

The Socratic Dialogues and their Influence on Early Christian Apologists

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Abstract

The early apologists of the Church such as Aristides, quadratus, Justin, Origen and Augustine as well as some of the New Testament writers employed philosophical arguments in their defense of the Christian faith before their critics and opponents. Aspects of their styles of argumentation can be traced back to early Greek philosophers like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. In this Paper I wish to examine the philosophical dialogues of Socrates and show the possibility of their influence on early church apologetics.

Key Terms

- Socratic Problem
- Dialogues
- Christian philosophy
- Epistemic justification

Introduction

At the beginning of *The Apology of Aristides (125 A.D.)* addressed to Caesar Antoninus, we find one of the earliest expressions of Christian philosophy. He writes:

... from Marcianus Aristides, an Athenian philosopher. I, O King, by the grace of God came into this world; and when I had considered the heaven and the earth and the seas, and had surveyed the sun and the rest of creation, I marveled at the beauty of the world. And I perceived that the world and all that is therein are moved by the power of another; and I understood that he who moves them is God, who is hidden in them, and veiled by them. And it is manifest that that which causes motion is more powerful than that which is moved. ... Now when I say that he is "perfect," this means that there is not in him any defect, and he is not in need of anything but all things are in need of him. And when I say that he is "without beginning," this means that everything which has beginning has also an end, and that which has an end may be brought to an end.¹

¹ Rendell Harris. ed. *The Apology of Aristides on Behalf of the Christians*. Vol. 1. (Eugene, OR. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004), 20.

In the New Testament book of *Acts*, the author, Luke (approximately 70 A.D.), describes Paul's visit to Athens in the following words:

Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the *Gentile* worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there. Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, "What does this babbler want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods," because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new doctrine *is* of which you speak? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean." For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing. Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription:

TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.

Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you: God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.' Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising.²

This is a selection from the Early Church which reveals that ancient Greek philosophy had a deep influence on how the defense of the faith was carried out against its critics. The early Church apologists employed philosophical expressions as well as ideas that, in many instances, parallel the orations and dialogues of ancient Greek thinkers. These apologists hailed the loftiness of Greek philosophy, but found it hollow and mistaken on the nature of God and the way of salvation. Even Paul in the *Acts* acknowledges their quest which led them to pledge

² The Holy Bible, New International Version.

ignorance of the ultimate God who, according to tradition, had visited a horrible plague on Athens³ leading to the erection of altars engraved with the writing “To The Unknown God.” It is evident that Socrates as presented to us by his contemporary, Xenophon, and his student, Plato, had one of the most profound impacts on them.

It is equally observable in the writings of the early Christian apologists that philosophy was viewed as one of the most effective tools to engage critical views held against the Christian faith. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* and several Church sources state that a number of early Church defenders adopted philosophy as a tool to engage the pagan world. *Encyclopedia Britannica* recounts that, having been trained in philosophy, Justin he “became a convert to the Christian faith in Ephesus before 132,” and, retaining his philosopher’s cloak, the distinctive badge of the wandering professional teacher of philosophy, he went from place to place discussing the truths of Christianity in the hope of bringing educated pagans through philosophy to Christ, as he himself had been brought.”⁴

Later in the 4th century A.D., Augustine would challenge, as did several of his predecessor apologists, the claim that Christians were atheistic and irreligious, a challenge that resonates well with Socrates’s refutation of the claim by the Athenians that he was an unbeliever in the gods and a corrupter of the youth. In his book, *The City of God*, Augustine even suggests that Socrates was an enlightened philosopher and propounded deep truths, which, unfortunately, the Greeks ignored and suffered consequences as a result.

³ Don Richardson. *Eternity in their hearts*. (Ada, MI. Baker Publishing House, 2006), 9-25.

⁴ *Encyclopedia Britannica*. (Chicago, IL. Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., 1973). Accessed Sep. 1, 2018.

