

THE HARMONY OF THE COSMOS, THE SOUL,
AND SOCIETY IN PLATO

Joseph Milne

And the love, more especially, which is concerned with the good, and which is perfected in company with temperance and justice, whether among gods or men, has the greatest power, and is the source of all our happiness and harmony, and makes us friends with the gods who are above us, and with one another.¹

GREEK PHILOSOPHY EMERGED THROUGH SPECULATION on the cosmic myths that symbolically revealed the divine order of the universe. From these speculations on the cosmic order arose the various notions of the elements, the planetary motions and mathematics, and these notions were related to the question of the human order and the order of society.² It was understood that the human order was distinct from that of the immortal gods, yet also distinct from biological necessity. Human nature dwelled in a region between the immortal and the mortal, open to eternity yet projected into time, apprehending the unchanging yet compelled to adapt to the ever-changing. In the primordial myths the order of nature (*physis*) and human law (*nomos*) arose together and were bound together.³ The order of nature and the order of the city resided in the rule of the gods, and this order could be observed in the harmony and proportion found throughout the Earth and the heavenly motions. The cosmos was filled with intelligence and with reason (*nous*), and every part and every motion attended the good of the whole.

In the myth of the Golden Age the human realm and the divine realm lived in perfect harmony. For example, in Hesiod we read:

The gods, who live on Mount Olympus, first
Fashioned a golden race of mortal men;
These lived in the reign of Kronos, king of heaven,
And like the gods they lived with happy hearts
Untouched by work or sorrow. Vile old age
Never appeared, but always lively-limbed,
Far from all ills, they feasted happily.
Death came to them as sleep, and all good things

Were theirs; ungrudgingly, the fertile land
 Gave up her fruits unasked. Happy to be
 At peace, they lived with every want supplied,
 [Rich in their flocks, dear to the blessed gods.]
 And then this race was hidden in the ground.
 But still they live as spirits of the earth,
 Holy and good, guardians who keep off harm,
 Givers of wealth: this kingly right is theirs.⁴

In the *Laws* Plato alludes to that ancient age in which Kronos ‘set up at that time kings and rulers within our cities – not human beings but demons, members of a more divine and better species... They provided peace and awe and good laws and justice without stint’.⁵ Yet this could not endure, and men began to devise their own laws, forgetting the gods and breaking the bond between the eternal and the temporal. The visible, temporal world may at best embody the divine pattern, and be regulated by it, and laws ought to be made as like as possible to the age of Kronos.⁶ This distinction drawn between the eternal and the temporal realms becomes the birthplace of philosophical enquiry because the distinction arouses a part of the soul that seeks reconciliation between the eternal and temporal orders of truth. The eternal realm beckons the soul, which finds itself dwelling between the two orders, to enquire into the truth of things for its own sake, as an end in itself. But once this yearning for truth is born, the mythological symbols of reality no longer suffice. They were born from primordial intuition, a form of knowing the essentially true at a single stroke but which is not yet reflective upon itself. The desire to *understand* this truth, beyond simply assenting to it, is the birth of philosophy.

In this way, Greek philosophy originated in meditation on cosmic myth, the primordial apprehension of the whole, with a view to affirming its truth through reason. And this meditation takes the form of the question: how may the human being and society live in accord with the cosmic good? What is the appropriate life of the human person or citizen? It is at once a rational and a religious question. For the Greek philosophers, questions of the explanation of things are secondary to this essential question that awakens questioning in the first place. Philosophical enquiry is not a precursor to the scientific explanation of things, because explanation is not a final end in itself, while the question of how should life be lived is. And so Greek philosophy, even in its weaker or degenerate forms, for example, with the sophists whom Plato frequently challenges in the dialogues,

always remains concerned with the relation of the divine cosmic order and the order of society or the *polis*.⁷ The *polis* and the cosmos are bound together, just as the *polis* and the soul are bound together. Greek society drifted into political decline as it forsook these connections. Thus Voegelin writes:

In their acts of resistance to the disorder of the age, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle experienced and explored the movements of a force that structured the *psyche* of man and enabled it to resist disorder. To this force, its movements, and the resulting structure, they gave the name *nous*. As far as the ordering structure of his humanity is concerned, Aristotle characterized man as the *zoon noun echon*, as the living being that possesses nous.⁸

And it is with a view to restoring these connections that Plato and Aristotle enquired into the nature of the *polis* and the question of the relation between nature (*physis*) and law (*nomos*). Thus Heraclitus says ‘Those who speak with understanding must hold fast to what is common to all as a city holds fast to its law (*nomos*), and even more strongly. For all human laws (*anthropeoi nomoi*) are fed by the one divine law (*theois nomos*). It prevails as much as it will, and suffices for all things with something to spare’.⁹ Hence the nature of the *polis* and the divine law that sustains it cannot be separated without causing harm.

