

SPECTACLES OF TRUTH
IN CLASSICAL
GREEK PHILOSOPHY

Theoria in its Cultural Context

ANDREA WILSON NIGHTINGALE

Stanford University



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Introduction

Think of the long trip home./ Should we have stayed home and thought of here? Where should we be today?/ Is it right to be watching strangers in a play/ in this strangest of theatres?/ What childishness is it that while there's a breath of life/ in our bodies, we are determined to rush/to see the sun the other way around?

Elizabeth Bishop, "Questions of Travel"

Questioning attains its own ground by leaping.

Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*

Italo Calvino's dazzling book, *Mr. Palomar*, offers a portrait of postmodern ways of seeing. Its hero, Mr. Palomar – named after a famous telescope – spends his time conducting experiments in viewing and contemplating the world around him.¹ In a chapter entitled "The Contemplation of the Stars," Palomar ventures out to look at the heavens "in order to detach himself from the earth." In this endeavor, Palomar deliberately follows the example of the ancient Greeks who, he believes, achieved knowledge and tranquillity from this exercise. He goes to the darkness of a nearby beach and, after spending half an hour perusing his astronomical charts, settles down to study the stars.

This activity, however, turns out to be quite complicated: "to decipher a chart in the darkness he must also bring along a flashlight. The frequent checking of sky against chart requires him to turn the light on and off, and in the passages from light to darkness he remains almost blinded and has to readjust his vision every time" (43). In addition, Palomar wears eyeglasses to read, which means that he must put them on to study the charts and remove them to look at the sky:

In other words, to locate a star involves the checking of various maps against the vault of the sky, with all the related actions: putting on and taking off eyeglasses,

¹ Calvino 1985, 37–48 ("The Eye and the Planets" and "The Contemplation of the Stars").

turning the flashlight on and off, unfolding and folding the large chart, losing and finding again the reference points.

Instead of discovering the “exact geometry of the sidereal spaces” that the ancients found, Palomar sees a complicated and confused picture in which “everything seems to escape him.” The heavens look unstable and contradictory, and he ends up distrusting what he knows: “oppressed, insecure, he becomes nervous over the celestial charts, as over railroad timetables when he flips through them in search of a connection” (47). Contemplating the stars leads to anguish rather than tranquillity, and Palomar’s effort to emulate the ancients is thus thwarted. After spending several hours in this vain endeavor, Palomar stops and looks around: he now sees that a group of people have gathered around him to watch his frenzied activities, “observing his movements like the convulsions of a madman” (48).

In this vignette, Calvino performs a postmodern reading of an ancient tale: Plato’s Analogy of the Cave, the foundational story of enlightenment. In books 5–7 of the *Republic*, Plato introduced a new kind of sage – a philosophic theorist “in love with the spectacle of truth.” Plato describes in lavish detail how the philosopher detaches himself from the earthly world and journeys into the radiant realm of “reality.” When he enters this region, the philosopher is at first blinded by the light of the sun that shines there. His eyes slowly adjust to this light, and eventually he can gaze directly upon the beings in the metaphysical realm, including the sun-like Form of the Good. He now sees that the shadow-figures in the cave were (at best) copies of the true beings in this realm, and that this region is the locus of true reality. With reluctance, he goes back into the cave and is initially blinded by its darkness. When he returns, the people who dwell there say that the journey has destroyed his vision; they mock him and think that he has lost his mind.

Calvino captures some central aspects of this famous story of philosophical theorizing. First, he reveals that Plato’s tale is as much about blindness as it is about insight. For, like Plato’s theorist, Calvino’s Palomar experiences intermittent periods of blindness in his efforts to see and study the heavens. And he also blinds himself on a larger level, since he turns away from the human world to search for fixed truths (deliberately emulating the detachment of the ancients). Here, Palomar closely resembles his model, for the Platonic philosopher detaches from society in his quest for knowledge, and suffers from bouts of blindness as he journeys out of, and back into, the cave. Finally, like his Platonic predecessor, Palomar appears to the ordinary person as a mad fool. In both stories, the theorist is himself the

object of public perception: other people see his blindness (but not, as it seems, his insight). In the Analogy of the Cave, the philosopher is not of course practicing astronomy. But the philosopher's effort to turn his gaze from darkness to light, from images to real beings, is wonderfully refigured in Palomar's move from star charts to stars, from artificial to heavenly light. Calvino also reminds us that Plato's Analogy is about heat as well as light – about passion and yearning as well as seeing. Palomar longs for the tranquillity that accompanies stable knowledge: he longs for the absence of longing, the end of wonder. He seeks *sophia* rather than *philosophia* – wisdom without its love. But Palomar ends in frustration and failure, whereas the Greek theorist transcends *aporia*, *eros*, and wonder. Or does he?

The Greek thinkers of the fourth century BCE were the first to call themselves philosophers, the first to define philosophy as a specialized discipline and a unique cultural practice. Creating the professional discipline of philosophy required an extraordinary effort of self-definition and legitimation. In addition to developing ideas and arguments, these philosophers had to stake out the boundaries of their discipline and articulate the ways that it differed from other modes of wisdom. Plato, Aristotle, and other fourth-century thinkers all matched themselves against traditional “masters of truth” even as they developed different conceptions of philosophy in competition with one another. In this period, the debate over the true nature of philosophy – and thus the highest form of knowledge – was lively and contentious. This foundational debate generated (among other things) a novel and subversive claim: that the supreme form of wisdom is *theoria*, the rational “vision” of metaphysical truths.

In the effort to conceptualize and legitimize theoretical philosophy, the fourth-century thinkers invoked a specific civic institution: that which the ancients called “*theoria*.” In the traditional practice of *theoria*, an individual (called the *theoros*) made a journey or pilgrimage abroad for the purpose of witnessing certain events and spectacles.² In the classical period, *theoria* took the form of pilgrimages to oracles and religious festivals. In many cases, the *theoros* was sent by his city as an official ambassador: this “civic” *theoros* journeyed to an oracular center or festival, viewed the events and spectacles there, and returned home with an official eyewitness report. An individual could also make a theoretic journey in a private capacity: the “private” *theoros*, however, was answerable only to himself and did not need to publicize his findings when he returned to the city. Whether civic or private, the practice

² I analyze the cultural practice of *theoria* in chapter 1. I use the masculine pronoun throughout this book when referring to the *theoros*, since *theoria* (both traditional and philosophical) was predominantly – though not exclusively – practiced by males.

of *theoria* encompassed the entire journey, including the detachment from home, the spectating, and the final reentry. But at its center was the act of seeing, generally focused on a sacred object or spectacle.³ Indeed, the *theoros* at a religious festival or sanctuary witnessed objects and events that were sacralized by way of rituals: the viewer entered into a “ritualized visuality” in which secular modes of viewing were screened out by religious rites and practices.⁴ This sacralized mode of spectating was a central element of traditional *theoria*, and offered a powerful model for the philosophic notion of “seeing” divine truths.

The comparison of philosophical activity to *theoria* at religious festivals was not a casual rhetorical trope: this move had powerful ideological associations. For, by linking philosophical theorizing to an institution that was at once social, political, and religious, the fourth-century thinkers identified theoretical philosophy as a specific kind of cultural practice. By aligning their discipline with the traditional practice of *theoria*, the fourth-century thinkers attempted to ground theoretical philosophy in the social and political world. The philosophers claimed a specific place for theoretical activity in the polis, even though metaphysical contemplation *per se* detaches the theorist for a time from the social world. Indeed they explicitly raised the question of the role of the intellectual in civic and political affairs (a question that is still very much with us today). As I will suggest, all of the fourth-century philosophers located the contemplative activities of the theorist within the context of political life (albeit in very different ways). The detached activity of theoretical contemplation is, they claim, central to the life of a flourishing polis.⁵

Plato – who was the first to conceptualize philosophic “theorizing” – made full use of the model of traditional *theoria*, with its journey abroad, viewing of a spectacle, and subsequent return home. In the *Republic* 5–7 – the most detailed account of *theoria* in the Platonic corpus – Plato models philosophic *theoria* on the traditional practice of civic *theoria*.⁶ In this kind of *theoria*, the *theoros* journeys forth as an official witness to a spectacle, and then returns as a messenger or reporter: at the end of the journey, he gives a verbal account of a visual, spectacular event. The journey as a whole, including the final report, is located in a civic context. In Plato’s

³ The Greek word *theoria* means, in its most literal sense, “witnessing a spectacle.”

⁴ As Elsner (2000) argues. I will discuss the notion of “ritualized visuality” in chapter 1.

⁵ This does not mean that the people of the fourth century actually accepted the philosophers’ claims (though some politicians did study with these men). See Humphreys 1978, ch. 9 for an analysis of the changing role of the intellectual in archaic and classical Greece.

⁶ As we will see, in other texts Plato describes the theorist as living a private, nonpolitical life. I discuss Plato’s different accounts of *theoria* in chapters 2–4.

account of philosophic *theoria* in the *Republic*, theoretical activity is not confined to the rational contemplation of the Forms; rather, it encompasses the entire journey, from departure to contemplation to reentry and reportage. The intellectual “seeing” at the center of the journey – which I call “contemplation” – is thus nested in a larger context which is both social and political. As Plato claims, the philosophic theorist will, when he returns, “give an account” of his vision which is open to inspection and to questioning. In addition, he will translate his contemplative wisdom into practical and (under certain conditions) political activities: his theoretical wisdom provides the basis for action. In the good city, moreover, the theoretical philosophers will rule the polis: here, Plato places the philosophic theorist at the very center of political life.

According to Plato, the philosopher is altered and transformed by the journey of *theoria* and the activity of contemplation. He thus “returns” as a sort of stranger to his own kind, bringing a radical alterity into the city. When the philosopher goes back to the social realm, he remains detached from worldly goods and values even when he is acting in the world. Even in the ideal city, the philosopher is marked by detachment and alterity – he possesses a divine perspective that is foreign to the ordinary man. This peculiar combination of detachment and engagement allows the Platonic theorist to perform on the social stage in a fashion that is impartial, just, and virtuous.

Philip of Opus (a member of Plato’s Academy) offers a quite different account of philosophic *theoria*: his philosophic theorist contemplates the stars. As he argues, the true philosopher engages in the activity of astronomical *theoria*, in which he beholds and apprehends “visible gods” in the heavens. This activity cultivates the virtue of piety, which has a direct impact on practical and political action. Paradoxically, viewing and studying the heavens makes the philosopher a supremely good and virtuous man on earth. Like Plato, Philip claims that *theoria* provides the only proper grounding for political *praxis*: the theoretical philosopher can and should govern the city. But Philip diverges from Plato by directing the theoretical gaze to the physical heavens rather than the metaphysical Forms.

To these fourth-century theorists, Aristotle responds with a bold new claim: *theoria* does not lead to *praxis*. Narrowing the scope of theoretical philosophy, Aristotle identifies *theoria* as an exclusively contemplative activity. In fact, he even separates the processes of learning and demonstration from the activity of *theoria*. To be sure, the theorist will attempt to argue and account for his findings, but this is not considered part of the *theoria*.

Rather, *theoria* is a distinct activity that is an end in itself, completely cut off from the social and political realm.

In his accounts of *theoria*, Aristotle retains the traditional notion of sacralized spectating, but he does not link this activity to the world of politics or *praxis*. Aristotle's theorist, in short, does not bring his wisdom into practical or political life. Indeed, as Aristotle claims, theoretical knowledge is completely "useless" (*achreston*) in the practical sphere: the philosopher engages in *theoria* for its own sake, as an end in itself.⁷ Where, then, does Aristotle locate the theorist within the polis? He certainly does not believe that the philosopher should rule or lead a political life. Rather, as he claims in the *Politics* (books VII–VIII), the polis as a whole should orient itself towards the education and leisure that allows the wisest men to engage in theoretical activity.⁸ Since business and politics are directed towards the higher goal of leisure, the good constitution should aim to promote noble leisure activities for citizens in the polis. According to Aristotle, the best and most proper leisure activity is that of philosophic *theoria*, since the perfection of intellectual virtue is the ultimate *telos* of the human being. Ultimately, practical and political activities should serve the higher purpose of creating the conditions for philosophic *theoria*, which is the best form of human activity. The good polis, then, must strive to bring about the full actualization of human capacities, even if only a few men can achieve this goal (i.e. the theoretical philosophers). Theoretical activity is thus given a unique and privileged place in the life of the city.

