A Different Perspective on *Arche* Using Culianu's Model

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"We see how, from a seed, Gnosis grows into a tree that starts to split into branches; some branches remain virtual, some actually grow. The generative model of gnostic systems is actually a Tree, the Tree of Gnosis." (Ioan Petru Culianu)

Arche

Pre-Socratic philosophers (Zalta et al. 2015) spent much of their time trying to explain natural phenomena, and searching for *arche* (ἀρχή), a first principle of everything that exists in nature. The philosophers or the philosophical schools came with different solutions:

Thales (c. 624–c. 546 BCE)—water;
Anaximander (610–546 BCE)—none of the elements (i.e. water, earth, air, fire) but *apeiron* (infinite or indefinite);
Anaximenes (585–525 BCE) and Diogenes of Apollonia (5th cent. BCE)—air;
Xenophanes (c. 570–c. 478 BCE)—one element is not enough, so he chose earth and water.

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Heraclitus (c. 535–c. 475 BCE)—fire; he also claimed that everything flows;
Parmenides (b. about 510 BCE)—contradicted Heraclitus; he argued that the first principle of being is the One, indivisible, and unchanging.

To prove Parmenides wrong (i.e. the change is possible), the Atomists Leucippus and Democritus, and the pluralists, such as Empedocles and Anaxagoras, developed different theories:

Leucippus (5th cent. BCE)—the founder of Atomism, and his disciple Democritus (c. 460–c. 370 BCE) claimed the existence of the empty space called *vacuum*. Matter is made of indivisible particles, named atoms (from ἄτομος, "átomos," meaning *indivisible*). They are indivisible because there is no vacuum in them;
Empedocles (c. 495–432 BCE)—all four elements are *archai* (first principles: water, earth, air, fire). They are moved by two opposing forces: Love and Strife;
Anaxagoras (5th cent. BCE)—affirmed that the cosmos was at first a mixture of all the ingredients (without specifying exactly what these ingredients are). At a certain point in time the mixture is set into motion by the action of the *nous* ("intellect").

After Socrates, the most important philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, developed very complex theories based on their own philosophical systems. Their theories can be synopsized as follows:

Plato (427–347 BCE)—there is a pair of opposed first principles, the One and the Indefinite Dyad (as Plotin named it) or Multiplicity (according to Speusippus); from their interaction the *Ideas* ("intelligibles") are born, which are the cause of everything else;
Aristotle (384–322 BCE)—all four of the elements are principles for the terrestrial region, but they are not enough for the rest of the Universe. So, long before Luc Besson, he added a fifth element, *aether*, the quintessence of the Celestial region.
Aristotle suggested that each of the four elements has a couple of properties (from the two essential contraries: hot/cold and wet/dry):
Fire is primarily hot and secondarily dry;
Air is primarily wet and secondarily hot;
Water is primarily cold and secondarily wet;
Earth is primarily dry and secondarily cold.

One of the last Neoplatonists, Proclus (410–485) rejected Aristotle's theory, and claimed that each element has three properties:
Fire is Sharp, Subtle, and Mobile;
Air is Blunt, Subtle, and Mobile;
Water is Blunt, Dense, and Mobile;
Earth is Blunt, Dense, and Immobile.

After the victory of Christianity in Europe, the search for an *arche* mostly stopped, since the general rule was that God is the only principle (the creator) of everything. Generally speaking, today the population of the Earth is divided in two halves, one half believing that a form of deity (Allah, Brahman, God, Yahweh, and so on) or more gods is/are the Creator. For the other half there is the Big-Bang. Curiously enough, these are not really two halves of the same circle, but rather two circles intersecting each other (many times peacefully, from time to time with passion, and, most regrettably, sometimes violently).

Culianu's Model

In his last books, Culianu started to think of a new epistemological instrument, a *novum organum*, called here Culianu's model (David 2014, 715–720). In a few words, it consists of a different way of approaching religion (in his last books published), but also philosophy and science (in projects Culianu did not have the chance to finish). If, traditionally, religion has been seen as a succession of events and doctrines since the beginning of humanity on this Earth, Culianu saw it as a system, a combination of what he called "ideal objects."

A definition is provided by Culianu (Culianu 1992, 21): "ideal objects are systems operating in a logical dimension and cannot go beyond their (generally quite simple) premises. Systems are fractalic in nature, that is, they tend to produce solutions ad infinitum according to (simple) production rules. And they interact with each other in quite strange ways, forming other systems whose general pattern of uncanny complexity may be called history."

