Paul of Tarsus addresses a central human problem: Why do we not do what we know we should? This presumes that we know what we should do. Paul’s claim that even those without the revealed law know what is right by means of “nature” and “conscience” may seem to impose Greek notions onto Hebrew religion, but in fact articulates suggestions already present in the law and prophets, namely that the revealed law codifies and concretizes the law already written on the human heart by the Creator. Since this core of universal principles lacks specific normative content, Pauline Christianity necessarily seeks to absorb what is good from the content of existing civilizations. In so doing, it separates the literature, thought and practices of the civilizations it absorbs from their religion, thus giving birth to the very notion of “culture,” and specifically to Greekness as a cultural entity that could be preserved and passed on without losing its otherness.

If we propose to reflect upon Jews, Greeks and Christians at the beginning of our era, this should not be understood as taking for granted that these three groups were already there during the period that we will explore. For one could claim that this period is precisely the one in which the three groups came into being or, more precisely, were defined either from the inside of from the outside, from themselves or from one another.

That the Christian group did not arise before this period, but precisely during it (Acts 11.26) will come as no surprise: in order to get Christians, you must have a Christ. Yet the other two groups received some new features, too, that gave them a decisive twist.
Three groups

A central figure in that story of mutual definition is Paul of Tarsus. I should like to make some very introductory statements about what he introduced into the Ancient world in the first century of our era. This revolution of sorts has something to do with the three human groups mentioned above. Paul articulated the three elements relative to one another in a new configuration that proved stable.

To begin with, the very way in which the topic is named has a Pauline ring. For we say: “Jews and Greeks.” We do not say “Jews and Pagans” more generally. This would be anachronistic, since the word “pagan” was coined when Christianity had already seized power, as a term of abuse lampooning those rednecks down in the sticks who still clung to their ancient gods. But it would make sense to say “Jews and Romans,” since our story takes place when the whole Mediterranean area was under the Roman Empire. The formula “Jews and Greeks” is almost a quotation from Paul (Rom. 1.16 et al.). The very fact that we choose to put things this way already betrays the depth of Paul’s influence over our parlance.

But more importantly, Paul’s revolution launched a process that was due to produce one of the three groups, the Christians, out of an original identity with the people of Israel. Furthermore, this separation may have contributed, along with other factors, to the shaping of what was then crystallizing as “Judaism.” This point is difficult to assess, so that it can be claimed that, without Paul, Judaism probably would have evolved along very much the same lines as the ones along which it really did. The Rabbis applied to the new religious group their usual tactics of “killing by silence.” As a consequence, it is pretty difficult to pinpoint a precise allusion to Paul’s teaching in the whole Talmud. One of them, however, may be Rabbi Yehoshua b. Levi’s famous sentence about the only free man being the one who sticks to the Torah.¹

Finally, the Pauline revolution had an effect on the “Greek” element. It enabled it to enter the Christian synthesis in a certain way. Greek is the name of a language and of a culture, not of a religion. Greek is, as it were, what is left of Ancient culture when it is shorn of its religious dimension. Greek is the first example of what we now call “culture.”

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Now, my claim is that this rump Hellenism was the indirect result of the Pauline revolution.

**The problem**

Paul’s problem is not what to do, but: how is it that we do not do what we should do?

Paul casts it in the form of a personal confession: “For to will is present in me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do” (Rom. 7.18–19). Probably, we should not take this too literally or too psychologically as a sigh of “Mr. Paul of Tarsus.” The literary “ego” stands for the situation of each and every son of Adam. Little wonder that Paul echoes well-known formulas in the “pagan” literature, Greek and Roman in expression, of roughly the same period, like Ovid, Seneca or Epictetus.²

We do not have to ask what to do, for we somehow know that already. What we have to look for is the reason why we do not abide by a law that we are perfectly familiar with.

Paul’s positive answer moves in two directions, towards the past and towards the future. Towards the past, there is God’s mercy that forgives our trespasses. Towards the future, there is God’s grace that enables us to do what we could not do if we were left to our own resources. This would lead us deep into Paul’s theology, where I cannot follow him here.

