Plato's Hopeful Agnosticism and the Restoration of Theological Humility

Jordan Valles
University of Redlands

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Jordan Valles
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This thesis is an attempt to explore the relationship between Platonic concepts and Christian Philosophy. Christianity is the religion of my youth and is also the religion which I still identify with today. However, my perception of Christ, his teachings, and the institution of Christianity as a whole has been greatly influenced by my studies in philosophy and in particular my studies in Plato. Therefore, in some ways, this thesis is both an academic as well as a personal endeavor.

Growing up in Southern California, the only churches I attended were non-denominational Christian churches. Although these churches were “non-denominational,” I found they always seemed to share an underlined sentiment of “Evangelicalism,” which is to say, there was always emphasis on the idea that we humans are born with a sinful nature which we inherit from Adam. Because of this biological relation to Adam, we possess an inescapable impurity that can only be remedied through a profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This process was referred to as “being born again” and was synonymous with “salvation.” Once a person is “saved,” he or she is naturally compelled to want to convert as many people as possible to their brand of religion so as to spare them from an eternity of suffering and condemnation which is the destined lot of the “unsaved.” Needless to say, I grew up attending churches which taught a very black or white, heaven or hell form of Christianity. It was a form of Christianity which encouraged unquestioning acceptance of the authority of the Bible as “God’s Word,” and a reverence towards pastoral leadership. Consequently, it was a
form of Christianity which discouraged multi-religious and philosophic exploration as well as skeptical questioning regarding interpretation, historical accuracy and authenticity.

It wasn’t until my first year of Jr. College that I was introduced to the dialogues of Plato which had a very profound impact on me. I can recall sitting in Starbucks reading Plato for the first time and thinking to myself, “Wow this is so interesting!” Here was someone writing more than four hundred years before Jesus was born and yet he seemed to be promoting a type of lifestyle which struck me as very similar to the kind of lifestyle which Jesus espoused in his teachings. I began to see so many parallels and similarities that I became convinced that either the authors of the New Testament or Jesus himself must have had some type of exposure to Platonic Philosophy.

When I began my religious studies at the U of R, I discovered to my great surprise that what I had thought was my unique insight turns out to be a widely accepted fact among scholars, that Jesus really did have a tremendous influence on many Christian concepts such as the perception of God, the idea of a spiritual world that is different from the physical and the notion of an immortal soul which is separate from the body. As Professor of religion and Jewish studies Alan Segal has pointed out, “Plato’s is the most influential Philosophical system for religion in the West until the modern period. After an initial and telling phase of rejection, Platonism became the cornerstone of the Christian doctrine of the immortality of the soul,”1 and Thomas Gaston notes that by the end of the second century “Platonism became ingrained in Christian discourse about God.”2

After learning that the influence of Plato’s ideas on Christianity is acknowledged and widely accepted among scholars, I began to wonder why the link between Plato and Christianity

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is less readily apparent within my church community. In all the churches I have attended, not once have I heard (and will most likely never hear) a pastor give a sermon on Plato's arguments for the immortality of the soul or why leading a virtuous life is good in and of itself. Nor have I ever come across the dialogues of Plato on a Christian bookstore shelf or a church library. I have spoken with educators who teach at Ontario Christian, a private secondary/high school in Ontario California, and they all have confirmed that Plato is nowhere to be found in the curriculum. Why is this? Where did Plato go? What was it about Plato's ideas that were influential enough to have laid a foundation for many Christian concepts but were too incompatible to be incorporated into the common knowledge that gets taught in church?

This by no means implies that Christianity has become a thoroughgoing anti-intellectual religion, devoid of all critical thinking and in complete denial of its roots in secular philosophy. Christianity is a very immense tradition, encompassing followers from all walks of life. Not every Christian votes Republican. Not every Christian believes that the profession of Jesus as Lord and Savior is the only way to attain salvation. It is not uncommon for a student attending a private Catholic institution to learn the tenets of Platonic philosophy. There are certainly circles of Christian academics who find no difficulty reconciling their faith in Jesus with Christianity's Platonic foundations, such as the prominent Princeton Professor and Christian philosopher Cornell West, who specifically sites the *Phaedo* as one of his sources of spiritual inspiration. Rather this essay is addressing the functions of a particular slice of Christianity which perpetuates the spirit of Evangelical Protestantism. Although this is only one voice in the vast spectra of the Christian religion, it is a very loud voice nonetheless.

Part of the problem is the mental gap that exists in the minds of Evangelicals which separates religious doctrine from secular philosophy. It is important to understand that this

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mental gap is a modern phenomenon. The line between religion and philosophy was much harder to distinguish in the times of early Christianity and arguably in part *because* of Christianity. Many scholars are of the opinion that it was Judaism’s, and later, Christianity’s absorption of Greek philosophy which transformed religion from being primarily a form of civic duty and patriotic expression to an institution concerned with ethics, morality, and spiritual development. Although these are subjects commonly identified with modern religion, their original and proper place in Greek and Greco-Roman culture was in the philosophical schools.4

Prior to Christianity, Greco-Roman religion was essentially Greek in spirit. Preceding the rapid growth of monotheism, religion was polytheistic and largely centered in ritual, ceremony, and sacrifice. These religious ceremonies often accompanied important watersheds in one’s life, such as birth, puberty, marriage and death.5 Thus, appropriate “pious” behavior consisted of performing the proper ceremonies of a particular cult (veneration towards a specific deity) and offering prayers and sacrifices to the gods on behalf of one’s personal prosperity as well as the longevity of the State and current ruler.6

In all instances, both private and public, these religious practices were carried out with an aim of receiving immediate, earthly benefits, such as the healing of an ailment, a fertile reproductive system, and weather which would produce bountiful crops. In truth, it was the philosophers who were credited with being the first to turn their attention inwards, developing complex theologies and codes of conduct which aimed at refining one’s character as well as providing a moral standard by which to live. Although there were no ritualistic demands and expectations of material gain, these philosophical prescriptions nonetheless possessed

4 Christopher M. McDonough, “Roman Religion,” EAGR 6: 96
6 McDonough, “Roman Religion,” 6: 97
tremendous religious significance in the modern sense of the term. As the French philosopher and historian Pierre Hadot has pointed out, "we are not just dealing here with a code of good moral conduct, but with a way of being, in the strongest sense of the term." 7

Based on historical evidence, many scholars believe Plato’s Academy to have been one of the first philosophical schools erected in the early fourth century B.C.E. Plato taught a distinct form of Idealism, in which ideas were perceived to be transcendental realities, existing outside of space and time and serving as a frame of reference for everything in the physical realm. Many scholars believe that Plato’s idea of “the Good” laid the philosophical framework for the Christian perception of God, while others credit Plato’s concept of the “World Soul.” 8 However, it was Plato’s theory of soul that would prove to have the most influence on Christian philosophy. Overtime, the religious implications and spiritual tone of Plato’s ideas are unmistakable.

While Plato produced additional theories which have had a profound impact on Christianity, such as the beauty of the celestial order above and a just society, 9 I will focus on the influence of Plato’s theory of soul in the Phaedo. I will then discuss how this theory of soul carried over into the writings of the Jewish Philosopher Philo of Alexandria. As I explore these two theories of soul I wish to point out a common sentiment of what I am calling ‘hopeful agnosticism’ and ‘theological humility ’expressed by the authors. I well then examine Augustine’s theory of the soul’s corruption, wishing to point out a shift in tone from agnosticism to what I am calling ‘theological certainty.’ I have chosen to work with these three philosophers because they exemplify how Platonic philosophy influenced both Jewish and Christian philosophy. Furthermore, these authors represent three separate periods of time which were

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8 Ferguson, Backgrounds of Early Christianity, 333
9 Ferguson, Backgrounds of Early Christianity, 335
important to the ongoing development of Platonic thought; with Plato (427-347BCE) as representative of Platonic philosophy, Philo of Alexandria (c.30BCE-50CE) as representative of Middle Platonism, and Augustine (354-430CE) as representative of Neo-Platonism.

What Was Meant by Soul?

Before examining Plato's view of the soul, it is important to establish how the term "soul" was used and what was understood to mean during the time Plato was developing his theories.

In his book, Studies in Heraclitus, the Greek scholar Roman Dilcher traces the first mention of the soul in ancient Greece to the Homeric poems in which the soul is the aspect of the human being which travels to the underworld after death in the form of a shade, phantom, or image of the previous living person. In The Odyssey, Homer paints a rather gothic picture of the afterlife, in which the deceased experience a very dark and sorrowful existence. When Odysseus travels to Hades, he encounters the souls of a wide variety of individuals, including "brides, [...] unwedded youths, [...] toil-worn old men, [...] tender maidens with hearts yet new to sorrow and [...] men slain in fight, wearing their blood-stained armour."^{10}

For Homer, the underworld of Hades appears as the common fate of all living people irrespective of their previous professions or life situations. Nor does it seem to matter the manner in which a person dies. Odysseus encounters his mother who died by means of suicide. It is Odysseus' mother who gives a detailed description of the soul's visible yet intangible state once departed from the body. While explaining to Odysseus why he is unable to embrace her, she states, "This is the appointed way with mortals when one dies. For the sinews no longer hold the

^{10} Homer, the Odyssey. XI. 25-54 (Murray, LCL)
flesh and the bones together, but the strong might of blazing fire destroys these, as soon as the life leaves the white bones, and the spirit\textsuperscript{11}, like a dream, flits away.\textsuperscript{12}

In Homer's depiction, although the departed lose their physical substantiality, the dead do not undergo any visual transformation; they travel to the \textit{underworld} in whatever condition they may find themselves at the moment of death; for example, brave soldiers still carry blood on their shields.

