

Cosmology and Politics in Ancient Greek Thought

A review of: **Dominic O'Meara. *Cosmology and Politics in Plato's Later Works*. Cambridge University Press, 2017. 157 p., illustrated**

Eugene Afonasin

Doctor of Philosophical Sciences, Professor, Institute of Philosophy and Law SB RAS
(Novosibirsk, Russia)
E-mail: afonasin@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0002-0623-0574

The political dimension of Plato's cosmological thought has been extensively explored as such and in its relation with Greek culture, but there remains a question of methodology. Which context will be more appropriate for Plato's works? Shall we focus on their metaphysical features (most conspicuous in Aristotle and Plato's immediate heirs in the Old Academy), or, alternatively, place them in a dialectical context (as in the case of the Skeptical Academy of Arcesilaus and Carneades)? Or, maybe, we have to plunge them in the depth of Greek cultural life and compare with technological advances of Greek civilization? This latter approach, having done properly, would be a real innovation, capable of, as it appears, presenting a fresh look at the familiar matters. This is exactly the task of a new project launched by Dominic O'Meara in the book under review. Plato's cosmological and political ideas are successfully discussed here in their relation with ancient crafts, arts, and various peculiarities of social life of the Greek polis.

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In his new book, Dominic O'Meara, one of the most famous contemporary Platonic scholars and the author of a philosophical masterpiece *Platonopolis* (2003), examines the order of the world in its relation to the order of a human community. It consists of seven short thematically related chapters, subdivided into two parts, concerned with the *Timaeus* (addressing the figure of the world-maker and the concepts of the structure and the beauty of the world), on the one hand, and the *Statesman* and the *Law* (dedicated to various aspects of legal and political science in Plato's later works), on the other.

However, first of all, why Platonic heritage requires interpretation and why Plato's writings provoke a multiplicity of interpretations, never definite and never final? "What is it in the Plato's writings that creates the need to interpret them, and to interpret them in ever-renewed ways?"

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(p. 2). And the answer Dominic O'Meara gives is that, predominantly, the philosophy of Plato is open to the future: the dialogues, situated in the past, provoke our on-going philosophical reasoning, the figure of Socrates, although a part of the past, drives us to think about the possible and impossible ideals, and the doctrines of Plato himself, "always inadequate to the best method... await, in their provisional past, a more adequate future." (p. 9).

The first part of the book deals with the *Timaeus*. The first chapter of this part, entitled "A Feast to the Goddess," is concerned with the great Athenian festival, dedicated to the *polis*' patroness, the goddess Athena (for more details, see Neils 1996). The dramatic setting of the *Timaeus* is this festival, which takes place each summer. Foreign guests, including Timaeus and Hermogenes, came from Italy to see the Panathenaea and to meet their Athenian friends, Socrates and Critias. The meeting, according to O'Meara, took place in Athens still at the height of her political power, before or in the earlier stages of the disastrous war with Sparta, that is to say in late 430s. The setting, terminology and structure of the *Timaeus* strongly suggests that the meeting is staged by Plato as a banquet, a feast of speeches, in honor of the goddess Athena, with Socrates appointed as its *symposiarch*. Socrates spoke the day before, having discoursed on the question of the best political order. Now it is time for Timaeus and then Critias and Hermogenes to offer their speeches (in this order). The sequence is not accidental and approved by the banquet master, Socrates, according to the speeches' appropriateness. After his opening talk about the best state the second speaker, Timaeus, is supposed to tell a story of the making of the cosmos and human beings. These discourses will be followed by Critias' complete story of ancient Athens and its victory over Atlantis, briefly summarized in advance (26c6), and Hermogenes' version of the same story about Atlantis with special emphasis on the military victory. The surviving writings of Plato contain a summary of Socrates' talk, the great discourse of Timaeus and an incomplete speech of Critias (preserved as an independent dialogue). These observations are important, according to O'Meara, for understanding of the structure of Plato's work. For one thing, it clearly shows that the *Republic* cannot be the first part of this sequence, although some commentators think so, because the dramatic framework of the *Republic* is the feast of Bendis, which took place in the Piraeus ca. 412. (i.e. later then the dramatic date of the *Timaeus*). But how and in what manner our philosophers are supposed to praise the goddess? In the third speech of the sequence, Critias praises Athena as the founder of ancient Athens, who gave to the city its best location, its institution and sciences, etc. (*Timaeus* 23d5, 24c4), although the events recollected are placed outside the real history. The fourth speech by Hermocrates continues the story of Critias and especially focuses on the military victory of ancient Athens over Atlantis, another legendary state, founded by Athena's rival deity Poseidon. Dominic O'Meara suggests that if the figure of Hermocrates evokes a real person — the Syracusan leader who contributed to the victory over Athenians in Sicily in 415–413 — then his military skills makes him the most appropriate person to tell the story about the legendary war. It is clear now why Socrates in his first speech says that he cannot praise the city sufficiently (19d1): having described in his introductory talk a model city from the philosophical point of view, he is now assigning more specific tasks to the speakers that are more competent in these matters. However, what about the second speech, the only one to survive as a whole, the one told by Timaeus? How this extensive discourse intends to praise the goddess? In the next three chapters O'Meara answers this question, and "in order to explore more fully the implications of Timaeus' cosmological account for the concept of an excellent state" in Chapters 5 to 7 makes use of "other texts written by Plato probably after the *Timaeus*, the *Statesman* and the *Laws*, to the extent that they might offer something like a substitute." (p. 23)

