The Bounds of Myth

The Logical Path from Action to Knowledge

Edited by

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The Notion of Subjectivity as Reflected in Early Notions of the Afterlife

Jon Stewart

Abstract

This article argues that we can track specific stages in the development of subjectivity by tracing the different accounts of the afterlife. As the sense of subjectivity and individuality becomes more pronounced, this is reflected in ever more refined views of the underworld or heaven, as the case may be. An attempt is made to establish the basic framework of this claim with just a few examples, which can be used as the point of departure for a more detailed study. The article examines the Mesopotamian, Hebrew, Greek, Roman and Medieval Christian views of the afterlife, which, when taken together, clearly show an undeniable trajectory.

Hegel was the first to suggest that the idea of human subjectivity was something that emerged historically, taking millennia to develop the ideas about it that are intuitive to us today.[1] His theory is that as humans emerged from nature, they first had no clear sense of themselves, and this was an idea that only started to arise in ancient Greek society.

Inspired by this theory, Bruno Snell, in his *The Discovery of the Mind*, and Charles Taylor, in his *Sources of the Self*, try to follow up on Hegel's intuition in different ways. As a classical philologist, Snell attempts to argue for Hegel's general thesis about the rise and development of subjectivity based primarily on linguistic evidence. He thus traces in minute detail the changes in the usage of different Greek words from Homer onward. By contrast, Taylor's *Sources of the Self* traces the development of inwardness with the eye of a philosopher.

1 This paper was originally given as a lecture at the workshop: "Individual and Collective Subjectivity: Historical and Contemporary Issues," that took place at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, June 26, 2019. This work was produced at the Institute of Philosophy, Slovak Academy of Sciences. It was supported by the Agency VEGA under the project Synergy and Conflict as Sources of Cultural Identity, No. 2/0025/20.

Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind: The Greek Origins of European Thought*, trans. by T.G. Rosenmeyer, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1953. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1989.

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However, his work is in a sense overly focused on philosophy in that it takes almost exclusively philosophical texts as its sources. While Taylor mentions Homer very briefly, his actual analysis begins with Plato. Thus, he overlooks the vast number of works in ancient literature, history and drama that could also be fruitfully used to support his thesis. Moreover, Taylor's work is focused primarily on the modern period, as is implied in the subtitle of the work, *The Making of Modern Identity*. While he purports to give a historical account of the development of the concepts of inwardness and the self, there are major gaps in the narrative. For however rich it might be, the first part of his account, which runs from Plato to Augustine to Descartes, leaves much unexplored.

Following in this research tradition, I wish to claim that the development of inwardness and subjectivity is an important feature of Western culture. These are ideas and conceptions which, although largely absent among the ancients, are widely celebrated today in our modern world. But these concepts are complex and in a sense too intuitive and too close for us to see them with a critical distance. We take them to be obvious, and this blinds us to their historical genesis.

Since this is such a broad topic, some principle of selection must be employed in order to make it manageable. In this paper I wish to focus specifically on early views of the afterlife. It is, I think, uncontroversial to claim that the view of humans after death in all cultures is closely related to their views of the self in general. My thesis is that we can track specific stages in the development of subjectivity by tracing the different accounts of the afterlife. As the sense of subjectivity and individuality becomes more pronounced, this is reflected in ever more refined views of the underworld or heaven, as the case may be. I believe that the basic framework of this claim can be established with just a few examples, which can be used as the point of departure for a more detailed study. I will thus examine the Mesopotamian, Hebrew, Greek, Roman and Medieval Christian views of the afterlife, which, when taken together, clearly show an undeniable trajectory. Suffice it to say that these individual treatments must remain perfunctory since the goal is to provide not an in-depth analysis of each individual case (for which specialized works are much better suited) but rather a synoptic overview which facilitates an understanding of the movement I wish to sketch. Finally, it should be noted that there is a substantial scholarly literature on the subject of images of the afterlife in antiquity.[2] These range from literary to anthropological studies. None of them

2 See, for example, Herbert Weir Smyth, "Conceptions of Immortality from Homer to Plato," in *Harvard Essays on Classical Subjects*, ed. by Herbert Weir Smyth, Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin 1912, pp. 239–83. Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, *'Reading' Greek*

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takes the approach employed here, and none of them is particularly interested in the question of subjectivity or individuality.

1 The Mesopotamian and Hebrew View of the Afterlife

The Sumerian underworld is known as Kur, Irkalla, Kukku, Arali, or Kigal. Glimpses of it appear in a number of surviving texts, for example, "Ishtar's Descent to the Netherworld," "Nergal and Ereshkigal," and most famously *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.[3] In *Gilgamesh* the gods decide that the hero Enkidu must die.[4] As he lies ill, Enkidu has a dream in which he sees the underworld. His account provides a colorful picture of the Mesopotamian pendant to Hades. Although there is an afterlife, it is a miserable one. Like the Greek underworld, the place where the dead go is a concrete physical location in the real world. It is a gloomy and dreary place that is ruled by Ereshkigal, the Queen of the underworld and her record-keeper Belit-Sheri. Enkidu describes it as a place where "people sit in darkness."[5] The dead have their bodies transformed into bird-like creatures with wings and feathers. They eat and drink only black dust. Enkidu sees once great kings and princes now languishing in this place of despair. Stripped of their previous positions, they appear in this land of the dead like servants or slaves. The key feature of the underworld is thus that it has a levelling effect on all human beings. This expresses the basic truth that everyone dies. Death makes no exception for nobility, wealth, power or fame. The good and the evil all in the end must perish in death.

This picture is similar to the one presented in some of the books of the Old Testament under the name Sheol or the Pit.[6] While this place is never described

Death to the End of the Classical Period, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1995. Alan E. Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds*, London: University College London Press 1993. Isabel Moreira and Margaret Toscano (eds.), *Hell and Its Afterlife: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate 2010.