Using Discourse Analysis as both theory and method, we will engage this discussion by asking three questions: First, how might the modern student of ancient Greek philosophy unravel the “Socratic Problem” in order to determine that what the early Christian apologists were replicating in their works was truly attributable to Socrates? Secondly, what evidence is there for the influence of Socrates on the Early Church Apologists, and what particularly in the Dialogues attributed to him is visible in their writings? Lastly, what is the epistemic justification for the claim by the early Christian apologists for the superiority of Christian philosophy over Greek philosophy?

The Socratic Problem

When discussing the influence of Socrates on the Early Christian Apologists, the first challenge we encounter is an identity question. Socrates did not leave anything written by him. What we know of his life and what he taught is relayed to us by others, e.g. his contemporaries, Alcibiades, Chaerephon and Xenophon, as well as his student, Plato. Plato’s student, Aristotle, who greatly influenced Aristides with his concept of “unmoved mover” as seen in the citation above.

The *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* confirms the “Socratic Problem” by stating that Socrates wrote nothing, but that the stories and information that we have about him come from Xenophon and Plato, but that some of what they wrote *about* him is incompatible. Quoting Darity, the Encyclopedia states, “We cannot be sure if or when Xenophon or Plato is reporting

about Socrates with historical accuracy. In some cases, we can be sure that they are intentionally not doing so, but merely using Socrates as a mouthpiece to advance philosophical dialogue.”⁵

In *The City of God*, St Augustine states that because Plato had a “peculiar” love for his master Socrates, he “made him the speaker in all of his dialogues, putting into his mouth whatever he had learned, either from others, or from the efforts of his own powerful intellect, tempering even his moral disputations with the grace and politeness of the socratic style.”⁶

Because of this age-old problem, even our current argument that Socrates influenced the Early Christian apologists is hit by this socratic problem and, therefore, some kind of resolution is necessary. While no conclusive resolution exists, Hugh H. Benson gives us some helpful approach.

Writing in chapter 9 of the *Routledge History of Philosophy*, Benson tells us that our knowledge of the philosophical views of Socrates can be derived from four main sources: First, in a comedy written by Aristophanes titled *The Clouds* in which Socrates plays a leading role; secondly, Xenophon who wrote a number of works on Socrates, the most significant being *Memorabilia* which includes several conversations attributed to Socrates; thirdly, Plato, Socrates’s student, who wrote twenty dialogues in which Socrates is the main speaker; and, fourthly, Aristotle, Plato’s student, who refers to Socrates over forty times.⁷

⁵ Louis Andre Dorion, *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates*. “The Rise and Fall of the Socratic Problem.” (London: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 25.

⁶ Aurelius Augustine, *The City of God*, Vol. 1. Edited by Marcus Dodds. (Project Gutenberg, 2014), 221. Accessed on September 3rd, 2018, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/45304/45304-h/45304-h.htm>

⁷ C.C.W. Taylor (ed), *Routledge History of Philosophy*. Vol. 1. *From the Beginning to Plato*. (London: Routledge, 1996), 298.

Writing in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Debra Nails⁸ notes that some of the early ways of resolving the Socratic Problem were weaved around the following four options:

1. The real Socrates is the one whose qualities in Plato are corroborated by Aristophanes and Xenophon. In other words, if what Plato presented as Socratic was found or attested in the works of Aristophanes and Xenophon, two of the thinkers of Socrates's era, then there would be a higher probability that Socrates was the real source. However, this does not dispense of the possibility of counter-influence, for if what Plato records as Socratic is regularly validated on the basis of his being a contemporary, it would mean that there is an overlapping possibility of Aristophanes and Xenophon equally being contemporaries of Plato, and hence the possibility of the writings of both Aristophanes and Xenophon melting into Plato's writings. Again, traces of pre-Socratic ideas in the works of Plato, for example the idea of Forms which is traceable in Parmenides and Heraclitus, suggests that the three philosophers cannot necessarily be credited for the true representation of what is Socratic on the sheer basis of corroboration.
2. The real Socrates is the one who pledged ignorance and denied having attained wisdom but instead exercises his mind in seeking understanding. This means that any passages that show definite conclusiveness or finality would be rejected as being Socratic. However, even this way of resolving the Socratic problem would thus beg the question as to how we would rate conclusive Socratic grounds such as "the unexamined life is not worth living" or "the most important thing in life is to know yourself." Conclusions such

⁸ Debra Nails, "Socrates" *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Edward N. Zalta (ed.), (spring 2018) Accessed August 31st, 2018. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/socrates/>

as Socrates's correction of Euthyphro or Meno would negate this way of identifying what was and what was not Socratic.

