

Beyond the Greeks

- Introduction
 - What about current schools of art, or cultural definitions of what's normal, or the social norms for behaving in a courtroom? Where did they come from and how do they change? How does cultural and artistic change fit with or against tradition and continuity? These questions are cultural versions of more general questions about the characteristics of the things we encounter day to day.
 - What I doing in this lecture is considering some large-scale strategies which philosophers and scientists have used in their attempts to understand how the basic features of things come to be. Then I apply those cosmological ideas to social, cultural, and artistic changes.
 - What I will have to say is more of a research program than an argument. It consists of a set of global historical claims and analogies.
 - I will start by examining the ancient opposition between Atomists and Platonists, then look at medieval treatments and at some more recent ideas. Historically I will argue for the mediating importance of the Neoplatonists, and the importance of medieval voluntarism. Philosophically I will talk about the way contemporary thought has gone beyond the Greek options, and beyond the voluntarism that helped create modernity.
- Atomism
 - Increasingly during the 19th and 20th centuries the problems of context and history emerge in philosophy, along with the desire for radical breaks and new beginnings.
 - The ancient Greeks do not provide the right tools for this investigation.
 - For Plato patterns and forms preexist. Novelty on our level comes at best from a previously unfamiliar form or pattern being instantiated. In general, though, novelty comes from chaotic deviations from the stability of pattern. If the right patterns are already found in society and thought and art, then novelty should be repressed.
 - For Aristotle, the repertory of forms and patterns is complete, at least on the natural level. He may be more open to new forms of society, though that is not clear. Art is a form of imitation so while it might discover new media and tools it will work within a limited circle of contents.
 - It is the atomists who are the most open to novelty, since the only thing that is held constant is the repertory of shapes in the basic atoms; they could combine in new ways. But, since the combinations are purely mechanical, there is little that they can say about context and history.
 - Greek atomism offers a enduring strategy for dealing with all levels of being.
 - The cosmological strategy of atomism is to trace all higher level characteristics and their changes to the activity and the combining of a set of given entities whose particular qualities are not further explained.
 - The purist example of this strategy the ancient Greek atomism of Leukippos and Demokritos, later expanded by Epikuros and expounded by Lucretius.
 - In this cosmological scheme the universe is a infinite empty void populated by small hard material particles that cannot be cut or broken down -- that are a-tomoi, uncuttable -- and that because of their various shapes can combine with one another by hooking together or getting entangled.
 - There is no reason or explanation for their shapes. They are not all spherical; some have holes, some have spiky shapes, some are quite irregular.

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- The atoms are moving in all directions, for no particular reason, and they collide and bounce off one another, and it just happens that some shapes are apt to hook on to others or get entangled, forming larger units. These units, being larger, will tend to pick up more atoms as they go along.
- It is very important to remember that this ancient theory does not postulate any forces acting on the atoms. They interact by contact and mechanical entanglement only.
 - The purity of the ancient theory resides in the fact that only the shapes and motions of the atoms have explanatory value. They control what happens, by purely mechanical means of contact, hooking together, entanglement and so on. This is different than the modern theory that postulates forces that act over distances, and talks about fields and laws.
 - Our whole visible cosmos is, for the atomists, a spherical assembly of atoms rotating in space, with the stars on its outer skin. There are other such cosmoi, and broken bits of still others, and half formed cosmoi, moving around and colliding in the void, just as the atoms are doing.
 - Another important feature of the ancient theory is that the individual atoms are completely unaffected by all their moving and combining. They are pure solidities moving in a space of pure vacuity. They have no internal structure or changes. When they collide they do not deform in any way; when they combine, their connections are purely external. Taken on its own, each atom is a little Parmenidean One, full and unchanging.
 - This is echoed in Hume's theory of psychological atoms, little impressions each qualitatively full, untouched by any necessary relations and only externally connected to other psychological atoms of experience. Later sense data theories repeat this ontology of purely external relations. Some political theories wish for such a state of pure natural individuality.
- Ancient atomism itself had little scientific effect. Aristotle's science was much more scientifically fertile. Atomist atoms were so small that there was no way to manipulate them. Simple explanations were offered about the ways in which the atoms might combine. But there was no way to test these explanations.
 - There are suggested explanations for some mid-level qualities (bitter tastes are caused by spiky atoms; mind is made of very mobile spherical atoms, and so on) although all such explanations are conjectural because the atoms are so small there can be no direct observation of their activity.
 - Also, it is unclear whether or not the ancient atomists thought that there were any laws governing the behavior of the atoms. That is, it is not clear whether they thought that if two atoms collided twice in exactly the same way they would rebound in the same way. After all, if they had thought so, they would have had to give an account of the being of those laws and how they operated, and that might have spoiled their mechanical simplicity.
 - I need to note for future use that one version of ancient atomism added to the rebounding of the atoms the possibility that an atom might suddenly and for no reason swerve from its straight path.
 - One purpose of this addition was to explain how it was that the atoms are rebounding off one another rather than not all moving together in one direction.
 - In this version of the theory the atoms could be imagined first as moving uniformly in one direction through space without interacting with one another. Then one or another atom swerves and soon all the atoms are bouncing off of one another. (This image is equivalent to having the atoms being at rest and then one or another of them starting to move.)