3 *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. by N.K. Sanders, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1960. See Jean Bottéro, "The Mythology of Death," in his *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods*, trans. by Zainab Bahrani and Marc Van De Mieroop, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 1992, pp. 268–86. Samuel Noah Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1956, pp. 154–67.

4 *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 89.

5 Ibid., p. 92.

6 See Philip Johnson, *Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press 2002. Martin Ravndal Hauge, *Between Sheol and Temple: Motif Structure and Function in the I-Psalms*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1995 (*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, no. 178).

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in much detail, it is consistently mentioned as a dark and dreary place. Also in common with the Mesopotamian view there is no judgment and no sense of rewards or punishments. This is something that is frequently referred to in the Book of Job and Ecclesiastes, both of which lament that in the end it all amounts to the same thing. In other words, in death no differentiation in made between rich and poor, noble and common, wise and foolish, righteous and sinful. In both Job and Ecclesiastes there is clearly a tone of dissatisfaction with this arrangement.

2 The Greek Underworld in Homer

The Greek underworld, Hades, is represented perhaps most famously in Book XI of Homer's *Odyssey*,[7] when Odysseus is commanded to go there in order to consult with the prophet Tiresias and get instructions about how to return home. The motif of a hero visiting the underworld while still alive is a well-known one in Greek mythology and is often referred to with the term *katabasis* (κατάβασις) or "descent."[8] This motif is also found in Mesopotamian literature. The mythological figures Herakles, Theseus and Orpheus all visit Hades in different circumstances. While these heroes manage to return from the land of the dead, the trip is perilous, and there is a sense that there is something unnatural about these visits.

According to ancient Greek geography, the Ocean was conceived as a great river that encircled the known world. Thus, it is constantly referred to as a "stream."[9] The underworld is located at the limit of the river, in a place that the sun does not reach, again a specific geographical location. After having arrived there, Odysseus, following the detailed instructions of Circe, performs a series of sacrifices in order to appease the gods of the underworld. He pours the blood of the sacrificial animals into a bowl, and the dead souls then come to him desiring to drink from it. This is the key for them to recognize Odysseus

7 *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. by Richmond Lattimore, New York: Harper Collins 1965. See Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, "To Die and Enter the House of Hades: Homer, Before and After," in *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death*, ed. by Joachim Whaley, New York: St. Martin's Press 1981, pp. 15–39. Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. by John Raffan, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1985, pp. 190–215.

8 See Radcliffe G. Edmonds III, *Myths of the Underworld Journey: Plato, Aristophanes, and the 'Orphic' Gold Tablets*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2004. Bruce Louden, "Catabasis, Consultation, and the Vision," in his *Homer's Odyssey and the Near East*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press 2011, pp. 197–221.

9 E.g., *The Odyssey of Homer*, Book XI, line 21, p. 168.

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and speak with him. But since Odysseus' goal is to consult with the prophet Tiresias, he, again following Circe's directives, draws his sword and, in the first instance, prevents the other souls from drinking. It should be noted that, in contrast to other variants on the motif of underworld visits, Odysseus does not descend into Hades as such, but rather the dead souls come up to him, attracted by the blood of the sacrificial animals, and after their discussions with him, they return.

The underworld episode in the *Odyssey* provides valuable insight into Greek religious practice and views of the afterlife. As Odysseus learns, the dead souls are no longer physical beings. When he tries to embrace the soul of his beloved mother, Antikleia, he cannot hold on to her: "Three times / I started toward her, and my heart was urgent to hold her, / and three times she fluttered out of my hands like a shadow / or a dream."[10] When he fails to understand this, she explains to him that this is "what happens, when they die, to all mortals. / The sinews no longer hold the flesh and the bones together, / and once the spirit has left the white bones, all the rest / of the body is made subject to the fire's strong fury, / but the soul flitters out like a dream and flies away."[11] The human soul is thus immaterial and separable from the body. After the body is cremated, the soul endures in an incorporeal form. The souls are thus referred to as *skiai* (σκιαί), that is, "shades" or "shadows." This conception can be seen as the forerunner of many different dualistic views that conceive of the mind and the body as distinct substances as, for example, in Plato.

There is, however, something odd or inconsistent in the conception of the dead souls as portrayed here since, despite the fact that they are immaterial, Odysseus is able to frighten them off with his sword, which one would expect would simply pass through them. But even if it didn't, the souls are dead anyway, and it is hard to understand why they would fear being injured or even killed a second time given their present condition. Equally odd is the fact that the spirits desire to drink the sacrificial blood that Odysseus has prepared. Drinking and eating, of course, hardly make sense if one does not have a body. But this notion is common in other ancient cultures such as that of the Egyptians, who buried their dead with food and drink. These contradictions point to a conception of immortality that is still closely tied to the natural human realm. The dead souls are very much like the living and are concerned exclusively with affairs of the living. There is no conception here of a higher sphere where the souls live an elevated, more sublime existence.

10 Ibid., Book XI, lines 205–8, p. 173. See also lines 390–5, p. 178.

11 Ibid., Book XI, lines 218–22, pp. 173f.

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The Greek conception has not yet fully emancipated itself from the natural sphere.

The picture of Hades bears certain similarities to the Mesopotamian underworld and the Hebrew Sheol. Despite the fact that the individual is conceived as surviving death, the new existence in Hades is by no means a desirable one. While most of the souls are apparently not experiencing any direct form of punishment, they are nonetheless clearly miserable and languishing. Odysseus meets his fallen comrade from Troy, the mighty warrior Achilles, and tries to console him. Achilles, however, rejects this consolation and speaks the famous lines, "I would rather follow the plow as thrall to another / man, one with no land allotted him and not much to live on, / than be a king over all the perished dead."[12] This is a profound statement coming from a man known as the exemplification of the warrior ethic, where personal honor is the supreme principle. Life in the underworld is so odious to him that it would be better to be a slave and still be alive. To a great warrior like Achilles, the thought of being a slave was absolutely the lowest, most humiliating and disgraceful thing imaginable. But yet even this is better than life in Hades. The reason that Achilles and the other souls are so miserable is presumably that they are deprived of any meaningful activity that characterizes the life of the living. They can no longer win glory by conquering their enemies or undertaking adventures. Given that their sense of self-identity is defined by this, they seem to languish in inactivity, deprived of the meaning that only the mortal condition can provide.

