

Introduction

Why Better Implies Best

I.1 The Argument

To be human is to want to be better – if not a better person, then at least better at something. Our lives are haunted by the gap between ideals and reality. We are not only capable of forming ideals – we are also capable of recognizing that we fall short. That shortfall is why most lives take the form of a quest toward an ideal. We tell a story to ourselves and to others about how we strive to close the gap between who we are and who we would like to be.

What makes this quest so quixotic is that the goalposts keep shifting. As I approach my earlier ideal of a good citizen or a good husband or a good scholar, I come to realize that I could be an even better citizen, husband, or scholar. The more you learn, the more you realize how little you know. Similarly, the more you strive to be virtuous, the more aware you are of your vices. The more we consult our conscience, the more it demands of us. That is why saints think of themselves as sinners, while sinners think of themselves as saints.

The first premise of this book is that we cannot seek to be better unless we are guided by a notion of the best. How could one identify “better” except in relation to what is best? The very notion of progress rests on the notion of a goal. As Aristotle says, the perfect is logically prior to the imperfect, just as actuality is prior to potency. Apart from our conception of the perfect, how would we know that we have room for improvement?

All of this might seem unexceptionable, but the quest for perfection has many enemies. Worldly wise people remind us that “the perfect is the enemy of the good.” Are not we often told, “one day at a time” or “it’s not the destination, it’s the journey”? Perhaps we should focus simply on getting better rather than on being the best. Who wants their life

tyrannized by the pursuit of an impossible dream? There is something obsessive about the pursuit of perfection.

In the life of nations, the dangers of perfection are even more evident. The politics of utopia has been widely discredited by the experience of communism and fascism. Today, politically savvy people talk about incremental reform, piecemeal social engineering, and the science of muddling through. Serious-minded reformers usually despise utopians as mere day-dreamers. But those reformers are wrong; there is no reform without utopia. And there is no becoming better without aiming for the best.

These attacks on the pursuit of perfection are better understood as attacks on perfectionism – that is, on misguided ways of seeking the perfect. Perfectionism, as an obsessive or fanatical idealism, is indeed the enemy of the good. The perfect itself cannot be the enemy of the good, because in practical reasoning the concepts of good, better, and best all imply each other and are inseparable. There are many ways to go wrong: one can pursue a good ideal in a bad way or simply pursue a bad ideal. An obsessive pursuit of an ideal often reflects an imperfect ideal, not the imperfection of idealism. Captain Ahab and Ebenezer Scrooge are to be faulted not for pursuing an ideal but for pursuing the wrong ideal. What about settling for the imperfect? Even that goal rests on knowing what is perfect.

A fundamental axiom of liberal political theory holds that a society can become better even when its citizens disagree about what is best. We can agree on the means even when we disagree about the ends. Augustine, for example, argued that both pagans and Christians can agree about the need for civil peace as a means to very different ends. More individual liberty and more economic security are popular ideas today because they are compatible with many different conceptions of the best human life. What makes liberal politics viable is that those with different conceptions of what is best can often agree about how to make society better. Better still implies best, but the same means of betterment can serve more than one end. Nonetheless, whether more individual liberty or more economic security is better depends on one's conception of what is best.

The second premise of this book is that the idea of a god or of the divine functions in practical reasoning as the limit case of what is best. Without a conception of godlike perfection, we could not choose what is better.¹

¹ In this book, I shall refer to divinities in general as “god” or “gods.” I reserve “God” for the biblical divinity – not to honor the biblical God but because “God” (English for Yahweh) is a proper name only of the biblical God.

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That is what the word “god” effectively means in our lives: whatever we take to be the best. It is important to note, however, that one can pursue a godlike ideal without pursuing a god. Augustine argued that because we desire God, that desire must be implanted by God. But the human pursuit of the perfect does not imply the existence of a perfect being. Practical reason posits perfection as an ideal to regulate our efforts to become better.

The medieval theologian Anselm famously defined God as “that than which nothing greater can be conceived.”² It is a conceptual truth about God, says Anselm, that he must be perfect; the very notion of affirming or imitating an imperfect God is incoherent.³ Even though the biblical God admits to making mistakes, the Bible often describes God as perfectly holy and righteous. The gods of Greek myths possess some obvious perfections: they never die or grow old, they are beautiful and strong, and they lead lives of leisure. Of course, these gods are far from morally perfect, which is why Plato will insist that the poets lie about the gods. As we shall see, nothing is more revealing of the differences between Plato and Aristotle than their differing views of divine (and, hence, human) perfection.

