1. URAM of Plato’s Theory of Forms and the Problem of Universals Concerning Postmodern Relativism

1. PREFACE

To date, the postmodern paradigm is by its nature primarily subversive of all enduring paradigms or universals, for at its core is the idea that reality is being at once multiple, local and temporal, and without any demonstrable

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1 Due to its extraordinary length, the present paper is the only article in this collection which has not been sent out for publication after the necessary corrections were done in accordance with the proofreaders. Fortunately, various parts of this paper have been used in the other articles written afterwards. Below is a review graciously written by one of the proofreaders, Prof. Michael Vertin, professor of philosophy at the University of St. Michael’s College, University of Toronto, on 28 July, 2001:

Dear John,

As you requested, I have read your paper “URAM of Plato’s Theology of Forms and the Problem of Universals concerning Postmodern Relativism.”

You focus firmly on the problem of universals. The broad historical perspective you adopt allows you to highlight that importance in various historical periods, from the Greek period to our own. Your account surely is a rich one, and your many and detailed references manifest your familiarity with a wide range of scholarly sources. Moreover, your paper’s sections and subsections provide the reader with a useful way of organizing the material, so that its elements and development from one period to the next stand out clearly.

I certainly agree with your assessment that the problem of universals is a crucially important one. It emerges inevitably in virtually any serious discussion of meaning, truth, and reality. And I find your overall account on target in the number of solutions it sketches, the historical examples of those solutions it cites, and the correlations it draws between earlier examples and later examples.

On the other hand, I am not so convinced as you are [at one point] that the Platonic answer is the correct one, whether in itself or as a necessary presupposition of the meaningfulness of Christians claims. It strikes me that the Aristotelian position accords more exactly both with a careful account of the psychology of human knowing, and with the ontological consequences of the psychological account. And not surprisingly, I find that the Aristotelian (and Thomist) account [which you have developed later in the paper as the ante-rem-God-in-rebus Thomist position] is more congenial as an articulation of the philosophical underpinnings of Christian doctrine. However, these are matters that scholars have disagreed about for a long time; and if there are some weighty authorities that I can point to as favoring the Aristotelian position, there are also weighty authorities that you can point to as favoring the Platonic position!

I wish you well in your presentation of your paper. John, I would expect that the audience would recognize and appreciate the care with which you have prepared it, and I would also expect that its contents might well stimulate a lively and fruitful discussion. Finally, I should add that I am edified by the deep and persisting commitment with which you continue to pursue your scholarly work in service of Christian belief.

Yours sincerely, Michael Vertin, Professor of Philosophy
universal foundation (Tarnas 1993, p. 401). As we know, the current so-called postmodern relativism in which “everything could change tomorrow” (Ibid., p. 402) has been sweeping across the whole world over the twentieth century, adversely affecting various traditional cultures, institutions, churches, lifestyles, and moral norms. Reacting to this massive onslaught of relativism, Pope John Paul II solemnly reinstated: “Every truth --- if it really is truth --- presents itself as universal, even if it is not the whole truth. If something is true, then it must be true for all people and at all times.” (John Paul II 1998, no. 27) Hence, postmodern relativism is in opposition to truth, or any possibility of absolute truth. Amid such an unprecedented upheaval, there is a real need for us to investigate this crisis of truth, and search for some general direction in which a solution might be found. Martin Bieler succinctly states: “The question of truth will be of decisive importance for the coming millennium. The bone of contention in future debates, however, will not merely be disagreement about what or who is the truth, but, even more fundamentally, about whether there is such a thing as [absolute] truth....” (Bieler 1999, p. 455)

At the same time, it is our profound conviction that “a philosopher’s commitment to a particular solution of the problem of universals determines his entire philosophical system.” (Miller 1967, p. 455) Before a general remedial direction could be discerned towards postmodern relativism which has run amok, it is important, therefore, to first situate postmodern relativism in a wider historical context in terms of the problem of universals (abbreviated henceforth as the PU: Bochenski 1956, p. 35). Just as statesmanship is said to count on using large maps, so our probe concerning the question of truth depends upon a panoramic view of the PU in the history of Western philosophy. In our limited space here we will only explore the general historical development of the PU which began in ancient Greece. Accordingly, Plato, in his relentless struggle with the relativistic Sophists, was developing his theory of forms, ideas or universals.

This paper, then, is divided into three parts: (I) The preface; (II) The historical probe with respect to the continuing competition among the three general solutions of the PU, i.e., the Platonic ante rem realism, the Sophistic post rem antirealism, and the Aristotelian in re realism as found in the Early Greek, the Patristic-Medieval Christian, the Modern Scientific, and the Postmodern Pluralistic Periods, stressing the struggle between Socratic-Platonic absolutism and Sophistic relativism in the Early Greek Period and, to some significant extent, during the Postmodern Period; and, finally, (III) The conclusion. It is hoped that this comparative historical study would help
us know more about the history of truth and its absolute possibility. As we know, many today are indescribably confounded by postmodern relativism and discouraged about any prospect of absolute truth.

At the same time, this article is also a further contribution to the two previous URAM Plato Studies. The first study was excellently delivered by George Kimball Plochmann entitled “Five Elements in Plato’s Conception of Reality” (URAM 4:24-57) and the second was equally done well by J. Patrick Mohr named “Ultimate Reality and Meaning in the Cave Analogy of Plato's Republic. A Further Contribution to URAM Plato Studies (URAM 4:24-57) (URAM 15:202-215).” While both in their distinctive ways have dealt with Plato’s theory of forms and the hierarchical structure attaining such supreme knowledge or reality in Plato’s works ad intra, the present article endeavours to focus primarily on this central, absolutist aspect of Platonism in its fierce struggle with the Sophists’ relativism. Historically, it attempts also to look beyond Plato’s ante rem realism ad extra, showing how this Platonic solution of the PU has been related with postmodern relativism in Western thought.

In retrospect, Plochmann’s article is an attempt to delve into Plato’s conception of reality in terms of the five linguistic elements mentioned in the Seventh Letter of Plato as five possible fundamental steps for finding such reality schematically and methodologically. “These elements are the name (onomat), the definition (logos), the image (eidolon), the knowledge (episteme), and the reality itself.” (Mohr 1992, p. 213; cf. Seventh Letter 342a-b: Plochmann 1981, p. 29) This Platonic reality, as we know, consists of the ante rem realism of unchanging forms (cf. Aspell 1967, pp. 430-433; Friedlein 1984, pp. 81-86) or universals (cf. Ross 1951, p. 225; Woozley 1967, pp. 195-197). On the other hand, Mohr’s work attempts to show that the URAM in the Cave analogy is the same as the URAM of Plato himself, i.e., the idea or form of the good. Mohr does so in a fourfold step-by-step structure, i.e., from seeing the shadows of images in the cave, to seeing the images themselves, then all things outside the cave, and finally the sun or the form of the good itself (cf. Mohr 1992, pp. 203-204). The form of the good is “truly ultimate in that there is no reality outside of its gathering.” (Ibid, p. 214)

2. PROBING THE HISTORY OF THE PROBLEM OF UNIVERSALS

2.1 Introducing our Historical Probe
The second part of the paper, being rather long, is subdivided into five sections: Section 1, i.e., the present section, is an introduction to the PU, followed then by Section 2 as regards the Early Greek Period which focuses on Plato’s life, works and theory, in particular the battle between Plato’s absolutism and the Sophists’ relativism. Afterwards, our general probe is briefly followed by Section 3 focusing on the Patristic-Medieval Christian Period which largely sought to baptize Plato’s and Aristotle’s solutions of the PU. Section 4 is on the Modern Scientific Period which began to abandon the previous unscientific realism of the Christians, replacing it with its scientific antirealism. Finally, Section 5 discusses about the current Postmodern Pluralistic Period which in its search and struggle with the PU has so far been dominated by the paradigmless, universalless relativistic antirealism inherited from the preceding era.

Overwhelmed by postmodern relativism, most of us today seem to have forgotten Plato’s ante rem realism, in particular the awareness that the postmodern relativistic solution represents after all only one of the three major solutions to the PU. It is important, therefore, for us to bring up the PU and its general history, as well as Plato’s absolutist solution and its relativistic opponent, i.e., the Sophists. This is to provide us with a more comprehensive historical background of the relativistic postmodernism, helping us in our common search and struggle with the PU which, however hidden from countless of us, does not appear to have left us at all throughout the entire history of Western thought.

2.2 The Fundamental Nature of the PU
Edward A. Synan offers us a succinct definition of the term “universal” as follows: “The term universal, derived from the Latin universalis (unum versus alia, one against many), signifies a unity with reference to some plurality. Unlike the singular, which cannot be communicated, the universal is by definition something that is communicated or communicable to many.” (Synan 1967, p. 452) Hence, the PU can be, on the one hand, a simple and universal problem; and is, on the other, a profound and complex one. It is simple and universal in the sense that it is a simple the-one-and-the-many problem which is universal to all individuals in all ages. We often encounter various things, properties or relations largely of the same type, like different trees, green colours, and good friendships. And as soon as we begin to ask if there is one real, universal, all-encompassing model tree, greenness or friendship among these diverse ones, we begin to encounter the PU.
Indeed, the PU can be a profound and complicated one when we begin to ponder and answer the above question philosophically. For example, Plato’s ante rem realism would say that there is indeed one real ideal tree, greenness or friendship, but it exists only in the suprasensible, transcendent realm, independently of things (Blackburn 1994, p. 387). But its opponent may demand a solid scientific proof of the existence of this ideal tree, etc. Aristotle’s moderate in re or in rebus (in thing or in things) realism (Ibid.) would deny any real, independent, and substantial existence of this ideal tree, etc., in the transcendent realm. “Universals are not substances existing independently of particulars. They exist only as common elements in particulars.” (Woozley 1967, p. 197)

In other words, this ideal tree, etc., would exist only as an ideal universal, form or concept in thing(s), if its essence could be abstracted or individuated from concrete singular things. Indeed, the skeptic of in re realism may question, among other things, whether it is an ideal theory to encounter relativism. Further, post rem antirealism would disclaim the existence of any ideal universal tree, green colour or friendship anywhere. “Nominalistic and conceptualistic antirealism,” according to R. E. Hennessey, would “deny real universality. For the former, only words have universality; for conceptualism, universal terms do refer to universal concepts, but to this universality there corresponds nothing in reality. Only individuals, or bare particulars, enjoy real existence.” (Hennessey 1979, p. 3614) As seen in Plato’s dialogues, the relativistic Sophists tended to be antirealists (cf. Tarnas 1993, pp. 26-36) who would deny the independent ante rem existence of any real ideal universal tree or model friendship.