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- Another purpose might have been to provide a way of talking about freedom, but remember that without a notion of laws governing the motion of the atoms the ancient theory can not be called "deterministic" in the sense in which the word is applied to more recent atomic theories.
- Also, the ancient theory had a strong ethical component. The ethical principles espoused by the atomists were a fairly standard Greek ethic of moderation. But one main point of the theory was to show how the world could be conceived without any extra forces or capricious gods. This removed the fear of arbitrary spirits and divine personalities controlling our lives or the cosmos. It encouraged the morality of moderation and enjoyment of our finite lifespan, with no hopes or fears for life after death. This is expressed directly in Epicurus' letters, and poetically in the philosophical epic poem of Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*.
- As a strategy for dealing explaining why the things we see are as they are, and explaining the arising of mid-level forms and changes, ancient atomism is strikingly clear. Given a set of basic entities whose qualities and characteristics (their shapes and motions) are not further explained, all further entities can be explained by the combination of the original set of entities.
 - Using this strategy you can either argue that there is no real novelty, or you can argue that there is an emergence of new forms of behavior, though without any new causal influences. In the original ancient theory once the atoms combined in various ways they produced objects which do things that single atoms cannot do, such as animals, humans, and the visible cosmos itself as an ordered array of such items. There are new behaviors, but in the end there is nothing but atoms and the void.
- Atomism in its strictly mechanical ancient form is not a live scientific option any more; we have too many forces and fields to add, and our atoms are not unchangingly solid. But atomism as a general explanatory strategy is very much alive.
 - The atomic strategy -- explain one level of entities by looking for a lower level of simpler entities whose characteristics are accepted as just given -- creates a model which scientists do follow, although they will apply it on many levels, and they will not be happy with any bottom level, always seeking to find a yet more basic level with fewer qualities that must be taken as purely given.
 - The atomist strategy can also be used in social explanations, for example by postulating a set of individuals who have certain given preferences and desires, and who can interact in various ways. Proceeding in this fashion you can construct models of economic behavior, theories about the formation of society, and analyses of institutions. Or you can use the atomist strategy to talk about perceptions and emotions, taking a level of simply given psychic atoms and talking about the way they combine and interact.
- There are some issues that the original theory did not perceive but were raised by their ancient opponents.
 - There is the issue of laws. Can all the systematic combinations and the ongoing regular behavior of things on the higher levels be successfully explained by pure chance on the lowest level? This was where Aristotle attacked the atomists most vigorously.
 - The atomists could have responded by arguing that we just happen to be in a cosmos where the atoms just happen to combine in ways that produce natural regularities. But as far as we can tell from their scanty texts, they did believe that most complete cosmoi tended to behave in regular ways (developing a vortex, sieving out atomic shapes, taking on a spherical shape with an earth in the middle, etc.).
 - Then again, atoms may share certain shapes, and they and their combinations can be numbered and counted. They stand in various relations to one another. What about these abstract entities, these relations and numbers and sets? Are they also real? Or are they

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our mental constructs, and what might that mean? Down this road lies Plato, as well as recent arguments about ontological commitment, and Quine's criterion for such commitments. The atomists had no discussion of these matters.

- Although the ancient Greeks had no real scientific research program resulting from atomism, one developed in the Renaissance. We think we know the story, but remember that the return of atomism in the Renaissance brought with it a notion of laws and a passion for mathematics that was absent in the ancient theory and in large part was due to Plato.
- Plato
 - Plato was deeply opposed to atomism. In his world mathematics rules. Abstract and internally connected entities abound and are truly basic.
 - it is true that in his cosmological dialogue Plato suggests that the physical world is constructed out of atoms, but his atoms are very different from Democritean atoms. Plato's have a small number of regular geometric shapes, and those shapes can be explained because they are the simplest three-dimensional solids that can be constructed out of the simplest plane figures. Geometry provides a basic order. Furthermore his cosmological theory includes, through the myth of the Demiurge, an element of intention and law that removes the pervasive randomness and chance found in the atomist theories.
 - Plato also opposed the ethical implications of ancient atomism. In his last work, *The Laws*, he proposes imprisonment and even the death penalty for those who persist in teaching that the cosmos is irrational and random. He does this because he worries about the implications of such theories for social order.
 - What underlies the things we encounter, for Plato, are laws and patterns rather than particular entities that just happen to have the basic qualities they do. We recall the disputes about his theories, about the ontological status of his Forms, the laws and patterns, about whether there is one world or two, and all the later disputes about status and reality of abstract entities such as numbers and sets. We know Aristotle's objections to Plato and the various replies that have been made to those objections. But in all these disputes, we know that laws and patterns for Plato are basic, and they are not pale abstractions; they are what is truly real and we are their embodiment, extension, their shadows.
 - The natural world is envisioned by Plato as surging energy and chaotic motions bound into order by the imposition of mathematical pattern. Social and psychological phenomena are similar, surging individuals or emotions and perceptions brought into harmony by complex patterned interactions and social laws.
 - It may seem strange that I have taken as my major ancient contrast Plato and the atomists, and have left Aristotle aside. Surely he stands in opposition to Plato. In fact, though, on the issue I am discussing Plato and Aristotle stand together against the Atomists. Both Plato and Aristotle affirmed the ultimacy of form and pattern active in this world. They differ in the mode of activity and in the ontological status of form, and these are not small differences. But they agree on explaining the fundamental characteristics of things and their mid-and high-level behaviors by talking about form and pattern and law rather than given fundamental lower-level entities.
 - Plato and Aristotle also agree that there is no fundamental novelty in nature, because the basic repertory of natural forms and laws is fixed and unchanging. What may seem novel will be, speaking positively, the appearance of a natural form hitherto invisible or unnoticed, as for instance if the form of the best city government is finally realized. Or, more commonly, novelty will be a mixing and weakening and decline from natural forms and harmonies. Such novelties do not occur in a lawful way; there are many ways of missing a target.