Even in these early depictions while the soul appears to be an exclusively human attribute and experiences some form of existence after death, it takes on a less fruitful existence than that which it experienced while occupying a body. The deceased souls found in the Homeric poems seem to resent the outcome of their destiny and would prefer to be alive in the world. This sentiment is clearly expressed by the late Achilles when he states, "I should choose, so I might live on earth, to serve as the hireling of another, of some portionless man whose livelihood was but small, rather than to be Lord over all the dead."\textsuperscript{13} Perhaps it is Homer's vision of the afterlife which contributed to the perception of death being "the greatest evil" which Socrates alludes to in the \textit{Apology}.\textsuperscript{14} It is interesting that Plato here refers to Homer in [34d] and states that he hopes to meet Odysseus in the afterlife [41c].

In his article "Ancient Theories of Soul," Greek Scholar and Princeton Professor Hendrik Lorenz singles out the fifth and sixth century B.C. as a turning point in the popular usage of soul, in which the term 'ensouled' emerged which simply meant to be 'alive' and was no longer exclusive to human beings but was understood to encapsulate all living things. Lorenz argues that at this point the essential meaning of the term underwent a change from being

\textsuperscript{11} Spirit may also be translated as 'soul.'
\textsuperscript{12} Homer, \textit{the Odyssey}. XI. 220-249 (Murray, LCL)
\textsuperscript{13} Homer, \textit{the Odyssey}. XI. 477-503 (Murray, LCL)
\textsuperscript{14} Plato, \textit{Apology}, 29b
understood as that which distinguishes a live human body from a corpse to the broader definition of that which separates what is alive from what is not alive. Lorenz likewise premises that at this time the soul was also beginning to be understood as something that might be affected by external influences and produce internal desires. By the end of the fifth century B.C.E. the soul was commonly thought of as the aspect of man which takes pleasure in eating, drinking and sexual intercourse, as well as the bearer of emotions such as love, hate, joy and grief. Scholars argue that the Greek historians Thucydides and Herodotus as well as the playwright Euripides and the poet Pindar, all contributed to the fifth century semantic broadening of the term ‘soul.’

Virtually all of the fifth and sixth century writers considered the soul to be a corporal component of the body, usually constituting a fine substance such as fire or air. This was essentially the common understanding of soul which Plato used as a springboard to launch into his own ideas and theories concerning the nature of the soul.

The notion of an immortal soul which outlives and separates from the body at death is not strictly a Platonic or even a Greek innovation, as Segal points out, similar beliefs had already existed in ancient Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Israeli cultures. What can be attributed to Plato is a new understanding of a person’s naturally dualistic state, existing in between “two distinct realities,” those being the spiritual or ideal and the physical or visible. Plato suggests that soul is to the body what ideas are to physical manifestations, implying that the soul is preexistent to the body and therefore holds a superior status. Another aspect which may not have been unique to Plato’s view of the soul but more than likely went against the grain of common perception was the analysis of death as beneficial. In contrast to the murky, insubstantial afterlife presented by Homer, Plato’s theories include a sublime afterlife for the soul. For Plato, death does not mark

15 Hendrik Lorenz, “Ancient Theories of Soul,” SEP 3-5
16 Segal, Life After Death, 205
17 Ferguson, Backgrounds of Early Christianity, 334
the end of a fruitful existence. Instead, death is viewed as the soul’s liberation from its bodily prison, followed by the potential ascent from the physical world of illusion to “the eternal realm of Ideas.”

Plato: The Hopeful Agnostic

Any analysis or interpretation of Plato’s work which strives to gain a better understanding of Plato’s own thoughts and beliefs can never amount to anything more than speculation. It is impossible to know what Plato actually believed. Plato never asserts his beliefs directly; rather he uses his late teacher Socrates as the main character in his dialogues. In the following section the use of the name ‘Socrates’ will refer to the literary character as he is depicted by Plato. It is often assumed that Plato is expressing many of his own opinions and beliefs through the mouthpiece of Socrates, but as students of ancient history we can never be certain and it is this element of uncertainty which allows room for interpretation. The element of interpretation is what separates ‘Platonic philosophy’ from ‘Platonism.’ ‘Platonic philosophy’ derives directly from the dialogues of Plato, whereas ‘Platonism’ consists of a collection of authors who all had their own interpretations of Plato’s work.

My interpretation of Plato as ‘hopefully agnostic’ stems from several passages in the Apology, Crito and Phaedo in which the character Socrates asserts his own uncertainty in regards to his thoughts on the nature of soul and the afterlife. Before turning my attention to the dialogues and their subtle references to ‘hopeful agnosticism,’ I wish to clarify what is intended by the term. What I mean by the term ‘hopeful agnosticism’ is an attitude of optimistic uncertainty when inquiring into matters of a spiritual nature, such as the nature of God, soul and the afterlife. For example, in the Apology Socrates is recorded as saying,

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19 John Dillon, “Platonism,” EAGR 5: 307
To fear death, gentlemen, is nothing else than to think one is wise when one is not; for it is thinking one knows what one does not know. For no one knows whether death be not even the greatest of all blessings to man, but they fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils. And is not this the most reprehensible form of ignorance, that of thinking one knows what one does not know?²⁰

Socrates seems to be suggesting that it is unwise for a person to assume the true nature of death, yet he goes on to make several assumptions of his own. However, Socrates’ assumptions regarding the nature of death seem to carry with them a tone of humility. For example, Socrates goes on to state that, “good reason there is to hope that [death] is a good thing. For the state of death is one of two things: either it is virtually nothingness, so that the dead have no consciousness of anything, or it is, as people say, a change and migration of the soul from this to another place.”²¹ While in this passage Socrates admits his uncertainty concerning the future of his existence, he counters this with a positive perspective, for he considers both outcomes to be beneficial. This is precisely what I mean by the term “hopeful agnostic.”

Socrates says there is good reason to hope that death is a good thing. Therefore, hopeful agnosticism, as I have defined it, is not a theological position as much as it is a theological approach. To be hopefully agnostic is to approach theology with an awareness that theology itself deals with the abstract and metaphysical; it is the understanding that when one embarks on a theological endeavor, one leaves the realm of scientific fact and empirically confirmed knowledge and enters into the realm of theory, opinion, and consequently...uncertainty. It is important not to confuse hopeful agnosticism with hopeful apathy. For example, if one were to ask a hopeful agnostic a theologically based question he or she would not respond, “I don’t know, but I’m hoping for the best.” rather the hopeful agnostic would respond, “I have no way of being certain, but this is what I believe, and these are my reasons for believing it.”

²⁰ Plato, Apology. 29b (Fowler, LCL)
²¹ Plato, Apology. 40c (Fowler, LCL)
perceives philosophy to be an active pursuit of pure knowledge, but his pursuit seems to be
guided by the realization that the attainment of pure knowledge regarding questions of a
metaphysical nature is highly improbable if not impossible. This realization does not seem to
hinder Socrates' pursuit of knowledge, but it does seem to instill in him a deep seeded humility
as is reflected in his final statement to the jury immediately after being sentenced to death;
Socrates states, "The time has come to go away. I go to die and you to live; but which of us goes
to the better lot, is known to none but God." 22

The Phaedo is a continuation of the Apology and Crito. Socrates has already been
charged with impious behavior and corrupting the youth. His sentence is death by poison. As he
awaits his final hours in his holding cell he is joined by his friends who wish to partake in one
last discourse with their beloved mentor. Given the circumstance that Socrates is hours away
from his own death, the topic of the immortality of the soul seems most appropriate.

In grasping the significance of this discourse, it is important to note that in the Apology
Socrates has been given the option of being cast into exile as an alternative to capital
punishment. 23 In the Crito he once again is given the opportunity to escape prison and steer clear
of death. 24 He adamantly refuses in both instances. In the Apology Socrates justifies these
choices, stating, "[to refrain from discourse while in exile] would be disobedience to the god and
[...] therefore I cannot keep quiet." 25 By bravely embracing his fate Socrates is validating his
life's work as one who pursues truth and wisdom at all costs. Socrates is making a very powerful
statement; he is implying that the loss of one's life is preferable to the compromising of one's
integrity and spiritual well being. Socrates becomes in some sense a philosophical martyr, dying

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22 Plato, Apology. 42a (Fowler, LCL)
23 [37e]
24 [44c-45d]
25 Plato, Apology. 38a (Fowler, LCL)
for the sake of what he believes to be the truth. As Socrates embraces death he likewise offers a final lesson to his pupils. His act demonstrates the strength of his own conviction that “no evil can come to a good man either in life or after death.”