The fourth-century proponents of theoretical philosophy turned to the traditional practice of *theoria* in their efforts to conceptualize and articulate a new mode of wisdom. In aligning themselves with a venerable cultural practice, the philosophers claimed legitimacy and authority for philosophic *theoria*. They appropriated the traditional practice of *theoria* by translating the physical journey to a sanctuary into a metaphysical quest for truth: wandering was reconceived as wondering, physical seeing as intellectual "gazing." Fourth-century thinkers such as Plato, Philip of Opus, and Aristotle claimed that the philosophic theorist (*theoros*) gazes with the "eye of reason" upon divine and eternal verities.

⁷ See chapter 5. In this book, I focus on Aristotle's explicit discussions of *theoria* in the *Protrepticus*, *NE*, and *Metaphysics* (and his analysis of *nous* in the *De Anima*). Aristotle often uses the verb *theorein* to signify "seeing" or "observing" in the most general sense, and occasionally uses the noun *theoria* to identify any sort of observation or investigation. I will confine my study to his explicit discussions of contemplative *theoria*.

⁸ As Yack (1991, 23) rightly argues, "although the polis is prior to the individual, according to Aristotle, it still exists for the sake of the good life led by individuals; individuals do not exist for the sake of the perfection of the polis."

The fourth-century philosophers differed quite strongly in their epistemological, psychological, ethical, and political theories. Yet all believed that wisdom takes the form of “seeing” truth. In this book, I will examine the Greek conception of the philosopher as a “spectator” – an idea that has had a profound impact on Western thinking. How did the fourth-century philosophers articulate and defend this new conception of knowledge? What is at stake, philosophically and politically, in identifying the philosopher as a sort of seer, detached from the physical and social world while he contemplates the verities? How and what does the philosophic theorist see? How (if at all) can the disembodied apprehension of truth be embodied and enacted in the practical realm? Where does the theoretical philosopher position himself vis-à-vis the political life of the city? In this study, I am not attempting to offer a philosophic analysis of fourth-century epistemology. Rather, I will investigate the foundational construction of theoretical philosophy in its intellectual and its cultural context, and explore the philosophical and historical ramifications of this momentous development.

There were of course many cultural factors and conditions involved in this radical reconception of wisdom in the fourth century: the implementation and impact of the technology of writing; aristocratic self-fashioning in democratic Athens and its opposition to democratic “wisdom”; the professionalization of numerous disciplines and occupations in fourth-century Greece; the creation of schools of higher education; and the decline of the city-state and the rise of imperial politics (which placed elites and intellectuals in a new position vis-à-vis the systems of power). In addition to analyzing the different philosophical constructions of *theoria* in the fourth century, then, we need to attend to the cultural and historical context in which this development occurred.

THEORIZING THE ANCIENT THEORISTS

In the modern and postmodern periods, philosophers and scholars have analyzed and attacked “the spectator theory of knowledge” from many different angles; in general, they identify Platonic and Aristotelian epistemology (and Cartesian dualism) as the primary culprits in this philosophic enterprise. Most twentieth-century thinkers, of course, view Greek metaphysical philosophy with suspicion if not scorn. The conception of knowledge as *theoria* is, for some, a cowardly flight from the world of action and, for others, a pernicious power-grab posing as disinterested speculation. Modern attacks on the “spectator theory of knowledge” and its claims to objectivity have been numerous and diverse, ranging from

phenomenologists such as Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty to pragmatists such as Dewey and Rorty, to poststructural and psychoanalytic theorists such as Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, and Irigaray. Nonetheless, the nature and scope of “visual thinking” – and various forms of “the gaze” – continue to be analyzed in many different disciplines.⁹

Nietzsche articulates, concisely and trenchantly, some of the key claims in the modern (and postmodern) attack on the spectator theory of knowledge:

Let us be on guard against the dangerous old conceptual fiction that posited a “pure, will-less, painless, timeless knowing subject”; let us guard against the snares of such contradictory concepts as “pure reason,” “absolute spirituality,” “knowledge in itself”: these always demand that we should think of an eye that is completely unthinkable, an eye turned in no particular direction, in which the active and interpreting forces, through which alone seeing becomes seeing *something*, are supposed to be lacking; these always demand of the eye an absurdity and a nonsense. There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective “knowing” . . . But to eliminate the will altogether, to suspect each and every affect, supposing we were capable of this – what would that mean but to *castrate* the intellect?¹⁰

Here, Nietzsche rejects (1) the notion of the disembodied intellect, (2) the conception of a non-perspectival viewpoint, (3) the claim that we can apprehend objective truths not constructed or affected by the human mind, and (4) the belief in a mode of cognition separated from will, desire, and the emotions.

This is powerful rhetoric, but it hardly does justice to the Greek theorists. In Plato’s conception of *theoria*, theoretical knowledge is a sort of “hot cognition” (to borrow Damasio’s term) in which eros and the affect of wonder play a key role in the activity of contemplation.¹¹ Plato hardly “castrates” the intellect: on the contrary, *theoria* is fueled and sustained by erotic desire. In addition, Plato believes that theoretical philosophers can, at best, achieve only a partial view of the Forms – a view that is distorted (in differing degrees) by the ontological and ethical limitations of their souls. In order to “see” reality, in fact, the philosopher must become blind to the human world: theoretical vision is by no means panoptic. While Plato does not, of course, argue for a perspectival or constructivist conception

⁹ See, e.g., Rorty 1979, Jonas 1966, Levin 1988 (and the essays in his 1993a volume), Foster 1988, Jay 1993, Goldhill 1996, 1999a, Cray 1999. For a discussion of the gaze in Roman culture, see Barch forthcoming (she analyzes the gaze in connection with eroticism and self-knowledge).

¹⁰ *Genealogy of Morals* III, 12 (trans. Kaufmann).

¹¹ The neurologist Damasio (2000) offers a powerful demonstration of the role that emotions play in the rational activities of the human brain. Opposing himself to Descartes and other Western philosophers who have detached reason from desire and the emotions, Damasio argues that cognition and ratiocination are invariably dependent on and accompanied by emotional processes (hence the phrase “hot cognition”).

of knowledge, his human philosopher never achieves a perfect, “frontal” view of the Forms.¹² Finally, side by side with Plato’s “official” account of theoretical contemplation as a disembodied activity focusing exclusively on metaphysical objects, we find another account that does not exclude the body from philosophic theorizing. For, in some dialogues, Plato argues that the visual perception of beautiful bodies – both human and celestial – plays a vital role in the activity of *theoria*. We are far, indeed, from Nietzsche’s “will-less” subject with an “eye turned in no particular direction.”

Most modern and postmodern critics of Greek *theoria* also emphasize the “spectatorial distance” that allows the subject to stand over against the object and apprehend it in a neutral and undistorted fashion: “objective truth” is achieved by reifying the object and keeping it separate from the viewing subject. As Hans Jonas claims, because of the spectatorial distance involved in seeing, the subject avoids direct engagement with the object; this separation of the subject from the object, in fact, produces

the very concept of objectivity, of the thing as it is in itself as distinct from the thing as it affects me, and from this distinction arises the whole idea of *theoria* and theoretical truth.¹³

Building on this notion of the subject gaining an “objective” (neutral, undistorted) grasp of its object, many thinkers have made the additional claim that theoretical “vision” *objectifies* the things it sees – it views the things in the world as objects available for the viewer’s use and control. Thus Levin (a neo-Heideggerian) claims that vision is “the most reifying of all our perceptual modalities”; this reification, he adds, encourages the subject to control and dominate the object:

to the extent that the will to power captures our capacity for vision, there is a strong inveterate tendency in our vision to fixate whatever our eyes behold, to “bring it to a stand,” a standstill, in our grasp and hold . . . Since the character of our everyday vision is such that we tend to reify, to substantialize, and to totalize, philosophical thinking, increasingly under the sway of a vision-based and vision-centered paradigm, represents itself as standing positioned in a relation of *opposition* to being.¹⁴

¹² And, when he “returns” (again and again) to the human world, he does engage in a constructivist project, for he must then attempt to create verbal and practical “imitations” of the Forms in the earthly realm – to represent truth in words and deeds. For the notion of the “frontal” view, see Levin (1988, *passim* and 1993a, esp. 202–3), who follows Heidegger in his criticism of ancient conceptions of truth and knowledge.

¹³ Jonas 1966, 147.

¹⁴ Levin 1988, 65; 1993a, 202. Heidegger’s meditations on seeing and theorizing are in fact far more complex than Levin’s (and they evolved as his philosophy matured). For an excellent account of Heidegger’s discussions of the Greek conceptions of *theoria*, see McNeill 1999.

Not surprisingly, once one brings in the will to power, it is but a short step to Derrida's assertion of "the ancient clandestine friendship between light and power, the ancient complicity between theoretical objectivity and technico-political possession."¹⁵

I do not want to discuss the many and incisive attacks on the enterprise of Western metaphysics. Let me simply point out that these critiques of "ocularcentrism" are more pertinent to Cartesian thinking (and, correlatively, to modern science) than to Greek theorizing. In stark contrast to the Cartesian tradition, the Greek theoretical philosophers sought to change themselves rather than the world around them. Indeed, the theoretical understanding of metaphysical objects was far from a neutral, scientific apprehension achieved at a distance: rather, the Greek theorist *distanced himself from the world* in order to achieve a *proximity to metaphysical objects*. Greek theorizing was based on the kinship – rather than the distance – between subject and object. Because of this kinship, the theorizing mind could grasp and even identify with metaphysical objects. In this activity (which was itself driven by a "desire to know") the theorist experienced a powerful *pathos*: a transformation of self and soul.

What, then, is the nature of this pathology? Let us look briefly at the fourth-century theories of physical vision that provided the analogue for theoretical "vision."¹⁶ In the *Timaeus*, Plato claims that human beings possess "light-bearing eyes" (φωσφόρα . . . ὄμματα) – eyes that contain a "pure fire which is akin (ἄδελφόν) to the light of day" (45b). This internal light

flows through the eyes (διὰ τῶν ὀμμάτων ῥεῖν) in a smooth and dense stream . . . and whenever the stream of vision is surrounded by daylight, it flows out like unto like, and by coalescing with this it forms a single body (σῶμα) along the eyes' visual path, wherever the fire which streams out from within makes contact with that which meets it from without. (45c–d)

The human perceiver, then, sends forth the light contained in the eye beyond the boundaries of his body out into the world: the eye's "light" flows forth like a tentacle and meets with the "light of day," which is akin to it.¹⁷ Because of this kinship, the eye's light is able to coalesce with sunlight to form a "single body" of light. When this chain of light comes into contact with things in the world, it "distributes the motions of every object" to the

¹⁵ Derrida 1978, 91.

¹⁶ For discussions of ancient optical theories, including those of Plato and Aristotle, see Beare 1906, Ronchi 1957, Lindberg 1976, 6–9, Burnyeat 1976, and Simon 1988.

¹⁷ It is "similar in its properties because of its similar nature" (45d).

body and soul of the perceiver.¹⁸ Seeing, then, is not the passive reception of external impressions or effluences but a participatory activity in which the human being interacts with its object in the medium of light. In fact, vision occurs when the subject reaches out and, in some sense, “touches” the object. The perceiver’s visual faculty does not, however, become identical with either the light or the object of vision. Rather, the kinship between the “light-bearing eyes” and the external light allows for the perception of the quite different essence of the object.

