ionian seas. Anaximander, for instance, appears to have been the leader of the Greek colony of Apollonia.

Another feature typical of these pre-Socratic thinkers is that Thales’ search for the primary principle gradually sub-divides in a number of sophisticated investigations of physis [nature]. Each of them approaches separately the “brick,” the “paste” and the “hand” that contribute to the constitution of the edifice of the universe as well as of its many details. In this manner develop the many sub-branches of the Western intellectual endeavor and, more importantly, a shift in the intellectual attitude towards the world of nature starts to take place.

A third feature worthy of note is that Thales’ more immediate followers begin to wonder increasingly about the “mind” that has conceived and/or conceives of the universe’s edifice. Their focus moves away from the more tangible material aspects of the existing universe and its ability to reproduce itself in ever-changing forms (i.e. by analogy to a living organism). Instead, the focus is redirected onto the ideal features that allow for the consistent organization of the universe, our grasp of it in spite of its inherent diversity, and the immutable structure granting its continuity through time (i.e. by analogy to a geometrical theorem).

With respect to this redirection, however, Empedocles (492 — 432 B.C.E.) represents a notable exception. Like most known pre-Socratic thinkers he too was a member of the elite, as he led the democratic faction of Agrigentum. Yet, he did not pursue any shift of focus from the material to the ideal aspects of the universe. On the contrary, Empedocles spoke of four fundamental material elements—fire, earth, air and water—that unite and divide by mutual love and hatred. These four elements are said to be the ‘seeds’ or ‘roots’ of all things, hence by analogy to botanical observations. Absorbed amidst the received wisdom of ancient Western philosophy, Empedocles’ theory of the four elements is to become later a standard conception of the sub-lunar world, at least until the eighteenth century, although it still informs much of today’s New Age theories.
As a general trend, however, the ideal turn—away from the more tangible material aspects of reality—will prove too strong a drive to resist. As Gaston Bachelard (1884—1962) and Ivan Illich (1929—2002) have observed, generations of successive philosophers will eventually redirect Thales’ water from actual streams and seas to the Christian metaphor of baptismal redemption and to ‘H2O’ i.e. the abstract formulation of modern chemistry. In this sense, Thales’ original philosophical enterprise could not but lose its life-centeredness, as his followers’ emphasis shifts from the embodied and dynamic features of natural life (i.e. from poiesis [making, generation]) to its logical and static principles of organization (i.e. to mathesis [learning, demonstration]). They all may keep seeing the universe as the ordered system of living nature—the Greeks’ standard conception of kosmos—but the focus is no longer on the living nature, but on the ordered system in abstraction. Thales’ reverence of divinity shifts away from the living, embodied realities of the observable world, preferring their intimate, “thinner” constituents that reason alone can grasp.

In McMurtry’s conceptualization for this chapter: ‘The diremption of thought from the principles regulating the life-ground to the abstracted principles in themselves as immutable directives from a higher ideal realm forms the essential dualism of Western philosophy ever after. It never fully reaches the idea of a comprehensive embodied unity of flesh and idea as an integrated open human possibility that overcomes all dualities in a oneness of life becoming the life-ground conscious of itself in human understanding’. (See Philosophy and World Problems).

1.1.2. Pythagoras

Pythagoras (569—475 B.C.E.), who was also a pupil of Anaximander’s, illustrates the initiation of this mathesis-driven trend most formidably. He understands the fundamental structure of reality to be numerical in nature, hence transforming the universe into a mathematically ordered organization of the indefinite. Individual frogs, stones and stars are turned into sets of universally valid arithmetical and geometrical properties, which only the trained mind of the philosopher can fully grasp. The study of arithmetic and geometry can give us access to something that is much more stable, certain and imperishable than what may be ascertained by any empirical observation, i.e. the compelling truths of deductive reason.

Pythagoras’ celebrated motto ‘a figure and a platform, not a figure and a sixpence’ is particularly telling, for it suggests that the study of arithmetic and geometry is a platform to reach the divine abstractions of the mind and not a tool to resolve life’s problems. The turn away of the more tangible material aspects of reality is also a value turn, not just a matter of intellectual focus. Even Pythagoras’ celebrated pacifism and vegetarianism can be ascribed to his mathesis-driven attitude, insofar as the murder of that which lives is a source of disharmony in the cosmos. In other words, the philosopher’s trained mind can realize that the universe, being a perfectly structured geometrical figure, ought to be kept in its proper form. Thus, the embodied life-ground becomes instrumental to the contemplation [theoria] of a sound universe and loses any value in itself.

With the Pythagorean school of Croton, the search for the primary principle grows not
only more abstract, but also more elitist. The sets of mathematical uniformities, into which natural reality is translated, require a very special education to be seen and appreciated. Only select groups of leisure-granted individuals, who can afford to devote themselves to a life of theoretical contemplation, are capable of this. In addition to the intellectual and axiological preferences, an aesthetic preference emerges in conjunction with his *mathesis*-driven attitude, as the removed perfection of ideal beings is opposed to the ordinarily perceived imperfection of embodied beings.

1.1.3. Heraclitus

Born in Ephesus, Heraclitus (540—480 B.C.E.) exemplifies further the growing theory-driven and elitist attitude of ancient Western philosophy.

On the one hand, Heraclitus conceives of the abstract logic of opposites of the ever-changing material universe (viz. life and death, hot and cold, day and night) as the fundamental, unifying “backbone” of reality. The world may ignite, flicker, die out and revamp ceaselessly, as though it were made of fire; yet there is logic behind its mutability. The existence and behavior of fire follow precise rules. According to Heraclitus, there is an underlying ‘Reason’ or ‘Word’ [*logos*] that gives unity to the plurality of unrepeatable phenomena of which nature seems to consist: ‘Listening not to me but to the Word it is wise to agree that all things are one.’ Heraclitus claims this abstract logic of opposites to be accessible solely to the enlightened minds of the few: ‘Of this Word’s being forever do men prove to be uncomprehending, both before they hear and once they have heard it... Other men are unaware of what they do when they are awake just as they are forgetful of what they do when they are asleep.’

On the other hand, Heraclitus was nicknamed ‘the obscure’ because of his style. He wrote in an oracular, aphoristic style, which was meant to be accessible only to superior minds like his own. Heraclitus’ social division between the unenlightened and the enlightened, and the mounting division between the sense-experienced world of nature and its underlying reason-grasped world of principles, reflect each other. Elitism may not be evil or life-blind as such. However, by focusing on the interests and concerns of a minority, it makes life-blindness more likely, especially as regards the ways in which the few may profit from the reduction or elimination of life amongst the many (e.g. Greek slave society, Athens’ pirate economy). Besides, by placing more emphasis on the abstractions of the mind than on the basic material needs of the living, elitism may easily lead to neglect or even justify the ways in which the select few enjoy their refined life of contemplation at the expenses of the many who toil for them.

1.1.4. The Eleatics

Emblematic is the case of Parmenides (b. 510 B.C.E.), leading politician and philosopher of the city of Elea. Parmenides argues that only the one, unchangeable world discovered by reason alone *is*: ‘For it is the same thing that can be thought and that can be.’ The fleeting world of natural phenomena, of which we have sensuous experience, *is not*: it is mere appearance and it is cognitively unreliable. With Parmenides, the primacy of rational intellectual abstraction becomes paramount axiologically, socially, epistemologically, and ontologically. The world that matters is not the world of matter: it is the ideal world; it is the world to which Parmenides has
privileged access by reason. In truth, according to Parmenides’ *Proemium*, there is no actual world of matter.

With Parmenides, Thales’ hylozoism is vanquished completely, as life cannot pertain to the world of matter, for the world of matter is illusory. Life comes to be understood as, and reduced to, the mind’s [*nous*] life of theoretical contemplation. Nothing of any relevance can be dug out of the lower material world of the senses, to which the ignorant person is enslaved. Revealingly, Thales’ far too many and far too trivial gods of the biosphere disappear as well, as Parmenides’ *Proemium* portrays philosophical wisdom as the gift of a goddess from the celestial sphere.