3. The real Socrates is the one who appears in Plato's earliest dialogues. The problem with this is that it is not completely certain what the chronology of Plato's works really was. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* explains that the earliest hint to this order was the fact that *The Republic* was written before *Laws*, hence no clear way of clearly demarcating Plato's works as earlier or later, and that even efforts to resolve this by appealing to "stylometrics" and "thematic order" did not help with the chronological challenge. . It could also be added here that even dialogues such as the Meno and the Phaedo do not give us the certitude we need to distinguish between what belonged to Socrates and what belonged to Plato's view of him. For instance, when we consider the discussion in the Phaedo on the cycle of life and death in the question of suicide this distinction is blurred because this is what we see developed in Plato's discussion of Forms.
4. The real Socrates is the one who turns from the pre-Socratic interest in nature to ethics, and has no theory of separate forms. This would confine Socratic thinking to ethics, forgetting that Socrates was a successor of several great thinkers like Heraclitus and Parmenides and so there was no way he would throw all prior reflection away and confine himself to ethics. Benson notes in the *Routledge History of Philosophy* that to hold this assumption we would need to "rehearse the entire history of philosophy up to Socrates focusing on whether any of Socrates' predecessors or contemporaries had or

practised a moral philosophy so defined.”⁹ Again, to deconstruct Socrates by removing anything from him that is attributable to later philosophers like Aristotle or Plotinus, or even to Plato who largely represents him, is to suggest a philosophical seclusion that does not do justice to Socrates. In fact, given the vastness of the subjects both Plato and Aristotle engaged in as philosophers, it would be unfair to imagine that Socrates was as confined as this option presupposes.

Citing Gregory Vlastos, Benson places the resolution of the Socratic problem in a close scrutiny of the Platonic Dialogues which distinguishes between the historical Socrates and the philosophical Socrates. He says that Vlastos’s position leads to three main conclusions. First, that the philosophical views advanced by Socrates in the early dialogues are distinct from the philosophical views advanced by that character in the middle dialogues, an interpretation derived from Vlastos’s ten theses. Secondly, the philosophical views advanced by Socrates in the early dialogues represent the philosophical views of the historical Socrates, a thesis based on the independent testimony of Aristotle and Xenophon. Lastly, the philosophical views advanced by Socrates in the early dialogues represent the philosophical views of Plato before he adopted the classical Platonism of the middle dialogues, a thesis based on Vlastos’s grand methodological hypothesis. Having established that a real Socrates really did exist in Athens in the 5th century B.C. and that he truly held dialogues with various people, which dialogues may be reasonably defended, we now turn to how these dialogues influenced early Christian apologists.

⁹ Hugh Benson, “Socrates and the Beginnings of Moral Philosophy.” In *Routledge History of Philosophy*. Vol. 1 *From the Beginning to Plato*, edited by C.C.W Taylor, 298-328. (London: Routledge, 1996), 8.

The Influence of Socratic Dialogues on Early Christian Apologists

Before looking at the dialogues themselves, the first notable interplay between Greek philosophy and Christianity is traceable to the parallels that exist between Socrates and Jesus. Socrates never wrote anything. His students such as Plato and Aristotle compiled what he taught. In the same way, Jesus did not write anything, although it is evident through His scribbling in the sand that He knew how to write. He also read the Scriptures regularly in the Synagogues. One of his close disciples, John, who adopted Greek philosophical language in his Gospel, writes, “Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.” (John 21:25).

