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Introduction

I. WHY COSMOLOGY AND ETHICS?

This book is a study of Plato's late cosmology and its relation to Plato's ethics. The combination might strike one as odd. Indeed, it might seem far from obvious, first, that Plato has any coherent cosmological story to tell; second, that even if he does, it would deserve any special attention beyond historical curiosity, still less as a necessary background for understanding his ethical thinking. In the modern literature, it has in fact been quite common to investigate Plato's ethics, but much less common to delve into his cosmology. At any rate, these two undertakings have usually been carried out in isolation from each other. Thus, for example, Terence Irwin's extensive treatment in *Plato's Ethics* contains no section on the *Timaeus*, and virtually no allusion to Plato's cosmology and theology. Even more striking in this regard is Christopher Bobonich's recent book on Plato's later ethics and politics, *Plato's Utopia Recast*, which, despite occupying more than 600 pages of exegetical treatment, does not for the most part consider it necessary, for its purposes, to take a stand on cosmological issues.¹

Certainly, some fresh air has been brought to these topics in a few recent contributions, though an extensive treatment of Plato's late cosmology in relation to his ethics is lacking to this day. Julia Annas, for example, devotes a chapter of her *Platonic Ethics, Old and New* to the issue of assimilation with god, but does not do much in terms of integrating this aspect of Plato with other aspects of his ethical thinking, and is at any rate quite comfortable with the thought that Plato's ethics can be understood independently of his metaphysical commitments.² And,

more generally, even when the issue of assimilation with god has been addressed,³ it has been somewhat detached from an examination of what Plato means by “god” in those cases, and of how such an issue may relate to his wider views about nature.

Let us now turn to the cosmology itself. This side of Plato's thought has received rather little attention compared with the stress placed on his ethics, metaphysics, and epistemology in recent decades. But even when scholars have dealt with the cosmology, it has been in a fairly self-contained way, with little or no emphasis on how this piece might fit into the overall picture. One can think here, for example, of the works of Luc Brisson (1974), Gregory Vlastos (1975), Eric Ostenfeld (1982), Richard Mohr (1985), and T. M. Robinson (1995). The present book has often gained from a critical engagement with their arguments; yet not much heed is paid in these works to the question of what bearing Plato's cosmological speculations might have on his ethical views, and vice versa.⁴

This is not to say that the late dialogues in which one finds a treatment of cosmological issues have not been studied. But here there has been a temptation to downplay the properly cosmological side of these dialogues, or turn it into something else (such as ethics). Thus, for example, when M. M. McCabe considers the *Politicus* myth, which contains a picture of cosmic reversals, she affirms that its main message is not cosmological, but ethical.⁵ This, so to speak, “reductive” approach may seem attractive; yet it risks, as I shall argue, depriving us of a richer picture. Let us first, though, try to understand what may motivate the prevalent attitude.

The neglect that Plato's cosmology as such has received in the last few decades may be due to several assumptions: first, that it is intractable (as much of it is written in the form of myth, and myths seem resilient to philosophical analysis); second, that it is contradictory (the *Politicus*, for example, appears to tell us that there is no god ruling our present universe, contrary to the story of the *Timaeus*); third, that it is an isolated compartment, or even a digression, in the context of Plato's philosophy as a whole, with little or no bearing on other aspects of it and on the way that we should live.

And yet – at least for those who have understood the main message of the *Republic* – it would seem alien to the Platonic spirit that philosophers should be occupied in abstract study unless such study is put to helping them and others lead better human lives. This also gives us a *prima facie* reason to be suspicious of the presumption that there might be loose elements, such as his cosmology, in Plato's thought that would

not, directly or indirectly, connect with his other interests, and particularly with his ethical concerns. This book is rather an attempt to prove the opposite. Indeed, I believe it is in his late dialogues – particularly *Timaeus*, *Philebus*, *Politicus* (or *Statesman*), and *Laws* – that we find Plato most fully developing his theory of nature and his insights about the relation of humans to the universe. (For this reason, apart from reasons of space, I shall focus on the cosmology of the late dialogues, although references to other dialogues will also be made where relevant.) It is my aim to show that we actually need Plato's cosmology in order to make sense of his late ethics, and that the cosmological background is even necessary for an understanding of some of his late epistemological and metaphysical preoccupations, which are in turn inextricably linked to ethical ones. It is also my goal to demonstrate that we ought to look at Plato's cosmology as something continuous with, and not disconnected from, the motivations that urged him in dialogues such as the *Republic* to give an answer to questions about human happiness and the best means to attain it. If it is true, as we shall see, that the meaning of human life cannot for Plato be adequately determined unless one inserts it into a larger picture, then the universe, I contend, provides in the late dialogues an inescapable point of reference.