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- Atomism and Platonism stand in sharp contrasts. What is to count as basic? A set of given factual characteristics of basic entities to be accepted as just there, or a set of universal patterns and mathematical and moral/social laws that can be argued to be necessary?
- Yet it would appear that modern science and philosophy have combined the virtues of atomism and platonism. Like ancient atomism, our theories assert individual basic entities with characteristics that are just given and must be accepted (the mass of the electron, perceptual data, personal desires and drives). But our theories also assert mathematically precise laws for the behavior and combination of these entities. Plato's element of law and mathematical pattern joins with atomism in the Renaissance. Science seeks basic entities but also seeks basic laws, and it trusts elegant mathematics to help in that search.
 - Galileo's laws of motion and Newton's force of gravity complicated the ontology of ancient atomism. Similarly Hume's laws of association and later laws of game theory and rational behavior complicate the theories of psychic and social atomism. Economics takes the desires of atomic individuals as given but inserts them into mathematical patterns. In philosophy, logical positivism, for example, finds in sense data psychic atoms of perception that are just given, but combines these with universal logical laws.
 - Novelty is handled more openly than the ancients did. There is still a repertory of basic laws and entities, and their combinations create new kinds of entities. Whether this means new kinds of laws and causes is much disputed. There is less certainty that the repertory is fixed and closed.
- So we seem to have married the ancient opponents. This conclusion is true as far as it goes but it is too hasty. There is more to both the ancient and the modern stories, and there is a crucial medieval addition to be traced as well.
- There is a side of Platonism that we have not yet taken into account.
 - I want to ask what may appear an odd question. For Plato natural beings and their particular qualities are not simply given but are ruled by eternal patterns and numbers. But what about those patterns themselves? Plato seems to suggest that the intuition of the forms carries a perception of their necessity. But intuitions are notoriously unreliable; even Plato insists on checking them via dialogue. So, can we ask: Why do we have the forms and patterns that we do and not others? Why are the laws of geometry and math what they are? What about the laws of ethics and society? Could the set of eternal forms and patterns have been quite different? If not, why not? And if so, why do we have the set that we do?
 - It is not clear whether or not Plato has an answer to this question, but given his desire to show foundational patterns, we would be surprised if he would have been happy with a higher level empiricism that concluded that the Forms were just there the way they were.
 - He states clearly in the later dialogues that the Forms are not independent of one another, that they have internal relations and connect into a network ruled by some very general Forms: unity, sameness, being, and the like. This suggests that the world of the Forms is a tight unity that hangs together.
 - He may have gone further. There are hints that Plato may have envisioned the possibility of deriving the set of forms and patterns from those highest general notions of unity and multiplicity combined with the mathematical properties of prime numbers and other mathematical relationships.
 - None of this is very clear, and Aristotle's cryptic remarks about Plato's forms being numbers, while they suggest such a program, do not explain it. The best we can do is to acknowledge that the discussions of the the great genera in the Sophist, and of the definite and indefinite in the Philebus, and what Aristotle reports about the one

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and the indefinite dyad, all might point in the direction of a program for the necessary mathematical generation of the forms and patterns, which would try show that that they were the only possible set of patterns and laws. The program was never carried out in detail but it suggests a sensitivity to the question of the necessity of the forms.

- In passing we can note that the same question could be asked about the panoply of natural forms and processes that Aristotle proposes. Could it be otherwise than the way it is? Aristotle's empirical bent would prevent him from asking such a question, but were he to get an answer it would probably be along the lines of asserting the teleological optimization given by the natural set of forms and laws.
- Whether or not Plato ever envisioned or tried to carry out such a program for the explicit derivation of all necessary laws, it has haunted research ever since. It complicates the picture of modern science as combining atomism and platonism.
 - It is a victory for Plato when Einstein desires to reduce all physical laws and constants to one basic law, to show that God does not play dice, that the laws and constants of physics must be the way they are. It shows up again in string theory, and in another way in those theories of economics and society which argue that social laws and patterns result from a necessary rational core being expressed in individual and social behavior.
 - //omit?/?/ Spinoza's God or nature has a rational core which expresses itself in the qualities and relations and activities of the entities we encounter. That core cannot be other than it is, and we and the natural world are its expression in space and time and psyche. We can reconcile ourselves to the world and its behavior by understanding the necessity of the rational core; even though we cannot analyze that necessity in any detail we know that the laws and behaviors and patterns that we encounter express the divine necessity.
- Neoplatonism
 - The problem of deriving Plato's Forms and laws leads on to Neoplatonism and the medieval theologian/philosophers.
 - For the Neoplatonists, Plato's Form of the Good becomes the One, the infinite point of unity and fullness that is above form. As they say, borrowing from Plato's *Timaeus*, the Good is not jealous. The pure indescribable unity of the One is reflected back in a changeless mind contemplating the One through a set of necessary unities and patterns which *are* that mind and are also Plato's Forms, the all and only ways to bring together unity and multiplicity. This in turn gives birth to the moving soul that is the origin and heart of our changing spatio-temporal world.
 - Neoplatonism can confuse us moderns. With its mystical doctrines and multiple levels of being that keep getting subdivided, with its causal relations that are neither Aristotelian nor modern, with its correspondences and magic and Gnostic tendencies, it all seems too excessive.
 - Neoplatonism is a mystic way but it is also the Plato who asks about the necessity and the origin of Forms and patterns and laws.
 - With their theory of the emanation of the Forms from the infinitely indeterminate One, the Neoplatonists offer an ontological status for form as midway between pure unity and dispersed spatio-temporal materiality, and combine this with a program for a kind of mathematical derivation of the Forms. This makes explicit what may or may not have been in the confusing hints about Plato's mathematical desires.
 - For my theme what is most important is the Neoplatonists new and explicit claim that the origin of form and pattern must be itself beyond form, pure unity. They introduce the

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notion of a positive fullness that is beyond form and pattern. Form and law are the modes of necessary unity that found our changing world. But they can also be seen as limitations on a perfection that is positively infinite, indescribably rich in its simplicity. The finite world is the moving image of eternity, to quote Plato, but that eternity reaches beyond the Forms and laws, which are now themselves seen as secondary and derived, the most perfect of entities, yes, but limited and finite in comparison to that which is beyond (determinate) being.