Another similarity is that, while Socrates taught in Athens, his teaching was rejected and he was executed. In the *Phaedo* which recounts the trial of Socrates, his friends persuade Socrates that he should let them storm the prison and free him, but he refuses. In the same way, Jesus’ teaching was rejected and He was crucified. When Judas comes to arrest Jesus and hand Him to the authorities, Peter tries to protest by cutting off the ear of one of the attackers, but Jesus rebukes Peter. Later He tells Pilate that His Kingdom is not of this world and that if it were, His followers would fight to release Him. On the cross He prays for the forgiveness of His killers.

Socrates’s main teaching was moral in nature, believing that to know the good is to do the good. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount” taught His followers to let their light shine before all men that they may see their good works, turn the other cheek, love their neighbors and do good to those who mistreat them.

Jesus employed a deep critical method in teaching. He asked people questions just like Socrates and did not readily give answers to questions He asked. His style was to interrogate by

asking questions that would make people understand their presuppositions. Socrates insisted that people should know themselves.

The critical interrogative method of Socrates is brought to us in the Euthyphro in which he encourages the importance of getting to know something by defining it instead of simply giving examples of its manifestation. In discussing the notion of piety with his friend Euthyphro, Euthyphro tells Socrates that he wanted to charge his father with a crime so that he can fulfill piety to the gods. Socrates then asks him what piety is, but instead of defining it, Euthyphro begins to list examples of acts of piety. Socrates insists on wanting to know, for instance, what all the acts Euthyphro was listing had in common in order to be called pious. The Euthyphro Dilemma on the state of piety melts into the question, what makes something holy. Socrates wants to know whether something is holy because it is loved by the gods or if the gods love something because it is holy.

In the Apology, like Jesus and His apostles, Socrates is brought in for trial. Charges are brought against him to the effect that he is impious, an atheist and that he corrupts the minds of the youth with bad teaching. As in John 19 where Jesus is brought before Pilate who discourses with Him on the question of truth, Socrates is accused by and discourses with Miletus on the truth of these charges.

In the Craedo, Socrates challenges the suggestion by Craedo that it would be noble to burst the prison and free him from his captors. Socrates refuses and says that this would go against what he had been teaching. Like Jesus, Socrates says we should not pay evil with evil but with the good. Unlike the sophists who merely went around teaching for pay, Socrates believed in what he taught.

John and Paul employ both the interrogative and narrative methods to persuade their readers of the veracity of the Christian faith. John uses the Greek term “logos” to explain the eternality of Christ. He says the “logos” became flesh and dwelt among men full of grace and truth from above. He talks of Jesus as the light. Paul uses Greek philosophical terms such as “sophia” to denote the superiority of Christian philosophy to Greek philosophy. The successors of the apostles continued with this methodology, but took it even further.

The quest to equate Christianity with Ancient Greek philosophy is not just visible in the Early Church apologists’ efforts to become the philosophers of their generation. It is also evident in how they weaved Greek philosophical ideas into the body of Christian teaching.

Encyclopedia Britannica tells us that in the second Apologia Justin uses the occasion of the trial of a Christian recently held in Rome to argue that “... the innocence of the Christians was proved by the persecutions themselves.” The Encyclopedia further cites Justin as arguing that “By his doctrine of *Logos spermatikos* he held that the Logos who was truly revealed in the incarnation of Christ, had previously been partially revealed as a seed (Gr. *Sperma*) sown in all men. Pagan philosophers derived any truth that they taught from this *Logos spermatikos* and from borrowings from the Old Testament.”¹⁰.

Like Socrates who was accused of impiety and Atheism, both Justin and Augustine cite the absurdity of Christians being charged with Atheism for not worshipping the Greco-Roman deities. The fifth chapter of Justin’s First Apology is titled “Christians Charged With Atheism” and Chapter Six, “Charge of Atheism Refuted.” Chapter nine is on the folly of idol worship and Chapter thirteen is titled “Christians Serve God Rationally.”