Now, one might say, to be fair to the contemporary tendency to neglect or downplay the cosmological passages in Plato's dialogues, that they are somewhat bizarre, or outmoded. In this regard, it may be harder to extract philosophical inspiration when reading the astronomical passages of the *Timaeus* than when, for instance, analysing the various puzzles concerning knowledge in the *Theaetetus*. In one sense, the complaint is just: why should it matter, philosophically, whether or not Plato, for example, believes the demiurge of the *Timaeus* to be a separate god in his structure of reality, or whether he thinks the planets err or revolve predictably? Even if it could be proved – as I shall attempt to do here – that some of his late ethical views rely on weighty cosmological assumptions (for example, that the study of astronomy will make the masses happy) it may be hard to make any sense of this, and the reader may choose to distance herself or himself from these passages and label their thoughts as outlandish.

Arriving at such conclusions too hastily, however, threatens to deprive us of the chance of seeing what larger philosophical motivations may have underpinned those particular views that we find odd, motivations that may, in addition, represent an important link, to this date perhaps still somewhat hidden, in the comprehension of later developments in

the history of philosophy. After all, it is an incontrovertible pillar of Aristotelian ethics that nature is normative, so that one ought to act in accordance with it;⁶ and the way in which Stoic ethics is made directly to rest on larger cosmic views is much discussed these days by classical scholars.⁷ The thought that to know oneself one should know the larger universe of which one is a part goes back at least as far as the Presocratics; and Heraclitus' contention that "all human laws are fed on a single, divine Law" is well known.⁸ The relation between law (*nomos*) and nature (*phusis*) was indeed a hotly debated issue at the time of the sophistic movement, and Plato's dialogues contain invaluable responses to that debate mainly by way of trying to supersede what had become in his eyes a largely unjustified divorce between these two notions. In this regard, it can be said that his cosmology is the best example of an attempt to reconcile them, by showing us how normativity is to be grounded on the workings of nature.⁹

For some, the appeal to ethical naturalism that is so common in philosophers of antiquity may appear ill advised, particularly given modern critiques that have denounced this procedure in terms of what has become known as the naturalistic fallacy, the supposed fallacy of inferring values from facts.¹⁰ At the same time, however, the issue is still a matter of dispute,¹¹ and Virtue Ethics, a movement that has its roots in the ancient philosophers (particularly Aristotle) and is making a significant comeback in contemporary ethical theory, is often sympathetic to the idea that ethics is very much about realising one's human nature to the fullest – and, as late Plato and many after him would add, one's human nature cannot be understood without in turn understanding the way it is part of nature. Even the extent to which role models are important in ethics is these days much discussed¹² (remember Aristotle's insistence on virtue consisting in a habit of choice "as the wise (*phronimos*) person would determine it" in *N.E.* II 6). It seems ironic, nevertheless, that so little attention has been paid to the possible Platonic roots of this philosophical way of thinking, even though Plato, or so I shall argue, presents in a surprising way no less than god, or the universe, as the most admirable role model for ethical enquiry.

Now, why "god or the universe"? One of my contentions in this book is that, despite apparent evidence to the contrary, there is for Plato no god over and above the universe itself. And by "god" here I mean an intelligent living being – a notion that may make us wonder whether Plato is not getting carried away. Why should we relate at all to such a view, except as a poetic, or perhaps Romantic, albeit inaccurate, way of

picturing nature? However strange it may seem at first sight, some modern environmentalists (such as deep ecologists) may, or at least should, regard Plato as an ally, and I have elsewhere discussed this issue.¹³ But my point here is rather different. Even granting that it *is* odd to claim that god is some kind of intelligence immanent to the universe, or indeed that the universe itself is an intelligent living being, the claim may start to look more interesting when we examine it not in isolation, but as a consequence of Plato's overall approach to the mind-body relation in his late dialogues. For now I shall say a brief word about this issue, which will occupy pertinent sections of the book, to illustrate another aspect of the cosmology whose philosophical and historical interest has tended to be overlooked and to which I hope to make the reader more alert.