Odysseus then sees a series of mythological figures: of special interest are Tityos, Tantalus, and Sisyphus, who are all portrayed as suffering terrible punishments for grave crimes that they committed.[13] Tityos has his liver constantly gnawed by two vultures, while Tantalus suffers from eternal hunger and thirst, although he is painfully close to both food and water. Once again, this picture would seem to be inconsistent with the idea that these figures are shades without bodies of flesh and blood. Finally, Sisyphus is condemned continually to push a large rock up a hill only to see it fall back down again. While the other souls in Hades are clearly miserable, they are not explicitly punished for any wrongdoings; only these souls suffer specific punishments. This can be regarded as the origin of the conception of Hell as described, for example, in Dante. The idea of Hell is, of course conceived as a place where the souls are subject to varying kinds of punishments in accordance with the gravity of their sins. But it will be noted that, on this Greek conception, this represents

12 Ibid., Book XI, lines 488–91, p. 180.

13 See Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, "Crime and Punishment: Tityos, Tantalos and Sisyphos in *Odyssey* 11," *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, no. 33, 1986, pp. 37–58.

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only a small number of the souls in Hades. On the Greek view, the underworld is conceived not primarily as a place of punishment but simply as a place of general despair and misery.

The trip to the underworld is also about the search for knowledge. This motif is also found in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Both Gilgamesh and Odysseus are renowned heroes on a quest. This means that they must undertake great journeys in order to achieve their ends. While Gilgamesh does not travel to the underworld as such, like Odysseus, he nonetheless gains knowledge about the secrets of human mortality. Odysseus wants, above all, to return home, but in order to do so, he needs the knowledge that only Tiresias can provide. But once in the underworld, he does not miss the opportunity to acquire new knowledge about the nature of life and death as well as concrete information about the fate of friends and family. Not all of this knowledge is immediately useful to him for the task at hand, yet he lingers there for a long time to learn as much as he can. Thus, not all knowledge must have a clear-cut utilitarian end. Like Gilgamesh, Odysseus goes to the ends of the earth, to the underworld and returns with knowledge. Siduri serves as Gilgamesh's divine guide to the underworld, just as Circe tells Odysseus how to find and safely enter Hades. The Greek story seems in a sense more optimistic than the Mesopotamian one in that Odysseus uses the knowledge he has gained in order to return home. By contrast, Gilgamesh, despite all that he has learned, has still not managed to overcome death. Nonetheless, the two stories bear much in common, for example, the focus on the inevitability of death, the pessimistic view of the underworld, the negative relations with the gods, the value of friendship and comradery, the importance of self-restraint, and the dependence on divine good will.

The idea of an underworld journey has the function of serving as a kind of revelatory vision. It allows the hero to see and understand certain things that are usually not accessible to people. The protagonist sees things in the land of the dead that are beyond the realm of mundane human experience, and this information constitutes an important basis for a general world-view that is relevant for cosmology, anthropology, etc. Gilgamesh was described as someone "who saw mysteries and knew secret things."[14] The underworld thus serves as a source of knowledge about the profound questions of human existence. Given this, it is no wonder that this motif was seized by later authors, such as Virgil and Dante, who used it as an explanatory tool for different things in their own cultural context.

14 *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 61.

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3 The Greek Underworld in Plato

At the end of the *Gorgias* Socrates presents a mythological account of the nature of life after death that draws on what is found in Homer, whom he refers to directly.[15] This passage has puzzled scholars for different reasons. First, it is not entirely clear how it fits with the foregoing arguments in the work or what purpose it is meant to serve philosophically. Second, Socrates presents the mythological tale straightforwardly and affirms its truth without any hint of his characteristic critical analysis.[16] This seems to contradict his general methodology, which takes nothing for granted and puts everything to the test of reason. Finally, it is a matter of debate how this account fits with Socrates' other treatments of life after death in Plato's other works, most notably the *Phaedo*, the *Symposium*, and the *Laws*. There are thus many open questions surrounding this passage.

However, what is interesting for our purposes is the view of human beings that is implied in the picture of the underworld that Socrates presents. The account that he gives is generally in agreement with what we find in Homer, but Socrates emphasizes and elaborates on a specific aspect that is undeveloped in the *Odyssey*, namely, the question of rewards and punishments. In contrast to the account given in Homer, in the myth that Socrates recounts, all of the souls are judged for their behavior in life. Socrates says,

> Now, there was in the time of Kronos a law concerning mankind which has remained in force among the gods from that time to this. The law ordains that, when his time has come to die, a man who has lived a righteous and holy life shall depart to the Isles of the Blessed and there live in complete happiness, free from evils, but that the man whose life has been wicked and godless shall be imprisoned in the place of retribution and judgment, which is called Tartarus.[17]

Instead of all the souls going to a single place, here there are thus two possible destinations. With this we can see an early version of the idea of heaven and hell in the Christian tradition.

15 Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. by Walter Hamilton and Chris Emlyn-Jones, London: Penguin 2004, p. 133, 525d-e, p. 134, 526c-d.

16 Ibid., p. 131, 523a: "Give ear then, as they say, to a very fine story, which will, I suppose, seem just a legendary tale to you but is a fact to me; what I am going to tell you I tell you as the truth."

17 Plato, *Gorgias*, p. 131, 523a-b.

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Socrates recounts that in the early days the judgment took place while the people were still alive, specifically on the day when they were destined to die; moreover, their judges were also living. But this arrangement was problematic since evil people could unfairly influence their judgments by giving the misleading appearance that they were moral and righteous. Socrates explains, "Many whose souls are wicked are dressed in the trappings of physical beauty and high birth and riches, and when their trial takes place they are supported by a crowd of witnesses who come to testify to the righteousness of their lives."[18] As a result, people with evil characters managed to get a favorable judgment and be sent to the Isles of the Blessed, and those with good characters to Tartarus.