Surely the demiurge, who is explicitly named the father (*Timaeus* 23c3) and the savior (48d4), must be Zeus, but not quite so, because Zeus, surprisingly, is named among the traditional gods who are obviously inferior to the demiurge (41a1). Apparently the demiurge, according to Heraclitus' famous saying (fr. 32 DK), "does not wish and wishes to be called by the name of Zeus" (p. 28). On the one hand, the speaker of the dialogue constantly associates Athena with her mighty father, who exerts absolute supremacy, deliberates and decides, assigns specific tasks to different gods, and could also (as the demiurge of the *Timaeus*) retire to his proper place. He emerges victorious over all sort of world's disorders, personified in the Titans and the Giants, rules justly and wisely, etc. (pp. 32–33) On the other hand, the demiurge of the *Timaeus* is a reformed divinity, morally and metaphysically perfect, the cause of good, not evil. This definitely distances him from the traditional deities of Homer, Hesiod and the tragedies.

The demiurge 'makes' the world not 'creates' it. He gives order, goodness and beauty to a pre-existent chaotic milieu (p. 34). Quite on the contrary, the traditional cosmogony of the poets is explicitly a divine genealogy, a sort of natural development of the ordered cosmos out of the primordial chaos to the effect that the most primitive deities, such as Erōt, Gē, Ouranos, etc. finally manifest themselves in Zeus and other younger deities. Apparently, in the traditional cosmogony Zeus does not 'make' the world.

The word 'dēmiourgos' has a variety of meanings, from a craftsman and an artisan to a public servant like a statesman, lawgiver and the founder of the cities. (p. 35) All these functions are visible in the demiurge of the *Timaeus*: as an artisan, he makes the world according to a certain model, and, as a good ruler, he "deliberates about what to do, seeks the best option, gives speeches to his subordinates, delegates tasks, legislates,... as if the variety of professions and trades... which had filled Athens during the great period of the reconstruction of temples had left their mark on Timaeus' speech," etc. (p. 35–36) This explains why, in his account of the creation of the world, Plato in the *Timaeus* does not follow a strict chronological order. Presenting instead his version of cosmo-genesis in an axiological order, he starts with the highest causes, the demiurge and his model and finishes with all the 'necessities' which constitute the body of the cosmos. His intention, according to O'Meara's observation, is signaled by the fact that in the *Timaeus* 34b10 he especially notes that he should have told about the making of the soul first, prior to a description of the formation of the body: "The mixed 'birth' of the world, offspring of a noble father [demiurge] and a needy mother [necessity], prefigures the birth of the ancient Athens from divine parents, Hephaistos and Athena, children of Zeus, and from the earth of Attica, as recounted by Critias in his speech," who had omitted to be sure the most salient features of the myth about attempted sexual relation of Hephaistos with his sister, probably reinterpreting this affair and giving it a new nobler sense: the Athenian are now born of the divine parents, the sources of all sort of wisdom and order, without sexual engendering, in imitation of the goddess Athena's birth from the head of Zeus (p. 39).