Neither Plato nor Aristotle abandon the gods nor the mythic symbols from which Greek philosophy was born.¹⁰ This may be seen in their insistence that virtue and knowledge are bound together and that only the virtuous soul may contemplate the truth of things and live in accord with nature. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, for example, Aristotle writes that the contemplative life is the happiest, as it is the life and activity of the gods:

For the gods, the whole of life is blessed, and for human beings it is so to the extent that there is some likeness to such a way of being-at-work; but none of the other animals is happy since they do not share in contemplation at all. So happiness extends as far as contemplation does, and the more it belongs to any being to contemplate, the more it belongs to them to be happy, not incidentally but as a result of contemplating since this is worthwhile in itself.¹¹

Coming at the close of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in Book 10, it is clear that it is only those who follow a noble life of virtue and excellence have the capacity to participate in the contemplative life. Contemplative knowledge is a kind of living

alignment with truth, and this is possible only in the soul of the virtuous person who has self-mastery. In the human realm this relation between knowledge and virtue is the first harmony, the harmony where the soul comes into accord with itself and with the divine order of things. Plato elaborates on this in the *Timaeus*:

God invented and gave us sight to the end that we might behold the courses of intelligence in the heaven, and apply them to the courses of our own intelligence which are akin to them, the unperturbed to the perturbed; and that we, learning them and partaking of the natural truth of reason, might imitate the absolutely unerring courses of God and regulate our own vagaries . . . Moreover, so much of music as is adapted to the sound of the voice and to the sense of hearing is granted to us for the sake of harmony; and harmony, which has motions akin to the revolutions of our souls, is not regarded by the intelligent votary of the Muses as given by them with a view to irrational pleasure, which is deemed to be the purpose of it in our day, but as meant to correct any discord which may have arisen in the courses of the soul, and to be our ally in bringing her into harmony and agreement with herself; and rhythm too was given by them for the same reason, on account of the irregular and graceless ways which prevail among mankind generally, and to help us against them.¹²

Yet for the soul to come into this accord remains a calling, something to be worked towards and not something simply given, even though it is the proper end or *telos* of human nature.

In the cosmic myths the relationship between the cosmic order and the ethical is implicit, because truth and falsehood, and justice and injustice are bound together in action, just as in Greek drama.¹³ But once the true and the just can be abstractly or metaphysically distinguished from one another, then their necessary unity comes into peril. It requires deep philosophical reflection to understand how they are ultimately bound together and originate from the Good. Thus Plato writes: 'Therefore, say that what provides the truth of the things known and gives the power to the one who knows, is the *idea* of the good'.¹⁴ It is for this reason that Plato is always asking questions about the essence of things. For it is, according to Plato, only through knowing the essence of a thing that one can see how it originates in the good. Likewise, the convergence of the true and the just in the order of things is the ground of the original harmony that extends into the cosmic order and into every particular being.¹⁵ Thus Apollo presides over law

and the celestial song of the Muses and over healing through his son Asclepius. The bringer of order is also the bringer of law and healing. Plato often likens the art of the lawmaker to that of the physician.¹⁶

For example, while speaking of how people desire only laws that will please them the Athenian Stranger says ‘Such a provision is in opposition to the common notion that the lawgiver should make only such laws as the people like; but we say that he should rather be like a physician, prepared to effect a cure even at the cost of considerable suffering’.¹⁷ Also *Gorgias* draws a comparison between the physician and the judge in administering justice, one curing the body, the other the soul.¹⁸ Again in the *Laws* Plato sees judicial penalty as aiming to restore the soul rather than merely causing it to suffer the consequences of injustice.¹⁹ In *Laws* we also read: ‘This, then – the knowledge of the natures and habits of souls – is one of the things that is of the greatest use for the art whose business it is to care for souls. And we assert (I think) that that art is politics. Or what?’²⁰ In the *Republic* Plato draws a direct analogy between health and sickness and justice and injustice, arguing that sickness and injustice are alike contrary to nature, while health and justice are according to nature.²¹ Or as Brill observes: ‘Plato’s infamous employment of the language of medicine to characterize the work of the laws, language which we have seen play a critical role in the *Republic*, is in part a function of his focus upon the condition of the soul of the citizen. This is to say that Plato’s therapeutic conception of law is inextricably linked to his psychology... Plato thus allots a dual educative/therapeutic function to the law’.²²

Thus the step from the primordial mythic apprehension of the cosmos to the reflective philosophical understanding of the truth of things, which took place in classical Greece after the age of Homer, also brings reason into reflection upon itself. This raises the question of the capacity of human intelligence to know the truth of things, and so the soul is brought into self-reflection and self-examination. Self-knowledge, knowledge of nature (*physis*), and divine knowledge reveal themselves as distinct orders of knowledge and yet bound together. We can see this most clearly wherever Plato raises the question of justice. Those who cannot or will not truthfully observe themselves, such as Thrasymachus, who in the *Republic* argues that justice is rule by the strongest for their own benefit and gives up and leaves the discussion once his argument does not stand up to scrutiny, or Meno who likewise sees virtue as doing what is to one’s advantage and harmful to one’s enemies, cannot grasp the true nature of justice.²³ They conceive the just or the good only as what is advantageous to themselves. They cannot consider justice in itself as it belongs to the right relation of all things with one another,

or as belonging to the harmony of the soul. Justice for Plato signifies more than anything else the great harmony that is of the essence of all things. So to conceive justice as privately advantageous is not only to mistake the nature of justice but also to divide the human individual off from the *polis*, and the *polis* from the cosmos. Civil fragmentation or factionalism is one of the perils of the step from the holistic mythic apprehension of the world and the human situation to the reflective philosophical apprehension of things.²⁴ There is an ever-present danger of losing the sense of the whole that belongs to the mythic and cosmic symbolism.²⁵ In philosophical reflection, reason must trace a path towards the whole from the particular, and from the immanent to the transcendent, as, for example, in the allegory of the cave in the *Republic*²⁶ or the ascent to the Beautiful in the *Symposium*.²⁷