Instead, I will focus on Paul’s first thesis, i.e.: we know what we should do.

**Norms**

In order adequately to appreciate the breadth of Paul’s revolution, we have to cast a glance at the whole realm of human action.

Whatever we do or make is regulated by a set of rules. No human society is devoid of such rules. They extend from phonology and grammar to limitations of marriage, prohibiting the wedlock between some parents, and include cooking recipes, table manners, etc. In each case, some behavior is supposed to be the right one, whereas the other ones
are excluded and punished in various ways, from a sneer to death penalty. I am not allowed to marry just any female; some are excluded. I cannot utter meaningless sounds while pretending to make sense. I cannot do whatever I want to my body, but I have to paint it, tattoo it, cut it, wash it, clothe it in a definite way, etc.

The presence or absence of some definite rules may define the identity of a human group, hence, the identity of the person who belongs to this group. Judaism, by the way, is the paramount example of a human group defined by its abiding by a definite Law and only thereby.

The presence of rules in general defines humanity, because it defines culture at large. The basic question is Kant’s second query in the Critique of Pure Reason: “what should I do?” As Kant himself observed, this question branches off from the more fundamental one: “what is man?”

Paul’s revolution implied a full-fledged new anthropology.

For the Jews of the first century, the question “what should I do?” was not a central issue. If they were pious, they had a ready answer with Moses’ law and in the “right path” [halakha] that was already evolving from it. Paul, himself an observing Jew, is no exception. Jesus’ original message already supposed that the rules were known: “change your heart” [metanoeite] supposes some knowledge of the direction in which we have to turn in order to find God; “the reign of God is at hand” [ègiken hè basileia tou Ouranou] supposes that we know what the laws of His kingdom will be; “God forgives your sins” supposes that we know which sins are forgiven, etc.

The problem already took a trickier turn when the Christian mission turned towards larger circles—first, probably, towards half-Pagans standing on the threshold of Judaism but hesitating in front of some unpleasant commands like circumcision, the so-called “God-fearing” [seboumenoi, metuentes] who did not accept the Law in its entirety, but chose à la carte.

Ultimately, the most difficult question arose: What about real pagans, who simply do not have Moses’ law to tell them what to do?
The answer

According to Paul, non-Jews possess another principle by which to distinguish the right from the wrong:

For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature \( \text{phusis} \) the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves \( \text{heautoi} \ldots \text{nomos} \): Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience \( \text{suneidesis} \) also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another (Rom. 2.14–15).

From the point of view of the historian of ideas, Paul introduced into the religious view of moral life concepts that are philosophical in origin: nature and conscience. He may have borrowed them from the kind of popular philosophical literature, mainly Stoic in origin, that flooded the Roman word. It looks like Paul is “Greek to the Greeks,” as he claimed to be Jew to the Jews (1 Cor. 9.20). He thinks in Greek terms while addressing Greeks. The problem that Paul answered by bringing onto the stage ideas from the outside, “Greek” ideas, was solved by the Talmudic Sages in a purely immanent way, on the basis of inner-biblical history: there are, prior to Moses’ Law, seven commands that were given to Noah and that hold good for whoever left the Ark, i.e. the whole mankind.\(^4\)

Are Paul’s two basic ideas utterly foreign to the Bible (the “Old Testament”)? As for words, this is clear. The Old Testament has no word for “nature”; the Hebrew word for that is not to be found earlier than in the Mishna. Furthermore, this word \( \text{teva}' \) hasn’t anything to do with the idea of growth that Greek ears felt in the word \( \text{phusis} \) (nature), despite scientific etymology (see Aristotle 1957, 4.4 (1014b16–18)). Paul knew enough Greek to feel this (Rom. 11. 21–24). But the Hebraic word meant rather the cast, the mold, the type that gives a thing its character. The idea of a moral conscience is expressed in modern Hebrew by a medieval word \( \text{matspûn} \), which in turn is a loan translation from an Arabic word \( \text{damîr} \). The oldest example quoted in Klatzkin’s philosophical Thesaurus is to be found in Judah Ibn Tibbon’s Hebrew translation of Bahya Ibn Paquda’s *Duties of the Heart*, in the prologue. With that we are as late as the twelfth century already (Klein 1987,
Whether the idea itself is extant in earlier times is controversial. Y. Leibowitz flatly considered conscience as a pagan idea that has no place whatsoever in Judaism (quoted in Falk 1981, 66).