In modern discussions of the mind-body problem it has been common to refer to Aristotle as a healthy historical alternative to either robust dualism or reductive materialism. Plato has been largely disregarded, either because he was assumed to endorse the "robust dualism" side of the story (as opposed to Democritean materialism),¹⁴ or because no definite view could be seen to emerge from his writings. And yet there is reason to suspect, as I hope the following treatment will suggest, that many of the merits that are attributed to the Aristotelian outlook nowadays in fact owe much to Plato, so that Aristotle himself may have been influenced by Plato's late writings. In particular, I shall try to demonstrate how, in late Plato at least (and whatever his former views may have been), the mind is the kind of thing that cannot exist independently of the body (and this will have not only metaphysical but also ethical and practical implications, if, as we shall see, the cultivation of an appropriate balance between mind and body will be particularly stressed). But if so, then we shall need to change, or at the very least qualify, our traditional stand on the "Platonic" view of the metaphysical status of the soul and its historical importance in understanding the modern debate.

It is precisely on the issue of god that Plato's late views are arguably more provocative than those of Aristotle. Whilst the modern relevance of hylomorphism has been much discussed, Aristotle's postulation of an active intellect, or *nous poiêtikos*, in *De Anima* III 5, has been seen as the exception to the rule. Whether that separate (or separable, *chôristos*) *nous* is taken to stand for an individual *nous*, or for the *nous* of god (as in Alexander's interpretation),¹⁵ it seems clear that Aristotle's theory cannot be counted as one that *excludes* the possibility of separate existence for the mind, or one part of the mind. Even his god is depicted as a separate *nous* which is totally immaterial (*Metaph.* XII 7, 1073a3–7). Of course,

this latter circumstance need not contradict modern stands on the mind-body relation. For it is often conceded that the discussion is restricted to our actual world and the way things are as far as the human mind is concerned, without this excluding that in other (possible) worlds things may be different.¹⁶ Even modern physicalists may not disagree that dualism is logically possible; they may just argue that it is not the way *we* are made up. In that regard, discussion of the mind-body problem is often limited to what status the mind (our mind) *does* have in relation to the body, as opposed to what status a mind can in principle have; and so it may be thought no harm for a theory of the human mind as nonseparate that there may be other minds (such as possibly god's) that are not. I hope it will emerge from what follows that Plato's late claims about the nature of the mind are much stronger, as they can be seen to include both the human mind and the mind of god. I shall also show how he views these two entities (or possible entities) as isomorphic, so that there is no room left for a separate *nous* in Plato's scheme of things – unlike Aristotle's. Thus, even if the thought that god is immanent to the material universe may strike us as odd, the philosophical motivation behind it is, at the very least, an intriguing one.

Now, how does all this relate to Plato's ethics? The postulation of the universe as an intelligent living being carries with it many implications. In the first place, it functions *teleologically*, that is, with some good purpose; and this purpose is given by reason. This contention is supposed to do some explanatory work: to tell us why things are the way that they are;¹⁷ but it is not exempt from problems. For one thing, it raises the need to account for the problem of evil; and so it is perhaps no accident that the dialogues containing the most detailed treatments of one issue should also contain the most daring suggestions on the other. Plato does think that it is the rationality governing the planets and stars that ensures that they do not err in their path; and he seems to be a firm believer that it is the rationality pervading the universe that establishes the foundation for a system of natural justice on which humans can rely. But the fact that he also considers another element in the constitution (and explanation) of the universe, which he calls "necessity" and which imposes limitations on intelligent activity, presents an interesting challenge for those who may think that his appeal to teleology is naïve. Indeed it is not, if his theory is, as I shall argue, that rationality is not completely successful in governing the universe, and that it is perhaps in the human sphere above all where things have been left unfinished. In this way, humans themselves are given a fundamental role in improving the goodness of the universe,

even though one is made painfully aware that they also have the capacity to make things significantly worse.

In a sense, making the universe intelligent and divine may seem to “depersonalise” god and show its workings to be much more automatic than the craftsman metaphor, for example in the *Timaeus*, may suggest; but there are many senses still in which the universe behaves like the ideal human being. Take the unerring behaviour of the stars. Plato refers to it in relation to their “thinking always the same things about the same things” (40a8-b1), just as in the *Gorgias* Socrates is himself portrayed, by contrast with the erratic procedures of the rhetorician, as always “maintaining the same things . . . about the same things” (490e9–11, cf. 491b5–8), and deems it shameful to engage in politics when one is never “thinking the same things about the same things” (527d7). As I suggest here, what Plato finds admirable (however remote this thought may seem to us) in the behaviour of the stars is performative consistency, that is, consistency not only among one’s thoughts, but also between one’s thoughts and one’s deeds. And this represents a continuation of, rather than a break with, his ethical preoccupations in the early dialogues.

