



Classificazione Decimale Dewey

— 292 (23.) RELIGIONE CLASSICA (Religione greca e romana)

Thema

— Soggetto: QDHA. Filosofia greca e romana antica

— Qualificatori: 3CT. 1000 a.C. - Primi anni d.C.

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THE GREEK PANTHEON AND THE BIRTH OF THE WEST

TOWARDS A NEW
PHILOSOPHICAL INTERPRETATION
OF THE OLYMPIAN RELIGION



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ISBN
979-12-218-2911-2

1ST EDITION
ROME 30 OCTOBER 2026

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INTRODUCTION

THE GREEK PANTHEON AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE METAPHYSICAL IMAGINATION OF THE WEST

Every great civilization develops, throughout its historical evolution, the fundamental categories through which it interprets reality, nature, the divine, and humanity. Such categories do not originate within philosophy itself. Rather, they first emerge through the symbolic and religious forms by which a community organizes its experience of the world. Long before becoming objects of conceptual reflection, they are embodied in myths, religious representations, ritual practices, and cosmological images that collectively shape a civilization's understanding of existence.

Religion, in this sense, constitutes one of the original spaces in which a particular conception of Being becomes historically recognizable. Divine figures, genealogies, the distribution of cosmic functions, and the overall organization of the sacred world do not merely belong to the symbolic heritage of a culture. They anticipate those conceptual structures that philosophy will subsequently reformulate through systematic reflection. The history of philosophy therefore cannot be understood independently of the history of religion; both participate, through different languages, in the construction of the same horizon of intelligibility.

Western civilization is no exception. Its intellectual history may be reconstructed as the history of metaphysics, of rationality, of political institutions, or of religious traditions. The present study adopts a different perspective. It proceeds from the hypothesis that the entire

development of Western thought has been shaped by the confrontation between two fundamentally different conceptions of infinity, whose opposition predates the systematic formulation of classical metaphysics and continues to reappear, under historically transformed conditions, throughout the subsequent history of Western philosophy.

Within this perspective, the immediate object of investigation is the Greek Pantheon; its deeper philosophical concern, however, is the historical formation of one particular configuration of Being that profoundly influenced the development of Western civilization. Olympian religion is therefore examined not simply as a historical or anthropological phenomenon, nor merely as the literary codification of Greek mythology, but as one of the decisive moments in which a specific conception of infinity assumed a coherent symbolic form capable of orienting the later development of metaphysics, theology, and political rationality.

Modern scholarship has profoundly transformed our understanding of Greek religion. The works of Jane Ellen Harrison, Martin P. Nilsson, Walter F. Otto, Karl Kerényi, Angelo Brelich, Jean-Pierre Vernant, Marcel Detienne, Walter Burkert, Robert Parker, and many other scholars have demonstrated the extraordinary historical complexity of Greek religious traditions and the symbolic richness of the Olympian world. The present work fully acknowledges these achievements. Its purpose, however, lies on a different level of inquiry.

The question addressed here is not primarily concerned with the historical origins of individual myths, the philological reconstruction of religious traditions, or the ritual functions performed by particular divinities. Rather, it seeks to understand the philosophical transformation embodied in the overall organization of the Olympian Pantheon and the role played by this transformation in the formation of some of the most fundamental categories of Western civilization. From this perspective, the Greek Pantheon is interpreted not simply as a collection of divine personalities but as a symbolic structure through which a new relationship between nature, divine power, humanity, and political authority became historically intelligible.

The methodological perspective adopted throughout this study may be described as genealogical. Genealogy, however, is not understood here as the reconstruction of historical influences between individual

thinkers, nor as a linear succession of philosophical doctrines. It refers instead to the persistence and transformation of fundamental ontological structures across different historical epochs, intellectual traditions, and conceptual languages. Philosophical categories are therefore approached not as static theoretical entities but as dynamic configurations capable of continuously re-emerging under historically different forms.

Within this framework, the present work identifies two fundamentally different conceptions of infinity.

The first conceives infinity as the original openness of reality, the inexhaustible creativity of nature, and the principle of a constitutive dialectic through which multiplicity permanently preserves its productive capacity. This conception finds one of its earliest philosophical formulations in Anaximander and subsequently re-emerges, despite profound historical transformations, in Epicurus, Lucretius, Giordano Bruno, Spinoza, Feuerbach, and Marx.

