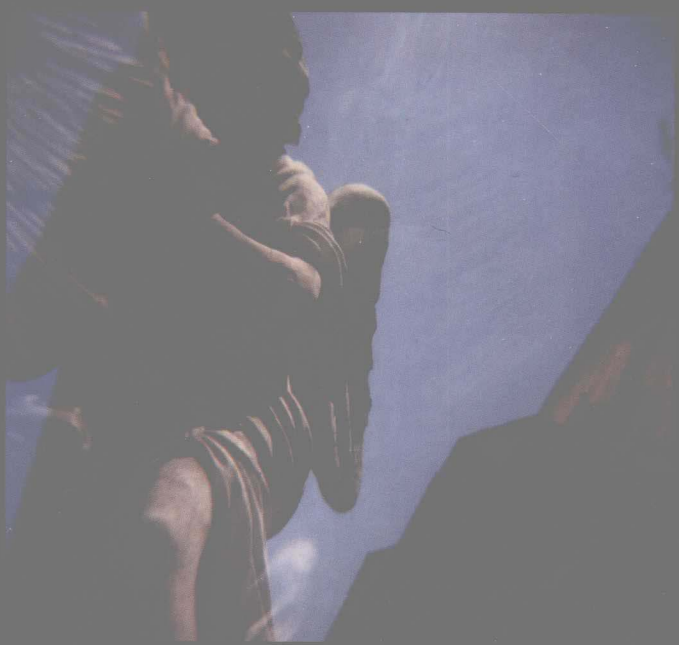
perspectives on western culture

Volume I

ATHENS AND JERUSALEM



Edited by
Brian Braman

BOSTON
COLLEGE

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Introduction

In the Jesuit context of higher education, study of the humanities properly contextualize both professional and scientific education by helping to prevent a narrowing of one's intellectual and spiritual horizon, with the concomitant loss of relevant and important questions concerning the meaning of our common human existence. In other words, a Jesuit liberal arts education is not a program of studies with no relation to the present or to the future. Nor is it a wholly disjointed field of knowledge. Jesuit education seeks to educate the whole of the person. It seeks to help the student to develop skills in practical living, it promotes the formation of good citizens by developing the mind, and it seeks to ground the student in a rich spiritual tradition. In short, the Jesuit commitment to the liberal arts seeks to liberate the student both intellectually and spiritually from various forms of cultural indoctrination, habit, and prejudices that can enslave him. It seeks to form students who are intelligent, responsible, reasonable and attentive.

The *Perspectives program* in general, *and Perspectives I* in particular comes out of this vision of educating the whole person. The overall philosophical vision of the four (4) year *Perspectives program* is that men and women are oriented in freedom towards transcendence. One of the crucial issues the *Perspectives program* attempts to grapple with is what may be called "a cover story of Western Thought." This cover story orbits around something analogous to what the German philosopher Martin Heidegger called "the forgetfulness of Being." Here, however, the forgetfulness that has taken hold and permeated not only the humanities but the natural sciences as well is the "forgetfulness of transcendence and transcendent destiny of human persons."[1]

Given the current climate of cultural amnesia, the *Perspectives program* can be therapeutic in helping us not only to remember our intellectual and spiritual heritage, but to appropriate it anew. With this in mind, *Perspectives I* is an opportunity for students to immerse

themselves into an ongoing conversation concerning some of the central issues of human existence as found in the philosophical and theological tradition of the West. *Perspectives I* gives the students a sense of being grounded in an intellectual tradition in which they can enter as interlocutors in order to discover more about themselves, and how they have come to be who they are as young men and women in the late 20th century. This coming "to know thyself" is made possible by means of a dialogue with some of the great texts of our tradition. Through total immersion in the philosophical and religious statements of each period, students are given the opportunity to understand themselves in relation to the significance of these critical periods of the past. Thus, there is a constant attention to the dialectic between the person's religious desire and desire to know. While *Perspectives I* deals with great books, the approach is not just the books themselves. The course begins with the foundations of western culture and moves progressively forward. The entire academic year is structured either implicitly or explicitly by the question "what is the best way to live"?