A good and beautiful model of the world is discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. Inspired by the paradigm, the philosopher-king builds the perfect state as a painter, who creates his masterpiece "in the image and likeness of the divine" model (*Republic* 500e–501b), just, beautiful and moderate. (p. 43–44) Or he does this as an architect — a city-planner who first creates a model or a plan of his building project and then supervises its actual realization. (p. 48 f.) In the same manner, the demiurge of the *Timaeus* is depicted first fixing a goal of his work, then moving to the paradigm to be used in order to achieve this goal, and finally building the real world based on a prefigured model. The goal is of course to make the most

perfect and complete (*teleōtatos*) world. Precisely for this reason the model of this world is exceptionally difficult to describe (*Timaeus* 50c). The world must be an ensouled animal, all-inclusive in a sense of inclusion of all the main animal genera, from the heavenly race of gods to all kind of terrestrial living creatures (39e7–40a2). The body of the world is made of four elements indissolubly bound by the demiurge by means of a geometrical proportion (so is fire to air as air is to water, and air is to water as water is to earth). The elements themselves are indeterminate pre-elements (“triangles”, 48b) “structured into determinate bodies by means of a variety of geometrical shapes and bound to each other by geometrical proportions.” (p. 53) These have their origin elsewhere: they must have come from above, from the Forms, which constitute the model of the world. The world is a unique animal, self-sufficient, just, and perpetual. It was first given general specifications, then drawn up in more details as a geometrical model; the task of building was entrusted by the architect to his craftsmen (the young gods), responsible for all minute details of the construction. Are the Forms thought up by the demiurge? Are they independent of him, or subordinate to him? These questions traditionally puzzle the interpreters of Plato, both ancient and modern. Dominic O’Meara suggests that “if the demiurge is a part of Platonic myth, a story told by Timaeus in honor of a reformed Zeus, a story designed to give expression to metaphysical and ethical/political principles which Plato wishes to defend, then there is perhaps less need to go so far as to draw the conclusion that the demiurge, like the architect and legislator, must have thought up his model. Perhaps it may suffice here... to say that... a world, a city or a soul, if it is to function well, must do so according to same general functional principles (the model), which will always be valid” (p. 58).

There are two important difficulties with this account. The first one concerns the problem of pre-cosmic imitations of the model (p. 58–61). The second concerns the ‘place’ in which the world is made. (p. 61–63) Indeed, it appears that, according to Plato, a disordered chaotic milieu the demiurge uses for creating the ordered universe, has already contained imitation of the model. Especially this concerns the traces (*ichnē*) of fire, water, earth and air, mentioned in the *Timaeus* 53a. This “traces” however, according to O’Meara’s suggestion (p. 60), are traces of the elements themselves, not of models of the elements (as some interpreters claim). In a sense, they are raw material used by the artisans to create the building blocks to be used for future construction. Now, in order to build something worthy the artisan needs not only the materials, but also a proper place and instruments, a well-equipped workshop, so to say. The Platonic notions of a place (*chōra*), a foundation (*hedra*), and especially of a ‘receptacle’ (*hypodochē*) and a ‘nurse’ (*tithēnē*), have received various interpretations. O’Meara notes however that the image of receptive matrix (*ekmageion*, *Timaeus* 50c) seems to refer to technical rather than biological production. So, as previously, it is better not to press Plato too hard on this point. Instead of looking everywhere for deep metaphysical meanings or biological associations, we may simply observe that, after all, speaking about ‘building bricks’, ‘casts’ for molding, etc. he is consistently developing his image of a divine architect.

Good is, according to Plato (*Timaeus* 64e, 87c), ‘resides’ in beauty, which in its turn manifests itself in measure and symmetry (p. 67–68). Beauty does not itself create the good. Rather, it characterizes the world when the world achieves its goal, which is the good (p. 76). The goal is achieved and the good realized through the structuring of the universe and the world-soul according to mathematical proportions, which are beautiful themselves. The model realizes the world, but the beauty of the model, concludes O’Meara, is different from the beauty of the world: the world is unique in its reality, and the model is not just another world (p. 78).