Like any object, an "ideal object" is held together by something, not solid as in the case of material objects, but by ideas run in time by human minds. Thus, religions have their source in the human mind, and the transmission of religions is from one mind to another. Ideas travel with people. One does not need to study or reproduce the entire way of thought of their predecessors; if only a fragment of an idea is heard or read, it is enough for one to develop a new way of thinking which may, but may not, look similar in some points with

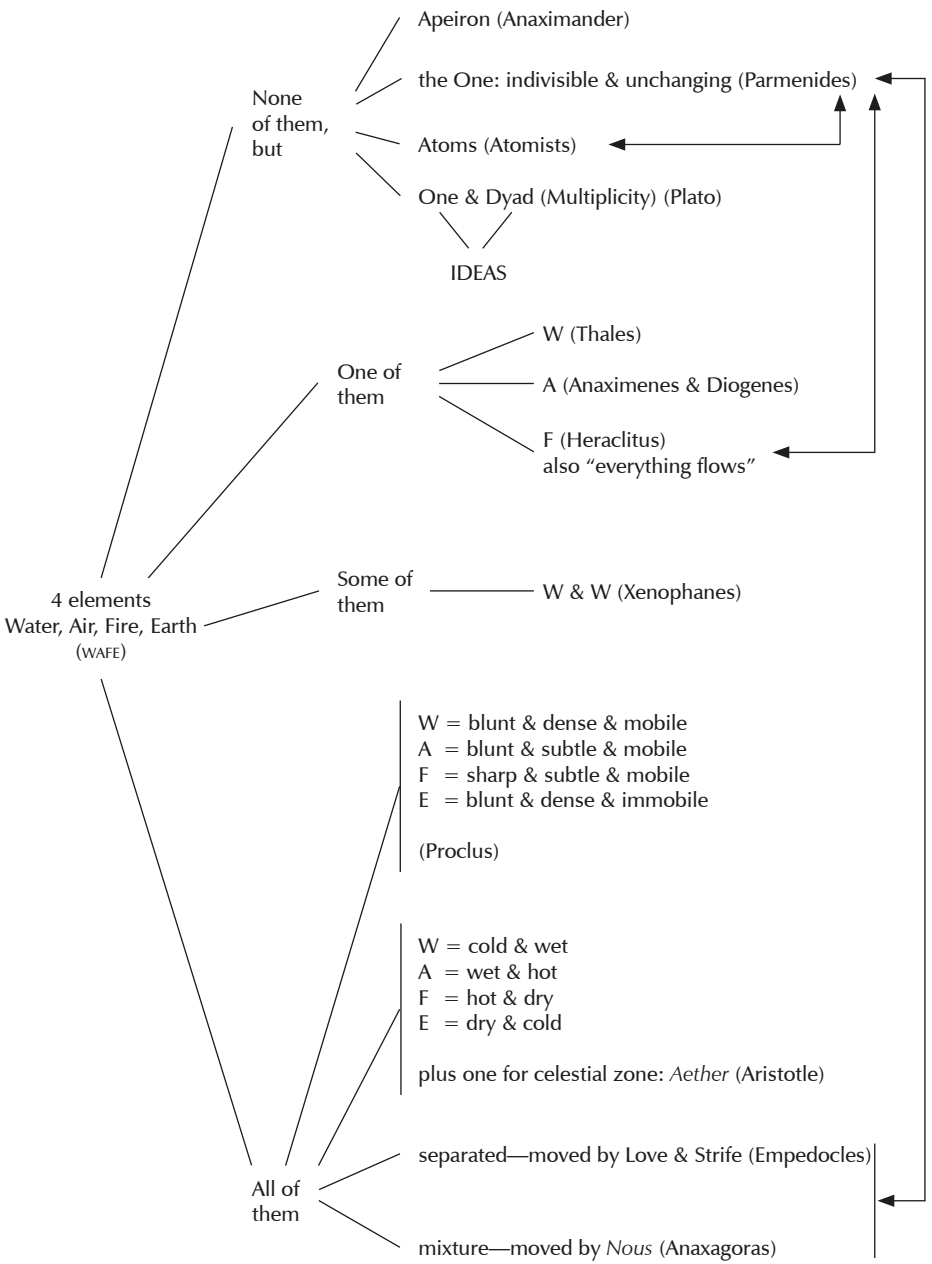
the first one: normally, the new one will be different in other points, according to many factors: the thinker's thoughts, cultural heritage, traditions, social and family environment, and so on. But after clearing up all these factors, the analyst could see the cognitive structure (as such, it is different from structuralism) of the religious, philosophical or scientific theories. To represent more graphically his point of view about the "ideal object," Culianu uses an example taken from *Flatland*, the story by E. Abbot, also used by Einstein in explaining his own theory. We could easily imagine a two-dimensional world, like the surface of a soup, with two-dimensional creatures. Those creatures see every object as a segment of a line. They cannot look up and see the third dimension, banal for us humans. Also, an object banal for us, a spoon, is unimaginable for them. If I take a spoon of soup from their world, apart from the catastrophic events, my spoon will appear to the poor survivors as a succession of segments of a line: first a small one (the edge of the spoon), then larger and larger as the spoon is getting closer to its largest part in the middle, then decreasing again. Like in a classic cartoon, which is animated by the succession of drawings, for a bi-dimensional creature the spoon is a series of lines coming one after another in a short amount of time—actually, the few seconds needed to take one spoonful of soup. It would take many years until a brilliant mathematician could calculate that this series of events is a tridimensional object. It would be very difficult for him or her, and almost impossible for the rest of the bi-dimensional population, to visualize what this object looks like, i.e. my spoon. Now, if we imagine we are in the same position as those creatures, it is also almost impossible for us to imagine an object which is not tridimensional: in our case, an "ideal object"; religion is composed of such "ideal objects." What appeared in human history as a series of events is similar to the segments for the bi-dimensional creatures. The difference is that in this case the "object" is not a four-dimensional solid object. It is made of ideas: once started from (quite simple) premises, in time the system produces solutions through the human minds; due to the vastness of human life and society, it intersects our history in a very complex way. The results are "maps" of reality; they "talk" about the same things, but they have different names: religion, and philosophy or science.