While Plato’s theory combines extramission and intromission, Aristotle rejects both of these alternatives. In the *De Anima*, Aristotle claims that vision takes place through the transparent medium of light, which stretches from the object to the interior of the human eye. The sense faculty itself must not touch the object – for if one puts an object right up against the eye, the person will not be able to see. Sight can only take place through the medium of light: the object affects the light and, through this medium, the form of the object reaches the sense faculty.¹⁹ According to Aristotle, in perception, an alteration takes place in the perceiver: the sense faculty is acted upon by the object and becomes what that object is “in actuality.”²⁰ Or, to be more precise, this faculty becomes identical with the *form* of the object, for the sense-organ receives sensible forms without their matter (424a–425b, 435a). As Aristotle suggests, “during the process of being acted upon the sentient faculty is unlike, but when it has been acted upon it is assimilated to that object and shares its quality” (418a5–6).²¹ According to this theory, the perceiver does not send forth emanations but rather receives the form of the sense-object through the transparent medium of light. The sense faculty, then, becomes identical to the forms of things in the world:

¹⁸ Plato does not say what the “motions” of the object are, but he suggests in the *Theaetetus* (156d) that the object, as well as the eyes, sends forth emissions: the eyes emit light and the object emits corpuscles (both of which emissions “are carried around in the space between” viewer and viewed).

¹⁹ *De Sensu* II.438a–b, *De Anima* 418a–419a, 432a, 435a. Aristotle offers a different account of vision in the *Meteorology*, where he subscribes to the theory of the extramission of visual rays (2.9.370a–3.4.374b; cf. *De Insomniis*, II.459b–460a). On Aristotle’s theory of vision, see Sorabji 1974 and 1992, Lear 1988, 101–16, Silverman 1989, Burnyeat 1992, Nussbaum and Putnam 1992, Everson 1997, 24–5, 115–16 and *passim*.

²⁰ *DA* 416b33–5, 417a6–20, 418a3–4. According to Aristotle, that which is capable of perception (*to aisthetikon*) is potentially what the sense-object (*to aistheton*) is in actuality (*DA* 418a3–4).

²¹ Whether the alteration in the perceiver is material or nonmaterial (or both) is a matter of debate: Aristotle never quite explains how the human mind becomes aware of a sensible perception. Burnyeat (1992) argues for a nonmaterial account of vision (perceiving requires no concomitant material change): all that is involved in the sense faculty’s taking on the sensible form is the person’s becoming aware of its object; cf. Sorabji 1974 and 1992, Nussbaum and Putnam 1992. Lear (1988, 110–11) argues that neither a purely material account nor a purely mental account is adequate. I favor Nussbaum and Putnam’s position.

this is not a matter of touching or intermingling (as in Plato) but rather of actual identification.

Both Plato's and Aristotle's theories of physical vision illuminate their conceptions of rational or mental "vision" (though Aristotle pushes the analogy between the operation of physical and mental vision further than Plato). In Plato, the light of the Form of the Good makes metaphysical "seeing" possible. Illuminated by this light, the human soul contemplates the Forms, which are ontologically distinct from it: while metaphysical beings are "akin" to *nous* and for that reason intelligible, they are not identical to the rational part of the soul. The living, moving soul seeks to apprehend unitary and unchanging beings that differ from it in kind; yet this apprehension is made possible by a basic kinship between reason and metaphysical realities. Aristotle, by contrast, claims that the mind has the potentiality to become what its objects are in actuality. Here, there is no "spectatorial distance" at all: in the activity of *theoria*, the philosopher's noetic faculty becomes identical with its object.

In philosophic *theoria*, as I have suggested, wandering is translated into wondering. Philosophy originates in wonder and *aporia* and aims for certainty and knowledge. How does the human mind relate and respond to the reality it apprehends? In Plato, the philosopher contemplates divine realities that are "kindred" to the soul but are nonetheless different in kind. When the soul encounters the Forms, it grasps both its kinship to and difference from "reality." By virtue of this kinship, the mind is able to apprehend the Forms, but it also recognizes the ontological uniqueness of these divine beings and thus experiences a powerful sense of awe and wonder. Plato's foundational conception of *theoria*, then, is grounded in a peculiar paradox: when the philosophical theorist achieves a vision of true being, he experiences knowledge and wonder simultaneously. In "seeing" and apprehending metaphysical reality, the Platonic theorist develops a sort of reverential knowledge: wisdom accompanied by wonder and awe.²² In addition, the soul's encounter with "Being" also leads to an understanding of the soul's own nature, boundaries, and capacities. In its ongoing attempts to "see" the Forms, the soul grasps its own nature and limitations by apprehending both its kinship to and difference from these timeless, changeless beings.

For Aristotle, the activity of *theoria* is separate from that of inquiring, learning, and wondering: we may identify it as *sophia* rather than *philosophia*. According to Aristotle, the philosopher "escapes" from wonder

²² See chapter 6 for a full discussion of this issue.

and perplexity when he “theorizes the cause” (τεθρηωρηκόσι τὴν αἰτίαν, *Met.* 983a14–15). When the philosopher “theorizes” or “sees” the cause, he moves from perplexity to knowledge and his wonder comes to an end. Philosophy, then, begins in wonder and culminates in *theoria*. What sort of knowledge does the Aristotelian theorist achieve? Aristotle claims that *theoria* is characterized by the activity and actualization of *nous*, the divine faculty in man. The ultimate object of the theorizing mind is divine *nous* (the primary substance and cause in the universe).²³ In theorizing the first cause, then, the theorist’s noetic faculty becomes identical (for a time) with divine being. By engaging in *theoria*, the theorist actualizes his highest and most divine faculty – the part of man that is, as Aristotle claims, his true self.²⁴

It may seem paradoxical to suggest that *theoria* – the rational apprehension of objective truth – has anything to do with the human “self.” In fact, theoretical contemplation is an activity that transcends the individual’s personal perspective and interests. As Gadamer observes:

Greek metaphysics conceives the essence of *theoria* and of *nous* as being purely present to what is truly real, and for us too the ability to act theoretically is defined by the fact that in attending to something one is able to forget one’s own purposes . . . *Theoria* is a true participation, not something active but something passive (*pathos*), namely being totally involved in and carried away by what one sees . . . Considered as a subjective accomplishment in human conduct, being present has the character of being outside oneself . . . this kind of being present is a self-forgetfulness, and to be a spectator consists in giving oneself in self-forgetfulness to what one is watching.²⁵

How can we attribute selfhood to the “self-forgetful” soul? How can the theorist – who is blind to the world as he contemplates eternal beings – achieve any sort of self-understanding? The fourth-century philosophers went in search of new kinds of selves.²⁶ In particular, they reexamined the boundaries between the human and the divine, positing a kinship between human *nous* and divine and metaphysical beings. Departing from traditional Greek views, these philosophers introduced the notion of a theorizing

²³ I will discuss this in detail in chapter 5.

²⁴ In *NE* x, 1178a2–4, Aristotle claims that *nous* is the true self; in choosing the life of *theoria*, he says, a man chooses the life that belongs “to himself rather than to another.” See also *NE* ix, 1166a16–17.

²⁵ Gadamer 1960/1990, 126–7.

²⁶ Heraclitus – who “went in search of [him]self” (fr. 101 DK) – was the first thinker to explicitly address the question of the “limits” of the soul (fr. 45) and to reconceive the human self as coextensive with a world that transcends the human individual. For an excellent discussion of Heraclitus’ conception of the “self,” see Long 1992, 266–75 (see also Annas 1985, 127–9). The fourth-century philosophers articulated a similar idea, but their theorizing “selves” were completely metaphysical.

self, which they defined in relation to metaphysical and divine beings and to the rationally organized cosmos. In placing the human being in this (new) relation to the divine, these philosophers developed a conception of human identity that was not socially or environmentally defined. Of course Plato and Aristotle fully understood that we are composite creatures that live in the terrestrial realm: their constructions of the theorizing “self” did not blind them to the fact that the embodied human being is defined in relation to the social and natural world. But, by identifying the human self with the best that is in him – the rational faculty – the ancient philosophers invited people to conceive of themselves (and the world) in a whole new way.

THEORIA IN ITS CULTURAL CONTEXT

In his portrait of Palomar contemplating the stars, Calvino makes fun of the nostalgic contemplative and affirms the contemporary understanding of human perception that so radically separates us from the Greek philosophers. Indeed, throughout *Mr. Palomar*, Calvino repeatedly reminds us that the human viewpoint is subjective and perspectival – that the viewer “constructs” what he sees and thus can never achieve the objectivity and truth to which the Greeks laid claim (and which Palomar vainly seeks). Calvino’s comic tale might seem to suggest that the Greek philosophers were rather simple and naive. The very opposite is true: these thinkers grappled with sophisticated arguments for skepticism, relativism, and cultural pluralism; and, in the city of Athens, they confronted the aims and claims of “democratic wisdom,” with its consensualist and egalitarian ideology.²⁷

The ancient conceptions of philosophic *theoria* are much more complex and sophisticated than modern and postmodern interpreters have allowed. In fact, the philosophers of the fourth century set forth a number of different conceptions of *theoria* (responding, among other things, to pragmatist attacks on the theoretical enterprise): our modern and postmodern contestations of ancient *theoria* overlook the fact that this idea was contested from the very beginning. Rather than grouping these theories together under the heading of “ocularcentrism” or “the spectator theory of knowledge,” we need to analyze the different versions of *theoria* offered in the fourth century and to locate these first theories of “theory” in their intellectual and sociopolitical context. From its inception, theoretical philosophy was a discipline characterized by an ongoing dialogue with voices

²⁷ For an excellent discussion of “democratic wisdom,” see Ober 1998.

both inside and outside the academy: the theorists picked a quarrel with traditional ideologies and practices even as they fought energetically for cultural capital.²⁸ From the very beginning, then, theoretical philosophy was a dialogical enterprise: its discourse was multivocal, even when it dreamed of univocity.

In attempting to understand the construction of “theoretical wisdom” in its historical context, we must remember that the fourth-century philosophers were (among other things) powerful polemicists making a serious bid for cultural capital. They claimed legitimacy, authority, and status in the culture at large and instituted the first schools of higher education as centers of “knowledge.” If one looks at intellectual life in the fourth century as a whole, one can see that the philosophers were participating in a broad-scale effort to create a new, cosmopolitan elite identified by culture and education. This effort of elite self-fashioning was, at least in part, directed against democratic ideology and practice. In the fourth-century Athenian democracy, power and money were no longer the markers of elite superiority; indeed it was possible for any citizen to acquire wealth and political influence. Since the aristocrats did not have an exclusive claim to property or political power in this period, many looked for other ways to distinguish themselves from their inferiors (especially the upwardly mobile).²⁹ The possession of a liberal or philosophical education served this purpose, since it identified the elite by recourse to criteria other than wealth or power.³⁰

In addition to being great thinkers, Plato, Aristotle, and their associates were also great rhetoricians: against tremendous odds, they sought to persuade people that the theoretical philosopher is the most free, noble, and happy human being. This individual is a new kind of *aristos*, and is identified and defined by traditional aristocratic markers. In particular, the claim that *theoria* is nonproductive, leisured, and fully free directly reflects the aristocratic ideology of classical Greece. All of the fourth-century philosophers define *theoria* in opposition to “banausic” activities and manual forms of labor (though each philosopher uses this rhetoric in a different way). And all identify theoretical philosophy as the only truly “free” activity, contrasting it with the “servile” pursuits of lesser individuals. Aristotle goes even further, arguing that theoretical activity is completely impractical and

²⁸ On Plato’s “dialogical” definition and practice of philosophy, see Nightingale 1995.

²⁹ See, e.g., Aristotle *NE* II, 1107b16–20, IV, 1122a28–33, and especially IV, 1123a18–27 (on these and related passages, see Von Reden 1995, 85 and Nightingale 1996b, 32–3).

³⁰ As Raafaub (1983, 534) has shown, the rhetoric of “illiberal” and “liberal” arts and activities (which included those of “philosophy”) was part of a larger ideology constructed by aristocrats hostile to democracy.

nonproductive. To be sure, these philosophers deploy aristocratic rhetoric in order to elevate themselves above traditional aristocrats; they do not simply pay lip-service to aristocratic ideology. But their use of this rhetoric reveals the elitist, antidemocratic aspect of theoretical philosophy in its foundational constructions.