To judge a god to be imperfect would be to erect a standard above that god by which to measure it. That standard of perfection, then, functions in practical reasoning as the true god.⁴ This line of reasoning led Plato and Aristotle to argue that the divinities of the Greek poets were not the true gods. Plato, for example, repeatedly says that “god is the measure of all things.” To be the measure of all things means precisely “nothing greater can be conceived.” As we shall see, both Greek philosophers and the Bible

² “Credimus te esse aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit.” See *St. Anselm’s Proslogion: With a Reply on Behalf of the Fool by Gaunilo and the Author’s Reply to Gaunilo*, ed. M. J. Charlesworth (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), chapter 2. Augustine had already defined God as “quo est nullus superior” and “aliquid quo nihil melius sit”; see *De libero arbitrio* 2.6 and *De doctrina Christiana* 1.6.

³ Is Anselm here defining the biblical God alone or any philosophical conception of a god? For the argument that Anselm intends his definition to apply to any meaningful conception of a god, see Charlesworth’s commentary in his edition of the *Proslogion*, at pp. 45, 56–57, 97. Anselm makes it clear that defining God in this way does not mean that God is comparable to other beings or that God is simply greater than another being. As Charlesworth puts it: “God, therefore, does not exist as the highest member of the hierarchical series, but rather *outside* the series.” See *St. Anselm’s Proslogion*, ed. Charlesworth, 51. According to theologian Don Cupitt, the object of religious devotion could be God, Being, or Life. “When we portray the religious object as God, we represent it as an imaginary focus of spiritual aspiration – an ideal of perfection.” *The New Religion of Life in Everyday Speech* (London: SMC Press, 1999), 87.

⁴ “Dass jeglicher das Beste, was er kennt, / Er Gott, ja seinen Gott benennt, / Ihm Himmel und Erden Übergibt, / Ihn fürchtet und womöglich liebt.” Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Spruchweisheit, Sprüche in Prosa* (Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1942).

will treat divinity as the ultimate standard for practical reasoning.⁵ Even to describe a god as the highest or supreme being is to presume to take his measure.⁶ Divine perfection is a presupposition of religious thought, not a proposition subject to verification.

But why cannot our standard of what is best be a human standard? If I want to be a better philosopher, why shouldn't I adopt a human role model, such as Plato or Aristotle? If I want to be a better citizen, why shouldn't I look to Pericles or George Washington? Again, logically, I could not know that Plato and Aristotle were better philosophers or that Pericles and Washington were better citizens without an ideal of the absolute best, most godlike philosopher or citizen. These paragons are better only by reference to the best. I might prefer human exemplars because they are better known to me, but I am still relying implicitly on an ideal that transcends human exemplars. There is an irony in measuring oneself in relation to Plato or Aristotle, given that they measured themselves in relation to a god.

We should never assume that any actual human being is the best possible exemplar. If Roger Bannister had modeled himself on the best actual human runner, he never would have broken the four-minute mile. There is no known upper limit on human achievement, which is why the idea of divine perfection is inescapable. To be the best we might be in any field of human endeavor is to reach for god. To do anything else is to sell ourselves short. Nothing seems so foolish and presumptive as to adopt a divine role model; yet rationality requires nothing less. We will never know what is humanly possible unless we aim for the divine. Our choice is not whether to seek the divine but rather to decide what kind of divinity to aim for.

We seek the divine because we want a more meaningful life, one that transcends the limits of our current existence. Meaning is a relation between a part and a larger whole. A word gets its meaning from the

⁵ According to Thomas Aquinas, the only predicates that properly belong to God are the class of perfections. Why? Because God is the symbol and goal of human aspiration. In other words, ascribing perfections to God serves a practical more than a theoretical goal. See David Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973), 139–141, 257, 267.

⁶ “To say that God is that than which nothing greater can be thought is tantamount to saying that whatever you think is less than God. Any idea of God, even that of the highest being, can necessarily be trumped, thought beyond, overshadowed. Hegel taught us that to think a limit is to be already beyond the limit. Thus to think of God as the unsurpassable highest reality is already to be beyond God and in a position to judge him and categorize him.” Robert Barron, *The Priority of Christ: Toward a Postliberal Catholicism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 213.