In the first semester of *Perspectives I*, students deal with two of what may be termed "spiritual eruptions": the rise of Greek Philosophy, and the Judeo-Christian experience of God's self-revelation in history. This idea of spiritual eruption is part of what the German Philosopher Karl Jaspers has called the "axial period" to world history. In his book *The Origin and Goal of History* Jaspers sees this axial period occurring between 800 and 500 BC. It "is here that we meet with the most deepcut dividing line in history."[2] Within this 300 year span we find the rise of Confucius and Lao-tse in China with the concomitant schools of Chinese Philosophy. In India there arises the Upanishads and Buddha, and just as in China, "these ran the whole gamut of philosophical possibilities down to skepticism, to materialism, sophism and nihilism."[3] In Iran, Zarathustra sees the world as a titanic struggle between good and evil. The Hebrew Prophets call the chosen people back to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The same God who told Moses that "I AM" has sent you. In Greece, Homer, the philosophers, and tragedians all are in one way or another in search of the "Divine Centre."[4] In Short, the first semester of *Perspectives I* looks at two of these spiritual eruptions which are the principle foundations of Western Civilization, the relationship between *Athens* and *Jerusalem*.

In Athens's "Socrates and Plato originated what traditionally has been meant by reason . . . philosophers asking about the right way to live so that their queries could not be satisfied by conventional wisdom."[5] Thus wisdom stands as a critique of Society. The importance of this discovery is the realization that the order and formation of the soul is the basis for the life of excellence (*arete*). In addition to the discovery of soul and concomitantly *Nous* (mind), the importance of education is recognized and understood as the means through which the human character is molded in accordance with an ideal.[6] For Plato, then, the importance of education is to help set the conditions for a type of intellectual conversion that enables the person to attain a certain independence from "the city

and what it takes for granted." We see this in the early dialogues of Plato, some of which we study in the beginning of the semester: *Meno*, *Apology* and *Crito*. Here Plato attempts "to reach the knowledge of *arete* by a number of different routes. They all led to the realization that the separate virtues—courage, prudence, piety, and justice—were simply parts of one whole virtue and that the essence of virtue in itself was knowledge."[7] For Plato, philosophy consists in ordering the soul by three forces, *Thanatos*, *Eros*, and *Dike*. "Philosophy is the erotic reaching out of the soul toward the *Agathon* (The Good), and the right ordering of the soul through participation in the *Agathon*."[8] In fine, Plato is concerned with the nobility and excellence of the soul. This nobility manifests itself "in the pursuit of the good and the avoidance of the ignoble in personal conduct. . ."[9] by a character properly shaped through education.

Aristotle, like his teacher Plato, also understood the question of the nature of the good life as a science of excellences. For Aristotle, it is scientific knowledge, not as abstract, but knowledge about the actual formation of the person as grounded in the normativity of *nous*.[10] In other words, Aristotle was in search of a normative human nature so as to determine what is indeed the highest good, which he eventually calls happiness. Moreover, his understanding of the formation and nature of the person was not to be dissociated from his other concerns regarding what constitutes a good society. For Aristotle, then, the good society would be that social organization which is so ordered that "the highest good of man can be realized."[11]

In the last analysis, Aristotle like Plato grounds his vision of human nature in an "ontotheological vision of the real."[12] Aristotle, following his teacher Plato, anchors his metaphysical assumptions in the belief "that beings own their intrinsic meaningfulness to the divine quality of the *kosmos*."[13] In fine, "Aristotle's most basic investigations in metaphysics and in practical and political philosophy have a structure not unlike the classic one of faith seeking understanding: the philosopher starts his dialectical ascent to knowledge from the best available opinions, using the light of *nous*. . . . ."[14]

Just as Plato and Aristotle grappled with determining the sources of individual and communal order or disorder, in others words "what is justice?," so did the Greek Tragedians. In fact, the why of tragedy as an art form was implicitly grounded in the conviction that the order or disorder of society was a reflection of the individual soul, an insight that Plato was to reinforce in his work *The Republic*. Tragedy as an art form is a symbolic attempt to articulate the sources of order and disorder in the context of communal self-understanding. The work of tragedy sought not only to validate the social order, but also to create a microcosm of the totality of that order. In short, the social order through the dramatic work understood itself as living under the spectre of tragedy: "the social order itself acquires the hue of tragedy when it is understood as the work of man, as an order wrested by man from the demonic forces of disorder, as a precarious incarnation of *Dike* (justice) achieved and preserved by the efforts of tragic action."[15] The public cult of

tragedy reminded the Athenian citizen that the struggle for order was a struggle that took place within the soul of each and every citizen: each citizen had to have the sense of being *tua res agitur*. The decisions that one made for or against the divine principle of justice, the responsibility that one took for his or her actions, determined the health or sickness of the polis. Thus the two plays we study by Sophocles, *Antigone* and *Oedipus Rex*, while different in dramatic subject matter, nonetheless both articulate two of Sophocles' chief concerns: the inevitability of suffering and how one responds to this suffering, and the unbroken course of the fate of a family. "Because it alone formed a whole large enough to demonstrate the working-out of divine justice which even religious faith and moral sentiment can hardly trace in the doom of one individual."[16]

