

Plato's Axial Critique of Oral and Scribal Wisdom

1. As we saw, early scribal writing serves to enhance speech, oral ritual and storytelling, through inscribing oral content onto a more permanent medium such as clay or papyrus, thereby enabling accurate communication across space and time. Plato, in the persona of his teacher Socrates, is one of a number of seminal thinkers alluded to in the previous video lecture who used the externalization of their culture's wisdom, myths and religious ritual, afforded by literacy, to adopt a systematic and critical attitude towards their traditions .
2. In *The Origins and Goal of History*, written in the wake of the destruction of the Second World War and the German national trauma of Nazism, Karl Jaspers identified this new theoretical mode of reasoning as an "axial" revolution occurring around ancient cultures roughly simultaneously from 800 to 200 BCE. Nazism had been a regression to a pre-axial, tribal religion saturated with mimetic violence and scapegoating. Jaspers could not explain what caused this rational revolution, but he considered it a decisive advance of the human spirit.
3. Eric Havelock, in *Preface to Plato*, argued that Socrates' new vision for knowledge and ethics was enabled by the rise of writing, more specifically the invention of the first fully alphabetic script by the Greeks two hundred years earlier. He argued that Platonic philosophy is best understood as calling for the overthrow of oral wisdom altogether in favor of a new literate understanding of the world. Socrates may have taught through oral dialogue, but what he taught, argued Havelock, could only be preserved if it were written down.
4. Early literacy inscribed in scribal thought, is hardly Axial in this way. In fact Jaspers' Axial revolution is also a revolution against scribal memorization as well.
5. Thus literacy even alphabetic literacy, by itself cannot be said to cause an Axial revolution in critical and systematic reasoning. Rather it is but one factor or, in the words of Latour, one actant in enabling its rise. Another factor or actant frequently cited to be also necessary is the rise of a literate intelligentsia alienated from court and temple, the home of scribal culture. Not beholdng to either, axial thinkers can criticize scribal wisdom for its merely stabilizing through transcription what is still essentially oral thought.

6. Indeed, Axial thought defines itself (1) over against oral appeals to authority and tradition altogether. (2) It opposes mimetic rhetorical persuasion to abstract logical argument, (3) evocative poetic metaphors to clear and distinct analytical concepts, (4) memorable narrative to prosaic theory.
7. Thus we find in virtually every Platonic dialogue Socrates asking for a clear and distinct definition of just what people mean by a particular, commonly held virtue. Just what is wisdom? What is justice? What is piety? What is happiness? And ultimately, what does it mean to be fully human?
8. Socrates asks these questions to scribally educated young aristocrats, the future leaders of Athenian society. And in each case they respond understandably by appeals to story and aphorism. They offer iconic examples from traditional myths and legend. But Socrates remains dissatisfied. He did not ask for examples of the virtue, he reminds them, but for what makes the stories they recount an example of that virtue. Taken aback, the young men then often respond with a well known memorable proverb or aphorism. But such sayings are contextual, and phrased poetically. Socrates easily comes up with counterexamples by citing unusual situations for which the saying was never meant to apply, or by exploiting ambiguities in its poetic wording.
9. Socrates is not asking for an (1) instructive (2) example or (3) apposite (4) aphorism, but for (5) an abstract principle applicable (6) anywhere (7) at any time. But any such definition while clear and distinct, and universally applicable is unlikely to be memorable. Such wisdom if it is to be preserved or even communicated beyond the current dialogue **must** be written down if it is to be preserved.
10. Famously, Socrates search for such universal, necessary knowledge always ends up in failure. He reduces his young men, proud of their scribal education to speechless ignorance. Their apparent wisdom is true ignorance.
11. But their failure is not really their fault. The scribal wisdom in which they were educated was not designed to satisfy the demands of theoretical axial thought. They could eloquently articulate Greek beliefs and values or *doxa*, but in terms of universal theoretical knowledge backed up by logically necessary proofs, or what Socrates will call *episteme*, literally, something on which one can stand, they have never thought like that.