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sentence of which it is a part. Similarly, the deeds of my own life get their meaning from the larger contexts in which I place them. If I am working to abolish slavery, I might first see my mission in terms of the history of abolitionism in my own nation; then I might see it in the context of the human history of abolitionism; third, I might see abolitionism in relation to God's liberation of Israel from slavery in the Bible; and finally, I might see my life's work in relation to God's liberation of humanity from sin itself. Similarly, I might welcome a needy stranger into my home as an act of compassion or hospitality; I might also welcome him in relation to the duties of good citizenship; finally, I might welcome a stranger as if he were Elijah or Christ himself. Meaning is additive: each of these stages of ascent creates more levels of meaning in my life. By interpreting my life in relation to the divine, I achieve the widest possible context of meaning. In a purely mathematical sense, a life lived in relation to a divine ideal possesses more meaning than one lacking such a frame.⁷

The third premise of this book is that language about the divine – whether in myth, theology, or philosophy – is an invaluable window on human nature. Whatever religious language might tell us about the gods, it certainly reveals a lot about us. In this book, I make no attempt to argue for the existence of any gods. I set aside the whole question of divine reality. I aim to show instead how the idea of god functions in human practical reasoning, especially in classical Greek philosophy and in the Bible. We ascribe perfection to the gods because we need a measure for our aspirations, not because we can claim knowledge of the divine nature.

In every human culture, there are stories celebrating human beings who seek to become gods – and stories about the hazards of doing so. Mythology everywhere, but especially Greek mythology, is concerned with the boundaries between humans and gods – and with the violations of those boundaries. We are deeply ambivalent about the human ambition to become like a god – an ambition that seems both heroic and hubristic. At the same time, the gods are notorious for their unwelcome intrusions into human life, which range from impregnating women to killing those with hubris. In Homer, the gods are passionate spectators of the human

⁷ Robert Nozick explains why meaning is additive and why meaning finds its limit in the divine: "Meaning involves transcending limits so as to connect with something valuable; meaning is a transcending of the limits of your own value, a transcending of your own limited value. Meaning is a connection with an external value, but this meaning need not involve any connection with an infinite value; we may well aspire to that, but to fall short is not to be bereft of meaning. There are many numbers between zero and infinity . . . The meaning of a life is its place in a wider context of value." *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 610–611.

drama, while the humans regard the gods with wariness. Both gods and men police the boundaries between divine and human very carefully.

Some anthropologists claim that all religions originated in practices of honoring, remembering, and worshipping the dead, who were felt – or feared – to be a living presence. Religion thus rests on the idea of the survival of human beings after death – that is, on the partial or complete divinization of human beings. Indeed, human beings do survive death – if only in the memory of the living. By remembering and worshipping the dead, we either honor their survival or ensure it. Stories of human efforts to become divine are thought experiments in human self-understanding: Are we more like other animals or more like the gods?

The quest to become like god is as central to ancient philosophy as it is to ancient religion; philosophy arose as a kind of purification of religion. The first people ever to call themselves “philosophers” – Pythagoras, Empedocles, and Parmenides – also claimed to have themselves become gods. And they were all worshipped by their disciples and others as divinities in human form. If to be divine meant to possess superhuman knowledge, then philosophy offered the chance for humans to become gods. This philosophical aspiration to become divine was taken up by the Socratic philosophers: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.⁸ As we shall see, Plato and Aristotle repeatedly insist that the aim of human life is to become as much like god as is humanly possible. Plato and Aristotle coined the words theology and theological, speculated about the nature of god, and offered guidance for how philosophers can ascend to the divine.

Ever since Plato and Aristotle entered the medieval universities, their overarching visions of human life were obscured when their writings were divided into separate bodies of knowledge, such as logic, metaphysics, ethics, politics, and theology. Twentieth-century analytic philosophers have remade Plato and Aristotle in their own image and likeness by dissolving their thought into a miscellaneous array of conceptual puzzles. When it comes to the philosophy of the Socratics, truly we murder to dissertate. For, as we shall see, in the thought of these philosophers, what

⁸ I call these thinkers “Socratic” for several reasons. First, they form a uniquely intimate philosophical tradition: Plato knew Socrates well, just as Aristotle knew Plato well. Without Socrates, no Plato; without Plato, no Aristotle. Second, they all share a dialogical or dialectical conception of philosophy. Even Aristotle is reputed to have written formal dialogues. Third, they all subordinate theoretical inquiry to the practical task of living well: Socrates more than Plato and Plato more than Aristotle.

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we call metaphysics, ethics, politics, and theology are all merely aspects or phrases of one aim: to become like a god.⁹

In this book, I devote a chapter to each Socratic thinker, showing how his thought is organized around the goal of becoming like god. As they journey toward god, our Socratic philosophers discuss a wide range of philosophical topics – from biology, physics, and cosmology to epistemology, ontology, and logic, not to mention ethics, politics, and rhetoric. Naturally, Socratic discussions of these matters – which are independently riveting – have attracted most of the attention among modern scholars. But all these topics, no matter how intrinsically important, are best understood as milestones or landmarks on a larger philosophical quest. Or, to alter the metaphor, philosophy serves as a ladder for a theological ascent.