Of course there were other important factors that contributed to the construction of the discipline of theoretical philosophy in the fourth century.³¹ One should note, in particular, the institution of philosophical schools and the increasing use and dissemination of written texts. These new forms of promulgating wisdom introduced a system of intellectual and cultural exchange quite different from that operating in the sixth or fifth centuries. In founding the first school of “philosophy” (circa 393 BCE), Isocrates created an educational institution permanently settled in one place which, offered a lengthy and systematic course of study.³² This new institutional form offered the possibility of extensive intellectual interchange in a private and leisured environment. Soon after Isocrates, Plato founded the Academy, using the Pythagorean *thiasos* or religious brotherhood as a model; refusing to take fees, Plato created an organization devoted to the cult of the Muses. Finally, in the 330s, Aristotle established his own philosophical school in the Lyceum.³³ People from all over the Greek world – including many powerful and influential men – came to study at these schools, many of whom were attracted by the written works of these philosophers. These institutions of learning conferred on the philosophers an established position and great prestige in the Greek world, thus rendering it unnecessary for them to travel abroad or perform in public to attract students.

In addition, because of the spread of literacy in the fourth century, the dissemination of written texts could take the place of verbal displays of wisdom.³⁴ The need for public performances of wisdom was thus reduced if not eliminated. Clearly, a written text could travel the Greek world far

³¹ In the fourth century, a different kind of elite began to emerge, one defined by (higher, specialized) education rather than by aristocratic lineage, wealth, or power.

³² Like the sophists, Isocrates charged a fee for his teaching (1,000 drachmas for a 3–4 year course of study), but he was neither a traveler nor a performer: students came to Athens from all over Greece to enroll in his school.

³³ Initially the Lyceum was housed in public buildings (since Aristotle, as a metic, could not own property in Athens), but Theophrastus (Aristotle’s successor as the head of the Lyceum) bought property near the grove and created a permanent place for the school. For a detailed discussion of Aristotle’s school, see Lynch 1972.

³⁴ On the extent of literacy in classical Athens and the ways in which writing was used in this period, see Harris 1989, ch. 4, Thomas 1989, ch. 1 and 1992, ch. 7. Of course many philosophers who disseminated ideas in writing felt anxiety about the efficacy of this new technology (see, e.g., Alcidas “On the Sophists,” Plato, *Phaedrus* 275d–e, Isocrates *To Philip* 25–7).

more easily than its author. The disembodied word had the advantage of communicating across great distances and creating a community of readers that transcended civic politics. At the same time, writing facilitated the presentation of long and technical arguments and gave readers a chance to study and respond to difficult ideas.³⁵ The fact that Plato and Aristotle attracted pupils from all over Greece would suggest that their writings were widely disseminated.³⁶ By reaching beyond the boundaries of their own cities, these philosophers communicated with like-minded, educated Greeks, thus contributing to the formation of an elite community of cultured intellectuals.

THE CREATION OF THE PHILOSOPHIC THEORIST

How did the fourth-century philosophers conceptualize “theoretical” wisdom and define it as an intellectual practice? The central metaphor used in the philosophic literature of this period was that of spectating at a religious festival. We find an excellent example of the philosophic use of this metaphor in a fragment of Heraclides of Pontus (a member of Plato’s Academy), which is summarized by Cicero. In this passage, Heraclides draws an explicit parallel between the *theoros* at the Olympic games and the philosophic theorist, who contemplates “the nature of things”:³⁷

The life of man resembles the festival [at Olympia] celebrated with the most magnificent games before a gathering collected from all of Greece. For at this festival some men trained their bodies and sought to win the glorious distinction of a crown, and others came to make a profit by buying or selling. But there was also a certain class, made up of the noblest men, who sought neither applause nor gain, but came for the sake of spectating and closely watched the event and how it was done.³⁸

³⁵ Though Goody and Watt (1968) go too far in claiming that the technology of writing caused the conceptual shift that made philosophic thinking possible (see also Havelock 1963). Lloyd (1987, 70–83) offers a compelling response to Goody and Watt’s thesis.

³⁶ For a discussion of the readership of Plato and Isocrates in the fourth century, see Usener 1994, 74–119, 174–230.

³⁷ Heraclides puts this idea in the mouth of Pythagoras, thus retrojecting this fourth-century conception of wisdom back onto the ancients and investing it with a venerable pedigree (as Jaeger 1923/1948, Appendix, Burkert 1960, and Gottschalk 1980, 29–33 have demonstrated; cf. Joly 1956, 22 and *passim*). I will discuss this revisionist move in more detail below.

³⁸ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* v.3: *esset autem quoddam genus eorum idque vel maxime ingenuum, qui nec plausum nec lucrum quaererent, sed visendi causa venirent studioseque perspicerent quid ageretur et quo modo*. A similar account is found in Iamblichus’ *Life of Pythagoras* 58 (though this does not mention Heraclides as the author). Gottschalk (1980) offers a complete study of the extant fragments of Heraclides; he discusses Heraclides’ “Image of the Festival” (and the dialogue in which it was included) in ch. 2.

Here, Heraclides depicts three groups of individuals gathered at the Olympian festival: the competitors, who seek glory and honor; the businessmen, who pursue wealth; and the *theoroi*, who go to the festival simply “for the sake of spectating.” This latter group provides the model for the theoretical philosophers. For, as Heraclides claims, the philosopher resembles “the most liberal man at the Olympic festival, who spectates without seeking anything for himself” (*liberalissimum esset spectare nihil sibi acquirentem*). The “noble” philosophers, Heraclides says, are “a special few who, counting all else as nothing, studiously contemplate (*intuerentur*) the nature of things.” In this passage, then, Heraclides claims that the activity of contemplative “spectating” is disinterested, noble, and liberal: the philosophical theorist engages in the contemplation of metaphysical realities as an end in itself.

Aristotle uses this same “festival image” in his popularizing dialogue, the *Protrepticus*:

Wisdom is not useful or advantageous (*χρησίμη . . . μηδ' ὠφέλιμος*), for we call it not advantageous but good, and it should be chosen not for the sake of any other thing, but for itself. For just as we go to the Olympian festival for the sake of the spectacle (*θέας*), even if nothing more should come of it – for the *theoria* (*θεωρία*) itself is more precious than money; and just as we go to theorize (*θεωροῦμεν*) at the Festival of Dionysus not so that we will gain anything from the actors (indeed we pay to see them) . . . so too the *theoria* (*θεωρία*) of the universe must be honored above all things that are considered to be useful (*χρησίων*). For surely we should not go to such trouble to see men imitating women and slaves, or athletes fighting and running, and not consider it right to theorize without payment (*θεωρεῖν ἄμισθί*) the nature and truth of reality. (B44)³⁹

Here, Aristotle compares the philosophic “theorist” to the *theoros* who goes to a festival to see dramatic, musical, or athletic competitions. Aristotle emphasizes that both do this “for the sake of the spectacle” rather than for profit or gain, though he clearly elevates the philosophic theorist above the ordinary *theoros* (who views the inferior spectacles of drama and athletics). The philosophic *theoros* contemplates “the nature of truth and reality,” pursuing this as an end in itself rather than for goal-oriented, utilitarian purposes. For this reason, philosophic *theoria* is not “useful or advantageous” and does not offer any “payment” or wage in the external world – rather, it is a completely free and leisured activity. Like Heraclides, Aristotle claims that the theorist does not seek personal profit but engages in an activity that is noble, impractical, and disinterested.⁴⁰

³⁹ In this book, I will use Düring’s edition of the *Protrepticus*, with his numeration of the fragments.

⁴⁰ I will discuss Aristotle’s *Protrepticus* in detail in chapter 5.

As these passages reveal, Heraclides and Aristotle defined *theoria* in opposition to practical activities: contemplation was starkly contrasted with economic transactions or political affairs. The theoretical philosopher, when he engages in contemplation, is disembedded from the social and political systems of exchange in the city and engages in transactions in a completely different sphere. The construction of this opposition between contemplation and action led, in turn, to the distinction between the theoretical and the practical (or political) life, and the question whether *theoria* had any purchase in the practical realm.⁴¹ Numerous philosophers in the fourth century discussed and debated these issues. As we will see, some thinkers in this period, cleaving to traditional notions of wisdom, championed the life of practical and political “virtue”; others extolled a life that combines contemplative and political activities; and yet others valorized the purely contemplative life.

Aristotle provides evidence of the fourth-century debate over this issue in the *Politics*. In book VII, he outlines a contemporary controversy over the question whether one should choose

the life of politics and action (ὁ πολιτικός καὶ πρακτικός βίος) or rather a life detached from all external affairs, for example a theoretical life (θεωρητικός), which some say is the only life for the philosopher (τινὲς φασιν εἶναι φιλοσόφου). (VII.2, 1324a25–9)

Here, Aristotle links together politics and moral *praxis* – the man living this kind of life displays his practical virtue in the political arena.⁴² Aristotle sets this in opposition to the “theoretical life,” which has little if any involvement in “external affairs” but aims, instead, at contemplative wisdom. He also reports that some thinkers consider that the purely contemplative life is the *only* one for philosophers; we may infer that other advocates of *theoria* consider intellectual contemplation the principle but not the exclusive aim of the philosophical life. Note that the distinction between the two kinds of life hinges on the participation in or detachment from political affairs – the practical life involves “active citizenship and participation in politics,” whereas the theoretical life is “that of a foreigner, detached from political participation” (ὁ διὰ τοῦ συμπολιτεύεσθαι καὶ κοινωνεῖν πόλεως . . . ὁ

⁴¹ Note that some fifth-century texts (e.g. Euripides’ *Antiope*, *Ion*, and *Hippolytus*) set forth the idea that a quietist life is superior to the life of politics. In this period, quietism was associated with “musical” or religious activity rather than philosophy (indeed, as I have argued, “philosophy” had not yet been constructed as a specialized discipline). See, e.g., July 1956, Carter 1986 (I discuss the debate over the political and “musical” life in the *Antiope* in Nightingale 1995, ch. 2).

⁴² See also *NE* x.7–8.

ξενικός καὶ τῆς πολιτικῆς κοινωνίας ἀπολελυμένος).⁴³ The contemplative philosopher, according to this account, lives as a “*xenikos*” – a (virtual) foreigner who is a sort of stranger in the polis.

Having set forth this debate in general terms, Aristotle examines the arguments used to bolster these positions:

Some reject the idea of holding political offices in the city, believing that the life of the free man is different from that of the political man and the most choiceworthy of all; others consider the political life superior on the grounds that a man who does nothing cannot do well, and doing well and happiness are the same thing.⁴⁴

The proponents of the theoretical life, then, use “freedom” as the marker of the good and happy life; by “freedom” they mean leisure and detachment from external exigencies and constraints (rather than mere political freedom). Advocates of the practical life, on the other hand, identify “action” as the marker of the good life; the theorists, they say, are “doing nothing” and thus can’t be said to live well. Aristotle admits that both sides have some claim to truth; in the end, however, he argues for the superiority of the theoretical life:

The active life is not necessarily active in relation to other people, as some men think, nor are only those thoughts active that are pursued for the sake of the things that result from action, but far more [active] are those theoretical ideas and thoughts that are ends in themselves and pursued for their own sake.⁴⁵

Here, Aristotle rejects the pragmatists’ argument by claiming that *theoria* is eminently “active” even though it does not aim at external results or goals and is done “for its own sake.”⁴⁶

Aristotle does not refer to the participants in this debate by name, but we can certainly identify some of the major players. Of the extant fourth-century authors, Isocrates champions practical and political over theoretical philosophy, Plato and Philip argue that the philosophic life combines

⁴³ *Politics* VII.2, 1324a15–17.

⁴⁴ οἱ μὲν γὰρ ἀποδοκιμάζουσι τὰς πολιτικὰς ἀρχάς, νομίζοντες τὸν τε τοῦ ἐλευθέρου βίον ἔπερόν τινα εἶναι τοῦ πολιτικοῦ καὶ πάντων αἰρετώτατον, οἱ δὲ τοῦτον ἄριστον, ἀδύνατον γὰρ τὸν μηθεὶν πράττοντα πράττειν εὖ, τὴν δ’ εὐπραγίαν καὶ τὴν εὐδαιμονίαν ταύτων (VII.3, 1325a18–23).

⁴⁵ ἀλλὰ τὸν πρακτικὸν οὐκ ἀναγκαῖον εἶναι πρὸς ἑτέρους, καθάπερ οἴονται τινες, οὐδὲ τὰς διανοίας εἶναι μόνας ταύτας πρακτικὰς, τὰς τῶν ἀποβαινόντων χάριν γιγνομένης ἐκ τοῦ πράττειν, ἀλλὰ πολὺ μᾶλλον τὰς αὐτοτελεῖς καὶ τὰς αὐτῶν ἕνεκεν θεωρίας καὶ διανοήσεις (VII.3, 1325b16–21).