The second conceives infinity as an abstract, separate, and apparently transcendent principle progressively assuming the function of the necessary and ordering One. Within this perspective, multiplicity is subordinated to a superior principle of organization, hierarchy, and closure. Such a conception receives its systematic philosophy in Christianity and in Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics, is incorporated into the theological framework of Christianity, and continues to operate—albeit in profoundly transformed forms—within the development of modern Western rationality.

The central hypothesis of this study is that Olympian religion constitutes one of the decisive historical moments in the symbolic formation of this second conception of infinity. Through the hierarchical reorganization of the divine world, the redistribution of divine functions, and the redefinition of the relationship between heaven, earth, and humanity, a representation of Being gradually emerged that would outlive the religious context in which it was originally constituted. Zeus, Hera, Athena, Apollo, Poseidon, and the remaining Olympian deities thus cease to be merely mythological figures and become symbolic expressions of a profound ontological transformation.

This interpretation does not imply, however, the disappearance of the alternative conception of infinity. On the contrary, the latter

continues to re-emerge throughout the history of Western philosophy, preserving the possibility of understanding nature, freedom, and creativity according to a radically different ontological horizon. Western intellectual history may therefore be interpreted as the continuous confrontation between these two competing configurations of infinity, whose multiple expressions traverse philosophy, religion, politics, and the formation of modern rationality itself.

The chapters that follow are situated within this theoretical horizon. The Greek Pantheon does not represent the conclusion of the investigation but one of the privileged historical sites where the formation of one of the two major metaphysical structures of Western civilization becomes particularly visible. Returning to Olympian religion therefore means returning to one of the foundational moments in which the West elaborated its enduring image of reality.

If this perspective proves to be philosophically justified, then the interpretation of Greek religion concerns far more than the reconstruction of the ancient past. It directly affects our understanding of the present by inviting a critical reconsideration of the categories through which Western civilization continues to conceive nature, divinity, freedom, and humanity. In this sense, returning to the Greek Pantheon is not an exercise in historical archaeology but an attempt to recover one of the deepest roots of Western metaphysics while simultaneously bringing back into view that alternative conception of infinity which, although never historically dominant, has continued to traverse the entire history of Western thought and remains, even today, a genuine philosophical possibility.

CHAPTER I

POETRY AND FIGURATIVE ART IN THE WAKE OF HOMER

The dialectical relationship established between the divine—elevated and transcendent—and the human—subordinated and brought under order both in thought and in action—opens a new historical horizon within Greek civilization. Common rational imagination no longer remains rooted in the eternal creativity of an intelligent and material divine power. Instead, it gradually detaches itself from that original horizon, emancipating itself from the powers of natural possession and domination only in order to reverse their direction.

Nature itself no longer constitutes the living principle whose intrinsic rationality guides human thought and action. On the contrary, it is now human thought and human action, legitimized by abstract divine powers—the Olympian gods—that come to define the possibility of a transformation apparently liberated from natural and material constraints. Divine power is thus extracted from its original immediacy, abstracted, and alienated into distinct divine figures that assume the superior functions of celestial determination. The human subject projects its own will to domination and its own need for order into separate, eternal agencies, personified according to its own qualities while simultaneously appearing independent of them.

Here begins the world of unified representation and of a deceptive, negative dialectical relation. Here emerges the common horizon of negation.

Within this horizon of separation, the new representations of divine power are systematically arranged according to precise organic relationships whose function is to conceal—and ultimately replace—the religious structures that had previously governed Greek spiritual life. Myth and ritual define each individual deity through a network of necessary relations with all the others. The Olympian Pantheon is therefore neither an accidental aggregation of divine personalities nor a simple literary construction. It is an organic symbolic system governed by an internal logic that becomes intelligible through the reciprocal functions and hierarchical positions assigned to each deity.

Religious transformation proceeds through gradual symbolic substitution. Earlier rituals are not abolished but appropriated and reinterpreted through new mythological narratives that progressively alter the meaning of inherited symbols and practices. Thus, the figures of the Great Mother Goddess—Gaia, Hera, and Demeter—undergo a continuous transformation, while new rational images progressively assume the superior functions of command and sovereignty, represented by Uranus, Cronus, Poseidon, and ultimately Zeus. At the same time, other divine figures—Dionysus, Asclepius, and Athena—replace the original forms through which creative action had previously been understood.