The Socratics were less interested in developing a science of god and more interested in the question of how to become like god. Theory, for them, is subordinate to practice: we want to know who god is so that we can better imitate god. About the practical task of how to become like god, the Socratics are impressively systematic – about precise doctrines of the divine nature, much less so. As we shall see, Socratic philosophy is not about how the heavens go but about how to go to heaven.

What makes philosophy Socratic is its relentless teleology: every action, these philosophers argue, is explained by the goal it seeks, not by the instruments it uses.¹⁰ Socratic philosophy can be accurately captured in a simple motto: mind over matter.¹¹ Aristotle says, for example, that human beings have hands because we are so intelligent; we are not intelligent because we have hands.¹² Mind explains matter – not matter, mind. When discussing teleological thinkers, we must not lose sight of the goal. I will argue that in the quest to become like god, we find the interpretive key to unlock the whole of their philosophical thought. Each Socratic thinker developed a strikingly original conception of philosophy as a path to salvation.

⁹ “One might say that the first principle of Platonic ethics is that one must ‘become like god.’” Lloyd P. Gerson, *Aristotle and Other Platonists* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 34.

¹⁰ Francis Cornford captures the unity of all the Socratic philosophers well when he says about Aristotle: “His thought, no less than Plato’s, is governed by the idea of aspiration, inherited by his master from Socrates – the idea that the true cause or explanation of things is to be sought, not in the beginning, but in the end.” Quoted in W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Greeks and Their Gods* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950), 354.

¹¹ The poet Virgil captures Socratic philosophy succinctly as “*mens agitat molem*,” at *Aeneid* 6.727.

¹² Aristotle, *Parts of Animals* 687a 7–8.

If all this sounds vaguely religious, it should. Socratic philosophy is more like religion than it is like modern philosophy.¹³ My chapters on Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle are sandwiched between a chapter on ancient Greek religion and a chapter on the Bible. Socratic philosophy can be understood only in the matrix of Greek religion; the Socratic philosophers did not abandon Greek religion but attempted to reform it. If Socratic philosophy aims at becoming as much like god as is humanly possible, then so does biblical religion. I will conclude this book by comparing the quest to become divine in Socratic philosophy and in the Bible because such a focused comparison will illuminate Athens and Jerusalem.

1.2 The Approach

One measure of the pervasiveness of the human aspiration to become divine is the range of words in English to describe it: from Greek, “apotheosis” and “theosis”; from Latin, “divinization” and “deification.” Although some scholars see differences among these terms, I shall use them interchangeably.¹⁴ Anyone who wants to learn about deification should begin with the pioneering books of M. David Litwa, who has traced ideas of deification throughout Western culture, from ancient religion to modern transhumanism.¹⁵ Litwa writes as a biblical scholar and classicist, whereas I write as a philosopher. Many scholars who write about deification, including Litwa, explore its manifold expressions in religious thought, but they rarely explore the religious critique of deification. I aim to explore the full ambivalence about deification expressed in Greek religion, Socratic philosophy, and the Bible.

I am an avid reader and sometimes even a writer of technical studies in Socratic philosophy.¹⁶ I am immensely grateful for the achievements of modern philological and philosophical scholarship – a debt I acknowledge in my notes. But what often gets lost in the mountains of scholarship is the

¹³ “Platonism in antiquity had many features of a religion as well as of a philosophical school.” Gerson, *Aristotle and Other Platonists*, 26.

¹⁴ Etymologically, the word “apotheosis,” unlike “theosis,” suggests a return to god.

¹⁵ Litwa’s books on deification include *Jesus Deus: The Early Christian Depiction of Jesus as a Mediterranean God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014); *Becoming Divine: An Introduction to Deification in Western Culture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013); *We Are Being Transformed: Deification in Paul’s Soteriology* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012); *Desiring Divinity: Self-Deification in Early Jewish and Christian Mythmaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹⁶ See my chapter on Plato’s *Cratylus* in my book, *The Philosophy of Positive Law* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005) and my chapter on Aristotle in my book, *Your Whole Life: Beyond Childhood and Adulthood* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).

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reason why we devote our lives to these thinkers. If Socratic philosophy survives as a part of the common intellectual culture, it will be because of the sweeping vision of human life found in Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, not because of their particular arguments. In this book, I present the full grandeur of the philosophical visions of the Socratic philosophers – an imaginative grandeur subsequently approached, in my view, only by Aquinas, Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel. I make no apology for focusing on the big picture, since this perspective is often obscured by the technical refinements of modern scholarship. I have drawn widely from the specialized philological and philosophical scholarship to ensure the accuracy of my portraits. Still, a focus on the big picture logically entails less fine-grain resolution on the details. I devote the main text of this book to describing the sweeping visions of the Socratic philosophers; I use extensive notes to ground this description in the relevant primary texts and interpretive debates.