While explaining why suicide is unlawful even when death is perceived as beneficial, Socrates states: “The doctrine that is taught in secret about this matter, that we men are in a kind of prison and must not set ourselves free or run away, seems to me to be weighty and not easy to understand. But this [...] I do believe to be sound, that the gods are our guardians and that we men are one of the chattels of the gods.” It is at this point in the dialogue that we come across the first indication of what I have termed ‘hopeful agnosticism.’ Socrates is referencing a rather mysterious doctrine which he admits to not fully comprehending. Nevertheless, Socrates seems to be using this enigmatic doctrine as a catalyst in developing a personal belief, which is to say, he is holding to a personal conviction that is based on a theory that he cannot fully explain or understand.

Plato’s View of the Soul

Although in the *Apology* Socrates admits to being unsure as to whether death is an evil or a good, in the *Phaedo* he proposes that the true philosopher ought to perceive death as beneficial, arguing that death is nothing more than the separation of body and soul. Plato’s notion of an immortal soul which is separate from the body would prove to be very influential and stands out as a common theme in the writings of later Platonists, including Philo of Alexandria.

In the *Phaedo*, Socrates states that although it is unlawful for a person to take his or her own life, the true philosopher should always be gladly willing to embrace death because to

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26 Plato, *Apology*. 41d (Fowler, LCL)
27 It is necessary for Socrates to address this issue given the fact that he has refused to avoid death, which some may perceive as a form of suicide.
28 Plato, *Phaedo*. 62b (Fowler, LCL)
29 Plato, *Phaedo*, 64c
practice philosophy is indeed to practice dying.\textsuperscript{30} The goal of philosophy is the attainment of wisdom which for Plato is knowledge of the Forms. The theory of Forms is central to every argument within the \textit{Phaedo}. Although the theory is too complex to go into detail here, it is important to establish a general understanding of the theory in order to understand both Plato’s and Philo’s view of the soul.

For each class of objects and qualities, there exists an absolute Form from which they derive their essence through participation. Each Form is unique, eternal, pure and perfect. Such Forms include “absolute justice,” “absolute equality,” “absolute beauty” and many others.\textsuperscript{31} Thus for Plato, the world of Forms does not include the familiar objects of sense perception. There is an implied ‘knowledge argument’ for the existence of the Forms. Anything of which we have knowledge must really exist. We seem to have knowledge of things which are not objects of sense perception, i.e. the Forms, therefore they must exist.

Socrates suggests that within this knowledge argument there is evidence for the soul’s preexistence before entering the physical world. For example, when we perceive two or more objects which are similar in shape and size, such as sticks and stones, we understand them to be equal. Yet, the idea of perfect equality which we use as a standard to measure objects similar in shape and size is different from the actual objects of perception. As rational beings we know that the idea of perfect equality is different from the objects we perceive as equal because the physical objects we perceive always fall short of perfect equality. Since perception begins at birth, and we have never perceived anything which is perfectly equal, we must have gained this knowledge of perfect equality before we were born, and therefore the Form of perfect equality as well as our souls must have existed someplace prior to this life. Since objects which appear to be

\textsuperscript{30}Plato, \textit{Phaedo}, 64a

\textsuperscript{31}Plato, \textit{Phaedo}, 65d
equal are inferior to the idea of absolute equality, the idea must have existed prior to the physical objects which strive for, but nevertheless fall short of, perfect equality. If this observation is accurate, it must necessarily apply to all ‘absolutes,’ i.e. the Forms.32

**Impurity and Purification**

According to Plato, one never encounters the Forms in their full perfection, but one is born with an innate knowledge of their reality and the true philosopher strives to understand them by shutting out the senses and contemplating them solely with the light of reason.33 Plato perceives the physical body as a hindrance to this pursuit because it fills the soul with countless irrational desires and fears.34 Furthermore, the body is not a trustworthy source of knowledge because the physical senses are only capable of perceiving material objects which are nothing more than imperfect reflections of their true Forms.

According to Plato, impurity of the soul is the result of reason’s surrender and attachment to desires, fears and passions produced by the body. Contemplation of the Forms is an activity of the soul as well as the way to achieve purification, but the soul cannot totally engage in this activity without the constant interruption of bodily needs and impulses. Thus, the philosopher spends his or her life trying to isolate the mind from the body in an attempt to free themselves from all of its passions and cravings, so that when in contemplation it may come as close as possible to arriving at pure knowledge.35

Socrates asserts that it is the role of our bodily senses to perceive imperfect material objects which always fall short of their immaterial perfect Forms, which we recollect at the

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32 Plato, *Phaedo*, 74a
33 Plato, *Phaedo*, 66a
34 Plato, *Phaedo*, 66c
35 Plato, *Phaedo*, 66b
moment of perception and understand to be the essence of the objects in question. This theory is commonly referred to as "the theory of recollection." If our physical senses are only capable of acquiring knowledge of an imperfect nature, it follows that our souls must have experienced a bodiless existence prior to being born, in which we acquired the perfect knowledge that has been with us our entire lives, albeit latent, and recollected through the medium of imperfect perceptions. If death is the separation of the soul from the body, it would prove to be a great benefit to the philosopher because he or she would then be able to contemplate the Forms with clarity, being free from all physical distractions and sensory deceptions.

By not accepting the experience of sense perception as a valid source of knowledge, Socrates is setting up the tone of humility which underlines his whole argument. If pure knowledge cannot be gained through the senses, and the soul cannot contemplate the Forms, i.e. true reality, without being interrupted by the body, then it follows that any conclusions drawn from the discussion on the nature of the soul can never possess full certainty. Socrates articulates this point in several passages, for instance when he states, "If pure knowledge is impossible while the body is with us, one of two things must follow, either it cannot be acquired at all or only when we are dead."

It can be argued that Socrates acknowledges this inevitable uncertainty as he explicates further as to why the philosopher should not fear death, he affirms:

If I did not believe [...] that I was going to other wise and good gods, and, moreover, to men who have died, better men than those here, I should be wrong in not grieving at death. But as it is, you may rest assured that I expect to go to good men, though I should not care to assert this positively; but I would assert as positively as anything about such matters that I am going to gods who are good masters. And therefore [...] I not only do not grieve, but I have great hopes that there is something in store for the dead.

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36 Plato, *Phaedo*, 75b
37 Plato, *Phaedo*, 76c-e
38 Plato, *Phaedo*, 67a (Fowler, LCL)
39 Plato, *Phaedo*, 63c (Fowler, LCL)
This is one of the most telling passages in regards to hopeful agnosticism. Socrates seems to be suggesting that there are particular subjects he can never be fully certain of, in this case, the eternal destiny of his soul. But rather than throwing in the philosophical towel and residing in a state of complete skepticism, he feels he has enough reasons to make judgments, not emphatic assertions, regarding life after death; and he is hopeful, not positive, that those judgments are rough approximations to the truth. One might contend that Socrates in all actuality is not as uncertain as he is presenting himself to be. It could be argued that Socrates’ refusal to avoid death and his calm demeanor are clear indications of his certainty. However, I would argue that even if Socrates does feel certain about what is to become of his soul after death, he is still aware that his feelings of certainty pertain to subjects which cannot be wholly proven. Perhaps Socrates is aware that any feeling of certainty he is experiencing is a subjective experience, which is why he does “not care to assert [his theory] positively.” In other words, one can feel certain about one’s beliefs and still adopt the hopeful agnostic approach.

**Kinship**

One of the arguments Socrates puts forward to prove the immortality of the soul is what is commonly referred to as “the likeness argument.” Philo drew heavily upon the likeness argument in developing his own theory of soul. It is the likeness argument which brings us back to that aspect of Plato’s view of the soul which was both unique and innovative; that man is a nonphysical soul trapped in a physical body, and therefore experiences two separate realities – an invisible reality of perfect forms grasped through contemplation, and a visible reality of imperfect objects experienced as bodily sensation. The visible world is always changing. The invisible world is always the same. Since the body is able to be seen and is always changing it
must be akin to visible reality. Since the soul is unseen and physically insubstantial it must be akin to invisible reality. If the soul is akin to the invisible realm of the Forms, we may presume it to share the same characteristics as the Forms, including changelessness, indissolubility, and thus…immortality. The soul, as principle of life and orchestrator of mental activity, is ruler of the body. It is the nature of the divine to rule and it is the nature of the mortal to be a servant to the divine. Thus, our souls are divine in nature inasmuch as they are rulers over our mortal bodies.

All objects receive their essence and natures from an absolute Form. Because a Form is changeless, it will never admit of its opposite essence because that would imply a change in the Form’s nature. Since the soul is akin to the invisible world of the Forms, then we may assume that the soul is to the body what Forms are to physical objects, that is, the source of their essence. An object’s essence is the result of that object’s participation in an absolute Form. Something is beautiful only to the extent that it participates in absolute beauty. Thus, if something is beautiful, the cause of its beauty can be traced back to its Form. Just the same, the cause of anything good is the participation in absolute goodness. Every Form lends a portion of its essence to whatever object or action we perceive to possess that quality. If there were no absolute greatness, nothing would be great; if there were no absolute justice, no action could be considered just. Socrates admits that he is uncertain as to how the eternal Forms of the invisible world infuse their essence into the physical, yet he cannot shake his conviction that “beautiful things are beautiful through beauty.”