A pupil of Parmenides’, Zeno of Elea (c. 490—435 B.C.E.), is famous for his logical paradoxes, which make the seemingly obvious phenomenon of motion utterly unintelligible. For instance, Aristotle’s *Physics* reports one of Zeno’s many puzzles, whereby ‘the slower when running will never be overtaken by the quicker; for that which is pursuing must first reach the point from which that which is fleeing started, so that the slower must necessarily always be some distance ahead.’ Achilles will never be able to reach the plodding tortoise, for the space between them can be divided *ad infinitum*.

With Zeno, the deductive principles of mathematical thinking wage war onto the inductive principles of empirical observation. As a result, the unity of our understanding is fractured and, more profoundly, the unity of the universe is fractured. Zeno makes us doubt the life-world and its experience itself by entangling us within the net of human abstractions as the ultimate reality, whence the world is devalued and estranged, even at the basic level of physical motion. The ideal is set into conflict with the bodily and priority is given to the former, hence with all that life-world that is not abstract thought. This prioritization is carried to a level not yet seen with any other pre-Socratic thinker but, possibly, only Zeno’s mentor, Parmenides. Probably, a neologism should be coined for the Eleatics’ understanding of life—*nous-zoism*—for all that is relevant, knowable with certainty, and actually existing, descends from the “higher” divine world of reason, to which the philosopher alone may attain entrance.

### 1.1.5. The Sophists

Zeno’s contemporary, Protagoras of Abdera (c. 490—421 B.C.E.), is known as the father of relativism: ‘Of all things the measure is man, of the things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not.’ Relativism annihilates the universal validity of human knowledge by making it relative to the particular understanding of each particular individual or, in an alternative version, of each particular human community. For Protagoras, each ‘man’, or his community, is the yardstick by which all phenomena are evaluated. This is, at least, the standard interpretation of Protagoras’ well-known statement quoted above, for another would be possible, which does not identify ‘man’ with the particular individual, but with humanity as a whole.

Gorgias of Leontini (c. 480—376 B.C.E.) similarly denies the possibility of valid universal human knowledge by highlighting how human thought is ontologically impalpable, utterly different from the physical reality that it wants to represent, and
bound to be unreliable because of the volatile interpretations of the particular individuals who entertain it.

Protagoras and Gorgias are the two most famous sophists of the golden age of Greek philosophy. Often regarded as the expression of the growing power of the urban middle class of their day, the sophists were itinerant masters of rhetoric, who were willing to train people from all social classes, as long as they could afford to pay for their costly services. In exchange for money, the sophists would help their clients to become skilled orators, in order to achieve success as, say, salespersons, politicians and lawyers. The sophists were individuals profiting from helping other individuals to achieve individual success: Pythagoras would have been disgusted. The world of human affairs was the only context they deemed relevant to explore and study. Anthropocentrism was their basic and defining assumption, probably to the point of understanding *anthropos* [human] as the particular individual.

Because of the “prostitution” of aristocratic knowledge to the layperson’s self-interest, Socrates (470—399 B.C.E.), Plato (427—347 B.C.E.) and Aristotle will criticize more or less ferociously Protagoras, Gorgias and their itinerating colleagues. The sophists’ denomination as ‘sophists’ is itself a derogatory “gift” received from these three great minds, who wanted the ‘sophists’ to be expelled from the exclusive circle of properly-called ‘philosophers.’ Indeed, the bad press received by the sophists has caused their art (i.e. rhetoric) to be regarded as a rather dubious activity, deceitful and indifferent to the pursuit of the actual truth. Western philosophers, not only in the days of classical Athens, have often desired not to be confused with the likes of Gorgias, who sold apparent truths. For centuries, Western philosophers have desired to be seen as the heralds of the actual truth, whether this be: metaphysical truth (e.g. classical and medieval philosophy), scientific truth [i.e. the role of modern philosophers as judges of properly conducted research (e.g. logical neo-positivism)], or critical truth [i.e. pertaining to the identification of the conditions for the possibility of knowledge (e.g. Kant’s transcendental idealism)].

### 1.1.6. The Skeptics

Not all Western philosophers have had faith in “deeper” or “higher” truths. The skeptical school of Pyrrho of Elea (c. 365—275 B.C.E.) and Timon of Phlius (c. 320—230 B.C.E.) represents the most adamant case in this direction. The name of the school reveals it: ‘skepticism’ derives from the Greek word *skepsis*, i.e. ‘doubt.’ And *epoché* or ‘suspension of judgment’ was the fundamental tenet of skepticism, which combines the distrust of the senses with the distrust of reason itself.

To put it simply, our senses are, according to skepticism, unreliable. For instance, something is hot for me, which is cold for another. In addition to this, reason itself is regarded as unreliable. For instance, the sophists’ ability to help lawyers to win cases in court by means of weak but strong-sounding arguments is just one of the many cases that display the prevailing irrationality of the human being. In brief, since we cannot know with certainty, whether inductively (i.e. by relying primarily upon the senses) or deductively (i.e. by relying primarily upon reason), we should be honest about our condition and pass no judgment at all. Furthermore, since human action is based on
belief, and belief cannot be supported by any reliable knowledge, action should be dismissed altogether. If you doubt of what you know, you will better do as little as possible.

Put in these terms, skepticism sounds extreme and, as a matter of fact, it was extreme. Pyrrho and Timon embraced an ethics of estrangement that goes under the technical term ‘apathy’ i.e. non-pathos. ‘Apathy’ is commonly translated as ‘indifference’, but its etymology reveals something extreme: non-feeling, numbness, absence of relationship between oneself and the surrounding environment. Significantly, Pyrrho is said to have been most consistent with this ideal of apathy: his friends accompanied him wherever he went, in order to prevent him from falling down cliffs or being trampled by carriages. As exaggerated as these stories on his account may be, they reveal the extreme consequences of ancient skepticism and, in particular, the extreme degree of indifference to life that the ethical ideal of apathy involved.

1.2. The Otherworldly Horizon: the Long-Lasting Legacy of Socrates and Plato

1.2.1. Socrates

Like Parmenides’, also Socrates’ philosophy springs ‘in obedience to God’s commands.’ It is said that the Oracle of Apollo’s appraisal of Socrates as the wisest of men led Socrates to search for the true nature of wisdom. Of this search, however, Socrates did not leave any written testimony. His contemporaries and, in particular, his pupil Plato, recorded how Socrates came to realize that he ought to live not for the sake of material gain, but for the sake of pure rational inquiry. Famously, for Socrates, ‘life without this sort of examination is not worth living.’ Consistently, his philosophy is animated by the search of truth by dialogical reason, i.e. the art of asking and replying to questions, also called the ‘Socratic method.’

Socrates’ philosophy is still hailed nowadays as an example of intellectual freedom and anti-dogmatism. Socrates was not afraid of testing the arrogant, self-satisfied wisdom of the public authorities of his time: politicians, rhetoricians, priests and lawyers—all claiming to possess wisdom unknown to most others. Socrates asked them probing questions and, upon the quality of the answers, verified the reliability of these authorities’ claims to wisdom.

Yet, when it comes to the life-ground, especially in its basic biological and social expressions, Socrates’ philosophy takes it mostly for granted and does not really discuss it. Socrates’ philosophy is oblivious even of that fundamental social life-supporting system that allows him to have time to engage in rational discussion with the self-appointed professional experts of his days, and these very experts to pursue their careers, i.e. Athens’ slave economy. Deep-rooted realities are the most difficult to see and to face openly, even for champions of iconoclastic thinking like Socrates.

Socrates was neither timid nor condescending, however. He was willing to face the fatal wrath of his compatriots—who had condemned him to death for religious heterodoxy and corruption of the Athenian youth—rather than relinquishing his business of ‘talking and examining both myself and others.’ Socrates regarded this business as ‘the very best
thing that a man can do’ and, when presented by his pupil Crito with the opportunity to flee from prison and avoid death, he reacted by examining the reasons pro and contra of such an opportunity, which implied breaking the laws of Athens. By the end of this lucid examination, the contra reasons were such that ‘the sound of their arguments rings so loudly in my head that I cannot hear the other side.’ In conclusion, Socrates opted for death, ‘since God leads the way.’