Philosophically, the PU can, then, be immensely complicated when we begin to explore it more deeply. As hinted above, three major PU solutions or distinctions can be distinguished: 1) ante rem realism; 2) in re realism; and 3) post rem antirealism. We do not intend to pursue every detail of them in this short paper. In the following, our primary focus is to investigate Plato’s absolutist theory of ante rem forms or solution of the PU ad intra (i.e., within Plato’s life and works) and ad extra (i.e., towards outside, historically) in its struggle with Sophistic relativism. Hopefully, such a knowledge could offer us some insight with regards to postmodern relativism.

3. EARLY GREEK SEARCH AND STRUGGLE WITH THE PU

3.1 Pre-Socratic Search for Archetypical Principles
The PU was treated throughout the Early Greek Period, even before the
dawn of Western philosophy (c. 6th century B.C.), when certain thinkers
began to search for archetypal principles to explain the changing universe.
Richard Tarnas in his superb work *The Passion of the Western Mind*
observer that “not only Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and Pythagoras before
them and Plotinus after, but indeed Homer and Hesiod, Aeschylus and
Sophocles all expressed something like a common vision, reflecting a
typically Greek propensity to see clarifying universals in the chaos of life.”
(Tarnas 1993, pp. 3-4) Tarnas lists some of these principles here:

These archetypal principles included the mathematical forms of
gometry and arithmetic; cosmic opposites such as light and dark,
male and female, love and hate, unity and multiplicity; the forms of
man and other living creatures; and the Ideas of the Good, the
Beautiful, the Just, and other absolute moral aesthetic values. In the
pre-philosophical Greek mind, these archetypal principles took the
form of mythic personifications such as Eros, Chaos, Heaven and
Earth (Ouanos and Gaia), as well as more fully personified figures
such as Zeus, Prometheus, and Aphrodite. (Ibid., p. 4)

Just before the birth of Socrates (c. 469 B.C.), Parmenides of Elea,
“champion of the One against the Many” (Sedley 1998, p. 233) explicitly
rejected Heraclitus’ doctrine of universal pervasive flux and “distinguished
the world of sense as the domain of appearance, change, multiplicity, and
falsity from the world of thought as the world of the stable, the one, and the
true.” (O’Farrell 1967, p. 327). During the life of Socrates (died c. 399
B.C.), the Sophists emerged. Zeroing in on human affairs, they rejected the
one in the suprasensible realm and embraced the many in the daily practical
world, holding that man cannot attain certainty suprasensibly and “the only
truth he has is the contingent judgment of the senses.” (Ibid.) Disgusted with
the Sophists and their relativism, Socrates began ---- followed later by Plato
after Socrates’ trial and execution ---- to challenge Sophistry and develop the
absolutist theory of forms, ideas or universals, based apparently on the
Parmenidean principle of changeless being and the Heraclitean principle of

Here, the concepts “Sophist,” “Sophistic,” and “Sophistry” are used
largely in the general sense of Socrates and Plato as found in the latter’s
works (as Socrates allegedly wrote nothing). It is true that the notional
negativity of these words as inherited from Plato and Aristotle has been
significantly reconsidered, refugured or reinstated by authors like Hegel, Grote, Kerferd, Buchheim, and Jarratt (cf. Raeder 1939, pp. 3-4; Kerferd 1981; Buchheim 1986; Jarratt 1991, pp. vii-xv; Tarureck 1995, pp. 132-149) in their research and re-interpretation over the last century or two.

3.2 Plato’s Life
Plato can be studied from many angles. Here we briefly examine his life and writings in terms of his struggle with the Sophists and their relativistic teaching.

Plato (428 or 427 - 348 or 347 B.C.) was born as the son of the Athenian aristocratic parents, Ariston and Perictione, during the Peloponnesian War. After a typical education of the time in which he was reportedly an excellent athlete and composer of lyric poetry, he became the pupil of Socrates for about seven years. He was originally called Aristocles and was later given the name Plato, “a sobriquet for which various reasons have been offered: his wide forehead, his robust physique, the breadth of his knowledge.” (Aspell 1967, p. 430) Indeed, “[t]he most decisive influence in Plato’s commitment to philosophy and in his intellectual formation was the life-and-death devotion of Socrates to truth,” (Ibid.), in particular Socrates’ struggle with the Sophists and their relativism.

After the execution of Socrates in 399 by Sophistic politicians, Plato left Athens and politics in disgust. He then travelled widely in Greece, Egypt, and Italy to broaden his knowledge and culture. About 387 he returned to Athens and founded the Academy. Apparently, through this school he intended to promote not only philosophy and science, but also justice and other virtues, in particular the possibility of absolute truth. To further influence the largely Sophistic society and politics, Plato continued to develop his absolute foundationalism or ante rem realism in his theory of forms which would later become the central characteristic of Platonism (Friedleim 1984, p. 81).

3.3 Introducing Plato’s Theory of Forms
“The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato,” states Alfred North Whitehead (Whitehead 1969, p. 53). Apparently, there are at least two general readings of this awesome statement. The first is summed up by Whitehead himself, as he alludes to “the wealth of general ideas” (Ibid.) found in Plato’s writings which have become “an inexhaustible mine of suggestion” (Ibid.) for so many thinkers throughout the last two millennia in
economics, politics, literature, psychology, art, mathematics, science and religion, etc. (Ibid.; Cavalier 1998, p. 5). The second can be made in terms of Plato’s theory of forms or universals, i.e., his historical solution to the PU, which seems to have inextricably affected the history of Western philosophy as a whole, and would continue to do so. It is indeed this second interpretation which we attempt to elaborate in this paper.

In order to have a more comprehensive grasp of the current postmodern relativism and its historical background, it seems necessary to explore its three key historical links, namely, a) the Sophists’ post rem nominalistic, conceptualistic antirealism; b) Plato’s ante rem realism; and c) Aristotle’s in re realism. Historically, the latter two represent two major philosophical positions towards or against the Sophists’ antirealism. Plato, obviously, employed his concept of forms to combat the Sophistic relativism, as well as to champion the possibility of absolute truth in his ante rem realism. It is of great interest and importance, hence, to examine the similarities between the Sophistic relativism and the postmodern version. In the following, we will first explore Plato’s largely anti-Sophistic life, works, and theory of forms.

3.4 Plato and the Sophists

When the various streams of Greek thought and art converged in Athens during the fifth century B.C., a certain intellectual development reached its climax in the so-called Greek Enlightenment (Tarnas 1993, p. 25). “The term sophist, meaning an expert either in practical or theoretical matters, was initially equivalent to (wise man). In the 5th and 4th centuries B.C. it designated one who possessed wisdom and virtue and for a livelihood made a profession of teaching these to others.” (Barth 1967, p. 437) In that light, these largely itinerant educators would include Socrates and Plato. However, metaphysically, epistemologically, and ethically, these educators can still be divided generally into two camps: (1) the relativistic “secular humanists of a liberal spirit who offered both intellectual instruction and guidance for success in practical affairs” (Tarnas 1993, p. 26), and (2) the conservative philosophers as exemplified by Socrates and Plato who were seriously concerned, among other things, with preserving traditional virtues and promoting absolute truth.

To the latter conservative circles, the liberal relativistic “sophistic philosophy was a radical phenomenalistic relativism that denied a knowledge of things in terms of being and satisfied itself with mere opinion as sufficient for practical human needs.” (Barth 1967, p. 437) In the end, strictly speaking, there is no truth but only subjective opinion to the Sophists
who “recognized that each person had his own experience, and therefore his own reality.” (Tarnas 1993, p. 27) However, “without their challenge Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle would not have achieved their masterly solutions to the problem of knowledge.” (Barth 1967, p. 437)

Protagoras (c. 590-420 B.C.) was usually regarded as the first and most eminent of the liberal, relativistic Sophists. “His famous formula --- ‘Man is the measure of all things...’ --- makes him the father of relativism and even, on some interpretations, of subjectivism.” (Kahn 1998, p. 788) “He was also considered the first theological agnostic: “Concerning the gods, I am unable to know either that they exist or that they do not exist or what form they have.” (Ibid., pp. 788-789). Rhetorically, he “was sometimes associated with the claim ‘to make the weaker argument (logos) the stronger’” (Ibid., p. 789). Another major relativistic Sophists was Gorgias (c. 480-380 B.C.) who allegedly made three nihilistic statements, expressing the tragedy of radical phenomenalistic relativism: “(1) nothing is; (2) even if anything is, it is unknowable to man; and (3) even if anything is knowable, it is incommunicable to others.” (Barth 1967, p. 438)

There is abundant evidence that the Sophists were concerned with the truth, but only as they saw it relativistically (Kerferd 1967, p. 495). “So cultural relativism can lead to ethical relativism, which can itself easily slide into ethical scepticism, and fall finally into deeply worrying ethical nihilism.” (Robinson and Groves 2000, p. 40) Ultimately, some Sophists, like Gorgias, concluded that there is no truth (and if there were we could not know it); hence “we must rely on opinion, and so speakers who can change people’s opinions have great power.” (Ide 1999, p. 863) In Aristophanes’ description, the so-called Sophistic new education defended even “adultery and self-indulgence as ‘necessities of nature,’” (Clouds 1075-8: Kahn 1998, p. 33) urging people “to ‘follow nature, frolic, laugh, consider nothing shameful.’” (Ibid.)