When Pluto and those in charge of the underworld complained about this, Zeus could not allow the injustice to stand. He then made three changes. First, he ordained that people should be judged naked, so that they could not hide anything or influence the judges by their expensive clothes. Second, he made it such that people did not know the day of their death so that they could not make special arrangements for their trials. Third, he decided that the judges themselves should be dead and should likewise be naked in order to ensure that they were incorruptible. Zeus then appointed three of his sons to be judges after their deaths: Minos, Rhadamanthus and Aeacus. In the *Odyssey*, it is mentioned that Odysseus sees Minos in the underworld, but there is no elaboration given of the nature or procedure of his judgments.[19] Rhadamanthus is also mentioned by way of allusion, although not in the underworld scene.[20] He is portrayed simply as dwelling in and perhaps ruling over the Elysian Field (which presumably corresponds to the Isles of the Blessed), but there is no mention of his role as judge. The element of judgment thus remains undeveloped.

The myth recounted by Socrates develops and extends the notion of divine justice that only existed in embryonic form in Homer. Here Pluto is upset about the injustices that arise concerning the judgments, and Zeus himself takes action to correct this. This view demonstrates an awareness or expectation that the gods act justly and are concerned with correct judgments. Moreover, the idea of judging people naked so that they can hide nothing also approaches our intuitive sense of what justice should be. This is a more satisfying picture of the afterlife than the one presented in Homer.

18 Ibid., p. 131, 523c.

19 *The Odyssey of Homer*, Book XI, lines 568–72, p. 182.

20 Ibid., Book IV, lines 564–5, p. 79.

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Socrates explains that the soul is separated from the body at death. The body maintains its physical features as in life, and the soul, although immaterial, also visibly displays the moral character of the deceased: "once it is stripped of the body all its qualities may be seen, not only its natural endowments but the modifications brought about by the various habits which its owner has formed."[21] Thus, the judges can see the moral character of the individual transparently by looking at his disembodied soul. This also seems to correspond to an intuitive sense of divine justice. The divine judges have the ability to see the precise nature of each individual in a way that would never be possible for living judges evaluating living people. Thus a divide is created between fallible human justice and divine justice. While human beings do the best that they can by creating laws and legal institutions in order to determine justice, they are still fallible, and miscarriages of justice do sadly take place. This is a fact of human existence, regardless of how good the given laws or judges are. But divine justice is not constrained in the same way. It can attain perfection in judgment since the judges are able to see the exact moral characters of individuals. They have complete knowledge, and their judgments are not clouded by deceptions and lying testimony. This idea strengthens the sense that there is something absolutely right and wrong, despite the fact that in the human sphere there is never any complete agreement about such things. With the idea of divine judgment, there is nowhere to hide. Everyone will get exactly what he or she deserves based on their moral character.

Moreover, the value of the individual increases, since now the moral character of every single human being is what is decisive. Each person is evaluated for his or her own merits. In death they can no longer be helped by their wealth or social standing. Their families or friends cannot come to their assistance. Now the dead souls stand completely alone and naked, that is, transparent before their judges. The individual moral character is thus more important than one's traditional roles in society or the family. Individual choice and responsibility now become tantamount, while custom and tradition are reduced to a secondary role. The idea of being judged naked and, indeed, as a disembodied soul also marks a shift from the outward to the inward. What is important is not the clothes that one wears or even the body that one possesses. One's outward roles in the family or society are likewise irrelevant. Instead, what is supremely valuable is the inward soul, which is invisible while one is alive.

An interesting deviation from the later Christian conception involves the notion of reincarnation, which, although not stated explicitly, is implied in

21 Plato, *Gorgias*, p. 132, 524d.

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the myth that Socrates recounts.[22] He explains the twofold goal of the punishments. There are hardened, unrepentant sinners who can never be redeemed. Their terrible punishments serve as examples to others. However, for the other sinners—presumably the vast majority of souls—the punishments serve the function of improving them. Their moral failings are curable. This picture implies that the souls will return to life with improved moral characters. Thus the whole process of judgement, punishment and moral redemption is designed to prepare people for their next life. It might be claimed that there is something intuitive about this model since in this way the punishments are made to serve a constructive purpose. When we punish children, the idea is that they will learn from this and be better adults for it. Likewise, when we punish criminals, the hope is that they will thereby be rehabilitated and eventually be able to resume a productive role in society. But if there is no future perspective, there is no constructive point to punishment. This seems to be a problem if the souls in the myth were simply to remain dead and suffer in the underworld forever. There is no point in trying to improve their characters since they will never become moral agents again. This problem is solved with the idea of reincarnation.

Moreover, if people are made to suffer eternal punishment, a disproportion seems to arise. For an individual finite sin, or even a number of them, one is made to suffer infinitely in eternity. Although we might derive a sense of vengeful satisfaction from seeing sinners suffer for their misdeeds, the principle of the punishment fitting the crime is violated. Why should we be made to suffer forever for a single misdeed or moment of weakness? The idea of reincarnation also solves this problem since it implies that the punishments are finite and that afterwards one will be given another chance. Only in the case of the incurable sinners is the punishment eternal.

Given all this, the point of the myth that Socrates recounts seems to be to motivate people to act justly. Socrates states straightforwardly, "I put faith in this story, and make it my aim to present my soul to its judge in the soundest possible state."[23] This reinforces the conclusion of the dialogue that one should strive for justice: "All other theories put forth in our long conversation have been refuted and this conclusion alone stands firm: that one should avoid doing wrong with more care than being wronged, and that the supreme object of a man's efforts, in public and in private life, must be the reality rather than

22 Socrates develops a theory of reincarnation in the *Republic*. See *The Republic of Plato*, trans. by Allan Bloom, New York: Basic Books 1968, Book X, pp. 292–303, 614a–621d.