Plato draws upon the earlier philosophers, as well as the poets, for the themes that occupy his dialogues. With some he draws out further what they express only tersely, for example, Heraclitus and Parmenides while others he strongly disputes, such as the Sophists Gorgias and Meno.²⁸ The great question that distinguishes these different interlocutors lies in the understanding of the relation of language (*logos*) to the truth (*aletheia*) of things. Speech may be divinely uttered and inspired or deviously uttered for private advantage, giving birth either to order and friendship, or to chaos and tyranny. For Plato there is a correspondence between words uttered and the truth of things, expressed in the word *logos* itself which means at once language and reason or intelligence. To 'speak truthfully' is possible either by divine inspiration, as with poetic frenzy, or where the soul is in harmony with itself and perceives the true order of things and can speak their right names.²⁹ Such speech arises from reverence for truth or piety and is profitable to all. The Sophists have separated speech from the *logos* of things through false employment of rhetoric. For the Sophists the art of speech is nothing else than the art of persuasion. They taught this art to those seeking a successful political career. In this sense the Sophists are utilitarian and pragmatic. But to reduce rhetoric merely to the art of persuasion divorces the *logos* from truth and from virtue.³⁰

There is, however, a middle place between true Platonic speech and sophistic speech, and this is *doxa* or opinion. *Doxa* is opinion held without proper enquiry or reflection, or views believed on hearsay.³¹ Such opinions may indeed be true, or a mixture of true and false. For Plato and for Aristotle common opinion is insufficient to establish either the truth of things or the good life. This applies as much to opinions about the gods, nature or politics as it does about everyday things.

The examination of common opinions plays a major role in the dialogues of Plato. Aristotle also will often begin his examination of a topic with a statement of what people generally believe. There is a strong dialectical element in his *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* which, like Plato, seeks a path from what seems to be true to what is actually true.³² Since this involves an examination of the premises or presuppositions of one's own thought it also demands self-examination and honesty, because the aim is not to establish a new opinion or *doxa* but to come into a transformed relationship with truth, to harmonise the soul with the nature and intelligent order of things.

For Plato the problem of the truth of things does not lie in correct or incorrect theories or doctrines, or in true or false statements, but in bringing the soul into a right disposition towards truth, ethically as well as intellectually. It may only be open towards it or closed towards it. Paradoxically, the soul is closer to truth by a recognition of its *not knowing*, as we see in Socrates' insistence in *Apology* that "I do not think I know what I do not know".³³ The urge for certainty can be an obstacle because it tends to reduce truth to mere propositions. What the philosopher seeks to accomplish is to bring the soul into harmony with itself and with the cosmic or heavenly order, as in *Timaeus* 47C.

That passage in the *Timaeus* alludes to the Pythagorean concept of the 'music of the spheres' in which the motions of the heavens form a choir of divine music, which only few can hear, and which regulates the universe in perfect proportion and symmetry, described in detail at *Timaeus* 35-37.³⁴ It is a symbolic idea, not to be taken literally, embodying an understanding of the universe governed entirely by intelligent order – not as imposed upon it from outside, but as its own living intelligence. Because it is intelligent harmony it is akin to the human soul when it is brought into its own proper order.³⁵ From this comes the tradition of the soul as a 'microcosm', containing within itself the same intelligence and beauty as the 'macrocosm'. The soul is not to be understood as a mere replica of the macrocosm, but as participating in the same intelligence, just as different living creatures participate in the same life. Intelligence and life are universals, just as the 'numbers' discerned in the music of the spheres are universals. Plato took 'number' very seriously and the study of mathematics played a major part in the Academy. The 'mathematical' is a type of learning or knowledge that shows itself as self-evident, as Plato demonstrates in the *Meno* with the slave who could solve a geometrical problem without any prior knowledge.³⁶ Nevertheless, the question of the real nature or essence of number remains a profound mystery, even though it manifests everywhere in the forms, symmetry, rhythms and cycles of nature.

But this passage from the *Timaeus* refers to an order of another kind, in which the soul is brought into accord with itself through the virtues. If the soul is to truly govern itself, as the cosmos does, then its various powers must be coordinated, and this is the work of the virtues. The virtue of temperance brings the *appetitive*, the *spirited*, and the *rational* parts of the soul into concord, with reason ruling.³⁷ But this virtue comes about through the cultivation of the virtues of *phronesis* (right judgement), courage and justice. For Plato, as for Aristotle also, ethics is not based on moral principles but on the virtues, which are states of the soul being at work or in action. The virtues are like skills. Temperance refers to the inner order of the soul, while the other virtues refer to its relationship with the world while maintaining its inner order. In the *Republic* and the *Laws* Plato assigns to the cultivation of the virtues the principle concern of education, not only for the sake of each individual but also because only virtuous souls can truly become citizens and live in harmony and friendship. For Plato citizenship and friendship are practically identical, since friendship and citizenship are sustained by a common love of excellence and justice.³⁸ Friendship is the proper proportion of the *polis*, resembling the cosmic order and the law of the gods. Plato speaks of this in the *Gorgias*:

Now philosophers tell us Callicles, that communion and friendship and orderliness and temperance and justice bind together heaven and earth and gods and men, and that this universe is therefore called Cosmos or order.³⁹