¹⁰ Encyclopedia Britannica, 165.

That Justin admired Socrates and viewed him both as a great philosopher and a pious man is quite evident in the *First Apology*. He writes in Chapter Five:

Why, then, should this be? In our case, who pledge ourselves to do no wickedness, nor to hold these atheistic opinions, you do not examine the charges made against us; but, yielding to unreasoning passion, and to the instigation of evil demons, you punish us without consideration or judgment. For the truth shall be spoken; since of old these evil demons, effecting apparitions of themselves, both defiled women and corrupted boys, and showed such fearful sights to men, that those who did not use their reason in judging of the actions that were done, were struck with terror; and being carried away by fear, and not knowing that these were demons, they called them gods, and gave to each the name which each of the demons chose for himself.

Note how Justin specifically talks about Socrates next:

And when Socrates endeavored, by true reason and examination, to bring these things to light, and deliver men from the demons, then the demons themselves by means of men who rejoiced in iniquity, compassed his death, as an atheist and a profane person, on the charge that "he was introducing new divinities; "and in our case they display a similar activity. For not only among the Greeks did reason (Logos) prevail to condemn these things through Socrates, but also among the Barbarians were they condemned by Reason (or the Word, the Logos) Himself, who took shape, and became man, and was called Jesus Christ; and in obedience to Him, we not only deny that they who did such things as these are gods, but assert that they are wicked and impious demons, whose actions will not bear comparison with those even of men desirous of virtue.¹¹

It is obvious that Socrates is the main influence behind this thought. To quote him in this regard as narrated by Hermogenes in the work of Xenophon, we see this influence in his defense at his trial when he says:

In the first place, sirs, I am at a loss to imagine on what ground Meletus asserts that I do not recognise the gods which are recognised by the state, since, as far as sacrificing goes, the rest of the world who have chanced to be present have been in the habit of seeing me so engaged at common festivals, and on the public altars; and so might Meletus himself, if he had wished. And as to novel divinities, how, pray, am I supposed to introduce them by stating that I have a voice from God which clearly signifies to me what I ought to do?"¹²

¹¹ Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson., eds. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*. Vol 1. (Albany, OR: Iranaeus, 1997), 8.

¹² Xenophon, *The Apology*. Translated by H.C. Dakyns. (Project Gutenberg, August 13, 2008), Section 20-24. Accessed September 3rd, 2018. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1171/1171-h/1171-h.htm>

One of the grounds for some of the Early Apologists hailing Socrates as a prototype of Jesus was his style of teaching and his challenging the Athenians to charge him with fault. The closest semblance to this is the account in John chapter 8 where the Jews are challenged by Jesus to accuse him of sin and no one does. He tells them that those who continue in His words would know the truth and the truth would set them free. The Jews get so incensed by Jesus calling them sinners and children of the devil that they pick up stones ready to kill Him, but He vanishes from their midst.

The approximate mirror of this is given to us by Xenophon in his *Apology* in which Hermoggenes narrates the trial of Socrates by the Athenians in the following words:

As they listened to these words the judges murmured their dissent, some as disbelieving what was said, and others out of simple envy that Socrates should actually receive from heaven more than they themselves; whereupon Socrates returned to the charge. "Come," he said, "lend me your ears while I tell you something more, so that those of you who choose may go to a still greater length in refusing to believe that I am thus highly honoured by the divine powers. Chaerephon [25] once, in the presence of many witnesses, put a question at Delphi concerning me, and Apollo answered that there was no human being more liberal, or more upright, or more temperate than myself. And when once more on hearing these words the judges gave vent, as was only natural, to a fiercer murmur of dissent, Socrates once again spoke: "Yet, sirs, they were still greater words which the god spake in oracle concerning Lycurgus, [26] the great lawgiver of Lacedaemon, than those concerning me. It is said that as he entered the temple the god addressed him with the words: 'I am considering whether to call thee god or man.' Me he likened not indeed to a god, but in excellence ..." [27] preferred me far beyond other men.¹³

While the audacity of Socrates equating himself with the gods and the blatant pride of religious achievement can be challenged as unfit to parade before people for self-justification, the parallels in discourse with the words of Christ as a thorn in the flesh of the Jewish society of

¹³ Ibid, Section 25 to 38.