23 Plato, *Gorgias*, pp. 134f., 526d.

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the appearance of goodness."[24] The question remains about the value of the myth for Socrates' purposes. If he believes that his argument has already thoroughly demonstrated the importance of acting justly, why does he need to mention a myth as well? In any case, we can see in the myth a further development in the conception of individuality and inwardness from what was seen previously in Homer.

4 The Roman Underworld

Corresponding to Book XI of the *Odyssey*, Book VI of the *Aeneid* depicts the hero's descent to the underworld.[25] While it is clear that Virgil is using the text from Homer as his model, there are some significant differences in the depictions, and these provide rich material for comparison and contrast. Once again it is possible to discern a clear elaboration of the concept of life after death and divine justice.

In Virgil's account of the underworld, the souls are differentiated much more specifically by their individual circumstances. First, Aeneas sees crowds of souls trying to cross the river Styx in the boat of Charon, who only allows the buried to come aboard. The unburied are not permitted to make the crossing but are forced to endure first a hundred years of wandering on the shores. Then there are the souls of children who died before they reached adulthood; then those who were executed unjustly on false charges. These souls are given a new trial in the afterlife and thus a chance to prove their innocence. This is described as follows: "Minos, the president of the court, shakes the lots in the urn, summoning the silent dead to act as jurymen, and holds inquiry into the lives of the accused and the charges against them."[26] This recognizes that there is something special and unique about the moral life of each individual. Moreover, the souls of dead children are recognized as full human beings. The account that Virgil gives here resembles in some ways that which Socrates recounts at the end of the *Gorgias*, where Minos and the other judges are mentioned.[27]

Aeneas and his guide the Sibyl come to a fork in the road, with Elysium on the one side and Tartarus on the other. With this division of the underworld into a heaven and a hell, Virgil follows the myth recounted by Socrates in

24 Ibid., p. 135, 527b.
25 Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. by David West, London: Penguin 1990.
26 Ibid., Book 6, lines 433–6, p. 127.
27 See Plato, *Gorgias*, pp. 131–6, 523a-527e.

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contrast to that found in the *Odyssey*. Aeneas is not allowed to enter Tartarus since he is pure and virtuous, but the Sibyl describes the place in great detail.[28] She outlines all of the different crimes that people have committed and the terrible punishments that they are suffering. Here the degree of detail involved goes well beyond Socrates' myth. We can clearly see in the Sibyl's descriptions the inspiration for Dante's elaborate portrayals in the *Inferno*, where he creates a detailed system of gradated punishments for the different crimes and sins.

In Tartarus, the Sibyl explains, Rhadamanthus is the ruler, and he upholds the laws and exacts the punishments on the sinners (another point of commonality with Socrates' account). Moreover, he gets them to confess the crimes that went undetected during their lives.[29] This is an idea that was presumably created in order to resolve the problem of divine justice. We might think of the question of justice as having two aspects. If there is divine justice, then no one who is innocent would ever be punished, and no one who is guilty of some crime would ever get away with it with impunity. With regard to the first part, Aeneas first sees the judge Minos who corrects the injustices that have happened to the innocent who were wrongly punished. Now Rhadamanthus rectifies the second half of the concept of injustice by punishing those who got away with crimes undetected. It will be recalled that this was a key element in Job's complaint. He could not understand why, given God's infinite power and justice, bad people seem to get away with their ill-deeds and live happy and prosperous lives. The answer to this that Job was given is, in effect, that it is a mystery and one needs to believe that God is just, despite all appearances to the contrary. In Virgil's underworld, this problem is resolved. While some evil people might have gotten away with their crimes in life, they will be caught by Rhadamanthus, made to confess, and punished accordingly. On this account, there is no escaping responsibility for one's ill-deeds. There is perfect divine justice, and it is clear to see. It is no longer a mystery that needs to be taken on faith. The wicked are made to suffer for their crimes, and, as in Dante, one feels a sense of satisfaction in seeing that justice is done, especially when one reads about their heinous crimes. While there are injustices in the world, these will all be corrected in the afterlife. This can be seen as a great psychological help to victims who suffer injustices in this world since it assures them that if they simply be patient and bravely endure the wrong done to them for a while, then after death they will in fact be vindicated and rewarded, while the ones who did them harm will be punished.

28 Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Book 6, lines 563–637, pp. 130–2.

29 Ibid., Book 6, lines 568–70, p. 131.

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Another new element here is that of the confession of the guilty party. In Socrates' account, the judges could see the moral characters of the individuals transparently since the latter were naked, and this seemed to be a guarantee for the correctness of their judgment. However, there always remains something slightly unsatisfying about such cases when unrepentant swindlers and manipulators stick to their claims of innocence even in the face of overwhelming and conclusive evidence to the contrary. Now here in Virgil this problem is also resolved since not only are such souls rightly judged by others but importantly they are also made to confess their own guilt. This seems to be a more certain vindication of the justice of their condemnation. The ultimate recognition of their own misdeeds is morally satisfying to see.

In Homer, it is not obvious what the dead souls in Hades are actually doing. They seem to have no real activity but are simply hanging around or wandering about. Similarly, in both the Mesopotamian and the Jewish underworld, the souls also seem to be simply sitting there languishing in darkness and despair. By contrast, here in Virgil's underworld, all of the souls have specifically appointed activities. The souls who committed some evil deed are made to suffer, whereas the souls who led virtuous lives, such as Aeneas' father Anchises, are enjoying themselves, engaging in exercise, music, dancing and other enjoyable activities. Once again, the picture of the afterlife presented by Virgil seems much more satisfying to our basic moral intuitions.