Within this process Hesiod and Homer become the principal architects of the new symbolic order. Through their poetry the Olympian ideology is gradually constructed, enriched, and consolidated before being continuously reinforced by subsequent traditionalist currents in their enduring struggle against the recurring naturalistic and critical-rational spirit. Heroic achievement and the daily labour of agricultural life alike acquire their justification—and frequently their glorification—within this new abstracting power, which constructs a specifically human form of authority capable of reversing the previous relation of dependence: no longer humanity subjected to nature, but nature itself reorganized through divine reason in accordance with human aspirations to transcend material necessity.

Such a transformation required not only practical recognition but also collective consent. It demanded the acceptance of Greek communities themselves together with the emergence of a new intellectual class capable of legitimizing the symbolic reorganization of reality.

Homer and Hesiod thus become the principal architects of this symbolic transformation. Through their poetry, the Olympian order is progressively constructed, enriched, and consolidated before being transmitted to subsequent intellectual traditions, which continually reinforce and refine its principles in their enduring struggle against the recurrent resurgence of naturalistic and critical forms of thought.

The transcendence of the heroic condition, no less than the everyday discipline of agricultural labour, acquires its justification—and, ultimately, its glorification—within this newly established abstract power. A specifically human authority is thereby constituted, capable of reversing the original relation of dependence. Human beings are no longer guided by Nature as the living expression of an intelligent and creative order. Instead, Nature itself becomes subordinated to a rational and divine order through which humanity seeks progressively to emancipate itself from material necessity.

Such a transformation could not become historically effective without achieving both practical recognition and collective legitimacy. It required the consent of the Greek communities and the parallel emergence of an intellectual tradition capable of providing its theoretical justification.

Organized around the principle of instrumentality, the emerging ideology gradually overturns the spontaneous teleology of natural creativity. Creative becoming is displaced by a higher and separate principle of determination which, descending from the abstract heaven of Reason, imposes itself as an unquestionable necessity, immutable and beyond dispute.

The influence exerted by the great Eastern civilizations—Egypt, Anatolia, and the Near East—together with the systematic elaboration later accomplished by Greek, Roman, and eventually Christian culture, contributed decisively to the formation of that historical horizon within which Western civilization would progressively organize its understanding of thought, action, labour, political institutions, warfare, and commerce.

The Olympian divinity fashioned by Hesiod and Homer thus comes to define the supreme symbolic horizon of the emerging civilization. At the same time, it opens a space of absolute mediation between

the human and the divine—a space that will later find its most radical secular expression in Sophistic thought and, above all, in Socratic philosophy.

The realism of Homeric humanism already anticipates the intellectual movement that culminates in Socrates. The inscrutability of divine judgement is transformed into the Socratic awareness of not knowing; the timelessness of eternity is reflected in historical time through the exemplary imitation of divine models. Upon this same symbolic structure Plato will construct the doctrine of the Ideas, while Christianity will later develop the figure of Christ as Saviour.

The heroic genealogy itself already prefigures this movement. Achilles is born from Thetis, Heracles from Zeus. The hero, generated through a union between the divine and the human—a birth that is never entirely natural and therefore exposes the soul to superior determinations—is guided through a succession of trials before ultimately returning to the divine source from which he originated. In this way the hero becomes the exemplary figure through whom ideology reproduces itself historically, multiplying both its symbolic authority and its ethical model.

Thus, if the progressive affirmation of rational mediation represented by Athena marks the historical transition from the age of war, embodied in the *Iliad*, to the age of commerce represented by the *Odyssey*, the normalization of historical time accomplished through Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works and Days* completes the ideological construction by establishing an increasingly intimate synthesis between the human and the divine. The Olympian horizon delineated by Hesiod in *Works and Days* introduces a decisive rupture with an earlier religious and cultural world still centred upon the free and vital productivity of natural and human powers. The new divine order no longer celebrates the inexhaustible creativity of nature. Instead, it establishes a symbolic horizon founded upon negation, punishment, and subordination.

Within Hesiod's account, divine justice becomes the principle that legitimizes both action and authority. The transgression committed by Prometheus and the punishment that follows are no longer interpreted simply as mythological episodes. They become the symbolic foundation of an entirely new conception of human existence.

