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- Socrates' Ancestor

- An Essay on Architectural Beginnings

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In Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*, where Socrates questions Euthyphro, who is prosecuting his own father for murder, on the nature of holiness and unholiness, of piety and impiety, justice and injustice, Socrates succeeds, as he so often does, in completely confusing his interlocutor.

Euthyphro: I really do not know, Socrates, how to express what I mean. For somehow or other our arguments, on whatever ground we rest them, seem to turn round and walk away from us.

Socrates: Your words, Euthyphro, are like the handiwork of my ancestor Daedalus; and if I were the sayer or propounder of them, you might say that my arguments walk away and will not remain fixed because I am a descendent of his.

Euthyphro: Nay, Socrates, I shall still say that you are the Daedalus who sets arguments in motion; not I, certainly, but you make them move or go round.

Socrates: Then I must be greater than Daedalus: for whereas he only made his own inventions to move, I move those of other people as well. And the beauty of it is, that I would rather not. For I would give the wisdom of Daedalus [Daidalou sophia] ... to be able to detain them and keep them fixed.¹

The year is 399 B.C. Socrates and Euthyphro both await judiciary hearings: Euthyphro to lay the charge against his father, Socrates to be charged for corrupting the youth of Athens. They converse before the stoa in the agora. Beyond them rises the Athenian acropolis, bright with the newly com-
pleted structures of the century that has just ended: the Propylaea, the Erechtheion, the temple of Nike Aphetos, and, of course, the Parthenon, temple of the city and its emblem, where, as many have noted, sculpture and architecture converge to the point where to distinguish them becomes not only impossible but irrelevant.

In the career of Daedalus, as in the Parthenon, sculpture and architecture also converge, for Daedalus, considered the mythical first architect, built not only the automata referred to in this passage, but also the Labyrinth and the choros, or dancing-floor, at Knossos as well as a fortified city in Sicily. Socrates, whose father Sophroniskos was a lithourgos, a stone-mason or stone carver (once more the line between building and sculpting is blurred), claims Daedalus as his ancestor, and in so doing suggests—not without irony, derision being a familiar undercurrent of the Socratic tone—the existence of an ancestral blood tie between architecture and philosophy, between the creations of Daedalus and speculative thought.

To explore the nature of this tie is the purpose of this inquiry. Why does it seem important to do so?

For the past century, the dawn of Western thought—considered in the twentieth-century twilight of its apparent decline—the “discovery of the mind,” as Bruno Snell has called it, the “theoretical event” or “birth of spiritual Europe” in Husserl’s terms, has been the subject of intensive study. Much of the discussion, to which philosophers, cultural historians, classical philologists, and anthropologists have all contributed, has naturally focused on the culture of archaic Greece and on the thought of the pre-Socratic philosophers. One approach, whose hidden agenda has been a systematic secularization, has concentrated on tracing pre-Socratic thought first to mythical, then to ritual or tribal roots. For all the brilliance of its scholarship, this is an approach that has tended to result in a “nothing but” kind of assessment, of which F. M. Cornford’s From Religion to Philosophy is an important early example: an assessment that ultimately begs the very questions it purports to answer. To attempt to eliminate the mystery of human existence by reducing its articulations in myth and speculation to the evolutionary products of “nothing but” tribal custom still leaves unaccounted for the mystery at the very core of tribal custom itself.

