

I and Thou

4.1. The problem of the authentic Socrates may reside mainly with ourselves: we make a clear distinction between ethical issues and matters of ontology. A proper reading of Aristotle's *Ethics* however, shows quite clearly that ethical issues were not distinguished in this way by Plato's pupil. The anabasis of the soul described in that work implies at the least a metaphorical emulation of the condition of the divine*[37]. The whole universe is conceived by Aristotle as a moral hierarchy from insect to the Good, and we do well to recall the passage in the *Timaeus* where Plato speaks of a similar hierarchy, ascended and descended according to the moral worth of the individual in life:

... by virtue of necessity... their bodies are subject to influx and efflux, [and] these results would necessarily follow, - firstly sensation that is innate and common to all proceeding from violent effections; secondly, desire mingled with pleasure and pain; and besides these, fear and anger and all such emotions as are naturally allied thereto, and all such as are of a different and opposite character. And if they shall master these they will live justly, but if they are mastered unjustly. And he that has lived his appointed time well shall return again to his abode in his native star, and shall gain a life that is blessed and congenial; but whoso has failed therein shall be changed into woman's nature at the second birth; and if, in that shape, he still refraineth not from wickedness he shall be changed every time, according to the nature of his wickedness, into some bestial form after the similitude of his own nature...*[38].

4.2. It has been argued, essentially following the Frazerian model of antiquity, [*Before Philosophy*, Henri Frankfort, et al.] that, among ancient cultures the world was conceived as a place populated entirely by entities, so that relation with the things in the world was essentially understood in terms of "I" and "Thou": subject and object, whether animate or inanimate, were understood to belong to the same generic category. But this presumes - for reasons which seem quite sound to us - that in fact the subjective and objective worlds are generically different. Thus, it would seem that to parallel epistemological processes with ontological ones must be to make an error. The implication of this view is that, at best, the ancients failed to formalise the difference between the two realms, and, at worst, that such a distinction never occurred to them.

4.3. If it is true that the ancients never came to grips with the distinction between the realms of the subjective and the objective, and therefore the distinction between the animate and inanimate, then it must follow that the ancient perception of the nature of the world must have been altogether in error (to which Wittgenstein objected), and the earliest part of human history may be legitimately characterized, with Frazer, as a childhood. The supposed failure to distinguish between the processes of the subjective and objective realms means that we can read the past as a struggle for the acquisition of the skill to do so: all arguments form part of an unplanned sequence, a blind upward groping toward the light of understanding. Whereas if the yoking of the subjective and objective realms owes its origin to the reasoned idea of the final cause, the concept of a final completeness of the world in which everything has its place and function, then we cannot with confidence interpret dialectical arguments or the evidence of human activity in antiquity as part of a blind anabasis, an improvised ascent to a rational understanding. This for the simple reason that these arguments and actions took place within a context in which the basic rational frame was *already taken for granted*. The importance of this is hard to overstate.

4.4. For now, the attempt to disinter the evidence for the unwritten history of the final cause as an idea is close to impossible: for, though the idea of the final cause might be admitted in the writings of earlier authors (Herodotus, Bk. I.30-33, already quoted, much of Homer, etc.), it is not understood to be intimately bound up with the view of reality which emerges from the Platonic corpus. Hence, evidence of the earlier history of the idea of the final cause is not of itself evidence for Platonism as a body of work emerging from an older pattern of ideas. Instead, the final cause is treated by critics as a traditional element within a radical programme of inquiry. By contrast, I argue that the Platonic teaching was not an exploration of reality by means of dialectical enquiry involving the use of traditional elements; but that Plato crossed well-rehearsed territory, probably with arguments more or less of his own construction.

[37] interestingly, in defining the action of the gods as passive contemplation, Aristotle reproduces the extreme Parmenidean form of Plato's Ideal theory, in which the Form of the Good is unchanging and unchangeable. In Bk. X of the *Ethics* Aristotle characterizes the activity of the divine as contemplation. The gods are living beings from whom all forms of activity have been removed. "...if a being lives, and action cannot be ascribed to him,... what remains but contemplation? It follows, then, that the divine life, which surpasses all others in blessedness, consists of contemplation". (*Nic. Eth.* X. 8. 7., F. H. Peters trans.)

[38] *Tim.* 42a-c

[This is a section from Thomas Jaeger's book *J. G. Frazer and the Platonic Theory of Being*, published by the Anshar Press in April 2016.]