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Philosophy and the View from Above in Alejandro’s Amenabar’s Agora

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Alejandro Amenabar’s Agora represents an exploration in film of the ancient philosophical exercise Pierre Hadot has dubbed the ‘view from above.’ Of particular note here is Amenabar’s use of tracking shots which several times withdraw vertically away from the action, up towards a serene view of the earth from above, as in Scipio’s dream in Cicero, and several other ancient texts. But this formal feature of the film supports the artful retelling of its historical tale, of the life and death of Hypatia of Alexandria. Beginning from reflections on the recent revival of interest in Hypatia, the female neo-platonic heroine of the film, the paper examines how Amenabar presents his Hypatia (Rachel Weiss) as exemplifying the ancient philosophical ideal of the sage, amidst and above the passionate political and religious strife of late fourth century Alexandria. We then consider Agora’s presentation of Hypatia as at once a proto-Copernicus and a proto-Kepler, over a millennia before the modern scientific revolution, based on the scattered records of Hypatia’s work in astronomy: arguing that Amenabar’s knowingly fictive re-imagining of Hypatia serves to make a wider philosophical point. By presenting Hypatia as both ancient sage and predecessor of the modern scientific worldview, we suggest, Amenabar’s Agora calls into question the old opposition of ancient-versus-modern, showing the place of ancient wonder and felicitas in knowledge of natural causes in the modern astronomical revolution, and the potential ethical impact of cultivating such natural philosophy.
BIOGRAPHY

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PHILOSOPHY AND THE VIEW FROM ABOVE IN ALEJANDRO’S AMENABAR AGORA

- What is the theme of Agora?
  - “To me, it’s a difficult question. I always say it’s a story of a woman, a civilization, and a planet. I tried to see the earth in perspective. I tried to look at the earth as small—as small as possible.”

I

Alejandro Amenabar’s feature film Agora (released in 2010) dramatises events from the times and life of the woman philosopher Hypatia (circa 355-415 C. E.), culminating in her death at the hands of Christian zealots. Interestingly, the film presents one Hypatia of several in a renaissance of interest in this remarkable Alexandrian figure in the last decade. Since 2005, there have been two Hypatia novels, one of which has been re-released under new title in 2010. Following Maria Dzielska’s 1996 invaluable study Hypatia of Alexandria, the first decade of the new millennium has seen four book-length studies on Hypatia’s life and thought. 2010 saw the re-release of Charles Kingsley’s nineteenth century classic Hypatia, or New Foes With an Old Face, including in a ‘Kindle’ edition. 2

The fascination with Hypatia which Amenabar’s Agora, and this kind of Hypatia-renaissance bespeaks, is not new, at least in the modern world. Hypatia has long been an iconic figure for feminist thinkers: historical testimony, if not (in Ursula Molinaro’s words) ‘to a time when women were still appreciated for the brain under their hair,’ then to the philosophical credentials of the second sex per se. 3 Earlier in modern times, however, Hypatia’s death at the hands of Christians, together with her gender, saw her raised up as a kind of symbol for several of the great enlighteners, in their public opposition to the Church and la querelle des anciens et des modernes. In 1720 John Toland penned the lavishly—if somewhat prolixly—titled Hypatia or, the History of a Most Beautiful, Most Virtuous, Most Learned and In Every Way Accomplished Lady, Who Was Torn to Pieces by the Clergy of Alexandria, to Gratify the Pride, Emulation, and Cruelty of the Archbishop, Commonly but Undeservedly Titled St. Cyril. Alongside Henry Fielding and Léconte de Lisle, no less a figure than Voltaire similarly saw in Hypatia and her fate, a drama of monumental importance. For Voltaire, Hypatia’s death was not simply the result of political conflict between Alexandria’s civil authorities and the rising power of the Church in which Hypatia came to be entangled. Hypatia was killed as the last great incarnation of Athens or secular philosophy, against the closed world of imposed dogma. In the late 19th century, similarly, Maurice Barrés would redub Hypatia Athénée in his ‘La Vierge Assassinée.’ 4 Edward Gibbon, in Chapter 47 of the second Volume of The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire of 1788, similarly raises the murder of Hypatia by Alexandrian Christians to a kind of set-piece illustrating his larger thesis, assigning the fall of ancient greatness to the rise of the religion of the Nazarene:

In the bloom of beauty, and in the maturity of wisdom, the modest maid refused her lovers and instructed her disciples; the persons most illustrious for their rank or merit were impatient to visit the female philosopher; and Cyril beheld, with a jealous eye, the gorgeous train of horses and slaves who crowded the door of her academy. A rumor was spread among the Christians, that the daughter of Theon was the only obstacle to the reconciliation of the prefect [Orestes] and the archbishop [Cyril]; and that obstacle was speedily removed. On a fatal day, in the holy season of Lent, Hypatia was torn from her chariot, stripped naked, dragged to the church, and inhumanly butchered by the hands of Peter the reader, and a

