

**N**OW THIS PERSPECTIVE becomes a perspective available only to those who have not accepted priestcraft as having epistemological authority. Whatever problems are to be addressed by oracles and priests, the problem of knowledge is not one of them, at least as this problem arises from the facts of the natural world. And I do want to underscore this, it is a point worth repeating: Something momentous takes place when a culture takes the position that the problem of knowledge is essentially a religious problem and invests its credulity in a denominated group of official interpreters whose judgments on matters of this kind are taken to be incorrigible.

Here I do not presume to weigh the claims of religion and the claims of the secular world. My own guess is that for every secularly produced fact, there may be some profound religious truth on which it depends. But here the complexity of the case and the shortness of life incline me, at any rate, to silence. What I am testing instead are the implications that follow, depending upon which of the positions is taken as a person or culture sets out to solve problems arising from life in the real world.

Once one confers on a select and denominated group ultimate epistemological authority on core questions arising from the problem of knowledge, the nearly inevitable result is philosophical paralysis. And what is more likely to happen is positions will become quite hardened, and the only thing left for scholarship is to interpret the words of the wise. So the entire debate now is not a debate about the nature of truth, but about how a text or holy maxim is to be understood. What the leaders of thought in the ancient Greek world might be inclined to say is that this may be the best way to get to heaven, but surely not to the moon.

The Hellenic world was scarcely, ah, well, devoid of religious influences on all aspects of thought and practice. No question about it, religion is a central fact of ancient Greek life. Consider again Pythagoras, who was a man of great spiritual devotion, a man whose mathematics is seeking to rise to the level of the divine. In Homer as well, whether it is lyssa [leusa?] or theumos or anything else invading the body, Homer leaves ample room for the realm of spirit to operate, and to operate powerfully according to its own principles — these being obscure, powerful, and chthonic.

SOURCE: Segment 3 of lecture 11 (“Hippocrates and the Science of Life”), which is part of a 60-lecture course by Professor Daniel N. Robinson entitled, “The Great Ideas of Philosophy, 2nd Edition” (2004). This course is available on CDs or on DVDs; it is sponsored by a commercial enterprise with two names, “The Great Courses” and “The Teaching Company.” The Internet website is based on the first name: <http://www.thegreatcourses.com>.  
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I said in an earlier lecture that the ancient Greek world never had an official religion, but was also never an entirely secular world either. There is a remarkable integration of the secular and the religious in this robust and flourishing culture in the fifth and early fourth centuries BC.

Nonetheless, the Hippocratics give us a particularly useful example of a science that is liberated from religious orthodoxies, an example matched by the productive scholarship of that same period in natural science, political science, psychology, and associated subjects. This is not to say that Hippocratic medicine was superior to what might have been found in Egypt, even five hundred or a thousand years earlier. But it is to say that it was based on an entirely different set of presuppositions.

Now throughout these lectures and in philosophy in general, there is a term that is quite commonly used to identify a particular approach to the problem of knowledge. The term is, quote, “empirical.” We often hear that one is engaged in empirical research; we describe a philosopher as being an empiricist; we say that science is an essentially empirical enterprise.

Now what do we mean when we use this word? *Empirical* is grounded in the ancient Greek word *empyrea*, which simply means observation. Now the Hippocratic physicians describe themselves as *empyrikoi*, each one of being an *empyrikos*. In this they meant to convey that their remedies were based on what had been observed, what had been observed to be effective, not on some grand theory by which remedies are allegedly deducible.

Now today, if a physician is asked about how medical science approaches disease, the reply is likely to be something like, “Well, the approach of medical science is empirical” — meaning based on clinical observations that tell us that when a particular condition is treated in a particular way, certain consequences follow. Those consequences that promote health are taken to be the right kind of therapy; and those consequences that don’t do that or make conditions worse are then abandoned. Nowhere in the approach do we find overriding, overarching, non-scientific theories or beliefs driving the entire practice.

# Glossary and biographic background

The definitions shown below come from the *Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*, 2nd edition (V3.0 for 32bit Windows systems, 1999).

**e•pis•te•mol•o•gy** *n.*

a branch of philosophy that investigates the origin, nature, methods, and limits of human knowledge.

— **e•pis•te•mo•log•i•cal** *adj.*

[page 1, paragraph 1, line 2 and page 1, paragraph 3, line 1]

**in•cor•ri•gi•ble** *adj.*

1. not corrigible; bad beyond correction or reform: *incorrigible behavior; an incorrigible liar.*

2. impervious to constraints or punishment; willful; unruly; uncontrollable: *an incorrigible child; incorrigible hair.*

3. firmly fixed; not easily changed: *an incorrigible habit.*

4. not easily swayed or influenced: *an incorrigible optimist.*

[page 1, paragraph 1, final word]

**chtho•ni•an** *adj. Class. Myth.*

Also, **chthon•ic**

of or pertaining to the deities, spirits, and other beings dwelling under the earth.

[page 1, paragraph 4, final word — the last word of text on page 1]

The following paragraph of biographic information appears on the back cover of the CD set marketed by the company called “The Great Courses,” a set that is dated 2004.

**Professor Daniel N. Robinson** is Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Georgetown University and a member of the philosophy faculty at Oxford University. He has also taught at other universities, including Columbia and Princeton. Among the more than 40 distinguished books to his credit is *An Intellectual History of Philosophy*. The former president of two divisions of the American Psychological Association, he was honored with the Lifetime Achievement Award from its History of Psychology division.