I will endeavor to show that Paul develops some possibilities contained in the Old Testament. Pagan conceptions played the part of the midwife and helped out what was implicit.

**Conscience**

In the Old Testament, some passages suggest that rules of conduct need not be formulated, because they are there already and have always been there. A well-known passage reads: “He hath shewed thee, o man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” (Mic. 6.8). The verse is never explicitly quoted in the New Testament, but it may be alluded to, rather obscurely, in the First Gospel: a harsh critique of the scribes and Pharisees is put into Jesus’ mouth, who taunts them with stressing minute details of the law and neglecting the weightier elements [ta barutera], i.e. judgment [krisis], compassion [eleos] and faith [pistis] (Matt. 23.23).

In Micah, the context is an attempt at playing down the importance of the sacrificial cult. The verb that is translated here by “to show” is often used for the instructions given by priests on the right way to offer sacrifices. Micah may have played on the word of art and given it a twist that runs counter its original context.

The subject of the sentence is not that clear, however: who does the teaching? I have quoted the Authorized Version. It translates the Masoretic text that has in fact the active form [bigged], “he has told you”; but the Septuagint supposes the passive form [haggad], understood as an impersonal: “it was told to you.” If we stick to the Masoretic text, we still have to ask who the subject is, and the context does not help us a great deal. A further question is the content of the teaching: it might be that each of the three keywords alludes to the basic message of earlier prophets, i.e. Amos (justice), Hosea (love), Isaiah (humility). But this does hardly more than push back the question: what those
three forerunners have preached is alluded to only vaguely. We do not know how to act justly, how to love, how to walk humbly. To put it in quite anachronistic terms: we do not receive any law-book, any hand-book of ethics, any treatise on spirituality. Now, this very imprecision may be essential and emphatically positive in nature.

A similar question occurs in Deuteronomy:

And now, Israel, what doth the Lord thy God require of thee, but to fear the Lord thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the Lord thy God with all thy heart and all thy soul. To keep the commandments of the Lord and his statutes, which I command thee this day for thy good? (10.12–13).

Again, the verses are never quoted in the New Testament, at least in a recognizable way. The first verse sounds very much like the passage from Micah. The second, which many commentators consider as simply a later addition, definitely bears the stamp of Deuteronomic style. It introduces the idea of divine commands. Hence, the text that began with rather sketchy indications, shifts to a more precise focus and ends with a circular reference to the content of the book in which it is to be read.

By so doing, the movement of the text mirrors on a smaller scale the whole evolution of later Judaism: the rather vague appeal of the Prophets crystallized into a whole “teaching” [torah]. And the torah was to become a code of behaviour that is supposed, at least in principle, to answer any possible question about the right path [halakha].

Nature

The idea of nature is delineated in another complex of ideas. We have just seen that the basic rules of decency are known to mankind. Let us ask at present what kind of attitude God can have towards this set of rules.

Let us have a look at the famous Song of the vineyard in Isaiah. The peasant does not spare any effort and does for his vineyard everything that can be done. Then it is said: “and he looked that it should bring forth grapes” (5.2). As we know, he was bitterly disappointed. But I will leave this aside and focus on his attitude. The formula is repeated
in the dialogue of reproach \( \text{rib} \) in which the wine-grower addresses the men in Judah: “wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?” (5.4). Finally, we are given the key of the parable: this peasant is nobody less than the God of Israel in His dealings with his chosen people: “He looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry” (5.7). The verb here translated by “look that, look for” \( \text{le-qawwoth} \) frequently means, in other contexts, “to hope.” In the former passages, other verbs were used. Micah said that God “requires” \( \text{li-sh’ol} \) something from man, i.e. justice, pity, humility. The Deuteronomy passage in the King James version has “to require” too, though for a different Hebrew word \( \text{li-drosh} \).