12. Ironically is said that Plato began his life as a poet, a tragedian like Sophocles. His Socratic dialogues though can be seen as intellectual tragedies. For as with Oedipus, the young men's tragic flaw is believing that since they can recall and eloquently express the wisdom of their culture, that they are wise.
13. But Socrates is wiser than them all, as the Delphic oracle had herself informed Socrates, not because he can recall better, but because he at least knows how much he does not know. He does not claim to be a wise man a *sophos*, at all but only one who longs for wisdom, a *philosophos*.
14. In his distinction between oral belief and literate knowledge, Plato sets up an opposition between appearance and reality, (1) between the natural world (2) of cyclical becoming, (3) at the very heart of the (4) traditional religious understanding of reality, as we have seen in earlier videos and (5) an unchanging, eternal reality of archetypal patterns, no longer personified into deities, but treated nevertheless as realities in their own right.
15. Indeed Plato in the person of Socrates will argue that these intelligible patterns, or "forms" *eidoi*, are ultimately **more** fully real (1) than the transient matter patterned after them. The world of fleeting appearances is but a half-real twilight world of light and shadow, being and nothingness, existent only to the extent that it mirrors, however imperfectly, (2) ultimate ideal and eternal Truth, (3) Goodness and (4) Beauty
16. Plato tries to communicate his axial vision of reality to his scribal audience by telling them a story of his own, memorable and evocative, that mirrors point by point, what is ultimately real, what he holds sacred, and the manner in which one can reconnect to it. This oral story mirroring literate theory, or allegory, begins with (1) men seated in a cave, chained hand and foot to a low wall behind them, their heads locked in place so as to face the cave's own back wall. (2) A hearth fire lights the cave from behind them. (3) Others, carrying statues and other objects walk back and forth between the fire and the low wall to which they are chained them. (4) All that the men can see are the flickering shadows these cast against the back of the cave. The setting is eerily reminiscent of those archaic cave paintings with which human inscription began. But rather than a transcendent experience beyond ordinary life, they believe them to be ordinary life and wisdom to lie in detecting patterns amongst these shadows playing on the wall before them.

17. Socrates tells of one prisoner breaking free from his chains, (1) blindly climbing out of the cave into the bright light of day. The climb is difficult and initially he is blinded by the sunlight. (2) But as his eyes become accustomed to the brightness, he comes to see what is truly real not mere the flickering shadows of their pottery imitations. He has become enlightened. He knows. He has become truly wise.
18. Socrates story does not end there. Rather like other axial prophets, he decides to return to the cave in order to free his companions. But when he tells them that what they take as real are really only apparent, and that their wisdom is really shared ignorance, they ridicule him. And should he persist, as Socrates did, (1) they will scapegoat him as a divisive troublemaker, literally, a heretic, and to restore the sacred order of society they will kill the idiot.
19. But on the day of his sacrifice by the people of Athens, Plato has Socrates engage in one last dialogue with his disciples, a final search for the truth of human death. In this dialogue Socrates extends the archaic belief in the immortality of the gods and the eternal cycle of nature to argue for the immortality of the axial sacred, the individual. This transference of the cosmic cycle of life and death to the individual was already present in archaic Egyptian religion, at least for those individuals who “counted,” the Pharaoh and the principal literate scribes of the royal court and temple. It was also already recently extended to initiates of mystery cults of Isis and Dionysius, Mithras and most relevantly for Socrates and Plato the Orphic mysteries of Eleusis just outside Athens.
20. What will survive death for the individual on Plato’s account is not of course one’s body, (1) which decomposes to be food for future life, but one’s (2) intelligence, *nous*, the locus of the abstract literate kind of thought that constitutes rational life. Socrates leads his disciples through his argument for the immortality of rational life. (3) Life, *psuchē* in its ‘purity,’ that is, independent of its appearance in this or that body, cannot die, (4) for death is its diametrical opposite. The literate, logical law of non-contradiction rules it impossible. (5) The life of the body, like the material cosmos is (6) cyclic with opposites forever changing (7) from one to the other, but rational life, or intelligence, considered in and for itself, cannot change into its logical opposite, death. Life itself cannot die (8) anymore than, in the words of Parmenides, being (*on*) can become non-being (*mē on*)