If this line of thinking has dealt with the emergence of Western thought by tracing supposed effect back to supposed evolutionary cause, another line of thinking has concentrated on the phenomenon of emergence, the event, itself. To this second school belong thinkers such as Heidegger and the philosopher of history Eric Voegelin. For them, especially in their later work, the essential thing has been to preserve the mystery of human existence against erosion by “nothing but,” through a study of the pre-Socratics that has had as its chief aim the disclosure of early Greek thinking as the West’s first articulation of that mystery as a mystery. This disclosure not only mitigates the picture of early Greek thinkers as either highly evolved tribesmen on the one hand or as underdeveloped nuclear physicists on the other, this last, to oversimplify matters, being the second half of the Cornford kind of argument; it also reveals fresh possibilities for being in the present twilight. For if the assessment of the first Greek thinkers as tribesmen/physicists has affirmed, and even encouraged, the scientism of this century, then disclosure of the awareness of mystery inherent in the articulations of emerging Greek thought suggests an alternative affirmation.
Plato, in the *Euthyphro*, suggests a link between architecture and such thought. It would be not only foolish but pointless to interpret this link as evolutionary or causal, to claim that architecture, taken as the embodiment of ritual, gave rise to philosophy, and so to fall into the “nothing but tribal custom” trap. Rather, as I shall argue, the awareness embodied in the architectural beginnings of archaic Greece shares a blood tie with the awareness that first becomes explicit in the speculative thought of the sixth century B.C. As equivalent manifestations of an emerging Western consciousness, the “architectural event,” if it may be so called, and the “theoretical event” can be understood as related moments in a single occurrence. It is of particular interest that the architectural event, chronologically speaking, came first, not so much because the roots of Greek thinking are to be unearthed in Greek architecture as such, but because, if the consciousness that is the hallmark of Husserl’s “spiritual Europe” first appeared in architecture, it is perhaps in this (first, architectural) moment of the emergence of Western consciousness that the possibilities for alternative affirmations are most readily revealed.

In the passage cited earlier, Socrates sets arguments in motion, just as, according to legend, his ancestor Daedalus had set statues in motion. But Socrates’ most ardent wish is to keep them still: he “would give the wisdom of Daedalus . . . to be able to detain them and keep them fixed.” This is a fifth-century aspiration, and the distance from the dawn of Greek thought is already considerable. In the *Hippias Major*, where Socrates says that the sculptors of his day would ridicule the works that earned Daedalus his fame, the inference is that moving statues are silly, just as in the passage cited the inference is that Euthyphro’s circular arguments are silly. Knowledge is at odds with things that will not stay put, as a passage in the *Meno*, where Socrates once more evokes the creations of his ancestor, confirms:

Meno: . . . I wonder that knowledge [epistémē] should be preferred to right opinion [doxa]—or why they should even differ.

Socrates: You would not wonder if you had ever observed the images of Daedalus . . . [which] require to be fastened in order to keep them, and if they are not fastened they will play truant and run away. . . . I mean to say that they are not very valuable possessions if they are at liberty, for they will walk off like runaway slaves; but when fastened, they are of great value, for they are really beautiful works of art. . . . When they are bound, in the first place, they have the nature of knowledge; and in the second place, they are abiding. And this is why knowledge is more honourable and excellent than true opinion, because fastened by a chain.

As Françoise Frontesi-Ducroux has observed in her penetrating study of the Daedalus legend, the expedient of binding these primitive Daedalian statues [soano] with cords or chains was a way of making the divine life in them manifest. Motion was life, and the animated life, the very divinity, of these images was best revealed by tying them down. For Plato, divinity, insofar as knowledge had divinity as its source and object, lay in fixity, and Plato’s emphasis was on the bound state as such. In the culture of prephilosophical Greece, divinity lay in animation, and soano were bound not because the fixed object was divine in its fixity, but rather the opposite: The emphasis was on the unbound, the animated state: the chains
that bound the cult statue harnessed a fearful, excessive, super-natural life only in order to better disclose its presence.

The contrast here made is somewhat subtler than I have so far suggested it to be. In the case of Daedalus' *xoana*, the chaining of cult statues brought the divine into the realm of human experience; for Plato, the binding of true opinion with the chains of recollection [anamnēsis] brings the divine into the realm of human knowledge. Plato's evocation of the animated cult statue reveals a detectable shift. In both cases binding has as its purpose to bring the divine into the human sphere, but there is a shift, and the shift is a shift of emphasis from the primacy of motion to the primacy of fixity; from the primacy of experience to the primacy of the knowledge Plato calls *epistēmē*.

Between the two poles of movement and of fixity, of experience and of knowledge, lies the phenomenon of the emerging Western consciousness, and to it, as Plato himself seems to suggest, the Daedalus story holds an important key. But, as already noted, Plato and his overt concern for fixity are already some distance from the earliest articulations of Greek speculative thought, and it is to the only verbatim record of the very first such articulation that I would now like to turn. A discussion of Daedalus and his legendary creations will come after, to be followed in turn by a discussion of the emergence of the *polis* and of the peripteral temple.