These liberal secular Sophists were, therefore, characterized by their extreme relativism, egoistical subjectivism, religious agnosticism, ethical nihilism, eristic wit (winning rhetorically at all costs), the impossibility of absolute truth and genuine knowledge (cf. Tarnas 1993, p. 28-33). Besides, they taught utilitarian pragmatism that “[t]he ultimate value of any belief or opinion could be judged only by its practical utility in serving an individual’s need in life.” (Ibid., p. 27) In addition, they seemed to be the early fathers also of modern or postmodern nominalism. Plato also criticized the Sophist belief that terms like goodness, justice, courage, piety, and beauty were without any absolute and solid foundation; they were, to the
Sophists, “ultimately only words, mere names for currently established human conventions.” (Ibid., p. 34) Coincidentally, these deleterious traits of the Sophists seem to largely concur with those emerging currently from the secular, liberal, and relativistic quarters of postmodernism. Anyway, Plato had to deal with this momentous struggle in his life and writings.

3.5 Plato’s Works
“Plato was not a voluminous writer; 1500 pages, more or less, suffice for all his works in a modern printing.” (Plochmann 1981, p. 25) Following Socrates his heroic master, Plato, as reflected in his writings, was quite concerned that the secular aspects of the liberal, relativistic Sophistry aforementioned would become avant-garde and permeate en masse the traditional normal life of the people, philosophically, ethically, culturally, politically, and religiously (cf. Buchheim 1986; Friedlein 1984, pp. 78-85). Unlike most of the Sophists’ works which have unfortunately been lost, all the dialogues of Plato seem to have been preserved (Blackburn 1994, p. 288).

Although the authenticity of the writings in Plato’s corpus has been a matter of dispute since antiquity, scholars today “generally agree that 24 dialogues and at least 2 epistles are definitely the work of Plato.” (Aspell 1967, p. 430) As the chronological order of composition has more or less been established (cf. Ross 1951, pp. 1-2), a gradual evolution of Plato’s largely anti-Sophistic philosophy and theory of forms can be detected in four distinct stages, according to the outstanding research and interpretation of Patrick Joseph Aspell (Aspell 1967, p. 430):

1) Initial Socratic Period (399-388) In the youthful, pre-Academy philosophical dialogues of inquiry, there is clearly “a systematic pursuit of one Form or Idea common to similar moral phenomena in order to arrive at the definition of a particular politicoethical virtue” (Ibid.), e.g., temperance (Charmides), courage (Laches), piety (Euthyphro), and beauty (Hippias Major). By “putting a theory of universals into Socrates’ mouth,” (Woozley 1967, p. 195) Plato seems to have re-created and vindicated the anti-Sophistic spirit and mission of Socrates (Aspell 1967, p. 430). It is true that “most of these dialogues end without reaching any definite conclusion, thus emphasizing the need of seeking further enlightenment.” (Ibid.) Distinctly ethical, this period includes the following dialogues: the Apology, Crito, Euthyphro, Laches, Ion, Protagoras, Charmides, and Lysis (Ibid.).
2) **Transitional Period (387-380)**  As Plato progressed intellectually and literarily, he began to develop a more advanced method to deal with the vexing Sophistic menace. “In addition to intensifying his polemics against the Sophists, he undertook the building of the Socratic concept into a metaphysical theory of Forms... concerning the greater questions of wisdom and the good life.” (Aspell 1967, p. 430) The dialogues in this period include the *Gorgias, Meno, Euthydemus, Hippias Minor, Hippias Major, Cratylus,* and *Menexenus* which “represent the inchoactive constructive stage of the Platonic mind and the beginnings of a systematic philosophy.” (Ibid.)

3) **Mature Period (380-361)**  At this peak of his intellectual genius, “Plato fully evolved his ontological theory of Forms and expressed the ramifications of this doctrine in epistemology, psychology, ethics, politics, and aesthetics.” (Ibid.) The dialogues in this advanced stage include the *Symposium, Phaedo, Republic,* and *Phaedrus* (Ibid.) In these principally anti-relativistic “dialogues of criticism and application, he subjected his speculative teachings to new facts and difficulties arising from other points of view.” (Ibid.) Concerned that the young people of Athens were being corrupted by the Sophists, the *Republic* was Plato’s systematic masterpiece to prove the falsehood and danger of the Sophists’ relativism (Robinson and Groves 2000, p.17). This work is characteristic of “the full development of his constructive powers” (Aspell 1967, p. 430) regarding the reality of *ante rem* forms, “chiefly bent on the question how society could be reshaped so that man might realize the best that is in him.” (Cornford 1972, p. xv)

4) **Final Period (361-348 or 347)**  “In the last period of his activity, Plato’s dramatic power declined, but his critical acumen advanced.” (Aspell 1967, p. 430) In his self-critical reflection, Plato “elaborated his metaphysics and epistemology, modified his politicoethical concepts, made greater use of logic, and discovered new interest in the mystery of the cosmos.” (Ibid., p. 431) Apparently, Plato carried his anti-Sophistic crusade unto the very end of his life. The dialogues composed include the *Theaetetus, Parmendies, Sophist, Statesman, Philebus, Timaeus, Critias, Laws,* and *Epistles 7 and 8* (Ibid.).

3.6 *Plato’s Theory as Reactionary to the Sophistic Relativism*

On the one hand, without doubt, we have to recognize the talents and achievements of the Sophists as such. G. B. Kerferd in his work *The Sophistic Movement* concludes: “What is needed is a recognition that in all
probability the sophists were no less distinguished and important part of
the achievement of Periclean Athens --- important in their own right and
important in the history of philosophy.” (Kerferd 1981, pp. 175-176) On the
other hand, we have to understand why Plato was so hostile in his reaction
against the doctrine of the Sophists. One may say that it was mainly because
of their extreme relativism. To the Sophists, “[t]ruth was relative, not
absolute, and differed from culture to culture, from person to person, and
from situation to situation. Claims to the contrary, whether religious or
philosophical, could not stand up to critical judgment.” (Tarnas 1993, p. 27)
Indeed, “[t]he ultimate value of any belief or opinion could be judged by its
practical utility in serving an individual’s needs in life.” (Ibid.)

Plato was, in particular, very uncomfortable with the Sophists’ relativistic
attitude, interpretation, and application of three traditional key terms, i.e.,
logos (word), physis (nature), and nomos (law) (cf. Taureck 1995, pp. 27-33;
Kerferd 1981, pp. 78-130). If applied Sophistically, words would become
empty, without a universal foundation. Logoi (words) would be used
abusively to smooth a speech for one’s gains. There would also be no eternal
nature. Physis (nature) would be treated at the whim of ever-changing
politics and socializations. Further, there would be no eternal and uncreated
divine laws. All nomoi (laws) would be destined to become humanistic and
conventionalistic, ever altering.

As a consequence, not only did Plato take a determined position against
the relativistic Sophists, he offered an alternative, i.e., he constructed “a
doctrine of absolute and objective values.” (Demos 1937, p. ix) By
attacking the vociferous Sophists, Plato was led to formulate his doctrine of
forms or ideas (Ibid, p. xi) with a universal, absolute foundation with regards
the three key terms aforementioned. “According to Plato, there is true right
and wrong, which is a universal principle for all times. We do not make
values or truth; we find them; they do not alter with races, places or
fortune.” (Ibid., pp. ix-x) Indeed, these ante rem forms are for philosophers
to discover as they mature in intellectual intuition (cf. Cornford, 1972, pp.
175-263).

3.7 The Essence of Plato’s Theory of Forms or Ideas
Essentially, Platonism is characterized by Plato’s theory of forms or ideas; it
is taken especially from the middle dialogues written in the mature period
mentioned (Blackburn 1994, p. 289). “Necessary truth, therefore, is the
conformity of man’s thought to the Ideas. Contingent and changeable truth
[as taught by the Sophists], or opinion, is the conformity of his knowledge to
the sensible world.” (O’Farrell 1967, p. 327) In this theory, “abstract objects, such as those of mathematics, or concepts such as the concept of number or justice, are real, independent, timeless, and objective entities.” (Ibid.) The essence of Plato’s theory of ideas “lay in the conscious recognition of the fact that there is a class of entities, for which the best name is probably ‘universals’ that are entirely differently from sensible things. Any use of language involves the recognition, either conscious or unconscious, of the fact that there are such entities.” (Ross 1951, p. 225) Indeed, every general word or universal concept used --- which would include every reference of logos, physis, and nomos, except proper names --- is a name for something of which there are instances, individuals or particulars (cf. Vries 1974, pp. 434-435). Roger Crisp states:

Plato’s theory of Forms is a realistic ontology of universals. In his *elenchus* [logical refutation], Socrates sought what is common to, e.g., all chairs. Plato believed there must be an essence --- or Form --- common to everything falling under one concept, which makes anything what it is. A chair is a chair because it “participates in” the Form of Chair. The Forms are ideal “patterns,” unchanging, timeless, and perfect. They exist in a world of their own. (Crisp 1999, p. 315)

Apparently, Plato’s theory of forms is not only *ante rem*, but also necessary anti-Sophist. Below is an illustration of this anti-Sophist realism.