His day are interesting. It is no wonder that the Early Church writers readily reconstructed Socrates as one of the most enlightened philosophers and sought to beat his pagan grounds by postulating a superior philosophy.

In responding to the charge that Christians are Atheists, Justin writes:

Hence are we called atheists. And we confess that we are atheists, so far as gods of this sort are concerned, but not with respect to the most true God, the Father of righteousness and temperance and the other virtues, who is free from all impurity. But both Him, and the Son (who came forth from Him and taught us these things, and the host of the other good angels who follow and are made like to Him), and the prophetic Spirit, we worship and adore, knowing them in reason and truth, and declaring without grudging to everyone who wishes to learn, as we have been taught.”¹⁴

Note that, like Socrates, Justin redefines the charge of atheism by shifting reference. Socrates had accepted his sentence to drink hemlock on the basis that what he had taught about the nature of God was true. He was unwilling to live and prove the mistakes of the Athenians. For Justin, indeed, if by atheism the charge was disbelief in the false gods, then Christians were atheists. If it meant they did not believe in the one and only true God, then they were not atheists. Franek observes that Justin cites Plato’s *Timaeus* although he alters the text a little to suit his apologetic needs. He ignores the fact that Plato does not primarily refer to Socrates in the *Timaeus* but simply to the fact that it is impossible to declare the “Father and Maker of all,” but he changes the meaning to imply that after the coming of Christ this impossibility is made possible.¹⁵

Socrates had an additional argument against the charge by Miletus that he did not believe in the gods the city of Athens acknowledged but in other divinities. He challenges Melitus to explain how one can be an atheist while at the same time believing in some deities different from

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Franek Juraj, “Omnibus Omnia: The Reception of Socrates in Ante-Nicene Christian Literature.” *Graeco-Latina Brunensia* 21, no. 1. (2016), 38. DOI: 10.5817/GLB2016-1-3.

what the city acknowledged. Reginald Allen records for us Socrates's answer to Miletus in his book, *Greek Philosophy from Thales to Aristotle*:

...answer my question, at least: Is there any man who acknowledges that there are things pertaining to divinities, but does not acknowledge that there are divinities?

There is not. How obliging of you to answer-reluctantly, and under compulsion from these gentlemen here. Now, you say that I acknowledge and teach things pertaining to divinities- new or old, still at least I acknowledge them, by your account; indeed you swore to that in your indictment. But if I acknowledge that there are things pertaining to divinities, must I surely not also acknowledge that there are divinities? ... So if I believe in divinities, as you say, and if divinities are a kind of god, there is the jesting riddle I attributed to you; you are saying that

I do not believe in gods, and again that I do believe in gods because I believe in divinities. On the other hand, if divinities are children of gods, some born illegitimately of nymphs, 9 or others of whom this is also told, 10 who could possibly believe that there are children of gods, but not gods? It would be as absurd as believing that there are children of horses and asses, namely, mules, without believing there are horses and asses.¹⁶

Turning to St Augustine's Book 8 of *The City of God*, it is clear that his thoughts were heavily influenced by early Greek philosophers, but especially Socrates, Plato and Plotinus. That Augustine had thoroughly studied the pre-Socratic philosophers is clearly demonstrated by his effortless narration of various philosophers from the Italic and Ionic schools including Pythagoras, Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes and Diogenes, among others. He cites the specific questions each of these philosophers dealt with and hails them for their contribution to the pursuit of wisdom. The introduction to Book 8 even suggests that some among the Greek philosophers had an understanding of the true wisdom, i.e. true philosophy, and, thereby, had some good insights into natural theology. Augustine writes,