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2. To inventory by date, these titles are: Hypatia’s Feud by Nicholas Fourikis (Mar 29, 2011); Flow Down Like Silver (Hypatia of Alexandria) by Ki Longfellow (Sep 9, 2009); Hypatia: Mathematician, Inventor, and Philosopher (Signature Lives) by Sandra Donovan (Jan 1, 2008); Lady Philosopher: The Story of Hypatia by Brian Trent (Feb 8, 2010); Hypatia of Alexandria: Mathematician and Martyr by Michael A. B. Deakin (Jul 17, 2007); Of Numbers and Stars: The Story of Hypatia by D. Anne Love and Pamela Paparone (Jan 2006); Remembering Hypatia: A Novel of Ancient Egypt by Brian Trent (Feb 23, 2005). Publication dates courtesy of www-site http://www.amazon.com Accessed May 2011.
4. At Dzielska, Hypatia of Alexandria, 2.
At several levels, there is little wonder that Hypatia continues to attract such fascinating and passionate identification. However fragmentary our knowledge of her is—and it is largely fragmentary and almost exclusively secondary—what is clear is that Hypatia was a remarkable woman. As Amenabar’s Agora attests, Hypatia assisted her father Theon (the last Head of the Alexandrian Museion) in compiling Ptolemy’s Almagest and Euclid’s Elements. She also certainly wrote commentaries, now lost or destroyed, on the mathematician Diophantus’ Arithmetica, together with the Conics of Apollonius (on which more anon), as well as upon the ‘astronomical canon.’ As the film represents by way of Hypatia’s slave-student Davus, we also know that Hypatia was instructed by her father in the refined art of building an astrolabe, a three-dimensional model of the Ptolemaic astronomical system. Alongside these intellectual virtues, however, the ancient sources concur as to her phronesis and sophrosyne: ‘articulate and eloquent in speaking as she was prudent and civil in her deeds. The whole city rightly loved her and worshipped her in a remarkable way ....’ As neither did she feel abashed about going about in the presence of men. For all men on account of her extraordinary dignity and virtue admired her the more. As the film again represents, Hypatia’s students included Christians, Jews, and pagans. Also present were leading, worldly men of the day: notably, Orestes the Prefect of Alexandria and Synesius, later the Bishop of Cyrene—both of whom feature in Amenabar’s Agora. The first-hand testimony we have concerning Hypatia from these students bespeaks this type of deep adoration Agora highlights in the three characters of Orestes, Synesius, and the divided slave-boy Davus. Synesius, whom Amenabar has chosen in Agora to align with Cyril, speaks in wonder-struck terms in his seven extant epistles to Hypatia, and others letters to fellow-students. ‘I account you the only good thing that remains inviolate, along with virtue,’ we read of Hypatia in Letter 81. Synesius’ longer Letter 137 styles Hypatia as she ‘who legitimately presides over the mysteries of philosophy.’ What the cinematographer for Agora smilingly remarks in The Shooting of Agora concerning Rachel Weisz’s Hypatia, seems then amply to have applied to nearly everyone who knew the original in ancient Alexandria: namely, ‘we all fell in love with Hypatia.’

Then there is the highly dramatic historical setting for the tragedy of Hypatia’s life and death—a first female philosopher martyred for political or religious causes, to join Anaxagoras, Socrates, and Seneca amongst the men. Alexandria was, in ancient as in modern times, a city geographically at the juncture between East and West; Europe and Africa; and thus, as the recreated architecture of Amenabar’s set conveys, the Graeco Roman and the Egyptian roots of Western civilization. The city was a hotbed of competing near-Eastern and Western cultures; a city wherein Jews and Christians still worshipped alongside the ancient pagan cults, not to mention the forms of Gnosticism, Manicheism, and the neo-Platonic philosophical school of which Hypatia was a


6 Cf. Michael A. B. Deakin, “Hypatia and Her Mathematics,” The American Mathematical Monthly 101: 3 (March, 1994): 234-243. We use here the ambiguous expression of Hesychius, Hypatia’s student. This astronomical study certainly included work on book III of the Almagest, for this is attested by her father’s subtitle to his commentary on this text: that it is ‘revised by my daughter Hypatia, the philosopher.’ But scholars now lean towards accepting that Hypatia also prepared our extant version of Ptolemy’s more practical work of astronomical observations, The Handy Tables. Compare on this Dzielska, Hypatia of Alexandria, 71-72.


11 Palladius the poet, most famously, eulogises Hypatia in these terms: ‘Whenever I look upon you and your words I pay reverence;/As I look upon the heavenly home of the virgin,/ For your concerns are directed at the heavens;/ Revered Hypatia, you who are yourself the beauty of reasoning;/ The immaculate star of wise learning.’ Cited at Dzielska, Hypatia of Alexandria, 22.

12 See the mini-documentary, The Shooting of Agora, on Amenabar 2010. Here and hereafter, (Amenabar 2010) refers to the film Agora on dvd and blue-ray, directed by Alejandro Amenabar, produced by Fernando Bavaira and Alvaro (Augustine Focus Features, New Market Films, Telecinco Cinema), and including mini-documentaries on the making of the film, whose titles will be given in notes as required.
legatee. In terms of Western history, moreover, as Gibbon and Voltaire each rightly highlight, Hypatia’s lifetime belongs to the last period of the decline of the classical world, the final eclipse of Mediterranean paganism, and the suppression of her philosophic culture until the medieval enlightenment of the 11th and 12th centuries. Already in the decades preceding the film’s action (391 and then 412-415 C. E.), the Emperor Julian had tried and failed to arrest the great cultural shift from paganism to Christendom, which a Christian minister in the film warns Hypatia is ‘a matter of time.’

Against the background of such a momentous civilizational break, emblematised by the destruction of the library of Alexandria which culminates the first half of the action of Agora, Hypatia is bound to stand out in an even more singular light than even her considerable virtues alone merit. The very paucity of first-hand evidence about her life, and of what remains of her work, in no way tell against the fascinating effect of her personage. This paucity provides a space for the play of imagination, and so for figures at different times of cultural division, like our own, to continue generating the profusion of different Hypatias.

So let us turn now to the specific features of Amenabar’s presentation of Hypatia in the 2010 film Agora, and our own specific interest in the film. As Agora’s producer Fernando Gaira comments in The Making of Agora, the film is at one and the same time a film about speeches and ideas, as it is a kind of biography of the political actions and choices of Hypatia and those around her. To specify, it seems to us that the film remarkably poses two types of theoretical questions: the metaphilosophical consideration of what philosophy is, and the seeming ancient answer to this question that philosophy is above all an existential orientation or bios; and secondly, the effect that the great modern revolution in ideas represented by the advent of modern science, led by the astronomical revolution, could have on this ethical conception of philosophy.

Concerning the film’s first, astronomical register, we’ve seen that the ancient sources concur that, following her father Theon, Hypatia seems to have held astronomy and the study of the movement of the physical heavens in a much higher regard than either Plato or Plotinus—the two fathers of the neo Platonic school. For all the ancient philosophers, as the opening scene of Hypatia’s teaching in Agora underscores, the heavens were held to be of a much higher ontological order, and governed by different physical laws, than the terrestrial realm which human beings occupy. In a decisive moment in the film, Orestes will try to use this to combat the plausibility of any heliocentric understanding of the cosmos (see below). Yet for both Plato and Plotinus, the highest truth is presented as hyperouranian, or even *epikeina tês oustias* (beyond substance, as Republic VI has it). So astronomy could at best be one step on the philosopher’s higher, metaphysical ascent.