Whatever is absolute can never admit of its opposite. Plato explains that if a physical object contains the essence of a Form, the essence will never change even if the object undergoes

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40 Plato, *Phaedo*, 100c
41 Plato, *Phaedo*. 100e (Fowler, LCL)
a change resulting in that object acquiring an oppositional essence. Plato illustrates this point by comparing the ideas of heat and coldness to the physical manifestations of fire and snow. Snow is not the same thing as coldness. Snow is cold because it participates in the idea of coldness. Thus, contained within the physical manifestation of snow is the essence of coldness. Fire is not the same thing as heat, yet contained within the physical manifestation of fire is the essence of heat. Although fire is not the opposite of snow, the essence of snow which is coldness will never admit the essence of fire which is heat. 42 Thus, one will never come across a hot snowball, nor will one ever perceive a frozen flame. In the same way, contained within the physical manifestation of a human body is the essence of soul which is the principle of life. Because the soul is akin to the divine and therefore unchangeable, it will never admit of its opposite which is non-life. Therefore, if the object, i.e. the body, undergoes a change, for example the acquiring of an ailment, the body may undergo a transition from being alive to being not alive, but the soul which was the initial source of the body’s life will not be affected; just as the Form of coldness will still remain even after a particular snowball melts, nor will the essence of heat be affected when a particular flame is consumed by snow.

The reason I have chosen to single out this argument is mainly because the notion of “likeness” seems to be a recurring theme throughout the Phaedo. What I am suggesting is that within the context of the Phaedo the notion of likeness serves as a template for how we are to understand the main topics of the dialogue, which are, the nature of philosophy, the nature of the soul, and the nature of death. Furthermore, I propose that the Phaedo’s recurring theme of “likeness” supports my interpretation of Plato’s approach to theology as hopefully agnostic.

In his essay “Philosophy and the Figurative” Professor of philosophy Kevin O’Neill points out that the Phaedo stands out as unique among Plato’s dialogues. Among O’Neill’s

42 Plato, Phaedo, 103d
justifications for this assertion is the observation that the *Phaedo* is the only dialogue, the initial setting of which, takes place outside the vicinity of Athens.\(^{43}\)

The *Phaedo* begins on the road. The main dialogue in the *Phaedo* is actually the character Phaedo’s retelling of the events which he has witnessed firsthand. The person he is retelling the events to is a Pythagorean who seeks Phaedo out while Phaedo is making a stopover in a small city called Philus located in Sparta (Athens sworn enemy). As readers, we find ourselves accompanying Phaedo on a homeward journey from Athens to his native city of Elis. O’Neill goes on to explain in great detail the many likenesses shared between Phaedo and Socrates, which, he suggests, is the reason why Plato appointed the character Phaedo as the bearer of Socrates’ metaphorical remains in the form of his final conversation, which by no accident of Plato’s is concerned with the nature of death, the soul’s immortality, and philosophy in general. According to O’Neill, this initial setting is both intentional and figuratively multilayered. One possible layer of meaning, O’Neill argues, is that Plato is suggesting that doing philosophy is *like* going on a journey. We know from the text that Socrates describes doing philosophy as practicing dying. If philosophy is *like* practicing dying and is also *like* taking a journey, then by extension, Plato may be suggesting the death is *like* taking a journey, perhaps even a homeward journey.\(^{44}\)

What does this template of philosophy as journey mean in regards to hopeful agnosticism? The word ‘journey’ may be defined simply as taking a trip from one place to another. However, the term ‘journey’ often carries with it connotations of adventure and mystery, such as a ‘spiritual journey’ or a ‘journey into the unknown.’ For example, compare someone who is taking a trip from California to New York with someone who is migrating from


\(^{44}\) O’Neill, “Philosophy and the Figurative,” 10
Mexico to the United States. The former is taking a trip; the latter is embarking upon a journey. Both travelers have a destination in mind. The person flying from California to New York begins his trip with a pretty good idea of what to expect in terms of possible delays and the innate risks that come with flying, but overall, this person expects to have a fairly safe trip with a fairly predictable outcome. The migrant on the other hand, is well aware that his voyage to the states is going to be anything but smooth sailing. The migrant knows that there are several things that could go wrong resulting in several possible outcomes. The migrant hopes to have a safe trip and arrive in the United States unharmed, but being aware of the nature of his journey, the migrant knows that a fairly safe trip with a fairly predictable outcome is highly improbable if not impossible.

In the same way, approaching theology with an attitude of hopeful agnosticism is much like taking a journey. The hopeful agnostic has a destination or goal in mind. The hopeful agnostic approaches theology with the hopes of arriving at some conclusion of truth which they can place their belief in with confidence and certainty, but being aware of the subjective nature of theology, they know that the outcome of their journey is unpredictable and that they may never arrive at their hoped for destination. This notion is exemplified in the Phaedo when the character Simmias expresses his dissatisfaction with the likeness argument. Before stating his objections at Socrates’ insistence, he states:

I think, Socrates, as perhaps you do yourself, that it is either impossible or very difficult to acquire clear knowledge about these matters in this life. And yet he is a weakling who does not test in every way what is said about them and persevere until he is worn out by studying them on every side. For he must do one of two things; either he must learn or discover the truth about these matters, of if that is impossible, he must take whatever human doctrine is best and hardest to disprove and, embarking upon it as a raft, sail upon it through life in the midst of dangers, unless he can sail upon some stronger vessel, some divine revelation, and make his voyage more
safely and securely.\textsuperscript{45}

From my interpretation of this quote, it seems as though Plato is suggesting that along with philosophy and death, being alive is also like taking a journey and a dangerous one at that! In the midst of the stormy sea of life, arguments and theories, i.e. human doctrines, become instruments of hope. Once again, Plato seems to be aware that the doctrines which we use as "rafts" to help us "sail though life" deal with issues that may transcend what one is capable of knowing in the present life. Nevertheless, we should still inquire into these issues to the uttermost, or in other words, as much as possible. If we come to find that the attainment of certainty is impossible, then we ought to place our hope in whatever doctrine we think contains the most truth and reason. Being that certainty is improbable; we should always be willing to adjust our beliefs if we come across "some stronger vessel," i.e. a doctrine or intuitive realization that seems more plausible than our current view. This passage exemplifies the commonly shared agnosticism between the two friends. But this is a special kind of agnosticism because it is adamantly hopeful and strongly encourages an effort to strive for knowledge, disregarding the high probability that such knowledge is not attainable. Thus, to be hopefully agnostic is also to be \textit{actively} agnostic.

Before responding to his listeners objections, Socrates likewise reaffirms the underlined theme of hopeful agnosticism before professing his opinions and states that:

\begin{quote}
Let us not admit into our souls the notion that there is no soundness in arguments at all. [...] rather assume that we ourselves are not yet in sound condition and that we must strive manfully and eagerly to become so. [...] because of my impending death [...] I fear that I am not [...] in a philosophical frame of mind [...] but am contentious, like quite uncultured persons. For when they argue [...] they do not care what the truth is in the matters they are discussing, but are eager only to make their own views seem true to their hearers. And I fancy I differ from them [...] only to this extent: I shall not be eager to make what I say seem true to my hearers, [...] but shall be very eager to make myself believe it. [...] How selfish my attitude is. If what I say is true, I am the gainer by
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{45} Plato, \textit{Phaedo}. 85c-d (Fowler, LCL)
believing it; and if there be nothing for me after death [...] I shall not be burdensome to my friends by my lamentations [...] and this ignorance of mine will not last.46

In addition to confirming the active nature of hopeful agnosticism, Socrates also seems to be acknowledging the inevitable subjectivity and biasness of his outlook. Because of his impending death, Socrates is aware that it is in his best interest to justify his hope in immortality and thus preventing him from being entirely objective. In other words, the hopeful agnostic approach entails an awareness of one’s own invested interest in one’s belief system; it is to be objective about one’s own subjectivity. Because Socrates imagines the afterlife in a positive light, and since he is confident in his own soul’s degree of purity, he is attempting to prove to himself that the hope he has in the existence of his soul and its immortality is reasonable, probable, and worthy of belief. Nonetheless, Socrates humbly admits that all of his self-comforting proofs may prove to be false.

When examined closely, we find that Plato’s arguments are full of flaws and are not quite logically sound. For example, how feasible is Socrates’ perception of death? Does his argument that death is the separation of body and soul beg the question by assuming the soul’s immortality? How plausible is the idea that humans experience two separate realities? If we experience an internal world of forms grasped through meditation and an outer world of imperfect objects grasped through sense perception simultaneously can they really be separate? If the soul achieves purification does it still have the potential to become impure and fall back into the cycle of reincarnation? All of these philosophical quandaries are left unsolved in the *Phaedo*. But what I am proposing is that Plato is totally aware of these holes. As I have shown, Socrates repeatedly admits the possible inaccuracy of his arguments, which may be why he ends the discussion by stating:

46 Plato, *Phaedo*. 91b (Fowler, LCL)
It would not be fitting for a man of sense to maintain that all this is just as I have described it, but that this or something like it is true concerning our souls and their bodies, since the soul is shown to be immortal, I think he may properly and worthily venture to believe; for the venture is well worthwhile.47

In this passage, the sentence “this or something like it is true concerning our souls,” is very revealing. Because the *Phaedo* is a work in metaphysics and very spiritual in nature, Plato appears to be suggesting that when trying to explain the inexplicable the function of philosophy becomes limited to telling us what things are like. In the face of such mysterious questions philosophy itself becomes one big ‘likeness argument.’ As O’Neill has pointed out, the *Phaedo* depicts Socrates in a very different light from any other dialogue. In the *Phaedo* we find Socrates (whose whole life has been devoted to philosophy) writing poetry, creating music and developing fables. The reason why Socrates is dabbling with these various disciplines, O’Neill suggests, is because in terms of explaining the inexplicable and telling us what things are like—music, poetry, and storytelling all become forms of philosophy.48

Transitioning into Middle Platonism, we find that Philo of Alexandria adopts a similar approach, as he perceives the stories in the Hebrew Scriptures to contain deep philosophical truths.