Socrates’ martyrdom combines most tellingly libido sciendi [desire for knowledge] and cupio dissolvi [desire for annihilation]. With it, Parmenides’ ‘nous-zoism’ strikes another victory, for life is understood as, and reduced to, the life of lucid intellectual contemplation. That which does not compute within the logical coordinates of dispassionate theoria has no truth—and thus no reality. Moreover, thus completing the process initiated by Thales’ immediate followers, even religious belief is reformulated by Socrates in terms of lucid intellectual contemplation. Death itself is welcomed on the grounds of reason, the authority of which is depicted with the colors of utmost divinity. As stated, Socrates opted for death, ‘since God leads the way.’ Twenty-two centuries after Socrates’ self-immolation, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844—1900) will describe Socrates as nihilistic, i.e. preferring annihilation to life. And if ‘life’ refers to the experience of contingent reality from the moment of our birth to that of our corporeal death, as it did for Nietzsche, then Socrates was most certainly a nihilist. In Plato’s Apology, Socrates is depicted as uncertain about the actual nature of death, as he states that ‘death is one of two things. Either it is annihilation… or it is really a change: a migration of the soul from this place to another.’ In either case, death is better than life. On the one hand, ‘if there is no consciousness but only a dreamless sleep, death must be a marvelous gain’, for it liberates us from the endless sorrows of existence. ‘If on the other hand death is a removal from here to some other place, and if what we are told is true, that all the dead are there, what greater blessing could there be than this?’ Were death such a ‘removal’, then Socrates would have reason to celebrate, for he would be ‘to spend my time there, as here, examining and searching people’s minds, to find out who is really wise among them, and who only thinks that he is.’ Although it is not clear whether death be ‘annihilation’ or some kind of ‘removal’, it is certain that Socrates preferred it to this-worldly life. Also, it is certain that Socrates’ approach made the compelling force of logical consistency absolute and, at the same time, belittled all material life concerns of the embodied living person, including the instinct for self-preservation. Socrates’ identification of the human soul with our rational abilities and its glorification as the godlike part of our being provides the ultimate reason to neglect material life concerns. Specifically, Socrates institutes an intimate ménage à trois comprising the possibility of an immortal soul, the human ability to reason, and the notion of divinity. This ménage is bound to characterize the centuries to come, starting with Socrates’ most famous pupil, Plato.

1.2.2. Plato

Plato takes very seriously Socrates’ latter hypothesis about death, i.e. death being the ‘removal from here to some other place.’ He depicts the human being as split in two sharply distinct parts: the mortal body and the immortal soul. The soul alone is to be regarded as truly human, hence valuable, for it is capable of rational thought; in this sense, the soul is divine. The body, instead, and the related requirements of material life
are dismissed as a disgraceful nuisance. The embodied living person must be transcended. Plato’s *Phaedo* and the *Thaetetus* are adamant on this point. There Plato states that ‘we must get rid of the body and contemplate things in isolation with the soul in isolation’, for the goal of human life is ‘assimilation to God.’

This ‘assimilation to God’ is possible because the universe itself is split in two parts, i.e. the mutable material world of sense-experience and the immutable ideal world of rational intellection—and only the latter is regarded as truly real, hence valuable. It is the realm of objective, universal, necessary truths, which any rational mind can reach inevitably and independently of any psychological, social and historical circumstances, if properly trained in the arts of ‘dialectic’ (i.e. the art of correct and enlightened reasoning, which one achieves by training first and foremost in mathematics). This realm lies beyond the material world known to most of us: ‘It appears that when death comes to a man, the mortal part of him dies, but the un-dying part retires at the approach of death and escapes unharmed and indestructible… and that our souls will really exist in the next world.’ Centuries later, Gottlob Frege (1848—1925), probably the most important logician of the modern times, argued in favor of the existence of such an otherworldly domain of being, distinct and independent from both the physical realm and the psychic realm.

Human society for Plato is split in two parts as well, i.e. those who are dominated by the irrational cravings of the body and those who have absolute self-mastery by means of reason—and only the latter are regarded as truly human.

By splitting the human being, the world and society in this manner, Plato’s philosophy neglects the environmental and the human systems fostering material life in the biosphere, whether in a sustainable fashion or not. The mortal life of the body and of any “lower” soul (or soul’s part) is instrumental to the achievement of the glorious life awaiting the “higher”, rational soul in ‘the next world’, to which alone pertains the perfect combination of rational order, ethical goodness, and aesthetic beauty. What this ‘next world’ is actually like, however, Plato cannot tell. About the *post-mortem* domain of being, Plato gives only mythical accounts, drawing inspiration from the great poets of the Hellenic world. As confessed in the *Gorgias*, Plato himself regards these mythical accounts as nothing but inadequate ‘fables by old wives.’ The full picture of this ‘next world’ will present itself only to the exceptional person that, during its mortal existence, became ‘as good and wise as it possibly can.’

Being itself bound to the material world it demotes, Plato’s philosophy reaches the limits of our cognitive faculties and is obliged to engage in the poetical language of Hesiod and Homer by lack of better means. Plato concludes his journey there, whence Parmenides had started his own: mythical divinity. Nevertheless, Plato is neither a visionary nor a poet. His incursions in the territory of oracles, myths, and ancient gods lay in the periphery of his system of philosophical thought. Plato resorts to “unreason” rarely and unwillingly, if and only if reason can find no route of its own. His paradigm for knowledge is mathematical thinking, not poetical or oracular language. He wants future philosophers to be selected according to their abilities for abstract thinking and deductive reasoning, not according to those for lyrical rhyming and sibylline prophecy. To Plato, the use of suggestive myths is secondary and far less satisfactory than the
‘wisdom’ that can be reached by the rational soul that ‘investigates by itself… into the realm of the pure and everlasting and deathless and changeless’ i.e. the realm of ideal entities.

To reach any significant ‘wisdom’ means to lead the kind of ‘examined life’ that brought Socrates to his death. Plato, like his mentor, is not afraid of death either. On the contrary, the mortal body is a burden to be freed from by ‘doing philosophy in the right way.’ The wellbeing of the rational soul is the centre of gravity of Plato’s view of life, and the task of philosophy is said to consist in ‘getting used to facing death calmly’ or ‘practicing death’, i.e. tackling cold-bloodedly that mysterious and unavoidable reality which most humans fear more than anything else.

In designing this ambitious life-plan for the philosopher, Plato’s thought synthesizes Socrates’ ménage a trois of soul, reason and divinity, with all the pre-Socratic elements that contributed to the rarefaction of the life-ground: the Ionians’ focus on the ideal sphere, Pythagoras’ preference for mathematical perspective, Heraclitus’ elitism, the Eleatics’ nous-zoism, the sophists’ anthropocentrism (in the sense of focusing on the human being alone, rather than on other living creatures as well), and the skeptics’ indifference to material life.

This rarefying synthesis is most evident in Plato’s Republic, where he discusses the ideal State or, as many scholars have argued, what the polis of Athens would look like if it were reformed according to the principles of Plato’s philosophical wisdom. For Plato, justice will never reign in any State ‘unless political power and philosophy meet together.’ Therefore, in his Republic, philosophers are kings and kings are philosophers, and they alone are allowed to know the actual ways in which the State operates, for they alone can conceive of the Good abstractedly enough, hence selflessly enough, to lead the whole State towards it. All remaining citizens, instead, should be kept unaware of such ways and manipulated thoroughly, for they cannot conceive of the Good abstractedly enough and, if allowed to follow their unenlightened minds, they would bring the State to its ruin. Top-down censorship and deception, as a result, pervade Plato’s ideal State/Athens.

For instance, the Rulers of the Republic are said to have to fabricate a ‘noble lie’ or mythical ‘fiction’ about the origins of the State, in order to justify and maintain the hierarchical tripartition of the polis into Rulers (philosopher-kings), Auxiliaries (guardians or soldiers) and Craftsmen (producers of material goods). Amid them, the Rulers are said to have to implement a system of eugenics by running fixed mating lotteries amongst the Auxiliaries, namely those better members of society who may, one day, aspire to the position of Rulers and care for the wellbeing of the State.