By contrast, Amenabar’s Hypatia is a woman-philosopher singularly devoted to astronomical observation and, as we see in at least one decisive moment of Agora, the early morning, almost Pythagorean contemplation of the heavens. The intellectual level or component of the story of the film in fact takes us, almost step by step, through the evidential conundrums and conceptual shifts required to resolve them in order for the early modern natural philosophers—Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, and Newton—to overthrow the Ptolemaic-Aristotelian conception of the closed, spherical cosmos, with the earth at its centre. In a way that is genuinely novel in the long history of re-imagining Hypatia, Amenabar’s Agora is the first that imaginatively presents her intellectual career as bringing together and anticipating several of the great physical and astronomical discoveries of the 16th and 17th centuries, culminating in Kepler’s monumental demonstration of the elliptical movements of the planets.

According to the synthesis of Aristotelian physics and cosmology with Ptolemy’s astronomy that would prevail largely unchallenged in the West until the 16th century, the way that terrestrial objects fall straight to the ground was taken to prove that the earth lay at the world’s centre. Otherwise, as we see Hypatia telling her enraptured class in the opening scene in Agora, all would evidently be formless, shapeless chaos, ‘and we would all would be better never having been born.’ The sun first of all, and then the other planets, by contrast move around the earth in perfect circles, nested in spheres of an ethereal fifth element not to be found here below. This is because

14. The library in the film is already the second, smaller library in the Serapeum, after the great library had been destroyed in 48 B. C. E. by Julius Caesar, apparently by accident, according to Plutarch.
15. See the mini-documentary The Making of Agora, on Amenabar 2010.
16. Amenabar, Agora scene 1 [0:0:45-0:3:45].
19. Amenabar, Agora scene 1 [0:3:30-0:3:45].
circular planetary motion is a motion as close as possible to self-sufficiency, with the moved object always returning to the same place. For this reason, it was felt to be nearly self-evident until Kepler, that this could be the only species of motion worthy of the divine principle’s design of the heavens.

Image 1: the Ptolemaic system, with earth at the centre of the finite, spherical cosmos

However, even observation according to the naked eye is sufficient to generate problems for this model. These problems are illustrated in Agora scene 3, after Hypatia’s slave-boy Davus is induced by the teacher to bring the astrolabe he has constructed to the academy. They concern how each of the so-called ‘planetes’ or ‘wanderers’ seem at various points in their orbits to retrogress or briefly turn backwards in their orbits. Ptolemy thought to solve this enigma while maintaining commitment to the seemingly clear and evident need that the heavenly bodies move in spheres, by inventing periodic epicycles. According to this hypothesis, the planets must move in smaller, spiralling circles as they travelled around their great orbit, which would explain the retrogressions.

Figure 2: epicycles in Ptolemy’s astronomical system

However, as the precocious young Orestes of the film interjects, there is an evident inelegance to this solution. If we suppose, as piety demands, that God or the gods could only have created the most perfect world-system, this device of circles-upon-circles—whose physical mechanism was also never explained until Copernicus—seems unnecessarily complex. As Copernicus goes to some pains to underscore in his ‘Preface’ to De Revolutionibus Orbium Caelestium addressed to the Pope, there was another suppressed ancient astronomical tradition—

beginning with some Pythagoreans whom Cicero and Plutarch both mention—that tried to resolve the problem of retrograde motion by arguing that the earth is not stationary or central in the cosmos.\textsuperscript{21} As Copernicus was to argue in 1542, it orbits the sun. In Agora, we are reminded of this ancient heliocentric tradition’s pr- eminent exemplar, Aristarchus, by an almost mad figure on the walls of the Serapeum. He appears after Hypatia, her students, and the pagans have been compelled to retreat there following the civil strife in the agora.\textsuperscript{22} His mad ravings place a seed of doubt in Amenabar’s Hypatia’s mind that Aristarchus may have been right. It is worth underscoring that there is no historical evidence of any kind that the historical Hypatia ever adopted the heliocentric hypothesis. Yet, as in Amenabar’s other fancies, nor is the idea wholly implausible. As Koestler and Kuhn each note, the high status afforded to the sun in neo-Platonic thought—hearkening back to the Republic VII—might well have predisposed a neo-Platonic thinker towards heliocentrism, as against thinkers in the other ancient schools. Both Copernicus and Kepler were moved by neo-Platonic considerations in generating the new astronomy.\textsuperscript{23}

Figure 3: the geocentric solution to the enigma of retrograde motion

![Figure 3: the geocentric solution to the enigma of retrograde motion](http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_XAakLKI3wRs/TQmZlO4cGmI/AAAAAAAAAGo/mYxg8JEU1e8/s1600/retrograde-motion.jpg) Accessed May 2011.

However, as Thomas Kuhn, Alexandre Koyré and other philosophers of science who have written on the modern astronomical revolution each stress, Ptolemaic geocentric astronomy was not a ‘stand-alone’ teaching.\textsuperscript{24} By the Alexandrian period of Hypatia, it had been closely integrated into Aristotelian physics. In the Christian period, it was to be accepted as pleasingly consistent with theological assumptions about man’s central place in the divine plan, together with biblical testimony on the structure of creation.\textsuperscript{25} The heliocentric model seems to conflict also with the unshakable phenomenological evidence of common experience, that we move and walk upon a stationary earth.\textsuperscript{26} In particular, if the earth moves like Aristarchus proposes and Hypatia begins to wonder in the second half of Agora, wouldn’t falling bodies necessarily as it were ‘lag behind’ the moving sphere?\textsuperscript{27} That such a consideration seems to us today so obviously wrong-headed shouldn’t deceive us.\textsuperscript{28} Faced with the rise of the Copernican astronomy, minds as great as the political philosopher Jean Bodin—or the great astronomical observer Tycho Brahe\textsuperscript{29}—raised versions of the same objection Amenabar has Davus raise in Agora:

No one in his senses or imbued with the slightest knowledge of physics [Bodin protests] will ever think that the earth, heavy and unwieldy from its own weight and mass, staggers up and down around its own

\textsuperscript{21} Cf. Copernicus at Kuhn, The Copernican Revolution, 141.
\textsuperscript{22} Agora scene 9 [0:44:10-0:45:30]; cf. Kuhn, The Copernican Revolution, 42; Koestler, The Sleep-Walkers, 48-51, 73-75.
\textsuperscript{24} Kuhn, The Copernican Revolution, 1-4, 7, 192-199.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 106-107; 106-113.
\textsuperscript{27} Koyré, Metaphysics and Measurement, 9-11.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 8, 1, 16-19.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 9-12.
In a famous dispute with Giordino Bruno on this matter, Tycho Brahe claimed on Aristotelian grounds exactly that an object falling from the top of a moving ship must not fall at its foot.\(^{31}\) It should drop some distance behind the mast—so if the latter were high enough, it would on this hypothesis fail behind the ship as a whole. As a physical hypothesis, Brahe’s position is wrong, as Amenabar has his Hypatia show in company with Orestes in *Agora* scene 12 [1:01:50-1:03:30], in what the director himself calls a kind of ‘physics lesson’ for we the audience. Hypatia, at 1:03:30, draws the decisive consequence. If an object dropped on a moving ship falls perpendicularly, relative to the ship on which it moves, so too could the earth be moving, and objects dropped from above its surface drop straight down in the ways we observe.

However, there is a second objection—from the perspective of the Ptolemaic-Aristotelian world system—to the possibility that the earth could move around the sun, as Aristarchus had hypothesised. This is that such a notion overthrows the unshakable distinction to be made between terrestrial physics—the realm of imperfect and linear motion—and the apparently unchanging, spherical wheel of the heavens.\(^{32}\) To posit with Copernicus that the earth moves around the sun is to position it as a wanderer or planet, as if it were a heavenly body—thus collapsing one central tenet of the pre-modern worldview. Yet, although the earth is central to the cosmos, what transpires on its surface is certainly nothing like so august a thing as the starry heavens above: viz. that ‘kind of moving image of eternity’ (*eikō ... kinetōn tina aiōnos*) of the *Timaeus* 37d5-7.\(^{33}\) Exactly such an inference in *Agora* is placed in Orestes’ mouth in *Agora* scene 12 [c. 1:02:50]. Hypatia need only look around her at the escalating political strife in Alexandria between Christian, pagan and Jew, if the Lady would really suppose that the earth could share the perfect circular movements of the heavenly things. Yet—ingeniously on Amenabar’s part, Orestes’ comment engenders an unexpected inference in the mind of his teacher. Rather than accept that this clash between terrestrial imperfection and heavenly, spherical perfection shows what Orestes supposes, Amenabar’s Hypatia infers that it is this perfection itself—or the way it has been conceived as necessarily implying spherical motion—that must be contested. ‘I must rethink everything,’ she immediately announces.\(^{34}\)

The reason why Amenabar thinks this fancy is at least worth staging has been mentioned above, and is illustrated in *Agora* scenes 6 [c. 25:30] and 15 [c. 1:19]. It lies in Hypatia’s known studies of the *Conics* of Apollonius of Perga’s (ca. 262 B.C.E. - ca. 190 B.C.E.) modelling in his *Conics* of the series of geometric shapes which one attains by cutting a cone at different angles. As the historical Hypatia knew, the implication of such a geometric model is that the circle is not a perfect, stand alone or *sui generis* geometric form. It is one species of a wider genus, including also the ellipse, parabola, and hyperbola: viz. that group of all the shapes one can generate by slicing a cone into differently shaped sections.

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33. ‘The filth and mire of the world,’ Montaigne was still able to write in the final decades of the 16th century, surely bespeaks its place as ‘the worst, the lowest, the most lifeless part of the universe, the bottom storey of the house,’ quoted in Shapin, *The Scientific Revolution*, 24.
34. If the historical Hypatia had made such a hypothesis, we note, the further physical barrier to the modern conception of the infinite, geometrical space of the universe proposed by Aristotle’s notion that all physical things have a natural “place” in the cosmos would also have been wholly overturned, some 1270 or so years before Newton’s *Principia*. 
Figure 4: Apollonian conic sections, and the four shapes they generate: circle, ellipse, parabola, hyperbola.


It is true that from such a geometric observation, the historical Hypatia may have been able to infer the elliptical movements of the planets which was to be first modelled by Kepler in 1605, and published in the Astronomica Nova of 1609. But there is no evidence she did. In any case, in Agora, this is the final intellectual step Amenabar’s Hypatia is able to take, before the terrestrial events of her day see her seized and murdered by Cyril’s sinister (and given Amenabar, remarkably named) parabolani. The elliptical model Hypatia generates with her slave Aspasias in Agora scene 20 [1:42:35-1:45:36] positions the sun as moving in a perfect ellipse around not one, but two ‘foci’ or equants (the positions of the sun at perihelion and aphelion). This clearly anticipates Kepler’s first and second laws on planetary motion, albeit that Kepler won this particular astronomical conquest on the field of the orbit of Mars, as surveyed by Tycho Brahe’s observations.

Figure 5: Kepler’s first law of planetary motion: elliptical movement


II

So much then on the first, intellectual and astronomical level of Amenabar’s Hypatia. What can we say concerning the second, biographical register of the film, and its dramatisation of the all-too-terrestrial fate suffered by Hypatia in Alexandria in 415 C. E.? And what, in relation to this, does the film Agora bespeak, if anything, concerning the other topic we raised above, the nature and representation of philosophy, through Amenabar’s proto-Copernican, proto-Galilean, proto-Keplerian Hypatia?