### 3.8 Plato’s Anti-Sophist Ante Rem Realism

Unlike common properties or universals in the sensible realm, Plato’s forms exist in the transcendent realm. These divine, invisible and changeless universals not only “share features of the things of which they are the form, but also cause them.” (Blackburn 1994, p. 289) Certainly, Plato’s *ante rem* theory of universals is different from the temporal, nominalistic, and conceptualistic view of the Sophists who are skeptical about any reality beyond the ever-changing, sensible, relativistic phenomena. There is nothing independent, real, divine, invisible, unchanging in the suprasensible realm to corroborate with any human or social logos, physis, and nomos. In other words, the Sophists refuse to acknowledge any absolute, eternal, and unchanging foundation for any general word, nature or law found in our daily, human, and ever-changing world.

As a reaction against such Sophistry, Plato’s *ante-rem* realism combined, integrated or established simultaneously the Parmenidean realm of
unchanging being and the Heraclitean realm of ever-changing becoming or appearance. Any general word, nature or law among us points to its transcendent, timeless universal. To Plato, *ante rem* universals necessarily exist even if there were no mind to be aware of it, as A. D. Woozley germanely puts it (Woozley 1967, pp. 194-195):

For the realist, universals exist in themselves and would exist even if there were no minds to be aware of them; if the world were exactly what it is now, with the one difference that it contained no minds at all, no consciousness of any kind, the existence of universals would be unaffected. They are public somethings with which we are somehow or other acquainted, and a mindless world would lack not universals but only the awareness of them: they would be available for discovery, even if there were nobody to discover them. For the conceptualist, on the other hand, universals are in the mind in a private sense, such that if there were no minds, there could be no universals, in the same way as there could be no thoughts or imagery or memories or dreams.

In addition to such a mind-independent concept of universals, Plato’s theory of forms is also dualistic by nature, as we explore it further below.

3.9 *Plato’s Dualistic Theory of Forms*

Plato’s theory of forms is fundamentally dualistic. It is extended to four general areas, metaphysical, epistemological, psychological, and politico-ethical as summed up more or less by Aspell below:

*Metaphysical Dualism* The general method employed in Plato’s works consists in an intellectual and moral conversion from particular, concrete sense phenomena to real, universal, abstract forms. At the same time, it clearly points to the existence of two worlds in Platonism, i.e., the world of particular, concrete sense phenomena, as well as the world of their independent, timeless, universal forms or universals (Aspell 1967, p. 431). The former is of relative phenomena, but the latter is of absolute reality. “Since reality is rational only so far as it is unchanging, then immutable, suprasensible Forms alone, e.g., Justice itself, are fully real and fully intelligible.” (Ibid., p. 432)

*Epistemological Dualism* Corresponding to these two worlds, there are two kinds of cognition: (1) the ever-changing, fallible opinion regarding the
countless particulars in the world of sense phenomena derived from sense perception; and (2) the genuine knowledge regarding the real, stable, and absolute forms or universals in the suprasensible world which are realizable only through our intuitive intellection, after years of philosophical discipline. “Thus, there are two worlds; the world of absolute beauty [justice, etc.], and the world of opinion, with its conventions and delusions.” (Demos 1937, p. ix) In this clear distinction between relative opinion and true knowledge, “Plato exposed the Protagorean error of confusing the former with genuine knowledge and refuted the relativism of the Sophists.” (Aspell 1967, pp. 431-432) “Socrates’s quest for truth, then was defended and justified by Plato’s epistemology.” (Ibid., p. 432)

**Psychological Dualism** According to Plato’s examination of the human psyche or soul, our tripartite soul partakes in both the sensible (or irrational) and suprasensible (or rational) realms. Aspell outlines its three principles as follows: “(1) the appetitive part, unruly and amenable to the siren of pleasure; (2) the spirited [part], noble and prompt to honor and courage; (3) the rational [part], the ‘god within man,’ able to contemplate Forms, and as charioteer, to check and direct the impulses of the instinctive and spirited steeds for the good of man (Rep. 436-441; Phaedrus 246-247).” (Ibid.) Analytically, the appetitive part of the human soul is closely related to the irrational, mortal corporeal phenomena, whereas the spirited and the rational parts are intimately akin to the rational, immortal world of forms. “The soul, living in virtue of its essential participation in the Form, Life, can never share in the contradictory Form, Death; a dead soul is an impossibility.” (Phaedo 95-106; Rep. 608-611: Aspell 1967, p. 432)

**Politicoethical Dualism** Plato was convinced that without the timeless, objective universal forms, like justice and goodness, existing as changeless universal constants which transcended the caprice of human conventions and political institutions, etc., “human beings would possess no firm foundation for ascertaining true values, and would thus be subject to the dangers of an amoral relativism.” (Tarnas 1993, p. 7) Plato’s speculative dualism thus “finds its practical application and extension in his contrast between ideal values and phenomenal values.” (Aspell 1967, p. 432) Born into this world as prisoners of the cave filled with sense phenomena or phenomenal values, all people are called to strive towards ideal values or true knowledge which can only be found in the suprasensible world of forms outside the cave (cf. Mohr 1992, pp. 202-215).
Indeed, “[t]he ethos of man’s life is to care for his soul (Apol. 29; Phaedo 114D, E), gradually liberating it from the bonds of body that, like Prometheus unbound, it may freely wing its way to an ever-clearer vision of [Forms such as] the Good and True and Beautiful --- man’s foremost subjective happiness.” (Aspell 1967, p. 432) In Plato’s ideal State, the political structure matches the tripartite human soul. While numerous workers in the lowest class provide our sensible needs, the guardians with honour and courage in the middle class are responsible for the security of all. At the same time, resembling the rational part of the soul, the superior class of rulers or philosopher-kings governs wisely according to their intimate knowledge of forms.

3.10 Problems of Plato’s Forms

As alluded above, Platonism advances “from Forms, through Forms, and in Forms she ends” (Rep. 511C: Aspell 1967, p. 431). Indispensably, Plato’s dualistic theory of forms and its implications depend on the ante rem metaphysical reality of the timeless, independent forms, without which the entire theory would necessarily collapse. At the same time, as the very existence of these suprasensible forms cannot be sensibly proven (cf. Tarnas 1993, p. 37), Plato’s theory has become extremely vulnerable to countless attacks in the history of philosophy. Consequently, Plato and his followers have often been labelled as extreme realists, as we observe:

The controversy over universals was a metaphysical discussion concerning the objective, ontological status of essences that are perceived universally by the intellect and that are seen to exist in many individuals. For Plato and the extreme realist tradition, universal essences have, as such, some kind of reality independent of the mind. (Synan 1967, p. 452):

It is true that “Plato’s distinction, with ‘being’ the object of true knowledge and ‘becoming’ the object of sense-perceived opinion, had reflected his elevation of real Forms above relatively unreal concrete particulars,” (Tarnas 1993, p. 58) but these all-important forms are nowhere to be found in our daily sensible experience. Labelled by Peter Geach “the Socratic fallacy,” many linguistic philosophers today do not believe “there is or must be any objective reality indicated by the employment of a common predicate of many subjects.” (Meynell 1998, p. 242) Besides, there is also The Third Man Argument. Woozley puts it succinctly:
As Plato came to realize later (*Parmenides* 131ff.), and as Aristotle repeated, if a Form stands to its particulars as “one over many,” and if the Form is an ideal pattern of which the particulars are imperfect copies, then an infinite regress argument is generated: for the Form to be predicable of itself as well as of its particulars, it must share a character with them, but then there will be a Form of this character; this second Form will be predicable of itself, requiring a third Form of it, a fourth, and so on ad infinitum. (Woozley 1967, p. 196)

Therefore, the open discussion in the *Parmenides* “contains sufficiently devastating criticism of the doctrine of forms to throw Plato’s later views into doubt.” (Blackburn 1994, p. 289) Further, there are also problems with Plato’s theory of Anamnesis or recollection of forms which Plato never really could offer us any convincing proof (Robinson and Groves 2000, p. 46). Accordingly, “[t]he repeated experience of changing, relative, particular, sensible images is the occasion of the soul’s recalling the stable, absolute, universal, intelligible Forms it once contemplated in a preexisting state, but that have been forgotten since its ingression into the body.” (Aspell 1967, p. 432) All in all, it would be a grave mistake to regard Plato’s theory of forms “as a final and fully worked out theory.” (Woozley 1967, p. 195) As “an unfinished symphony of philosophy,” (Aspell 1967, p. 431) the incompleteness of Plato’s theory of forms has, thus, provided a few grave difficulties or precarious areas for Platonists to defend.

### 3.11 Aristotle’s In Re Realism

Aristotle (384-322, B.C.), Plato’s famous but dissenting disciple, studied at the Academy for 20 years but finally broke with his teacher and started his own school, later known as the Peripatetics (Owens 1967, p. 809). It is important, hence, to do a brief comparison of their major differences on the solution of the PU as found below (cf. Tarnas 1993, pp. 55-72). Hopefully, this outline would also help us to understand how Plato’s *ante rem* realism substantially differs from Aristotle’s *in re* realism in dealing with Sophistic relativism:

1) “While Plato distrusted knowledge gained by sense perception, Aristotle took such information seriously, contending that knowledge of the natural world derives first from the perception of concrete particulars in which
regular patterns can be recognized and general principles formulated.” (Ibid., p. 59).

2) For Plato, real understanding of the world begins with the suprasensible intuition of the forms existing in the invisible, transcendent realm. Aristotle stresses the human capacity to recognize their forms in the sensible world (Ibid.); real understanding starts with the sense perception of visible, empirical substances. For Aristotle, there is no form without substance. “If substance did not exist, nothing would.” (Ibid., p. 56).