Certainly, the amount of data one needs in order to understand and illustrate such "maps" is enormous. One lifetime is not enough to know and process all the data but maybe with the help of our computers—with their fast development—we will be able to create those "maps" in the future.

Culianu's last books are a practical exemplification of his theory. Probably the clearest example one can find is in *The Tree of Gnosis*, regarding the nature of Christ, i.e. "divine" versus "human." See an analysis in David (2015) and a new illustration in Fig. 1.

FIGURE 1. THE NATURE OF CHRIST IN CULIANU'S MODEL

Figure 2. The perspective on *arche* using Culianu's model



Application

THE NEXT question is: is Culianu's model really applicable outside religion, for instance in philosophy? This will get us back to *arche*, which is our subject. The answer could be effortlessly guessed as being positive, from the way we presented *arche* at the beginning of this study. Like in Culianu's example, the applicability will be more easily visualized if we put the results in an illustration (see Fig. 2).

Discussion

THERE ARE few issues with Culianu's model that we have to analyze. Because of his early death, Culianu did not have the time to continue his intuitions and to resolve some inherent contradictions.

Consider the "ideal object." What exactly is it?; what is its nature?; where does it reside?; from where is it coming? These are only a few of the questions the researcher encounters when reading Culianu's texts. As Culianu affirms, the ideal object is an "object that exists in its own logical space" (Culianu 1992, 18). It is not a solid object, like the spoon, but is it an entity, a complete "thing"? Culianu claims that it is a system of thoughts, so its "nature" is not tangible; it belongs to a different dimension than our tridimensional world: a dimension of the "mental space." This is the place "ideal objects" reside in and come from. At the time Culianu was writing his theory, cognitive sciences were in their infancy, and the concept of "mental space" was not very well developed. Culianu did not specify what he meant by this term. He just emphasized that we do not know what it is: we can only suppose that it has one or several dimensions more than our three spatial dimensions. It is as infinite as the human imagination. Again, it is not clear whether Culianu considered the "mental space" as something common to people, or if every individual has his own "mental space." Since he refuted Jung's theory of "collective unconscious," he would probably not replace it with another term like "collective mental space," and so he would probably agree with the last hypothesis. Thus, the "mental space" resides in the human mind, and it is not at all transcendent. Consequently, the "ideal object" comes and intersects our history not from "outside" but from inside, from the human mind. It starts from simple premises and it develops in time to many and sometimes complex results. The author of this study subscribes to the dynamic cognitive model of genesis and development of what we are used to calling religion. Nevertheless, one can notice a possible weak point of the theory, as Culianu saw religion as a whole, as a system. "The *system* means that all phenomena which refer to a single unity are linked and integrated in a complex structure that gen-