As concerns what this wellbeing may actually consist in, it can be stated that it is seems to be the production and preservation of an elite of philosophers, who can devote themselves to a life of contemplation and, unwillingly but necessarily, of kingship. Philosophers must become kings out of necessity, for just rule is possible only to those who would not rule in order to attain the selfish satisfactions typical of tyrants and corrupt governments: riches, admiration, nepotism, etc. In Plato’s ideal State, the unenlightened mass of ‘cowherds and shepherds… farmers and craftsmen…
merchants... ship-owners... hired laborers’ who are relegated to the bottom layer of society, see to the basic material necessities of everybody else. The lowest tier of Plato’s just society are going to attend to everyone else’s ‘simple needs’ so that the rest of society may develop, flourish, attain the heights of philosophical bliss, and rule over the lowest tier by philosophically justified deceptions.

If Plato concedes any room to the consideration of basic environmental or social systems promoting broader and deeper ranges of life, it is because they allow for the possibility of enlightenment. And with enlightenment comes the possibility for the enlightened ones to approach the truer life that awaits them beyond the present one, of which this-worldly reason cannot give a definite picture. In brief, kingship should pertain only to those citizens, whose paramount interest is the pursuit of philosophical enlightenment. It is in fact only by the absolute rule of such superior members of society—i.e. those who have attained philosophical wisdom—over the remaining inferior members of society—i.e. those who have not attained philosophical wisdom—that the former group can keep the latter out of the way in the pursuit of intellectual perfection—i.e. the paramount goal to be achieved.

1.2.3. Heathen Neo-Platonism

Challenged by the cognitive limitations of the human being, Plato explores in the *Phaedrus* and in the *Symposium* the paths of mysticism and *eros* [love] for the sake of enlightenment. These paths appear to Plato to be less reliable and less communicable than dialogical and deductive reason. For this motive, Plato does not pursue them further, leaving both alternative paths to the margins of his philosophy. In the centuries following Plato’s death, in a climate of mounting religiousness (especially of Persian and Semitic inspiration), the heathen school of Alexandria is to rediscover these paths and, in particular, to initiate a long tradition of philosophical mysticism. For the sake of brevity, this whole tradition is addressed hereafter as Alexandrine and Neo-Platonic, although it embraces several different phases and geographical centers of development.

The Neo-Platonic tradition turns Socrates’ and Plato’s quest for wisdom into the pursuit of the most complete union with God or the Supreme One. God is understood by Neo-Platonism as the intelligent and benevolent principle of unity, from which the whole universe derives. Their pursuit thus combines together the sophisticated language of Greek philosophy and the growing enthusiasm for transcendence typical of late antiquity. For example, Neo-Platonism argues that God created the whole world, from the luminous Ideas to shadow-like matter, by means of mystical ‘acts of intellection’, variously explained as ‘theophanies, ‘emanations’, ‘illuminations’, etc. Ammonius Saccas (175—242), Plotinus (205—270), Porphyry of Tyre (233—309), lamblichus of Apamea (d. 330 C.E.) and Proclus of Constantinople (410—485) are the best-known members of this tradition, all of whom emphasized the otherworldly drive contained already in Plato’s dialogues and in the teachings of Socrates.

The Neo-Platonic approach to divine agency is somehow sensitive to the immense variety of living beings present in the universe, of which the One is, after all, prime and fundamental fountainhead. However, though recognizing this variety of living being, their approach makes “true” life as disembodied, abstract and otherworldly as possible,
for it establishes a clear hierarchy of value, being and knowledge, which moves from the pure ideal reality of God to the murky imperfection of material reality. Since the human being is regularly depicted as split in two—with a body and a soul pulling into opposite directions—it follows also that the Neo-Platonists endeavor to pursue an existence of disembodied intellectual perfection, of which mystical fusion with God can provide an exhilarating experience before one’s bodily death.

The heathen Neo-Platonists’ pervasive addition of religious elements to Plato’s a priori deductions allows for a qualitatively “other” dimension of being. This dimension is presented in a much more articulate fashion than in Plato’s myths, since it is assumed that this “other” dimension can be revealed to us either directly (e.g. by mystical vision, by divine inspiration) or indirectly (e.g. by holy scriptures, by inspired teaching). Their thematic emphasis is then on this “other” dimension, whilst material life concerns, if discussed at all, are relevant if and only if, and insofar as, they may affect the soul’s ideal life concerns.

Most telling is the case of Porphyry’s text On Abstinence from Killing Animals, which is generally regarded as a founding moment of Western vegetarianism. Porphyry claims that we ought not to feed on carcasses of dead animals because certain animals may possess a rational soul. The source of ultimate value is, for Porphyry, rationality. Also, ‘someone who is eager to live, as far as possible, in accordance with intellect and to be undistracted by the passions which affect the body’ should eat that which is ‘intrinsicly pleasure-free and lighter on the digestion, and more quickly assimilated by the body... [And] less provocative of desires and less conducive to obesity and robustness.’ A vegetarian diet, in other words, is less tasty, more digestible and healthier than a meat-based one. Consequently, it allows for less distraction, more time and better fitness to pursue the training required by mystical philosophy. Besides, indulging in the murderous activities of hunting and of meat eating may even corrupt the rational soul, thus making enlightenment impossible to attain. Porphyry’s vegetarianism may be seen superficially as an act of love towards the life-ground. Yet, to a deeper look, it reveals, like Pythagoras’, a purely instrumental character: it is another, “higher” life that possesses inherent value.

1.2.4. Early Christian Neo-Platonism

Most Fathers of the Church were influenced by Plato and the Neo-Platonic tradition. As such, their thought often combined heathen philosophy and mysticism with the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures and religious devotion. Life was understood as the “truer” life of the soul or spirit (soul and spirit being sometimes distinguished: the soul, or its highest intellectual part, referred to the rational component; the spirit to the animate component). Of these two, the latter was often regarded as either mortal or inferior [e.g. Justin (100—167), Tatian (second century C.E.), Augustine (354—430)], since it was shared with other and inferior living creatures. The former, instead, was seen as characterizing the human being alone on Earth in the likeness of God. Henceforth, the former alone could allow the believer to rejoin God in ‘the next world.’

To the early Christian thinkers, ‘the next world’ consisted in the blissful life to follow the Final Judgment and the Resurrection of the Bodies. As such, the initial Christian
understanding of ‘the next world’ differed from Plato’s and relied upon a historical revelation that was not available to him. Christianity contained, like all Semitic creeds, elements that were not fully consistent with, or explainable by, the philosophical language of Greece (and, by direct influence, of Rome). Indeed, some of these elements were far more materially oriented and this-worldly than Plato’s own ones (e.g. there is no notion of an otherworldly afterlife in the most ancient Jewish religious texts). The marriage of Christian beliefs and Greek philosophy was neither easy nor obvious. Still, it occurred, and it let Socrates’ *ménage à trois* find within Christianity a novel and powerful way to survive.

For example, in spite of its later condemnation as heretical, the prolonged success of Gnosticism amid Christians during the second century C.E. signifies the depth reached by the syncretism of Christian, Platonic and Neo-Platonic elements in the late antiquity. Gnosticism endorsed the starkest dualism of mind and body, which reflects itself into the division between an immaterial world and a world of matter, and into the separation between the inferior human beings led by bodily cravings and the superior human beings led by intellectual aspirations, which translate further into mystical transcendence. Indeed, many forms of Gnosticism reflected this division of reality by establishing puzzling divine diarchies. Sometimes, they posited one good God responsible for the ideal being and one evil God responsible for the material being. Some other times, they posited one purely transcendent God immune from contact with the contingent world of living bodies and an inferior demiurge operating as His intermediary.

Though immune from the puzzling bi-theism of the Gnostics, the eminent Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (20 B.C.E.—50 C.E.) had already moved in the direction later followed by Christian apologists, who will make the philosophical neglect of material life concerns into a firm cultural given of the West. Christians may ‘busy themselves on Earth’, an anonymous early apologist says in the *Letter to Diogenetus*, ‘but their citizenship is in heaven.’