3) Plato’s form, idea, or universal is an absolute, independent, timeless, suprasensible substance for things in the sensible world to imitate or participate in. For Aristotle, a form or universal is an essence, derived from a sensible substance, i.e., “every substance has a form, an intelligible structure, that which makes the substance what it is.” (Ibid., p. 58)

4) “For Plato, the particular was less real, a derivative of the universal; for Aristotle, the universal was less real, a derivative of the particular.” (Ibid., p. 57). “With Aristotle, Plato was, as it were, brought down to earth.” (Ibid., p. 55).

5) “By replacing Plato’s Ideas with universals, common qualities that the mind could grasp in the empirical world but that did not exist independently of that world, Aristotle turned Plato’s ontology upside down. Plato’s Ideas were for Aristotle an unnecessary idealist duplication of the real world of everyday experience, and a logical error.” (Ibid., p. 57).

6) Plato’s forms are perfect, unchanging, static, and non-evolutionary, existing in the eternal world of being, in contrast with sensible substances existing separately in the world of becoming or appearance. On the other hand, Aristotle’s forms are imperfect, changing, dynamic, progressive, and evolutionary, existing in the temporal world of becoming.

7) Our mind is born with an innate memory of forms according to Plato’s theory of Anamnesis or recollection. To Aristotle, “the human mind is like a clean tablet on which nothing is written.” (Ibid., p. 59).

8) For Plato, forms are for us to discover in the transcendent realm. It is clear that Plato’s forms can only be grasped by intuition only after a sound
development of our intellect, as found in the long training of a philosopher-king who was fit to rule only after having gained sufficient knowledge of such forms. With Aristotle, Plato’s forms seem to have been brought down to the empirical, sensible earth for us to discover and the learning process appears to be shorter and more available to ordinary people.

9) Characterized by abstract geometry in his school, Plato is directing our attention to heavens, to the invisible order and transcendent world of the forms. Marked by organic biology in his teaching, Aristotle is guiding our concentration on earth, on the visible order and immanent world of the universals.

10) The unique strength and weakness of Platonism seems to consist simultaneously in the doctrine of suprasensible forms --- i.e., Platonism is awesomely ante rem, but it can be so transcendent that the followers would tend to forget about the daily, sensible world. At the same time, Aristotle’s strength and weakness lie in his teaching of sensible universals --- i.e., Aristotelianism is wonderfully involved in the sensible rebus (things) of this world, but it can easily border on earthly pluralism such that its applicants would incline to forget about the possibility of the eternal, suprasensible order.

11) In other words, Platonism can potentially lead us to transcendent absolutism in which we can be easily lose direction regarding our daily world on earth. On the other hand, Aristotelianism can easily lead us to practical relativism in the practical, pluralistic world, in which we can easily lose direction regarding the eternal and suprasensible realm filled with its independent and transcendent forms as Plato taught.

12) As a conclusion, we find that Plato’s absolutist ante rem realism, especially if it is well integrated with Aristotle’s in re realism, is an ideal way to deal with Sophistic relativism as in re realism stresses so much on the particulars in our daily, empirical world. In other words, Aristotle’s pluralistic in rebus doctrine of forms does not appear to be an ideal way to combat Sophistic relativism. However, if we integrate Aristotelian realism well with that of Plato, it may become quite a different tool.

In the following, we will continue with our historical probe as regards the struggle for the possibility of absolute truth in the Patristic-Medieval Christian Period.
4. PATRISTIC-MEDIEVAL CHRISTENING OF THE GREEK SOLUTIONS

The Christian struggle against the Sophists lasted throughout the Patristic-Medieval Christian Period, starting even in the first century, A.D. (Winter 1997, p. 231). “It has often been said by historians, and not without good reasons, that the whole philosophy of the Middle Ages was little more than an obstinate endeavour to solve one problem --- the problem of the Universals.” (Gilson 1938, p. 3) A certain debt is due to Boethius (c. 480-542) for raising the issue of universals in the Middle Ages with his translation of and commentary on the Isagoge of Porphyry. As a cultural epoch, the Patristic-Medieval Christian Period is characteristic of its baptism of both Plato’s and Aristotle’s realisms.

4.1 St. Augustine’s Christening of Plato’s Ante-Rem Realism

St. Augustine (354-430 A.D.), led to Christianity by the Platonic Plotinus (c.204-270 A.D.) and Porphyry (c.234-c.301 A.D.), became the greatest of the Western Church Fathers in the Patristic age. His authority can be seen throughout the Middle Ages and into the seventeenth century (Harrison 1999, p. 853). In his other-worldly Neoplatonic philosophy, he was “a thoroughly representative Christian Platonist, in full accordance with other Christian Platonists of his time, and after, in making a stand against pagan Platonism which was necessitated by his Christian belief.” (Armstrong 1966, p. 9) Neoplatonism, according to Frederick Copleston, “was the last breath, the last flower, of ancient pagan philosophy; but in the thought of St. Augustine it became the first page of Christian philosophy.” (Copleston 1962, p. 250)

Following Plato’s ante rem realism, Augustine believed that the PU began and was solved in eternity by God even before creation. Making “the idea of truth central in his philosophy,” (O’Farrell 1967, p. 327) “Augustine sees truth in the common freedom of reason, in the attempt of two men to convince one another, nevertheless it is present only in revelation, Church and Bible.” (Jaspers 1962, p.78) It is God, the first and subsistent Truth, the inward Teacher, who, in living communication with the Word of God Himself, instructs and guides us to truth (Ibid., p. 79). Truth is “that which shows what is.” (Harrison 1999, p. 853) Truth is independent, timeless ante rem “because it will be true not only that the world has ceased to exist, if it has ceased to exist, but it will also be true that the truth has ceased to exist if it has ceased to exist.” (sol. 2.15.28: Watson 1990, p. 111) Truths as
mathematical and ethical truths are not derived from sense experience, but from the intellectual understanding which is given by the subsistent, illuminating Truth (Harrison, 1999, p. 853).

Historically, “Platonic realism was championed by St. Augustine, for whom divine illumination performed much the same function as Plato’s Form of the Good, rendering intelligible by its light the necessity of eternal truths which the human intellect could grasp.” (Woozley 1967, p. 198) In Augustine’s thought, Plato’s suprasensible forms as objective essences continue to be independent “exemplars contained in the divine intelligences” (Ibid.) by which all sensible reality is judged. For example, in judging a physical object to be beautiful, the objective existence of divine beauty, however invisible, is implied as a universal and a standard (Ibid.).

4.2 St. Thomas’ Integration of Aristotle’s In Re and Plato’s Ante Rem Realism
In his integration of Aristotle’s in re and St. Augustine’s Platonic ante rem realism, St. Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274) appeared to have achieved the most perfect synthesis of Christian philosophy, explicitly treating of truth as a transcendental property of being (O’Farrell 1967, p. 327). Apparently, St. Thomas “aspired to deepen Aristotle by using Platonic principles.” (Tarnas 1993, p. 183) His solution of the PU may be called ante-rem-God-in-rebus realism. In God, through God, and for God, St. Thomas attempted to “fully connect the created world with God” (Ibid., p. 182) who is “the infinite self-subsistent ground of all being,” (Ibid.) “the supreme Form drawing nature forth... the very ground of nature’s existence” (Ibid., p. 183), as well as “the sustaining cause of all that exists, the ultimate unconditioned condition for the being of all things.” (Ibid., p. 188)

Besides, as self-subsistent Existence or Being, God is “the source of all existence, the source of all contingently (tenuously, partially, minimally) existing things.” (Swiezawski 1995, p. 43) As Actus Purus or Pure Act in whom there is no potential but only realization, there is both fullness of life and complete fullness of realizations in God (Ibid., p. 45). Containing all the eternal types of ante rem forms, God is the ante rem Being itself, unlimited, absolute, beyond definition, permeating all creation, rebus (things) or created beings (cf. Tarnas, pp. 182-183) as “the infinite act of existence (esse) from which everything derived its own being.” (Ibid., p. 184) “For God’s essence was precisely his existence, his infinite act of being which underlay the finite existence of all created things, each with its own particular essence.” (Ibid., pp. 182-183) “Only in this way was the
Aristotelian Prime Mover genuinely connected to the creation he motivated. And conversely, only thus was the Platonic transcendent genuinely connected to the empirical world of multiplicity and flux.” (Ibid., p. 183)

Further, as God’s ante rem forms functioning as the divine, timeless solution of the PU permeates all creation, St. Thomas, like Aristotle, believes that we should first seek to know concrete things. Afterwards, we can know their universals (Tarnas 1993, p. 185). In other words, God has solved the PU in rebus, it is now our task to discover His ante rem solution by studying sensible things from which their suprasensible universals can be abstracted. Aquinas is convinced that “man could strive to know things as they are because both the things and man’s knowledge of them were determined by and, like man himself, expressive of the same absolute being – God.” (Ibid., p. 187). St. Thomas thinks, therefore, that objective knowledge or absolute truth is possible to human intellect or judgement. The way of truth, for St. Thomas, was the way of the Holy Spirit (Ibid., p. 188). Tarnas germanely elaborates:

This capacity was the light of the active intellect lumen intellectus agentis. The light of human reason derived its power from the divine Truth which contained the eternal types of all things. In endowing man with this light, God has given him the potential for knowledge of the world, just as God had endowed all beings, as possible objects of knowledge, with intelligibility. Thus the human mind could make true judgments. (Ibid., p. 187)

St. Thomas’ solution is inextricably linked with the omnipresence of God, as well as with His omnipresent transcendentals such as Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in all things. At the same time, we are all born with a certain lumen intellectus agentis. Hence, by means of God-centred prayer, contemplation, and study, etc., as led by the Holy Spirit, it is our responsibility to develop and to help others to develop the light of human reason (lumen intellectus agentis).