While tragedy was concerned with reminding the Athenians that the health or sickness of the polis was determined by the decisions one made for or against the divine principle of justice, and the responsibility one took for his or her actions, comedy sought to reflect the "eternal spectacle of human nature and its weaknesses."[17] But like tragedy, comedy, and particularly that of Aristophanes, sought to keep a constant watch "on education, philosophy and music. Thereby, these activities were for the first time regarded as expressing the culture of the nation, and as standards of its spiritual health."[18]

In *The Clouds* we find a very different picture of Socrates than we encountered in the Platonic dialogues. For Aristophanes, Socrates is just another sophist who has contributed to the moral and spiritual decay of Athens: the loss of those virtues associated with the men who were victorious at the battle of Marathon. From Aristophanes' perspective, Socrates like the sophists "analysed everything and thought nothing was so great or so sacred that it was beyond discussion and did not need to be founded on a rational basis."[19]

Beginning the second half of the first semester we shift our attention to the second defining symbol of Western Culture: Jerusalem. There are two elements to this symbol. The first refers to the "faith that originates with God's calling out of Abraham. . . . That faith is fundamentally the remembrance of God's leading Moses and the Hebrews out of Egypt into their formal constitution as God's people of the promise on Sinai. . ."[20] The second element concerns the Christian account of the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ and our liberation from sin.[21]

We begin our hermeneutical analysis of Jerusalem by reading the *Hebrew scripture* and focusing upon covenant with God. This covenant (as manifested in the *Decalogue* (ten commandments), is the basis for a new social order. The covenant has obligations that are universally binding regardless of the social status of persons or territorial boundaries. Thus the *Decalogue* "is not an accidental collection of 'religious and moral precepts,' but a magnificent construction, with a firm grip on the essentials of human existence in society under God."[22] *Hebrew scriptures*, then, can be understood not in the modern sense of a critical history of pragmatic events, but rather a critical

the Gospels overall are understood to be various answers to the question Jesus asked his disciples "who do you say I am?" In addition, the Gospels make it clear the Jesus event has shifted the foundation of salvation. This shift is most clearly seen in the letters of St. Paul, particularly Paul's letter to the *Galatians*. For Paul, "salvation comes through faith in Jesus. Attempting to add the law to that faith is really a rejection of that salvation and a return to slavery."[28] However, Paul's theology of justification by faith while in one way discontinuous from the *Old Testament* in its condemnation of the Law, is nonetheless continuous, because its true meaning has its origins in Covenant theology.[29]

In short, the Jesus event is understood as an announcement of a new universality that gathers together Greek and Jew. "Because Jesus is the messianic Son of David, the one who fulfills the prophets, his word about the will of God is more than a human interpretation. . . . Indeed by going beyond the law as the possession of Israel and its Jewish interpreters, . . . Matthew sees that Jesus' teaching can be preached as God's word to all the nations."[30]

Lastly, Tertullian, one of the early Latin fathers of the Christian Church asks the question: "what does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?" It is this tension between faith (Jerusalem) and reason (Athens) that takes us through the remainder of the semester. Yet, while there exist this tension, we discover that both faith and reason are necessary in order to build and properly order a human life, a culture.

In reading the *Confessions* of St. Augustine we discover that Augustine makes sense of his existential situation through a turn inward to explore the dynamics of the soul: ***faith seeking understanding***. In Book 19 of *The City of God* Augustine defends Christianity against the pagan attack that it is responsible for the downfall of Rome. Augustine points out that it was the salutary effects of the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity that kept the empire together.[31] Conversely, Professor Ernest Fortin has shown that while Augustine thought the classical tradition had failed, it never occurred to him to lower the standard of human behavior in order to make his own teaching effective. "Classical thought has failed, not because it expected too much of most men, but because it was compelled to rely on purely human means to bring about the realization of the noble goals that it set for them. Thanks to the revelation of divine truth, the justice which had hitherto eluded man has at last become accessible to him, but it belongs properly to that city of which Christ is the founder and ruler."[32]

Almost 1000 years later Aquinas picks up where Augustine left off. In Aquinas' retrieval of Aristotle, Aquinas assumes the adequacy of reason to explore and illuminate the experience of faith. Simultaneously, however, Aquinas emphasizes the importance and necessity of faith to keep in check the destructive hubris of the human knower. In addition, Aquinas suggests it is possible through reason to order the natural virtues as a foundation for the Christian life of charity without destroying or denying them. In other words, Grace builds upon nature; it does not destroy it. Faith does not deny our natural end, but reveals to

us our true destiny and the deepest longing of our hearts. For Aquinas, Augustine's "restless heart" is not only the desire to understand everything about everything, but ultimately the desire for God.