For instance, a Christian disciple of Ammonius Saccas, Origen of Alexandria (185—253), claimed that matter exists for the sake of the soul’s subsistence alone. Had it not been for the Original Sin, there would be no material receptacle sustaining any soul. Having there been the Original Sin, a hierarchy of matter is now in place and it is thus presented in Origen’s *De principiis*: ‘When intended for the more imperfect spirits, [matter] becomes solidified, thickens, and forms the bodies of this visible world. If it is serving higher intelligences, it shines with the brightness of the celestial bodies and serves as a garb for the angels of God and the children of the Resurrection.’ True life, then, lies in the world to come after the extinction of the mortal body, the cravings of which ought to be countered firmly by the believer. Zealously, if not overzealously, Origen is said to have preached and practiced self-castration, in order to reject the sinful desires of the flesh. After all, if ‘true life’, as the Pseudo-Areopagite (sixth century C.E.) states, is ‘assimilation to God’, whose goodness ‘draws the holy minds upward to its permitted contemplation, to participation and to the state of becoming like it’, who needs testicles to produce sperm and continue the contingent world of embodied living persons? The believer’s gaze should not be directed towards the realm of corporeal things, but towards the realm of ideal things.
Though less extreme than Origen, Augustine himself proceeded with the synthesis of Semitic, Platonic and Neo-Platonic elements, typical of late antiquity. On the one hand, Augustine’s *De utilitate credendi* describes ‘purity of understanding’ as crucial to the pursuit of wisdom and of salvation itself. On the other hand, his epistles highlight both the importance of poetical insight (or ‘understanding according to allegory’) and the importance of religious fervor, for ‘we move to God not by walking but by loving [*non ambulando, sed amando*].’ In his *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, one’s itinerary to God is thus characterized: ‘Let not what was made by [God] take hold of you, so that you lose Him, Who also made you.’ The contempt of Plato’s ideal rulers for the petty, selfish, material appetites is seen by Augustine as the trademark of the Christian believer: ‘Christians are well aware that the death of the godly pauper whose sores the dogs licked was far better than the wicked rich man who lay in purple and fine linen.’ Steeped in otherworldliness, Augustine taught not to consider ‘of what consequence is it what kind of death puts an end to life… [since] death becomes evil only by the retribution which follows it.’

So starkly Platonic was Augustine’s conception of the universe that he stated: ‘if, when we say, Thou shalt not kill, we do not understand this of the plants, since they have no sensation, nor of the irrational animals that fly, swim, walk, or creep.’ The spiritual level of being, to which rationality and soul properly pertain is so superior, that the material level of being can be disposed of—even killed at will. Started by Thales’ immediate followers, the loss of reverence for the embodied living realities of the observable world, in lieu of their intimate “thinner” and reason-grasped features, reaches its deepest level. Animals, ‘since they are dissociated by their want of reason… are therefore by the just appointment of the Creator subjected to us to kill or keep alive for our own uses.’ Non-human beings are so inferior to human beings, that they have no intrinsic value, but instrumental value solely.

Augustine admits that animals may be appreciated as intriguing expressions of God’s creativity, but he does not show the apparent concern for animal welfare of Porphyry. On the contrary, he furthers Porphyry’s anthropocentric conception of animal life, which will attain its peak in modern Western philosophy—most notably with Descartes (1596—1650) and Nicolas Malebranche (1638—1715)—whereby all living bodies will be claimed to be nothing but mechanisms, by analogy to the technological paradigm of the Modern Age i.e. the clockwork.

### 1.2.5. Tertullian and His Heirs

Antipathy to the philosophical “contamination” of religion did occur and has lasted throughout the history of Western philosophy. In the early days of the Christianization of the Roman Empire, the apologist Tertullian (155—220) stated famously: ‘What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What has the Academy to do with the Church? What have heretics to do with Christians? Our instruction comes from the porch of Solomon, who had himself taught that the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart. Away with all attempts to produce a Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic Christianity! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after receiving the gospel! When we believe, we desire no further belief.’ Tertullian saw philosophy as
intellectualist and dangerously close to the heathen world. It contained elements that could be disruptive of religion, especially its requirements of intelligibility and consistency, which could not be applied to many mysterious and irrational aspects of religion. For Tertullian, religion’s otherworldliness did not need philosophy’s otherworldliness to complicate and problematize it.

Religion and philosophy were different; hence, they could collide—and they did collide. Before the alleged destruction of the famous library of Alexandria by the Muslim Caliph Umar al-Khattab or Omar (581—644), a mob of Christians had already lynched a respected Neo-Platonic philosopher who taught in those illustrious premises, Hypatia (350—415). This lynching took place under the patriarch Theophilus, who had had all pagan temples destroyed, as ordered by the Christian emperor Theodosius (346—395). On its part, the heathen world was not entirely sympathetic to the success of the creed of Yeshua, as the symbol of his followers, the cross, the cross, states poignantly. Yeshua was executed by the public authorities of heathen Rome by crucifixion, i.e. the punishment reserved to rebellious slaves and political criminals.

Throughout Western history, a few strong voices are to reissue Tertullian’s refusal of the heathen intellectualism “contaminating” the irrational beauty of faith. Thinkers as diverse as Pierre Damien (1007—1072), Al-Ghazali (1058—1111), Martin Luther (1483—1546), Fyodor M. Dostoyevsky (1821—1881) and Miguel de Unamuno (1864—1936) have all engaged in a sophisticated battle against the supremacy of reason over faith. Their voices have symbolized the attempt to liberate religious faith from excessive faith in human reason—‘Socratism’, as the Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard (1813—1855) aptly named it. Who needs priests, saviors, prophets, mystical intuitions and existential leaps, if a good philosophy book can do their job?

Ingenuous efforts notwithstanding, the achievements of resistance against philosophical “contamination” have been rather poor, at least in the Christian traditions. On the one hand, this resistance has led to the re-conceptualization of all those philosophical elements that are not consistent with the central doctrines of the faith. Often, such re-conceptualization has caused ferocious struggles amidst disagreeing factions, excommunicating and persecuting one another. On the other hand, the same resistance has led to the conceptualization of religion itself in philosophical terms, to demonstrate and reinforce the internal consistency of the revelation. Often, such conceptualization has made religion even more otherworldly, philosophy elaborating in more abstract and technically sophisticated terms human-like divinity and related embodied metaphors (e.g. “spirit”, “garden of Eden” and “grace”). Perhaps, no stronger evidence of the success of Plato’s creation can be retrieved than the fact that Tertullian and his intellectual heirs have all made use of philosophy’s own armory against philosophy. Ignoring philosophy was not an option.

1.2.6. The Otherworldly Horizon as the Medieval Mindset

Ignoring religion was not an option either. The truly epochal cultural revolution begun four centuries after Plato’s death—i.e. the advent of Christianity and, later, of Islam—cannot be underplayed. With the widespread assertion of these two Semitic creeds, religion returned onto the forefront of all aspects of Western life, including the
intellectual creations of the intelligentsia, with a pervasiveness seen only in the days preceding Thales’ first investigation of nature. Religion “enriched” or “corrupted” philosophy at least as much as philosophy did the same to religion, and continued to do so at least until the age of libertinage (i.e. the seventeenth century). This mutual “enrichment” or “corruption” of religion and philosophy happened most visibly during the Middle Ages, when Christianity embodied, and entrenched itself within, sophisticated and fiercely hierarchical administrative and cultural bodies, both vertical (e.g. papal government, feudal patriarchy) and horizontal (e.g. confraternities, monastic orders), whose influence is still far from dissolved today.

In the Middle Ages, there were agnostics and even atheists, like the emperor-scholar Frederick II (1194—1250), author of a remarkable *Art of Falconry*, and the poet Guido Cavalcanti (1255—1300). Possibly, the position of revealed religion may have even started to recede as early as the fifteenth century, with the Florentine and Roman revival of paganism. Yet, it is only in the nineteenth century that the Western intelligentsia became mostly and thoroughly secular, with a significant section of the masses following one century later. Atheism, as the second chapter of the *Proslogion* by Anselm of Aosta (1033—1109) exemplifies, was mostly a hypothesis. It may have been philosophically interesting, but existentially ridiculous, for it is ‘the fool [that] has said in his heart: God is not.’