Prometheus' gift of fire—through which human communities acquire the capacity for autonomous development—is transformed into the origin of disorder itself. The possibility of human autonomy is represented as the source of envy, conflict, violence, and war. The reactionary echo of the so-called Dark Ages is thus projected backwards into myth: natural and rational human freedom becomes the primordial fault responsible for humanity's fall from its original condition.

The succession of the Five Ages acquires, from this perspective, an entirely new philosophical significance. The Golden Age represents the memory of an original harmony between humanity and nature. The Silver Age marks the emergence of possession as the first principle of corruption. The Bronze Age universalizes violence through warfare. The Age of Heroes restores only a partial reflection of the original order, insofar as heroic virtue succeeds in legitimizing conquest through the language of justice and glory. Finally, Hesiod's own Iron Age reproduces, under new historical conditions, the same degeneration initiated by the desire for possession. Violence, injustice, and suffering once again dominate human existence.

Only divine justice is capable of restoring order. Law therefore appears as the necessary instrument through which collective life may be preserved, while labour assumes a radically new symbolic function. No longer simply one among the natural expressions of human creativity, work becomes expiation, discipline, and moral obligation. Yet precisely through organized labour the community may recover peace, stability, and conformity with the divine order. Honesty, moderation, prudence, and justice cease to be merely practical virtues; they become the ethical expression of a transcendent principle governing both society and nature.

The Olympian horizon thereby transforms the very meaning of human history. History no longer unfolds as the open manifestation of creative potency but as the progressive restoration of an order that has been violated. Human existence is consequently interpreted within the categories of guilt, punishment, reconciliation, and obedience. In this sense, Hesiod establishes one of the earliest symbolic formulations of that metaphysical structure which, through profoundly different historical forms, will later permeate Platonic philosophy, Aristotelian

metaphysics, Christian theology, and significant strands of modern Western thought.

The Olympian order acquires its definitive symbolic architecture in Hesiod's *Theogony*. It is here that the original act of rebellion against the divine order undergoes a profound mythological transfiguration. The passage from the world of natural and rational plenitude to that governed by a deceptive and negative dialectic is represented through the succession of divine generations themselves.

The mutilation of Uranus by Cronus—whose symbolic meaning may be understood as the severance of the superior creative principle from its immediate productivity—marks the first decisive rupture. Yet this rupture is not presented as a catastrophe. On the contrary, it becomes the necessary premise for the subsequent establishment of a higher order.

Only Zeus ultimately recomposes the fracture inaugurated by Cronus. He does so by founding a universal horizon structured around order, necessity, and collectively accepted subordination. At this moment one of the fundamental categories of Western civilization begins to emerge: what elsewhere in the present study has been designated as the Necessary and Ordering One.

This principle reverses the original projection of creative potency. Instead of allowing determination to arise immanently from the living productivity of nature, it establishes an abstract centre from which every relation of dependence is subsequently organized. Natural and rational multiplicity cease to constitute the primary reality. They become secondary expressions of a superior principle whose legitimacy no longer derives from creative openness but from transcendence, hierarchy, and necessity.

Abstract Reason thus becomes the new symbolic horizon within which every natural, immediate, or even apparently supernatural content may be received, organized, and assigned its proper function. Divine intentionality and causal necessity converge in the constitution of the human world.

Within this symbolic reorganization Apollo and Athena gradually assume decisive importance. Apollo embodies the principle of intellectual determination, while Athena represents rational will in

its operative and political dimension. Together they prepare the systematic redistribution of divine functions throughout the Olympian order.

The earlier religious universe is not destroyed. Rather, it is appropriated and reorganized through successive symbolic substitutions. Hera, Aphrodite, Ares, and Hermes no longer preserve their original religious significance. Each becomes the transformed expression of earlier divine powers: the Great Mother Goddess, the creative desire associated with Demeter and Dionysus, the distributive sovereignty formerly represented by Poseidon, and the connective function originally embodied in the Panion divinities.

Greek polytheism thus reaches its mature configuration. Yet this new configuration rests upon three fundamental principles that will continue to shape the subsequent history of Western metaphysics: separation, alienation, and heterodetermination. Through them the Olympian religion becomes far more than a religious system. It becomes one of the earliest symbolic formulations of a metaphysical order destined to survive the civilization that first gave it expression.