**Philo of Alexandria**

Many Platonic authors held different interpretations of Plato’s work. Platonism’s tolerance for various interpretations makes it difficult to group authors of a specific time period under one heading, such as “Middle-Platonism.” Everett Ferguson suggests that Middle-Platonism is a prime example of eclectic philosophy, for it incorporated the logic of Aristotle, the ethics of the Stoics, as well as the metaphysics and number symbolism found in

47 Plato, *Phaedo*. 114d (Fowler, LCL)
48 O’Neill, “Philosophy and the Figurative,” 18-21
Neopythagorianism.\textsuperscript{49} Within the timeframe constituting Middle-Platonism (80 BCE – 250 CE), central themes highlight the backdrop of the existing content produced by the Middle Platonists. Some scholars have argued that among the principle themes characterizing Middle-Platonism are the immortality of the soul, the belief in a transcendental ultimate principle, and an intelligible world which serves as a prototype for the physical.\textsuperscript{50} Such themes are broad and abstract enough to encompass a wide range of perspectives, including the tremendously influential writing’s of Philo of Alexandria.

Philo was a prominent member of the Alexandrian Jewish community and a proponent of Hellenistic education, which he himself had received.\textsuperscript{51} The details surrounding Philo’s life are obscure. However, it is widely accepted among scholars that Philo was the brother of a wealthy money lender and a member of the Jewish aristocracy. These clues point to the assumption that Philo was fairly affluent, allowing him to explore and become acquainted with both Greek philosophy as well as traditional Jewish doctrine. Scholars suggest that it is the reconciliation of these two cultures which accounts for the distinctiveness of Philo’s vast corpus of writings. Scholar of Judaica Geoffrey Wigoder has suggested that Philo’s work was among the first to coherently and systematically synthesize Greek philosophy with Old Testament doctrine.\textsuperscript{52}

Philo applied Platonic ideas to Hebrew scripture. Conversely, Philo interpreted Platonic ideas through the lens of Mosaic doctrine as a way to give spiritual and religious validity to the themes characteristic of Middle-Platonism. As Philo espoused a non-literal approach to scripture, he believed the Septuagint must be interpreted allegorically in order to reveal its deepest truths and highest meaning. It is this method of allegorical interpretation which would

\textsuperscript{49} Ferguson, \textit{Backgrounds of Early Christianity}, 388
\textsuperscript{50} Dillon, “Platonism,” 5: 308
\textsuperscript{51} H. Crouzel, “Philo of Alexandria,” \textit{EEC} 2:682
\textsuperscript{52} Geoffrey Wigoder, “Philo,” \textit{NEJ} 604
prove to have a major influence on the Christian apologists of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} century, establishing a connection between Platonic thought and patristic theology. By interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures allegorically, Philo was able to reconcile his Mosaic religion with his Greek education.\footnote{S. Lilla, "Platonism and the Fathers," \textit{EEC} 2:690}

\textbf{Philo's View of the Soul}

Philo begins his inquiry into the nature of the soul by making a self-evident observation followed by a long series of open-ended questions. Philo reflects, "I am formed of soul and body, I seem to have mind, reason, sense, yet I find that none of them is really mine."\footnote{Philo, \textit{Cher.} 110-114 (Colson, Whitaker, LCL)} Philo seems to be noticing that as a human being he has been endowed with various mental and physical capacities. Since he reasons that he has not endowed these capacities upon himself, they do not belong to him. Philo’s recognition that he is not self-created will lead to his theory that God is an ultimately transcendent Being. Simultaneously, Philo’s self posed questions echo those that Socrates and his companions are engaging in the \textit{Phaedo}. Philo ponders:

\begin{quote}
Where was my body before birth, and wither will it go when I have departed? What has become of the changes produced by life’s various stages in the seemingly permanent self? [...] Whence came the soul, wither will it go, how long will it be our mate and comrade? Can we tell its essential nature? When did we get it? Before birth? [...] What of it after death? But then we here who are joined to the body, creatures of composition and quality, shall be no more, but shall go forward to our rebirth, to be with the un-bodied, without composition and without quality.\footnote{Philo, \textit{Cher.} 114-117 (Colson, Whitaker, LCL)}
\end{quote}

One could interpret that in echoing Plato, Philo is being rhetorically strategic. By beginning his inquiry with a series of mystical questions he gives the impression that he is starting his endeavor from a position of ignorance or puzzlement and in doing so he sets the tone of humility. In
addition, Philo seems to be preparing his (Jewish) audience for the bold claim that such questions are not dealt with directly in the scriptures. One will not find the answers to such questions from a literal reading of the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible). In other worlds, scripture by itself is insufficient for the acquirement of wisdom. One must read the Septuagint in conjunction with Platonic concepts in order to receive its full meaning. Consequently, one must be educated in order to understand Platonic philosophy. For Philo, as for Plato, education plays an important role in the purification of one's soul, stating that, "knowledge of the schools adorns the whole house of the soul."  

For Philo, like Plato, the human body only becomes alive through the infusion of soul. For Plato, the human soul is a portion of an absolute Form. For Philo, all Forms are ideas in the mind of God and therefore our souls are a portion of God's very essence. The portion of God's essence which lends itself to the body in the form of the ruling aspect of the soul is the divine Logos which acts as God's creative force. Expanding Plato's likeness argument, our souls are akin to the divine and invisible, whereas our bodies are akin to the mortal and created world. Philo concludes: "Justly and rightly then shall we say that in the invisible soul the invisible God has his earthly dwelling place."  

Whereas the character Socrates admits to being unsure how it is that a Form imparts a portion of its essence into a particular object, Philo asserts that because all forms are ideas in the Mind of God it is God's creative force which imparts objects with portions of His own essence. Here in some sense, Philo answers Socrates' uncertainty by suggesting that it is the Divine Logos which infuses the essence of coldness into snow, or the essence of heat into fire. However, only the mind is capable of receiving a portion of God's reason, which is the Divine Logos itself. The

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56 Philo, *Cher.* 102-105 (Colson, Whitaker, LCL)
57 Philo, *Her.* 133-140
58 Philo, *Cher.* 97-101 (Colson, Whitaker, LCL)
human soul is a mixture of body and mind. The soul is brought to completion and comes to life with the minds reception of Logos. The Logos, as God’s creative force, imparts objects with their particular natures, but only to the human mind does it impart itself and in doing so makes the soul akin to the divine. It is only through this reception of Logos that one is able to contemplate God and the nature of soul, never fully grasping either one.59

Purification and Rebirth

Philo answers the question “whence came the soul?” by suggesting that the soul comes directly from God; consequently, “each [one] has come into this world as into a foreign city, in which before [its] birth [it] had no part, and in this city [one] does but sojourn, until [one] has exhausted [one’s] appointed span of life.”60 In other words, our souls are not at home in the physical world. Assuming a soul has been purified from all vice and passion, rebirth is the soul’s return from a foreign city back to its original place with God, who is “un-bodied, without composition and without quality.”61

Once a person dies, the elements which make up the physical body will return to their elemental forms; Philo explains that “these all belong to the body, but the soul whose nature is intellectual and celestial will depart to find a father in ether, the purest of the Substances.”62 Drawing on Socrates, Philo goes on to reference an ancient doctrine which states that there is a fifth substance which circulates around the four elements and from which they emerge. If this doctrine is true, our souls must also be emanated from this fifth and “purest of Substances.” Already we see that Philo perceives the soul to be on a continual journey. To be an embodied soul existing in a physical world is to journey through unknown and unfamiliar territory.

60 Philo, Cher. 117-121 (Colson, Whitaker, LCL)
61 See page 33
62 Philo, Her. 282-285(Colson, Whitaker, LCL)
Because the purified soul, which is akin to the divine, returns to God immediately following the
death of the body, we may rightfully interpret Philo’s view of death as a homeward journey.

Philo does not directly say that a soul which has failed to achieve purification will be
reborn into the physical world, but there are several passages which imply such a notion. For
example, Philo explains that for the mind which truly loves God, “He (God), plants in, as a
branch of goodly birth, and He deepens its root to reach to eternity and gives it fruitfulness for
the acquisition and enjoyment of virtue.”63 In regards to the unpurified soul Philo states, “he
(God) banishes the unjust and godless souls from himself to the furthest bounds, and disperses
them to the place of pleasures and lusts and injustices.”64 It is reasonable to infer that Philo is
referring to the physical world when he speaks of “the place of pleasures and lusts and
injustices,” considering that a few lines later he says, “the body is the region of pleasures and
lusts.”65 As noted earlier, Philo perceives the body as being akin to the created world. Thus we
may conclude that it is the created world which Philo is referring to in the aforesaid quote. When
speaking of the unpurified soul Philo also states that, “it makes no account of the nature which is
outside qualities and forms and fashionings, the nature of which the Man of Practice loves.”66
One could argue that Philo’s “Man of Practice” is tantamount to Plato’s “true philosopher.”67

The aspect of the soul which has been endowed with Logos is capable of contemplating
God and spiritual subjects to a certain extent. For Philo, such contemplation is crucial to the
attainment of immortality, which is proper rebirth into the intelligible world. One could argue
that Philo’s conception of soul contemplating God is equivalent, perhaps modeled after, Plato’s
conception of mind contemplating Forms. Philo states that this contemplation is performed best

63 Philo, Cong. 56-59 (Colson, Whitaker, LCL)
64 Philo, Cong. 56-59 (Colson, Whitaker, LCL)
65 Philo, Cong. 59-63 (Colson, Whitaker, LCL)
66 Philo, Cong. 59-63 (Colson, Whitaker, LCL)
67 See page 16
when the mind turns its attention inward and shuts out the other senses as much as possible.