4.3 The Patristic-Medieval Sophistic Post Rem Antirealism
Just as the seeds of Augustine and Thomas’ realisms had been preplanted by Plato and Aristotle, the roots of Sophistic antirealism in the Patristic-Medieval Christian Period can be traced to the Greek Sophists (cf. Lacy 1974, pp. 4-10). Regarding Sophists and the Roman Empire in the second century, A.D., G. W. Bowersock observed: “The wealth, intelligence, and
patriotism of the sophists, expressed in public service and benefaction, contributed largely to the prosperity of their cities. They became a valuable part of the local administration which was so important to the efficient functioning of the Roman Empire.” (Bowersock 1969, p. 43)

As a whole, Sophistic post rem antirealism can be divided into three groups (Henessey 1979, p. 3614; Blackburn 1994, p. 387): a) Nominalistic post rem antirealism, teaching that universals are only empty names, concepts or terms which correspond to really nothing in reality; b) Conceptualistic post rem antirealism, teaching that universals can become meaningful and useful universal concepts despite that they are concepts to which nothing corresponds in reality; and c) Deconstructive post rem antirealism, being skeptical of traditional universals, says that they should be deconstructed and given with practical meanings.

Simultaneously, it was St. Albert the Great who taught that the universal is verified in three modes: “Prior to the individuals (ante rem), universals are forms that are the principles of things. In the individual (in re), universals are forms that exist in things, sources of their names and natures. Subsequent to the individual (post rem), they are forms that are separated through abstraction.” (Synan 1967, p. 454)

In the Medieval Period, nominalistic antirealists can be represented by Roscelin of Compiegne (c.1050-1125) and William of Ockham (1300-1350), while conceptualistic antirealists can be represented by Peter Abelard (1079-1142) and John of Salisbury (c.1115-1180). As nominalists, Roscelin “considered things so radically singular that he reduced the universal to ‘an emission of the voice’ (flatus vocis), (Synan 1967, p. 453) whereas for Ockham, “no degree of reality can be so slight as not to be too much.” (Ibid., p. 454) On the other hand, as conceptualists, Abelard believed that a universal possesses meaning, more than just an emission of the voice (Ibid., p. 453), while John of Salisbury “dismissed universals as dreams and monstrosities” (Ibid.) and yet regarded the dialectic of universals to be a useful collaborator with every science (Ibid.).

5. MODERN GRADUAL ABANDONMENT OF THE CHRISTIAN SOLUTIONS

The Modern Scientific Period lasted from about the 15th to beginning of the 20th century. As the existence of the Christians’ supernatural universals were impossible to be verified by the sense-based modern science, whether in Augustine’s ante rem or in Thomas’ ante rem in rebus realism, a gradual
abandonment of such epochal solutions started to take place. Culturally, the modern epoch was characterized by its paramount commitment to the nominalistic and conceptualistic post rem antirealism. A mass exodus from the Christian solutions can be detected among many modern philosophers.

5.1 Abandonment of Christian Suprasensible Universals by Modern Thinkers

The anti-realism of the Modern Scientific Period can be historically traced back to William of Ockham and Francisco Petrach (1304-1374) in the late Medieval Period. Significantly, Ockham’s terminist nominalistic razor permitted no transcendent universals to be multiplied without necessity. Holding that “science is of universals,” (Synan 1967, p. 454) he allowed universals to exist only in natural science, instead of in philosophy and theology also. Ockham “thereby severed the unity so painstakingly constructed by Aquinas” (Tarnas 1993, p. 205) in his via moderna.

Surely, as Francisco Petrarch “the first man of the Renaissance” (Ibid., p. 211) recovered the original works of Plato and Neoplatonists which “implied the existence of a universal religion,” (Ibid., p. 213) the Christian realism began to lose its unmatched position to the Humanists. Further, these Christian solutions along with scholastic theology were put down by Martin Luther (1483-1546) and the Reformist Protestants who believed in sola Scriptura. Besides, the Jesuit liberal education in the Counter-Reformation brought forth unintentionally “a decidedly nonorthodox tendency toward intellectual pluralism, skepticism, and even evolution” (Ibid., p. 247). Galileo, Descartes, Voltaire, and Diderot were among the students (cf. Ibid.).

In the 17th century, Francis Bacon (1561-1626) in his scientific, nominalistic empiricism developed the inductive method, rejecting Aristotle’s logic and deductive method, as well as speculative scholasticism (Friedlein 1984, p. 188). While Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) promoted materialistic mechanism in his nominalistic natural philosophy, René Descartes (1596-1650) conceptualistically treated each Cartesian innate idea as universal “as a means or instrument of grasping, from the same aspect, a number of individuals.” (Miller 1967, p. 455) As the material science emerged triumphantly through the pioneering discoveries of Nicholas Copernicus (1473-1543), Johann Kepler (1571-1630), Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), and Issac Newton (1642-1727), etc., Europe in general moved further away from the spiritual, suprasensible Medieval matrix and its Christian theories of transcendent forms.
Hard to embrace scientifically were also the non-Christian, innate order and connection of ideas taught by Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) and the similar pre-established, God-ordained harmony of an infinity of windowless monads proposed by Gottfried W. Leibniz (1646-1716). Influenced by Newtonian physics, John Locke (1632-1704), for one, rejected innate ideas in his conceptualistic rational empiricism, believing that all our ideas come only from our sense experience (cf. Friedlein 1984, pp. 210-211).

In the 18th century, the conceptualistic stand on general ideas of George Berkeley (1685-1753) “centered upon the impossibility of separating the physical existence of an object from its existence in perception” (Synan 1967, p. 455) was greatly esteemed by the nominalistic David Hume (1711-1776). “For Hume the idea in the mind designates a particular object used in reasoning as though it were universal” (Ibid.) with “no real mental or nonmental referent.” (Ibid.) Hume’s fork helps materialists distinguish between useless propositions regarding the relations of transcendent ideas and useful propositions concerning verifiable sense matters (Flew 1984, p. 156).

Influenced by Newton’s unsurpassed physics and Hume’s destructive skepticism on metaphysics, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) became the greatest of modern philosophers (Russell 1967, p. 677) as he offered the modern age his anti-supernatural, anti-metaphysical physicism (cf. Gilson 1938, pp. 227-252). Inspired by post rem materialism, François Voltaire (1694-1778) developed his rational religion without transcendent forms (Friedlein, 1984, p. 216). Similarly, Denis Diderot (1713-1784), chief editor of the Encyclopédie, espoused “materialism ambiguously joined with a deistic ethics” (Tarnas 1993, p. 310) and the physician Julien Offray de la Mettrie (1705-1751) “portrayed man as a purely material entity.” (Ibid.) At the same time, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) stressed human feeling without the Christian ante rem universals as part of our true nature, contributing to the so-called enlightened minds “the modern sensibility in its gradual departure from Christian orthodoxy,” (Ibid., p. 313) as well as the modern sentiments needed for the 1776 French Revolution.

The 19th century only hastened the modern cultural departure from Christian realism. To begin with, the popular ideal dialectics of Georg W. Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), an ante rem realism of the Absolute, lost its mass appeal to the materialistic dialectics and Communism of Karl Marx (1818-1883) and his disciple Friedrich Engels (1820-1895). Then, “the impact of Hume’s nominalism was intensified by John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), for whom a universal term signified a totality of particular attributes
or individuals.” (Miller 1967, p. 455) Perfecting Bacon’s inductive method, Mill taught that the essences supposed by some “are simply names conventionally applied to certain attributes.” (Ibid., p. 456)

Further, the genetic post rem determinism of Charles Darwin (1809-1882) continued to attenuate the modern man’s conviction of “his rational and volitional freedom, while eliminating his sense of being anything more than a peripheral and transient accident of material evolution.” (Tarnas 1993, p. 332) Christianity was, thus, intellectually marginalized, as the modern atheistic, practical philosophy --- with its roots in the Renaissance, its birth in the Enlightenment, and its base in the scientific positivism --- became the modern cultural paradigm and pragmatic answer to the problems of Medieval philosophy (Rentto 1992, p. 149).

5.2 Sophistic Characteristics among Modern Thinkers
In retrospect, most of the modern thinkers mentioned above appear to share many of the characteristics of the Greek Sophists (cf. Kahn 1998, pp. 33-34; Dherbey 1985; Taureck 1995), such as: a) the Protagorean trait that man is the measure of all things; b) skepticism and contempt for traditional values; c) nominalistic and conceptualistic antirealism towards the existence of universals; d) exclusive stress on the concrete multiple or particulars; e) radical concentration on the world of phenomena or appearance to the detriment of the timeless, suprasensible world; f) theological agnosticism; g) ethical nihilism; h) sensist materialism; i) rationalistic empiricism; j) secular humanism; k) political pragmatism and utilitarianism; and above all, l) pluralistic relativism in denial of the possibility of absolute, eternal ante rem truth.

5.3 Modern Maintenance of Plato and Aristotle’s Realism
Not all thinkers in the modern era became anti-realisers. Quite a few embraced Plato and Aristotle’s realisms. On the Christian side, numerous Popes such as Nicholas V in 1451, Paul V in 1614, Benedict XIV in 1756, Pius IX in 1870, and Leo XIII in 1879 championed the genius of St. Thomas as the Church’s answer to the antirealism of the age (cf. Wallace and Weisheipl 1967, pp. 109-110).

Further, there were the Cambridge Platonists, a group of 17th-century Protestant “philosophers, most of them at the University of Cambridge, united in opposition to corpuscular physics and the mechanism of Thomas Hobbes as appropriate foundations for philosophy.” (Riedl 1967, p. 438) On the secular side, the works of Romantic Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
(1749-1832) and German idealist Hegel led one to penetrate nature’s appearance and discover its universal essence or truth (cf. Tarnas 1993, pp. 378-381).

