

East versus West: A Review of Epistemology

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The people who gave us the Bible did not look at the world the way folks do in modern Western civilization. It is intellectually dishonest to argue with that. However, most people seem to think it doesn't matter, and that's downright foolish.

West

Even if you never darkened the door of any real college, you probably have heard of those old Greek Philosophers: Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Whether you know it or not, almost everything you think you know today is affected by what these men taught in ancient times. In particular, we take a lot from Plato. His basic contribution is the idea man must struggle intellectually to see all things in terms of ideals. It's not enough that you can name the things you see, and have some idea how each one works. You must rise up to the level where you can see how similar things are alike, and why other things are different. You have to construct categories, give your knowledge structure, so that you can begin to understand the nature of things.

This structure works. It works so well, we tend simply to dismiss what can't be understood that way. Plato's best student, Aristotle, extended the concept. Aristotle organized the entire range of human knowledge, based on those assumptions handed down from Plato, who expanded on the work of his teacher, Socrates. This system is the very foundation of Western Civilization. So solid and stable are these underlying assumptions about human existence and the very nature of knowledge itself, most people simply don't have to bother examining it. We take it for granted this is not simply how we look at things, but is the very nature of existence itself.

But the people in Bible did not see the world that way. They adhered to a much older set of assumptions about reality. In fact, it would be fair to say Aristotle had to reject that older world view when he constructed his new one. Today, the entire realm of human knowledge has relegated that older viewpoint to the museum, as it were. We consider it primitive, and lump the biblical world view in with pagan Hindu, Buddhist, and other Eastern religions. Without even discussing it, we simply assume modern Western understanding is superior.

This is insanity. Most modern Christians in the Western world are showing contempt for something they refuse to understand. Lumping them all under the term mysticism as if that is enough to dismiss it is simply wrong. The Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) intellectual culture was distinctively different from the other Eastern cultures, in part because it was the culture God Himself made. He didn't just allow it to form, but intervened directly in human history to shape the intellectual assumptions of men like Abraham.

The Bible truly does arise from the ANE cultural base. It was not produced in a cultural-intellectual vacuum. If you don't understand the Hebrew world view, you can't understand the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus Himself was Hebrew, and taught from that Hebrew view. The bulk of His debates with the Jewish leaders was based on their having

moved away from that Hebrew mindset into Hellenism. We can't read Jesus' words through mental assumptions He would reject. Do not assume the writers of the New Testament were Hellenized when Jesus condemned that very thing. Paul knew Greek and Greek philosophical assumptions, but spent three years with the Risen Christ to regain a proper Hebrew spiritual mind. Indeed, all His teaching calls men back to the ancient Hebrew ways, which came from the hand of God.

The fatal flaw in Hellenism or Western reasoning is assuming man is the measure of all things. It is inherently human-centered, which should obviously be a sinful notion. Man is fallen, but the results of Socrates-Plato-Aristotle denies that man's rational faculty is included in the Fall. The Fall was precisely in the decision to put human intellect on the throne of the heart. The modern Christian notion man can theoretically reason his way back to God is not at all in Scripture, but is read back into it from Hellenistic assumptions which we were silly enough to adopt from the Pharisees. When Paul writes in Romans how fallen man cannot even desire to know God, the Western Christian mind translates that somehow as a mere cultural issue. Teach them better and they'll "make a decision for Christ." Paul says bluntly that's not possible, that only a miracle from God can bring any human to the place of repentance and faith.

The fundamental assumption of ANE thinking is man cannot know more than a certain limited amount. Even that is by God's grace. The only way anyone can hope to truly understand anything at all is by revelation. It must come from above, not be built up from below.

While Western Christians do say such things, it amounts to lip service when we see the actual working out of this bastardized understanding of the world. We call it "noble" when men are called, and give titles, plan professional tracks and plaster fame on them as if God's whim in choosing them somehow equates to making such men great. Paul said he was nothing. The very existence of educational certificates and degrees is the child of Aristotle's mind, not the mind of the Spirit.

That's the way the world does things, not the Kingdom of Heaven. Most modern Christianity hangs onto some semblance of spreading the gospel message, and people continue crossing over into the Realm of the Spirit, very much in spite of Western Christianity, not because of it. We don't have what Jesus had in His ministry because we refuse to embrace the source of that power. We have our dime-store version of faith, and while God continues to touch lives through Western churches, it's because that's the best He can get from us.

East

To this day, we still use a significant amount of Aristotle's formal structure for human knowledge. He willingly explained how he got that structure. It was a matter of observing directly, or collecting the observations of other wise philosophers, and building from those observations the structure. That is, examine all the various examples of a given object, then draw out from those examples the nature of the thing. Items related were placed near each other in a yet wider structure, and so on, until the whole of human academic pursuit had been organized. The priesthood of philosophers thus presented to the rest of mankind a fully organized grasp of the world.

From what is known this way, things which cannot be observed directly could also be extrapolated, as surely it would all follow the same rules. So Aristotle postulated how beings higher than humans might exist, and determined what must be true about them. The result is essentially agnosticism, by virtue of eliminating much of what various religions asserted, but which did not fit Aristotle's logic.