⁴⁶ Aristotle adds that cities are “active” even when isolationist; and god is active even though he has no external activities.

contemplation and virtuous action (which is based on theoretical wisdom), and Aristotle detaches *theoria* from *praxis*, ranking the theoretical life as the best and happiest.⁴⁷ As fragmentary evidence attests, Heraclides of Pontus, Theophrastus, and Dicaearchus also weighed in on this issue, and no doubt many other figures participated in the debate whose names have been lost (e.g. the author of the *Magna Moralia*). Cicero, for example, tells us that Dicaearchus and Theophrastus (both members of Aristotle's Lyceum) took opposite sides in the controversy, the former championing the practical life and the latter the theoretical life.⁴⁸

As I have suggested, some men participating in this debate advocated a pragmatist programme that was diametrically opposed to the claims of the “theorists.” These thinkers aligned themselves with traditional Greek notions of wisdom, explicitly opposing the newly invented discipline of theoretical philosophy. One of the most influential proponents of pragmatism was Isocrates, who offered a direct response to the arguments for *theoria* issuing from the Academy and Lyceum. In the *Antidosis*, for example, Isocrates reports that most men believe that philosophers who are “skilled in disputation or in astronomy, geometry, and things of that sort” are doing nothing but “prattling and splitting hairs, since none of these things is useful (χρήσιμον) either in private or in public life” (261–2). Isocrates goes on to agree that these studies are useless (μηδὲν χρησίμην . . . τὴν παιδείαν ταύτην, 263), and claims that the name “philosopher” should not be given to these abstract thinkers “who ignore the things that are necessary” (τοὺς δὲ τῶν μὲν ἀναγκαίων ἀμελοῦντας, 284–5). In fact, he argues, one should only give this title to “those who learn and practice the studies which will enable them to manage wisely their private households and the commonwealth of the city, since it is for the sake of these things that one should work, philosophize, and act” (285). Isocrates thus champions a pragmatic, antitheoretical brand of philosophy explicitly designated as “useful” and geared towards the “necessary” aspects of human life: he exalts his own wisdom precisely by reference to its relevance for practical and political life.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Though the theorist will of course engage in practical activities insofar as he is a human being – a “composite” of body and soul.

⁴⁸ *Letters to Atticus*, 11.16: *tanta controversia est Dicaecharcho, familiari tuo, cum Theophrasto, amico meo, ut ille tuus τὸν πρακτικὸν βίον longe omnibus anteponat, hic autem τὸν θεωρητικὸν . . .*

⁴⁹ According to Einarson (1936, 272–8), Aristotle's *Protrepticus* was a direct response to Isocrates' arguments in the *Antidosis*; the fact that both authors use the same terminology of “useful/useless,” “necessary/unnecessary” is indeed striking (see also Eucken 1983 for a more detailed discussion of Isocrates' response to the positions adopted in the Academy and the Lyceum).

FOURTH-CENTURY “REVISIONINGS” OF THE EARLY
GREEK THINKERS

The development of *theoria* in the fourth century marked a significant departure from previous theories and intellectual practices. Scholars have not fully acknowledged this shift, in part because the fourth-century philosophers themselves represented theoretical philosophy as an ancient, time-honored practice. In making this revisionist move, they claimed that early thinkers such as Thales, Pythagoras, and Anaxagoras were engaging in *theoria* and living the “theoretical” life – i.e. the life of detached, non-political contemplatives. But, as earlier sources attest, these (and other) preplatonic thinkers were highly political and pragmatic *sophoi*. As I will argue, the fourth-century philosophers retrojected their own conception of theoretical wisdom back onto the ancients and thus invested it with a venerable pedigree.⁵⁰ This projection of fourth-century conceptions of philosophy onto earlier Greek thinkers has the effect of concealing the radical paradigm shift that occurred in this period.

We find an excellent example of this revisionist move in Aristotle’s *Protrepticus*. According to Aristotle, Pythagoras and Anaxagoras were philosophers whose sole purpose was to contemplate and, indeed, to “theorize” the heavens:

For what end did nature and god bring us into being? Pythagoras, when asked this question, said, “to behold the heaven” (θεάσασθαι . . . τὸν οὐρανόν) and he also claimed that he was a *theoros* of nature (θεωρόν . . . τῆς φύσεως) and that he had come into being for this purpose. And when someone asked Anaxagoras for what end he would choose to exist and live, he said “for the sake of beholding (θεάσασθαι) the heaven and the stars and the moon and sun,” since all other things were worth nothing (τῶν ἄλλων γε πάντων οὐδενὸς ἀξίῳ ὄντων) . . . Whether the cosmos is the object of this knowledge or some other nature, we must inquire later; but this is sufficient as a beginning. (B18–20)

These early Greek thinkers, Aristotle asserts, practiced theoretical philosophy and considered this the highest form of wisdom. Note, however, the slight qualification in the last line: Pythagoras and Anaxagoras contemplated the physical cosmos rather than metaphysical objects (which, from Aristotle’s perspective, is a primitive form of *theoria*).

⁵⁰ As Jaeger 1923/1948, Appendix, Burkert 1960, and Gottschalk 1980, 29–33 have demonstrated; cf. Joly 1956, 22 and *passim*.

Aristotle expresses a similar idea in the *Nicomachean Ethics* book VI:

People say that men such as Anaxagoras and Thales are wise (*sophoi*) but not prudent (*phronimoi*) when they see them displaying their ignorance of things that are advantageous to themselves; they believe that these men possess a knowledge that is rare, marvellous, difficult, and divine, but that it is useless because they do not seek things that are good for human beings. (VI.7, 1141b)

Here, Aristotle draws a stark contrast between the wise (*sophos*) and the prudent (*phronimos*) man in order to illustrate the differences between theoretical and practical wisdom.⁵¹ In this passage, Aristotle claims that Thales and Anaxagoras pursued the theoretical life of “useless” contemplation and paid no attention to earthly affairs. Aristotle thus portrays his predecessors – all of whom were famous for their practical and political activities – as proto-theorists who turned their back on the human world to contemplate higher realities.

Plato makes a similar move in the “digression” in the *Theaetetus*, where he draws a stark contrast between the contemplative philosopher and the politician (172c–176d). In this passage, Socrates reports that Thales fell into a well while gazing at the stars because he didn’t see what was at his feet (174a–b). Once again, we find a fourth-century text representing an ancient sage as a philosophic contemplative.⁵² Here, Thales is stargazing rather than engaging in metaphysical *theoria* (though his practice of astronomy was no doubt based on expertise in mathematics). Although Socrates does not explicitly identify him as a “theorizer” (by using the terminology of *theoria*), he clearly represents Thales as living an exclusively contemplative life. In fact, this passage depicts, for the first and only time in Plato, an impractical philosopher who is completely ignorant of human affairs: he doesn’t know his neighbors, doesn’t notice what he is doing, and “scarcely knows whether he is a man or some other kind of creature” (174b).⁵³ Indeed, this philosopher experiences complete *aporia* in the human world, since

⁵¹ Although Aristotle credits some unnamed “people” with this view, he appears to agree with their basic position.

⁵² One might think that the *Hippias Major* 281c offers a similar account of earlier thinkers. Here, Socrates says that most of the early wise men down to Anaxagoras kept clear of politics. But he is almost certainly being ironic, for he has just mentioned Pittacus, Bias, and Thales, who were famous for their political activities.

⁵³ Even the otherworldly *Phaedo* does not suggest that the philosopher, while on earth, is or should be impractical and ignorant of human affairs. We must remember that, in the *Phaedo*, the ideal of “practicing death” is set forth by Socrates – a philosopher who pursues a practical form of wisdom and who has extensive interactions with the city and people of Athens. Note also the claim at the opening of the *Sophist* that the true philosopher comes in many guises, including that of the sophist and statesman (216c–d).

“only his body lives and sleeps in the city” while his mind wings its way up into the heavens (173e–174a).

I do not believe that Plato endorsed this extreme form of contemplative philosophy. Rather, he includes in his dialogue a conception of philosophy – no doubt embraced by some contemporary thinkers – that conflicts, in important ways, with his depiction of the philosopher in the dialogues dealing with *theoria*.⁵⁴ In particular, the fact that he puts this extreme view in the mouth of Socrates should certainly give us pause. For Socrates pursued a form of wisdom that was ethical and practical; in addition, he was intimately connected with numerous people and seriously engaged with the political issues of the day.⁵⁵ But, regardless of whether Plato espoused this conception of the philosopher (here represented by the contemplative Thales), the very existence of this story about Thales is revealing. For it reminds us that philosophers of the fourth century were refiguring certain archaic thinkers as contemplative “theorists.”

Heraclides also engages in this revisionist project. For example, he put the “festival-image” (quoted above) in the mouth of Pythagoras: it was Pythagoras, he suggests, who was the first to call himself a philosopher, the first to practice *theoria*. Scholars have rejected this attribution, since before the fourth century the word *philosophia* signified “intellectual cultivation” in the broadest sense and did not pick out a specific discipline or intellectual practice.⁵⁶ In asserting that Pythagoras identified himself not only as a “philosopher” but a philosopher engaged in *theoria*, Heraclides clearly retrojects the fourth-century conception of theoretical philosophy back onto the ancients. In another fragment of a dialogue of Heraclides, moreover, we find Thales claiming that he always lived in solitude as a private individual and kept aloof from state affairs.⁵⁷ In stark contrast to earlier sources, who describe Thales as a political and pragmatic sage, Heraclides turns him into a solitary contemplative. Finally, Heraclides even identified the mythological figure Atlas as a wise astronomer: as he claims, the story

⁵⁴ See, e.g., Rue 1993; I am much indebted to Long, “Plato’s Apologies” (1998), though I do not agree that the digression represents Plato’s own view. Note that Plato claims in the *Republic* 600a that Thales is “a *sophos* in practical affairs,” adding that “many clever inventions in technical and practical affairs” have been ascribed to him (as well as to the Scythian Anacharsis). Here, as well as at *Protagoras* 343a, Plato reflects the traditional view of Thales as a prototypical sage. It is only in the *Theaetetus* that he reports the story that Thales is a contemplative.

⁵⁵ As Blondell (2002, 298–302) rightly argues. According to Blondell, the differences between Socrates and the contemplative philosopher he describes here reveal that Plato “implicitly acknowledg[es] the inadequacy of the ideal in question as a model for actual human life.” As she claims, the idealized philosopher in the *Theaetetus* offers a paradigm which is “inaccessible to embodied human beings in any literal sense, but still valuable as a source of inspiration . . .” (p. 292).

⁵⁶ Burkert 1960, Nightingale 1995, ch. 1 and *passim*. ⁵⁷ Diogenes Laertius (hereafter DL) 1.25–6.

that Atlas carried the world on his shoulders reveals – when interpreted allegorically – that he practiced philosophical speculation.⁵⁸ Here, *theoria* is even injected into the mythic realm.

Let me emphasize that the philosophers of the fourth century generally portrayed the early thinkers as engaging in a primitive form of *theoria*: the contemplation of the stars. This kind of *theoria* is astronomical rather than metaphysical, and is therefore identified as a mere precursor of the theoretical contemplation of immaterial “realities.” These early thinkers, then, engaged in a form of *theoria* that anticipated – but still fell short of – “true” *theoria*, which is essentially metaphysical. Strictly speaking, they are proto-theorists, since they focused on the cosmos rather than on higher realities.