To approach an answer to these questions, let’s begin from one response to this film which I believe is deeply erroneous. This reading is as understandable as it is passionate, in the present period of the ‘new atheism’ and public polemics concerning religion. This reading sees the message of Agora as all-too-clear. Beneath its technical and intellectual sophistications, it is an openly antichristian film. Agora is one more, aggressively secularist salvo in the newly militant atheist attack on the religious roots of Western moral thinking. Hypatia is killed, brutally and unjustly, by Cyril and his fanatical parabolani—who are dressed in a manner knowingly recalling the Taliban. The closing credits then remind us that Cyril was canonised by the Church, underlining

35. Cf. on the distances of the earth from the sun at the different points of its annual rotation http://www.physicalgeography.net/fundamentals/6h.html Accessed May 2011.
the film’s damning testimony concerning Christian barbarism and anti-intellectualism. But with Amenabar’s 
Agora, this deeply unrepresentative moment in the great history of the Christian religion is presented as if it
were representative of the Church per se, not only the early Church’s regrettable militancy against the pagan
world. We are now to believe that the Church’s anti-feminine, anti-philosophical excesses also delayed the
West’s scientific progress for 13 centuries! But surely Amenabar has misrepresented Christianity, as he has
reshaped Hypatia to fit into his own secularist, scientific frame. Amenabar would have done well to reflect not
only on the role that medieval Christian scholasticism was to play in preparing the ground for the modern
scientific conquests, but also what many observers see as the entirely ambiguous moral and political
consequences of the great revolution in natural philosophy of the 16th - 17th centuries. As the English cleric John
Donne remarked in 1611, just two years after Amenabar’s hero Kepler had gone to print with his New
Astronomy:

And New Philosophy calls all in doubt,/ The Element of fire is quite put out/ The Sun is lost, and
th’earth, and no man’s wit/ Can well direct him where to look for it;/ ‘tis all in pieces, all coherence
gone;/ All just supply, and all Relation.37

Putting aside larger questions concerning the very type of politicising reading of a work of art such a response
bespeaks, it seems to us that the Agora-as-anti-Christian reading of Amenabar’s film—which Amenabar has
repeatedly denied was his intention—is importantly blind to the deeper political or trans-political direction of
Agora.38 Let us explain how.

It seems to us that the brilliance of Amenabar’s script lies in how the historical events that Agora narrates
come reflections or effective commentaries on two framing intellectual thoughts which the film places in the
mouth of Hypatia. We have said above how Agora’s setting in ancient Alexandria casts an unusually telling
light on the conflict between a series of opposing forces and sources for Western thought and life: Europe and
Africa, the West and the near-East, reason and revelation, or Athens and Jerusalem, as some authors have put
things. Then there are the oppositions the film dramatises between male and female, and let us also now add the
bios politicos or political life, and the bios theoretikos or life of the mind. However it is interpreted, Hypatia’s
remarkable fate somehow speaks to the continuing challenge we cannot avoid of trying to live with, reconcile,
or at least accommodate these opposed poles in our forms of life. Of course, their tension always provokes the
temptation to long for some simple solution—for instance, the lasting triumph of revealed religion over political
life, including the ecclesial monitoring and censorship of all intellectual inquiry, as was achieved at various
times in the Christian era; or by contrast the secularist attempt of a party like the Bolsheviks last century, who
aimed to expunge all inherited religion in the name of the proletarian revolution. What then does Agora say
concerning these shaping Western cultural tensions, and the possibility of any such, ‘monocentric’ solution to
the clashes of male and female, religion and philosophy or science, Athens and Jerusalem?

The first of the two key theoretical thoughts which I think Amenabar is asking us to interpret as an allegorical
comment on the terrestrial or political action of the film, was introduced above. When Hypatia sets about trying
to cast aside the ancient, ‘spherophilic,’ astronomical prejudice in order to account for movements of the earth,
she models an elliptical orbit. In order to do this, as we saw, she is forced to displace the single centre of the
earth’s orbit. In its place, as Kepler was later to do, she posits two equants, circumscribing the earth’s orbit so
that at each moment on its path its combined distance from these two ‘centres’—if that word still applies—
remains constant. Now, as an allegorical imaging of a view which would seek not to expunge, but to preserve
and balance the Christian, revealed source of Western ethical life alongside the ‘Athenian,’ secular root, this
remarkable scene of fictional astronomy is not bad.

Then let us consider the second thought that I think Amenabar goes to some length to highlight in the film. The
thought in question, is the first of the so-called ‘common notions’ [koinia enoiai] from the first book Euclid’s

38  For one thing, Amenabar seems to have gone to some lengths to underline the parallels between his heroine’s
death and that of Christ—including having her trailed to martyrdom by a divided disciple who has betrayed her
several times in the course of the story. See Amenabar’s comments in interview: ‘Is Hypatia a martyr? Yes.
Again, I found links to her story and to the story of Jesus Christ. They were dragged through the streets, tortured
and killed. We don’t know if she knew what was coming. The fact is that she was a woman who wanted to be
treated as an equal to a man. She was very prominent in the city.’ Scott Holleran, “Interview: Alejandro
Elements. Hypatia is known to have taught this work, like Apollonius’ Conics, and indeed to have written a commentary upon it. The thought states that ‘Things equal to the same thing also equal one another [τὰ τὸ αὐτὸ ἄρθρα ἀλλήλων εἰσίν];’39 or as Amanabar’s Hypatia puts it in Agora’s third scene—if two objects are equal to a third, then they are equal to each other.40 The thought is used in the film exclusively in practical or ‘political’ contexts.

The first use comes in Agora’s third scene, wherein the young Orestes, yet a pagan, confronts Synesius, who is already a Christian. Hypatia uses Euclid’s first common notion here to reconcile the representatives of the two traditions, by referring each to a greater, third reality: their shared experience of philosophy and the life of inquiry. However, interestingly enough given Hypatia’s rephrasing of it, the Euclidean notion appears exactly two more times in Agora, once in the mouth of Orestes as Prefect and the third time, in the mouth of Synesius, who by 415 C. E. has become Bishop of Cyrene and an ally of Cyril. ‘More things unite us than divide us,’ Orestes says at Agora 1:02:50; when he is trying, as the Prefect of Alexandria, to mediate in the civic strife between Christians and Jews: a strife which escalated after the death of Bishop Theophilus on October 12, 412 C. E.