The motto *philosophia ancilla theologiae* [philosophy is theology’s handmaid] expresses very well the compromise found in the medieval world. This compromise was not typical of medieval Christianity alone: Islamic and Jewish philosophies of the same age complied largely with the same motto too. Throughout the Middle Ages, the *Zeitgeist* [spirit of the times] remained typically transcendent, even when “infidel” or “heretical” (from whichever confessional perspective). Faith could not be eluded easily and it was often the starting point of any intellectual investigation. Augustine’s phrase ‘*credo ut intelligam*’ [‘I believe in order to understand’] colored the activity of most philosophers and philosophies of the Middle Ages. Iamblichus’ ‘theurgy’, or training of the soul into presuming always the presence of divinity in the universe, was a given of nearly every serious intellectual pursuit. The Socratic-Platonic drive for ‘the next world’ thrived.

Overviewing nearly one thousand years of Western philosophy, we can discern two fundamental assumptions in the medieval understanding of life. Firstly, *God is the source of all being* and, *a fortiori*, of all life, both material and immaterial. As John Duns Scotus (1266—1308) categorically synthesizes in *De Primo Principio*: ‘Thou art true Being, Thou art total Being.’ Secondly, *God is ultimately transcendent*. Although God is the Creator of material reality and continues to be the fundamental reason for its being, God is also altogether above and untouched by it and the imperfections of material reality.

The nature of the Christian God is pregnant with implications for human life, for it is only by positing an ultimately “other” form of existence that the life of the eternal soul can be regarded as the true life. Medieval thinkers posited this “other” form of existence as the basis of human existence, alienating it from the embodied world as inherently corrupt regularly. Hence, like Plato and the Neo-Platonists, medieval philosophy focused upon something “higher” or “deeper” than the terrestrial world of life to which...
the Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems (EOLSS) is devoted. Along Socrates’ and Plato’s lines, reason, ensoulment and divinity went hand-in-hand with one another realm of existence precisely not life in this sense. Bonaventure of Bagnorea (1217—1274) wrote the most influential and highly representative Itinerarium mentis in Deum [The Itinerary of the Mind (or Soul) to God], not corporis [of the body] or hominis [of the human being] or personae [of the individual]. And he wrote it despite the Christian dogma of the resurrection of the bodies.

Bishop Boethius (480—525), who describes himself as ‘nourished on the philosophies of Plato’, designed the typical training of the medieval scholar. Revealingly, it comprises the trivium (logic, grammar, and rhetoric) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, and music), with the life-ground as an instrumental way station towards reconciliation with the transcendent God.

At the same time, it was widely recognized that God had made the realm of material life and used it to reveal Himself. The language of religion is thus pregnant with earthly-life-ground-related imagery (e.g. ‘water of life’, ‘bread of life’, ‘shepherd’ and ‘sheep’) meant to help the embodied and ensouled human being to be rejoined with God in Heaven. Experiences of the life-ground, ironically, are drawn upon to invoke the meaning of a redemption from the body.

This withdrawal from the world of change and bodily corruption explains the standard medieval notion of the material universe as an ordered, substantially static and harmonious reality, which mirrors imperfectly the better reality to come post mortem. In spite of its apparent conflicts and contradictions, God’s benevolence ensures that the universe persists as a fundamentally consistent totality, which may not contradict or forestall His good plans, His Providence operating throughout it. Even the catastrophes and the miseries of natural life can be redeemed by this assumption: the earthly life-ground rests upon an otherworldly guarantor. This, at least, was the standard supposition of the medieval mind, from Christian Augustine’s theodicy to Jewish Ibn Gebirol’s (1021—1058) Fons vitae [source of life]. Since God is ultimately transcendent, then a better or truer life must be disembodied and intellectual. Natural catastrophes and corporeal miseries, including mortality, are thus defended against by dismissing them in the light of this “better”, “higher”, “deeper”, “truer” life.

1.3. The Modern Separation from the Life-Ground: Kant’s Copernican Revolution

1.3.1. Modern Science

The grip of religion over society has loosened remarkably in the past few centuries. Similarly has loosened the grip of those hierarchal bodies typical of the Middle Ages, which supervised the process of selection of the few privileged minds onto whom the gift of education could be bestowed. Then, like in the early days of Western philosophy, intellectual speculation was a luxury of the elite. Glancing over the centuries fifteenth to twenty-first, one may observe the progressive disintegration of medieval Christianitas into a plethora of confessions and into a growing disaffection towards religion. Nowadays, most scholars and scientists do not presume that a benevolent God operates behind the universe and many people do not lead their lives trying to emulate Yeshua or avoid eternal damnation, even whilst they may claim to belong to some Christian
confession. It took about six centuries to demolish that which was erected in about ten. Nowadays, possibly like never before in human history, theoretical and practical atheism have become a mass phenomenon, especially accentuated amongst the intellectual elites.

The advent of modern science played a crucial role in the process of demise (or demotion) of religion. Religion, though not annihilated, is no longer the fundamental source of insight, especially amid intellectuals. Science, by large, has replaced it in this role. This change is far from complete and may never be complete. God might be dead, as Nietzsche stated, but religion is not (e.g. today's politically assertive Islamic and Christian fundamentalism). Its implications for human existence are still unfolding and difficult to evaluate. Indeed, from a strictly theoretical point of view, it is unclear whether science could have anything to say to religion, insofar as science and religion deal with qualitatively distinct questions. Putting it like Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889—1951), the former deals with ‘how the world is’, whereas the latter with why or ‘that the world is.’

Still, from a practical point of view, science and religion have been intertwined as well as opposed throughout Western history. There are endless examples of this long and complex history of mutual interrelation. It may suffice to consider the following: the trial of Socrates for impiety; the interpretation of Moses as a Jewish Plato by Philo of Alexandria; the *autodafé* [burning alive] of Giordano Bruno (1548—1600) for heretical views in astronomy; the commentary of Biblical prophecies by Isaac Newton (1643—1727); the science-worshipping ‘New Christianity’ of Claude Henri de Rouvroy Comte de Saint-Simon (1760—1825) and Auguste Comte (1798—1857); the defense of positive atheism by Richard Dawkins (b.1941).

The success of science in the Modern Age over religion is rather peculiar: it means the success of a culture of critical doubt over a culture of dogma. The advancement of science relies upon the advancement of doubt, as new theories attack old ones and new beliefs are formed in lieu of old beliefs. Naturally, certain “attacks” may be more or less dramatic. Some, in rare occasions, may even question the possibility itself of actual knowledge, as they imply a reassessment of the scientific method employed, or of the fundamental concepts of one or more particular disciplines. For example, the indeterminacy, or uncertainty, principle of Werner Heisenberg (1901—1976) and the theorem of incompleteness of Kurt Gödel (1906—1978) can be seen as two major instances of skeptical re-examination of crucial scientific assumptions. Both Heisenberg and Gödel did not only challenge pre-existing knowledge in physics and mathematics, but also made knowledge in physics and mathematics less firm than ever before.

Most scientists still share with most non-philosophers the widespread, almost commonsensical realism that claims science to be able to describe the world as it is. Their faith in the ability of modern science to penetrate into the depths of reality and depict it accurately can even become a comprehensive worldview comparable and alternative to a religious one, as famously discussed by Sigmund Freud (1856—1939) in his *Interpretation of Dreams*. Indeed, this scientific worldview can become extremely confident in its exclusive abilities to attain knowledge, especially when it comes to campaigning against rival worldviews or to attempting to obtain funds from public
institutions. Theoretical physicists and mathematicians interested in foundational issues are not so optimistic, yet. They are aware of the contingent fortunes of scientific theories, their dependence on contexts and aims for technological application, and the role played by the inquirer in determining the nature of nature itself (i.e. the features of the very reality investigated). Serious self-critical scientific endeavor is a constant reminder of the limitations of human understanding, the fruits of which we assume often and uncritically as granted and justified.