As I have indicated, the fourth-century philosophers offered an anachronistic account of the early Greek thinkers: in fact, these individuals were far from theoretical contemplatives. Consider, for example, Thales of Miletus, who was ranked by posterity as both a Sage (one of the elite Seven) and a Philosopher. The fifth-century historian Herodotus offers several short accounts of him in the *Histories*. In book 1, he tells us that Thales predicted an eclipse and that he engineered the diversion of the river Halys for the benefit of Croesus and his army (when they attempted to invade Persia). Herodotus also reports that, when the Ionians in Asia Minor were being subdued by the Persians, Thales fought to create a confederation of Ionian city-states with a supreme deliberative council in the city of Teos.⁵⁹ Diogenes Laertius (third century CE) relates another story about Thales’ “cunning intelligence”: in order to demonstrate how easy it was to get rich, Thales, foreseeing that it would be a good season for olives, rented all the oil-presses and obtained a monopoly on the proceeds.⁶⁰ These stories about Thales portray a man of many skills. Alongside his astronomical expertise and cosmological thinking, he demonstrates a good deal of practical wisdom: engineering the diversion of a river, serving as a leader in

⁵⁸ Note that Dicaearchus, in arguing for a pragmatist conception of philosophy, also looks to the ancients for support: he exalts the ancient wise men who “did not philosophize in words [but rather] by the practice of noble deeds” above the later philosophers who turned to discourse and disputation (fr. 31 Wehrli).

⁵⁹ Herodotus *Histories* 1.74–5, 170. DL 1.25 reports that Thales advised the Milesians to reject the alliance offered to them by Croesus, which ended up saving them when Croesus was at war with Cyrus.

⁶⁰ DL 1.26. Cf. Aristotle, who also reports that this story “is told” about Thales (*Politics* 1.4, 1259a). In fact, this story about Thales conflicts with Aristotle’s claim in the *NE* (vi.7, 1141b3–8) that Thales was a contemplative. In the *Politics* (1259a), Aristotle reports the story of Thales and the olive-presses as mere hearsay; as he adds, although the creation of a monopoly “was attributed to Thales because of his wisdom,” in fact it is a universal principle of business.

political affairs, and exhibiting a keen understanding of agriculture and commerce.⁶¹

Pythagoras, too, was a fundamentally practical and political sage.⁶² This remarkable figure, who almost certainly did not publish any writings, developed a complete and systematic “art of living.” Pythagoras instituted a new mode of life by creating a religious society in the city of Croton. The members of this society, which included women as well as men, lived a life of austerity and discipline that featured a vegetarian diet, the practice of self-examination, obedience to precepts known as *akousmata*, and a strict code of silence about Pythagorean doctrine and practice. Pythagoras and his followers, then, adopted an entire way of life; their ideas and doctrines translated directly into daily *praxis* (for example, their belief in the immortality of the soul and its transmigration into animals led them to abstain from meat). Insofar as Pythagoreanism offered its members hidden knowledge that could not be divulged, it resembled the mystery religions, which promised to benefit initiates by the revelation of secret wisdom. In addition to these private and secret practices, however, Pythagoras participated fully in political life; in fact, he and his followers are said to have taken over the government of Croton.

It comes as a great surprise, then, when fourth-century philosophers represent thinkers such as Thales, Pythagoras, and Anaxagoras as theoretical philosophers who lived a private life devoted exclusively to contemplation. What is at stake – intellectually and culturally – in the shift from the conception of the wise man as practical, political, and polymathic to that of the contemplative philosopher engaged in metaphysical *theoria*? How did the “theoretical” philosophers of the fourth century conceptualize and legitimize this new form of wisdom?

ARISTOTLE’S “HISTORY” OF PHILOSOPHY

In analyzing this “historicizing” project, we must remember that the history of philosophy, as a genre, did not emerge until the later part of the fourth century BCE (following, as one would expect, the creation of philosophy as a specialized discipline in the first half of the century). Aristotle offers the earliest systematic attempt to organize and analyze the doctrines of his predecessors, and is thus identified as the first historian of

⁶¹ See also Aristophanes *Clouds* 180, and *Birds* 1009, which identify Thales as a practical/political sage (a view echoed by Plato in *Protagoras* 343a, and *Republic* 600a).

⁶² On Pythagoras and the early Pythagoreans, see Burkert 1972, Kahn 2001, chs. 1–3.

philosophy.⁶³ Although Aristotle offers precious evidence of the ideas of the early thinkers, scholars have long recognized that his historical accounts in the *Metaphysics* I (and *Physics*) are highly tendentious. For Aristotle constructs his “history” as a discussion of the evolution of the ideas that he himself sets forth, for the first time, in a full way (especially the doctrine of the four causes). The only early thinkers who qualify as “philosophers” are those who apprehended at least one of Aristotle’s four causes and who articulated this in language that was “clear.”⁶⁴ Aristotle thus separates the early philosophers from nonphilosophical poets and writers by recourse to the clarity of their exposition.⁶⁵

Having thus separated the philosophers from other early authors, Aristotle proceeds to use the same criterion – that of clarity – to distinguish earlier, “immature” philosophy from his own philosophic work. For example, he dismisses Xenophanes and Melissus on the grounds that they are “crude” (ἀγροικότεροι, 986b25–7) and claims that the thinkers up through Empedocles set forth their ideas in a fashion that was “vague and unclear” (ἀμυδρῶς μέντοι καὶ οὐθὲν σαφῶς, 985a13). He then compares these early thinkers to untrained men in battle who “rush around and often strike fine blows but act without understanding”; they “do not appear to understand the things that they say, since they rarely if ever apply them” (985a14–18). Finally, after surveying all his predecessors up through Plato, Aristotle claims that these thinkers were “groping, albeit vaguely” (ἀμυδρῶς) for the ideas that he himself has articulated (988a20–3).

But the early thinkers were not just vague and unclear: as philosophers, they were immature and even infantile. Thus, according to Aristotle, “Empedocles speaks in baby talk” (ψελλιζέται), and therefore one must read him “with a view to his underlying ideas” in order to ascertain the philosophical doctrines hidden in the verse (985a4–6).⁶⁶ At the end of the

⁶³ Hippias, in his “Anthology of Related Sayings,” and Plato (especially in the late dialogues) both attempt to organize the ideas of their predecessors; so far as we can tell, Hippias’ account was very general and sketchy, and Plato discusses the early Greek thinkers only when they are relevant to a given argument in a dialogue. On the pre-Aristotelian discussions of the early thinkers, see Mansfeld 1990, chs. 1 and 2.

⁶⁴ For a discussion of Aristotle’s use of the notion of “clarity” in his efforts to demarcate poetry and philosophy (and, in turn, immature and mature philosophy), see Mansfeld 1990, 22–83 and cf. 126–46.

⁶⁵ As Aristotle says in the *Poetics*, Homer is a poet and Empedocles a philosopher, even though they both write in verse (1447b17–20).

⁶⁶ Plato (*Gorgias* 485b) and Aristotle (*Historia Animalium* 536b8 and *Problems* 902b22) use the words ψελλιζέται and the adjectival ψελλός to refer to the speech of babies and small children. *Problems* 902b22 defines “baby talk” as the “inability to join one syllable to another sufficiently quickly” (which is the result of the fact that young children do not yet have control over their tongues – a point which Aristotle reiterates in *HA* 536b8; see also *PA* 660a26).

historical excursus in *Metaphysics* I, Aristotle makes this same claim of all the early philosophers:

That all seem to have been searching for the causes described in the *Physics*, and that we cannot speak of any cause outside of these [four], is clear even from the things said by earlier thinkers. But they spoke of these things vaguely (ἀμυδρῶς), and although in one sense these ideas have all been stated before, in another they have never been articulated at all. For early philosophy talked, so to speak, in baby-talk (ψελλιζομένη), since it was young and in its infancy (ἄτε νέα τε καὶ κατ' ἀρχὰς οὔσα). (993a11–16)

The “history of philosophy” in *Metaphysics* I, then, offers a biological account in which philosophy started as a babbling infant and then slowly grew into the mature doctrines of Aristotle.⁶⁷ For, in Aristotle’s view, his predecessors were “groping” to understand the doctrines of causality that he himself has fully articulated. Indeed, according to Cicero, Aristotle explicitly claimed to be bringing philosophy to its perfect *telos*:

Aristotle, upbraiding the early philosophers for claiming that philosophy had been perfected by their own genius, says that they were either completely foolish or completely conceited, but adds that, as he saw it, philosophy would in a short time be brought to completion (since in a short period of years a great advance had been made). (*Tusculan Disputations* III.28.69)

Although this report may not be fully accurate, it chimes well with Aristotle’s evolutionary account of the discipline of philosophy in the *Metaphysics* I.

As a “historian” of early philosophy, then, Aristotle makes a double move: he claims that the ancients attempted to develop and practice theoretical philosophy, but then argues that they could not articulate their theories clearly because philosophy was “in its infancy.” The ancients therefore give Aristotle’s own theoretical activities a venerable pedigree even as they point up his vast superiority to the entire tradition. Not surprisingly, Aristotle pays no attention to the practical or political activities of the individuals he discusses; rather, he treats them as proto-theorists. To be sure, his “history” of philosophy makes a very important contribution to the history of ideas, but it offers a distorted picture of early Greek wisdom and completely obscures the pragmatic and polymathic nature of the Presocratic thinkers. Ultimately, Aristotle’s projection of “theoretical philosophy” onto

⁶⁷ For example, Aristotle says that Anaxagoras, in claiming that there is *nous* in nature, “was like a sober man in comparison with his predecessors, who spoke incoherently.” (984b15–18). But this sign of “progress” does not mean that philosophy had escaped from the “unclarity” of its beginnings: even Plato, Aristotle claims, “uses empty phrases (*kenologeîn*) and poetic metaphors” when he says that the Forms are patterns (991a20–2).

the ancients has the effect of concealing important differences between the early Greek thinkers and the philosophers of the fourth century.

SOPHIA IN THE SIXTH AND FIFTH CENTURIES BCE

In order to locate the development of philosophic *theoria* in its intellectual and cultural context, I want to discuss, in very general terms, the conception and practice of wisdom in sixth- and fifth-century Greece. A brief look at this period will provide the historical backdrop for the radical turn taken by the fourth-century theoretical philosophers. First of all, the preplatonic thinkers did not conceptualize or formulate a “spectator theory of knowledge,” nor did they privilege disinterested contemplation over practical or political activities. In fact, they did not even call themselves philosophers. They did of course engage in some forms of philosophical speculation, but this intellectual activity was not distinguished or detached from other forms of wisdom. Indeed, the preplatonic thinkers did not treat theoretical, practical, and productive wisdom as separate or distinct categories. It is difficult for us to think this distinction away and to imagine a culture that had a completely different sense of the nature and operation of wisdom. But we must remember that the sixth- and fifth-century thinkers did not acknowledge or use Aristotelian categorizations; they had a more fluid and inclusive conception of “higher” wisdom than the philosophers of the fourth century.

In the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, the term *sophoi* had a wide range of application (including poets, prophets, doctors, statesmen, astronomers, scientists, historians, inventors, and various kinds of artisans); it did not pick out a specific kind of wisdom or expertise. Although, in this period, different kinds of wise men were seen to be practicing distinct activities, there was nonetheless a generalized competition among the different groups for the title of “wise man.” It was not until the late fifth century that intellectuals began to construct boundaries between disciplines such as philosophy, history, medicine, rhetoric, and various other *technai*, and even then they did not distinguish between theoretical, technical, and pragmatic modes of wisdom.⁶⁸ Throughout the fifth century, philosophers, historians, sophists, and physicians worked within a single, quite broad intellectual

⁶⁸ As Thomas (2000, 31) claims, “there were few demarcations between the various groups who may be categorized by modern scholars as Presocratics, natural philosophers, sophists, and doctors – even if you accept, for instance, the distinction that sophists share their wisdom for money, the interests and methods of prominent individual sophists, as conventionally labelled (e.g. Protagoras, Prodicus) are by no means entirely distinct from some of the *physiologoi* or natural philosophers or from certain writers in the Hippocratic Corpus.” See also Nehamas 1990, Vegetti 1999.

matrix: these individuals competed with one another (and, at times, with poets, prophets, and politicians) for prestige and authority.⁶⁹ As Rosalind Thomas suggests, there was “no neat and tidy division of specialties, but a community of contemporary interest and debate, theory and counter-theory, in which ‘*physiologos*,’ ‘scientist,’ ‘doctor,’ and ‘*sophistēs*’ were not always easy to disentangle.”⁷⁰

It was not until the fourth century that thinkers first began to use “sophist” and “philosopher” as technical terms, which they retrojected back onto earlier thinkers and wise men. *Sophistēs*, in fact, was a near synonym of *sophos* until the late fifth century, and did not refer to a particular kind of individual (let alone a “movement”).⁷¹ The words *philosophia* and *philosophiein*, moreover, were very rarely used until the fourth century and, when they were used, did not pick out a special and distinct group of thinkers. In the fifth century, *philosophia* and its cognates signified “intellectual cultivation” in the broadest sense.⁷² In short, none of the wise men in the sixth and fifth centuries called themselves “sophists” or “philosophers” (in the technical sense), nor did others refer to them in this way. If we avoid these anachronistic categorizations, we get a rather different picture of the early Greek thinkers.