It is, we say, with philosophers we have to confer with respect to this theology, - men whose very name, if rendered into Latin, signifies those who profess the love of wisdom. Now, if wisdom is God, who made all things, as is attested by the divine authority and

¹⁶ Reginald Allen, *A History of Philosophy from Thales to Aristotle* (Readings in the History of Philosophy). (New York, NY: Free Press, 1991), 80.

truth, then the philosopher is a lover of God. But since the thing itself, which is called by this name, exists not in all who glory in the name, - for it does not follow, of course, that all who are called philosophers are lovers of true wisdom,--we must needs select from the number of those with whose opinions we have been able to acquaint ourselves by reading, some with whom we may not unworthily engage in the treatment of this question. For I have not in this work undertaken to refute all the vain opinions of the philosophers, but only such as pertain to theology, which Greek word we understand to mean an account or explanation of the divine nature.¹⁷

St Augustine puts Socrates above the earlier philosophers and hails him as the first philosopher to direct philosophy towards the regulation and correction of manners among humans. This does not mean that the pre-Socratic philosophers did not concentrate on moral ideas, but that Socrates is the one who insisted on the high premium of a value-based life. Augustine says that those who went before Socrates concentrated their efforts on physical or natural inquiry. According to Augustine, Socrates did this because he believed that this would enable the philosophers to have a purified mind which alone is capable of understanding metaphysical reality. He observes that, according to Socrates:

...all diligence ought to be given to the purification of the life by good morals, in order that the mind, delivered from the depressing weight of lusts, might raise itself upward by its native vigor to eternal things, and might, with purified understanding, contemplate that nature which is incorporeal and unchangeable light, where live the causes of all created natures.¹⁸

Epistemic Justification for the Superiority of Christian Philosophy

It is not a hidden fact in the writings of Early Christian thinkers that they viewed Christianity as a superior worldview to Greek philosophy. As seen earlier, Justin declared that Greek religion was informed by demonic influences and not the true God. Aristides castigated

¹⁷ Aurelius Augustine. *The City of God*, Vol. 1. Edited by Marcus Dodds. (Project Gutenberg, 2014), 219. Accessed on September 3rd, 2018. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/45304/45304-h/45304-h.htm>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 220.

Graeco-Roman idolatry and chided confidence in pagan religion in general, wherever it was found, arguing that it was creation worshipping creation. Augustine, in *The City of God* attributed the fall of Rome to the worship of impotent and immoral gods.

Juraj Franek correctly observes that the early Christian writers freely quoted and interpreted Socrates to suit their goal of portraying Christianity as a superior and reasonable philosophy. He says that these writers tried to “negotiate a viable relation between pagan intellectual tradition and the exigencies of a newly founded religion.”¹⁹ Franek calls this an “epistemic justification.” The implication of Franek’s thesis is that Christian epistemology presupposes the knowledge of Christ as the missing link in Greek metaphysics. This is the position held by the Apostle Paul, Luke and John in the New Testament. Paul would argue in 1 Corinthians 1:18-20 that Christ is the wisdom of God and that God has chosen wisdom from Christ to shame the wisdom of man. In verse 20 he challenges the philosophers of this world to show up in the face of the superiority of Christ and adds in Romans 1:18 that God’s wrath is revealed from heaven against those who suppress this revealed truth.

Franek argues that this epistemic justification was heavily grounded in apologetic aims which presupposed that nothing would match the Christ. He says that this justification is hinged on four main things:

1. Miracles;
2. Superior moral behaviour of Christians;
3. Divine inspiration and fulfilled prophecy, and
4. The limitation of human wisdom.²⁰

¹⁹ Juraj, p. 34.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 31.