The establishment of this new symbolic order profoundly transforms not only the representation of the gods but the very conception of history, humanity, and reality itself. The world is no longer understood as the immediate manifestation of an inexhaustible creative principle. Rather, it becomes the progressive realization of an order whose legitimacy derives from a transcendent source.

Within such a horizon, reason itself undergoes a decisive transformation. It no longer coincides with the living intelligence immanent in nature. Instead, it assumes the form of an ordering faculty that assigns to every being its proper place within a hierarchically structured totality. The rationality of the cosmos is therefore no longer the spontaneous expression of creative becoming but the visible manifestation of a superior and universal order.

It is precisely within this transformation that the heroic figure acquires its exemplary significance. The hero no longer embodies the free emergence of creative potency from within nature. His life becomes the visible mediation between humanity and the transcendent order governing the universe. Every trial, every victory, every suffering ultimately

contributes to the confirmation of that universal necessity which the Olympian gods embody.

This symbolic logic extends far beyond mythology itself. It gradually establishes one of the most enduring structures of Western civilization: the conviction that the realization of freedom requires submission to a higher principle capable of transforming necessity into justice and obedience into rational order.

The history of Greek religion therefore cannot be interpreted simply as the succession of different cults or the gradual evolution of mythological narratives. It constitutes the progressive construction of a symbolic grammar through which the metaphysical imagination of the West first learned to conceive unity as hierarchy, transcendence as the condition of intelligibility, and order as the ultimate foundation of both political authority and philosophical truth.

Against this process, however, another possibility never entirely disappears. Beneath the Olympian reorganization survives the memory of an earlier religious horizon, one in which nature, creativity, and freedom remain inseparable. This submerged tradition continues to resist every attempt at complete symbolic appropriation. Although repeatedly transformed, displaced, or concealed, it re-emerges throughout the subsequent history of philosophy whenever creative infinity once again becomes the ontological foundation of reality.

The history of Western thought is therefore not the uninterrupted unfolding of a single metaphysical tradition. It is the history of an unresolved conflict between two radically different conceptions of Being, whose first great symbolic confrontation becomes visible within the religious transformation accomplished by Homeric and Hesiodic Greece.

The symbolic reorganization inaugurated by Olympian religion reaches its highest philosophical significance precisely where mythology begins to generate metaphysics. The hierarchical order established among the gods does not merely regulate the divine world; it gradually provides the conceptual model through which reality itself comes to be interpreted.

From this moment onward, cosmology, theology, and political order converge within a single symbolic architecture. The distribution of divine functions anticipates the distribution of ontological principles.

Myth thereby becomes the first language through which metaphysical categories acquire historical visibility.

Within this process, Zeus no longer represents simply the supreme deity of the Olympian order. He becomes the symbolic figure through which transcendence is transformed into the governing principle of reality. The world is no longer conceived as the immediate unfolding of an inexhaustible creative potency, but as the ordered realization of a superior intelligence that confers legitimacy upon every determination.

The philosophical consequences of this transformation are far-reaching. Once the principle of transcendence has become the foundation of intelligibility, multiplicity can no longer possess autonomous ontological dignity. Difference survives only insofar as it is gathered into a superior unity. Becoming itself is accepted only when interpreted as the progressive realization of a pre-established order.

It is within this symbolic horizon that later Greek philosophy will progressively elaborate its own conceptual language. Heraclitus, despite preserving the dynamic character of reality, already opens the way toward an understanding of conflict capable of serving a higher rational unity. Parmenides, by contrast, radically opposes multiplicity in defence of the unity of Being, thereby inaugurating one of the decisive trajectories of Western metaphysics. Plato will subsequently transform this ontological unity into the intelligible order of the Ideas, while Aristotle will provide it with its most systematic philosophical formulation through the concepts of substance, actuality, and the unmoved principle governing the cosmos.

From the perspective adopted in the present study, however, these developments do not constitute isolated philosophical achievements. They represent successive conceptual articulations of a symbolic transformation whose earliest and most influential expression had already taken shape within the Olympian reconfiguration of the sacred.

The transition from mythology to philosophy therefore appears far less discontinuous than modern historiography has often assumed. Philosophy does not simply replace myth. It inherits, reorganizes, and rationally reformulates symbolic structures that had already begun to redefine the relationship between nature, humanity, and the divine.