6. POSTMODERN CULTURAL BREAKDOWN AND NEED OF UNIVERSALS

6.1 Mass Abandonment of Christian Universals by Postmodern Thinkers
If the antirealism against the Christian suprasensible universals in the Modern Scientific Period was misbehaving, that in the Postmodern Pluralistic or Relativistic Period has been horrendous. As the central prophet of postmodernism (Tarnas 1993, p. 395), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) appears to have found the source of his antirealism in the thought of Protagoras (Dherbey 1985, p. 30).

In a nutshell, the Protegorean-Nietzschean aura and drive of the postmodern mind has identified the human being, especially the superhuman, as the measure of all things (Ibid.). Augmented by the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the individual and his (or her) very consciousness have practically replaced the Christian God and His mind as found in the Sacred Scriptures or interpreted by the Church. “Logical Positivism, a 20th-century school of philosophy, asserted that any statement’s meaning depends on how it can be verified.” (McHenry 1988, p. 63) Since metaphysical statements and Christian universals cannot be verified scientifically, these Logical Positivists concluded that they have no meaning (Ibid.).

Indeed, many postmodern philosophers tend to treat Plato’s theory of forms as “the Socratic fallacy” (Meynell 1998, p. 242). For example, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) criticized “metaphysical experience as something beyond the realm of language” (Ibid.). Metaphysical theorizing necessarily fails “because it tries to talk about a realm that exists outside of the realm that language can illuminate.” (Ibid.)

Perhaps the thinker most identified with the man-centered ontology is the existentialist Martin Heidgger (1889-1976) who, as a disciple of Edmund Husserls (1859-1938), claimed that “ontology is only possible as phenomenology.” (Dahlstrom 1989, p. 338) Abandoning God as the Absolute Being, the Heideggerian “postmodern human exists in a universe whose significance is at once utterly open and without warrantable foundation” (Tarnas 1993, p. 398) in uttermost Heraclitean flux.
Moreover, as a prominent representative of postmodern skepticism, Michel Foucault (1926-1984) espoused deconstructionalism “without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises.” (Foucault 1970, p. 387) Simultaneously, Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), a leading figure in the post-structuralism, tends to fall into linguistic nihilism, making all philosophical and theological statements made since Plato rationalistic rubbish (cf. Osborne 1992, pp. 178-180).

Besides, along with the promulgation of atheistic Marxist philosophy by George Lukacs (1885-1971), Max Horkheimer (1895-1973), and Louis Althusser (1918-1990), etc., the global expansion of anti-Christian Communism in the 20th century has notably suffocated the dissemination of Christian universals to millions of people. As Neo-Marxism has spread globally in the form of liberation and feminist theologies, traditional Christian theology in the West has not been immune to such an antirealist influence. As a whole, postmodern thinkers turn relentlessly towards antirealism, rejecting the traditional Christian rationality, along with its universals of cognition or norms of evaluation (Meynell 1999, p. 184). They are also “apt to repudiate the related ideals of objectivity and truth as either impossible or objectionable.” (Ibid.)

6.2 Postmodern Cultural Crisis
The West is suffering from a devastating double-bind effect. Not only have the Christian universals been shattered by its scientific progress, the once absolute sensible universals of Newtonian physics were also smashed by the development of high energy physics at the beginning of the 20th century. Concerning the PU, the most obvious common denominator between modernism and postmodernism or late-modernism (Rose 1991, p. 80) is that they have adopted the post rem antirealism.

The major difference appears that postmodernism is much more engrossed than modernism in the unfortunate and unexpected consequence of this solution in spurning both universals as well as traditional truth-promising metanarrative schemas (cf. Lyotard 1984). This universalless mentality has been leading the West currently to “the decline and fall, the deconstruction and collapse, of virtually every one of the West’s great intellectual and cultural projects: the end of theology, the end of philosophy, the end of science, the end of literature, the end of art, the end of culture itself;” (Tarnas 1993, p. 393) including that of tradition, law and ethics. Amid such a pluralistic cultural crisis, there is undeniably an urgent need for a review.
Without doubt, some revealing wisdom is in order, as the world around us continues to hold on to the concurrent conception of reality “which is itself multiple and in profound flux,” (Tarnas 1993, p. xiv) facing the dangerous lack of a cultural foundation for grappling with “the emerging nihilism.” (Ibid., p. 395). Josef de Vries seems to be able to help us see through the present extreme relativism, as he accurately remarks on the antirealism which most people today have endorsed as the solution to the PU:

[W]ithout universals there are no universal judgments and therefore --- since every inference demands at least one universal judgment as a premise --- no progressive thinking, no going beyond immediately given experience, no science, and especially no metaphysics. Consequently, the devaluation of the universal logically leads to the positivistic splintering of the whole intellectual life, in the realm of practical philosophy and of social living to the dissolution of the natural law; finally, it leads to total subjective individualism, since, on this hypothesis, the only reality is the individual, his personal experience and his arbitrariness. (de Vries 1974, p. 435)

What a horrible consequence a group, society, culture, civilization or age which completely denies the existence of universals would become! Nonetheless, one may say that such a group, society or culture would still adhere itself to a certain absolute universal, i.e., the universal without universals, or the universal that annihilates all universals. Below is a further sketch of such a postmodern position which, in Plato’s terms, is obsessed with visible things and images in the world of appearance (Cornford 1972, p. 222).

6.3 Postmodern Obsession with Visible Things and Images in the World of Appearance
In accordance with Platonic infrastructure (Cornford 1972, p. 222), the following cultural pattern may be observed with respect to the four major periods of the West. In its pluralistic search and struggle with the PU, the ancient Greece distinctly offered the West not only Sophistic antirealism, but also Plato and Aristotle’s realisms towards the totality of reality. The latter includes the Good [the form of forms], forms, mathematical objects (in the intelligible world), as well as visible things and images (in the world of appearance). While Sts. Augustine and Thomas in the Patristic-Medieval Christian Period christened both Plato and Aristotle’s realisms, Modern
thinkers have approached the Good and forms with its nominalistic and conceptualistic antirealism, embracing exclusively mathematical objects, visible things and images. As a sequel, the Postmodern Pluralistic Period has been predominantly espousing antirealism, endlessly zeroing in on mathematical objects, visible things and images.

According to Plato (Ibid.), forms will lead us to knowledge (episteme), while mathematical objects lead to thinking (dianoia), visible things to belief (pistis), images to imagining (eikasia). Deeply immersed in the world of appearance or particulars, our postmodern culture has suffered serious lack of true knowledge, i.e., that of forms or universals, which should be our way out of this quandary. Regarding our present state of mind, we are living in a world of fast-changing opinions or information, full of uncertainties. To be sure, we are not living in a world of stable ever-lasting knowledge, as some might want to think. Our whole postmodern society, in fact, is filled with relativistic thoughts in mathematical objects, relativistic beliefs in visible things, as well as relativistic imaginings in images.

Apparently, insofar as truth is concerned, the conceptualistic image is everything there is today to countless people (Tyrangiel 2001, p. 60). Differently expressed, the 20th century has been exceedingly focused, even to the degree of obsession, on visible things, their images, and image-making. Since there is neither any absolute nor absolute foundation, what appears to our perception becomes everything. All credible data are, thus, reduced to sensible and psychological images. What really matters is what appears as correct, rationally, scientifically, intellectually, mentally, publicly, commercially, fashionably, photographically, legally, politically, and multiculturally.

Esse est percipi, i.e., to be is what is perceived. We seem to be deepening and yet limiting Berkeley’s maxim that to be is to be perceived to the world of phenomena. In our current mentality of post rem antirealism, only what appears to our mind is real. Espousing Kant’s standard of truth, we do not believe that we can ever know what stand beyond those appearances of visible things and phenomena of images. Reality is all in our mind as we interact with those relativistic images within. Following Hume’s footsteps, all orders and coherences have become mind-constructed fictions or images (Tarnas 1993, p. 340). Absolute truth does not exist. In fact, absolutism is a muddy word. Truth has become pluralistic, relativistically so. Tarnas sums it up comprehensively below, without making the clear demarcation line between the Modern Scientific Period and the Postmodern Pluralistic Period which we have done:
Kant’s penetrating critique has effectively pulled the rug out from under the human minds’ pretension to certain knowledge of things in themselves, eliminating in principle any human recognition of the ground of the world. Subsequent developments in the Western mind -- the deepening relativism introduced not only by Einstein, Bohr, and Heisenberg, but also by Darwin, Marx, and Freud; by Nietzsche, Dilthey, Weber, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein; by Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, and Foucault; by Gödel, Popper, Quine, Kuhn, and a host of others --- radically magnified that effect, altogether eliminating the grounds for subjective certainty still fell by Kant. All human experience was indeed structured by largely unconscious principles, but those principles were not absolute and timeless. Rather, they varied fundamentally in different eras, different cultures, different classes, different languages, different persons, different existential orders. In the wake of Kant’s Copernican revolution, science, religion, and philosophy all had to find their own bases for affirmation, for none could claim a prior access to the universe’s intrinsic nature. (Tarnas 1993, p. 351)

It appears that, for quite a long while, the Sophistic post rem antirealism has been tested and re-tested in the postmodern condition, repeatedly leading us to nowhere, but crisis after crisis instead. As a consequence, there has never been a time since the end of the Patristic-Medieval Christian Period when the West is seriously challenged to revisit the other two solutions to the PU, i.e., the Platonic ante rem realism and the Aristotelian in re realism. In other words, the whole Western civilization is in dire need of an opening out of the present crisis situation. But first let us briefly examine some major popular theories of truth today.