- This can have religious implications. It helps explain why Philo of Alexandria uses an early version of Neoplatonism ("middle Platonism") to structure Jewish philosophy around the time of Christ, and other Jewish thinkers and mystics continue down that road. Origen, the first Christian Neoplatonist, was a contemporary of Plotinus and like him a student of the mysterious Ammonius Saccas. Augustine was converted first to Neoplatonism and later to Christianity. Later Alfarabi and Avicenna take up Neoplatonism to explain Islamic faith.
- Like Plato and Aristotle, the Neoplatonists do not imagine the emergence of novel forms and patterns. There will be surprises as the eternal forms are found embodied in many levels, but to a broad enough mind there would be nothing new. This will all change in the middle ages, curiously because of an inheritance from Neoplatonism.
- Medieval creationism and voluntarism
 - I have led us a little way into the tangled jungle of Neoplatonism in order to indicate how with the doctrine of the One above form and law, and the doctrine of a divine mind, the stage is set for a new explanatory strategy: voluntarism, which allows unlimited novelty.
 - Medieval discussions of form and pattern start from the premise that the world is divinely created. But how that creation is to be understood varies within the philosophical and theological traditions in medieval Europe and the middle east.
 - The general strategy used by philosophers such as Aquinas and Avicenna and Maimonides combines Platonic and Aristotelian and Neoplatonic themes. God is conceived as infinite, beyond any description that we can give. But his unfathomable nature is taken as containing the equivalent of the Platonic Forms, usually conceived in a Neoplatonic fashion as the divine mind's self-understanding of the finite modes in which divine infinitude and perfection can be shared. The general laws of logic and mathematics and nature and ethics flow from God's essence much in the manner that the Neoplatonists saw the Forms as intermediate between pure unity and the diverse patterns in nature.
 - The details vary with different thinkers, but the general strategy is to anchor the laws of nature, morality, and society in God's essence. God is seen as expressing himself in creating. God is bound by the laws of logic and mathematics, not because they were some foreign imposition, but because they express his very nature.
 - There are disputes about just where the line between necessary patterns and contingent choices on God's part might lie, but the hope is to attribute divine necessity to the more general laws and patterns. We cannot know the details of the derivation since we cannot know God's essence, but we can be sure that the laws of logic and mathematics and morality in nature have are in accord with the higher harmony found in God. No doubt there were choices to be made about the details of nature, but the overall framework of laws is steady and well-founded, and the conceptual necessities we can perceive in the basic laws of logic, mathematics, nature, and morality provide echoes of the divine necessities.
 - When we look at the way in which Neoplatonism was turned to the theological purposes of the three monotheistic religions, we see how a text and a set of ideas can be reread in a different context and extended in ways which the original author would not have seen.

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The extension takes something deep found in the text and turn it to new directions and purposes. Part of my argument later is that this is not an exceptional example but is what happens all the time.

- A second wave of thinkers, however, found this synthesis demeaning. If God is to be supreme he is to be supreme. Muslim thinkers such as Al Ghazzali and 14th-century Christian thinkers such as Okham argued that God is pure infinite freedom, not to be constrained by any necessary laws. The laws of nature, and even the laws of mathematics and logic and morality, do not bind God. They are the results of God's decisions, not constraints upon them. They express God's decisions, not his nature, which is pure and formless. Neoplatonic derivations are rejected, but the idea of a pure perfection beyond form and pattern is retained. Now that pure infinitude is God's will, which can be the source of endless novel patterns.
 - When laws are seen as constraints rather than expressions, God's supremacy enforces a kind of divine arbitrariness. This position has come to be known as divine voluntarism.
 - God is to be supreme, above any finite law or pattern. His will is absolutely unrestricted. As Descartes, also a divine voluntarist, puts it later on, God is the *efficient* cause of the laws of logic and mathematics. He makes them be what they are. He could have created a world in which $2+2=5$. There are no restrictions on what he could or could not do.
 - Divine voluntarism changes the status of mathematical and logical and ethical laws, making them contingent truths whose explanation is in an opaque choice made by God. There are no conceptual necessities to be intuited. Concepts and their combination in laws become something like the atoms were for the ancient atomists, simply given, but with power and authority behind them. Corresponding new analyses of language and perception atomize experience and deny any necessary connections.
 - For instance, Al Ghazzali sounds remarkably like Hume on the lack of necessary connections among atomized events and perceptions, but unlike Hume, Ghazzali's purpose is to exalt God's power and allow for miracles.
- What I want to emphasize concerning divine voluntarism is that there is no knowable transition from the indeterminate formless will of God to the determinate results of his decision. This maintains God's freedom and supremacy over the laws of nature and logic.
 - There is no derivation, a la Plato, and no claim for a set of necessary forms, a la Neoplatonism, and not even a claim that there is a determinate set of possibilities God chooses among, a la Leibniz. For Aquinas and Avicenna it's true that we cannot trace a derivation from God's unknowable essence to the basic laws of nature, logic, morality, but we are assured that there is a necessary connection, that God's essence lies behind the basic laws, and in some cases we can see the necessary relations of the concepts and laws. For the voluntarists no such connections or necessities exist. God has no essence except freedom and power. On the created level every individual and every concept is separate, complete in itself, atomized, and their interrelations are established externally by a decree that has no overt or hidden rationality behind it.
- Voluntarism thus introduces the notion of a self that is formless yet the source of decisions. This brings a basic opacity where Plato sought for crystal clarity. Voluntarism stands in deep opposition to Platonism, but moves in a different direction than atomism. It invokes entities that are simply given, but it also invokes laws, and those too are simply given, the results of a decision. There is no necessity to be intuited.
 - On a practical level, since that divine decision is opaque to us, the result is to turn us towards empirical investigation much more effectively than did ancient atomism or Platonism, because the voluntarists acknowledge the importance of laws and patterns but

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deny any rational way of knowing them; we have to go and look. Studying the laws of nature becomes a way of discerning God's decisions.

- There is a trust that God's decision establishing the universe is unified enough that it is worthwhile trying to look for laws of nature that fit together in some kind of unity. God does not have to have decided that way, but it is presumed that he did. Hence voluntarism motivates the scientific search for the laws of nature and the presupposition that mathematics will help describe them, even though the voluntarists have given up the idea that mathematics provides any necessity for those laws. Isaac Newton is the paradigm example of a divine voluntarist who trusts that God has established deep harmonious laws that can be sought out.
- The opacity of God's decisions opens the door to sudden novelty. God is not bound by his previous decisions; discontinuities are possible; new patterns could arise in nature or in society. This is especially true in those versions of voluntarism (such as in Descartes and Al Ghazzali) which have God recreating the universe moment to moment. Such a God is a Sartrean freedom, able to innovate with anything anytime.
- Decisions in contexts
 - Voluntarism introduces a new approach to explaining how it is that things have their basic characteristics. These result from a decision made by a being that has no characteristics of its own that could allow a decision to be predicted or explained.
 - Because God is the source of everything (even of his defined relation to us), and because God exists in no context that is not of his making, divine voluntarism is a coherent position.
 - *Divine* voluntarism has faded as a widely-held philosophical position, though it still appears when divine command meta-ethics faces the *Meno*. But divine voluntarism gave birth to a human voluntarism that wrought its own revolutions and is still a live option.
 - Neoplatonism's formless One, reread as a knowing and willing God who relates to history as the God of the monotheistic scriptures, provides a transition from the ancient to the modern world.
 - Divine voluntarism gives an account of the origin of the basic cosmological facts and laws, as well as the basic laws of mathematics, logic, and morality. But this cosmological explanation is transferrable to the human level. There we picture the human self as a formless energy or power that decisively produces forms and laws for behavior and society and art. When the theological voluntarism it leaves us with human individuals centered on their decisive freedoms rather than their rational perceptions.
 - Moved from the divine to the human level voluntarism appears philosophically it appears on the level of social and artistic explanation. It emphasizes unified and self-defining persons and communities. It opens the door to novelty.
 - It provides the model for the individuals and groups who come together to create social contracts and laws out of a state of nature. It provides the image of the genius artist who creates new unexpected works and schools of art. It appears in the debate whether rationality and logic and mathematics and ethics govern decisions or arise from decisions.
 - Modernity brings disputes about whether at the core of an individual (or a community) there is a rational perception of necessities, or a decision creating laws and values. In the first case rationality is a source of guidance and values, in the second case rationality works within parameters that are the results of decision, and seeks consistency and instrumental success. Those disputes continue to this day, and voluntarism is a option in most social sciences and much of philosophy.
 - Some critics of the modern world see voluntarism as its primal sin. They often cite Nietzsche (not quite fairly) though they could with more reason cite Ockham, or parts of Fichte, or of

