INTRODUCTION

THEOLOGY, SCIENCE, AND RATIONAL GROUND

The Concept of Rational Ground

From its very beginning, philosophy set for itself the challenge of pursuing specific sorts of answers to a seemingly trivial question: Why? This question admits of a wide range of answers, it seems. Yet in its infancy, philosophy set about putting this question with a certain kind of precision. Religion, myth, and tragedy all ask this kind of question and all give answers of specific kinds to this question. Philosophy, at its inception, distinguished itself from these by defining what the question means and what would count as an answer.

The question specific to philosophy is a combination of epistemology and metaphysics. Philosophy, already in Plato, understands that the answer to the question must fulfill two conditions: (1) The answer must explain how we come to know that about which we are asking the question; and (2) the answer must explain how that about which we are asking the question came to be. In the Phaedo, Socrates puts this succinctly: “It seemed to me splendid to know the reasons for each thing, why each thing comes to be, why it perishes, and why it exists.” This precise question, that is, the question of the reasons of the thing that perform both an epistemological function and a metaphysical function I call the question of the rational ground.

The rational ground, therefore, is a specific kind of answer to the question “Why?” For it is an answer that appeals to reason (epistemological) and holds that, in one way or another, reason is the cause of a thing (ontological). In short, the rational ground is an answer that attempts to join the way in which a thing comes to be with the way in which a thing is known. The shortest expression of the rational ground comes from Aristotle’s Posterior Analytics: “We think that we know each [thing] . . . when we think that we know the cause through which the thing exists . . .” (71b10).

R. A. Lee, Jr., Science, the Singular, and the Question of Theology
© Richard A. Lee 2002
Rational ground joins the order of genesis (coming to be) and the order of knowledge (coming to know).

The rational ground provides a kind of answer that is different from, for example, the answer of a myth or a story of creation. For a story of creation provides a ground for the coming to be, passing away, and existence of a thing, but it does not provide a rational ground. A story of creation merely posits that the existence of a thing is the result of some kind of divine creative activity that is itself not further explicable in terms of its causes. There is no rational ground where the ground offered is not subject to reason. One can read the section of the *Phaedo* cited above as Plato’s attempt to distinguish the kinds of answers that are properly philosophical from all other kinds of answers. Philosophy is the search for the rational ground, and this has certain consequences.

The first consequence of the search for rational ground is that the ground, that is, that which has metaphysical responsibility for a thing coming to be or existing, is rational, that is, it appeals to reason. When Socrates finds the writings of Anaxagoras, he is pleased because it seemed to Socrates that “intelligence (*nous*) should be the reason for everything” (97c4). Socrates finds that Anaxagoras, in the end, supposes that things like air and ether and water are the causes. “But to call such things ‘reasons’ is absurd” (99a5). Anaxagoras’s primary mistake was to offer as a ground that which is not rational. Air, ether, and water cannot be the rational ground because they are not, according to Socrates, subject to reason.

This leads to a second consequence. If the ground, that is, that which is responsible for the existence and coming to be, of a thing is to be a rational one, then it will be difficult to separate this ground from reason itself. This again is seen clearly in the story that Socrates tells of Anaxagoras. For what appealed to him in Anaxagoras was the fact that reason, intelligence, *nous*, was posited as the cause for all things. This is a direct result of the ground’s being rational. For in the very notion of rational ground, as we have seen, the reason for something coming to be is precisely the reason for our being able to know the thing. Thus, the ground of the coming to be or existence of the thing is not only a metaphysical ground, but an epistemological ground. In this way, the ground is often reason itself.

This leads to a final consequence. Since the attempt at uncovering the rational ground of something existing or coming to be is both metaphysical and epistemological, it is also general in a certain sense. There is not an infinite plurality of rational grounds, one for each singular. Rather, the rational ground itself is an attempt to explain, on another level, why something exists in the way it does. This requires, therefore, that the reason for existing be more general than the singular that is existing before us. When we ask why a human is a human, or even why *this* human is human, we ask