6.4 Contemporary Popular Theories of Truth
There are two general categories of theories of truth: ontological and epistemological. As such, any ethical or moral theory is necessarily a manifestation of its ontological or epistemological underpinning. Ontologically, truth in being is the conformity of a being to a mind or “the conformity of a being to the exemplar or idea on which it depends.” (O’Brien 1979, p. 3577) Obviously, the exemplar, idea, form or universal can be human or divine. Epistemologically, “[t]ruth in knowing or truth as known is the knowing conformity of a mind to a being.” (Ibid.) In this act of
knowing truth, we exercise our cognitive judgment in affirming or negating facts or data out there. Ultimately, the “radical criterion of truth in knowing is truth in being.” (Ibid.)

As postmodernism has disowned any ontological form or universal, what remains to be championed are basically: a) truth in being as oriented towards the human mind, such as human consensus as truth (cf. Ilting 1976, pp. 20-50); b) truth in knowing oriented towards epistemic relativism or relativistic coherentism. The latter “has no foundations but owes its strength to the stability given by its interlocking parts. This rejects the idea of a basis in the ‘given’, favours ideas of coherence and holism, but finds it harder to ward off skepticism.” (Blackburn 1994, p. 123)

This is exactly what we are facing today, i.e., popular theories of truth which ultimately espouse no ante rem foundation as it is impossible to verify sensibly. Some examples are: the common-sense correspondence theory, “which claims that a statement is true if it corresponds to the facts” (Flew 1984, p. 355); the pragmatic theory which states that a true assertion is one that proves the best for us economically in the long run (Ibid.); the consensus theory which teaches that truth is to be “endorsed unanimously by all persons who had had sufficient relevant experiences to judge it” (Kirkham 2000, p. 900); the deflationary theories of truth ascription, such as the reducundance, performative, and prosentential theories teaching “that there is no such property as truth and thus there is no need for, or sense to, a theory of truth distinct from a theory of truth ascriptions.” (Ibid.; cf. Kirkham 1992).

To regain a healthy balance, it becomes crucial for the extremely relativistic, foundationless West today to reattain some realism and, thereby, to reunite itself even with some ante rem foundation(s) or universal(s).

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

No one person, culture, and age can avoid the PU. In a way, the history of Western philosophy can be portrayed as a history of thought struggling with the PU between realism and antirealism. Historically, five PU solutions may be distinguished competing against one another, whether manifestly or implicitly, primitively or maturely: 1) ante rem realism as represented by Plato; 2) in re realism as represented by Aristotle; 3) nominalistic post rem antirealism as represented by Ockham; 4) conceptualistic post rem
antirealism as represented recently by Kant; and 5) deconstructive post rem antirealism as represented by Foucault.

Facing extreme postmodern relativism or ethical nihilism, Western civilization is in urgent need of an opening out of this pressing impasse. There is no doubt that postmodern relativism may be traced to Derrida, Heidegger, Nietzsche or even to the Enlightenment two centuries or so ago. However, in the ultimate search, postmodern relativism can be traced back to the Sophistic relativism in the Greek Enlightenment, at the time of Socrates and Plato (cf. Tarnas 1993, pp. 25-31). Hence, by examining how relativism was handled then should shed some unusual light to how such a foundationless idea ought to be dealt with now.

If there is one clear lesson to be learned from our historical probe regarding the PU, it is that, to survive as a civilization or culture, the postmodern West can no longer continue with its present post rem antirealist solution to the PU. Civilizationally speaking, in order to restore some universality or arriving at some real solid foundation(s), the West needs to seriously revisit the PU and even Plato’s foundationalist theory of forms developed in his struggle against antirealist Sophists.

“From St. Augustine, Boethius, Joannes Scotus Eriugena, William of Champeaux, and John Duns Scotus to Hegel and Alfred North Whitehead, theoreticians have defended the objective reality of universals.” (Hennessey 1979, p. 3614) Plato’s theory of forms teaches us that we do not make values or truths. They are discovered through the development of our intellectual intuition. Values and truths are absolute and universal since they are necessarily the conformity of our thought to the ante rem forms which are absolute and universal (O’Farrell 1967, p. 327).

Truth, even absolute, is, therefore, possible. We are deceived, for example, to think that Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) --- the postmodern antirealist Gorgias (Taureck 1995, p. 146) --- has solved the PU for the present generation effectively when he and other antirealists have simply denied the existence of universals and allocated metaphysics to a realm “that exists outside of the realm that language can illuminate.” (McHenry 1988, p. 63; cf. Schoedinger, 1992, p. 266; Zabeeh, 1966, p. 43)

Before any irreparable damage should occur, the West should realize that it has been destroying itself with the post rem nominalistic, conceptualistic, and deconstructive antirealism. Believing that the human being is the maker of all values and truths, this threefold post rem antirealism has been the general leading solution to the PU held since the beginning of the Modern Scientific Period. Culturally, Christianity has been increasingly put aside,
along with her integration with Plato’s ante rem realism and Aristotle’s in re realism. In the process, values and truths have become human-made and consensus-based, increasingly naturalistic, relativistic, pluralistic, and even nihilistic, without any absolute and universal suprasensible or supernatural ante rem foundation.

In the historical development of antirealism, contemporary deconstructive antirealists can be represented, among others, by Karl Marx, Martin Heidegger, and Michel Foucault in their revolt against traditional Christian universal concepts. “To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.” (Rom 8:6) Whether we like it or not, one needs to know that Western culture is composed of three predominant sources: i.e., a) ancient Greek philosophy; b) Judaeo Patristic-Medieval Christianity; and c) modern science and humanities (Russell 1961, p. 547). Despite its sweeping openness to Greek philosophy and progress in science, the soul of Western civilization remains substantially and unmistakably Christian. The supernatural-natural being of the West, therefore, cannot afford to cut itself off from the supernatural Christianity and her solutions to the PU. If the West did, as it does now, its soul would be experiencing chaos and death.

Karl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), at the end of his life, compared our age to the beginning of the Christian epoch (cf. Tarnas 1993, p. 412; Jung, 1970, pars. 585-586). In the midst of different Christian renewals, a re-beginning of the Christian epoch may be occurring as our Sophistic postmodern age (cf. Dunning 1995) is heading towards a pluralistic search and struggle with the PU which includes the Christian dimension. Markedly, we are now in a situation similar to the last stage of the ancient Greek era which preceded the period of the Early Church. Hopefully, the West, in all its honest trials and errors, will become wisely open to all its cultural sources and treasures, especially to the Christian baptism of the Greek realisms which has taken centuries to experience, develop, test, re-test, and mature. Face to face with the current dead end of foundationless relativism, the postmodern particulars, many, multiple, and profound flux must be overcome in terms of ante rem realism and/or in re realism. In other words, out of the present post rem universalless chaos, a healthier balance had to be regained for the present generation through its unprecedented embrace or reintegration with its traditional Christian universals. Between the two opposites, the thesis and the anti-thesis, a reunion or a synthesis is long due.

Historically, the West appears to have encountered at least three major crisis stages involving its traditional cultural values in which certain
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important traditional elements, due to new discoveries or insights, are revolted against as antithesis in radical deconstruction. Viewed in terms of the notion “enlightenment,” we may regard the Sophistic Enlightenment as the first major historical crisis stage (cf. Coby 1987; Solmsen 1975) at the time of Socrates and Plato, and the Modern Enlightenment or “Age of Reason and Science” in the Modern Scientific Period as the second one (cf. Earl 1964, pp. 245-264). Finally, the “New Enlightenment” (Meynell 1999, p. ix) in the current Postmodern Pluralistic or Relativistic Period may be viewed as the third crisis stage regarding traditional values. Meanwhile, it is possible to treat the present New Enlightenment as the duration of the Modern Enlightenment, just as the Postmodern Period may be perceived as the Late Modern Period.

Nevertheless, insofar as the last two Enlightenments are concerned, indispensable realist elements in the traditional culture as a thesis have been integrated with or reconstructed into a larger synthesis with certain valid elements of the new discoveries or insights. Apparently, how well the ongoing postmodern New Enlightenment will turn out depends very much on how philosophically persistent, sound, and rational the realists are (Meynell 1999, p. 186).

The postmodern West, in the final analysis, can no longer move forward indefinitely, foundationless, paradigmless, universalless, or formless “without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises.” (Foucault 1970, p. 387) It is in pressing need of some solid, unshakeable and perhaps ante rem universal foundation(s). This is precisely where Plato’s ante rem foundationalist theory of forms could offer much inspiration, direction, and challenge with respect to the objective reality and functionality of ante rem universals. Meanwhile, theorists of truth today, Neo-Thomist or not, may have to be more familiar with the PU and even to help make more perfect Plato’s unfinished theory of forms.

Seemingly, one foremost solution may have been presaged in 1879 by the publication of Aeterni Patris, the encyclical of Pope Leo XIII (1810-1903) on the restoration of Christian philosophy. Despite difficulties yet to surmount, this time-tested ante rem-God-in rebus realism of St. Thomas Aquinas (cf. Meynell 1999; Hudson and Moran, 1992) appears to be a tremendous, much-needed solution or balance of postmodern relativism. Today, it is exciting to witness the agreement among so many great Catholic thinkers, such as Jacques Maritain, Bernard Lonergan, Karl Rahner, Karol Wojtyla, Edward A. Synan, Gerald A. McCool, David L. Schindler, and J. A. DiNoia, etc., that the perennial philosophy of St. Thomas “offers the basis...
for a unique philosophical outlook that is needed influence on the turmoil and postmodern philosophical thinking” (Hudson and Moran 1992, back cover).

REFERENCE:


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