This happy picture does not bear critical scrutiny with regard to the underlying philosophical anthropology. For example, it is not clear how physical exercise makes any sense for disembodied souls. Moreover, Aeneas is said to see the dead souls of his fellow Trojan warriors, who take "the same joy in their chariots and their armor as when alive."[30] The idea seems to be that the warriors can still practice their military skills in the afterlife since this is a source of pleasure, even though they have no need to engage in warfare and thus no need of such skills. But it would seem impossible for an immaterial shade, who cannot even be grasped, to wear armor. Perhaps most absurd in this picture is the image of them feeding and caring for their horses in Elysium. It is clear that Virgil wants to portray this condition as a positive form of a continued earthly existence with all of the pleasures and joys that one experienced during life. Since tending to horses is a pleasant pastime for some, this requires that horses also be present in the afterlife.

It is noted that here Aeneas sees the souls of his fellow Trojans, "the ancient line of Teucer, the fairest of all families, great-hearted heroes born in a better

30 Ibid., Book 6, lines 655–6, p. 133.

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time."[31] Given Virgil's goal of glorifying the heroes of Troy as the forerunners of the Romans, it stands to reason that they would be depicted as noble and dignified, enjoying a happy existence in Elysium. This should be contrasted with the picture of the Greek heroes from Troy who are described earlier. They are in neither Elysium nor Tartarus, and their location is described simply as "the place set apart for brave warriors."[32] Although some of these Greeks are interested to see Aeneas and to talk to him, others are portrayed in a decidedly cowardly fashion:

> But when the Greek leaders and the soldiers of Agamemnon in their phalanxes saw the hero and his armor gleaming through the shadows, a wild panic seized them. Some turned and ran as they had run once before to get back to their ships, while others lifted up their voices and raised a tiny cry, which started as a shout from mouth wide open, but no shout came.[33]

Here the goal is clearly to emphasize the greatness of Aeneas as a warrior, who can instill such fear in the Greeks merely by his appearance. In contrast, to the Trojans in Elysium, they appear as weak and undignified. The obvious absurdity in this picture is that it is difficult to understand why they would fear that Aeneas would do them harm if they are already dead anyway.

In Elysium Aeneas is united with the ghost of his father, Anchises, who died during the journey from Troy. He now in a sense takes over as guide from the Sibyl and tells of the rationale and organization of this part of the underworld. He presents a doctrine of reincarnation. People are born, live their lives, and then die and come to the underworld. There the souls drink from the water of the river Lethe, which causes them to forget their past lives.[34] Then they are prepared to return to mundane existence again, where they are given a new body and can live a new life. Scholars have identified elements of Platonism and Stoicism in the cosmology that Anchises presents, but it is uncertain to what degree Virgil's vision of these things was widely shared in the Rome of his day. In any case, there is a clear mind-body dualism at work. The spark of life is fire, which comes from heaven.[35] The body is simply physical matter, which decays and is perishable, while the soul endures. With an echo of Plato's

31 Ibid., Book 6, lines 649–50, p. 133.
32 Ibid., Book 6, lines 479–80, p. 128.
33 Ibid., Book 6, lines 488–94, p. 128.
34 Ibid., Book 6, lines 713–6, p. 135.
35 Ibid., Book 6, lines 730–1, p. 135.

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Phaedo,[36] the body is even portrayed as a "prison" to the soul and the cause of both grief and joy.[37]

Anchises seems to indicate that even the souls in Elysium were in some ways sinful and needed to pay for their missteps in different ways, before they could be allowed to enjoy the afterlife. He explains that the souls "are put to punishment, to pay the penalty for all their ancient sins. Some are stretched and hung out empty to dry in the winds. Some have the stain of evil washed out of them under a vast tide of water or scorched out by fire."[38] These sins are thus taken seriously, but they are apparently of a different category than the far more serious crimes committed by the inveterate and hardened sinners, who are punished in Tartarus.

Anchises emphasizes the key point: "Each of us suffers his own fate in the after-life."[39] Once again we have seen that there was a levelling effect in the Mesopotamian and the Jewish afterlife. Even in the Homeric underworld the dead souls seemed all to be treated equally, despite the differences in their moral characters. Now, however, people are evaluated individually. The moral life of each person is of interest to the gods, and people are judged and held responsible for their own decisions and actions. This represents a new conception of individuality and an increased awareness and appreciation for the realm of inwardness and subjectivity of each person. This in turn generates a demand for individualized justice.

5 Dante's Christian View

For the *Inferno*, Dante is clearly inspired by the accounts of the underworld in Homer in the *Odyssey* and especially Virgil in the *Aeneid*.[40] However, being ignorant of Greek, he was considerably less familiar with the former. Just as these ancient epic poets portrayed the underworld and used it in different ways as a part of their own narrative, so also Dante exploits this motif and even makes it central to his own work. Indeed, Dante alludes to Aeneas' visit to the underworld directly, before undertaking his own journey.[41]

36 Plato, *Phaedo*, in *The Last Days of Socrates*, trans. by Christopher Rowe, London: Penguin 2010, p. 114, 62b.
37 Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Book 6, lines 735–6, p. 135.
38 Ibid., Book 6, lines 739–43, p. 135.
39 Ibid., Book 6, lines 743–4, p. 135.
40 *Dante's Inferno*, trans. by Mark Musa, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1995.
41 Ibid., Canto 11, lines 13–5, p. 27.

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The purpose of the underworld scenes in both Homer and Virgil is one of knowledge. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is told by Circe that before he can continue his journey home, he must visit the underworld and ask for help from the prophet Tiresias.[42] The prophet tells him what he needs to do to complete his voyage successfully and even explains how he will die.[43] This episode plays an important role in the narrative since it anticipates the adventures that Odysseus will have in the second half of the work and gives him invaluable guidance about what he must do in order to arrive back home safely.

In the *Aeneid*, Virgil uses the device of the underworld in a slightly different way. Before he even enters the underworld, Aeneas hears the prophecies of the Sibyl, which anticipates the second half of the story.[44] Thus, in contrast to the account in the *Odyssey*, this is not the reason why he goes to the underworld. Instead, the underworld episode in the *Aeneid* serves the function both of allowing Aeneas to be reunited with his dead father Anchises and, more importantly, of permitting him to catch a glimpse of the glorious subsequent history of Rome, which vindicates all of his sufferings and self-sacrifice. In both cases, important knowledge is gleaned. Moreover, the respective underworld scenes provide an occasion for the presentation of a kind of cosmology that reflects the world-view of the time.