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Hobbes, or Descartes' primacy of the will over the intellect. The critics seek a return to basic natural laws of thought and morality that might curb our unruly yet increasing powers.

- My goal is not to affirm such natural necessities. There is no return to the Greeks. What I want to do is affirm the possibilities of novelty that come with voluntarism, but also point out the conceptual tension in the application of voluntarism to human affairs. When it is a question of a creator god making decisions, voluntarist theory says God has a will that is totally unconstrained by any structures or history or rationality. But when the voluntarist notion of decision is applied to humans, suddenly history and context and finitude become stubbornly problematic.
- The distinction of God from his creation becomes the distinction of subject from object. (and, within the subject, a distinction of pure freedom from settled past language and habit). A moment of formless creative decision is inserted into individual and/or social processes. But that decision exists in a context it did not choose, amid already definite histories and drives and languages and options that it did not make. Like a ghost the formless human will haunts the context without finding a place for itself. It can have no connection, in a field where all is connected. Its decisions turn out to have historical and psychological connections to a context, connections it cannot claim to have created.
 - If humans truly had a will like the divine will, they could break off at any point, step out of any context, and create novel art and social forms without limit -- a genius or a founding social decision would come as a lightning bolt from outside, creating a new era or a new artistic style or a new state with no connection to the previous history. Sartre would be vindicated -- but we recall that Sartre had great difficulty linking his pure freedom with history, embodiment, and context.
 - Indeed, like a ghost, that formless human will tends to evaporate into determinism by context, without real change or novelty. Trends continue. Separate factors impinge on one another. The artistic breakthrough gets traced to prior movements. The new social form echoes earlier subordinate forms. Human voluntarism, having defied Plato, seems to become atomism.
- We need some notions that can account for innovation but also prior connections, language and history. Novel beginnings may seem totally new, but subsequent reflection and analysis shows that there are connections even though it may have been important for the artist or the politician or the community to think of itself as making a radical and unprecedented new start.
- New options
 - Nineteenth and twentieth century philosophy spent much effort trying to re-conceptualize these relations.
 - What interests me are the attempts to rethink change so that we are not left with the opposition between Plato's laws and the atomists' separations, nor are we left with the opposition between an indeterminate power of creation and its defined results.
 - Both of the ancient rivals affirmed something as simply given, basic entities or laws, but we find ourselves in a situation where in cultural, artistic, and intellectual matters what is given is received from past changes and open to future changes, and its being given is its being actively received and reinterpreted.
 - A retreat to an atomism of concepts or perceptions, or a retreat to Platonic intuition and laws and perceived necessity -- these avoid the situation of being fallible in the midst of history and working as best we can. It is this fallibility that is exemplified by scientific methodologies today, and philosophy is learning to appreciate how its own stance might be similarly self-interpreted.
 - Both nineteenth and twentieth century philosophy try to find accounts that explain both continuity and novelty without recourse to a formless voluntaristic power. But there is one

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important difference between them, a theme that is prominent in the nineteenth but lessens in the twentieth century.

- Many 19th century attempts to conceptualize the relation of novelty and context employ large-scale teleology. History is seen as developing in ways that may be unexpected from the perspective of any previous era, but which are retrospectively seen as contributing to a goal. It may not be obvious until the end of the process that it has been aiming at the goal.
 - Hegel and Marx think that the final goals of spirit can only be conceptualized when Spirit has reached a particular level of development, although there are foreshadowing through history.
 - Popular accounts of evolution stressed a developmental teleology absent from Darwin's own ideas, while the social Darwinists thought that it was only when the Europeans achieved a certain level of civilization that they were able to understand how the processes of history were leading to the constant improvement of society and individuals that culminated in European society.
 - Of course the nineteenth century does also contain moves away from large-scale teleology. This allows Nietzsche, for instance, to argue that each individual should express the will to power by imposing a goal on himself, improving his life in an artistic way, even as society is declining rather than progressing.
- Darwinian evolution denies large scale teleology but it works within what arrives from the past. Traits that are selected for one purpose can suddenly get selected for a new purpose when they meet the environment. It is possible, for example, that insect wings first developed as a kind of flat surface for temperature regulation, but as they grew bigger they proved useful for hopping and gliding, and began to be selected along that new axis of development. The same might be said for social institutions, which might find themselves playing very different roles; an agricultural family arrangement might be selected for labor stability in an industrial environment.
 - What makes Darwinism a significant strategy for explaining basic characteristics and changes is its attempt to show the arising of pattern and law out of chance and randomness.
 - Strictly speaking, there is no one process called evolution. What occurs is variation, reproduction, and selection. Each of these is in turn a multitude of different causal chains and processes. It is crucial for Darwinian explanation that variation and selection be independent of each other. It is their interaction which produces change but that change is neither following a law nor guided by any intention.
 - Yet the result of all this chance interaction of different causal chain is the emergence of regularities and patterns and organisms which are structured with organs and behaviors that function to achieve goals in a fashion that Aristotle would approve.
 - As an account of ongoing change, Darwinism does not ask, or answer, questions about the ontological status of emergent patterns, but it provides a mechanism that can explain how novel patterns might emerge.
 - The Darwinian strategy is not a full-scale cosmological explanation, but it can be applied to more than biological evolution. It has been used to discuss social and psychological matters, and has been suggested for individual consciousness, social theories and scientific theories. In all these areas it sees is no unified overall mechanism but an interplay of variation and selection. However, in psychological and social cases Darwinian explanations tend to produce Just So Stories that are difficult to verify.

