The Parables of Jesus and Socrates

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1 Introduction

In 1937, Swiss scientist Fritz Zwicky began to study the gravitational forces in a far away constellation named Coma Berenices, which can be found roughly three hundred million light years away from the earth. What he found was puzzling: the movement of the galaxy clusters within the constellation were moving at a very fast rate; much too quickly for the amount of mass that Zwicky was able to calculate visually. Perhaps what puzzled Zwicky the most was how the planets, which were circulating at such a fast rate, stayed in orbit. Under the normal laws of physics, planets have the potential to become detached from their orbit and be flung off into space if they move too quickly. As it turns out, the phenomenon that Zwicky had discovered was what scientists now call “dark matter” or “dark energy.” These phenomena are called “dark” because they are completely invisible, yet they account for over 90% of all gravitational force in the entire cosmos, and they explained why Zwicky was unable to see what caused the planets to move so quickly and yet remain within orbit.

But what does a discussion about the discovery of dark matter and energy have to do with Greek philosophy and the New Testament? The answer is this: even though Greek philosophy may not always be easily detected in the New Testament, we can be sure that certain philosophical schools were integral to how the ancients understood both themselves and their respective contexts, including both Christian and Jewish contexts. By extension, this essay will argue that in order for New Testament writers to have successfully dialogued with certain groups, allusions to philosophy were unavoidable. Not only this, but already established philosophical questions may have been rather influential for helping the earliest Christians shape statements about their beliefs. This will be illustrated by how the Parable of the Sower, found in each of the Synoptic Gospels, addresses certain questions concerning belief and disbelief, knowledge and ignorance. It will be argued that the ways in which Jesus talks about belief, for example, echo the ways that Socrates talks about it in the Parable of the Cave. This does not mean that the Synoptic Gospels directly imitated...
Plato’s *Republic*, but it means that Jesus and Socrates (the Synoptics and Plato) are in dialogue with one another because they are addressing the same topic.

With regard to philosophy, I would like to make some clarifying comments concerning what it is and how the term will be used in this essay. Philosophy is an appropriate term for describing the ways in which we discuss the answers to certain questions. But philosophy is not theology, nor is it science. According to Bertrand Russell, theology consists of speculations on matters that are unascertainable with regard to definite knowledge. Science, on the other hand, appeals to human reason rather than to authority. Said another way, “all definite knowledge belongs to science; all dogma as to what surpasses definite knowledge belongs to theology.”

The reason, therefore, why the teachings of Jesus in the Parable of the Sower occupy the place of philosophy is because of their practical applicability. In other words, the teachings of Jesus are applicable to general human life, and are concerned with philosophical categories like ethics and metaphysics. Not only this, but the teachings of Jesus apply themselves directly to existential queries, namely how humanity understands itself in the here and now with regard to the Kingdom of God.

More specifically, thinking about the Parable of the Sower in philosophical terms is helpful. As will be seen below, the most prominent features of the parable are concerned with knowledge and ignorance. Jesus’s comments on this subject are an attempt to qualify the true nature of knowledge and the avenues by which one comes to a position of knowledge. This kind of dialectic was common in the ancient world, and first century readers of the parable would have made a number of connections with other dialectics concerning the same topic. Again, this is not to say that the Synoptic tradition was directly emulating Plato, for example, but it means that, by establishing the same topic, the Synoptic tradition is in communication with other dialectics concerned with the same topic.

The question then becomes: how can we be certain that two texts are in communication with each other, and are these two texts discussing the same philosophical topic? The purpose of this essay is to argue that, in the Parable of the Sower, the Synoptic writers are in communication with Platonic notions of knowledge and ignorance. This communication is not always obvious, which means that philosophy may occupy a role similar to that of dark matter: its effects may be detected even when the cause of those effects are not readily seen.

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