Chapters 5–6 deal with the political philosophy of Plato's late dialogues. The meeting described in the *Statesman* took place just before the trial of Socrates; therefore, the dramatic date of the dialogue is 399 BCE. As in the *Timaeus*, the conversation happens during the Panathenaic festival. An unnamed guest from Elea (unnamed, according to O'Meara's suggestion, because after the generation of Zeno there probably were no significant representatives of the Eleatics worth mentioning) discusses with Socrates' namesake (=young Socrates) the question of political order. The basic metaphor employed in the speech is this of a new robe (*peplos*) weaved for the goddess Athena. Young girls weave a new robe for the goddess under the direction of an elderly woman. This *paradeigma* (*Statesman* 277d–278e), that is to say an illustrative example, designed to elucidate a more complex subject matter, is developed by an older instructor for his younger student in order to explain the peculiarities of political philosophy. The politician is not just a good or responsible citizen. He possesses special expertise, which helps him to manage things well. The political art (*tekhnē*) is compared then with the skills employed by a trainer of group sports. Indeed, a trainer of this sort, unlike the one coaching individual athletes, is developing a comprehensive program aimed at some common good, which cannot however account for personal needs of specific members of the team. In the same vein, the legislator designs laws as general rules, applicable to all citizens, irrespective of any peculiarities and circumstances which may occur in a given situation (*Statesman* 294e ff.). The law, which in Greece was almost exclusively associated with statutes (so that even customary behavior, practiced for many generations, was routinely attributed to an ancient and often mythical lawgiver), is therefore not a foundation of the good state. A wise political leader is concerned with the specific needs and does this according to his expertise. In the absence of an experienced statesman, law (which guarantees social stability) must remain unchanged, as in the story about Solon, who left Athens for ten years precisely in order to prevent his fellow-citizens from changing a new political regime which he has previously established. Quite on the contrary, in a well-designed state its 'open-texture,' to use a term coined in modern times by Herbert Hart (1961), undergoes constant transformation (=is weaved as a *peplos* for the goddess) by people skilled in the political science, working under the direction of a wise man, who decides, in Aristotle's words *poia poiois harmottei* (*Ethics Nicom.* 10.9., 1181b7), what kinds of law are suited best to what sorts of folk. Since these skills are difficult to imitate, borrowed constitutions are rarely implanted successfully in a foreign soil (*Statesman* 293e; 297c ff.). This is however the subject of the greatest of Plato's dialogues.

In his *Laws* the Athenian guest (maybe Solon or somebody of his status, according to O'Meara's suggestion, p. 107) discusses the ways political science could help to establish and run a new *polis*, which, according to Plato's scheme, is governed by the Guardians of the law, who maintain the pre-established order, and the Nocturnal Council, which is largely responsible for whatever changes the state undergoes. Also the members of the Council travel extensively to see what is going on abroad, presumably for security reasons but also in order to exchange and accumulate ideas, vital for the political science. The most successful of them they adopt home. This is clear. Less obvious is a link O'Meara establishes between some ideas expressed in the *Laws* and the Athenian festival of Dionysus (p. 113–114).

What kind of science is first introduced and then elaborated by the Guardians? They must know the good on which the goal to be achieved in their political planning depends. In addition, they must have a model be imitated. The ideal state has special spatial organization: the land must form a circle with the acropolis in the middle. There must be sufficient territory and resources to support its limited population, which would make the state self-sufficient

(*Laws* 737d, etc.). The land, which remains common property, is subdivided into twelve regions and distributed equally among five thousand forty households. Some inequality is allowed only in the case of mobile goods, etc. The physical organization of the polis is reflected on the spiritual level. Religion is also determined in clear spatio-temporal terms. The center is occupied by the temples of Hestia (Hearth), Zeus and Athena, each of the twelve regions and tribes are consecrated to a god of traditional religion. These gods, as well as the paradigm state itself, are not named to account for the future regional specific. “The organization of the religious space, where a differentiated multiplicity is brought to unity, mirrors the way in which land and population are distributed in the state” (p. 121). Time is also made sacred: religious feasts dedicated to specific gods take place regularly throughout the entire year (*Laws* 828b). The precise religious calendar is not fixed for the model state: this also remains a discretion of the future lawgivers. Moreover, the organization of the paradigm polis reflects the order of the universe (the one described in the *Timaeus*). The sacred land, dedicated to the gods, is of spherical shape, circular and self-sufficient like the cosmos; the state as everything in the cosmos is designed according to geometrical proportions; the sacred territory of the state corresponds to the cosmic order with the earth (Hestia) in the center, the moon and the sun (Athena and Zeus), located next to it, and the planets and the fixed stars found on the periphery as separate villages which encircle the acropolis; and through the religious festivals the people and the gods are engaged all year round in elaborated astro-choreography (p. 123).

Well, here is the story told by Dominic O’Meara. To conclude, the book is superbly written and well produced. Readers interested in the history of ancient philosophy, cosmology and political thought will find it indispensable.

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