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- The Darwinian approach is less successful where intention and interpretation seem actively engaged, as in political literary, artistic, architectural, and cultural novelties. But it has been invoked for basic impulses and psychological patterns.
- Evolution needs to be placed in a larger cosmological context. Variation and selection require a background context, a more general level of regularity and law that lets them happen, but itself needs either to be explained or to be taken as just given. Precisely because variation, selection, and reproduction are not part of some grand single process they require an environment with its own laws as a background in which they can work. Those laws and patterns (of physics, chemistry, geology, etc.) are not themselves the result of a Darwinian process.
 - But could they be? There are, for instance, theories of a multiverse that postulate a kind of selection among universes with different physical laws that occur randomly or bud off from one another. Different physical constants randomly occur in the different universes; we live in one where the basic laws allow planets and stars and evolution. This is a bold idea, but it still presumes a yet more general level of laws of physics and geometry making possible the whole multiverse process.
 - A version of this issue haunts any attempt to give a general theory of cultural and artistic movements and changes: if the theory speaks of changes, is it itself above them? Even if one rejected Kant's permanent transcendental categories and embraced a series of quasi-transcendental self-conceptions of knowing and meaning, that embrace would itself be offering a stable higher level description.
- Whitehead and Deleuze
 - The last cosmological/social/cultural parallels I want to draw will involve a few remarks about two thinkers I left out of my enumeration above: Whitehead and Deleuze. In each there is a cosmology of time and process that applies to social and individual change as well.
 - Both Whitehead and Deleuze developed large ontological theories with cosmological as well as social and artistic implications. My aim is not to elaborate on their theories but to follow up my selected themes.
 - In Whitehead, I want to highlight his treatment of causality. Rather than seeing causal relationships as a force or influence reaching from the past shaping the present and future, Whitehead reverses the model. A present entity actively takes up its inheritance and synthesizes itself by bringing together and in some sense "choosing" what elements of the past are to be significant in the present. In doing so it can introduce novel combinations and emphases and directions.
 - Whitehead means this to apply to all events, and here he is a kind of atomist. He believes that all continuous entities, whether an electron moving in space and time, or a table, or human individuals and societies moving through history, are composed from a sequence of atomic events each one forming itself by taking up the past. An electron, or a person, is made up of a series of events that each forms itself, then is finished and becomes material for later events. Electrons and material objects are sequences of events in which almost no novelty is introduced. Greater novelty comes about through the greater complexity of events interacting with one another in organisms and persons and societies.
 - Whitehead also suggests that although an electron is a sequence of events with almost no introduction of novelty, slowly the physical universe can introduce new modes of arrangement, new dimensions of time and space, and mutate the overall framework within which organic and personal and social events happen. So novelty is possible on all levels.

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- Each Whiteheadian actual entity, each little atom of process, resembles a mini-Hegelian absolute coming to its self-realization, though not necessarily in any consciously clear way. Each is also a little will to power reinterpreting its world in achieving intense satisfaction.
- The "choice" an event makes is not a formless power introducing novelty. Each event has what Whitehead calls a "subjective aim", a guiding mood or impulse; there is no formless subjectivity.
 - On the other hand Whitehead's conservatism shows in the way subjective aim is received by each event, gifted by Whitehead's god. This sounds medieval and there are indeed medieval echoes, but Whitehead's finite god is no ultimate creator; he is a unifying and harmonizing entity that provides not a defined goal but an impulse, an encouragement to greater intensity and harmonious complexity.
- Whitehead's cosmology is conceptually exciting, but there doesn't seem to be much empirical support for it, and there are theoretical problems reconciling it to Einstein's special relativity. I'm not interested in supporting the cosmology, but I want to emphasize his point that in personal and social matters what might be seen as determination by the past could better be seen as active reception and reinterpretation.
- Gilles Deleuze remarked that Whitehead was much more important than the standard 20th century philosophical histories realized, for he was a philosopher of the event.
 - Deleuze found Whitehead's theories prefiguring some aspects of his own. He found valuable Whitehead's emphasis on novelty, his insistence that what seem to be unified entities are complexes of quasi-independent components with their own impulses, and his belief that the fundamental psychic phenomena are mood and impulse rather than ideas and representations.
 - For Whitehead as for Deleuze consciousness and explicit ideas and judgments arise from a mood or impulse that is not representational or "intentional" in the technical sense of the word. Deleuze and Whitehead (with Nietzsche) were allied in opposing the dominance of Kantian theories of mentality and representation.
 - The two were also allied in refusing both strict determinism by the past and the eruption of completely novel forms with no past connections at all. Deleuze was a partisan of social and cultural revolution, but he was no simple voluntarist. Revolution does not come out of nowhere, though it may appear to do so. For Deleuze the twists and turns of novelty can be more abrupt than for Whitehead, but nonetheless he saw change as developing from active impulses picking up and doing new things with their inheritance.
 - Deleuze, however, is more thorough going in his rejection of teleology. Even more than Whitehead, Deleuze sees no overarching goal except the intense self-realization of the individual entities. For both thinkers, though, the cooperation of individual entities can lead to something greater which has its own realizations and intensities.
 - Whitehead's fine-grained atomism leads him to see individual people as complex societies of many events. Deleuze's selves are similarly constituted by multiple sources, as in Nietzsche, but without Whitehead's neat hierarchy of levels.
 - Also, Whitehead's God is a conservative being that ensures a level of continuity and memory that Deleuze rejects. Instead of Whitehead's God working for greater intensity, Deleuze appeals to the ancient atomist doctrine of the unexpected eruptive swerve. Individual entities can impulsively swerve in new directions. Once that direction or impulse is there, however, then active reception of the past is involved.
- The details of Whitehead's and Deleuze's theories are complex and although they share many features they ultimately move in different directions. There are striking divergences between Whitehead the Edwardian gentleman and Deleuze the French revolutionary, particularly in the way in which they approach social institutions. What I highlight for my

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purposes here is the way in which they both emphasize active reception rather than forces and movements coming from the past. They both speak in terms of self creation in the present, which has the air of voluntarism, but they emphasize context and history along with novelty. For them, neither self nor context is fully definite, and the two cannot be separated.