One may wonder why this be the case, i.e. why we may assume often and uncritically the status quo as granted and justified. In Western politics, for instance, empires have fallen, slavery has waned and governments have rarely hidden their oppressive character, as torture, war of aggression, colonial exploitation and undue imprisonment are still ordinary policies. In Western science, centuries-old comprehensive systems of explanation have fallen (e.g. Aristotle’s cosmology), successful theories have waned (e.g. the chemical theory of phlogiston), and powerful explanatory hypotheses have known unsteady fortunes (e.g. atomism). Still, the longing for knowledge and the quest for an unshakable epistemic ground have neither waned nor disappeared. Immanuel Kant (1724—1804) would probably argue that abandoning the quest for an unshakable epistemic ground is impossible and, at the same time, that this quest is bound to fail. This happens because the determination of general—or, allegedly, universal—systems of knowledge belongs to the human condition as much as feathers belong to the body of the adult raven. For Kant, we are naturally inclined towards general, conclusive explanations, whether these explanations be valid or not. Indeed, Kant suggests that it may be even immoral not to act upon this natural inclination, which leads us to investigate the universe: ‘man may postpone enlightenment in what he ought to know, but to renounce it for posterity is to injure and trample on the rights of mankind.’

1.3.2. Rationalism and Empiricism

Our drive for the explication of all mysteries can lead us to make claims that experience does not, or cannot, substantiate. For human knowledge to be actual knowledge and not mere speculation, Kant thought that we need the input of both abstract, all-embracing categories of understanding (viz. ‘cause’, ‘species’, ‘class’) and perceived, concrete, particular instances that realize them (viz. the billiard ball dislodged from its location by another, the thousands cats in your hometown, the fellow-citizens of yours who sell their labor for wages in order to survive). That which does not benefit from both inputs is either sheer speculation or baffling sensation, not knowledge: ‘Thoughts without content are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind.’

By requesting the inputs of both categories and perception, Kant’s critical philosophy tried to combine the well-established philosophical currents of rationalism and empiricism, which emerged during the centuries sixteenth and seventeenth, in connection with the advent of modern science. The former, echoing Plato, took mathematics (especially geometry) as the paradigm of knowledge. It had faith preeminently in the ability to attain knowledge deductively, i.e. via consistent logical derivations from self-evident truths or ideal principles of reason [e.g. the ‘geometrical method’ of Baruch de Spinoza (1632—1677) and the ‘clear and distinct ideas’ of René Descartes]. The latter, echoing Aristotle, took physics (i.e. the study of material nature) as the paradigm of knowledge. It had faith preeminently in the ability to attain
knowledge inductively, i.e. via repeated perceptual experience and the intelligent combination of the resulting mental impressions or ideas [e.g. the experimental method of Francis Bacon (1561—1626) and the rational associationism of John Locke (1632—1704)].

Despite their ancient echoes, both rationalism and empiricism regarded the study of knowledge as the defining mission of philosophy, hence abandoning the traditional self-understanding of Western philosophy. Until then, Western philosophy had portrayed itself as concerned primarily with metaphysics i.e. the study of the fundamental properties and regulating principles of reality. Rationalism and empiricism, instead, were concerned primarily with epistemology i.e. the study of knowledge. By this alone, empiricism and rationalism took Western philosophy one step away from reality, leaving its direct study to the modern scientist, especially in the field of physics (more on this point will be discussed in Section 2.1). Immanuel Kant, with his critical philosophy, is to entrench this retreat from reality even more firmly.

1.3.3. Kant

Kant did not share with the empiricists and the rationalists the same optimism vis-à-vis the cognitive abilities of the human being. By attempting the synthesis of rationalism and empiricism, he aimed at showing how human knowledge is not much about reality as such, but about reality as we humans can know of it. Kant’s work was a watershed in Philosophy because it repositioned what we know for certain as grounded in a priori categories of human sense and understanding which organized the world to be intelligible to us. He shattered our hopes to be in immediate contact with some kind of virginal, pure reality to be discovered “out there” as it is, has been, and will be. According to Kant, we are not tabulae rasae [blank tablets] receiving and recording faithfully information through the senses or through the self-evident demonstrations of reason. Rather, Kant posits the phenomenon (i.e. the thing-for-us) at the centre of the intellectual inquiry as distinguished from the noumenon or thing-in-itself. Whereas of the former we can have science i.e. true knowledge, of the latter only have conjecture. This is due to the fact that only phenomena can be objects, since the subject constitutes them through the cognitive filters at her disposal, roughly her senses and concepts. All else has too little empirical content to be an actual object—hence no objective, true knowledge of it is possible. The world we can know of is the world we participate in determining as an ordered collection of objects.

Modern scrutinizers of the scientific method like Giambattista Vico (1668—1774) and Paul Heinrich Dietrich Baron d’Holbach (1723—1789) had already observed that, when studying nature, we can discern how things operate as they do, but not why. According to Vico this distinction between ‘how’ and ‘why’ explains why the human sciences, which deal with realities made by the human being, can satisfy our thirst for knowledge much more fully than the natural ones. At least hypothetically, we can trace the original intentions that brought about certain laws, constitutions and mourning rituals. The same cannot be achieved with respect to atoms, chemical elements and biological metabolism.

Kant transforms Vico’s and d’Holbach’s distinction between ‘how’ and ‘why’ into the
constitutive feature of human knowledge as such. For Kant, *phenomena* alone can be known by us, not *noumena*. Kant’s revolutionary intuition has changed the history of Western philosophy and, on a larger scale, our understanding of cognition in general. Kant personally resisted the explanation of the constitution of experience in mere psychological terms. Still, today’s science is indebted to Kant whenever it studies the individual and collective cognitive structures that are characteristics of our species (viz. cognitive stages, Gestalt psychology, sociology of knowledge) and/or acknowledges the unavoidable contribution of the observer in the determination of the object of inquiry (viz. subatomic physics, cultural anthropology).

In this perspective, the case of Georg Simmel (1858—1918) is most representative. Although engaged in the establishment of the relatively novel discipline of sociology, Simmel resisted the temptation of promising utter objectivity and the ability to unveil reality as it is. On the contrary, Simmel claimed that society should be understood in a fashion analogous to Kant’s understanding of nature. ‘Society,’ he affirmed, is made of ‘individual elements... given which in a certain sense always remain in their discreteness, as is the case with the sense-perceptions, and they undergo their synthesis into the unity of a society only through a process of consciousness which puts the individual existence of the several elements into relationship with that of the others in definite forms and in accordance with definite laws.’ In this way alone, as Simmel concluded, one can find an answer to the question: ‘how is society possible?’

### 1.3.4. Idealism

Before Kant, the unity in plurality of the world’s systems was the world’s own unity. After Kant, the unity in plurality of the world’s systems was the unity of the human mind. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770—1831), who resented Kant’s ‘Copernican Revolution’ as an expression of philosophical timidity. It reduced the relations of the world to the ordering mechanism of the human mind, the infinite reality developing around us to the logically programmed workings of internal categories of perception and understanding. Hegel believed human reason capable of grasping the fundamental unity of being in all of its expressions, namely God’s dynamic self-revelation through the material universe and Hegel’s own conceptual representation of it as the highest moment in the history of Western philosophy in the most perfect State ever witnessed i.e. early nineteenth-century Prussia (at least in one plausible interpretation). Reason, according to Hegel, could mirror reality in the most accomplished fashion and his own philosophy was the mirror needed for such a glorious accomplishment.

Despite his monumental ingenuity and enormous influence throughout the nineteenth century, Hegel did not succeed. Kant’s disruption of the correspondence between reality and thought has become a standard element of the modern mindset. Kant did never claim, like the founder of idealism George Berkeley (1685—1753), that *esse est percipi* [being is being perceived]. Knowledge, for Kant, was via ideas or representations [*Vorstellungen*], not of ideas or representations alone. Still, like Berkeley, Kant was an idealist, though of the transcendental type, i.e. concerned with the identification of the conditions of possibility for knowledge. Kant formalized the organizing role that the perceiver plays in constituting reality, but did not want to do away with the independence of reality from the knowing subject. One thing is to entrap the human
being within the cognitive cage proper to our species; another is to entrap the whole universe within it.