We finish the first semester with an excerpt from Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Dante wrote his major work in the vernacular around 1300 AD. By writing in Italian, "Dante was concerned with translating the knowledge of reality—hidden in the seven liberal arts, in philosophy, theology and history—from dead, fossilized Latin into the living, spoken language."[33] In addition to his concern about bringing to life the "liberal arts," there is his major conviction, as expressed in *The Divine Comedy*, that the cosmos is permeated through and through with divine Eros.[34] Not only is the cosmos permeated by divine Eros, but this Eros is connected to ethics. For Dante this means something analogous to the Aristotelian science of right conduct. Dante understands this science of right conduct as "the building of one's individual perfection on the foundation of the soul's perfection, its nobility, that is the divine germ in man derived from nature and grace."[35] In other words, if "the religious core of Dante's poem is to be discovered anywhere, it is in its concentration on the single most profound longing of the human soul, a longing once described by the author himself as 'the inborn and perpetual thirst for the godlike kingdom."[36]

Dante, then, is a fitting end to the first semester because not only is he the great poet of the individual,[37] but he helps to set the conditions for what eventually is called the turn to the subject that takes place with the rise of modernity: which we take up in the second semester.

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Notes

[1] Kevin McGinley, *The Perspectives Program at Boston College*, an unpublished paper given at the Perspectives colloquium 1985.
[2] Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968). 1
[3] Ibid.
[4] Werner Jaeger, *In Search of The Divine Centre*, **Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture II** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).
[5] Fred Lawrence, *Athens and Jerusalem: The Contemporary Problematic of Faith and Reason*, Unpublished Paper, 1997. 1
[6] Werner Jaeger, *Archaic Greece: The Mind of Athens*, **Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture I**, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967). xxii
[7] Ibid., Vol. II
[8] Eric Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, **Order and History III**, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957). 272
[9] Ibid., 14
[10] See also Pat Byrne's *Analysis and Science in Aristotle* (New York: Suny Press, 1997). 210. In his work on Aristotle's *Analytics* Professor Byrne has situated it "within the cultural situation Aristotle faced, like Plato and Socrates before him. The aberrations introduced into public life by sophistic thinking established a priority for evaluating *public arguments*, . . . "
[11] Voegelin, Vol. III, 302
[12] Louis Dupre, *Passages to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). 27
[13] Ibid.
[14] Lawrence, 2
[15] Eric Voegelin, *The World of the Polis*, **Order and History II**, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956). 263
[16] Jaeger, 280, Vol. I
[17] Ibid., 358, Vol. I
[18] Ibid., 364, Vol. I. In short, comedy "was produced by democracy as an antidote to its own overdose of liberty."
[19] Ibid., 372, Vol. I
[20] Lawrence, 2
[21] Ibid., 3
[22] Eric Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, **Order and History I**, (Baton Rouge: Louisian State University Press, 1955). 427
[23] Karl H. Pesche, *Christian Ethics: Moral Theology in the Light of Vatican II* **General Moral Theology I**, (Dublin: C. Goodliffe Neale, 1986). 19 "Fear of the Lord is to be understood in terms of the Israeli's experience of the "terrifying mystery of God above all in the majestic theophany at Mount Sinai."
[24] Ibid., 20
[25] Ibid.
[26] Voegelin, Vol. I. 440

[27] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The von Balthasar Reader*, Edited by Medard Kehl, S.J., and Werner Loser, S.J. Translated by Robert J. Daly, S.J. and Fred Lawrence. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982). 46

[28] Pheme Perkins, *Reading the New Testament*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1988). 166

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid., 223–224

[31] Lawrence, 5

[32] Ernest Fortin, *Classical Christianity and the Political Order: Reflections on the Theologico-Political Problem* **Collected Essays II** (London: Rowman & Littlefield 1996). 239

[33] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics III* **Studies in Theological Style: Lay Styles** (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1969). 13

[34] Ibid., 29

[35] Ibid., 33

[36] Ernest Fortin, *The Birth of Philosophic Christianity* **Collected Essays I** (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996). 265

[37] Dupre, 45

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