We find excellent evidence of the absence of disciplinary distinctions in the work of Heraclitus: in exalting his own brand of wisdom, he debunks not only that of Homer, Hesiod, and Archilochus, but also Hecataeus (a proto-historian), Xenophanes, and Pythagoras (DK B40, B42, B57). Clearly, Heraclitus conceived of himself as rivalling disparate wise men rather than a specialized group of intellectuals (those later identified as philosophers); indeed, he explicitly claims that his rivals have *polumathīē* – wide, non-specialized, learning – but lack true understanding. The fact that Heraclitus’ opponents include poets and prose writers as well as a religious/political guru such as Pythagoras gives us a good idea of the milieu in which he was working. He and other early thinkers did seek to distinguish themselves from other “wise men.” But these attacks were *ad hominem*, and should not be mistaken for the explicit and systematic differentiation of one genre or discipline from others. Although we see in the early thinkers the

⁶⁹ Lloyd 1987, ch. 2 and *passim*. In a recent book (2000) on Herodotus, Thomas offers fresh evidence for this position. We should not interpret Herodotus simply within the field of historiography, she claims, since his work responds directly to that of poets, historians, natural philosophers, sophists, and medical writers; rather, we should treat all of these *sophoi* as participating in a broad-ranging, non-specialized analysis of the physical and human world.

⁷⁰ Thomas 2000, 160; see also Jouanna [1992]/1999, 366–403, Wallace 1998.

⁷¹ Lloyd (1987, 93n. 153) offers a good discussion of the uses of the word *sophistēs* in classical Greece.

⁷² For a list of the few occurrences of the word φιλοσοφείν and its cognates in Greek texts before the fourth century, see Nightingale 1995, 14–15 with notes (see also Überweg 1871, 1–4; Havelock 1963, 280–1 with notes, and 1983b, 56–7).

development of the modes and topics of inquiry that we now recognize as “philosophical,” these thinkers did not articulate the criteria that distinguished their intellectual endeavors from other disciplines. It is significant, of course, that some opted for prose over verse, and that some repudiated “mythic” modes of wisdom, but this is very far from the explicit definition of a new discipline.⁷³

Another early thinker who defies disciplinary categorization is Empedocles, who treated topics ranging from cosmology, anthropology, and religious purification to the transmigration of the soul. This combination of mysticism and rationality has created enormous scholarly problems. Most interpreters have “solved” this problem by separating the disparate fragments of Empedocles into two very different works: *On Nature*, a “naturalist” poem, and *Purifications*, a supernatural story of reincarnation. Recently, however, several scholars have shown that some of the material ascribed to the latter poem belong in the former; as they suggest, the separation of the naturalist from the mythical material is based on the anachronistic assumption that true philosophy has no room for the supernatural.⁷⁴ The fact that Empedocles wrote poems (or perhaps a single poem) which included “philosophical” and “nonphilosophical” (i.e. religious) material challenges the standard modern approach to the early thinkers. Among other things, it exposes our tendency to retroject contemporary conceptions of philosophy onto the ancients. If we resist this move, we can see that many of the early thinkers were engaged in complex and broad-ranging projects that do not fall neatly within the boundaries of philosophy as we now conceive it.

Clearly, the fourth-century depictions of earlier thinkers as solitary contemplatives is quite misleading. In particular, they indicate that the wisdom of the early thinkers was confined to intellectual speculation. In fact, there is considerable evidence that most of these men were able performers of practical and political wisdom.⁷⁵ For example, Thales played a leading role in Ionian politics, and Anaximander led a colony from Miletus to Apollonia

⁷³ For several recent analyses of the attempts by certain preplatonic writers (including poets and historians) to reject “mythic” modes of thought and/or discourse, see Detienne [1981]/1986, Lloyd 1987, ch. 4 and *passim*, Most 1999. For an excellent study of philosophical conceptions and uses of myth, ranging from the early thinkers to Plato, see K. Morgan 2000.

⁷⁴ See Martin and Primavesi 1998, ch. 3.

⁷⁵ For the notion of the “performance of wisdom” in Greek culture, see Martin 1993. He uses the word “perform” not in the sense of play-acting or pretending; rather, it signifies the displaying or enacting of wisdom in any public context (“a public enactment, about important matters, in word or gesture . . . [that is] open to scrutiny and criticism,” pp. 115–16). Martin focuses on the seven sages, but one could extend the notion of “performing wisdom” to other *sophoi* in the archaic and classical periods. See Lloyd 1987, 89–98, Demont 1993b, and Thomas 2000, ch. 8 on the public “displays” of wisdom by a wide variety of *sophoi* in this period. For Athens as a “performance culture,” see Rehm 1992, Goldhill and Osborne 1999. Goldhill (1999a) offers an excellent summary of different conceptions of “performance” in recent scholarship and theory.

on the Pontus (DK12 A3). Pythagoras was part religious guru, part politician, part mathematician. Parmenides is said to have served as a lawmaker in his city (DK28 A1). In Empedocles, we find not only a natural philosopher but a religious thinker, orator, and physician.⁷⁶ Anaxagoras enjoyed a close relationship with Pericles; tradition reports that some Athenians considered him so great a threat to the city that they put him on trial for impiety.⁷⁷ Zeno of Elea was a fierce advocate of political freedom, taking part in the conspiracy against the tyrant Nearchus;⁷⁸ and Melissus served as a general in a sea battle against Pericles in 441/0 (DK 30, A3). Finally, Democritus – now identified almost solely with the theory of atomism – was a political leader who had a coin stamped with his name (indeed this polymathic sage wrote treatises on disparate subjects such as medicine, anthropology, ethics, and politics).⁷⁹

As Paul Cartledge asks, “who are we to say whether Democritus might not himself have seen his ‘scientific’ work as fundamental but yet subordinated ultimately to an overarching and overriding ethical-political project rather than as an independent end and goal in itself?”⁸⁰ We could ask the same question about many other “presocratic” thinkers. Indeed, in the recent *Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy* (ed. A. A. Long), a number of scholars have argued that these individuals were not only practicing intellectual speculation but were engaged in therapeutic, salvific, theological, and poetic projects akin to those of other nonphilosophical *sophoi* of their day.⁸¹

As I have suggested, the thinkers of the sixth and fifth centuries did not develop the conception of the spectator theory of knowledge or practice a contemplative mode of life. None claimed that the wise man must detach himself from the world and “gaze upon” truth, or that he should turn his back on practical or political affairs. In fact, in the preplatonic thinkers, there is little if any evidence that knowledge takes the form of “seeing” truth.⁸² When the possession or acquisition of knowledge is described by

⁷⁶ On Empedocles’ activities as a physician, see Jouanna [1992]/1999, 262–4. Aristotle claimed in the *Sophist* that Empedocles was the first to invent rhetoric (DL VIII.57).

⁷⁷ See Wallace 1994, 136–8 (and notes) for a review of the ancient evidence for this trial. Even if this trial never took place (as he and other scholars believe), the story gives evidence of the widespread belief that Anaxagoras was overly involved in the political affairs of Athens.

⁷⁸ Others call the tyrant Diomedon or Demylus. See DK 29, A1, A6, and A7. ⁷⁹ Cartledge 1998, 4.

⁸⁰ See Cartledge 1998, 8 and *passim*.

⁸¹ Long 1999a. See esp. Long, “The Scope of Early Greek Philosophy” (ch. 1), Broadie, “Rational Theology” (ch. 10), Leshner, “Early Interest in Knowledge” (ch. 11), and Most, “The Poetics of Early Greek Philosophy” (ch. 16).

⁸² Note that the *mantis* and the *prophetēs* were not represented in Greek texts as “seeing” some invisible spectacle of truth: Teiresias reaches his conclusions when (with the help of his assistant) he attends

preplatonic thinkers (which is quite rare), it generally involves hearing or learning a divine or superhuman *logos*. The emphasis is on discourse and hearing rather than spectating or seeing.⁸³

Consider the famous opening of Parmenides' poem, which describes the author's journey towards Truth (DK28 B1). The maiden daughters of the sun escort the poet along the "resounding road of the goddess" to the "etherial gates" at the threshold of "the paths of day and night." A divinity opens the doors. At this point, the reader expects that the poet will now see the truth unveiled. Instead, he encounters a goddess who speaks. There is no description of the appearance of the goddess and, indeed, no visual detail at all. Amazingly (from our post-Platonic vantage point), the poet journeys out of – rather than into – the light: the sun maidens escort the poet into the "House of Night," having ventured from there "into the light" in order to fetch him.⁸⁴ What the poet encounters when he crosses the threshold, then, is not a vision but rather the voice of a goddess. "Come now, and I will tell you," she says, "and, when you have heard me (*akousas*), carry my account away" (DK B2). Compare the famous journey in Plato's *Analogy of the Cave* (*Republic* VII), written over a century later. In Plato, the philosopher moves out of the darkness of the cave and into the light, where he sees with the "eye of his soul" the beings in the metaphysical realm of the Forms. This stands in stark contrast to Parmenides' philosophical revelation, where the truth is revealed in the darkness by a goddess who plays the role of muse. There is no "vision" of truth in this or other philosophical texts of the early period.

to bird-signs and entrails, and Oedipus (after he is blinded) comes to know his own fate by way of a prophetic understanding of a number of different oracles (the physical features of the grove of the Eumenides also provide him with clues). As Fritz Graf has suggested (in a personal conversation), the Greek "seer" does not engage in the act of mental seeing (Cassandra, in the *Agamemnon*, may seem to be the exception, but her vision of what is going on in the palace serves the dramatic spectacle; it does not provide evidence of actual prophetic practice).

⁸³ Many preplatonic thinkers discussed and speculated about the nature and reliability of physical vision; but they did not articulate a conception of knowledge as "seeing" truth. For discussions of vision and visual artworks in the early thinkers, see Heraclitus DK B101a, Empedocles DK A86, A92, B23, B84, B86, B87, B88, B89; Anaxagoras DK B21a; Leucippus DK A29, 30, 31; Democritus DK A135, B5h, B28a, Gorgias DK B3.86, B4, B5, B26, B28, *Helen* 15–19, Hippias DK A2. Note also that some fragments from the early thinkers make passing references to "seeing" that something is true (e.g. Parmenides DK B4.1, Empedocles DK B129.5, B110.2); but none turns this into an epistemological theory.

⁸⁴ As Popper (1992) and Sedley (1999b) have shown. According to Popper, the element of light "intrudes" upon darkness, thus creating the phenomenal world – i.e. light's intrusion creates the dualism that characterizes the cosmos described in the *Way of Opinion*. As Sedley puts it, "elemental dualism is the physical counterpart of mortals' combination of being with not-being" (1999b, 124). Furley 1989, ch. 3 claims that the poet does journey into the House of Night, but that this is not a place of darkness: rather, it is a region beyond the duality and opposition of light and darkness.