This passage demonstrates how for Plato the understanding of ‘order’ always bears an ethical meaning, and so the order of the cosmos is at once a proportional and virtuous order. Likewise, the proper relation between gods and men is at once proportionate, just and temperate. We find the same idea in Plato’s *Laws* when discussing the ends the lawmaker must seek to attain: ‘When we asserted one should look toward moderation, or prudence (*phronesis*), or friendship, these goals are not different but the same’.⁴⁰ This connection of the proportionate and the virtuous in the order of nature passes down through the Stoics, Neoplatonists, the Christian Fathers, and through to the High Middle Ages where it is given full expression by Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica*.⁴¹ There is a particular word, *homonoia*, which bears this special sense. It is made up of Greek prefix *homo-*, which means ‘alike’ or ‘same’ and *nous* which means ‘mind’ or ‘understanding’ or ‘insight’. So *homonoia* means to be ‘like-minded’ or of common understanding or agreement. Its opposite is *stasis*, ‘internal division’, which in the political sense

means ‘civil war’ or ‘factionalism’. For Plato these words are strongly connected with justice and injustice. Justice is a form of harmony and right proportion, while injustice is a form of discord and disproportion. This is clear in *Republic* Book I:

Injustice, Thrasymachus, causes civil war [*stasis*], hatred and fighting among themselves, while justice brings friendship and a sense of common purpose [*homonoia*]. Isn't that so?

Let it be so, in order not to disagree with you.

You're still doing well on that front. So tell me this: If the effect of injustice is to produce hatred wherever it occurs, then, whenever it arises, whether among free men or slaves, won't it cause them to hate one another, engage in civil war [*stasis*], and prevent them from achieving a sense of common purpose [*homonoia*]?

Certainly.

What if it arises between two people? Won't they be at odds, hate each other, and be enemies to one another and to just people?

They will.

Does injustice lose its power to cause dissension when it arises within a single individual, or will it preserve it intact?

Let it preserve it intact.

Apparently, then, injustice has the power, first, to make whatever it arises in — whether in a city, a family, an army, or anything else — incapable of achieving anything as a unit, because of the civil wars [*stasiizonta*] and differences it creates, and, second, it makes that unit an enemy to itself and to what is in every way its opposite, namely, justice. Isn't that so?

And even in a single individual, it has by its nature the very same effect. First, it makes him incapable of achieving anything, because he is in a state of civil war [*stasis*] and not of one mind [*homonoia*]; second, it makes him his own enemy, as well as the enemy of just people.

Hasn't it that effect?

Yes.⁴²

This discussion is an attempt to refute the Sophist position that justice is not a universal principle and that injustice for the individual may be advantageous. If each individual seeks their own advantage, the Sophist holds, then somehow all will gain and justice is superfluous. The Sophist cannot see that strife between the different parts of the individual soul will follow from any form of injustice, internal or external. For Plato the individual soul cannot be broken off from the universal order without harming itself. Hence justice has the peculiar quality of being at once a principle (*arche*) ordering nature as a whole and an active state of being of the just person. For Plato only the just person really knows the nature of justice. Or the nature of justice is known only in its active performance.

As we observed at the outset, Plato is seeking to articulate in philosophy what was previously evident in myth where the gods presided over the cosmic order and in every particular down to the smallest detail. Thus ‘cosmos’ and ‘law’ were practically identical, as is clear in the passage from *Gorgias* above. But with the rise of early philosophy, which began to consider the cosmic order in rational rather than in mythic terms,⁴³ there also arose various forms of agnosticism, especially with the Sophists. Here two words already discussed become especially important: *physis* (nature) and *nomos* (law). Originally these two words formed a single concept, as may be seen in Heraclitus’ fragment B 114:

Thou who speak with the intellect [*xyn nooi*] must strengthen themselves with that which is common [*xynoi*] to all, as the polis does with the law [*nomos*], and more strongly so. For all human laws [*anthropeioi nomoi*] nourish themselves from the divine law [*theios nomos*] which governs as far as it will, and suffices for all things, and more than suffices.⁴⁴

For Heraclitus to speak of the divine law (*theios nomos*) is to speak of law that ‘suffices for all things’, including the laws of the *polis* that ‘nourish themselves from the divine law’, and there is no appearance of *physis* as separate from *nomos*. Nature and law are bound together. And the *polis* likewise comes into being through *nomos*, since human laws take their existence from the same divine law that governs all things. The human citizen, by definition, is the being that reflects and deliberates on law, or on justice and injustice.⁴⁵ That is the original philosophical understanding. But later *physis* began to be conceived as separate from divinity and *nomos* and then the notion arose that human laws (*anthropeioi nomoi*) derived neither from divine law (*theios nomos*) nor from *physis*.⁴⁶ Rather, human law began to be conceived as merely conventional, differing from city to

city, with no ground in *physis*. Thus arose the notion that individuals could follow their own nature (*physis*) and ignore the laws of the *polis*. And since the laws of the *polis* existed only by convention, the Sophists believed that no harm could come to them through disobeying them, at least in private if not in public. From this arose the further notion that the laws of the *polis* were made by the strongest and that justice was nothing else than the rule of the strong over the weak.⁴⁷

While the Sophists could argue private advantage with this teaching, for Plato it indicated the decline of Athens and the destruction of citizenship.⁴⁸ But it also indicated, on a more profound level, the loss of the symbolic understanding of the order of the cosmos as revealed through the myths of the gods. The loss of knowledge of the *divine order* signified the fragmentation of the *human order*. Thus for Plato *homonoia*, *physis*, and *nomos* form a single complex, and it is the challenge of human reason to grasp this. We find the same insight articulated centuries later by Cicero: 'But those who have reason in common also have right reason in common. Since that is law, we men must also be reckoned to be associated with the gods in law. But further, those who have these things in common must be held to belong to the same state (*civitas*)'.⁴⁹ The citizen comes into being through *homonoia*, oneness of mind, agreement on a common purpose. Human reason is rooted in cosmic reason. The flourishing of the *polis* depends upon this grounding of the soul in the universal order and unity of *physis* and *nomos*.