The difference between “expecting” and “asking” can be accounted for by the different identity of the addressee: God can talk to the people and tell him what he expects. But you simply cannot speak with a vineyard. Nevertheless, there is a common feature. What Isaiah stresses is that the wine-grower was not expecting something extraordinary. As a rule, a vine produces grapes and not, say, bananas. Growing grapes is what the vineyard spontaneously does, and the grapes should taste good provided the soil was well tilled, etc. It is the nature of plants to yield seed and fruit “after its kind \( \text{mîn} \)” (Gen. 1.11). This example enables us to draw a line between two kinds of actions.

Let us call them “asking” and “expecting.” We can ask a person to do something; we can expect from him that he will do something. In this second case, we hardly need to ask. At most, we can remind a person to do things: do not forget to do this or, more politely: I am sure that you will do that, etc. When we really must ask is when some behaviour is not natural, not spontaneous.

Even when God asks something from mankind, He only recalls what He expects from it.

To expect is what we do when we are facing the nature of something. Even when God addresses His people and gives commands, he is not looking forward to miracles, but to plain decency. This involves that good behaviour is somehow “natural” to mankind. As a matter of course, this does not mean that we spontaneously perform just actions,
without our having to go through a process of education, of self-im- 

provement, etc. This means that such behaviour is nothing more than 

the way in which mankind can reach its own fulfilment, by developing 

the features that make it specifically human up to their fullness.

A contrary behaviour would thwart the progress of mankind; it would 

even endanger its survival in the long run. Hence, Deuteronomy can 

make at the same time, almost in the same breath, two statements: 

(a) the choice between good and evil is not a trifle, what is at stake is 

ultimately life or death (30.15), and (b) the criterion of choice is “not 

hidden from thee, neither it is far off,” far-fetched, but “very nigh unto 

thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart” (30.11, 14). Curiously, this for-

mula echoes Seneca’s later words about conscience as the inner God: 

“God is near to you, with you, in you [prope est a te deus, tecum est, 

intus est]” (Letters to Lucilius (in Seneca 1965), 41.1–2).

A shift in the origin of norms

What the Pauline revolution achieved did not amount to simply cast-

ing away the yoke of the Law. What Paul did discard was the idea ac-

cording to which God has to dictate rules of conduct. Paul kept the 

idea of a set of rules, and even the idea of a divine origin of those rules, 

but he put the idea of a divine origin of norms at one further remove.

Norms are not dictated by God through the mediation of a Prophet at 

some point of history; they are inscribed in the “heart” of man (Rom. 

2.15). If I may bring to bear an anachronistic opposition, they do not 

belong to the realm of history, but to the realm of something like “na-

ture,” such as it was understood as God’s creation.

This has to be brought back to our memories, because the Pauline 

revolution was misunderstood by many, from the beginning, as if it 

boiled down to simply casting away the yoke of the commands. Now, 

the frequently levelled accusation of anomianism is hardly fair. Paul 

himself, probably, had coined the catchword that “everything is permit-

ted” [panta <moi> exestin]. He had to qualify it by adding a rider: “All 

things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient; all things are 

lawful to me, but all things edify not” (1 Cor. 10.23; see 6.12). “Eve-

rything is permitted” does not mean that the boundary between good

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and evil, between life and death is erased. This means that this limit is
not adequately expressed by the opposition of the permitted and the
forbidden. When we address children who have no idea of electricity,
we can take a short cut and say that it is forbidden to put one's fingers
into the electric outlet. What we really mean is that this is dangerous.
Some things are allowed because they are intrinsically good, whereas
some other ones are forbidden because they are intrinsically bad.

The basic idea is that God does not replace our judgment of the right
way to do things. No doubt, He sheds light upon it, He reminds us of
some basic principles, but He never dictates what is to be done.

What remained after Paul's razor was the basic survival kit of man-
kind. The content of this kit is already part of the seven commands
given to Noah and the ten given to Moses (Exod. 20.1–17). We could
even say that it is nothing more than the eternal Tao without which
mankind could not lead a human life or even, perhaps, could not live
tout court.