Now, there is also another sense in which the cosmology of the late dialogues resumes Socratic themes, and it is what I shall argue is their more populist conception of happiness, as opposed to the elitism of the middle dialogues. If we recall, it was Socrates in the *Apology* for whom the unexamined life is not worth living, and no one, not even the craftsman or the stranger, was regarded as exempt from such a challenge.¹⁸ This may contrast with dialogues such as the *Republic*, where philosophical examination and (one could argue) autonomous human fulfilment seem to be reserved for very few. It is worth reviewing this turn, so as to show how, in his later period, Plato may have felt a certain dissatisfaction with some aspects of his middle-period ethics, to which the cosmology represents a response. This will further help us see how the late cosmology, far from being a loose cannon in Plato’s philosophy, may indeed prove to be quite central to an understanding of its development. I shall offer next a preview of this issue.

II. PLATO’S COSMOLOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE DYNAMICS OF PLATO’S THOUGHT

In the *Gorgias*, Socrates can already be found telling Calicles: “the wise men say, Calicles, that both heaven and earth, and gods and humans, are bound by communion, friendship, orderliness, temperance and justice;

and that is why they call this whole an order (*kosmos*),¹⁹ and not a disorder (*akosmia*) or unrestraint (*akolasia*)” (507e6–508a4). The insistence on an order that pervades the universe is particularly relevant in a context where lack of order or consistency (*homologia*) in one’s beliefs threatens to dissolve the unity of the subject (cf. 482b–c). The friendship and harmony that holds the universe together as one already functions as a paradigm, we may say, of the internal unity that is desirable for the person.

Beyond this allusion, however, we do not find much about cosmology in Plato’s early dialogues. Later on, in the *Phaedo*, Socrates refers to the ordering *nous*, or *nous diakosmôn*, of Anaxagoras (also mentioned at *Cratylus* 400a), and expresses initial enthusiasm about a mind that could account for the good arrangement of the totality of things, which is professed to be “the way things are now” (99c1–2). But this possible course of explanation is not pursued, given Socrates’ disappointment at the mechanical way Anaxagoras proceeded to explain each individual phenomenon (cf. 98b–c).²⁰ Nonetheless, soon in the *Republic* we find allusions to a craftsman or demiurge (*dêmiourgos*) of our sight (VI 507c), who is also responsible for the heaven – and things in it – being arranged “in as beautiful a way as is possible” (VII 530a5–7). This is a designing agent who would have taken care not only of the universe as a whole but also of individual phenomena. Plato does not expand on the cosmological significance of this *dêmiourgos*; we shall have to wait till the late dialogues for that. They will also provide the detailed teleological explanations that Socrates had failed to find in Anaxagoras. However, the notion that cosmic order and beauty has its foundation in some sort of design starts becoming explicit here; and it may be no accident that, at least as far as the *polis* is concerned, the philosopher ruler is called a demiurge (*dêmiourgos*) of virtue, who orders the state, the citizens, and himself according to goodness (VII 540a8–b1, cf. VI 500d). Some parallelism between the ideal *polis* and the *kosmos* is thus suggested, even though they are kept distinct. To what extent the *kosmos* itself may later on stand for or replace, for many, that ideal *polis* of Plato’s dreams is a matter that will concern us presently.

Indeed, while scholars have tended to neglect Plato’s late cosmology, there is no controversy about the relevance of the *Republic* for an understanding of Plato, even though the theories set out there do leave problems that have not escaped its readers. Thus, I shall now focus on certain ethical issues in the *Republic* so as to show how this central work contains gaps and flaws demanding a solution that, I argue, is to be found at least partly in the late cosmological passages. I am for this purpose assuming

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Excerpt

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that the *Timaeus*, *Philebus*, *Politicus*, and *Laws* are chronologically posterior to the *Republic*. This assumption can for now rely on scholarly consensus, though I shall in any case be referring to the chronological issue later.