Philo asserts:

If the senses are a hindrance to the exact sight of the spiritual object, those who find happiness in beholding are at pains to crush their attack; they shut their eyes, and stop up their ears, and check the impulses bred by their other senses, and deem it well to spend their days in solitude and darkness, that no object of sense perception may bedim the eye of the soul, to which God has given the power to see things spiritual. 68

Philo refers to this process of shutting out the senses as “divorce from what is mortal,” 69 which closely resembles what Plato referred to as the practice of dying. 70 Through such contemplation, one comes to realize that the body is a mere vessel for the soul, which the soul did not create but is the workmanship of another. This leads Philo to conclude that a creation can never fully comprehend its creator. 71

Theologically Humble

Although less agnostic than Plato, Philo’s theories reflect a theological humility inasmuch as they present God as a fully transcendent entity beyond human comprehension. According to Philo, through contemplation of the cosmos one can come to understand that God exists, but mere contemplation of the cosmos is insufficient as a means of understanding God’s essence; Philo explains, “the Being that in reality Is can be perceived and known, not only through the ears, but with the eyes of the understanding, from the powers that range the universe, and from the constant and ceaseless motion of His ineffable works.” 72 Thus, the senses are capable of acquiring the knowledge that God is, but they are not capable of understanding what God is. Philo explicates further, “It is quite enough for a man’s reasoning faculty to advance as

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68 Philo, Mig. 189-192 (Colson, Whitaker, LCL)
69 Philo, Mig. 189-192, 192-195 (Colson, Whitaker, LCL)
70 Plato, Phaedo, 64d-65a
71 Philo, Mig. 192-195
72 Philo, Post. 165-168 (Colson, Whitaker, LCL)
far as to learn that the Cause of the universe is and subsists. To be anxious to continue his course yet further, and inquire about essence or quality in God, is a folly fit for the world’s childhood.”

In regards to God’s incomprehensibility Philo states, “who can make any positive assertions concerning His essence or quality or state or movement? Nay He alone shall affirm anything regarding Himself since He alone has unerringly exact knowledge of His own nature.”

According to Philo, the Logos which acts as the ruling aspect of the soul is able to inquire into subjects of a divine and spiritual nature, but as noted above, whatever assertions result from such an inquiry will never possess positivity. Since one can never be positive even as to the nature of one’s own soul, one most certainly can never be positive as to the nature of God, from which the soul is generated. Since one can never possess full knowledge of God’s nature, it follows that one cannot assign a proper name to God. Philo affirms, “Think it not then a hard saying that the Highest of all things should be unnamable when His Word has no name of its own which we can speak. And indeed if He is unnamable, He is also inconceivable and incomprehensible.” This is the core of Philo’s theological humility.

Philo’s theory of God’s transcendence is derived in part from a Mosaic teaching which states that the attempt to understand God’s nature by examining the cosmos is useless. We are much better off examining ourselves. If one focuses one’s attention inward, one’s reason will lead one to the knowledge that:

As there is mind in you, so is there in the universe, and that as your mind has taken upon itself sovereign control of all that is in you, and brought every part into subjection to itself, so too He, that is endued with lordship over all, guides and controls the universe by the law and right of an absolute sway, taking forethought not

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73 Philo, *Post.* 168-171 (Colson, Whitaker, LCL)
74 Philo, *LA.* 3. 204-206, 206-210 (Colson, Whitaker, LCL)
75 Philo, *Mut.* 14-17 (Colson, Whitaker, LCL)
only for those which are greater, but for those which are of less importance in our eyes.\textsuperscript{76}

Thus, our only chance of catching a glimpse of God’s nature is by examining the ruling aspect of the soul which according to Philo is an emanation of God’s essence.

Philo’s take on the perception of God seems to keep in line with O’Neill’s interpretation of the \textit{Phaedo}, which in part, suggests that Plato is aware that philosophy is incapable of naming Being and thus it joins forces with other forms of artistic expression in order to give us a clue as to what Being is \textit{like}\textsuperscript{77}. Philo has confessed that God, which to him is the ultimate principle of Being, is unnamable, thus indescribable, and by extension incomprehensible. What is interesting about Philo’s proclamation of God’s incomprehensibility is that it implies that not only is philosophy incapable of naming Being but also Judaism as well. Is it possible that Philo understood the Hebrew Scriptures to be a collection of so many stories which do not tell us what Being is but point to what Being is \textit{like}? Could this play a role in why Philo feels so strongly about reading the scriptures allegorically?

Philo insists that it is imperative not to read the Septuagint literally, lest we develop an anthropomorphic perception of God. For example, when it states in Genesis that man is created in God’s image, Philo explains that “image” is to be interpreted as “Mind.” Thus, it is only that aspect of soul which has received the Divine Logos that is reflective of God’s image, i.e. God’s Mind. Philo then relates this interpretation to the likeness argument by stating, “The human mind evidently occupies a position in men precisely answering to that which the great Ruler occupies in all the world. It is invisible while itself seeing all things, and while comprehending the substances of others, it is as to its own substance unperceived.”\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{76} Philo, \textit{Mig.} 185-189 (Colson, Whitaker, LCL)
\textsuperscript{77} O’Neill, “Philosophy and the Figurative,” 21-22
\textsuperscript{78} Philo, \textit{Op.} 68-71(Colson, Whitaker, LCL)
Philo suggests that it is not a person’s body but a person’s reason that is a reflection of God’s image. In regards to the passage in Genesis in which God breathes life into Adam, Philo interprets “Adam” as “mind”⁷⁹ and “breathed into” as “be-souled” stating, “God forbid that we should be infected with such monstrous folly as to think that God employs for inbreathing organs such as mouth or nostrils; for God is not only not in the form of man, but belongs to no class or kind.”⁸⁰ Philo explains that the injection of God’s essence into any object such as the human mind requires three things: that which “inbreathes,” that which “receives,” and that which is “breathed.” That which breathes is God, that which receives is the human mind and that which is breathed is the Divine Logos. This closely resembles the relationship between Forms, particular things, and essential natures discussed in the Phaedo.

Philo affirms the hopeful agnostic approach in a statement which closely resembles Socrates’ final statement in the Phaedo. Philo asserts:

> Since we bear upon us deep ingrained the imprints of injustice and folly and the other vices we must be content if through a study of probabilities and by our own efforts we may discover some semblance of the truth.⁸¹

What does Philo mean by a study of probabilities? We know that Philo is a student of both Greek philosophy and Hebrew Scripture. Is it possible that Philo views philosophy and religion as arguments and stories which when faced with the task of naming Being can only present us with probabilities and likenesses? Like Socrates in the Phaedo, Philo seems to be acknowledging that he is inquiring into matters which transcend human comprehension, but he does not let this realization hinder his pursuit of the truth. Instead, he places his hope in what appears to him to be a God given gift of reason. Philo is hopeful that the exercise of his reason and will, two aspects

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⁷⁹ Notice that “image” is interpreted as Mind with a capital, while “Adam” is interpreted as mind with no capital.
⁸⁰ Philo, LA. 1. 35-39 (Colson, Whitaker, LCL)
⁸¹ Philo, Aet. 2-4 (Colson, Whitaker, LCL)
of the soul, are sufficient to cultivate a love for virtuous living and consequently, purification of
the soul. Furthermore, one could argue that the encouragement of an allegorical reading of
scripture implies that the soul’s faculty of reason is superior and more akin to the divine than
scripture is itself if one is to depend on one’s reason to properly understand the scripture and to
gain the confidence to trump the authority of the scripture with one’s own interpretation.

Transitioning into Neo-Platonism, we find that Augustine is an example of a Christian
Neo-Platonist who adopted Philo’s allegorical method of reading scripture. However,
Augustine’s reading of the Platonists and Judeo-Christian scriptures leads him to an
interpretation which is radically different from Plato’s and Philo’s; an interpretation which places
the soul in very stark circumstances; one in which the soul’s faculties of reason and will are not
as akin to the divine as Plato and Philo would have us believe.