Although our evidence for the preplatonic sages and thinkers is not always adequate, we must nonetheless attempt to locate them in their contemporary intellectual and cultural context. In doing this, we may find it rather difficult to distinguish them from other wise men of the period. First of all, many of these thinkers were famous for their practical and political wisdom. In addition, the ideas and methods they developed were also taken up by other kinds of thinkers and intellectuals (e.g. poets, sophists, doctors, rhetoricians, etc.). On what grounds, then, can we isolate these figures and treat them as philosophers? A. A. Long argues that this group of thinkers was distinctive because they “left an intellectual legacy which could be drawn upon, improved, and criticized”; though they might have initially acted as ambitious individuals staking a claim to *sophia* (rather than as deliberate founders of a new discipline), they nonetheless succeeded in creating an enduring tradition of intellectual thinking. But we must not forget, Long adds, that the sixth- and fifth-century thinkers were engaged in a project that was salvational as well as rational: the cultivation of true *logos*, they claimed, would lead to a happy life.⁸⁵ Nehamas captures this well in his conception of the philosophic “art of living” – though in this case we must say *arts* of living, since the early Greek thinkers enacted different modes of life based on different notions of wisdom.⁸⁶ These recent studies of the preplatonic thinkers remind us to attend to the pragmatic aspects of early Greek philosophy – to the embodied performance or enactment of wisdom.⁸⁷

Of course the practical, pragmatic conception of wisdom did not disappear when theoretical philosophy was developed. Figures such as Antisthenes, Aristippus, Diogenes, Zeno, Pyrrho, and Epicurus developed and enacted highly practical philosophies. The development of theoretical knowledge did not eclipse practical philosophy, then, but led to new ways of linking theory to practice (which, in turn, led to new attacks on the validity and/or efficacy of theoretical knowledge). In fact, most of the proponents of theoretical wisdom in the Greek and Roman tradition connected it to

⁸⁵ Long 1999b, 9, 13–14. See also Broadie (1999), who argues that the majority of the early thinkers were engaged in “rational theology.”

⁸⁶ Nehamas explicates this idea in his superb book, *The Art of Living* (1999a; see also 2000a). He does not discuss the early Greek philosophers in this study, but his conception of the “art of living” would certainly apply to many of these thinkers, since the concept of the specialized, professional “philosopher” did not exist in this period. See also Nehamas (1990) for a discussion of the demarcation of the boundaries between “philosophy” and “sophistry” in the fourth-century BCE.

⁸⁷ See also Hadot (1995), who argues that *all* of the ancient philosophers pursued, first and foremost, practical and “spiritual” goals. He claims that ancient philosophy was defined by the cultivation of a distinct “way of life”; it was never simply a cognitive or intellectual activity. This thesis, however, is far too sweeping, for it bunches a multitude of very different thinkers into a single group.

praxis, thus conceiving of the wise man as both a spectator and a performer of wisdom.⁸⁸

Why did the thinkers of the fourth century develop a conception of knowledge as “seeing Being”? Why did they consider the practice of traveling abroad and watching the spectacles at religious festivals a compelling paradigm for philosophic activity and apprehension? This book offers an interdisciplinary study of these questions, examining the cultural practice of *theoria* and its appropriation by the fourth-century proponents of theoretical philosophy. Let me emphasize that this is not a study of Platonic and Aristotelian epistemology. This book will approach philosophic *theoria* from a very different angle: it analyzes the mythic, rhetorical, and analytic discussions of philosophic *theoria* in relation to the traditional practice of *theoria*. By examining the link between traditional and philosophic *theoria*, we can locate the creation of theoretical philosophy in its historical context and analyze this discipline as a cultural as well as an intellectual practice.

In chapter one, I offer a detailed examination of the practice of *theoria* in classical Greece. *Theoria* brought foreign Greeks together in shared religious sanctuaries to witness spectacles and participate in rituals. In these religious spaces, the *theoroi* engaged in the act of “sacred spectating,” viewing objects and spectacles made sacred by ritual. The *theoroi* attended collective rituals and events designed to knit the participants into a single group. In addition, a panhellenic ideology was explicitly articulated in public discourses. Although a *theoros* never shed his political identity, he participated in an event that celebrated a “Greek” identity over and above that of any individual city-state. The *theoros* was thus encouraged to adopt a broader, more encompassing perspective. The gaze of the *theoros*, then, is characterized by *alterity*: the pilgrim brings his foreign presence to the festival, and he interacts with people from other cities and cultures. He thus returns home with a broader perspective, and brings information and ideas from foreign parts into the city. *Theoria* was at once a religious and a political practice: how did sacralized spectating influence political ideology and *praxis*? I analyze the interface between religious spectating and political action in the practice of *theoria*.

In chapter two, I discuss Plato’s appropriation of the model of traditional *theoria* in his accounts of theoretical philosophy. In particular, I examine his strategic use of the language and structure of *theoria* in the *Phaedo*, *Republic*,

⁸⁸ For contemporary discussions of the relation of theory to ethical and political practice, see Arendt [1971]/1978, 69–238, Dunne 1993, Bartlett and Collins 1999, Lilla 2001.

and *Phaedrus*. Plato's comparisons of philosophic "spectating" to *theoria* at panhellenic festivals (including the Eleusinian Festival of the Mysteries) have generally been interpreted as ornate metaphors for the mere act of thinking. As a result, scholars have not explored the link between philosophic theorizing and the traditional practice of *theoria* at religious festivals and sanctuaries. This chapter focuses on Plato's deliberate and extensive use of the model of traditional *theoria* in his discussions of philosophy. As I will suggest, this model provided the terminology and narrative structure that Plato used in his foundational accounts of theoretical philosophy. A full understanding of the practice of *theoria* will enable us to examine Plato's conception of philosophy in its social and historical context. In addition, we can investigate the way that Plato attempted to position this philosophic practice in the social and political affairs of the city.

In chapter three, I will analyze Plato's discussion of philosophic *theoria* in the *Republic* v–vii, focusing in particular on the theoretic journey depicted in the Analogy of the Cave. Building on the model of traditional *theoria*, Plato constructs a philosophic *theoros* who detaches himself from the social world and "journeys" to see the divine Forms. He is altered and transformed by this contemplative activity, and returns to the city as a stranger to his own kind. This *atopos* individual becomes a sort of agent of alterity, and must confront the problem of bringing alien ideas into the city. As in traditional *theoria* at religious festivals, Platonic *theoria* features a sacralized mode of spectating that differs from mundane modes of viewing. How, then, does Plato conceive of this "theoretic" gaze? What does the philosopher see? And what does he fail to see? As I argue, philosophic vision is predicated on periodic bouts of blindness – paradoxically, the philosopher must go blind in order to see. After investigating Plato's accounts of philosophic blindness and insight, I will discuss the theorist's return to the city. How does this estranged individual function in the human and terrestrial world? How do his contemplative activities affect his actions in social and political life?

In constructing the theoretical philosopher, Plato invites his readers to identify with a strange sort of person. In the figure of the philosopher, Plato introduces a new *aristos* – an individual so exalted that he makes all noble, prestigious, and powerful men look common and servile. Using mythic and rhetorical discourse, Plato attempts to make what is familiar strange and what is strange familiar, thus dislodging the reader from his ordinary beliefs. In his efforts to unsettle the reader, Plato uses a very distinctive rhetorical strategy – what I call the "rhetoric of estrangement." For example, in the Analogy of the Cave, Plato portrays our familiar world as a dark and prison-like cavern – a place of exile rather than a true home. Where, we

must ask, do we dwell? By estranging the reader from his traditional views and confronting him with the “reality” of the metaphysical region, Plato invites him to look beyond the familiar world and to embrace the alterity of the theoretical perspective.

In the *Republic*, Plato sets forth what is generally considered the standard account of philosophic theorizing: theoretical contemplation is a strictly metaphysical activity in which the mind separates itself from the senses (and, indeed, from the entire physical world) and apprehends the Forms. In the myths in the *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*, however, Plato suggests that physical vision has a positive role to play in philosophic theorizing. In chapter four, I will examine these mythic accounts of the philosopher’s visual apprehension of the physical cosmos and of certain (exceptional) bodies within it. In these texts, Plato identifies certain bodies as perfect (or near-perfect) “images” of the Forms: they are not just shadowy *eidola*, but *agalмата* or “sacred images” of true reality. In viewing these exceptional bodies, the philosophic theorist engages in a form of sacralized spectating right here on earth. The physical sight of these bodies, I argue, makes an important contribution to the philosopher’s journey towards the Forms.

Plato takes this idea even further in the *Timaeus*: in this text, the astronomical viewing of the heavens is directly tied to metaphysical contemplation. The cosmos as a whole possesses a perfect body whose motions and revolutions are steered by divine *nous*. When the philosophic theorist looks at the heavens, then, he sees “visible gods.” Here, Plato identifies the astronomical contemplation of the heavens as a vital part of philosophic theorizing. In contemplating and imitating the divinities in the macrocosm, the philosopher can bring order and harmony to his individual psyche – he can turn the chaos of his soul into a (micro-) cosmos. The spectacle of the heavens thus translates into virtuous action on earth. Philip of Opus offers a similar account of astronomical *theoria* in the *Epinomis*. But he departs from Plato by dispensing with the theory of Forms and claiming that astronomy is, itself, the highest mode of theoretical wisdom. By theorizing the visible gods in the heavens, Philip claims, the philosopher develops not only wisdom but piety: the philosophic astronomer will thus be the most virtuous individual in practical and political affairs, and the ideal leader of the city.

Aristotle set forth a very different conception of *theoria*. Dispensing with the metaphor of the journey, he focuses almost exclusively on the notion of a sacralized, divine form of viewing. In the act of spectating at religious festivals, Aristotle found the model of a visual activity that is set apart from practical and productive endeavors. Rejecting Plato’s claim that

contemplation provides the basis for *praxis*, Aristotle argues that *theoria* is a completely disinterested activity that can only be pursued for its own sake. *Theoria* does not lead to action in the practical world; indeed it is defined in opposition to activities that are “useful and necessary.” In this chapter, I will examine Aristotle’s creation of the distinction between theoretical, practical, and technical forms of reasoning (a distinction that has informed all of Western thinking). I will also discuss his arguments for the superiority of theoretical over practical and productive activities: why (and how) does he privilege “useless” knowledge over that which is useful and beneficial?

In articulating the idea that the highest form of knowledge is neither practical nor productive, Aristotle uses language that has powerful ideological associations. In particular, he claims that *theoria* is not “useful” or “necessary” but rather a completely “free” and “leisured” activity that is an end in itself. In his attempt to demonstrate the superiority of *theoria* over other modes of knowledge, Aristotle makes use of traditional aristocratic rhetoric. According to Greek aristocratic ideology, the truly “free” and “noble” man is self-sufficient rather than subservient; in contrast to “servile” individuals who degrade themselves by working for others (engaging in “productive” labor), the aristocratic gentleman is noble, leisured, and fully free. Aristotle exploits aristocratic discourse to articulate the idea that *theoria* is a completely self-sufficient, independent, and leisured activity. As he claims, *theoria* is never useful or serviceable in the practical world, but is a noble and disinterested activity that is an end in itself.

Unlike Plato, Aristotle almost never uses the “rhetoric of estrangement.” Rather, he develops what I call a “rhetoric of disinterest” – a discourse that portrays certain activities as being superior to all endeavors that serve a separate end. By identifying *theoria* as a nonutilitarian (“useless”) activity done only “for its own sake,” Aristotle sets forth an idea that will have a long history in Western thinking about “pure” intellectual activities and “liberal” education. As I will suggest, he appropriates and transforms traditional aristocratic rhetoric to convey the idea that *theoria* and other “liberal” pursuits are superior precisely because they are “useless” and disinterested. An examination of this rhetoric – which is but one strand in a very complex philosophical project – will help us to locate Aristotle’s argument in its cultural context.

Since the fourth-century philosophers used different modes of discourse in articulating their conceptions of *theoria*, I have found it necessary to approach each thinker rather differently. In particular, my examination of Plato and Philip is more literary and less technical than my analysis of Aristotle (though I will analyze Aristotle’s rhetoric as well as his arguments).

In spite of their differing methodologies, all of these philosophers were confronted with the same task: the conceptualization and legitimation of a new form of knowledge defined as distant, divine, and “foreign” to the ordinary man. To articulate this outlandish idea, each of these thinkers had to stretch language, creating new vocabularies and discourses. Their intellectual explorations, in short, called for new feats of language. In Thoreau’s memorable words:

I fear lest my expression not be *extra-vagant* enough, may not wander far enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience so as to be adequate to the truth of which I have been convinced.⁸⁹

The fourth-century philosophers claimed that we must “wander beyond” the familiar limits of experience in order to achieve wisdom. And they themselves wandered outside familiar language to convey this new idea. This book will examine this discursive and philosophical achievement.

⁸⁹ Thoreau 1983, 372–3.