One remarkable way in which Plato conceives the proportionate ordering of the *polis* in the *Laws*⁵⁰ is to limit the population to 5,040 households or extended families. The land for such a city should be large enough to support its population moderately, without excess, yet sufficient for defence against injustice from neighbouring cities, and strong enough to aid neighbours if they suffer injustices. The number 5,040 has exactly 60 divisors, counting itself and 1, and also is the sum of 42 consecutive primes. It therefore lends itself to complex proportionate divisions of functions of the population. This is not the place to elaborate on the special characteristics of this number. But the notion of a *natural size* of a self-sufficient *polis* which accords with the fertility of the land, the natural division of the human crafts and due administration of law, education and religious rites, and is of sufficient strength to have good relations with neighbouring cities, indicates that the human person naturally belongs to society. In his study of Plato's *Republic* Voegelin writes: 'Human nature is conceived as dispersed in variants over a multitude of human beings, so that only a group as a whole will embody the fullness of the nature. Order in society would then mean the harmonisation of the various types in correct super- and subordination'.⁵¹ There is a final argument

that gives the natural size of the *polis* strong support. Such a *polis* is of a size where all citizens may know one another and be friends, and this is conducive of virtue:

There is no greater good for a city than that its inhabitants be well known to one another; for where men's characters are obscured from one another by the dark instead of being visible in the light, no one ever obtains in a correct way the honour he deserves, either in terms of office or justice. Above everything else, every man in every city must strive to avoid deceit on every occasion and to appear always in simple fashion, as he truly is – and, at the same time, to prevent other such men from deceiving him.⁵²

Friendship emerges yet again as a principle of harmony promoting justice, openness and honesty. Human happiness is not attained through amassing wealth or by taking advantage of fellow citizens or of other cities or nations. For Plato the economic aspect of the city belongs to the realm of necessity and is therefore the least dignified of human concerns. The regulation of the population to 5,040 where each household has equal land to support itself, maintained by a prohibition on selling its land, removes the need for competition or opportunity for exploitation and frees all citizens to pursue the arts, learning and culture. Plato introduces another mathematical proportion, suggesting that the difference in wealth between citizens should never be more than ten times, and so the realm of necessity does not become an occasion for strife. Indeed, Plato says the earth must be acknowledged and honoured as the mother and sustainer of all living beings and must never be abused. There is a natural apportionment in which things ought to be honoured:

We say, then, that the likelihood is that if a city is to be preserved and is to become happy within the limits of human power, it must necessarily apportion honours and dishonours correctly. The correct apportionment is one which honours most the good things pertaining to the soul (provided it has moderation), second, to the beautiful and good things pertaining to the body, and third, the things said to accrue from property and money. If some lawgiver or city steps outside this ranking either by promoting money to a position of honour or by raising one of the lesser things to a more honourable status, he will do a deed that is neither pious nor statesmanlike.⁵³

This apportionment of honours corresponds with the cosmic hierarchy, where the divine intelligence descends through the orders of nature, ruling things justly and according to their proper ends. In Book X of the *Laws* Plato disputes the Sophist view that denies this divine hierarchy and holds that things come into being instead by nature, by art and by chance.⁵⁴ This view separates *physis* and *nomos* where the laws of cities are held to be arbitrary conventions devised by art. It conceives of intelligence coming into being last in the order of things, rather than first since nature (*physis*) here signifies only blind necessity. This view brings the gods into dispute, or at least their origin. For if the universe came into being through blind necessity, then the gods can be neither wise nor beneficent to the cosmos, the city or the soul, but will themselves be ruled by blind necessity.

From this state of affairs there arise various positions in relation to the gods: (a) that they do not exist, (b) they exist but care nothing for humanity, and (c) they exist and may be bribed into granting human desires. These positions derive from the belief that the gods came into being after the elements and the heavens, and that 'intelligence' is an incidental or chance product of nature (*physis*), and so all human laws and institutions have no ground in the cosmic order and exist only by human invention. It is a consequence of separating *physis* and *nomos*. It reduces *physis* to a mere *mechanism*, and *nomos* to arbitrary invention, and removes intelligence and justice from the cosmos – rendering it no longer a *cosmos*.

Plato devotes the whole of Book 10 of the *Laws* to this question, and how reasoned argument can overcome this false interpretation of the order of things. It is here where we can see most clearly how Plato is concerned to recover philosophically what has been lost or corrupted in the understanding of cosmic myth. The truth of the ancient myths is no longer intelligible to the Athenians. The symbols that once communicated the presence of the divine intelligence in all things, and in the art of law-making, no longer reveal their meaning. If indeed the universe is ordered by blind mechanism rather than divine intelligence, then there is no basis to cosmic justice or justice in civilisation. There is no ground for preferring a virtuous life to the opposite. And even if the mechanisms of nature may be discerned through empirical investigation and calculation, they will have no intelligible purpose or end. What emerges is a universe with no *telos*, where things exist without meaning. Enquiry into such a universe itself has no meaning.