21. Socrates tries to help his students better understand his belief in the eternity of the life of reason by once more telling a story or better allegory, what has come to be referred to in the history of Philosophy as “The Myth of Er.” This myth is effectively a rational re-interpretation of the agrarian Elysian mysteries. Rather than a ritual re-enactment by an initiate of Persephone’s descent into the Underworld and her subsequent return to life on earth in the Spring, eternal intelligences descend into the material world and nature’s cycle of becoming to return at death liberated from matter to their true life in the Elysian fields.
22. As they fall into the material world (1) of becoming they forget everything, and (2) so are born into the world (3) knowing nothing. Learning, Socrates argues, is really a matter of recollection.(4) But by recollection he does not mean recalling (5) (6) what others have taught or (7) (8) memorizing traditional myth and ritual. Recollection for him is rather the recognition of a truth (9) triggered by the vigorous back and forth of logical argument. The philosopher devotes his life to the recollection (10) of who he truly is, that is coming to know himself, and to the recognition (11) of ultimate Truth, Goodness and Beauty, that is, the ideals and values his experience points to however fitfully and ambiguously. (12) In so doing the philosopher is already strives to liberate himself from this twilight world of animal corporality and return to the light and life of pure intelligence.
23. Socrates thus reassures his disciples that he does not fear his immanent death, as he has been effectively practicing dying all his life. And indeed his last words are a request to offer a sacrifice to Asclepius, the god of healing, presumably for his now being healed from his bodily condition. And so Socrates died, writes Plato, at the close of the Phaedo, “he who was, of all those we have known, the best, and also the wisest and the most just.” Nor would he prove the last martyr of the Axial revolution.
24. And yet, while axial literate critics of their culture, Socrates, and Plato, remain hybrid thinkers, ambivalent about literacy supplanting the spoken word. Knowledge is still a matter of remembrance, albeit the remembrance of theory-- abstract concepts, systematic arguments rather than of what one has been told or from one’s past experience. So too Socrates and Plato remain ambivalent about the value of reading. Texts are mute. Their author is absent, unable to answer questions or rebut objections. Readers might think they learn something from reading a text, but, particularly if read in solitude, there is no way

for them to know whether they could defend what they claim to know against any and all comers. Plato sought to remediate this limitation to literacy precisely by embedding his literate arguments in oral dialogues with characters championing the many sides of a question, at least those sides Plato can himself anticipate. But argument however compelling, if not live, remains second best for both. This valorization of living argument over the “dead” letter of a text will remain until the discovery of the printing press and the rise of Cartesian and scientific reasoning.

25. Even further, learning as recollection, and the search after wisdom, philosophy especially, continues to have a mimetic dimension for Socrates and Plato as well. For knowing is still a matter of imitation, and the more we attend to the eternal patterns of the cosmos, the ideal values and ultimate meanings to which all things point in their imitation of them, however imperfectly, to that extent we too already begin to transcend the body and live, as Plato’s disciple Aristotle calls, “the life of the gods, however briefly and however far it is possible” for transient live here below. This acesis, or discipline of theoretical, literally contemplative deification transforms philosophers into what they hold sacred, deities far more real than the popular anthropomorphic gods of oral myth and ritual.
26. In the next video we shall study another axial radicalization of proto-axial religious thought and practice in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He will be a particularly insightful critic of the mimetic violence animating archaic scribal culture and its ritual scapegoating to protect the purported sacred order of society. He will also end up a sacrificial scapegoat himself, like Socrates, but will re-enact the return to new life in his person in the company of his companions and finally send them off to proclaim a new kind of sacred order, the Kingdom of his and our own divine Father