There is an important shift that takes place in the protagonists in the three epics. In Homer, it is the great warrior Odysseus, who makes the trip to the underworld. Likewise, in Virgil, it is the hero Aeneas, the man responsible for the beginnings of Rome, who undertakes the journey. Both of these men have accomplished heroic acts and are esteemed as great leaders by their peoples. The trips to the underworld are just one episode among others in their eventful lives. By contrast, Dante is a more ordinary person. He is not a great military hero. But yet he too must undertake a similar journey. He contrasts himself with Aeneas and with St. Paul, who is also reputed to have made such a visit to the underworld.[45] Dante asks, "But why am I to go? Who allows me to? / *I* am not Aeneas. *I* am not Paul, / neither I nor any man would think me worthy."[46] This is important since it shows that the spiritual struggles of the individual are now the main human focus and not the outward exploits such as military

42 *The Odyssey of Homer*, Book x, lines 488–95, p. 165.

43 Ibid., Book xi, lines 90–149, pp. 170–2.

44 Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Book 6, lines 83–7, p. 117.

45 See 2 Corinthians 12:2–4, which is the basis for the apocryphal work, the *Apocalypse of Saint Paul* or the *Visio sancti Pauli*. Although the text of this work has been mostly lost, it seems to have contained a description of Heaven and Hell.

46 *Dante's Inferno*, Canto ii, lines 31–3, p. 28.

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conquests or long journeys on the sea. The inward struggle of the individual makes us all in a sense play the role of hero in our own epic. As individuals, we are now important, regardless of the fact that we have not fought great battles, defeated monsters, or ruled as famous kings.

One can also see an important change in the nature of the underworld as it is presented by the three epic poets. In Homer, the underworld is more or less simply a kind of residence for the dead. Only in a few instances is there mention of punishments, and, as we have noted, for the most part, the dead souls are merely whiling away the time there, with no real occupation or activity. Moreover, in Homer there are no real distinctions made among the different kinds of dead souls. Hades seems to be a place for everyone. By contrast, in Virgil, there is a clearer distinction made among the different souls and their fates. They are separated into two places, one Elysium, which is the home for the virtuous souls, and the other, Tartarus, where the evil ones go. Here there is a much clearer sense of rewards and punishments based on the actions of people in their lives. Moreover, Virgil has recognized and addressed the problem in Homer about the lack of activities of the dead and has given the departed souls things to do: those in Elysium engage in physical exercise and pleasant pastimes, while those in Tartarus suffer terrible punishments. In Dante, the conception of divine justice is worked out in great detail with an elaborate scheme of rewards and punishments.

The *Divine Comedy* thus represents a kind of theodicy that explains God's justice. Although the mundane world is full of apparent injustices, these will all be punished in the afterlife. This is demanded by God's power and wisdom. On the inscription of the gates of Hell, it is written, "Justice moved my heavenly constructor; / divine omnipotence created me, / and highest wisdom joined with primal love."[47] Thus, Hell was created by the demands of justice to punish the sinful. God's infinite power has made this possible, and his infinite wisdom has ensured that justice is done in the case of each and every individual.

Dante thus takes upon himself the enormous task of developing a detailed and systematic theory of divine justice in his account of the punishments in Hell. He portrays the entire spectrum of sin and thus develops a corresponding theory of justice and punishment to fit the different levels of guilt and culpability. Needless to say, this is a tremendously ambitious undertaking. Just recall that in some of the other works that we have discussed, the idea of divine justice was a mysterious matter. It was impossible to make sense of why the evil people seemed to profit and the good seemed to be punished. This was the

47 Ibid., Canto III, lines 4–6, p. 34.

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question that Job asked with some urgency. For the Mesopotamians, there was only a vague sense of divine justice, whereas most of the time the gods seemed spiteful and impetuous. Similarly, the Greek gods were quickly offended and behaved like children. Given this background, it is now a major undertaking that Dante sets for himself to paint a vivid picture of the nature of divine justice in its finest details.

Dante's theory of punishment in the *Inferno* is an aspect of his work that overlaps with the field of social-political philosophy and jurisprudence. He is thus sometimes seen as a forerunner in the theory of punishment in these fields. It is easy to think that Dante's imaginative forms of punishment are simply arbitrary productions of a poet, designed for artistic effect, but there is a deeper underlying theory behind this.

For Dante, the basic principle of divine justice and punishment is referred to as "*contrapasso*" (in modern orthography, "*contrappasso*").[48] This Italian word comes from a combination of two Latin terms, "*patior*" the deponent verb for "to suffer" and "*contra*," which means something like "opposite." The idea implies that the punishment is conceived as the opposite or mirror image of the crime itself. It is thus intended as a natural inversion of the sin. This is a general principle, but it is not always applied consistently, and in some cases the punishment seems to resemble the sin itself instead of its opposite.

One example of *contrapasso* can be found in the third canto, where Dante and Virgil see the souls of those who remained forever neutral, refusing to take sides.[49] These sinners are rejected by both Heaven and Hell. They are condemned to run back and forth continuously following a banner. The idea is that the opposite of those who remain noncommittal are those flippant people who zealously throw themselves behind every new cause without any real reflection. This is represented by the idea of following a banner. The noncommittal people are thus condemned to this meaningless existence of aimlessly supporting an unknown political movement. Just as they in life failed to show any commitment by supporting something, in death they are compelled in a sense to support any arbitrary cause. Note that in both cases, the result is the same: the person who supports nothing shows no character, just as the person who supports everything and who quickly moves from one allegiance to the next indifferently. By contrast, the person with true moral character carefully reflects upon which causes to support and chooses the one that reflects his or her own values. Dante's point here is that even those sinners who choose evil

48 See ibid., Canto XXVIII, line 142, p. 207.

49 Ibid., Canto III, lines 35–69, pp. 35f.

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at least show some moral character in contrast to those who remain forever neutral and noncommittal. Even though he is evil, Milton's devil in *Paradise Lost* can still in some sense be admired since he at least demonstrates a certain consistency of character, which is completely lacking in the case of these sinners in Dante.