From this, we can discern a distinct epistemology. That fancy word means the study of how humans can know things. Ideas which have a basis in logic, thus fitting the rational ideals, were correct. Ideas which could not be tested in the same way as everything else were reduced to mere belief. As you can see, this in the long run brings us to the Scientific Method. Knowledge then becomes whatever is verified, mostly by trying your hardest to disprove it, and failing. The point is, it's not called "knowing" if it can't be verified under a commonly accepted matrix of tests.

That's fine if everything you want to know can be confined to what you can observe, even if only indirectly through effects. If you are content with results which can be quantified and qualified under that matrix of values, the world stands pretty well understood. You can determine your own measures of success, construct the means to test for failure, eliminate what won't work, and find a path which leads to a good life. Sounds like a good religion, no?

What Aristotle tossed aside is something entirely outside that matrix. A fundamental element of ANE (biblical) culture is the insistence success in this life is not all it's made out to be. Maybe failure here is okay if by some other measure you have done well. Aristotle and his friends rejected that out of hand. It requires accepting the notion a thing could be known which must be revealed, not discerned. ANE epistemology asserts the only stuff really worth knowing is revealed knowledge, and everything else is just mechanisms.

So it is with the God of the Bible. The first element in revelation is you can't possibly get it on your own. If God doesn't reveal it to you, it remains unknown and unknowable. That's because whatever "it" is remains a part of a living God. Truth is by no means some objective body of logic and reason out there, standing on its own. Truth is "truth" only insofar as it reflects something of God's nature as the Person. A thing cannot be true on its own, but is true only if God says so. Disciples of Aristotle reject that. To them, deities were notoriously flighty, arrogant, loaded with whims, and all too powerful. The God of the Bible is nothing like that.

Even if He were, the biblical approach is to assert God has every right to act that way if it suits Him, since He made it all. In other words, God is unassailable. There is no standard except Him, so any standard raised up to test Him is already sin. The biblical matrix is pretty simple, in that it carries a fundamental assumption of morality. There are two things: (1) What God says, and (2) everything else – sin by definition. That results in falsehood and death.

Indeed, we find it well nigh impossible to fully explain the difference between East and West from the Western position. That is in part because true knowledge in the Bible cannot be brought down to human language. It can be perceived on some level other than the intellect, but the purpose in knowing is not to own and control, but to obey those "whims" of God. The aim of it all is to meet His approval, and that approval is not

discerned by any formal standard at all, but by a means which cannot be put into words. Each and every human is then utterly dependent, moment by moment, throughout all of their lives, upon that living Being. Few things are truly locked down in the mind, because there is the assumption whatever you have there is surely incomplete. Somewhere down the road, what you “know” will be shown false. Yet, you are bound to obey what you know at the time, even if it falls short. God is pleased that we intend to obey, not in the obedience itself.

That would drive Aristotle and his friends mad.

What Difference It Makes

It is not as if we have to completely ditch the legacy of Aristotle. We simply have to put it in its proper place. In our minds, we must recognize there is a limit, a wall. The wall was placed by God, and it serves well His purpose. Those within are spiritual beings; those without are also without His divine Presence in their spirits. They are dead – spiritually dead. Their epistemology is also dead. That is, it cannot help us in any way with issues regarding Life in the Kingdom.

To drag Aristotle into our understanding of revelation is rather like dragging a stinking corpse into God’s Presence and expecting Him to be pleased. Aristotle died and went to Hell. He cannot help you understand God. Do not underestimate the magnitude of the sin here. Almost the entire mass of disputed theology and Bible analysis rests on trying to involve Aristotelian epistemology. All the major disputes arise because major figures in history bought into the same sin as the Pharisees.

The Pharisees arose from the ashes of powerless religion after the Restoration, the return from Babylonian Exile. You can research the critical details of how that transition came about, but the point is the Pharisees were heretics. They had embraced with a passion the Hellenist philosopher’s arrogance, as if their pitiful inductive analysis could explain God and the Law. So they read the Law from an epistemology hostile to God’s revelation, and it’s no surprise Jesus kept finding fault with their teaching.

The body of their teaching still exists today as the core document of modern Judaism, which we call the Talmud. While it was not in a written form in Jesus’ day, He referred to it as the “traditions of the elders.” He also referred to it as a poor substitute for the Word of God. The Pharisees made up lies about the Talmud being the oral teaching of Moses somehow rediscovered, preserved as oral lore. It was so utterly different from what we know of Moses’ intellectual background, their claim is ludicrous on the face of it. But the Pharisees went even further and claimed it took precedence over the Books of Moses, the Law. All you have to do is examine the material, and the accusations of Jesus, to see the Pharisees had found a thousand excuses to be materialistic. Indeed, their whole teaching was a parody of the Law, with an entirely Aristotelian spin. Jesus condemned it.

When you examine how Jesus taught things, and you compare it with what we know of ANE intellectual assumptions, you realize He was demanding His nation return to their ancient Hebraic roots. But as we’ve already shown, virtually the entire Western Church refuses to check, and simply condemns the idea. The culture of the ancient Hebrew

people is the one God made, and was the chosen setting for His revelation. The entire Bible reflects the call to return to that ANE epistemology.

Without it, you cannot hope to understand what God has been trying to say all these generations. We cannot hope to heal the rifts in His Body, nor clarify the points of difference. I would go so far as warn He cannot come back for us until this has been fixed, because we cannot fulfill the Master's commission without understanding His mind. Jesus' mind ran on the basis of ANE epistemology, and our term for that today is ANE Mysticism or Christian Mysticism.