Augustine

Augustine was born 354 C.E. in the Roman province of Thagaste in North Africa (located
in what is now Algeria) during a time when Rome was experiencing a perpetual state of warfare,
mainly with barbarian warbands and the Persian military. Augustine’s mother was a devout
Christian and his father was a ‘pagan.’ In 370 at the age of 17, Augustine traveled to Carthage to
study rhetoric. Here he became acquainted with the writings of the Platonist Cicero which
inspired him to further his studies in philosophy. Before settling as the Bishop of Hippo in 391,
Augustine moved to Italy in 383 where he became the municipal chair of rhetoric at Milan. In
Milan, Augustine attended the sermons of the Bishop Ambrose, who often explained biblical
passages allegorically and punctuated his sermons with the language of Neo-Platonic
mysticism. Augustine described Plato’s system as “the most refined and enlightened” teaching

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in philosophy.\textsuperscript{84} While Augustine was a Professor in Milan, Christian Neo-Platonism was popular among educated men.\textsuperscript{85} The main distinction between Middle Platonism and Neo-Platonism is the latter's overwhelmingly religious orientation. The Neo-Platonists applied Platonic ideas to a variety of religious texts, resulting in new and original interpretations of Plato's work.\textsuperscript{86} As Augustine wrestled with the philosophical concepts he found in the writings of various Platonists he became obsessed with one question in particular: "from what cause do we do evil?"\textsuperscript{87} It is Augustine's answer to this question which will be the focus of this section.

Augustine's work has been very influential to both Western and Christian philosophy. Distinguished Professor of philosophy at Baylor University Thomas Hibbs has suggested that "Augustine's influence may be more significant and more pervasive than that of Plato," and labels him "the most important Christian author, excepting only the authors of scripture."\textsuperscript{88} The two texts I have chosen to examine in order to gain insight into Augustine's theory of the soul's corruption are the \textit{Confessions} and \textit{Enchiridion}. Written around 397, shortly after Augustine became the Bishop of Hippo, \textit{Confessions} is one of Augustine most widely read books. Although it is impossible to know how much of Augustine's writing is rhetoric and how much is actual conviction (as it is with Plato and Philo), the \textit{Confessions} is the most autobiographical of his works and presents the reader with a humanized depiction of Augustine. It is in the \textit{Confessions} that Augustine records his quest to discover the origins of evil and consequently the corruption of the soul. The \textit{Enchiridion} in turn is much more explicit in detailing the intricacies of his theory. Whereas the \textit{Confessions} was written in the form of a prayer to God (in true Neo-Platonic

\textsuperscript{84} Brown, \textit{Augustine of Hippo}, 91
\textsuperscript{85} Brown, \textit{Augustine of Hippo}, 92
\textsuperscript{86} Robert M. Berchman, "Neoplatonism," \textit{EEC}, 801
\textsuperscript{87} Brown, \textit{Augustine of Hippo}, 46
fashion), the *Enchiridion* more specifically addresses a set of questions posed by a Roman citizen named Laurentius. 89

As we have seen, Plato used the term “Forms” to describe ultimate reality. Philo, as a Jew and student of the Hebrew Scriptures, expanded Plato’s theories to include a clearly defined monotheistic God. Augustine, as student of both Hebrew and Christian scripture, radically reshaped these theories to include the element of a humanized mediator between God and man, which is Jesus Christ. Like Philo, Augustine rejects a literal reading of Scripture and adopts an allegorical approach, stating that it is “a very unseemly thing to believe [God] to have the shape of our human flesh, and to be girt up in the bodily lineaments of our members.” 90 Augustine notes that one of his greatest struggles was his habit of perceiving God as a physical substance. Part of Augustine’s difficulty was the anthropomorphic nature of the Old Testament. In fact, when Augustine turned to the Bible to answer his philosophical questions he was initially very disappointed with the earthly tone and depraved stories found in the Old Testament as well as the unpolished language of the Latin translators. 91 Augustine relates that it was only after reading the Hebrew Scriptures figuratively that his faith in Catholic doctrine was restored, concluding that “the Catholic faith [...] might well be maintained without absurdity [...] after I had heard one or two hard places of the Old Testament resolved [...] which when I understood literally, I was slain.” 92

**Augustine’s View of the Soul**

Philo’s theory of soul remains closely aligned to Plato’s inasmuch as both men understood the soul to be akin to the divine and capable of achieving self-purification so that it

89 Hibbs, “introduction,” vi
90 Augustine, *Confessions*, book V. 10 (Watts, LCL)
91 Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 42
92 Augustine, *Confessions*. Book V.14 (Watts, LCL)
might return to its original place with the divine. Augustine turns the conversation in an entirely new direction with his view of the soul and its process of purification. According to Plato and Philo, the soul’s impurity results from its attachment to the physical body and all of the desires which it produces. Augustine rejects this theory stating that the body could not possibly be the cause of the soul’s corruption because God “made not only our souls but [also] our bodies.”  

According to Augustine, everything that God creates is intrinsically good; leading him to conclude that evil is not a substance nor does it possess any reality in itself. Evil results from the corruption of the will. Augustine observes that although he knows right from wrong, his will often chooses to do what is wrong and refuses to do what is right, which he considers an act against his own will. Augustine concludes that the soul’s inability to consistently choose what is good is not the body’s fault; rather it is the result of a corrupted will.  

While Philo identifies himself as a soul composed of body and mind, Augustine identifies himself as a man composed of body and soul. The soul is superior to the body because it judges the information presented by the bodily senses. However, Augustine does state that the body, although not evil in itself, is a constant source of temptation. Such temptations are only a problem in light of the corrupted will’s inability to resist them. Augustine explains that even after experiencing the reality of God in a meditative trance, he was unable to remain in such a state because of his attachment to bodily pleasures; he explains:

[I] was ravished to thee by thine own beauty; and yet by and by I violently fell off again, even by mine own weight; [...] this weight I spake of was my own fleshly custom. [...] I thought I was not yet able to cleave unto thee: for that the body which is corrupted, presseth down the soul, and the earthly tabernacle weigheth down the mind that museth upon many things.”  

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93 Augustine, *Confessions*. Book VII.3 (Watts, LCL)
94 Augustine, *Confessions*. Book VII.3,15,16
95 Augustine, *Confessions*. Book VII.17 (Watts, LCL)
The reason why Augustine is not able to consistently “cleave unto” God is because he has not yet fully embraced Jesus Christ as his mediator between himself and God; he explains, “I could not find [the strength to enjoy you] until I embraced that Mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ; who is over all, God blessed forever more.”

It is only through baptism in the name of Jesus Christ that one gains the capacity to lead a truly virtuous life. This is quite a big shift from Plato and Philo who thought the soul’s reason was the mediator between the divine and physical worlds. Plato wrote that meditation guided by one’s power of reason and habitual detachment from the body would cultivate a love for virtue, even though it took several lifetimes. Philo adopted this theory and interpreted Hebrew Scripture through a Platonic lens. Philo understood the Word of God to be the Divine Logos “through which” God created the universe and which is the reasoning aspect of the soul. It is the soul’s portion of God’s reason which gives a person the capacity to enjoy virtuous living, eventually resulting in purification. At the heart of both Plato’s and Philo’s theories is a strong reverence for reason and self-actualization. Judging from the text, it appears as though Augustine does not hold the soul’s power of reason in such high regard. Augustine does not perceive the soul’s reason as being akin to the divine in the way that Plato and Philo do. This is mainly because the soul’s reasoning is subject to change whereas divine reasoning is not. Only Jesus possessed unchangeable reason because he was God’s Word, i.e. God’s Reason made flesh.

Born to Die, Free to Sin

Augustine makes a clear distinction between freewill and human will. According to Augustine, anyone conceived through sexual intercourse automatically inherits a corrupt will that can be traced back to the transgressions of Adam and Eve. The transgressions of Adam and Eve

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96 Augustine, Confessions. Book VII.18 (Watts, LCL)
97 Augustine, Confessions. Book VII.17,18
were influenced by evil angels, who by their own freewill chose to rebel against God. It is only these rebel angels along with Adam and Eve who can rightfully be said to have possessed freewill. The freewill possessed by Adam and Eve was designed to be harmonious with God’s nature. When Adam and Eve freely chose to rebel they altered the nature of their wills so that they no longer complied with God’s nature and instead conformed to the nature of the rebellious angels who Augustine describes as our “corruptors [...] possessors and companions.”

Augustine concludes that humanity, in its fallen state, does not possess the will power to deliver itself from condemnation. A soul cannot purify itself through willful actions, no matter how good those actions are in nature. Augustine uses suicide as a metaphor for the situation, explaining that, “as a man who kills himself is still alive when he kills himself, but having killed himself is no longer alive and cannot resuscitate himself after he has destroyed his own life – so also sin which arises from the action of the free will turns out to be victor over the will and the free will is destroyed.” This being the situation, the human will is now a slave to sin; it is free inasmuch as a slave is free to perform whatever actions are in accordance with the master’s will. In other words, the will is free, but it is only free to sin in accordance with the corrupted wills of the rebellious angels who are our “masters and companions.” True freedom lies in “the joy that comes in doing what is right,” which can only be achieved through conversion followed by baptism. A person who dies unconverted without the sanctification of baptism experiences “two deaths at once,” the death of the body and the death of the soul.