erates them. By being a mental process, this system goes on the path created by the computational rules of the mind. . . . *Autonomous* opposed *heteronomous*; it means that religion, in its origin and function, is not the secondary product of other systems (for example, of the economy, or of the society); it does not depend on them and does not generate them" (Culianu 2002, 339–340).

For the sake of argument, we will ignore the first (very controversial) aspect, of considering "religion" as autonomous, because the matter is now its "systemic" aspect. I believe the next aspect unnecessarily complicates Culianu's theory. Because, if we consider the "system" as being an "object" (it is not important it is "ideal" and not "physical'), it is contradictory to think of it as *infinite*, as Culianu claimed (1992, 74). It has to be finite, like any object. What is more, human life, our Earth and Sun, and all the others that exist in the Universe, although some of them will last billions of years, are obviously not infinite, not a single one of them.

We believe that at some point Culianu would have realized this contradiction and corrected it if he had had time. In one of his last books, when he described the Gnosis as a tree, Culianu understood that this is a better image, which fits his model perfectly. The Gnosis starts from human minds (and the premises Gnostics were meditated at), and grows like a tree: "We see how, from a seed, Gnosis grows into a tree that starts to split into branches; some branches remain virtual, some actually grow. The generative model of gnostic systems *is* actually a Tree, the Tree of Gnosis" (Culianu 1992, 242). The comparison is adequate, as it can be seen in Fig.1. A tree is finite, but it is also open: hypothetically, until someone cuts it (i.e. an intervention of power), new branches could grow in time. To continue the association, subsequently religion is the "forest." A forest with trees of different kind, some bigger and with many branches, some smaller, some younger and some older; nevertheless, they are all "trees" grown from the same soil, the human mind.

As Fig. 2 clearly shows, applying Culianu's model in philosophy, to *arche*, leads to the same arborescent pattern: the growth of *arche* during time can also be seen in the shape of a tree. This makes us assume that philosophy itself is also a "forest," certainly grown from the same soil, the human mind. Therefore, it makes sense for Culianu to assert that religion and philosophy (and science, and even literature), in their substance, are not as different as we have learnt to consider.

We used the image of the "forest" with the intention of being consistent with the "tree" scheme. Obviously, the forest is made of individual trees that do not come into contact too much; in contrast, ideas can and do communicate, intersect and influence each other, so probably a better image is that of a web (a network) of all these "ideal trees."

Conclusion

With proper amendments, Culianu's model proved to be not only of interest, but also capable of solving some difficulties and problems we encounter in our research. One of these, emphasized by Culianu himself, is the abandonment of the search for the origins and derivations of religions. The origin is in the human mind, and the transformations of one into another are cognitive computational processes starting from the same or similar premises.

Culianu's model proves its applicability in philosophy: this should not be a surprise, since the domain of philosophers was thought. The next question one could ask is: is the model applicable in science, too, as Culianu claimed? If not, the author of this study, or maybe someone else, will soon answer that question. At this point, what matters is the original perspective upon the history of philosophy, and the new light it projects on human thoughts. As the application of Culianu's model showed, identical to the case of religion, the controversies, some of them very vivid, maybe obsessive, or even fanatical, are nothing more than "games of the mind," and are not worth killing or dying for.

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Abstract

A Different Perspective on *Arche* Using Culianu's Model

Since the beginning of philosophy in Europe, philosophers have asked themselves several questions of major significance, and arrived at different conclusions. One of these constitutes the subject of this article, which was considered of notable importance, at least during the time of Greek philosophy: the search for an *arche* (ἀρχή), the first principle of reality. Firstly, this study will take a short look at this aspect of the history of philosophy. Secondly, it will describe and analyze Culianu's model, as briefly and accurately as possible. Finally, it will investigate Culianu's theory on the chosen subject (*arche*), to see if Culianu's model also applies in the case of philosophy.

Keywords

Ioan Petru Culianu, Culianu's model, *arche*, religion, system