And here is a further interesting thing. The third restatement of Euclid’s common notion, in the mouth of Agora’s Synesius (Agora scene 21: c. 1:50-1:51), is actually not equal to its two predecessors. Euclid’s first common notion was still a means, in Orestes’ restatement, for showing how two disputing parties, each with their own identity, nevertheless share more than their present rages were allowing them to see. In Synesius’ final statement, by contrast, it becomes the vehicle for Synesius to try to compel Hypatia to renounce her distinct identity as a philosopher and assent to baptism—since both Synesius and Orestes are now Christians. Perhaps this is why Amenabar has Synesius momentarily stumble as he pronounces the thought, before stating ambiguously that Hypatia ‘has been taken away from what she herself taught us.’ This indeed she has, but by the actions of her pupils, and not through any change in her own conduct. As Hypatia affirms in the next scene, following Orestes’ protestation that he cannot govern without her, and that she must not let Cyril win: ‘Cyril has already won.’41 She then walks out into the agora, refusing police protection and thus knowingly choosing her martyrdom.

So let us then state what seems to be the largest thought of this very thoughtful, very philosophical film. Amenabar himself, in interviews concerning Agora, states the most literally wonder-ful motivation for making Agora. ‘I was on a boat’ in Malta in 2004, Amenabar reports, ‘and for the first time I saw the Milky Way, and I was overwhelmed ... I wanted to convey this.’42 In Amenabar’s-Hypatia’s Euclidean terms, what this means is that, whatever the differences between reason and revelation, paganism and monotheism, Christianity and Judaism—each of the oppositions that collide in the film—there is always a greater third thing which they have in common. But that thing is the cosmos as a whole in ancient terms, or in modern language, the infinite physical universe of which we and our affairs form but one, comparatively very tiny, passing, part. If we can remind ourselves of this, Amenabar’s Agora seems to be trying to say that the terrible differences that divide cultures and lead to murder, political strife and wars will seem less intransigent, and perhaps become less deadly.

Now, however unlikely or trite such a thought sounds, it alone can explain not simply the content, but also the particular form, into which Amenabar has shaped his life of Hypatia. In particular, we mean by this the single, most unusual formal feature of the film that is perhaps the first thing to strike the viewer as she watches the film. This is that, nine times throughout Agora, Amenabar has recourse to a type of distinct photographic shot which looks down from above at the action of the film, or its immediate surrounds, or the city of Alexandria itself, or the entirety of North Africa, or ultimately the whole of the earth set against the background of space. Agora literally opens and closes with shots which represent such views from above. The opening sequence was originally shot so that for some two minutes the unsuspecting audience would have been presented with this sweeping observation of the heavens panning finally down to earth. Agora’s last shot, symmetrically, withdraws upwards from the streets to a view from the skies as we take our leave from the strife of 415 C. E. Alexandria. In between, Amenabar undertakes different essays of the same technique seven further times—and each, notably, at those moments of greatest passion for one or more of the characters. These moments include, for instance, the civil war between pagans and the Christians in the agora in 391 C. E., and the destruction of the smaller Alexandrian library that followed the Emperor’s bequeathing its control to the enraged Christians. That

40. Amenabar, Agora scene 3 [0:13:30-0:14:30];
41. Amenabar, Agora scene 21: c. 1:51:40
these shots are meant to be more than mere establishing shots, allowing us to spatially situate the actions, is shown by the cosmic scale of the spatial ‘context’ to which several of the shots introduce us. In several instances, including what Amenabar describes as his favourite shot in the film after Orestes has broadcasted his love for Hypatia in the theatre, Amenabar lets us continue (impossibly) to hear the sounds of the streets—children crying, dogs barking—as we ascend with his lens to a god-like view of the canopy of clouds above North Africa and the earth.\textsuperscript{43}

So let us now complete the circle, or the ellipse, of our two interests in Agora—namely the astronomical story first, but secondly the question about the nature of philosophy, related to the film’s biographical representation of the life of the famous woman-philosopher Hypatia. In its biographical role, we begin by noting that Agora stands legateae to an entire genre of ancient philosophical writing beginning with Xenophon’s \textit{Memorabilia}, pre-eminently including Diogenes Laertius’ \textit{Lives of the Philosophers} and also, closer to Hypatia’s particular perspective, Porphyry’s \textit{Life of Plotinus}. For the philosopher according to the ancient conception of philosophy as it has been reconstructed by Pierre Hadot, Richard Sorabji, John Sellars, A. A. Long and others, pursues ‘philosophy as a way of life.’ To be a philosopher of whatever school—Stoic, Epicurean, neo-Platonic or Peripatetic—was according to Hadot and these other authors far more than one, albeit peculiar, ‘9-to-5’ career specialisation, from which one knocks off in the evening, and which may say nothing at all as to how the philosopher comported him or herself towards his own passions and thoughts, other human beings, and the larger political and physical world. Ancient philosophy’s aim was not simply theoretical, but had the larger aim to make possible, or even to embody, the highest forms of human flourishing. On this model, a philosopher’s deeds and mode of living were as much the expressions of their ‘philosophy’ as their speeches, writings, and arguments—in fact, even more so. And, despite great metaphysical differences between the ancient schools, if Hadot at least is right, what united each of them at this ethical level, was this observation: that our all-too-human passions engender partial, limited, and ultimately distorted or fantasmatic perceptions of the world, in this way promoting unnecessary forms of suffering and destructive action. To take an extreme case, the man who is in a rage cannot think reasonably or impartially about his situation. His attention is focused on just this particular situation, which must imperatively be changed, with increasing disregard for whatever external cost—‘a horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!’ On this basis, whether through the Epicureans’ distinction between natural, necessary and unnecessary desires or in the Stoic distinction between things which are \textit{eph'emén} and those which do not depend upon us, each ancient philosophical school tried to engender in practitioners an enlarged, more rational perspective on their lives and world, as free as possible from the blinding lens of excessive passion as possible.\textsuperscript{44} The means to do this was not simply theoretical observation and argument—although these were vital. They also included a series of imaginative and existential exercises, aimed at rehabilitating the passions, challenging the habitual forms of evaluation they promote, and engendering new forms of self-examination. Take in Agora, for instance, the striking moment when Hypatia—as at least one ancient sources attests\textsuperscript{45}—answers the erotic suits of her student (in the film, it is Orestes) with a cloth discoloured by the blood of her cycle. This gesture is surely meant to shock Orestes out of his passion-shaped, partial perspective—‘Hypatia is harmony itself’—towards a more comprehensive viewpoint. As such, it is very close to some of the remarkable imaginative exercises recommended to \textit{prokopta} (students) by the Stoics—not to mention Epictetus’ frequently near-comic reprimands to his students to shape up.\textsuperscript{46} Amenabar’s Hypatia is not wholly without anxiety or anger in the film: at different points we see her moved to anger with Davus, indignation at the rage of the pagans against the Christians, sadness at the civic strife between Christian and Jew and the crying of a little girl caught up in it, and daughterly love for her father. Nevertheless, Weisz’s performance highlights the equanimity to which the historical records concerning Hypatia attest, and what the Stoics might have called her \textit{aproptosia}: the absence of hurry or panic in judgment, even as she silently assents to her slave Davus’ final loving gesture of euthanizing her, as she looks out through the—elliptical—opening in the roof of the Serapeum-Church towards the sky.\textsuperscript{47}