- Hermeneutics and Deconstruction
 - One could go on comparing these two thinkers but I am not expert in either of their intricate theories. Instead, I turn to a few further reflections about active reception and breaking down the subject-object polarity in contemporary hermeneutics and deconstruction. These thinkers make no attempt to transfer from cosmological to cultural strategies; they take on the cultural directly.
 - The word *hermeneutics* was coined by scholars the field of scriptural interpretation. Schleiermacher developed the notion and it was only in the 20th century that the word spread to other kinds of interpretation. The scriptural case, however, shows an important feature. Proper scriptural interpretation involves seeking what the text might mean *both* in its original context *and* in the contemporary context. Interpretation needs both historical research and contemporary translation. To interpret is to make relevant, and that means to translate and adapt.
 - The hermeneutical attitude in the act of interpretation and re-creation sees social and artistic traditions as always being modified and at times as taking turns which their proponents may or may not realize are radical. Even when as in political revolutions self-consciously new institutions are created, there is an inheritance of ideas and goals which even as they are being rejected help determine what is new.
 - This goes against the popular attack on Gadamer as urging us to stay tied to an inheritance in the past which can only be reread and continued. Gadamer's interest is in creative rereading as well as in the continuity of tradition. In any case I would emphasize more ideas from Paul Ricoeur, who in his work on imagination, will, and narrative temporality is very concerned with the ways in which the past is re-figured. There is no reception of the past without reworking it.
 - Similarly, a new social or artistic creation can produce its own precursors. James Joyce writes a new kind of novel, a radical break, and suddenly some earlier novels must be seen in a new light as moving in Joyce's direction.
 - Heidegger asks that we relate to the past authentically, which, he says, means not that we blindly continue it nor attempt to flee it into something totally new, but that we find new and creative possibilities in what has shaped us. (Heidegger is, however, not completely free from a certain longing for a total break which will also be a truer connection with our origins.)
 - The hermeneutical attitude puts us far from ancient atomism with its insistence that there are certain basic physical or social atoms whose characteristics do not change but only combine with one another.
 - But it puts us equally far from Platonism since for Plato the eternal forms are available to intuition and do not need to be reinterpreted. (Though the more practical Plato of *The Laws* and the dialogue on the *Statesman* is aware of the need to interpret and weave together the eternal forms with historical events and attitudes.)
 - Hermeneutical attitudes also challenge voluntarism, since we are never in a position of nakedly deciding. Neither self nor its creations are fully formed and settled. Nor is there any pure ahistorical act of will.
 - Paul Ricoeur's insistence on the importance of imagination highlights the non-theoretic component of our activity, and tries to understand an impulse which is located in

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language and tradition yet capable of novelty. Creativity is neither as self-consciously self transparent as in Hegel, nor as opaque and impulse driven as in Nietzsche.

- Hermeneutics and deconstruction are often opposed to one another, but here I want to see them sharing an emphasis on active reception and a refusal to see either self or cultural objects as fixed and definite.
 - Deconstructive strategies question continuity and unity and therefore stand opposed to hermeneutical approaches. But what I want to emphasize is that both tendencies see form as open. In hermeneutical approaches any past form is open to refiguration. Deconstructive analysis questions the stability of form. Going further than hermeneutics, deconstruction seeks multiplicity and possibility in all apparently stable forms.
 - Whether the stability of a literary or cultural form is taken to be enforced by a policing function, or whether the stability is an illusion based upon logocentric styles of reading, deconstruction is interested in showing how what appears to be a stable form about which we might ask questions of origin and connections is really a cluster of possibilities held down, at best, via social or individual decision.
 - Yet the society or the individual making the decision is itself fragile and open. There is no pure decision and no unified center to be the deciding will or subjectivity. Voluntarism must be severely qualified
 - Nothing is as sure and stable as it appears to be. In this sense deconstruction is a strategy of openness together with an analysis of closures.
 - Deconstructive thinkers sometimes thought to assert that social, artistic, and intellectual patterns have no stability at all. But we do stop at red lights, and we do know that behaving in a courtroom is different than behaving in one's living room, and languages do manage to communicate on a day-to-day basis. Extravagant claims of total indeterminacy are refuted by our daily life, but important deconstructive claims remain, about the openness and fertility of form, and about how strategies for freezing form are always failing, and about what appears to be a single form shows on close examination a set of possibilities some of which are much wilder than one might imagine. This reinforces the sense of openness to change in any cultural or artistic or intellectual "system". The system is not closed, and its elements are linked less tightly and themselves multiply defined. At the same time the self and its power are less pure and open than we might hope.
- Conclusions
 - Looking around, we see that a shared move for many thinkers in the last two centuries has been to refuse the idea that the self and object, and the self and its past and context and language are separate and each completely definite. They are neither governed by fully present laws nor assembled out of fully definite atoms.
 - Greek thought tended to subordinate cultural and social patterns to "natural" patterns in the wide sense of the word. This subordination breaks down when voluntarism exalts the pure power of a decision that is prior to all pattern. Modern thought inherits this as a split between subject and object, which was not so strong in the Greek world. I have been following one strand in the genesis and retreat of that division.
 - On the level of divine voluntarism the contrast can be stark: God's freedom is completely undefined (or purely self-defined), while what he chooses to create is completely defined and definite. That is not true for us. In the human level there is no sharp distinction between creator and created. The human creative moment is not wholly indefinite, while its context is not wholly definite. Both sides mix definition and possibility.
 - What gets challenged is the sharp division into two sides (subject and object, will and results, power and structure). On the level of human culture, art, and intellect