This is another crucial point where Augustine’s thought diverges from that of Plato and Philo. For Plato, death is the separation of body and soul. For Philo, death is the soul’s return to

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96 Augustine, *Enchiridion*, VIII.26 (Outler)
99 Augustine, *Enchiridion*. IX.30
100 Augustine, *Enchiridion*. IX.30 (Outler)
101 Augustine, *Confessions*, Book V.9 (Watts, LCL)
its elemental forms, that is, the body’s return to the earth and the Logos’ return to God. For Augustine, death is not only evidence of humanity’s fallen state; it is retribution for the transgressions committed by our ancestors. Augustine supports this theory with scripture, quoting Paul’s letter to the Romans, “by one man sin entered into the world and death through sin; and thus death came upon all men, since all men have sinned (Rom. 5:12).”

It is interesting how in the *Phaedo* Socrates places a high level of importance on choice and even relates choice to first causes. For Augustine, the origin of evil, i.e. its first cause, can also be traced back to the choices made by the rebel angels and first humans. However, as a result of those choices, human-beings have in some sense lost their right to choose. A major difference between Plato, Philo and Augustine is that for Plato and Philo perfection and consequently purification is a choice. For Augustine perfection is impossible in the present life and consequently one’s only hope for purification is redemption through baptism. Thus, the hope espoused by Augustine is different than that espoused by Plato and Philo because Augustine’s hope is dependent on deliverance whereas Plato and Philo’s hope is independent and requires nothing more than education, reason, contemplation and willpower.

Theological Certainty

Thus far, I have suggested that Plato was hopefully agnostic in his approach to theology and issues of a spiritual nature inasmuch as he acknowledged that one can never possess full certainty regarding such issues while confined to the physical body. I have likewise proposed that Philo had a humble approach to theology inasmuch as he perceived God to be ultimately transcendent, unnamable, and beyond the grasp of human comprehension. As I have shown, this sentiment of humility and agnosticism is displayed in several passages in the writings of these authors. From my interpretation of Augustine’s *Confessions* and *Enchiridion*, there appears to be

102 Augustine, *Enchiridion*. VIII.26 (Outler)
a shift in tone from Hopeful Agnosticism to a more assertive approach to theology, resulting in what I am calling ‘theological certainty.’ In the *Confessions* Augustine explains how he once admired the agnosticism of the Philosophers until he fully embraced Jesus Christ as his soul’s redeemer. Although in the *Confessions* Augustine admits there is some merit to agnosticism, it is insufficient to satisfy his spiritual needs. As Princeton Professor of history Peter Brown has suggested, Augustine “wanted complete certainty on ultimate questions.”

Plato and Philo thought of reason as being separate from the physical senses. Because reason is an aspect of the soul and the soul is akin to the divine, one can use reason to inquire into spiritual matters in order to gain an understanding of what true reality is like. For Augustine, reason is not solely an aspect of soul, rather it is an aspect of the entire human being, which is a mixture of body and soul, therefore reason is not exempt from the soul’s corruption. Reason, in Augustine’s system, is insufficient for spiritual inquiry. Augustine does not trust his reason the way Plato does not trust his physical senses. If both reason and the physical senses are not trustworthy sources of knowledge, where does Augustine derive his sense of certainty regarding Catholic doctrine? According to Augustine:

> Things that arise in sensory experience [and] analyzed by the intellect, may be demonstrated by the reason. But in matters that pass beyond the scope of the human senses, which we have not settled by our own understanding, and cannot – here we must believe, without hesitation, the witness of those men by whom the Scriptures, rightly called divine, were composed […] [therefore] we begin in faith.

This passage clearly distinguishes the difference in perception between Augustine and Plato.

Like Plato, Augustine acknowledges that certain matters are beyond human comprehension. Plato’s solution to this condition is to “take whatever human doctrine is best and hardest to
disprove and, embarking upon it as a raft, sail upon it through life." Augustine seems to be using the Bible as his "raft" to "sail through life." The difference is that for Augustine the Bible is not an imperfect "human doctrine," the Bible is divine. The "faith" that Augustine speaks of, is faith in the perfection of the Scriptures. For Augustine, contrary to Plato and Philo, it is the Bible which is akin to the divine, not our faculty of reason.

In addition to hope, Plato's philosophical system still requires a great deal of faith in the modern sense of the term, which is to say, belief in what cannot be proven. As noted earlier, Plato's theory of immortality presupposes the existence of soul, the Forms, and truth in general; which could be described in modern terms as having faith, considering the existence of either three cannot be wholly proven. The difference between Plato's 'hope' and Augustine's 'faith,' is that Plato's hope is open-ended and not confined to a particular doctrine, not even his own. Plato's hope is open to the possible discovery of "stronger vessels" of arguments and theories which may be more reasonable than the ones we currently place our hope in. Augustine's faith appears to be much more finalized and definitive. Nothing can trump the authority of the divine Scriptures, not even one's own reason. Augustine's faith requires "belief without hesitation." Plato's theories appear to acknowledge an unavoidable level of uncertainty. Augustine rejects this uncertainty as if to imply that faith and uncertainty are incompatible, he asserts:

I [am not] at the moment trying to deal with the knottiest of questions which baffled the most acute men of the academy, whether a wise man ought to ever affirm anything positively lest he be involved in the error of affirming as true what may be false [...] Among us on the other hand, 'the righteous man lives by faith.' Now, if you take away positive affirmation, you take away faith, for without positive affirmation nothing is believed.  

106 See page 21  
107 See page 21  
108 See page 42  
109 Augustine, Enchiridion, VII. 20
Herein lays the main difference between hopeful agnosticism and theological certainty. Augustine argues that one cannot have faith unless one affirms that faith positively. Recall that in the *Phaedo* after Socrates relates his expectations of going to other "wise and good gods" once departed, he immediately follows with the statement, "though I should not care to assert this positively." Following Augustine’s logic, because Socrates does not affirm his theory positively, he essentially has no faith in it. But is this assertion justified? Is it reasonable to say that a person who is willing to die (and did die) for his beliefs has no faith? What I mean to suggest is that although Socrates does not express his certainty in a verbal sense, his actions confirm his sense of positivity concerning what he claims to believe. As mentioned earlier, is not martyrdom a fair indication of certainty? Thus, in some ways Socrates may be perceived to be just as certain as Augustine. Likewise, in some aspects Augustine is just as skeptical as Plato; the difference is that Augustine is not skeptical about the soundness of metaphysical arguments, he is skeptical about the consistency of human nature (and who can blame him!). Augustine was Bishop during a time when many Christian sects treated each other like rival gangs rather than fellow Christians, and as Peter Brown suggests, Augustine "wanted some degree of permanence and stability" which he could not detect in himself or the people around him. As Brown argues, Augustine thought that such permanence and stability could only come from outside himself.

**Conclusion**

There is nothing wrong with a person developing strong beliefs which he or she feels certain of; even to the point they are willing to sacrifice their lives to uphold them, but what the

110 See page 16
111 Chadwick, Augustine of Hippo, 98-15
112 Brown, Augustine of Hippo, 105
113 Brown, Augustine of Hippo, 105-106
hopeful agnostic approach suggests is that theology is not a stable subject, in fact it is more like a stormy sea. Theological humility implies a willingness to switch “rafts” on that stormy sea when we come across a stronger one that will make our voyage though life more safe and secure, and that requires that we loosen the degree of permanence of our current belief system. Hopeful agnosticism implies a truce with some level of uncertainty, no matter how small. In my opinion, certainty oversteps its boundaries the moment it causes one to denounce other belief systems as ‘cultic’ or when it causes a person to begin a sentence with the words “God says...” I think as a society we would be wise to take a page from Plato’s book and admit that no matter how certain we feel towards our beliefs, there is always the possibility of error, and thus we must remain humble.

In his book On Religion, Professor of philosophy and religion at Villanova University John Caputo argues that religious passion confronts the impossible. Once you confront the impossible, you do not know the outcome, therefore, “the condition of this passion is non-knowing [...] This non-knowing is not a simple garden-variety ignorance but rather more like what the mystics call a docta ignorantia, a learned or wise ignorance, that knows that we do not know and knows that this non-knowing is the inescapable horizon in which we must act.”

The anti-thesis to this non-knowing approach is what I have deemed ‘theological certainty,’ which, when juxtaposed to the hopeful agnostic approach appears to be a contradiction. Hopeful agnosticism defines theology as open-ended, uncertain, unstable, a confrontation with the impossible; it is like a dangerous journey not a safe round-trip. If theological certainty is a contradiction, it should not be surprising that people who claim to possess theological certainty can often act in contradictory ways. As Caputo points out:

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114 See page 21
In the United States, abortion clinics are bombed and physicians killed in the name of life and saving the unborn, while terrorists atrocities in the name of God abound in Northern Ireland and the Middle East. That contradiction, murdering and maiming in the name of the right to life, killing in the name of the love of God, is an emblem of the contradiction in which fundamentalists and the radical religious right are caught up today. 116

From cross-burning White supremacists to self-righteous suicide bombers; from charismatic leaders with vindictive agendas to church-going protesters screaming obscenities at family members of deceased soldiers—society has taught us that any belief system devoid of humility has the potential to become counterproductive. As a society we must know where to draw the line between hope and certainty...between faith and arrogance. I would argue that hope and faith are what causes one to die for one’s beliefs, whereas certainty and arrogance are what causes one to kill others for their beliefs. Rather than judging religions and philosophers based on what theology they invoke, I believe we ought to judge them based on the type of character their teachings produce. Only then will we experience a restoration of theological humility and consequently a more peaceful and compassionate society.

116 Caputo, On Religion, 107
Bibliography


