

Part IV

The Perfection of the Spheres

Throughout this book thus far, I have offered a comparison between the astronomical ideas of ancient (and some more modern) cultures outside of the West and contemporary ways of understanding celestial events. Although these contemporary understandings are not solely the domain of the West, much of the conceptual underpinning of these understandings *are* derived from Western thought. Astronomy today has become truly a global phenomenon—people working on the understanding of galaxies, supernovae, black holes, dark matter, and all kinds of other astronomical issues, come from countries around the world. Traditions that were once very separate, such as those of China, India, and Europe, now work on the same problems in the same ways, often working together. The European Space Agency recently sent a groundbreaking mission to study a comet, while the Indian Space Research Organization only months before put an orbiter around Mars. The China National Space Administration has also been involved in space exploration and scientific research, sending missions to the moon. All of the data gained on these various missions is used, interpreted, and understood using the same methods, the same tools, and the same background assumptions. Today, we might say that astronomy has become globalized, homogenized, and professionalized. Part of this, of course, is due to more general globalization, which has connected us all in ways we have never been connected before. But it is also undeniable that much of this globalization has been one way, as “Westernization.” Although the ancestry of contemporary astronomy is not limited to the West (a fact not often noted in histories of astronomy), a large part of its background originates in Western thought, and many of the philosophical assumptions underpinning the scientific focus of contemporary astronomy come from the West.

Every comparison is an investigation of different ways of understanding the world, no one of which has title to definitively claim itself as a representative of “the way things are.” Thus, when I have compared ancient and contemporary understandings of astronomical events in previous chapters, I have not attempted to do so from a place of comparing ancient thought against the background of

“the right view.” Rather, I have compared these ancient views with the ways that astronomers in the contemporary world think about these events. Are either of these the *true* understanding? This is impossible to say, given what we know (and do not know) about the universe in which we live. Every way of understanding the world comes with its own presuppositions, assumptions, and concerns. The accounts we build of the universe are not objectively better, or more complete, than those we have looked at from the ancient world. The contemporary story of astronomy is still a story, more or less significant and accurate in that it expresses to us some important aspect or element of the cosmos in which we live.

Thus, in this chapter I look at astronomy in the ancient and early Western world. I discuss some of the views and assumptions that have informed its astronomy and continue to inform our understanding of the cosmos today, even though they are often unrecognized. In the final section, I describe the ways in which the early Western views developed into what we know today as astronomy. Comparing ancient views with those of our modern understanding will reveal hidden assumptions and philosophical commitments.