There is, however, an alternative approach that Plato takes to the question of the order and harmony of things. This is through *kallos*, beauty. All that is truthful, harmonious, or virtuous appeals not only to the rational part of the soul but also to *eros*, the love of beauty. But just as reason can go astray with sophistry, so

likewise *eros* can go astray by identifying beauty with particular objects. In the final speech in the *Symposium*, Socrates reports a discourse he had with Diotima on the ascent of *eros* from temporal things to eternal Beauty. In the *Phaedrus* Plato demonstrates that, whatever we behold here on earth as beautiful, moves the soul to a great passion because it is reminded of Absolute Beauty which it once beheld before coming into the human body.⁵⁵ This great passion is *eros*, which desires at once to unite with and to create beautiful things. In the earthly sense it is the desire for bodily generation, which is to attain a kind of immortality. But what *eros* truly desires is not particular instances of beauty in temporal things, but the Beautiful itself which is eternal and the source of all beauty. What the soul most desires is to give birth to the beautiful within itself, to become that divine Beauty. Thus whenever it beholds the beauty of goodness, it desires to become good, or in beholding the beauty of justice it desires to become just, or in beholding the beauty of wisdom it desires to become wise. It desires both to unite with these beautiful things and to give birth to them. For Plato truth is always associated with beauty, and beauty always associated with goodness, and so the true and the beautiful give birth to virtue in the soul.

One of the great questions of philosophy is: how is truth known to be truth? One of Plato's answers is that the soul *recognises* truth whenever it presents itself. It is an act of *anamnesis*, remembering. This is what occurs with the slave in the *Meno* discussed earlier. In myth this is the goddess *Mnemosyne*, mother of the Nine Muses. Since the intelligence of the soul corresponds with the universal intelligence, or with the 'rational motions of the heavens' as described in the *Timaeus*, it responds through kinship with the universal intelligence. Or, as Aristotle says in the opening of *Metaphysics*, 'All human beings by nature stretch themselves out towards knowing',⁵⁶ just as he says in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the senses are oriented towards what is best or most beautiful: '. . . since every one of the senses is at work in relation to something perceptible, and is completely at work when it is in its best condition and directed towards the most beautiful of the things perceptible by that sense'.⁵⁷ This is the ground of reason, and why it is drawn towards truth, with the senses directed to the same end.

For Plato it is the same with *eros*, love. *Eros* is the ground of all the different kinds of love, and the root of all desire or yearning. It seeks to unite with divine Beauty, and this is the reason why the soul is moved whenever it is struck by anything beautiful. But in order for it to arrive where it desires to be, it must learn to distinguish between particular instances of beauty and Beauty itself. In the *Symposium* Diotima explains to *Socrates* how, upon seeing the beauty of one

beautiful body, the soul must learn to see that it is the same beauty present in every beautiful body.⁵⁸ The same procedure must be followed with the virtues, and with institutions, and with laws, moving each time from the particular instances of beauty to the universal, until it finally arrives at Beauty itself which has no form, but which gives to all beautiful things their form.

It is clear that Plato understands that the truth of things, or goodness or beauty, can be known only through the ascent of the mind from the temporal realm to the eternal. The soul is by nature open to eternity. This is what defines the soul as dwelling between the mortal and the immortal. If it judges or measures only by the temporal or finite, then it will never arrive where it seeks to be and will have only relative or contingent knowledge, or at best what Plato calls 'right opinion'. In many ways, this principle may be demonstrated. For example, we only know the finite by an intuitive reference to the infinite. Yet the infinite is never visible. Or we recognise the imperfect because we have an intuitive knowledge of the perfect. Yet the perfect is never visible. Likewise with justice or goodness. But also there is a kind of 'poetic frenzy' that embraces the divine, where the mind goes out of itself in giving birth to beauty:

If anyone comes to the gates of poetry and expects to become an adequate poet by acquiring expert knowledge of the subject without the Muses' madness, he will fail, and his self-controlled verses will be eclipsed by the poetry of men who have been driven out of their minds.⁵⁹

By the constant reference to the eternal or the transcendent, Plato opens the door to a philosophical understanding of what was previously established through cosmic myths and the gods. Yet, as is clear in Book X of the *Laws*, piety towards the gods remains essential if the harmony of the *polis* is to be maintained. The proper life of the city, which brings harmony to the soul, is possible only so far as the civil laws derive from the harmonious order of the universe permeated by divine intelligence. It is this divine intelligence that manifests in number and proportion everywhere, and in the providential laws that nourish life and draw human intelligence, through awakening *eros*, towards the contemplation of truth.

NOTES

1. Plato, *Symposium*, 188a, in *The Dialogues of Plato*, translated by B. Jowett, Volume I (New York: Random House, 1937).

2. In Book 1 Chapter 3 of *Metaphysics* Aristotle gives a wide-ranging account of

how the ancient thinkers conceived the origin and order of things, both of how the gods brought things into being and later how they conceived various elements, such as air, fire or water, as being the origin of things. In Chapters 4 and 5 he recounts how Hesiod, Parmenides, Empedocles and Anaxagoras conceived things coming into being in various ways. In Chapter 6 he gives an account of how Plato, following the lead of all these previous thinkers, sought to give more precise definitions of things, and that there was a distinction to be drawn between sensible changeable things and their forms and numbers which do not change, here drawing upon the Pythagoreans. For a penetrating study of the political and philosophical conditions of Athens that Plato confronts and seeks to remedy see Eric Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle, Order and History*, Volume III, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000). For an excellent introduction to the emergence of philosophy in Greece see H. and H.A. Frankfort; John Wilson and Thorkild Jacobson, *Before Philosophy* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1973). See also Alexander P.D. Mourelatos, *The Presocratics: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974).