To briefly respond to these grounds of epistemic justification in the light of the portrait of Socrates by these early Christian writers, the first challenge one encounters is the conflict between the rationalism of the Socratic dialogues and the insistence that a faith can be validated by a supernatural occurrence such as the healing of diseases or the exorcism of demons. The former demands a logical explanation for all things; the latter an acceptance of that which goes beyond reason. In the Socratic world, something would be true if it can be defined and proved. In the world of the Early Christian apologists, a faith could be proven true on the basis of supernatural occurrence. Most apologists of the early Church do not belabor this and so, later philosophers like Spinoza and Hume would revisit this. Aquinas would belabor this in his *Summa Theologica* and Rene Descartes would push the rational element. The one aspect of miracle that shocked the Greek audiences was the miraculous act of Jesus rising from the dead. This is what prompted the Athenian philosophers to tell Paul that they wanted to hear him again, because it was strange to their ears. Notably, it was understandable for one to die for a cause as Socrates did, but the Greeks found it strange that someone would both die for a cause and then rise from the dead. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul hinges Christianity on this fact to the extent of saying that if Christ is not risen from the dead, then Christianity is not true and that Christians would be the most pitied people on earth.

On the persons of Socrates and Jesus, a level of critical congruence is visible in the absurdity of employing an ad hominem argument on either of them. Something is not true or admirable just because it was said or practiced by someone considered authoritative. The epistemic justification of the Early Apologists may indeed be challenged on the basis of the fallacy of an ad verbum elevation of Christ over Socrates. In fact, appeal to authority in this restricted sense becomes empty because it sets a positive ad hominem against a latent ad

hominem abusive, should it argue, say, that Jesus was superior to Socrates on the basis of this or the other. The two ad hominem would go something like this: “Jesus is the Son of God and Socrates is not.” The “isness” and “is not-ness” forms my basis of comparing the two ad hominem applications.

On the fulfilment of prophecy, without defining what prophecy is, the Christian apologists would run into the argument that in the pre-Socratic era Thales was capable of predicting an eclipse. The pragmatic test here would not work unless the volume of miracles in the ministry of Jesus were pitted against the single prediction by Thales. The corroboration of the numerous prophecies stemming right back to the Old Testament and their fulfilment in one person, i.e. Jesus, would be viewed as superior not just because of numbers but by virtue of their enigma. Again, the contradictory nature of Greek and Roman deities as discussed by Aristides and Augustine portray an inferiority on the part of these deities in that they encouraged diabolical acts. Augustine even asks in *The City of God* how to distinguish between what was sacred and what was sacrilegious if all kinds of impurities were practiced in the worship of pagan gods. This debate by the Early Christians sought to defend the fact that Christianity was divinely inspired but pagan religions were not.

Lastly, the superiority of Christianity over human philosophy remains a fundamental theme of the Early Christian apologists. They argue that human philosophy is limited and cannot lead to man’s salvation. This as a ground for epistemic justification is granted by the Greek philosophers who argue that we must keep inquiring and that pledging ignorance is useful to discovery. The early Christian writers would take this further and argue that in the person of Christ we find the solution to this limitation in the incarnation. St Athanasius spends a lot of space in his works on this including a whole treatise titled “On the Incarnation.”

In conclusion, the foregoing discussion provides some interesting but incomplete analysis of the influence of Greek philosophy on the Church. More could be done especially in the area of actual textual analysis of the Dialogues. Similarly, more time could be spent on the writings of the Early Church Fathers to expand this quest. It may also be observed that too little attention has been given to early Christian thinkers with regard to their deep philosophical interests and activities. In particular, I believe that more could be done to credit St Augustine as one of the greatest philosophers who ever lived. This is because, besides ecclesiastical interests and preoccupations, it is evident that Augustine extensively read the pre-Socratics, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle with enviable attention and depth. He provides significant historical accounts of these philosophers and critically weighs their philosophical ideas against his newfound Christianity.

It would be interesting to also consider taking this discussion further to probe the epistemic justification by the early apologists to employ ad hominem arguments from authority, an approach that Ancient Greek philosophy would not permit. It would also be interesting to carry out a study on the actual portrait of Socrates by secular historians and pit the portrait against that of the Early Church apologists which tends to reveal an interpretation that suits the epistemic justification they set forth through reinterpretation.

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