Together with the *Phaedo* and the *Symposium*, the *Republic* is considered to encompass Plato's middle-period metaphysics, in which he postulates imperceptible and unchanging entities called Forms as the foundation of the world of change that we perceive, and also as the foundation of his ethics. Such entities are the highest object of human knowledge (this represented at its summit by philosophy) and also the highest goal of human aspiration. There is throughout these dialogues a deep concern for the happy or self-fulfilled life expressed in a state of well-being, or *eudaimonia*.²¹ The *Phaedo*, with its other-worldly tones, reserves the possibility of *eudaimonia* strictly speaking for the philosopher, as something to be attained once he is freed from the chains of the body (80e–81a). Philosophy, then, is there regarded as the only means of salvation, and confined to a small group of initiates such as Socrates and those in his circle. The *Republic* can be seen as an attempt to extend happiness to the whole of society,²² but now such happiness seems to assume one of the following two forms: either (1.) you are again a philosopher, having direct and infallible knowledge of the Forms, from which you get enlightenment about the nature of the truly good and happy human life;²³ or (2.) you are under the rule of a philosopher, in those cases where you lack a philosophical nature. But even here you are capable of attaining happiness if you follow strictly the rule of the philosopher: he or she, possessing the infallible knowledge that you lack, will be able to impart to you right opinions about the best way to conduct your life in a harmonious community.²⁴ In all cases, virtue is a necessary prerequisite for happiness: If you are happy, you have the wealth of a good life, and this presupposes wisdom and justice (VII 521a, I 354a).

The picture in the *Republic* might then seem quite promising compared with the *Phaedo*. First, Plato is showing concern for the happiness of a community, not just of a few individuals, and second, he is inscribing individual happiness in the context of a happy society (*polis*). He is saying that if you want to find a means to self-fulfilment you cannot ignore your immediate social background. Rather, you should start by considering yourself part of that whole and discover that it is by promoting the latter's well-being that you will find the rewards of personal well-being. In this case the main virtues to be furthered in the community will include sound-mindedness (*sôphrosunê*), that is, the modest recognition of whether you have the right nature to rule others or rather be ruled; and

justice (*dikaiousunē*), the limiting of yourself to the role that you are supposed to perform in order to promote the good of your society.²⁵ It seems, however, that these two virtues cannot exist without wisdom,²⁶ a virtue possessed by the *polis* thanks to those, namely the philosophers, who rule and enjoy knowledge of the true nature of the good (the Form of the Good): these are the ones who will tell you accordingly what your role in a good society is. Without wisdom, then, justice and sound-mindedness do not seem liable to be preserved (cf. IV 443e, 442c–d). Nor indeed does courage, the virtue consisting in holding to a right opinion about what should be feared (IV 429b–c), given that such opinion is imparted through education by those who already possess knowledge (*ibid.*). So having a professional army preserve that opinion will make the *polis* courageous, as long as they follow the instructions of the philosophers who are in power and know what is best for the whole community.

Now, if this is the case in the *Republic*, it is not hard to see how the very same postulates that seem to allow for human happiness can become a great limitation on it. If happiness lies in virtue, and preeminently in wisdom, then it is only the philosophers who will have autonomous grounds for happiness. This is fine for them, who can rely on the unshakeable motivation for their behaviour given by their own reason. In the case of the rest, though, their share in happiness will to a great extent be parasitic on the rule of a philosopher. If they need someone to tell them what is good so that they can do it,²⁷ then their happiness is, to use a Kantian term, heteronomous, not autonomous, that is, it stems from the rule of others rather than from one's own self-rule. But what if the ideal person on whose existence and rule the happiness of the majority depends does not exist? In addition, even if that person did exist, a lot of control would need to be exerted on the majority if they are to follow the philosophers' prescription. For it seems that if they do not have internal stable reasons for the parameters that they accept as good, their opinions might easily be shaken by the wind.²⁸ (Note that, except for the military and the ruling class, the great mass of people in this society does not have access to education.)²⁹ Evidently, Plato himself concedes that the rule of the philosopher is only an ideal. Though not impossible, it is really very hard to realise, but it does at any rate provide a model that might orient human behaviour.³⁰ Maybe Plato is still influenced by the striking paradigm of Socrates as a case where philosophy is put to foster the good of a community: If we were to have one of those rare philosophers around, their example would be so inspiring that we would either wish to subject ourselves to their care, or it would at least be beneficial for us even to