Another perhaps more obvious example of *contrapasso* is the punishment of the sorcerers and fortunetellers in Canto 20.[50] These people dedicated their lives to gazing into the future. Now their punishment is that they have their heads turned around so that they are looking backwards and can thus only see what is behind them.[51] They are condemned to look only at the past and are prevented from seeing what is in front of them, the future. While in life they adopted the one principle in a one-sided way, that is, a fixation on the future, they are punished in death by the other side of the same principle, that is, the past, which they neglected.

One might argue that we can see in this conception of justice an echo of Aristotle's principle of *sophrosyne*. For the Greek philosopher, the goal was to find the appropriate middle way between two extremes. Here the extremes are a fixation with the future and with the past. While the sorcerers and fortunetellers were guilty of the one in life, they are punished with the other in death, just like a pendulum swinging from one side to the other. But the proper disposition is one in the middle, that is, one that is occupied primarily with the present and limits the concern with the future and the past in an appropriate manner.

Here in Canto 20 we see the familiar figure of Tiresias,[52] who connects the *Divine Comedy* with Book XI of the *Odyssey*. But while Tiresias was a sympathetic figure in Homer (and, it should be noted, also in Sophocles), here he is presented as one of the sinners wallowing in Hell. This clearly demonstrates the radical inversion of values that Christianity has effected on the pagan world. For the ancients, the ability to see into the future was a legitimate and valuable skill that was honored. By contrast, in the Christian world this is merely a sign of superstition.

The idea with *contrapasso* is that when the evil will commits a sin, it rejects the divinely ordained order of things and embraces a different principle. The person thus shows a blindness by adopting a one-sided principle. The punishment is intended to bring this to light by making the sinner suffer the opposite principle. In a sense this can be thought of as giving the sinner exactly

50 Ibid., Canto XX, lines 1–60, pp. 148f.
51 Ibid., Canto XX, lines 10–5, p. 148.
52 Ibid., Canto XX, lines 40–5, p. 149.

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what he wants, and when the negative implications of this are shown, the one-sidedness of the principle is exposed. In this way the punishment is in a sense a reflection of the will of the sinner himself.

As noted, not all of the punishments follow the principle of *contrapasso*, strictly speaking. In Canto 28 the sinners who are guilty of having caused schisms and divisions among people are punished by having their bodies severed from the head to the midsection.[53] They wander around until they grow together and are then cut open again. With this grotesque punishment, the split that they have caused to happen among peoples is replicated on their own bodies. They have not respected the unitary whole of a community or a people, and so the unity of their own bodies is destroyed. This form of punishment seems to deviate from the principle of *contrapasso* since it is not the opposite of the sin but rather a kind of repetition or reduplication of it. This punishment takes the will of the sinner as the point of departure. Since the sinner wanted to cause division, this will is generalized to include the person's own body. Thus, in a sense the sinner has willed his own punishment, which is simply an extension or magnification of the same principle instead of some version of the opposite.

6 Conclusion

The model for religious knowing is often thought to be that of revelation. According to this view, God provides humans with knowledge that is already fixed, finished and unchangeable from the start. However, even the most cursory understanding of the history of religion shows that religious ideas are in fact mutable. Like all other ideas created by the human mind, religious ideas also change and develop over time. Some ideas are better than other ones in the sense of being more intuitively satisfying or internally consistent. One might conceive of this as a kind of evolution of ideas by natural selection. Over time new ideas arise which improve upon shortcomings of earlier conceptions.

Historians of technology and science can trace the many steps over a long period of time that led from the invention of the wheel to the development of, for example, computers. Many different ideas had to be developed and applied before complex machines were possible. So also with religious ideas. Complicated systems of belief or practice did not arise all at once. They

53 Ibid., Canto XXVIII, pp. 203–7.

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represent ideas that developed over an extended period of time and which were constantly refined and improved as specific shortcomings became visible.

Another analogous model can be found in the development of legal thinking. Initially early peoples began by establishing the most basic laws required for civilized life to exist. Examples of this can be seen in the Ten Commandments or Hammurabi's Laws. Then over the course of time these basic laws proved to be incomplete since cases arose which were not unambiguously covered by them. Thus, new laws had to be created in order to close the legal loopholes and extend the legal framework to cover the maximal number of possible cases. Over time this resulted in the highly complex legal systems that we know today. Basic human intuitions that we would today call religious began and developed conceptually in the same way.

Early humans presumably wished that their deceased loved ones would continue to live in some form or another. But from this vague intuition, it took a long time to develop a conception of heaven or hell with all of the finely tuned features that these ideas imply. In the sequence of accounts of the underworld traced here, we can clearly see key ideas changing and becoming more refined. Perhaps most importantly, the idea of individuality and human subjectivity changes. The value of the individual increases. At first, the individual was not taken into account and did not seem to have any great significance. But then over the course of time this came to be recognized. Each person was regarded as important and needed to be understood and evaluated individually.

This new idea of human subjectivity brings with it new conceptions of the afterlife and divine justice. At each stage innovations are introduced that are intended to overcome the shortcomings of the earlier conceptions. This implies that as the concepts of individuality developed, the older conceptions of the afterlife and divine justice became unsatisfying. Thus the new concept of the individual demanded a new and updated version of the other concepts in order to keep step with people's moral intuitions. It is probably meaningless to ask which concept came first since it seems clear that we are talking here about a constellation of concepts that belong together. In any case, it seems indisputable that a huge amount of conceptual progress has been made when one compares the rather vague conceptions of the Mesopotamians and the Hebrews with the much richer conceptions found in Virgil and Dante.

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