**Culture**

Those basic rules of decency are admittedly not enough for us to an-
swer the manifold questions that arise from human life in its personal
and social dimensions. This is obvious as for legal systems and political
organisation. This is all the more blatant if we think of the ways in
which human life can flourish in the different realms of higher culture,
which involves artistic creativity, religious imagination, care and con-
trol of the body, refinement of mores, etc.

About all this, Paul has nothing very much to say, barring some
elementary principles about the necessity of a government to which
obedience is due (Rom. 13.1). As for the other elements of culture,
Paul probably had some smattering of Greek popular literature and
philosophy. He can quote from Aratos (Acts 17.28), Epimenides (Tit.
1.12) and Menander (1 Cor. 15.33)—all stock-phrases, anyway. But
his writings betray scarcely any interest in those issues. Nevertheless,
the religious revolution he introduced had among its most lasting con-
sequences a new stance towards culture, not to say the birth of the very
idea of culture.
Why? Pauline Christianity lacks a definite content, it is empty, it produced a momentous ebb that left bare the whole realm of norms. Precisely for this reason, it had to fill itself with a content that it had to borrow from the outside. Christianity has to suck into itself what was already available on the market of civilizations. This is what it later did, first with Roman culture, i.e. the Roman system of law and of administration, together with what the Roman world already had borrowed from Greek scientific, literary, philosophic, etc. lore.

This brings me back to my first remark on things “Greek.” There is something like Greek culture only since the Pauline revolution. What undoubtedly existed previously was the Greek παιδεία (education, formation). It was a way of life. To be sure, παιδεία included what we call “culture,” i.e. literature and art, and even culture of the body; it was inseparably gymnastic and music, two pursuits that are, in Plato’s words, “sisters.” But the package included at the same time what we call “religion,” wherefore Plato is careful to sketch a “theology” too. This cult addressed the gods of the πόλις (city) or, later, of the κόσμος (world) as the Stoics experienced it and as it was mirrored in the Roman Empire. This cult was not palatable for Jews and, for that matter, not for Christians either.

We cannot capture the essence of the Pauline revolution by simply saying that it built a synthesis between the Greek and the Jewish by enabling the Greek element to enter the Christian synthesis. At the same time, it allowed the Greek element in culture to develop as such, i.e. while keeping its otherness with regard to the synthesis in which it entered without its melting away in it.

This enables me, let me say en passant, to build a bridge between the theses developed in my last book on divine law (Brague 2007b) and a previous book that I wrote more than ten years ago on nothing less than the essence of Western culture (Brague 2002). To cast the matter in the mold of the concepts that I coined there: “secondarity” towards Judaism enabled “secondarity” towards Hellenism; Greek culture could be “included” and not “digested.”

In conclusion, let me sum up my thesis: Paul’s revolution may have helped Rabbinic Judaism to shape itself indirectly. It certainly gave
birth directly to Christianity as a group different from Judaism. At
the same time, it produced indirectly Greek culture as an independent
entity. Paul was the father of at least two of the three groups that we
are concerned with.

Endnotes

1. *Pirqey Aboth* 6.2. For other examples, see Urbach 1979, 258, 295, 302, 427ff.
   On the context, see Pines 1984, 247–65, esp. 256–259; my translation in

2. See Ovid 2004, 7.20ff; Seneca 1965, 21.1; Epictetus 1898, 2.26.4; for Jewish
   literature, see Book of Secrets (1Q 27), 8–12 (García Martinez and Tigchelaar

3. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* A 804ff. / B 832ff. and Introduction to Vor-

4. *Tosefta Avoda Zara*, 8 (9), 4 and b Sanhedrin, 56a; see Zuckermandel 1970,

5. For further discussion, see Brague 2006.

6. See Plato, *Republic* 404b4–5; 379a5–6. On the Greek idea of culture, see
   Jaeger 1934.

7. More on “inclusion” and “digestion” in Brague 2000; French version in Brague

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