3. See Frankfort, *Before Philosophy*, Chapter VIII, pp. 248-62 for an account of how Greek poetry and myth were transformed into philosophy. See also Martin Heidegger *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 13-17 for an account of the original meaning of *physis* in Greek thought.

4. Hesiod, *Works and Days*, translated by Dorothea Wender (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1979), pp. 62-63, lines 108-130.

5. Plato, *The Laws of Plato*, translated by Thomas Pangle (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 713c.

6. Plato, *Laws*, 714a.

7. The word *polis* has no exact English equivalent and is often misleadingly translated as 'city' or 'city-state'. In Classical Greece it meant a self-ruling people, where every citizen took part in the political rule of the community, including the making of laws. In the opening of his *Politics* Aristotle describes the *polis* as the coming together of the family, the village and the agricultural community into a single 'natural' society, the kind of society that human nature is inherently inclined towards, embracing the common good through rational discourse, able to sustain itself without the need of external trade, and strong enough to defend itself. Its aim is to live virtuously and nobly. In the discussion of the founding of Magnesia in the *Laws* Plato likewise sees the *polis* as self-sufficient and even having a natural limit of 5,040 households.

8. Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), p. 59. For an account of Socrates' and Plato's challenge to political corruption that prevailed in Athens, see Melissa Lane, *The Birth of Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), Chapter 4.

9. Heraclitus, Fragment B 114, quoted from Max Hamburger, *The Awakening of Western Legal Thought*, translated by Bernard Mial (New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1969) p. 9, with Greek terms inserted as given by Voegelin in *Anamnesis*, p. 59.

10. Every society has its founding myths and associated symbols, even a modern secular society, such as symbols of justice, liberty or sovereignty. Such symbols are also part of the social narrative or history through which a community identifies itself. A contemporary illustrative narrative is the materialist myth of progress, with its symbols of mastery over nature, an atheist narrative such as Plato critiques in *Laws* Book 10. In the dialogues, Plato often refers to or calls upon the presiding gods, even when speaking abstractly about justice, education or an art. Most dialogues begin with or imply a dedication to one of the

gods or take place on a journey to a sacred shrine, as for example, in the *Laws* where the Athenian Stranger and his companions Kleinias and Megillus discourse on their way to the shrine of Zeus, or the opening of the *Republic* where Socrates goes with Glaucon to say a prayer to the goddess Bendis.

11. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* translated by Joe Sachs (Newbury MA: Focus Publishing, 2002), Book 10 1178b.

12. Plato, *Timaues* 47d.

13. For a full study of Plato's understanding of the connection between cosmic order and virtue as exemplified in the *Timaues* and *Critias* see T. K Johansen, *Plato's Natural Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

14. Plato, *Republic*, translated by Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 508e.

15. See *Laws* Book 10.

16. For example, in *Laws* 684c while speaking of how people desire only laws that will please them, the Athenian Stranger says 'Such a provision is in opposition to the common notion that the lawgiver should make only such laws as the people like; but we say that he should rather be like a physician, prepared to effect a cure even at the cost of considerable suffering'. Also *Gorgias* 478-79 draws a comparison between the physician and the judge in administering justice, one curing the body, the other the soul. Again in the *Laws* 728b Plato sees judicial penalty as aiming to restore the soul rather than merely causing it to suffer the consequences of injustice. In *Laws* 650b we read: 'This, then – the knowledge of the natures and habits of souls – is one of the things that is of the greatest use for the art whose business it is to care for souls. And we assert (I think) that that art is politics. Or what?' In *Republic* 444c-e Plato draws a direct analogy between health and sickness and justice injustice, arguing that sickness and injustice are alike contrary to nature, while health and justice are according to nature.

17. Plato, *Laws*, 684c.

18. Plato, *Gorgias*, 478-79 in *The Dialogues of Plato*, translated by B. Jowett, Volume I (New York: Random House, 1937).

19. Plato, *Laws*, 728b.

20. Plato, *Laws*, 650b.

21. Plato, *Republic*, 444c-e.

22. Sara Brill, *Plato and the Limits of Human Life* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), pp. 168-69 and 173.

23. Plato, *Republic*, 337c; Plato, *Meno*, 71e in Jowett, *The Dialogues of Plato*.

24. For a detailed discussion of the break from myth and the transition to philosophy in Athens see Eric Voegelin *The World of the Polis, Order and History*, Volume II (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), Chapter 6, 'The Break with Myth'.

25. On the place of myth and symbol in any society Ricoeur observes 'The first function of the myths of evil is to embrace mankind as a whole in one ideal history. By means of a time that represents all times, 'man' is manifested as a concrete universal; Adam signifies man. 'In' Adam, says Saint Paul, we have all sinned. Thus experience escapes its singularity; it is transmuted in its own 'archetype'. Through the figure of the hero, the ancestor, the Titan, the first man, the demigod, experience is put on the track of existential structures: one can now say man, existence, human being, because in the myth the human type is recapitulated, summed up. See Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 162. Also see Ford Russel, *Northrop Frye on Myth* (New York: Routledge, 1998), Chapter 14, 'Ricoeur and Frye on Myth'.

26. Plato, *Republic*, 514a-520a.

27. Plato, *Symposium* 201d-207a.

28. For a valuable historical and philosophical discussion of the relation of Parmenides and Heraclitus to Plato See Voegelin, *The World of the Polis*, Chapters 8 and 9, and for the Sophists see Chapter 11. See also Mourelatos *The Presocratics*.