My chapter on Greek religion could be subtitled: “What every student of Greek philosophy should know about Greek religion.” The philosophical quest to become like god grew out of heroic divinization in Greek poetry and cult. Greek religion is a vast subject, of course, which is why I focus only on its most basic concern: the question of whether humans can or ought to become gods. I limit my analysis of Greek religion to the epoch between Homer and Aristotle, that is, the Archaic and Classical periods.

My approach to Greek religion is unusual because of my extensive use of Poseidonius’s tripartite division: theology of the philosophers, theology of the poets, and theology of the civic cult. This triad gives us three places to look for Greek religion. For the theology of the philosophers, I draw on the writings of Plato and Aristotle; for the theology of the poets, I draw freely from the works of Homer, Hesiod, and Pindar, because they are the poets who most influenced the Socratic philosophers; for the theology of the civic cult, I rely on historians of ancient Greek ritual. Whatever the utility of Poseidonius’s tripartite theology to the study of Greek religion in general, it is indispensable for understanding the relation of Greek religion to Greek philosophy.

The supreme philosopher of the human ascent to the divine is Plato, who is the source of almost all subsequent philosophical, religious, and mystical thought about the human aspiration to become divine. That is why my chapter on Plato is the centerpiece of this book. But Plato cannot be understood except in relation to his teacher, Socrates. The Platonic quest to become like god was inspired less by the teachings than by the exemplary life of Socrates.

The quest for the historical Socrates has been largely quixotic. We have two striking – though sharply contrasting – portraits of him in dialogues by his students, Plato and Xenophon. Unfortunately, we lack sufficient external evidence to determine the historical accuracy of either. What we can say is that the Socrates who matters to Western philosophy is the Socrates of Plato.¹⁷ But Plato never tells us whether his Socrates is the Socrates of history or a spokesman for Plato's own ideas. To distinguish the historical Socrates from the Platonizing Socrates within Plato, scholars have relied principally upon Xenophon and Aristotle.¹⁸ There will never be agreement about precisely where the historical Socrates ends and where the Platonizing Socrates begins – especially if one assumes, as I do, that there is a basic continuity from Socratic to Platonic philosophy. Plato's own thought develops the thought of his beloved teacher by seeking solutions to the puzzles Plato finds in the discourse and in the deeds of Socrates.¹⁹

What is the relation of the historical Socrates to the character "Socrates" in Plato's dialogues? I have taken a conservative or minimalist position by limiting my "Socrates" to Plato's *Apology* and Alcibiades's memoir of Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*. Here, I join a long line of readers of Plato since Friedrich Schleiermacher who believe that, in these speeches, Plato's Socrates most closely approaches the historical Socrates.²⁰ I will assume that the *Apology* reveals how Socrates saw himself, while Alcibiades's speech in the *Symposium* reveals how Socrates was seen by some of his students. By adopting such a minimalist view, I hope to give my portrait of Socrates the most secure footing possible within the dialogues of Plato. If the

¹⁷ "The Socrates who formed Plato was the Socrates as seen by Plato." Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 3 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), 7.

¹⁸ Aristotle makes it clear that Socrates cannot be credited with Plato's theory of separate forms: "Socrates did not make the universals or definitions exist apart; his successors, however, gave them separate existence, and this was the kind of thing they called Ideas." Aristotle's testimony provides solid grounds for distinguishing the historical Socrates from the Socrates that Plato uses to develop Platonic ideas. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1078b 30–32; cf. *Metaphysics* 987a 29–987b 13, 1086a 37–1086b 5.

¹⁹ Within the mainstream of Anglo-American scholarship, views range from the minimalist position of Charles H. Kahn, who acknowledges only the *Apology* as genuinely Socratic, to the maximalist position of Mark L. McPherran, who uses Plato, Xenophon, and Aristotle to "triangulate" a historically plausible Socrates. See Charles H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 71–95; and Mark McPherran, *The Religion of Socrates* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 12–19.

²⁰ According to Mario Montuori: Schleiermacher, Hegel, Grote, Zeller, and Gomperz all "considered the *Apology* and Alcibiades's speech in the *Symposium* as a historically-faithful description of Socrates's personality" – a view that Montuori himself rejects. See *Socrates: Physiology of a Myth* (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1981), 37. For my purposes, it is sufficient to assume that Plato sees the historical Socrates in these terms.