In either case, however, the focus of philosophy was not on LSS, but on the cognitive abilities that permit notions such as ‘life’, ‘support’ and ‘system’ to be formed. After Kant, we can still talk of natural systems and human-made systems in a sensible fashion. Yet, we must acknowledge that we are “talking of” such systems, i.e. that we are creatures that make use of concepts and words in order to “see,” appreciate, and know the surrounding universe. Representation makes the object possible for us, not vice versa.

Kant deemed himself to be an empirical realist, in the sense that he thought that we, as cognitive agents, are somehow in touch with the noumena. What this “touch” should be like, given the overall outlook of Kant’s understanding of human cognition, is unclear and has been debated since Kant’s days. Most nineteenth-century Western philosophy, especially in the German-speaking world, participated in this debate, thus concentrating almost exclusively on the study of those faculties of the thinking mind—whether individual, collective or divine—that allow for the constitution of reality by the knowing subject. Reason, understanding, imagination, judgment, intuition, reflection, and other mental abilities have been scrutinized carefully and insightfully by thinkers such as Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762—1814), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775—1884), Antonio Rosmini (1797—1855), Francis Herbert Bradley (1846—1924), and Edmund Husserl (1859—1938), founder of phenomenology.

Although different from the transcendent otherworldliness of the ancient and medieval times, the modern currents of rationalism, empiricism, idealism and phenomenology cooperated in positing another kind of otherworldliness, i.e. that of the invisible knowing mind. This mind, whether individual, collective or divine, is taken to be somehow separate and sovereign over the known world which is presupposed by the mind as passively inert and external. Since philosophers are meant to deal primarily with the ordering mind, the embodied objective world—and its LSS in particular—recede into mute insignificance. The philosophical mind as it were worships itself. Epistemology, not how to live or relate to the larger life-host and world, is their main preoccupation.

1.3.5. Schelling

The convolutions consequent to Kant’s critical appraisal of human knowledge and his undiminished trust in its possibility became most evident in those philosophers that tried to regain the life-ground and yet remained “trapped” within the Kantian “cage”, which keeps us apart from the natural world as an immediate, independent, unconditional reality.

Schelling, for example, may be said to be the only nineteenth-century German idealist who had a genuine concern for embodied living being. He is often saluted as ‘the philosopher of nature’, for he had an acute interest in it both as a scientific and as an aesthetic reality. His works are full of observations and examples that only a man
enamored with wildlife would utter. In this sense, Schelling’s debt to Friedrich Schiller (1759—1805) and German Romanticism cannot be underestimated. Schelling lived in the age during which the tamed nature of German feudal agriculture was being lost to capitalist industrialization. More or less aware of the causes of this loss, Western poets turned en masse towards the uncorrupted beauty of nature and its majestic power—flowers smell sweeter the closer you are to the grave, and Romanticism flourished in graveyards.

Schelling was, in many respects, a Romantic poet himself. Like, and more than, the other champion of German Romanticism, Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744—1803), he unashamedly turned the gaze to the living world of nature and, therein, he envisioned philosophical ideas embodied and revealed in the phenomena of biological, chemical and physical realities. Yet, his actual philosophical enterprise shows little sign of the life-ground, that which is ‘all the conditions of our existence required to take the next breath becoming conscious of itself through our evolving understanding of it as who we ultimately are’ (McMurtry). For Schelling’s work is essentially devoted to the knowledge and intelligibility of rational man as such. Along Kantian lines, his philosophy attempts to understand ‘whether Nature and experience be possible.’

Philosophy again returns to preoccupation with its own conceptions. It is only the ‘common understanding’ that believes uncritically ‘that there are things outside us.’ However, ‘in matters of philosophy the common understanding has no claims whatever.’ Philosophy is an abstract endeavor, which leads us away from the world of our daily existence: ‘From ordinary reality there are only two ways out—poetry, which transports us into an ideal world, and philosophy, which makes the real world vanish before our eyes.’ Philosophy, in essence, is a hermeneutical enterprise: ‘[C]hemistry teaches us to read the letters, physics the syllables, mathematics Nature; but it ought not to be forgotten that it remains for philosophy to interpret what is read.’

Most revealing is Søren Kierkegaard’s sore disappointment with Schelling’s teaching, for hearing which he had ‘been pining and thinking mournful thoughts long enough.’ Kierkegaard had hoped to hear something relevant for the sake of his personal life from a man known for his love of nature. Yet, what Schelling and his idealist colleagues could ‘say about actuality is often just as disappointing as it is when one reads on a sign in a secondhand shop: Pressing Done Here. If a person were to bring his clothes to be pressed, he would be duped, for the sign is merely for sale.’ Lost as they were in figuring out how the universe is constituted by the mind, idealism had lost touch with nature and dealt only with ‘nature’ i.e. ideas, representations, conceptions of nature, the conditions of possibility for the constitution of which had to be explained.
Bibliography

There are many resources relevant to each section of the text above. Rather than listing primary and secondary volumes concerning specific philosophers, which would be too many, what follows is a small, select group of reference materials focusing either on the history of philosophy or on the history of green thought that was particularly helpful during the completion of this text. More specific references are provided in the article-contributions of the topic area.

A. Printed resources


Clarence Glacken (1967), *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century*, University of California Press, Berkeley. [20th-century classic in geography dealing with three fundamental philosophical issues in historical perspective: the idea of a designed earth, the idea of environmental influences on culture and the idea of humans as geographic agents]

David Boucher and Paul Kelly (eds.) (2003), *Political thinkers: from Socrates to the Present*, Oxford University Press, New York. [A comprehensive introduction to the great political theorists of the Western canon, organized by historical period and carefully referenced].

Ernan McMullin (ed.) (1965), *The Concept of Matter in Greek and Medieval Philosophy*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame [Collection of essays discussing the wide array of metaphysical and ontological interpretations of material reality from ancient Greek thought to late medieval philosophy]

Ernan McMullin (ed.) (1978), *The Concept of Matter in Modern Philosophy*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame. [Collection of essays discussing the wide array of metaphysical and ontological interpretations of material reality in the modern age]

Etienne Gilson (1952), *La philosophie au moyen-âge*, Payot, Paris. [20th-century classic on the history of Western philosophy, thus including Jewish and Islamic medieval thought, from 2nd-century Christian theology to 15th-century humanism; translated in several languages]

Giovanni Reale (1991), *Storia della filosofia antica*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano [20th-century classic in five volumes on the history of ancient philosophy, both Greek and Latin, making ample use of original sources; translated in several languages]

Greg Garrard (2004), *Ecocriticism*, Routledge, London. [Original account of the emergence of self-aware green trends in recent literature and literary criticism; identifies topical areas such as “wilderness”, “apocalypse” and “dwelling”]

James Montmarquet (1989), *The Idea of Agrarianism: From Hunter-gatherer to Agrarian Radical in Western Culture*, University of Idaho Press, Moscow, Idaho [Comprehensive account of agrarian social, political and intellectual movements in the history of Western civilization]

John Deely (2001), *Four Ages of Understanding: the First postmodern Survey of Philosophy from...*
Ancient Times to the Turn of the Twenty-First Century, University of Toronto Press, Toronto. [Learned and comprehensive account of the history of Western philosophy in the light of the study of signs, identifies the birth of modern semiotics with the fracture between modernism and postmodernism]

John McMurtry (1999), The Cancer Stage of Capitalism, Pluto, London. [Carefully referenced analysis of contemporary globalization through the lenses of the medical paradigm of carcinogenic pathology; defines groundbreaking notions of life-ground, life-value and civil commons]


B. Electronic resources


The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, The University of Tennessee at Martin, Martin, 2006 <http://www.iep.utm.edu/> [Rich electronic encyclopedia devoted to philosophy]


Biographical Sketch

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