The point we wish to make here is that one of the philosophical exercises Hadot identifies across the different ancient schools to engender such a philosophical attitude or way of living was what he calls ‘the view from\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Agora} scene 5 [21:48-22:20]. Then there is the way, as Amenabar shows us the destruction of the library, that most dramatic historical moment in the film [scene 9, 0:54:40], he speeds up the footage of the looters below, so their chaotic movements appear like ants. We will return to this below.


\textsuperscript{45} The ancient source is Damascus, cited at Dziezka, \textit{Hypatia of Alexandria}, 50.

\textsuperscript{46} E. g.: Epictetus, \textit{Discourses} 1, 4, 14ff.; 3, 21, 7-8.

\textsuperscript{47} We note that the morning after Hypatia has made her momentous, Keplerian discovery, Amenabar pictures her meditating before an open sky, before rising with a sense of quiet joy upon her face. It will be the last day of her life (\textit{Agora} scene 20, 1:46:05). Of course, Neoplatonism was an openly contemplative school, for which the highest human experience involved some species of supra-discursive unity with the One both beyond Being.
above."\(^{48}\) The exercise is also adduced, in precise terms, by Lady Philosophy in *The Consolations of Philosophy* Book II, Chapter 7.\(^{49}\) As the context and work as a whole makes clear, Lady Philosophy’s aim is not simply to say something theoretically true. By doing so, she aims to shake the prison-bound Boethius out of lamenting the loss of his good name in Rome:

‘Yes,’ said she, ‘... there is one thing which can attract minds, which, though by nature excelling, yet are not led by perfection to the furthest bounds of virtue; and that thing is the love of fame and reputation for deserving well of one’s country. Think then thus upon it, and see that it is but a slight thing of no weight. As you have learnt from astronomers’ showing, the whole circumference of the earth is but as a point compared with the size of the heavens. That is, if you compare the earth with the circle of the universe, it must be reckoned as of no size at all. And of this tiny portion of the universe there is but a fourth part, as you have learnt from the demonstration of Ptolomeaeus, which is inhabited by living beings known to us. If from this fourth part you imagine subtracted all that is covered by sea and marsh, and all the vast regions of thirsty desert, you will find but the narrowest space left for human habitation. And do you think of setting forth your fame and publishing your name in this space, which is but as a point within another point so closely circumscribed? And what size or magnificence can fame have which is shut in by such close and narrow bounds?’\(^{50}\)

Whether Alejandro Amenabar was aware of this ancient philosophic practice or not as he created Agora, it seems to us that the resemblance is remarkably close between this kind of thought-experiment Philosophy prompts Boethius towards, and the kind of ‘view from above’ shots that punctuate the action of Amenabar’s film. We noted the fact that these shots are prompted by the moments of highest human passion and conflict in the film. This also encourages the hypothesis that Amenabar was aiming in his film, at producing in audiences exactly the type of philosophical, ethical effect Lady Philosophy aims to induce in Her charge at this point of the *Consolations*. In Hadot’s précis, the aim of the ‘view from above’ meditation used particularly in the Stoic and Platonic schools was ‘to attain to greatness of soul, and in all schools its function was to teach people to despise human affairs and to achieve inner peace.’\(^{51}\) Philo of Alexandria has this to say concerning the aim of this exercise in what Hadot calls ‘practical physics’:

> As their goal is a life of peace and serenity, [the philosophers] contemplate nature and everything found within her: they attentively explore the earth, the sea, the air, the sky, and every nature found therein. In thought, they accompany the moon, the sun, and the rotations of the other stars, whether fixed or wandering. Their bodies remain on earth, but they give wings to their souls, so that, rising into the ether, they may observe the powers which dwell there, as is fitting for those who have truly become citizens of the world...\(^{52}\)

In several interviews concerning his film, Amenabar has confirmed our interpretation of *Agora* as a kind of uniquely, almost directly philosophical film in the classical senses of philosophy just introduced: or better, as a kind of cinematic practicing of the view from above, which enacts in its form, the type of philosophic comportment its content celebrates in the film’s adorable heroine. ‘But the movie really—I say also it is not

\(^{48}\) See the chapter of *Philosophy as a Way of Life* of this title, which is devoted to this form of philosophical meditation. Hadot cites examples of the exercise in both Epicureans and the great Stoics; together with anticipations or similar themes in Plato, Homer, Xenephon, Proclus, Plutarch and Cicero. Pierre Hadot, “The View from Above” in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, with an Introduction by A. Davidson (Ed.) (Michael Chase, trans.) (Blackwell: London, 1996), 238-250.


\(^{50}\) Ibid.


