

ARTICULATING THE IDEA: “WISDOM BELONGS TO GOD”. HELLENIC REASON’S SELF-CRITICISM: ORIGINS, FORMS, DEVELOPMENTS, ANCIENT, MEDIEVAL, AND MODERN
A COLLOQUIUM HELD AT AND SPONSORED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF KING’S COLLEGE
JUNE 18TH TO 21ST 2017
NOTES TO AID DISCUSSION

The title of our “Wisdom Belongs to God” Colloquium comes from Socrates’ conclusion from of the *elenchus* inspired by the Delphic Oracle. He reported “I dare to say, gentlemen, the truth is that wisdom is proper to God and this is the oracle’s way of saying that human wisdom is of little or no value” τὸ δὲ κινδυνεύει, ὧ ἄνδρες, τῷ ὄντι ὁ θεὸς σοφὸς εἶναι, καὶ ... ἡ ἀνθρωπίνη σοφία ὀλίγου τινὸς ἀξία ἐστὶν καὶ οὐδενός. (Plato’s *Apology* 23a) Our subject is Hellenic reason’s self-criticism of this kind, found in diverse forms from its origins and throughout its developments: Ancient, Medieval and Modern. The Colloquium will exhibit and discuss a broad temporal range of these self-reflective movements of reason and many of its forms.

From at least the time of Homer, the Greeks characterised themselves in terms of an inquisitive, ceaselessly active, practical, modern reason with an inclination to scepticism; so multi-formed and determined to succeed with its schemes as to be deceptive and untrustworthy. So the Romans described them, taking up from Athena in *Odyssey* 13. Think of the difference between the gods which Homer places on the side of the Achaians and those on the side of the Trojans, and, even more strikingly, the character he gives Odysseus who wants to slay immortal beings, has an endless curiosity which keeps getting his companions killed, and even tries to match wits with Athena. However, what makes the Hellenes philosophical, unless philosophy be (against Socrates, Plato and Aristotle) mere sophistry and eristic, is that, fully aware of the power of this kind of reason, they know the evil in it. In consequence, the reason that is proper to them is ultimately self-critical and moves to self-transcendence.

Thus Achilles, the proud questioner of authority, learns though the death of his “other self” that he too is part of a political community and must submit to leadership in order to secure his purposes. Odysseus suffers almost endlessly for his proud proclamation of his crafty defeat of the Cyclops and must endure at the origins of things, the divine–human border. He learns to submit to humiliation and the non-being which he used as a ploy against the son of a god, in order to come home.

Oedipus supposes that he has a reason which can overcome fate and mock revelation. He discovers to his destruction that he does not even know who he is. Yet his is reason’s self-discovery. Oedipus affirms that putting out his own eyes is his own work (*Oedipus Tyrannus*, 1331). Pentheus in the *Bacchae* suffers the fate of sceptical rationalism when it uses force against the holy which he sees only as indecency, idleness, drunkenness, orgies and folly. But Pentheus is fascinated by what he denies and hates. Oedipus is compelled by his own character to know, even to know his own ignorance and himself as murderer and incestuous son. Reason triumphs in its own self-discovered ignorance. Comparably Pentheus is torn to pieces by his mother and aunt, who also are moved by Dionysus while denying him. Prometheus is taught that technological reason is evil unless it is contained within the ends of the political whole.

All these fears of endlessly meddling rationality and the deeply thought criticism of it appear in a great chorus of the *Antigone* of Sophocles: “Awesome and terrible wonders are many, and none is more than the human... speech, and wind-swift thought, and all the moods that mould a state, hath he taught himself... Cunning beyond fancy’s dream is the fertile skill which brings him, now to evil, now to good.

When he honours the laws of the land, and that justice which he hath sworn by the gods to uphold, proudly stands his city: no city hath he who, for his rashness, dwells with sin.” (332ff) The written laws set up by human reason must stand under the unwritten law to which even the gods conform. Thus only are the foundations of the city of reason kept firm.

When we move to philosophy the affirmation of critical, questing reason and its self-criticism come out together in Plato’s depiction of Socrates in the *Apology* declaring: “Wisdom belongs to God”. Socrates, in obedience to the god whose oracle agreed that he was wisest of humans, subjected to his *elenchus* all who might be thought to know or supposed themselves to know. He arrived here: “But the truth of the matter, gentlemen, is pretty certainly this, that real wisdom is the property of God, and that this oracle [about Socrates being the wisest] is his way of telling us that human wisdom has little or no value”. Thus, critical philosophical reason both is affirmed and also discovers its own limit. In Socrates reason’s quest is undertaken with an ascetic totality appropriate to what is laid on by divinity and it arrives beyond him at the divine wisdom in which it can participate. Plato and Aristotle affirm divinity is not jealous, its goodness is as self-diffusive as the light of the sun, and above all it shares the wisdom which is proper to it.

Philosophy and theology take up the grounding of critical reason in its self-affirming self-transcendence in a myriad of ways of which those delivering papers have given a rich sampling. We see that the mutual implication of Platonism, Skepticism and religion is present from the beginning, can dominate the Academy, and will be essential to anagogy in Plotinus and Augustine. Philosophy demands ritual and finds that myth and poetry may pass on divinely given knowledge she cannot possess otherwise. The Hellenes sought to join philosophy to the pristine wisdoms of their older Eastern neighbours both because they experienced their own limits and because philosophy could open up hidden truth. Thus we understand that the road to Philo, and the endlessly varied mutual interchanges between philosophy and “the Book” of the Abrahamic religions, start within and is travelled by reason. Reason will surpass and also ground herself in discovering her union with the ineffable beyond thought and being. These ancient patterns and interactions are found in every period of philosophy’s history and continue in our own time. This we shall celebrate together.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ON THE COLLOQUIUM GO TO THE DALHOUSIE CLASSICS DEPARTMENT
WEBSITE <https://www.dal.ca/faculty/arts/classics/wisdom-belongs-to-god.html>
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November 21, 2016