29. For frenzy see, for example, Plato's *Phaedrus*.

30. For a valuable discussion of Plato's views on the Sophists see the 'Introduction' in Joe Sachs, *Socrates and the Sophists: Plato's Protagoras, Euthydemus, Hippias Major and Cratylus* (Indianapolis, IN: Focus Publishing, 2011).

31. See, for example, *Laws* 899d-902c on false or misguided opinions about the gods. For a detailed discussion of the special meaning of *doxa* in *Parmenides* and the shaping of Plato's philosophy of being see Voegelin *The World of the Polis* Chapter 8, especially p. 285ff.

32. In the *Politics* 1252A Aristotle argues that those who claim that skill in political rule is the same as household management or mastery of slaves, but on a larger scale, 'do not speak beautifully'. As Sachs remarks on this passage in note 39, 'the same assumption is made by the Eleatic Stranger at the beginning of Plato's *Statesman* (258E-258C)'. The classic example of the movement from appearance to the true is the allegory of the Cave in *Republic* 514a-520a.

33. Plato, *Apology* 21-22 in *Plato: Complete Works*, translated by G. M. A. Grubb (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997).

34. For a valuable study of this tradition see S. K. Heninger, *Touches of Sweet Harmony* (Tacoma, WA: Angelico Press, 2013).

35. For a detailed study of Plato's understanding of how the soul is brought into harmony see Francesco Pelosi *Plato on Music, Soul and Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

36. See Plato, *Meno* 84c-85d. The question the dialogue poses is whether virtue can be learned and if a distinction can be drawn between given or innate knowledge and acquired knowledge. That the slave who can solve a geometrical problem without prior study suggests, Socrates argues, that certain kinds of knowledge are already within the soul. Nevertheless, the dialogue comes to no conclusion as to whether virtue is innate or can be taught. The final suggestion is that virtue may be a gift from the gods. It is worth bearing in mind that for Plato it is the enquiry itself that matters, even if it leads to contradictory conclusions or no conclusion at all. Through the act of enquiring into the truth of things the soul already comes into a more harmonious relation with itself and with the greater order of things. It becomes temperate. The path any dialogue follows depends upon the condition of the souls of the interlocutors. This should make us particularly cautious about drawing fixed theories or doctrines from them.

37. Plato, *Republic*, 441e4-6.

38. For a wide-ranging study of Plato on friendship see Mary P. Nichols, *Socrates of Friendship and Community: Reflections on Plato's Symposium, Phaedrus, and Lysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

39. Plato, *Gorgias*, 507d in *The Dialogues of Plato*, translated by B. Jowett,

40. Plato, *Laws*, 693c.

41. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 4 Vols., (London, Second and Revised Edition, Literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, London Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1920) 1A. 110-19 and 1A2æ. 90-97. See also on justice, community and the common good 2A2 æ. 58.

42. Plato, *Republic*, 351d-352a in *Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1997).

43. See 'The Emancipation of Thought from Myth' in Frankfort, *Before Philosophy*.
44. Quoted from Voegelin, *Order and History Volume II: The World of the Polis*, p. 380.
45. Aristotle, *Politics*, translated by Joe Sachs (Newbury MA: Focus Publishing, 2012), 1253a8.
46. For a penetrating and comprehensive study of the emergence of *physis* from earliest Greek thought and its meaning in Plato see Gerard Naddaf, *The Greek Concept of Nature* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005). For an excellent history of the rise of law on Greece see Michael Gagarin, *Early Greek Law* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).
47. In this regard it is worth noting that a unique characteristic of early Greek law was that it was governed by the citizens collectively and separately from political rule. Elsewhere laws were usually imposed upon citizens by a ruling class. See Gagarin, *Early Greek Law*. That by Plato's time it could be thought to be imposed by the strong for their own advantage, as maintained by some Sophists, shows how the understanding of *nomos* had changed since the time of Homer and Hesiod.
48. See Voegelin, *Order and History, Volume III*, p. 68ff for a discussion of how Plato saw the decline of Athenian politics and how this led him to enquire into the nature of justice and the order of the *polis*.
49. Quoted by Malcolm Schofield, *The Stoic Idea of the City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 68 from Cicero's *De Legibus* 1 23. There is a clear resonance here with Heraclitus' fragment B 114 quoted earlier. Also see Katja Maria Vogt, *Law, Reason, and the Cosmic City: Political Philosophy in the Early Stoa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) for an excellent study of the political and ethical philosophy of the Stoa.
50. Plato, *Laws*, 737c-738e.
51. Voegelin, *Order and History, Volume III*, p. 164. See also the discussion of the natural division of labour in the community in Brill, *Plato and the Limits of the Human*, Chapter 4, especially p. 98-99.
52. Plato, *Laws*, 738e.
53. Plato, *Laws of Plato*, *Laws* 697b.
54. See Gabriela Roxana Carone, *Plato's Cosmology and its Ethical Dimensions*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 164 ff. for a useful discussion of this argument and its importance in the *Laws*, 888e.
55. *Phaedrus*, 244-245, in Jowett, *The Dialogues of Plato*.
56. Aristotle *Metaphysics*, 980a translated by Joe Sachs (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Green Lion Press, 2002).
57. Aristotle *Metaphysics*, 1174b.
58. *Symposium*, 201d-207a.
59. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 245a, in *Plato: Complete Works* edited by John M. Cooper.