\(^{52}\) Philo, cited in Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 243-244. We comment in passing that only something like this transformative ethical effect would seem able to explain the devotion to Hypatia attested to by all the first-hand accounts of her students—given that she seems mostly, as in the film, to have lectured concerning astronomical and mathematical matters, which for moderns seem fairly anerotic, unmoving, if elevated pursuits. In *Letter 10*, Synesius—who we recall was a Bishop of Cyrene, and thus no insignificant man—counts Hypatia’s passing failure to respond to his epistles a greater loss to him than that of his children, his friends, and the good will of all around him. In language drawn at once from the neo-Platonic school, his own Christian faith, and the wider cultural culture, Synesius describes his study of philosophy with Hypatia as his greatest gift from God the ruler of all; a type of purification unfit for the vulgar, the ongoing attempt to uncover the inner eye of the soul, or to open oneself to the emanations of the divine intellect: ‘for whom in the full health of the mind’s eye God kindles a light akin to his own, that light which is the cause of knowledge to the mind, and to knowable things the cause of their being known.’ Synesius of Cyrene, *Letters 10*, 137, 154.
anti-Christian,’ Amenabar has said concerning Agora’s politics. But then, in the same breath, he typically ties this political meaning to the formal procedure of the view from above which has been the focus of the second half of this paper:

The movie—what it is saying is that every time you defend your ideas by using arms, by killing people, then you become [like] an insect and that happened with the Jews, that happened with the Christians and that happened with the Pagans. It's happening nowadays with fundamentalism... any kind of fundamentality...  

By contrast:

If you film a lot of people from above and speed it up, we look like ants. I wanted to show that perspective so people would realise we’re nothing but tiny creature. Yes and, at the same time... great—you see these highly developed people as small as ants knowing so much about the universe. So the movie shows man at his best and at his worst.

Although we cannot pursue this thought here, let us close by indicating the largest philosophical implication of the type of philosophic, spiritual exercise which we have presented Agora as being. This is an implication which speaks to the type of recurrent anxiety we met above in John Donne, concerning the advent of the modern, mathematical worldview, and its alleged amoral or demoralising effects on the moderns. The West’s pre-modern societies may not have known the extent of the universe, the infinite vastness of space and quantity of the stars, that the stars move in ellipses, that comets are heavenly bodies, and so on... But their closed, teleological or providential sense of the world provided a moral orientation and sense of metaphysical orientation we moderns now lack, one that civic societies arguably need if they are to flourish. It would follow that today’s much-vaunted ‘return to religion’ would have a rational, albeit deeply antiscientific and tendentially reactionary basis. What is striking about the ‘view from above’ in ancient philosophy—and what Amenabar’s Agora, I think, highlights by having his ancient philosophical heroine discover the foundations of the modern physical worldview—is that, in fact, such a philosophic ethics was in no way predicated on the Aristotelian-teleological worldview which the scientific revolution refuted. It is for instance the very centreless vastness of geometric space which horrified Pascal that Lucretius celebrates Epicurus for breaking open, ‘far beyond the flaming walls of our world,’ in his poem of the nature of things. And it is this very ‘infinity’—the as-it-were mathematically sublime disproportion between what our passions restrict us to, and this infinity ‘in which the mind can plunge its gaze at will, and to which the mind’s thoughts can soar in free flight,’ that is efficient for promoting this philosophic ethical sense. Said differently, such a philosophic ethics would be rooted in the double sense Amenabar indicates, that humans are both tiny from a greater, cosmic perspective, but great enough to realise this, if only we can keep this thought in mind to temper our more ignoble passions. And as we have contended that Agora tries to show, the moderns’ advances in natural science would thus represent not a threat to our ethical life. They would involve an awe-inspiring expansion of its horizon and continuing lesson in

55. The same enlarging, philosophical aim again applies to the way Amenabar has spoken about the historical component of the film: what he terms its ‘journey into the past.’ ‘Agora may be set in the past, but in many ways it is about the present,’ the director affirms, before adding in a way that directly evokes certain other Stoic meditations: ‘It’s a mirror for people to take a step back, observe time and space from a distance and surprisingly find that not so much has changed in the world.’ The enlarged perspective on life that exercises like the ‘view from above’ exercise were meant to engender were intended to reorient their προκόποιν or students’ comportment towards the passing of time—as well as to underscore their smallness in physical space. Passion closes attention upon the singular moment, which is valued or reviled as if it were ‘without example,’ to use one of Machiavelli’s favourite turns of phrase. The πάθη speaks in the imperative voice, and demand that something be done right now, putting aside all longer term considerations. For just this reason we are enjoined by the Stoics to reflect repeatedly on the eternal recurrence of the same patterns of events in all human affairs, as a means to reorient our desires. Even if one considers the great days of the noblest monarchs (Augustus, Vespasian, Trajan, Croesus, Philip, Hadrian), Marcus thus for instance reflects: ‘You will see all these things: people marrying, bringing up children, sick, dying, warring, feasting, trafficking, cultivating the ground, flattering, obstinately arrogant, suspecting, plotting, wishing for some to die, grumbling about the present, loving, heaping up treasure, desiring consulship, kingly power. Well then, that life of these people no longer exists at all.’ Marcus Aurelius, Meditations IV.32; cf. VIII. 31.
56. At Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life, 243.
philosophical humility.\textsuperscript{57} Or, to give the last word to what Amenabar has said concerning what he wanted audiences to take away from \textit{Agora}:

\begin{quote}
... [a sense] mostly [of] having travelled to the stars... and if people don’t like the film, I hope at least that it makes them want to climb a mountain one day, or go to the desert or the sea, and look at the stars—because we can’t see them from the city. And I think that at least once in our lives, we should look at the sky around us and see where we are, because it is really amazing.\textsuperscript{58}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{57}. Dario Marinelli, who composed the musical score for \textit{Agora}, puts things beautifully when he expresses the hope for the film that: ‘... what comes across very clearly is this extreme separation that there is between our planet seen from afar and our stories and destinies as a whole. It’s a split in perspective which is very important when it comes to seeing our planet as it is still ravaged by wars and conflict, and being able to step out of it and just see it from a distance as something that has an integrity in its own right and a beauty in its own right. And these kinds of thoughts will probably resonate with people, and make them look at our planet with slightly different eyes...’ \textit{The End of the Journey: The Post-Production of Agora}, in Amenabar 2010.

\textsuperscript{58}. \textit{The Post-Production of Agora}, in Amenabar 2010.