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- everything is both formed and forming, definite enough yet opening to new possibilities. The distinction between creatures and God is not paralleled by a distinction between self and object so much as between past and present-future.
- It's useful to highlight those who see no indeterminate power in the self, yet refuse to reduce everything to causal chains or interactions of perfectly definite entities.
 - Kant affirms the power of subjectivity and freedom but structures it with a priori laws; there is no formless power or self. This is true of the German Idealists, even Fichte, as well.
 - The much neglected Neokantians, the rejected parents of both analytic and continental philosophy, also conceive self and world as ordered by necessary transcendental laws and open to the decisions of a finite self structured by those laws.
 - Pierce and Dewey worked within a Hegelian legacy that distrusted separations and formless powers, and refused to disjoin self and context.
 - The chaos that Nietzsche sees in nature and within the self is neither totally settled nor totally indefinite. It is a welter of contending forces whose direction depends in part on their connections -- they are not separate atoms -- but who open directions that a strong will -- itself one or more of these forces -- can further define and refine.
 - With Nietzsche, Deleuze sees the self (and society) as a similar congeries of forces and directions, opening possibilities. While he takes much from the ancient atomists, Deleuze refuses their picture of entities as assembled from components that are each totally definite and self-sufficient. At the same time he rejects any sharp subject/object division that gives power to one side over the other.
 - Heidegger talks of self and society as "thrown projects", opening to future possibilities on the basis of a past whose heritage is revisable by retrieving its basic original impulses in creative ways. As "being in the world" humans are always in nets of meaning and activity where no sharp subject/object division can be made.
 - Deconstruction insists that forms and contexts are not so defined and stable as they appear. Nor are languages and selves.
 - These thinkers would likely refuse an ontology of ultimate determinism, but that is less important for my themes than what they would say about the sources and the changes of social and artistic and cultural phenomena.
 - My point is that there are substantial currents of thought that see self and society as different from both the Greek options, and from their modern rationalist and determinist descendants, as well as from voluntarism and its modern progeny. These movements keep the modern turn towards self-assertion and self-comprehension. But they see self-comprehension as enmeshing the self more firmly in context and history rather than affirming a separate power, and winning through to understanding ongoing processes of change and self-creation, rather than any set of higher laws or atomic elements.
 - One might object that my survey is slighting the vast stretches of philosophy since the eighteenth century that have been devoted to atomism and determinism, plus all the efforts today that have been going into a consistent materialism that can talk non-dualistically about intentional and cultural phenomena.
 - It's true; I am slighting these, and for two reasons. First, aside from some facile evolutionary psychology these parts of philosophy have rightly concentrated on general ontological issues, and don't have much to say in response to questions about cultural and social change in general and this or that social phenomenon in particular.
 - Second, and more to the point, as Kant pointed out, even if our lives are in fact totally determined by lower level laws, when we are agents we have to treat ourselves as free on the level of individual and social decisions. It is practically

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irrelevant to those involved making decisions and carrying out actions whether from some distanced point of view they are seen as determined. No amount of ontological overview will help me decide whether or not to take a vacation, or how to plan a building, or what kind of laws we should pass. Social, cultural, artistic matters are practical, and if we are looking to understand how they come to be and change we have to approach them on their own levels.

- So it remains helpful in social and artistic matters to look at those who speak on those levels directly and affirm something more than a deterministic self but something less than the voluntarist pure power.
- This also means, as you may notice, that the guiding analogy I have been using between cosmological strategies and cultural and artistic phenomena should be suspect. Indeed that has been one lesson from this overview, as we have seen the strategy discarded by more and more thinkers in the past century or so.
- I've tried to show how common themes and reactions show up in recent philosophical schools that may be quite opposed to one another. On the longer view I've tried to show that we are no longer Greek, but neither are we modern in the classic seventeenth century sense, nor in the sense that Latour attacks. We are caught in the middle, dealing with social, cultural, artistic practices without the anchor of fixed laws or atomist foundations. We have to be creative without the secure distance of a pure self.
- Hegelian Coda
 - As an emblem of these considerations, I would like to bring in Hegel again, because he offers much to ponder as he tries to have it all.
 - On the one hand, Hegel is the ultimate anti-atomist; for him nothing stands complete on its own; everything exists through mediation and arises out of interconnections.
 - On the other hand, Hegel's philosophy seems an apotheosis of Platonism. He believes in a rational derivation of basic a priori laws and forms for the general features of reality.
 - Like Plato, he attempts to provide a network of basic concepts which are known by pure thought and function as a priori prescriptions for various areas of culture and nature, though how the network of concepts maintains itself, and how we come to know it, are quite different than what Plato suggests.
 - But, importantly for my themes, Hegel argued that Plato's world was deficient in subjectivity and freedom in both social and individual lives.
 - He argues that individual free rational decision and responsibility was not encouraged in Plato's Republic, and in art and life it led to tragedy with Antigone and Socrates. Hegel argues that with the Sophists and Socrates, then with Roman individuality, and most decisively with Christian theology and life, a new conception of human individuality arises in a new kind of society.
 - Hegel goes on to incorporate modern subjectivity, yet refuses a sharp distinction between subject and object, self and body, self and context, and none of these are conceived as totally definite and complete.
 - Themes from voluntarism are domesticated by a priori structures which are not just abstract laws but are self-reflexive, so that self-assertion and self-creation involve and produce a conceptual self-knowledge, which in turn illuminates processes and practices in the historical world.
 - Hegel's attempt to have it all does not succeed, in my opinion -- that's a long story -- but if we reject his closures we can still profit from the richness of his concrete and logical analyses, and we can still be helped by his anti-atomism and inspired by the way he refuses voluntarism while affirming self and cultural creativity. That creativity becomes even more

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pronounced if we give up his rational optimism. Ricoeur speaks of post-Hegelian Kantians, and that seems about right to me.

- We can keep Hegel's anti-atomism and his refusal of any opposition between the determinate and the indeterminate. We can see with him that what appear to be settled concepts, cultures, and artistic movements contain internal tensions and spacings in the concrete mixtures of self and world that move towards new forms.
- We can deny Hegel's closure of the self-knowledge in the abstract logic, yet we still can affirm Kant-like but more self-reflexive transcendental concepts that describe their own processes of meaning creation and re-creation. These don't dictate their lower level instantiations nor give much direction for cultural movements. But they can provide a kind of criterion of authenticity for cultural and artistic change: does the new acknowledge all the moments of the process of its own becoming?
 - (See my "Authenticity With Teeth" in the anthology Philosophical Romanticism.)